

Feminine Genius

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The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling (closing message of the Second Vatican Council).

Critics of the Catholic Church frequently mock the Church's insistence that women have unique gifts for the Church and the world. Indeed, Pope John Paul II's exhortations to women that they employ their "feminine genius" to build a culture of life often are met with a chorus of dissent from within and without the Church. The tired mantra is that "until women are ordained to the priesthood, the Church is guilty of discrimination."

How should Catholics respond to these charges? How can Catholic women communicate the deeper truths of the "effect and power" of the feminine vocation?

First, is it logical to think the Church would entrust the enormous mission to "aid humanity in not falling" to second class citizens? Of course not. Indeed, the Church has called women to be the stealth weapon of the twenty-first century. It urgently needs and seeks the particular, active participation of its daughters.

But the innate power of the feminine genius comes into focus only when the vocation of women is grasped properly. The Church recognizes that the culture of death is successful wherever women abdicate their unique calling; it therefore calls women to recover the fullness of their vocation, the fullness needed to "aid humanity in not falling."

This fullness of the feminine vocation is missing in the debate over "power-sharing" in the Church and the insistence on the ordination of women, because the fullness of the human experience can be realized only when the inherent gifts of each gender are ordered to each other. This is the "known but forgotten truth" that has proved prickly for those who are critical of the Church.

Dignity and Vocation

The phrase "feminine genius" is attributed to John Paul II, but the concept is outlined in some exhortations of Pope Pius XII, in particular to the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations (1957). The Second Vatican Council further elaborated on the timeliness of the definitively feminine contributions to society. Yet the most comprehensive summation of the meaning of womanhood in light of this "hour" of history is *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women). Promulgated by John Paul on the feast of the Assumption in the Marian year of 1988, *Mulieris* is a reflection on the spiritual and moral strength of the woman. The Pope further reflected on the subject in his

1995 *Letter to Women*, which addressed the challenge of contemporary feminism—and offered a warning about forms of feminist ideology that are more destructive than constructive.

It is clear that the Church sees an almost startling importance in feminine attributes and their potential to build a culture of life, and *Mulieris* offers women practical ways to apply their feminine genius to the world around them. Four aspects of that genius are key to the feminine battle plan to “aid humanity in not falling”: receptivity, sensitivity, generosity, and maternity.

Receptivity

It was a woman, the Blessed Virgin Mary, who first received the Son of God. The essence of Mary’s *fiat* is feminine receptivity unblemished by original sin. At the Annunciation, heaven invites—it doesn’t force—Mary to receive God-made-Man. Like Mary, all women are called to be a “genius” of receptivity—biologically, emotionally, and spiritually. Women’s bodies are created to receive new life, but in order to be fully feminine, women’s hearts and spirits must be receptive also.

Women’s receptive nature is paramount in understanding women’s genius. Men’s nature is generative: Men are called to give their lives—even unto death—for the defense and protection of women. But men’s nature and gifts are only half of God’s design for humanity. His gift of himself and his masculine way of relating to the world are stunted and sterile when he cannot understand himself in relation to women, both physically and spiritually.

In Genesis, Adam lacks a suitable partner until God creates Eve. She is like him in her humanity but delightfully different in her specifically feminine mode of being. Likewise, she is complete—fully feminine—only in relation to the masculine dimension of human being. Thus, masculine and feminine attributes can be understood only in relationship to each other.

Thus, we see that God entrusted the future of humanity to woman and her ability to love sacrificially and that the dignity of every woman is complete when she loves mankind in her capacity as an image of God. In *Mulieris*, John Paul writes of God’s “feminine qualities” found most prominently in the Old Testament (e.g., “As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you” [Isaiah 66:13]). When the woman works within her natural, receptive nature, she is personally fulfilled and the community around her is blessed by the feminine aspect of the human experience.

When women are open to receiving life, the world flowers once again.

Receptivity is the foundation of all other feminine attributes. The woman finds in each life something unrepeatable, something wondrous. The gift of self for the woman is a gift of life for all of mankind. When women work in concert with the principle of receptivity, they encourage pro-life and pro-family policies in the workplace and in the culture.

Sensitivity

A woman's receptive nature is at the heart of her sensitivity. Having the capacity to welcome life within her own body makes her ever alert to the inner life of others. Before the world knows this new being, she is sensitive to its needs and has hopes for its future.

Many people see sensitivity as a weakness, not realizing that it is actually a strength, a gift that women have to see beyond the exterior and look into the deepest needs of the heart, never separating the inner person from his outward contribution.

This sensitivity to others can be employed in the public realm and have an incalculable influence on public policy. When one Catholic teenager took on the fashion dictates of a giant department store, the store listened to her demand for fashionable clothing that was also modest. When nurses spoke out for increasing nutrition for unresponsive patients, hospital policies changed. In a significant number of these "hopeless" cases, the increased attention brought patients back to health.

When women lobby for more humane treatment of prisoners, laws are changed. When women fight against the sex industry's assault on community values, zoning laws change. When women fight against pornography's assault against the human person, public policy follows their lead. (Many women have been duped by the idea that "sex work" should be legal so a woman can "choose" to demean herself. The Church refuses to allow women to be oppressed in this manner, however "legal" it may become. Nothing could be more insensitive to the human person than reducing human bodies to a commodity to be sold. If women do not employ their sensitivity to oppose it, a brave new world of clinical cannibalism looms before us: wombs for rent, human organs for sale, cloned human beings being parted out like an old car.) The Church urges women to exercise their sensitivity to restore awareness of the humanity of each person.

Women can show society, private and public, how to be open, receptive, and sensitive to the deepest human needs.

Generosity

A woman's capacity for generosity is tied intimately to her receptive nature. Generosity makes a woman available for the needs of her community and her profession—needs that go far beyond operational efficiency.

The first generous act is to welcome new life, and in this, Mary is our best example. But there are many Gospel accounts of generous women. For example, the story of the widow's mite reminds contemporary women that the size of our offering is less important than the orientation of our hearts. And the woman who anointed Jesus with the precious perfume teaches us to recognize human value over material value.

The generous hospitality of Martha and Mary has universal appeal to all who yearn for the warmth of human communion. Critics who mistake their generous service for

servitude are missing the point: Jesus exhibits a keen interest in the lives of women and their surroundings, and he invites them to participate in his work. His desire for human communion is met not only by the apostles but also by women such as Martha and Mary. This is demonstrated in his deep spiritual and intellectual exchange with Martha (John 11:21–27). Jesus trusted women's generous hearts with his own human need for hospitality, support, and understanding of his mission.

The Church perceives the grave danger of propaganda that seduces women away from their inherently generous nature and argues that all levels of human interaction benefit from the influence of women as women—that is, in accord with their authentic feminine nature. That natural generosity, a weapon against dehumanizing scientism, is manifested when women emphasize the social and ethical dimensions to balance the scientific and technological achievements of mankind (see *Letter to Women* 9).

Maternity

The mystery of motherhood cannot be exhausted or captured by words, but it has been jettisoned by some women who wrongly believe that equality will be achieved by obliterating the differences between men and women. Some would have women emulate masculine traits to achieve equality, but the sad result of that approach has been a diminishment of the authentic feminine aspects of the human family.

John Paul writes that women exercise “an affective, cultural, and spiritual motherhood, which has inestimable value for the development of individuals and the future of society” (*Letter to Women* 9). He also highlights maternity, biological and spiritual: “Woman is endowed with a particular capacity for accepting the human being in his concrete form” (MD 18). This singular feature—which prepares her for motherhood, not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually—is inherent in the plan of God, who entrusted the human being to woman in an altogether special way (cf. *ibid.*, 30).

John Paul understands that it is this maternal orientation that builds cohesive, life affirming communities. It is maternal influence that promotes unity within families and is the genesis of peace in the whole of the human family.

Mary Ann Glendon—wife, mother, and professor of law at Harvard University—reminded women that they are the transformative presence in the culture. And it is a hallmark of Catholic Christianity that we do not have the option to turn our backs on the sinful world; we're not allowed to throw up our hands and retreat into private life. For the shaping of culture comes down to the nurture and education of human beings, one by one. And women as mothers, teachers, and in countless other ways have long played a decisive role in the transmission of culture. That is why Pope John Paul II says in *Evangelium Vitae* that ‘in transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, that is unique and decisive.’ And that is why he has asked women to be in the forefront of efforts to build a culture of life.

The Time Is Now

The Church has placed enormous emphasis on women at this hour of history. The culture of life simply cannot be built without the influence of women. Happily, the hope in women as agents of this restoration is well founded on a key demographic: Women, as never before in history, hold crucial positions in the public square. The gains that women have made professionally and culturally place them and their “feminine genius” at the epicenter of societal change. Women can open new vistas for the culture of life from the authority and power of their places in a society that values women’s rights. Of course, only women with a formation in and an understanding of their feminine genius can bring about those changes.

Pope John Paul writes that “woman has a genius all her own, which is vitally essential to both society and the Church.” Thus, “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” (Angelus message of July 23, 1995).

Ultimately, feminine genius is centered on the redemptive act of Jesus Christ. Alice von Hildebrand remarked that “when piety dies out in women, society is threatened in its very fabric, for a woman’s relationship to the sacred keeps the Church and society on an even keel, and when this link is severed, both are threatened by total moral chaos.”

Women who desire to take their position in this war for life must anchor their efforts in the Eucharist, which “expresses the redemptive act of Christ” (MD 26). It is women, joined to Christ eucharistically, who have the power and perseverance to extend that redemption society in their unique, feminine manner.