

FEMININE GENIUS

Discussing a Woman's Role in
the Church, Family, and Society



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FEMININE GENIUS

Discussing a Woman's Role in the
Church, Family, and Society

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LEADER'S INTRODUCTION

The Big Picture

God's word is alive and it should be embodied in our lives.

There is a certain “genius” to being a woman. And today's world is in need of that genius. More than ever, it seems, our culture needs the witness of authentic femininity. Being a woman is an incredible gift and opportunity. God has made us good, and he wants us to share our gift.

Pope St. John Paul II spent considerable time exploring this genius. As a pastor, who no doubt spent many hours counseling women and hearing their stories in the confessional, he had a particular insight into the female heart. From his experience and reflection on the Scriptures, Pope St. John Paul II wrote a letter specifically about women: *Mulieris Dignitatem*, on the dignity and the vocation of women. In it, he noted the particular genius of femininity, God's beautiful design for women, and their essential contribution to the world.

However, even with this great calling, we know, perhaps all too well, that there is much debate and even confusion in our culture over our role. Are we the same as men? Is our role somehow inferior? What is our place in the Church, the family, and society? These questions have

been vigorously debated, and differing trends have emerged, not all of them good.

Additionally, many women have experienced the heartache and struggle of not being affirmed in their dignity as women. God designed us for a unique and beautiful life, and yet too often this has been trampled upon or confused with competing visions of how femininity should be expressed.

Our hope is that this Bible study will allow us to rediscover the greatness to which we are called and encourage us to embrace it. Using the writings of Pope St. John Paul II, the Scriptures, and various other female writers, this study explores God's original plan for us, how that plan has been derailed, but also how it has been restored in Jesus Christ. It then explores our unique dignity, our receptivity and capacity for others, and our indispensable role in society. The study also addresses some of the challenges involved in living out this call and offers some practical direction for living out this vocation.

As you study the "Feminine Genius," we encourage you to think deeply about your privileged dignity as a woman, discuss the difficulties involved in living as a woman today, and, finally, allow Jesus and His Blessed Mother to guide you into faithfully living your amazing role in God's plan for salvation.

How FOCUS Equip Studies Work

Each FOCUS Equip study highlights one particular passage of Scripture. As the leader, you guide a discussion about the passage, which allows participants to discover truths within the passage for themselves. This process is called self-discovered learning. Its format can help participants learn about Scripture and the way to discover Scripture on their own.

Introduction

At the same time, you are not left alone to understand the Scriptures by yourself. Each chapter will contain a section titled “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” It will provide you with details about the passage, along with summaries about the passage’s big picture, how it applies to Jesus, and how it can apply to your group.

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The discussion guide supplies you with an opening question, some background information to share about the passage, and a set of example questions and answers on each passage to use with your group.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Prepare by studying “What Do I Need to Know about This Passage?” before the Bible study, and then use the discussion guide to direct the conversation with your group.

How to Prepare Your Study

With all of this information at your disposal, you are all set and ready to go. You just need to pass out the notes, ask each question as it is written, and read the answers to the questions, right? Well, not exactly. It would not make for a very engaging Bible study. This material is a Bible study in a can: It is meant to preserve good-quality Biblical content and allow for a broad distribution, but someone still needs to take the material out of the can, spice up the content, and serve it to your study. That person is you.

This is where the audience for your study is crucial; these are the people for whom you are “cooking.” Whether you have a group that has never heard the Gospel before or a group that attempts to live out the Gospel each day, you can adapt the Bible study to the group. The flexibility of this format is what can make it so effective.

Most likely, however, you will have a group with both kinds of people. Try to create a Bible study where beginners can learn the basics while the experts can be rejuvenated. Scripture is a great way to do this. St. Gregory the Great once said, “Holy Scripture is a stream in which the elephant may swim and the lamb may wade.” Both groups should be able to discover something meaningful in the Scripture passage.

For more on How to Lead a Bible study, check out our resource on FOCUSEquip.org. As a review, FOCUS Bible study leaders have 3 roles and 3 goals in each study.

Introduction

Your 3 Key Roles

With all of the above information in mind, remember that you have 3 key roles in this study. These 3 roles are your contribution to the study, and doing these 3 things well will make the study successful.

1. **Prayer:** Ultimately, it will be God Who changes the lives of the participants. By personal prayer and praying for your participants, you open the door for God to accomplish great things. Please take time to pray for your group, talking with God about each participant.
2. **Hospitality:** Effectively welcoming participants, getting to know them, meeting them outside of Bible study, and becoming real friends will be a great asset to the study. Create an environment that is open and personal, allowing participants to feel comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences.
3. **Facilitator:** A good discussion really enhances the fruitfulness of a Bible study. Take the time to review the study and ask good, relevant questions to your group. Guide the discussion, allowing everyone to participate. Bring the discussion back if it gets too far astray.

Your 3 Key Goals

There will, no doubt, be many questions and discussions that come up throughout the study. You may even find yourself a bit lost here or there. However, the goals listed below are what you are ultimately trying to accomplish. Keeping these in mind throughout the study will help you stay on course.

1. **Deep Transformation:** Through interaction with God's word and one another, it is our hope that the lives of your Bible study members will be profoundly changed. The purpose of a Bible study is not to simply learn information or to be a part of a Bible study club, but allow the Lord to transform our lives. Specifically, we hope that students, through Scripture, are drawn more intimately to our Lord in the sacraments and liturgy of the Church where they can most fully receive the gift of God's grace in their lives.
2. **Intimate Fellowship:** If people are going to be deeply transformed, they will need others along the way, not only to help this transformation, but also to make sure they continue this transformation in the future. Your goal as a leader is to take a group of people with various backgrounds and personalities and help them form authentic relationships with one another.
3. **Spiritual Multiplication:** Another important dynamic of small groups is their ability to be reproduced. As you lead, pray that the Lord will raise up members of your small group to go on to disciple others and to lead Bible studies of their own.

Final Note

One of the best ways to learn how to lead a Bible Study is to learn from others. Consider observing someone else's Bible study to learn how they have been successful. Also, ask a missionary or your discipler to come to your study and give you feedback on how you are doing.

Introduction

The Challenge

To properly lead this study, you will need to prepare in advance and apply God's word in your own life.



Chapter 1

The Original Plan

Genesis 1:26-31, 2:7-8, 15-25

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 12 - 17

DISCUSSION

Pages 18 - 24

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Genesis 1:26–31, 2:7–8, 15–25

The Big Picture

Studying the creation of Adam and Eve helps us to understand our ultimate goal and the purpose of our femininity.

On any journey, in order to understand where we are and where we're going, we first have to know where we started. This is what the book of Genesis is all about. In a speech during the World Day of Peace in 1995, Pope St. John Paul II, speaking about God's original plan for the human couple, stated, "We need to return to this plan, to proclaim it forcefully, so that women in particular—who have suffered more from its failure to be fulfilled—can finally give full expression to their womanhood and their dignity."¹ The Holy Father encourages us to look at the creation of Adam and Eve in order to better understand God's purpose in creating man and woman. Likewise, he encourages us to look at God the Father's original plan for this first couple so that we can more fully understand and live out our femininity.

¹Pope John Paul II, Message for the XXVIII World Day of Peace: "Women, Teachers of Peace" (Rome: Vatican, 1995).

A Communion of Love (Genesis 1:26–31)

God said, “Let *us* make man in *our* image.” Have you ever noticed that He uses the plural “us” and “our”? Why is there a plural reference to God in verse 26 (“our”), and then a singular reference in verse 27 (“His”)? These verses give us a glimpse into the inner life of God. God is a Trinity—one God (i.e., “His”) in three divine persons (i.e., “our”). He is a union, or communion, of persons.

We all know the Scripture verse “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8), and the Catechism of the Catholic Church gives us a beautiful explanation of what this means and how it affects us: “God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange” (CCC 221). This “eternal exchange of love” of the Trinity flows from God the Father: God makes a total gift of Himself (because God is love, and love gives itself freely), and this gift begets the Son. The Son, seeing the total gift of the Father, responds by making a total gift of Himself in return. The love between them is itself the person of the Holy Spirit.

If both men and women are created in the image and likeness of God, a few things are then true: In addition to possessing equal dignity and the gifts of reason and will, it also means that we are *designed* to imitate the Trinity’s communion of love and self-giving.

Helpmates (Genesis 2:7–8, 15–25)

The second chapter of Genesis provides a more descriptive and metaphorical account of Creation that helps us understand the fundamental and profound truths concerning man created as male *and* female in the image and likeness of God.

In this second account, Eve is not on the scene at first: God creates Adam and then announces, “It is not good that the man should be

alone; I will make a helper fit for him.” But God’s next move is to create the animals and have Adam name them. This may seem like a strange task, but it helps Adam to realize something about himself: Even after seeing and naming all of the animals, Adam is left feeling alone because “there was not found a helper fit for him.” Adam was not made simply to till the garden and rule over the animals. There is still something missing.

It is only then that God culminates his act of creation by forming Eve from the rib of Adam. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that Eve was made from Adam’s rib to show that they are equal in dignity: Eve was not created from Adam’s head to rule over him, nor was she created from his feet to be ruled by him. Rather, she was created from his rib, to rule *with* him.

And what does Adam think of God’s new creation? “At last!” he proclaims. He immediately recognizes this being as “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone,” and for this reason, she is called “woman.” Adam is euphoric. You can almost hear him gasp in awe as he recognizes what a great companion God has created—not only beautiful, but someone who is like him. Eve is different from all other creatures that Adam has so far encountered, in part because, like him, she is a human person who can give and receive love. In Adam’s eyes, even her very body speaks to this ability to give and receive love in a way that complements his. His body speaks the same to her.

Pope John Paul II elaborates on this complementarity in *Mulieris Dignitatem*: “The woman is another ‘I’ in a common humanity. From the very beginning they appear as a ‘unity of the two,’ and this signifies that the original solitude is overcome, the solitude in which man does not find ‘a helper fit for him’ (Gen 2:20). Is it only a question here of ‘helper’ in activity, in ‘subduing the earth’ (Gen 1:28)? Certainly it is a matter of a life’s companion, with whom, as a wife,

the man can unite himself, becoming with her 'one flesh' and for this reason leaving 'his father and his mother' (Gen 2:24)."² Physically and spiritually, man and woman are not the same but instead complement each other. Together they express the fullness of humanity.

Application to Jesus

God the Father sent the Son, the second person of the Trinity, to earth to show us the ultimate example of self-giving love in Jesus' death on the cross.

Trinitarian Love

Before woman was created, Adam was limited in his capacity to image the Trinity and give of himself in love to another human person. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, "Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."³ After Eve is created, Adam recognizes her as a perfect recipient for his gift of self. "At last," someone of his nature whom he can love, and from whom he can receive love in return. Even their physical communion images the Trinity: As the love between the Father and Son begets another divine person (the Holy Spirit), the physical love between a man and woman has the potential to create another *human* person. By experiencing this physical and spiritual exchange of love in marriage, men and women can more perfectly know, understand, and experience the love of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

²John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women], 6.

³Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* [Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World], "24.

Application to Our Lives

We were not made to go through this life alone. Do we ever try to be more autonomous and self-sufficient than is good for us?

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 1:26–31, 2:7–8, 15–25

STEP 1: OPENER

Share with the group a situation in which you thought you were doing everything right or were on the right track, only to discover that you hadn't been given the right directions or instructions to begin with.

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Whenever we want to know whether we are doing something right, we need to go back to the original design or instructions. In terms of what it means to be a human being, this is what the beginning of the book of Genesis is all about. Through figurative language and metaphorical explanations of actual events, the author gives us deep insights into the big questions of life, including what it means to be male and female.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read Genesis 1:26–31, 2:7–8, 15–25.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

Read Genesis 1:26–31.

1. Why is there a plural reference to God in verse 26 and a singular reference in verse 27?

God is a Trinity: one God (“his”) in three divine persons (“our”). He is a union, or communion, of persons.

2. CCC 221 says that “God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange.” What do you think it means for the Trinity to be an “eternal exchange of love”?

The “eternal exchange of love” of the Trinity flows from God the Father, making a total gift of Himself (because God is love and this is what love does), which begets the Son. The Son, seeing the total gift of the Father, responds by making a total gift of Himself in return. The love between them is personified in the Holy Spirit.

3. If we know that God is an exchange of love, what does being created in His image and likeness mean for us?

It means that we are created to share the same characteristics of the Trinity: to live in a communion of love, to give and receive love.

4. An obvious way to live out an exchange of love is within one's vocation (marriage, priesthood, religious life). However, how can we live it out now, if we have not yet found our primary vocation? Feel free to be specific.

First and most importantly, by giving ourselves in love to God. Next, in seeking out community and giving of ourselves to those around us: for example, being charitable to our roommates and family, being quick to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, making sacrifices for others, letting others have their way instead of insisting upon our own, etc.

Read Genesis 2: 7-8, 15-25.

5. Why did God think it wasn't good for Adam to be alone?

Adam didn't have a helper/companion.

6. What did Adam come to understand about himself through living, at first, alone? How did this affect his understanding of Eve as gift?

Adam was able to understand for himself what he needed (or didn't need) to be complete. He experienced what John Paul II calls the "original solitude" so that, when God created Eve, Adam would appreciate her and know how she was different from all the other creatures.

7. How does the world try and mislead us, as women, about what we really need to be complete? Which messages are particularly enticing to you personally?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. How do you feel about Eve being created from Adam (or, more specifically, his rib)?

This could elicit a host of responses, some positive and some negative. Allow the group to discuss. Share St. Thomas Aquinas's insight into this passage, found in the "Helpmates" section of "What do I need to know about this passage?," as one possible explanation.

9. What do you think of Adam's initial reaction to Eve?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. How is Eve different from all other creatures?

Like Adam, Eve has reason and free will. Because of these gifts, she also has the capacity to give and receive love so that, together, the man and woman image the Trinity in a communion of love.

11. A document produced during the Second Vatican Council teaches us that, "Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."⁴ How does this relate to Adam and Eve? How does this relate to you?

Before Eve was created, Adam's self-understanding was limited, because there was not another human to whom he could make a true gift of himself. Similarly, each of us will only come to truly know ourselves when we exist as a gift for others.

⁴Vatican Council II, "Gaudium et Spes," 24.

12. What does it mean for Eve to be a “helper” to Adam?

Adam and Eve share in work and God's commandment to “subdue the earth” but, as John Paul II says, “Certainly it is a matter of a life's companion, with whom, as a wife, the man can unite himself, becoming with her ‘one flesh’ and for this reason leaving ‘his father and his mother’ (Genesis 2:24).” As discussed above, they also help each other to be who they were made to be by giving and receiving love.

13. How can we be “helpers” to the men around us and assist them in being who God created them to be?

Allow the group to discuss. Ideas: We can help them discover their calling to imitate God in self-giving by modeling generosity ourselves. We can encourage them in their work and in their pursuit of virtue.

14. How does the physical union of a man and woman in marriage help each to understand the Trinity better?

Through their union, they can better understand God as a communion of persons in love. Also, just as the love between the Father and Son itself begets another divine person (the Holy Spirit), so the physical communion between a man and a woman has the potential to participate in the creation of another human person.

NOTES



Chapter 2

The Plan Derailed

Genesis 3:1–19

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 26 - 31

DISCUSSION

Pages 32 - 38

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Genesis 3:1–19

The Big Picture

The tensions that exist in relationships between men and women today have their roots in Adam and Eve's original act of disobedience toward God.

In the previous chapter, we discussed how God created man and woman as complementary persons with equal dignity, and that the creation of the two sexes overcame “original solitude.” In God's original plan for man and woman, they were created to live in a communion of love, both giving and receiving.

We know, however—perhaps quite intimately and painfully—that this original plan is often not lived out today in the relationships between men and women. If Eve was originally created with equal dignity alongside Adam so that together they might image the Trinity, then why is there often competition and strife between the two sexes? In the third chapter of Genesis, we trace the origins of the problem. First, though, let's refresh our memories about one part of God's original plan.

Review Genesis 2:15–17. In this passage, God’s generosity shines through, giving Adam free reign over nearly every tree in the garden. There is just one tree, though, from which He forbids Adam to eat. Let’s fast-forward now to Genesis 3.

Loving Father or Tyrannical Lawgiver? (Genesis 3:1-19)

By this time Eve is on the scene, and an infamous character now joins her. Look carefully at what the serpent says: He twists God’s words and leads Eve to disbelieve God’s goodness. God did *not* say that they could not eat of the fruit of *any* tree of the garden; in fact, he said that they could eat of *every* tree, except one. He also didn’t say anything about touching it. The devil’s lies shrewdly contradict what God told Adam. Eve believes him and begins to lose trust in her Creator.

Can’t we see this so often in our own lives and sins? We disbelieve that God is a generous, provident Father who has our best interest in mind, and instead we grasp at what we think we need, rather than being receptive and letting God provide.

The Protector

What about Adam? Where was he when the serpent approached Eve? We know from Genesis 2:16 that God gave Adam the command to “till and keep” the garden. The Hebrew word for “keep” is *shamar*, which can be translated as “protect.” In her Bible Study *Courageous Love*, Stacy Mitch states, “The words ‘till and keep’ literally refer to Adam’s responsibility to cultivate and guard the garden and its contents. He shirked his responsibility to guard his wife by allowing the serpent, a malicious intruder, to interrogate his wife and allure her to sin.”⁵

⁵Stacy Mitch, *Courageous Love: A Bible Study on Holiness for Women* (Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 1999), 93–94.

Note that Adam and Eve committed the first sin *together*. John Paul II explains that, even though Adam and Eve had different roles in the first sin, “*that first sin is the sin of man, created by God as male and female.*”⁶

Curses (Genesis 3:14–19)

After Adam and Eve eat the fruit from the forbidden tree, they hide from God, who comes to look for them in the garden. When God finds them, He addresses Adam first: God gave Adam the command not to eat the fruit, and Adam is the head of the human race. As the first man, Adam represents all of humanity—and so we begin to see how all of mankind is affected by sin.

There are four relationships wounded by original sin: man’s relationship with God, with himself, with his fellow man, and with creation. Each has become disordered. The Catechism explains the consequences of original sin for the relationship between men and women: “The harmony in which they [Adam and Eve] had found themselves...is now destroyed: the control of the soul’s spiritual faculties over the body is shattered; the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions; their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination” (CCC 400).

Application to Jesus

Thankfully, with the Incarnation, Jesus becomes the new representative for all of humanity, the New Adam.

⁶Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Woman, Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 9 (emphasis in the original).

Man and Woman After the Fall

John Paul II explains it further:

The biblical description in the Book of Genesis outlines the truth about the consequences of man's sin, as it is shown by the *disturbance* of that original *relationship between man and woman* which corresponds to their individual dignity as persons.... While the violation of this equality, which is both a gift and a right deriving from God the Creator, involves an element to the disadvantage of the woman, at the same time it also diminishes the true dignity of the man. ⁷

Instead of man and woman existing as a gift for the other, they now seek their own interests. The differences between them, which once inspired wonder and communion, now breed misunderstanding, tension, and selfish use of the other.

Genesis 3 explains that a woman's desire shall be for her husband, but that he will dominate her. It seems like a positive thing for a woman to desire her husband; how could that be negatively affected by sin? One possibility is that a woman could become preoccupied with and motivated by getting men's attention. Think of the saying, "Men use love to get sex and women use sex to get love." A woman's desire to be loved can sometimes leads her to manipulate a man—or to settle for being used. If, instead, a woman's primary desire were for God, she would find true fulfillment and satisfaction in the One who loves her perfectly.

Similarly, we can see the effects of the man's curse of "lust and domination" in such things as pornography, promiscuous sex, sexual abuse, and rape. For both men and women, it is only when their foremost desire is for God that they will find fulfillment, as He is the only one who will truly satisfy all our longings.

⁷*Ibid.*, 10 (emphasis in the original).

Application to Our Lives

Can you imagine what it would have been like before relationships between men and women were subject to lust, domination, and unhealthy attachment? What is one thing you can do to make your relationships with men correspond more to God's original plan?

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Genesis 3:1–19

STEP 1: OPENER

Bring a few magazines to the study (*Cosmo*, *Maxim*, *Seventeen*, etc.) and ask the women to look through them and pick out one or two articles or images that might illustrate the disorder and problems that exist in male/female relationships today.

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Last time, we read about the creation of man and woman. We learned that they were created as complementary persons with equal dignity, and that a man and woman living in a communion of love are an image of the inner life of the Trinity. Our experience, though, tells us that, when it comes to the relationships between men and women, things have not turned out the way God planned. We can think of many instances where a woman's dignity is ignored, or where we can see deep wounds caused by the way the two sexes selfishly treat each other. Today, we're going to look at the third chapter of Genesis to find out why this is so and delve into how it affects us right now.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read Genesis 3:1–19. To begin, let's refresh our memories about one part of God's original plan.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

Review Genesis 2:15–17.

1. What are the three duties that God gives to Adam?

To till the garden, keep the garden, and not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

2. The Hebrew word for “keep,” *shamar*, can also be translated as “protect.” With this in mind, how is Adam also responsible for the first sin?

It’s not clear where Adam was when the serpent approached Eve. Regardless, Adam failed to protect the garden and all of God’s gifts, the most important of which was his wife, Eve, from the devil.

Read Genesis 3:1–7.

3. What does the serpent first say to Eve?

“Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’”

4. Do you notice anything strange about what he says?

He twists God's words. God did not say they couldn't eat of any tree; He said they could eat of every tree, except one.

5. How do the serpent's lies and suggestions affect Eve?

They cause her to question what God said and distrust His goodness and providence.

6. Jesus tells us that Satan is the "father of lies" (John 8:44). What are the lies that we, as women, hear and believe from the devil?

Allow the group to discuss. Some answers could likely be: I'm not enough: pretty enough, smart enough, skinny enough, etc. Or, I'm too much: too emotional, broken, serious, loud, etc. Or perhaps that we have to have it all to be happy: good grades, a career and family, an active social life, a multitude of talents—putting emphasis on "having" (grades, success, boyfriend, etc.) versus "holiness."

7. What can we do to combat these lies?

Allow the group to discuss. Some ideas include turning to the Word of God to hear the Truth; seeking friendships and community with those who speak the truth to us; being aware of the specific lies that each of us is likely to listen to in our hearts, and rejecting them as soon as they creep in. If it seems relevant, you could encourage your group to read chapter 4 of Song of Songs to hear how beautiful women are in the eyes of God.

8. Do you have a "serpent" in your life, someone who presents you with temptation? Have you ever misled someone, like the serpent misled Eve?

Allow the group to discuss.

Read Genesis 3:8–19.

9. After Adam and Eve eat the fruit, whom does God address first? What is significant about this?

God addresses Adam first, which is fitting: God gave Adam the command not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam is also the head of the human race, and since he is the first man, he is the representative for humanity.

10. What are the curses that God describes for Adam and Eve after they have eaten the fruit?

For Adam, his work will be difficult and full of toil. For Eve, her childbirth will be painful, and her relationship with her husband will be full of tension.

11. The Catechism says that, after the fall, “the union of man and woman becomes subject to tensions, their relations henceforth marked by lust and domination” (CCC 400). How have you seen this double problem of “lust and domination” in relationships between men and women?

Allow the group to discuss.

12. At first glance, it seems like a good thing for a woman to desire her husband, but how could it actually be sinful or broken?

Women can become preoccupied with and motivated by getting men's attention. Think of the saying, “Men use love to get sex, and women use sex to get love.” A woman's desire to be loved can lead her to either manipulate a man or to settle for being used.

13. Do you ever find yourself experiencing an unhealthy desire for men, perhaps by either being preoccupied with getting attention or using manipulation to obtain it? How can we combat this tendency?

Allow the group to discuss. Some possibilities include reminding ourselves that our worth as women does not come from anyone's opinion or interest in us, but from being made in the image and likeness of God. Our focus should not be on "getting" but instead on giving. More practically, the group might decide to do individual examinations of conscience each night for the next week on the issues of desire and manipulation.

14. Do you think it is a common problem for women (on this campus) to be used by men? If so, how are they used?

Allow the group to discuss.

15. If, in baptism, we are wiped clean of original sin, why do we still experience the effects of Adam and Eve's sin?

Have someone in the group read CCC 405. As a result of Adam and Eve's sin, every man and woman inherits and is born with concupiscence—that is, the fallen state that inclines us to evil. Because of concupiscence, we all have (1) a darkened intellect, (2) a weakened will, and (3) disordered passions.

16. The Catechism describes Adam and Eve's sin as such: "Man, tempted by the devil, let his trust in his Creator die in his heart and, abusing his freedom, disobeyed God's command.... All subsequent sin would be disobedience toward God and lack of trust in his goodness" (CCC 397). How are your sins a manifestation of a lack of trust in God's goodness?

Allow the group to discuss.

NOTES



Chapter 3

Jesus Confirms Our Dignity

John 4:1-42

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 40 - 45

DISCUSSION

Pages 46 - 50

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read John 4:1–42

The Big Picture

Some of the ways in which many women experience the effects of original sin are through discrimination on one hand and disordered attachments on the other. Jesus brings hope to these situations and shows us a radically different attitude.

In the last chapter we learned about the Fall of Adam and Eve, and how their sin ushered tensions and misunderstandings into the relationships between men and women. Throughout history, women have been particularly affected by this great disruption of God's original plan in the form of discrimination. Commenting on a particular scene in Jesus' life when He encounters a woman about to be stoned for adultery, Pope John Paul II points out that it represents "the concrete and historical situation of women, a situation which is weighed down by the inheritance of sin. One of the ways in which this inheritance is expressed is habitual discrimination against women in favor of men."⁸

Perhaps the last chapter (and your own experience) left you feeling discouraged and hopeless about the possibility of overcoming the

problem of “lust and domination.” If so, read on, because there is certainly hope!

Jesus, the Restorer

Even in the midst of our disobedience, God does not abandon us. Instead, He Himself becomes our Savior in the person of Jesus Christ. The remarkable thing is that He came not only to restore our relationship with Him, but also our relationships with one another. Jesus’ triumph over Satan was accomplished not only in His death on the cross but in His daily interactions with those around Him, and the example these interactions give us for honoring the dignity of others. Jesus’ own life shows us specifically “what the reality of Redemption means for the dignity and vocation of women.”⁹

Jesus, the Radical

During His lifetime, Jesus caused quite a stir by the way He treated women. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II meditates on Jesus’ interaction with women during His time on earth:

It is universally admitted—even by people with a critical attitude towards the Christian message—that in the eyes of his contemporaries Christ became a promoter of women’s true dignity and of the vocation corresponding to this dignity. At times this caused wonder, surprise, often to the point of scandal: ‘They marveled that he was talking with a woman’ (John 4:27), because this behavior differed from that of his contemporaries.”¹⁰

⁹Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 14.

⁹*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

In fact, John Paul II goes on to say,

Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent protest against whatever offends the dignity of women. Consequently, 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."¹¹

Contrary to the discrimination against women prevalent during His day, Jesus' revolutionary words and actions always expressed the "respect and honor due to women."¹² In fact, John Paul II describes some of the women in the Gospels as "guardians of the Gospel message," as it is with them that Jesus' "conversation concerns the most profound truths of revelation and faith."¹³

Jesus, the Messiah (John 4:1–42)

Not only is Jesus speaking to a woman—something strange enough that even His disciples question Him about it—but also a Samaritan, with whom Jews did not interact. Moreover, they don't have just a casual exchange: Jesus discusses truths that reach to the core of both her life and faith and His own mission on earth.

Having had five husbands (and the current one who is not a husband), the woman has been on a search for love—presumably having used or having been used by some of these men, looking to them to satisfy a thirst that only God can quench. Jesus knows her sins, but He also

¹¹*Ibid.*, 15 (emphasis in the original).

¹²*Ibid.*, 13.

¹³*Ibid.*, 15.

knows her dignity and potential for holiness. John Paul II says,

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. He himself, the Christ, is the definitive confirmation of this worth.... 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).... *Each of them from the “beginning” inherits as a woman the dignity of personhood.* Jesus of Nazareth confirms this dignity, recalls it, renews it, and makes it a part of the Gospel and of the Redemption for which he is sent into the world.¹⁴

Application to Jesus

During His public ministry, Jesus reveals to women some of the most profound truths about His identity and mission.

After recalling her sin, Jesus does not leave the woman without hope, instead revealing to her the cure for her wound: Himself. He says, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14). Finally, Jesus reveals to her the answer to the mystery of His identity: He is the Messiah, the one for whom she has been waiting. She, a woman, is the first person in this Gospel with whom Jesus shares this revelation! She is then given the privilege of being the catalyst for the conversion of her village.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 13 (emphasis in the original).

John Paul II explains that Jesus' attitude in the Gospels "confirms and clarifies, in the Holy Spirit, the truth about the equality of man and woman. One must speak of an essential 'equality,' since both of them—the woman as much as the man—are created in the image and likeness of God. Both of them are equally capable of receiving the outpouring of divine truth and love in the Holy Spirit. Both receive his salvific and sanctifying 'visits.'"¹⁵

Jesus brings redemption to the tensions that exist within men and women's relationships. His encounters with women all give witness to a woman's true dignity. As an answer to men's inclination to dominate, Jesus shows that women are created with an equal dignity and deserve equal treatment and respect. In response to a woman's tendency to have a disordered desire for a man, Jesus teaches that relationships with men will not totally fulfill us. Even within the best of relationships, both men and women will still be thirsting for something deeper. God is the only one who will quench that thirst.

Application to Our Lives

Jesus desires to speak to us, too, to the depths of our soul and life. Are we afraid of this conversation?

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 16.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

John 4:1–42

STEP 1: OPENER

Can you think of a couple whose relationship you really admire? What is it about that relationship that inspires you?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Though our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and, through their disobedience, caused discord and selfishness to enter into relationships between men and women, God, in His goodness, did not abandon us. Instead, He became human to redeem us and restore order to these relationships. In this chapter, we will look at Jesus' interactions with women in the Gospels to see how He witnesses to our dignity and shows us our true path to happiness.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Read John 4:1–42.

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

Read John 4:1-42

1. Why might this Gospel story be a story of hope for women (and men)?

Allow the group to discuss. See the "Jesus, the Radical" section in "What do I need to know about this passage?" for ideas.

2. How do Jesus' actions illustrate the point that all persons, men and women alike, are created with equal dignity?

Jesus does not shy away from speaking with a woman, even when His disciples "marveled" at it. He has a discussion with her about incredibly profound topics of faith, topics that were probably discussed only among men in those days. God also chooses her to be the catalyst for the conversion of her village.

3. Why do you think Jesus asks the woman to call her husband?

Allow the group to discuss. This question allows Jesus to speak to a part of her soul that is hurting. Through this question she admits the fact that she has had six "husbands." She has been on a search for love, looking to different men to satisfy a longing in her soul.

4. What is the cure Jesus gives her for her unending search for love?

Jesus. Only God can truly quench the thirst in our souls for love and communion.

5. With regard to your relationships with men, what still needs redemption? In what way does evil need to be defeated there?

Allow the group to discuss.

6. Either in your own life or your experiences with others, can you relate to the woman at the well—someone who looks to another person to make her happy and satisfied?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. What else are you tempted to use to try and satisfy the longings in your soul?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. John Paul II describes several women in the Gospels as “guardians of the Gospel message” as their conversations with Jesus “concern the most profound truths of revelation and faith.”¹⁶ What are the truths that He entrusts to the woman in this story?

Allow the group to discuss. Some suggestions: He satisfies the thirst in our soul for love; He knows us and our struggles intimately; He is the Messiah who “will show us all things” (Jn 1:26).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 15.

9. Why do you think Jesus chose to reveal His identity to this woman?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. What message or knowledge has Christ entrusted to you recently? Perhaps it's a lesson He's taught you through an experience, or something He's spoken to you about in prayer.

Allow the group to discuss.

11. What do you need to do to make yourself more receptive to divine truths?

Allow the group to discuss.



Chapter 4

Capacity for the Other

Luke 1:39-56

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 52 - 57

DISCUSSION

Pages 58 - 64

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Luke 1:39-56

The Big Picture

A woman is particularly endowed to embrace and cherish others.

“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.”¹⁷

—Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*

In the last chapter, we looked at the way Jesus treated a woman in the Gospel. Unlike many of His contemporaries, Jesus recognized the unique dignity and purpose God gave to each woman and sought to help these women discover that dignity for themselves. In the next four chapters, we will move from focusing on a particular Scripture

¹⁷Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 30 (emphasis in the original).

passage to reading more from John Paul II's 1988 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women." These passages will help us to understand some of the aspects of what John Paul II so beautifully called the "feminine genius" and the great mission that God entrusts to women because of this "genius."

Our Genius

What does John Paul II mean by "feminine genius"? In an Angelus address, he explains it in this way:

In fact, woman has a genius all her own, which is vitally essential to both society and the Church. It is certainly not a question of comparing woman to man, since it is obvious that they have fundamental dimensions and values in common. However, in man and in woman these acquire different strengths, interests and emphases and it is this very diversity which becomes a source of enrichment.¹⁸

His words echo God's original plan for the human couple, which we discussed in chapter one: that men and women were not created to be in competition but instead to complement each other. Men and women express dimensions of the human person in different ways, and together these expressions reveal the fullness of the human person.

So what are some of the feminine "strengths, interests and emphases" to which John Paul II alludes? We will start by looking at a woman's unique relationship with other human beings.

The most obviously unique thing about a woman's body is its ability to conceive and bear life. Having this physical capacity points to a

¹⁸Pope John Paul II, "The Feminine Genius," art. 2, in *The Genius of Women*, 27–28. Internal citations omitted.

greater reality about femininity: According to John Paul II, the female personality is being particularly receptive and sensitive to others, as well as generous in making a gift of self. He says,

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.¹⁹

Application to Jesus

In the Gospels, Jesus' words and actions echo the truth about the differences between men and women. John Paul II says, "Christ emphasized the originality which distinguishes women from men, all the richness lavished upon women in the mystery of creation."²⁰

God has endowed each woman, whether she physically gives birth or not, with a natural sensitivity to the human person in all his or her unique dimensions. St. Edith Stein—an atheist Jewish philosopher and university professor turned convert, nun, and theologian who was killed at Auschwitz—expands our understanding of this idea: "Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is *living, personal, and whole*."²¹ Stein goes on to describe this inclination as a yearning to "cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth."²²

¹⁹MD, 30.

²⁰MD, 25.

²¹Edith Stein, *The Collected Words of Edith Stein, Volume Two: Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 43 (emphasis in the original).

²²*Ibid.*

Some women are called to do this as literal mothers, but all are called to do this as *spiritual mothers*—reaching out to those around them—and, in their own way, to exercise and develop their capacity for the other. Stein reminds us that each woman will do this in her own beautifully unique manner when she says, “No woman is only woman; like man each has her individual specialty and talent.”²³

The Visitation (Luke 1:39–56)

Men and women are called to serve one another out of reverence for Christ. Often the service of women is practical and concrete, in direct relation to the needs of the people around her.

Because of our fallen nature, our world often sees service as degrading. However, in a Christian worldview, service has the greatest dignity. Jesus himself tells us that He came “not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28). John Paul II even says that Mary’s role as Queen of the Universe is based on service, in imitation of her son: “For her, ‘to reign’ is to serve! Her service is ‘to reign!’”²⁴

Pope Francis has observed that women’s role in the Church and the world is one of service, not servitude. He explains,

In the Church as well, it is important to ask oneself: what sort of presence does woman have? I suffer—to tell you the truth—when I see in the Church or in church organizations that the role of service, which we all have and should have...when a woman’s role of service slides into *servidumbre* [servitude].... When I see women carrying out acts of servitude, it is because the role a woman should play is not properly understood.²⁵

²³*Ibid.*, 47.

²⁴Pope John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women* (Rome: Vatican, 1995), 10.

²⁵Pope Francis, “Address to Participants in a Seminar Organized by the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the Occasion of the 25th Anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*,” Rome, 12

How do we see Mary's feminine capacity for others in the story of the Visitation? We read that, after Mary's encounter with the angel, she "arose and went with haste into the hill country" (Lk 1:39) to be with her cousin Elizabeth, who was expecting a child. How many of us, after receiving the kind of news that Mary did, would so immediately turn our thoughts to another in need? Might not our own incredible news eclipse that of others? Mary selflessly takes on another person's concern as her own and bravely sets out on what must have been a tiring journey in order to serve another. We can even imagine how much more tenderly Mary may have cared for and helped her pregnant cousin, knowing what was happening within her own body.

Application to Our Lives

We, too, are called to bring Christ to others, even when the "journey" is difficult.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Luke 1:39-56

STEP 1: OPENER

Do you think there are fundamental differences between men and women? Why or why not?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

In the last chapter, we examined how Jesus treated a woman He met with loving respect and dignity, an attitude often unusual for His time. Through these encounters, Jesus confirmed what we learned from reading the creation accounts in Genesis: that man and woman were each created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore with equal dignity.

In the next four chapters, we will move from primarily focusing on a passage from Scripture to focusing on passages from Pope John Paul II's 1998 apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women." In this document, the pope explores the Church's thoughts and teachings on feminine humanity. The quotes selected from the letter will help us to understand some of the aspects of what John Paul II so beautifully called the "feminine genius" and the great mission that God entrusts to women because of this "genius."

STEP 3: PASSAGE

"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."²⁶

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

1. What do you think John Paul II means by the "feminine genius"?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. Read aloud: "In fact, woman has a genius all her own, which is vitally essential to both society and the Church. It is certainly not a question of comparing woman to man, since it is obvious that they have fundamental dimensions and values in common. However, in man and in woman these acquire different strengths, interests and emphases and it is this very diversity which becomes a source of enrichment."²⁷ Do you agree that men and women express dimensions of the human person in different ways? If so, what do you think some of their complementary "strengths, interests and emphases" might be?

Allow the group to discuss.

²⁶MD, 30.

²⁷Pope John Paul II, "The Feminine Genius," art. 2, in *The Genius of Women*, 27–28. Internal citations omitted.

3. What is unique about a woman's body, compared to a man's?

Its ability to conceive and bear life.

4. How does a woman's physical capacity to conceive, give birth to, and nourish a child speaks to a greater reality about the whole feminine personality?

Allow the group to discuss. John Paul II describes the female personality as being particularly receptive and sensitive to others, as well as generous in making a gift of self to them.

5. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II writes, "The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of their femininity—and this in a particular way determines their vocation."²⁸ What do you think is the connection between a woman's moral and spiritual strength and this awareness of being a custodian of human life?

Morally speaking, it seems that women are more able to avoid the temptation to seek one's own advancement or selfish interests at the expense of others, often those who are most weak and defenseless. Think about your reaction to news of a woman committing some kind of cruelty to another human being, compared to hearing of a man doing the same thing. Women who have an awareness of this mission from God become a spiritual strength to those around them and teach others about their own responsibility toward the human family, thus bringing about the kingdom of God more fully.]

²⁸MD, 30.

6. St. Edith Stein, a convert, nun, and theologian who was killed at Auschwitz, says, “Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is living, personal, and whole.”²⁹ Stein goes on to describe this inclination as a yearning to “cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth....”³⁰ Does this feminine response resonate with you, either in your own experiences or from your observations? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. Regardless of a woman’s state in life and whether she has had children, God has endowed each woman with a spiritual maternity: a natural receptivity and sensitivity to the human person in all its unique dimensions and potential. Share with the group an example of someone you know who lives out spiritual motherhood.

Allow the group to discuss.

8. How can you better live out this spiritual maternity in your daily life?

Allow the group to discuss.

9. Edith Stein reminds us that each woman manifests the feminine genius in her own beautifully unique manner when she says, “No woman is only *woman*; like man, each has her individual specialty and talent.” How can you live out your unique feminine

²⁹Edith Stein, *The Collected Words of Edith Stein, Volume Two: Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 43 (emphasis in the original).

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*, 47.

genius in your work, classes, or social life?

Some examples: Take the time to really get to know your classmates and coworkers. Stand up against gossip. Surprise someone with a note or gift when they are having a bad day. Appreciate people for a job well done. Offer to help someone who is struggling/burdened with work.

10. Men and women are called to serve one another out of reverence for Christ, though often the service of women is practical and concrete, in direct relation to the needs of persons.

What is your reaction to this idea?

Allow the group to discuss. Because of our fallen nature, our world often sees service as degrading. However, in a Christian worldview, service has great dignity. Jesus himself tells us that he came “not to be served but to serve” (Mt 20:28). John Paul II even says that Mary’s role as Queen of the Universe is based on service: “For her, ‘to reign’ is to serve! Her service is ‘to reign!’”³²

Consider sharing Pope Francis’ quotation from “The Visitation” section.

Read Luke 1:39–56

11. How do you see Mary’s “capacity for the other” in the Visitation?

See “The Visitation” in “What do I need to know about this passage?”

³²Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 10.

NOTES



Chapter 5

A Mission for Our Times

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 66 - 71

DISCUSSION

Pages 72 - 76

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Big Picture

Women have an indispensable role to play in the improvement of society *precisely because* women are different from men.

"In our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material well-being to a degree hitherto unknown. While this favors some, it pushes others to the edges of society. In this way, unilateral progress can also lead to a gradual *loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human*. In this sense, our time in particular awaits the manifestation of that 'genius' which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human!"³³

—Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*

In the last chapter, we began to explore what John Paul II meant by the term "feminine genius." We discussed how men and women, equal in dignity, express a common humanity through complementary gifts

³³Pope John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women," *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 30 (emphasis in the original).

endowed by God. John Paul II describes the female personality as being particularly receptive and sensitive to others, explaining that God entrusts the human being to women in a unique and beautiful way. This uniquely feminine sensitivity and capacity for the other creates a critical and exciting mission for women today. Within each of our spheres of influence, we are to help preserve and bring to the forefront the truth about the human person, those things that John Paul II calls “essentially human.”

Women and Society

John Paul II argues that society urgently needs women who live out their femininity:

It is a “sign of the times” that woman’s role is increasingly recognized, not only in the family circle, but also in the wider context of all social activities. Without the contribution of women, society is less alive, culture impoverished, and peace less stable. Situations where women are prevented from developing their full potential and from offering the wealth of their gifts should therefore be considered profoundly unjust, not only to women themselves but to society as a whole.³⁴

St. Edith Stein echoes the pope’s sentiments when she writes, “The participation of women in the most diverse professional disciplines could be a blessing for the entire society, private or public, precisely if the specifically feminine ethos would be preserved.”³⁵

What would it look like to live out a feminine ethos in professional life? According to John Paul II, it would mean remaining sensitive to what is truly human and to how one’s work affects actual human beings. While business can become more concerned with efficiency and

³⁴Pope John Paul II, “The Feminine Genius,” art. 1, in *The Genius of Women*, 27–28. Internal citations omitted.

³⁵Edith Stein, *The Collected Words of Edith Stein, Volume Two: Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 49.

profit than with the good of human beings, women can bring their care for individuals into the public sphere, making all professions more authentically human. Women have a special ability to pay attention to the needs of others and to respond holistically to them as persons, rather than as problems to fix.

It is very easy in many professions, and even in student life, to become completely consumed with one's individual tasks and lose sight of the bigger picture. Similarly, in our competitive world, it can be even easier to prioritize one's own success and advancement at the expense of others. A woman's special sensitivity and empathy for other people can help to hold this selfish tendency in check. Her natural desire to promote the growth and development of the whole human person—including herself, her coworkers, fellow students, and those affected by her work—can present a compelling contrast to our individualistic society.

Application to Jesus

All professions and environments would benefit from receiving the light of Christ in a more profound way.

Woman as the Heart of the Family and Soul of the Home

While women's involvement in professional work is of the utmost importance to the proper advancement of society, this work cannot eclipse the most natural way that most women will demonstrate their "capacity for the other": as wives and mothers. St. Edith Stein comments on the persistent question of how married women can balance their vocation to motherhood and professional life:

But possibly more nowadays than in former times, both husband and wife will work. Therein arises the difficult problem of the double vocation: there is danger that her work outside of the home will so take over that finally it can make it impossible for her to be the heart of the family and the soul of the home, which must always remain her essential duty.³⁶

Dr. Evelyn Birge Vitz discusses this difficult issue in her book *Real Women*. While working outside the home for some women is a necessity, Vitz says,

Whatever the reasons why we work, the important question is this: Where are our priorities? The priorities of secular society are worldly esteem and prestige, high pay, and the rest. But, for Christian women and mothers, the priorities have to be different. We need to ask ourselves—and keep asking ourselves: What is the nature of my commitment to my job, my career? Am I working for God and my family, or just for me?³⁷

While the particular circumstances of our lives will differ, calling for personal discernment in our choices, Vitz offers a general suggestion: If women need to work when the children are young, they might look for jobs that better support their responsibilities at home (working fewer hours, closer to home, at a less high-pressured company, etc.). However, if women can stay home when the children are young, they may have the opportunity to work outside the home when the children are grown, giving them the chance to have both a family life and a career...maybe “just not all at the same time.”³⁸

Of course, some circumstances don't allow women to make such choices: single motherhood, for example, or having an ill husband and needing to provide for the family. But for young women who might be afraid that choosing to stay home would mean missing out on other

³⁶Stein, 109.

³⁷Vitz, Evelyn Birge. *Real Women* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 131–32 (emphasis in the original).

³⁸*Ibid.*, 133.

opportunities, it's important to understand the truly irreplaceable contribution mothers make to society by raising a loving family.

Finally, Vitz encourages women to “keep in mind two great Christian insights. The first is that success in the eyes of the world ultimately does not matter. Money, prestige, all these things don't really fulfill, nor do they last. The second is that charity, love—which begins at home—does fulfill, and it lasts; in fact, it is eternal.”³⁹

The influence of much of our culture and media today can make it difficult to value the role of “heart of the family and soul of the home.” The nature of this work is often hidden and quiet, two things not particularly esteemed by our society. Regardless, Pope John Paul II reminds us that we must think with the mind of Christ instead of that of the world. The gift of motherhood, as well as fatherhood, and the responsibility to nurture and educate a family are some of the most sacred and beautiful gifts that God has entrusted to women and men in a special way. They are not roles to begrudge or suppress; rather, they can become paths to self-discovery and true happiness. “Motherhood implies from the beginning a special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman's ‘part’. In this openness, in conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman ‘discovers herself through a sincere gift of self.’”⁴⁰

Application to Our Lives

We will only experience true happiness when we exist as a gift for others.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁰MD, 18.

NOTES

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

STEP 1: OPENER

What unique contributions do you think women bring to home life and professional life?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

In the last chapter, we began to explore what John Paul II meant by the term “feminine genius.” We discussed how men and women, equal in dignity, express a common humanity through complementary gifts bestowed by God. John Paul II describes the female personality as being particularly receptive and sensitive to others, explaining that God entrusts the human being to women in a unique and beautiful way. In this chapter, we will examine the critical and exciting mission that God has for the women of our time by reason of their feminine gifts.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

“In our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material well-being to a degree hitherto unknown. While this favors some, it pushes others to the edges of society. In this way, unilateral progress can also lead to a gradual *loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human*. In this sense, our time in

particular awaits the manifestation of that 'genius' which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human!"⁴¹

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

1. In our society today, where do you see "*a gradual loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human*"?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. In his July 23, 1995, Angelus address, John Paul II said: "It is a 'sign of the times' that woman's role is increasingly recognized, not only in the family circle, but also in the wider context of all social activities. Without the contribution of women, society is less alive, culture impoverished, and peace less stable. Situations where women are prevented from developing their full potential and from offering the wealth of their gifts should therefore be considered profoundly unjust, not only to women themselves but to society as a whole."⁴² How do you think women use their feminine gifts to enliven society and promote culture and peace?

Allow the group to discuss.

⁴¹Pope John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 30 (emphasis in the original).

⁴²Pope John Paul II, "The Feminine Genius," art. 1, in *The Genius of Women*, 27–28. Internal citations omitted.

3. Edith Stein wrote, “The participation of women in the most diverse professional disciplines could be a blessing for the entire society, private or public, precisely if the specifically feminine ethos would be preserved.”⁴³ How can women bring a “specifically feminine” quality to the workplace?

Many professions like business, advertising, and law are more concerned with efficiency and profit than with the good of human beings. By bringing their care for individuals into the public sphere, women can make all professions more authentically human. Women have a special gift to pay attention to the needs of others and to respond more holistically to them as persons, rather than as problems to fix.

4. What do you think John Paul II means in the passage above when he refers to “what is essentially human”?

Allow the group to discuss. Here, John Paul II is referring to those things that set human beings apart from the rest of creation: their ability to love, know, and serve God, to create culture and beauty, etc.

5. What is the mission that John Paul II calls on women to perform?

Allow the group to discuss. He encourages women to embrace their feminine gifts and bring them into all aspects of society, thereby making it more human and sensitive to others.

6. How do you feel about performing this mission?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. While women’s involvement in professional work is of the utmost importance to the proper advancement of society, this work cannot eclipse the most natural way that most women will

⁴³Stein, 49.

demonstrate their “capacity for the other”: as wives and mothers. Our society often does not value this role. How do you feel about it?

Allow the group to discuss.

8. Why do you think our society devalues the role of wife and mother?

The nature of this work is often hidden and quiet, two things not particularly esteemed by our society, which prizes productivity and tangible results.

9. Edith Stein comments on the persistent question of how married women can balance their vocation to motherhood and professional life: “But possibly more nowadays than in former times, both husband and wife will work. Therein arises the difficult problem of the double vocation: there is danger that her work outside of the home will so take over that finally it can make it impossible for her to be the heart of the family and the soul of the home, which must always remain her essential duty.”⁴⁴ Why do you think it is the woman who is “the heart of the family and soul of the home”?

As discussed in the previous chapter, women have a unique capacity to promote the growth and development of the whole person. This is precisely the family’s mission with respect to each of its members.

10. John Paul II says, “Motherhood implies from the beginning a special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman’s ‘part’. In this openness, in conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman ‘discovers herself through a sincere gift of self’.”⁴⁵ How do you see motherhood as a path to self-discovery?

Allow the group to discuss.

⁴⁴Stein, 109.

⁴⁵MD, 18.



Chapter 6

The Prophetic Nature of Women

Luke 1:26-38

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 78 - 81

DISCUSSION

Pages 82 - 86

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Read Luke 1:26-38

The Big Picture

Women's natural receptivity allows them to be prophetic witnesses to receiving and responding to God's love.

"Holy women are an incarnation of the feminine ideal; they are also a model for all Christians...an example of how the Bride must respond with love to the love of the Bridegroom."⁴⁶

—Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*

Chapter 6 will continue our examination of John Paul II's understanding of the feminine genius. Equipped with the knowledge that God has endowed women with a unique sensitivity to the human person and that she therefore has a vital role to play in the proper advancement of society and culture, we will explore an even greater mission entrusted to her, one characterized by the feminine expression of receptivity.

⁴⁶Pope John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women," *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 27.

Receptivity

In what ways can we see that women are physically receptive? In the sexual act, a wife physically receives her husband in a mutual gift of self. As we discussed earlier in our study, when God creates a new human life through the intimacy of husband and wife, the woman receives that life into her very body and nurtures the baby for nine months in her womb.

Historically, some feminist thinkers have resented the idea that women are naturally receptive. To them it implies that women are weak and passive. Philosopher Alice von Hildebrand, however, insists upon the correct definition of receptivity:

[Receptivity] is not to be confused with passivity as Aristotle does when he claims that the male is superior to the female because he is “active,” whereas she is passive. Clearly passivity is inferior to activity, for one is only being “acted upon.” But this is not true of receptivity which involves an alert, awakened, joyful readiness to be fecundated by another person or by a beautiful object. All created persons are essentially receptive because “there is nothing that we have not received.” Women feel at home in this receptivity and move in it with ease and grace.⁴⁷

Women are called to just this kind of *active* receptivity.

The Bridegroom and Bride

Here again, a woman’s biological experience speaks to a deeper truth about her personality. Our natural familiarity with receptivity extends beyond our physical self and characterizes our interior life

⁴⁷Alice Von Hildebrand, *The Privilege of Being a Woman* (Ann Arbor: Sapientia Press, 2002), 63.

and relationship with God. "To accept her state of creaturehood is easier for a woman than for a man, who is always tempted to be in command.... *Receptivity is a religious category par excellence.*"⁴⁸ Because receptivity is natural to women, we seem to find it easier to embrace our position of dependence in relation to God and to receive the greatest gift He gives to us: His love.

Together, Christians make up the Church, who is the Bride of Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom. John Paul II explains the significance of this relationship when he says, "The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: *it is she who receives love, in order to love in return.*"⁴⁹ Each human being, male and female alike, is made in the depths of his or her being to receive the gift of God's love. Therefore, all of humanity stands in a receptive position before God who desires to unite us to Himself with a spousal union by the gift of the Spirit. He wants us, humanity, to be His bride so that He can love us and we can love Him in return. Women are predisposed to understand this truth, because it is already stamped into our feminine bodies and personalities. In a sense, women teach all of humanity how to be truly human and in relationship with God!⁵⁰

"Holy women are an incarnation of the feminine ideal; *they are also a model for all Christians*, an example of how the Bride must respond with love to the love of the Bridegroom."⁵¹ John Paul II describes this as "a special kind of 'prophetism' that belongs to women in their femininity. The analogy of the Bridegroom and the Bride speaks of the love with which every human being—man and woman—is loved by God in Christ. But in the context of the biblical analogy...it is precisely the woman—the bride—who manifests this truth to everyone."⁵² This is truly an amazing gift and responsibility given to us by God.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 64-5.

⁴⁹MD, 29.

⁵⁰Concept taken from Christopher West's talk, "Woman, God's Masterpiece."

⁵¹Pope John Paul II, "Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women," *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 27 (emphasis added).

⁵²MD, 29.

Application to Jesus

It is no accident that the Church has always referred to herself as “she.” In a sense, humanity is feminine in relation to Christ, her Bridegroom, and we are all called to open ourselves to receive Christ’s love and love Him in return.

The Annunciation (Luke 1:26–38)

How does Mary embody active receptivity in this scene? Mary asks for understanding and freely chooses to say “yes” to God’s plan for salvation, allowing the Son of God to be conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. “Mary’s words at the Annunciation— ‘Let it be to me according to your word’—signify the woman’s readiness for the gift of self and her readiness to accept a new life.”⁵³ Mary not only receives but responds to the gift with her own gift of self: “The existence of Mary is an invitation to the Church to root her very being in listening and receiving the Word of God, because faith is not so much the search for God on the part of human beings, as the recognition by men and women that God comes to us.”⁵⁴

Application to Our Lives

Let us spend time each day listening, receiving, and then responding in love to the Word of God.

⁵³MD, 18.

⁵⁴Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* (Rome: Offices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2004).

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Luke 1:26-38

STEP 1: OPENER

What is a characteristic that all women possess?

STEP 2: BACKDROP

Chapter 6 continues our examination of Pope John Paul II's understanding of the feminine genius. Equipped with the knowledge that God has endowed women with a unique sensitivity to the human person, and that she therefore has a vital role to play in the proper advancement of society and culture, we will explore an even greater mission entrusted to her, one characterized by the feminine expression of receptivity.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

"Holy women are an incarnation of the feminine ideal; they are also a model for all Christians...an example of how the Bride must respond with love to the love of the Bridegroom."⁵⁵

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

⁵⁵MD, 27.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

1. One special dimension of the feminine personality that John Paul II talks about is our natural receptivity. In what ways can we see that women are physically receptive?

In the sexual act, a wife physically receives her husband in a mutual gift of self. When God creates a new human life through the intimacy of husband and wife, she receives that life into her very body and nurtures the baby for nine months in her womb.

2. Historically, some feminist thinkers have resented the idea that women are naturally receptive. Why do you think this is?

At first glance, receptivity does not seem compatible with our culture's obsession with productivity and usefulness. In this context, speaking about woman's receptivity can make women seem inferior and of lesser value compared with those who produce.

3. Philosopher Alice von Hildebrand warns that receptivity must not be confused for and passivity. She writes, "Clearly passivity is inferior to activity, for one is only being 'acted upon.' But this is not true of receptivity which involves an alert, awakened, joyful readiness."⁵⁶ Share an example of the type of receptivity von Hildebrand describes.

Allow the group to discuss. One idea is a mother being open to conceiving life.

⁵⁶Von Hildebrand, 63.

4. How can a woman's natural inclination to receptivity be a gift from God?

Allow the group to discuss.

5. A woman's biological experience of receptivity speaks to a deeper truth about her personality, her interior life and relationship with God. How do you see this manifest itself in women's lives?

Allow the group to discuss. See the "Receptivity" section in "What do I need to know about this passage?" for ideas.

6. Because receptivity is natural to women, we seem to find it easier to embrace our position of dependence in relation to God. Alice von Hildebrand states, "To accept her state of creaturehood is easier for a woman than for a man, who is always tempted to be in command."⁵⁷ Do you agree? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II speaks at length about the analogy of the Church as the bride and Christ as her bridegroom: The bridegroom loves and the bride receives the love and then loves in return. With this in mind, recall the passage from John Paul II that opened this chapter and explain why you think he calls women "a model for all Christians."

Each human being, male and female alike, is made in the depths of his or her being to receive the gift of God's love. Therefore, all of humanity stands in a receptive position before God, who desires to unite us to Himself with a spousal union by the gift of the Spirit. He wants us, humanity, to be His

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 64–65.

bride so that He can love us and we can love Him in return. Women are predisposed to understand this truth, because it is already stamped into our feminine bodies and personalities. Women are therefore in a position to teach true receptivity to the world.

8. How can you be more receptive to the love of God in your life?

Allow the group to discuss. Answers might include prayer, reading Scripture, and going more frequently to Mass and confession.

9. How can you, with all your feminine gifts and strengths, live out this call to be a “model” for all Christians?

Allow the group to discuss.

10. In what ways can you better respond to God’s love and return it to Him and those around you?

Help others to recognize their dignity and purpose; be more active in leading others to Christ and the Church; anticipate other’s needs and show Christian charity.

Read Luke 1:26–38.

11. How does Mary embody receptivity in the scene of the Annunciation?

She is open to God’s plan for her life (and His plan for the world) and consents to it. Through her consent, she receives life in her womb. She is also open to the responsibility that comes with raising a child.

12. Is it easy or difficult for you to be receptive? Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

13. What are some practical ways that we can live out this quality of receptivity?

Allow the group to discuss. Ideas: allow ourselves to be served; joyfully accept the good intentions of others, especially men who wish to honor us (i.e., opening doors, carrying something heavy, clearing our dishes, etc.).]

14. How might you better live this *interior* quality of receptivity in your life?

Allow the group to discuss. Ideas: Pray to ask Mary to help you to be more like her in her receptivity; think kindly of those who offer to serve or honor you, rather than having a resentful attitude; trust that God loves you unconditionally and desires your good; do a daily examen about the gifts and blessings that God has given to you.

NOTES



Chapter 7

Mary, Our Model

UNDERSTANDING

Pages 90 - 93

DISCUSSION

Pages 94 - 99

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

The Big Picture

It is in Mary that we discover the true nature and most perfect example of feminine humanity.

Mary is “the new beginning” of the *dignity and vocation of women*, of each and every woman.... A particular key for understanding this can be found in the words which the Evangelist puts on Mary’s lips after the Annunciation, during her visit to Elizabeth: “He who is mighty has done great things for me” (Lk 1:49). These words certainly refer to the conception of her Son, who is the “Son of the Most High” (Lk 1:32), the “holy one” of God; but they can also signify the *discovery of her own feminine humanity*. He “has done great things for me”: this is the discovery of all the richness and personal resources of femininity, all the eternal originality of the “woman”, just as God wanted her to be, a person for her own sake, who discovers herself “by means of a sincere gift of self”.... In Mary, Eve discovers the nature of the true dignity of woman, of feminine humanity. This discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life.⁵⁸

—Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*

90 ⁵⁸Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women,” *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD) (Rome: Vatican, 1988), 11 (emphasis in the original).

We have now reached the last chapter in our study of John Paul II's apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* and the concept of the feminine genius. We will spend this last chapter meditating on Mary as the perfect model of feminine humanity and how she teaches us about our own dignity and vocation.

"The Church sees in Mary the highest expression of the 'feminine genius' and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration."⁵⁹ The Blessed Virgin Mary is a guiding light for us on our path to heaven, and especially in living out our feminine nature. Though sinless, she is not a goddess or an unattainable ideal. She is a fully human woman created by God without the stain of original sin on her soul, called to be mother to God's only Son. As the perfect woman, totally disposed to do the will of God, Mary models for us the characteristics of the feminine genius that we have examined in the previous chapters.

Mary's Gift of Self

John Paul II says that Mary's words at the annunciation "signify the discovery of her own feminine humanity." Why do you think this is the case? As the Second Vatican Council states, man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self." At the moment of the Annunciation, Mary held nothing back and made a sincere gift of herself to God. In doing this, she discovers who God made her to be in all her human and feminine richness. She perfectly exhibits the feminine qualities of receptivity and sensitivity discussed in the precious chapters.

In his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*, John Paul II states that women should look to Mary to discern the virtues that will truly help them to discover and live out their unique femininity:

⁵⁹Letter to Women, 10.

It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement.⁶⁰

Application to Jesus

Mary's feminine genius is always at the service of Christ, her Son.

Mary as the New Eve

John Paul II also says that Mary represents “the eternal originality of the ‘woman’, just as God wanted her to be.” This is why Mary is the most perfect model for us. Just as Christ is described as the “new Adam,” Mary is the “new Eve.” It’s as if, with Mary, God pushed the reset button. Like Eve, she was created without sin. Mary, however, corrected Eve’s mistake and said yes to God, making a complete gift of self to him. This was God’s intention from the beginning: that, in their own uniquely feminine way, women would freely choose to respond to His love with their own gift of love and thereby discover their true dignity and vocation.

If Mary is the Mother of all of humanity, then we can have confidence in her love and care for us. As women, we can look to her as the model of the feminine virtues John Paul II calls “the genius

⁶⁰Pope John Paul II, “Mother of the Redeemer,” *Redemptoris Mater* (Rome: Vatican, 1987), 46.

of women.” All of humanity—not just women—can look to her as an example of faithfulness in following God: “The dignity of every human being and the vocation corresponding to that dignity find their definitive measure in *union with God*. Mary, the woman of the Bible, is the most complete expression of this dignity and vocation.”⁶¹

Mary is a model to all Christians because she is a true model of being open to the will of God, carrying Jesus Christ within her, and then bearing Him to the world. Her mission has always been to bring Jesus Christ to the world and to bring the world to Jesus Christ. Let us go to her with all of our needs, our sorrows, and our joys. She will rejoice with us in our triumphs and console us in our suffering. Let us entrust ourselves to her, knowing that she will bring us to her Son.

May St. Edith Stein’s words guide us on this journey, as each of us continues to discover and live out our own feminine genius:

Whether she is a mother in the home, or occupies a place in the limelight of public life, or lives behind quiet cloister walls, she must be a handmaid of the Lord everywhere.... Were each woman an image of the Mother of God, a Spouse of Christ, an apostle of the divine Heart, then would each fulfill her feminine vocation no matter what conditions she lived in and what worldly activity absorbed her life.⁶²

Application to Our Lives

By imitating Mary in her total love for and service to God and those around her, we will realize our true dignity and fulfill our feminine vocation.

⁶¹MD, 5.

⁶²Edith Stein, *The Collected Words of Edith Stein, Volume Two: Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 52.

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

STEP 1: OPENER

Share with the group an example of someone you know (or know of) who lives out their feminine genius.

STEP 2: BACKDROP

We have now reached the last chapter in our study of John Paul II's apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* and the concept of the feminine genius. We will spend this last chapter meditating on Mary as the perfect model of feminine humanity and how she teaches us about our own dignity and vocation.

STEP 3: PASSAGE

Mary is 'the new beginning' of the *dignity and vocation of women*, of each and every woman... A particular key for understanding this can be found in the words which the Evangelist puts on Mary's lips after the Annunciation, during her visit to Elizabeth: "He who is mighty has done great things for me" (Lk 1:49). These words certainly refer to the conception of her Son, who is the "Son of the Most High" (Lk 1:32), the "holy one" of God; but they can also signify the *discovery of her own feminine humanity*. He "*has done great things for me*": this is the *discovery of all the richness and personal resources of femininity*, all the eternal

originality of the “woman”, just as God wanted her to be, a person for her own sake, who discovers herself “by means of a sincere gift of self”.... *In Mary, Eve discovers* the nature of the true dignity of woman, of feminine humanity. This discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life.⁶³

STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Note that answers appear in italics.

Exploration: Questions and Answers

1. Is it easy or difficult for you to relate to and find inspiration in Mary as an example of living out the feminine genius? Why or why not?

Allow the group to discuss.

2. Throughout *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II frequently brings his reflections on the feminine genius back to Mary. Why do you think he does this?

Allow the group to discuss. Read: In his encyclical letter Redemptoris Mater, John Paul II states that women should look to Mary to discern the virtues that will truly help them to discover and live out their unique femininity. He says, “It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments

⁶³MD, 11.

of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement."⁶⁴

3. Out of the list of "lofty sentiments" in the previous quote, which one most resonates with your life right now? Which one is especially difficult?

Allow the group to discuss.

4. How does Mary represent, as John Paul II says, "the eternal originality of the 'woman', just as God wanted her to be"?

Just as Christ is described as the "new Adam," Mary is the "new Eve." It's as if, with Mary, God pushed the reset button. Like Eve, she was created without sin. Mary, however, corrected Eve's mistake and said yes to God, making a complete gift of self to Him. This was God's intention from the beginning: that, in their own uniquely feminine way, women would freely choose to respond to His love with their own gift of love and thereby discover their true dignity and vocation.

5. John Paul II says that Mary's words at the annunciation "signify the discovery of her own feminine humanity." Why do you think this is the case?

As the Second Vatican Council states, man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self." At the moment of the Annunciation, Mary held nothing back and made a sincere gift of herself to God. In doing this, she discovers who God made her to be in all her human and feminine richness. She perfectly exhibits the feminine qualities discussed in the previous chapters, including receptivity and sensitivity to another.

⁶⁴Pope John Paul II, *Mother of the Redeemer, Redemptoris Mater* (Rome: Vatican, 1987), 46.

6. What are specific ways that you think looking to Mary will help you achieve your own true flourishing?

Allow the group to discuss.

7. What can you do to learn more from Mary?

Allow the group to discuss. Ideas include praying to her, meditating on her life with Jesus through the rosary, cultivating a devotion to one of her titles, reading a book on Mary.

8. The following words by St. Edith Stein can serve as a guide on our journey to heaven: “Whether she is a mother in the home, or occupies a place in the limelight of public life, or lives behind quiet cloister walls, she must be a handmaid of the Lord everywhere.... Were each woman an image of the Mother of God, a Spouse of Christ, an apostle of the divine Heart, then would each fulfill her feminine vocation no matter what conditions she lived in and what worldly activity absorbed her life.”⁶⁵ What do you think of Stein’s words here?

Allow the group to discuss.

⁶⁵Edith Stein, *The Collected Words of Edith Stein, Volume Two: Essays on Woman* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 52.

NOTES

NOTES

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FEMININE GENIUS

