



Chapter 7

Mary, Our Model

UNDERSTANDING

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DISCUSSION

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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. 93

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.

