

JOCELYNE'S RESOURCE-OF-THE-MONTH: October 2017

My Commentary on: "*Mulieris Dignitatem*" By Saint Pope John Paul 2

Vatican Link → https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women.html

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"*Letter to Women*" By Saint Pope John Paul 2

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True Feminism, Part 5: The Masculine and Feminine Genius

In part one of this series on feminism, I spoke of the God-given gift of womanhood and of motherhood. In part two, I looked at abortion and contraception as two main fruits of the movement of feminism, attacking authentic womanhood. In part three, I wrote of the relationship between men and women according to God's design, as revealed in Sacred Scripture. I expanded on this idea in part four, where I looked at God's plan in terms of the roles of men and women in marriage and in the life of the family. This month, I would like to go even broader and look at the specific God-given gifts of men and women and how this relates to our roles in our society and the world.

Women and men are different and have different strengths and gifts given them by God. These differences do not make one greater or lesser than the other; we are simply different. The strengths and gifts that men and women embody will impact how we perform our duties and how we attend to our families, our world and the Church. God has provided us with guidance as to how we can live harmoniously together to ensure the greatest human flourishing and happiness. The Word of God (the Bible) and Sacred Tradition have been compiled and preserved by the Catholic Church, and have much to tell us about God's design for men and women.

My Resources-of-the-Month for October and November speak to the distinctive charisms of men and women, and rely heavily on both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition in addressing the topic. Saint Pope John Paul 2, in his apostolic letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, coined the term "feminine genius" to describe the unique gifts that women embody. Dr. Deborah Savage looks at the "masculine genius," or the unique gifts that men embody. I agree with Dr. Savage that it is important to look at the genius of both sexes and how they are related, as in isolating the masculine or feminine genius, the temptation to pit men and women against each other is too great to ignore. Men and women are not in competition with each other; we are complimentary! It is important to use this knowledge so that as men and women we can come to know ourselves better, and help each other reach our greatest potential. I believe that if we truly embrace these charisms, "our masculine and feminine genius," and work together using these complimentary strengths, our world will benefit greatly. As men and women, we can use this information to help make the world a better place to live.

Being that this is a commentary on feminism, I will begin with and focus more on the "feminine genius." I have written previously of the difficulty I have had in coming to terms with my womanhood. My train of thought was as follows: "As a woman I am 'the second sex,' lesser than and dominated by men, doomed to suffer simply because I am a woman." I no longer think this way, but at the time, my heart was troubled by many faith-based questions centered on womanhood and the role of women. I felt that my womanhood put me at a disadvantage, even when it came to the things of God. I prayed about this incessantly, begging God for understanding and peace, begging Him to show me where I fit in as a woman. So when I first heard about the so-called "feminine genius," I was intrigued and wanted to learn all I could about it.

I had two main questions: What is this feminine genius? How does the feminine genius impact the vocation of women? These are the questions I will attempt to answer in this commentary. *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of

Women), is a rather long Papal letter that few will find the time to read. I, admittedly, had a difficult time getting through it. I've been working on this topic for months now. I actually meant to publish this commentary last month, but did not finish on time. My goal is to summarize the most pertinent details for you, so that you will have access to this important information. If you can find the time, I do encourage you to read this letter however, as I will not be able to address all of the divinely inspired wisdom contained in it. Another wonderful resource on the feminine genius is Saint John Paul 2's *Letter to Women*. This is more easily digested and only a fraction of the length of *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

Perhaps it is important to start by mentioning that Saint John Paul 2 (JP2) acknowledges the equal dignity of women and men, and also affirms their differences. He states, "In the sphere of what is 'human' – of what is humanly personal – 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are distinct, yet at the same time they complete and explain each other."

In his *Letter to Women*, JP2 also acknowledges the historical and current hardships, discrimination and violence against women, and apologizes for any role the Church may have played in this. He acknowledges also that there is more work to be done to ensure the equality of men and women in all domains of life. JP2 recognizes the many accomplishments of women throughout history regardless of the more difficult situations in which they have found themselves and laments, "Yet how many women have been and continue to be valued more for their physical appearance than for their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity; in a word, the very dignity of their being! (*Letter to Women*)."

JP2 similarly notes that, "progress tends to be measured according to the criteria of science and technology." While women have also contributed in this area, men are generally leaders when it comes to scientific and technological progress. However, JP2 expresses that this should not be the only measure of progress in our society. He says, "Much more important is the social and ethical dimension, which deals with human relations and spiritual values. In this area, which often develops in an inconspicuous way beginning with the daily relationships between people, especially within the family, society certainly owes much to the 'genius of women' (*Letter to Women*)." In other words, we need to stop comparing women to men and measuring a woman's success in comparison to men's success. In sports we do not do this. We recognize the differences between men and women. Women compete against women and men compete against men.

This absolutely does not mean that we categorize women and men and reduce them to silly stereotypes! When Saint John Paul 2 refers to the "feminine genius," the woman adorned in pink, smiling while she attends expertly to her domestic tasks is not his idea of the image of the perfect woman. The woman who embraces and truly embodies this feminine genius is a woman of substance, a woman of strength and power, and a woman of great faith! So what exactly is this "feminine genius?"

What is the Feminine Genius?

It is important to note that while these traits may be special charisms held by women, this does not mean that men do not have these qualities too; it simply means that these are woman's gift and that the way she embodies these traits is different than the way men do. This same logic applies to the charisms that make up the masculine genius.

Saint John Paul 2 looks to Sacred Scripture, particularly the creation accounts in the book of Genesis to address what they have to tell us about God's design for men and women. I have touched on this topic in my previous true feminism commentaries. JP2 likewise looks to sacred scripture for insight into what he calls the feminine genius. His papal letter is chalk-full of references to scripture. "Every word and gesture of Christ about women must therefore be brought into the dimension of the Paschal Mystery. In this way everything is completely explained," he notes.

According to St. John Paul 2 and his study of divine Revelation (the Bible), women are especially gifted in the following areas that I've split into two main categories. These speak to the physical and spiritual realities of the human person (body and soul). Please note that these charisms can apply to both categories, but are primarily linked to one or the other.

1. Gifts related to motherhood (a physical reality): women are life-giving, sensitive, gifted in service to the marginalized, intuitive, introspective, generous, heart-centered/people-oriented, and they reinforce others in their vocations.

2. Gifts related to the spirituality (soul) of women: women are spiritually gifted in the areas of fidelity, insightfulness, faithfulness, prophesy, and in uniting reason and feeling in a way that only a woman can (what JP2 calls a “resonance of mind and heart”).

Now, I'd like to summarize in more detail what JP2 has to say about these charisms that comprise the feminine genius.

Firstly, and this should come as no surprise, women are motherly. Women are life giving, physically and spiritually. This means that women are people-oriented and gifted in the way that they reinforce and support others. Women's orientation towards people is heart-centered. In his *Letter to Women*, JP2 writes: “Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge the person, because they see persons with their hearts.” Women are gifted in their ability to pay attention to others, and in determining and responding to the physical and spiritual needs of others. My own experience dictates the truth of Saint John Paul 2's statement that, “Motherhood develops this predisposition even more.” Nothing compares to the feminine love of a mother (this includes spiritual mothers)! As Eve was the “mother of all the living (Genesis 3:20),” women nourish and comfort the lives that God has entrusted to her care and do this in a way that is distinctive of her femininity. This is why JP2 states that, “The mother's contribution is decisive in laying the foundation for a new human personality (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).”

According to Dr. Savage's interpretation, women receive life and help others become the best they can be, what God made them to be. We do this in the way that we pray for and encourage others, for example. “Thus the ‘perfect woman’ (Prov 31:10) becomes an irreplaceable support and source of spiritual strength for other people, who perceive her great energies of her spirit. These ‘perfect women’ are owed much by their families, and sometimes by whole nations,” JP2 indicates (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).

Women embody a special gift of sensitivity, which is traditionally associated with her motherliness. “From the beginning of Christ's mission, women show to him and to his mission a special sensitivity which is characteristic of their femininity (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).” This motherly charism means that women are especially gifted in serving the marginalized with sensitivity, compassion and mercy. John Paul 2 expressly mentions that in the work of education and health care “women are ever ready and willing to give themselves generously to others, especially in serving the weakest and most defenseless (*Letter to Women*).” Women are also especially insightful and introspective. We “enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic (*Letter to Women*),” according to Saint John Paul 2.

The second aspect of the feminine genius is a spiritual reality. Women embody a spiritual beauty all her own! We are deeply faithful and loyal. Examples of this gift of fidelity appear numerous times in the Bible. If we look at Jesus' passion and death, it is clear that many women courageously accompanied and supported Him, when all but one the Apostles fled in fear. “John was the only Apostle who remained faithful, but there were many faithful women (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).” Women have therefore a gift of faith and fidelity that is unique!

Another aspect of the gift of spirituality exemplified by women is a distinctive ability to prophesy. “‘To prophesy’ means to express by one's words and one's life ‘the mighty works of God’ (Acts 2:11), preserving the truth and originality of each person, whether woman or man (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).” Always looking to Sacred Scripture as the ultimate resource, JP2 observes that women receive divine gifts and they prophesy. He recognizes that “Both [women and men] are equally capable of receiving the outpouring of divine truth and love in the Holy Spirit. Both receive his salvific and sanctifying ‘visits’ (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).” He also recognizes, however, the special way that women embody this charism. Many examples of this are provided in scripture where women were known to accompany Jesus, proclaim the Good News, and provide for Jesus and His apostles “out of their means (Luke 8:1-3).” Women also became disciples of Christ (e.g. the woman of Samaria at the well). Most notably, women are first at the tomb and first to hear and declare, “He is risen!” In this way Mary Magdalene becomes “the apostle of the Apostles (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).”

Saint John Paul 2 also refers to the passage from the letter to the Ephesians that I looked at in an earlier commentary (specifically chapter 5:21-23). He says that this passage “enables us to think of 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 and the text's interior logic, it

is precisely the woman – the bride – who manifests this truth to everyone.” JP2 continues saying that, “This ‘prophetic’ character of women in their femininity finds its highest expression in the Virgin Mother of God.”

Women are evidently spiritually gifted, and capable of a deep and true faith. Saint John Paul 2 notes that Christ speaks to the women of the Bible about profound Gospel truths and they understand and become disciples themselves. In fact, JP2 lists this as one of the gifts of woman, “this feminine response of mind and heart (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).” This means that women contribute to “the growth of a culture which unites reason and feeling” (*Letter to women*). The spread of the Gospel therefore begins with women because of this gift. In other words, women impregnated with the Gospel will nourish it and help it grow and develop!

Saint John Paul 2 makes very clear that womanhood is therefore not only a physical reality, but a spiritual one as well. The feminine genius is embedded in the very essence of her being (physical and spiritual). It is a God-given gift!

Now on to my second question...

How Does the Feminine Genius Impact the Vocation of Women?

It should be no surprise that in looking at the Gospels, JP2’s prime example of the “feminine genius” is the Blessed Virgin Mary. He notes: “Grace never casts nature aside or cancels it out, but rather perfects it and ennobles it. Therefore, the ‘fullness of grace’ that was granted to the Virgin of Nazareth, with a view that she would become ‘Theotókos,’ [God-Bearer] also signifies the fullness of the perfection of ‘what is characteristic of woman,’ of ‘what is feminine’ (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).” Our Lady is in essence “the archetype, of the personal dignity of women,” or our ultimate example of female perfection!

Our Blessed Mother is both virgin and mother. JP2 thus identifies motherhood and virginity as “two particular dimensions of the fulfillment of the female personality.” He writes, “Indeed, the person of the Mother of God helps everyone – especially women – to see how these two dimensions, these two paths in the vocation of women as persons, explain and complete each other.”

While Saint John Paul 2 provides the Blessed Virgin Mary as the ultimate example of the embodiment of the “feminine genius,” he includes the examples of St. Catherine of Siena, St. Teresa of Avila and others as well. If you know anything about these women, you know that they were definitely not dainty and weak. St. Teresa of Avila and St. Catherine of Siena have had an irrevocable and profound influence on the Church and our world, and have been named Doctors of the Church. This is an exceptional title given to saints whose contributions, especially to theology and doctrine, are considered of special importance. Notably, all three women are mothers, either physically, spiritually, or both (as in the case of Mary, mother of God).

It is therefore clear that the Church’s position on the vocation of women and the importance of motherhood in no way impedes or enslaves women. Should all women be wives and physical mothers exclusively, tending to the home? Not at all. Just look again to the examples of St. Teresa and St. Catherine. Both were never married. They were consecrated virgins and were both highly influential women, working outside the home founding communities and ministering to, teaching and advising others (Including the pope in St. Catherine’s case!). In this way they were both powerful spiritual mothers!

As further support for working women, Dr. Deborah Savage quotes the Compendium on Catholic Social Thought, which stipulates: “The feminine genius is needed in all aspects of the life of society, therefore, the presence of women in the workplace must be guaranteed.”

A true feminism will also support those who wish to tend to their families at home, however. Saint John Paul 2 accurately notes in his *Letter to Women* that currently in our society, “the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to this gift.” He continues, “much remains to be done to prevent discrimination against those who have chosen to be wives and mothers.”

JP2 also states in his apostolic letter that, “[Consecrated] virginity has to be considered also as a path for women, a path on which they realize their womanhood in a way different from marriage.” The Church has always provided this avenue as an option for women who do not wish to marry and feel called to consecrated single life. He does clarify that, “This cannot be compared to remaining simply unmarried or single, because virginity is not restricted to a mere ‘no,’ but contains a profound ‘yes’ in the spousal order: the gift of self for love in a total and undivided manner.” Through consecrated virginity, a woman therefore offers her whole self (body and soul) to God, in a different manner than married women do so.

“A woman is ‘married’ either through the sacrament of marriage or spiritually through marriage to Christ. In both cases marriage signifies the ‘sincere gift of the person’ of the bride to the groom. In this way, one can say that the profile of marriage is found spiritually in virginity. And does not physical motherhood also have to be a spiritual motherhood, in order to respond to the whole truth about the human being who is a unity of body and spirit? (*Mulieris Dignitatem*)” That is in essence our vocation as women, to gift our whole selves to God, following His will in marriage or as a consecrated single.

The vocation of women is therefore tied to motherhood (physical or spiritual). JP2 details, “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 – precisely by reason of [her] femininity – and this in a particular way determines [her] vocation.” He continues, “A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting... (*Mulieris Dignitatem*).”

JP2 notes that, “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.” This is our ultimate goal, to do the will of the Father by offering our whole selves, body and soul, to Him, in imitation of Mary, His mother. In fact, we are all called to imitate this, men and women alike.

JP2 in his “Letter to Women” ends by identifying a three-fold servile mission of women: “service of humanity, of peace, of the spread of God’s kingdom.” This servile mission (gift of self), enriched with the gift of her “feminine genius” can be accomplished through her work either inside or outside of the home, and does not restrict her freedom of choice when it comes to employment. In other words, women can exercise their feminine genius in any area of life!

I will continue this commentary next month, where I will comment on the masculine genius, and the shared vocation of men and women. I’m so excited to share with you more of what I’ve learned!

Your sister in Christ,



Jocelyne

Also Quoted

"The Masculine Genius" - Dr. Deborah Savage, Franciscan University Presents, previously recorded episode: Published June 2016, <https://www.faithandreason.com/2016/05/6342/>