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## Chapter 5

# A Mission for Our Times

### UNDERSTANDING

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### DISCUSSION

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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!”<sup>33</sup>

—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

<sup>33</sup>Pope 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.<sup>34</sup>

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.”<sup>35</sup>

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

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

<sup>35</sup>Edith 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.<sup>36</sup>

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?<sup>37</sup>

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.”<sup>38</sup>

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

<sup>36</sup>Stein, 109.

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

<sup>38</sup>*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.”<sup>39</sup>

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.’”<sup>40</sup>

### **Application to Our Lives**

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

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>40</sup>MD, 18.



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!"<sup>41</sup>

#### **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."<sup>42</sup> How do you think women use their feminine gifts to enliven society and promote culture and peace?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

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

<sup>42</sup>Pope 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.”<sup>43</sup> 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**

<sup>43</sup>Stein, 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.”<sup>44</sup> 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’.”<sup>45</sup> How do you see motherhood as a path to self-discovery?**

*Allow the group to discuss.*

<sup>44</sup>Stein, 109.

<sup>45</sup>MD, 18.

