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## Chapter 6

# The Prophetic Nature of Women

Luke 1:26-38

**UNDERSTANDING**

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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."<sup>46</sup>

—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.

<sup>46</sup>Pope 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.<sup>47</sup>

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

<sup>47</sup>Alice 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.*"<sup>48</sup> 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.*"<sup>49</sup> 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!<sup>50</sup>

"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."<sup>51</sup> 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."<sup>52</sup> This is truly an amazing gift and responsibility given to us by God.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, 64-5.

<sup>49</sup>MD, 29.

<sup>50</sup>Concept taken from Christopher West's talk, "Woman, God's Masterpiece."

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

<sup>52</sup>MD, 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.”<sup>53</sup> 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.”<sup>54</sup>

## **Application to Our Lives**

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

<sup>53</sup>MD, 18.

<sup>54</sup>Congregation 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."<sup>55</sup>

## **STEP 4: EXPLORATION: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Note that answers appear in italics.

<sup>55</sup>MD, 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."<sup>56</sup> 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.*

<sup>56</sup>Von 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."<sup>57</sup> 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*

<sup>57</sup>*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.*



