

prologue

Dear Participant,

We live in an age of confusion: confusion about what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, and how, as men and women, we're called to love.

God, however, is not a God of confusion. He is a God of clarity. He is a God who wants his children to know who we are and how he made us to live.

Long ago, God began revealing those truths to a small tribe of people in the Near East: the Israelites. Then, in the fullness of time, he became man and lived among us. During Jesus' time on earth, he showed us the face of God. He also showed us our face—who God created us to be.

In the two thousand years since, the Church that Jesus Christ established has been the guardian of those truths. The pope, in union with the bishops, has defended, interpreted, and proclaimed Divine Revelation, helping each successive generation encounter it anew.

In our own time, Pope Saint John Paul II recognized the growing confusion surrounding questions of human dignity and sexuality. Accordingly, he worked throughout his papacy to help people see how the truths of Revelation applied to those questions. He authored hundreds of addresses, letters, books, and even poems about human love and what it means to be created in God's image.

One of the questions nearest and dearest to his heart, however, was the vocation and mission of women.

As a young priest in Poland, in the first years after World War II, the future pope befriended countless married couples. He lived amongst them as a friend and spiritual father, witnessing the joys and the sorrows of family life. Likewise, as a professor of philosophy and bishop, Saint John Paul II worked alongside women. He saw the gifts we brought to the world. At the same time, he saw the world reject those gifts by demanding that we be less than or other than God made us to be.

From the time of his election to the papacy in 1978 until his death in 2005, Saint John Paul II never stopped proclaiming women's dignity. With a wisdom born of true friendship with women and deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, he strove to help us discover who God made us to be. He also strove to help us understand how much the world needs the feminine genius.

Today, thanks to documents like his "Letter to Women," we can continue to learn those lessons. We can sit, spiritually speaking, at Saint John Paul II's feet and hear, through his words, Christ speaking to us.

This study is designed to help you discover God's love for you, call for you, and plan for you. Through the prayerful reading of John Paul II's letter, careful reflection on key passages, and lively discussion about how those passages apply to your life, you can encounter the truth about who you are. You can find clarity in a confusing world.

The team at Endow will be praying for you as you embark on this study. So too, we trust, will Saint John Paul II.

Your Sisters in Christ,

The Endow Team

chapter one

A LETTER TO ALL WOMEN

Opening Prayer

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful
and kindle in them the fire of your love.
Send forth your Spirit and they shall be created.
And You shall renew the face of the earth.

O, God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit,
did instruct the hearts of the faithful,
grant that by the same Holy Spirit
we may be truly wise and ever enjoy His consolations.
Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

Our Lady, Seat of Wisdom, pray for us.

I. SETTING THE STAGE

I greet you all most cordially, women throughout the world!

I am writing this letter to each one of you as a sign of solidarity and gratitude on the eve of the Fourth World Conference on Women, to be held in Beijing this coming September.

Before all else, I wish to express my deep appreciation to the United Nations Organization for having sponsored this very significant event. The Church desires, for her part, to contribute to upholding the dignity, role and rights of women, not only by the specific work of the Holy See's official Delegation to the Conference in Beijing, but also by speaking directly to the heart and mind of every woman. . . .

I would now like to speak directly to every woman, to reflect with her on the problems and the prospects of what it means to be a woman in our time. In particular, I wish to consider the essential issue of the dignity and rights of women, as seen in the light of the word of God.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 1.1–1.2

Key Points

The United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing in 1995.

This was the occasion that led John Paul II to write his "Letter to Women." The letter, however, is also connected to another UN conference that took place in Cairo the previous year. The UN organized that 1994 conference to tackle the issue of population control, and in the months leading up to it, those planning the conference made no secret of their intention to advocate for abortion on demand as a means of population control.

Recognizing the problems of the Cairo agenda, John Paul II spent the summer of 1994 combating its flaws.¹ His public audiences during June, July, and August of that year delved into topics such as human dignity, the meaning of marriage, discrimination against women, and a Catholic understanding of fertility.

The pope's "campaign" worked. Paired with the Holy See's active diplomacy during the Cairo conference, it succeeded in preventing abortion from being enshrined in UN documents as a universal right and stopped the UN from endorsing abortion as an acceptable

¹ Mary Ann Glendon, "What Happened at Beijing," *First Things* 59 (January 1996): 30–36.

method of family planning. Afterwards, papal biographer George Weigel noted, "The most consequential thing that the planners of the Cairo conference had failed to take into account was the moral power of John Paul II."²

The pope, however, knew that abortion's most radical supporters wouldn't give up the fight. He expected the same issues to be back on the table at the 1995 Conference on Women. So, in the year leading up to the Beijing conference, John Paul II dedicated himself to explaining Church teaching on the dignity and vocation of women. After declaring 1995 "The Year of the Woman," he delivered multiple addresses and wrote multiple documents about women, our role in society, and the obstacles we face. This "Letter to Women" was one of the most important of those documents.

All Church documents are not created equal.

Before we delve more deeply into John Paul II's "Letter to Women," it's helpful to understand the type of document it is. Some Church documents, such as dogmatic constitutions and encyclical letters, convey the Church's authoritative teaching and provide clear instruction on questions of faith or morals. Others, such as post-synodal exhortations and apostolic letters, are more pastoral in nature and aim to help bishops, priests, and the laity live the faith more fully.

Finally, messages, letters, and addresses, such as John Paul II's "Letter to Women," seek to encourage specific groups within the Church or offer insight on contemporary questions.

These messages don't have the authoritative weight of encyclicals, but the Church nevertheless asks the faithful to consider the wisdom they offer with care and reverence.

² George Weigel, "What Really Happened at Cairo," *First Things* 50 (February 1995): 24–31.

Whatever the form of document, however, in writing to the faithful, contemporary popes follow in the footsteps of their predecessors, who have used letters to instruct Christians since the earliest days of the Church. The earliest papal letters have been preserved for us in Sacred Scripture, where we find two letters from Saint Peter, the first pope. Another early example of a papal epistle is Pope Saint Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians.

Clement was Saint Peter's successor as Bishop of Rome and (perhaps) a former slave or servant. Sometime, possibly as early as the late '60s, before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, Clement sent a letter to settle a dispute between Christians in Corinth.³ "Be of humble mind," he wrote, "laying aside all haughtiness, and pride, and foolishness, and angry feelings . . . and remember the words of Jesus."⁴

When John Paul II writes us, in his "Letter to Women," he is doing much the same thing as Clement did more than 1,900 years earlier.

All people have great dignity.

From the opening lines of his "Letter to Women," John Paul II stresses that all women matter. Simply because we exist, we have dignity.

The word *dignity* expresses the truth that every human being has an intrinsic worth. That worth has nothing to do with sex, age, health, appearance, education, social status, employment, or even the choices we make. Rather, we matter—we have dignity—because God made us, loves us, and desires a relationship with us. We have dignity, because we are created in the image and likeness of God (see Gen. 1:17; CCC, 1700).

The Catholic Church teaches that this dignity is *inalienable* and *inviolable*, meaning that nobody, not even ourselves, can take it away from us. We can wound our dignity through sin, we can act in a way that violates our dignity or goes against it, but our dignity remains *inherent*—or essential—to who we are (see CCC, 1487, 2736). As the Second Vatican Council explains in the dogmatic constitution, *Gaudium Et Spes*, "The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to be in communion with God."

³ For the most thorough contemporary treatment of the dating and authorship of Clement's First Epistle, see Monsignor Thomas Herron's *Clement and the Early Church of Rome: On the Dating of Clement's First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Emmaus Road Press, 2011).

⁴ Pope Saint Clement 1, "The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians." Available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/patristc/anf1-1.htm>.

Bringing It Home

All too often, those outside the Church take it upon themselves to speak for Catholics. The media, government, and secular critics tell the world what Catholics believe and want. Think, for example, of how the Church's opposition to abortion or contraception have been labeled by the press as "anti-woman." Or think about how the Church's belief that sex is for marriage is labeled "anti-sex." Neither are true, but the culture likes to put its own distortive spin on Catholic teaching.

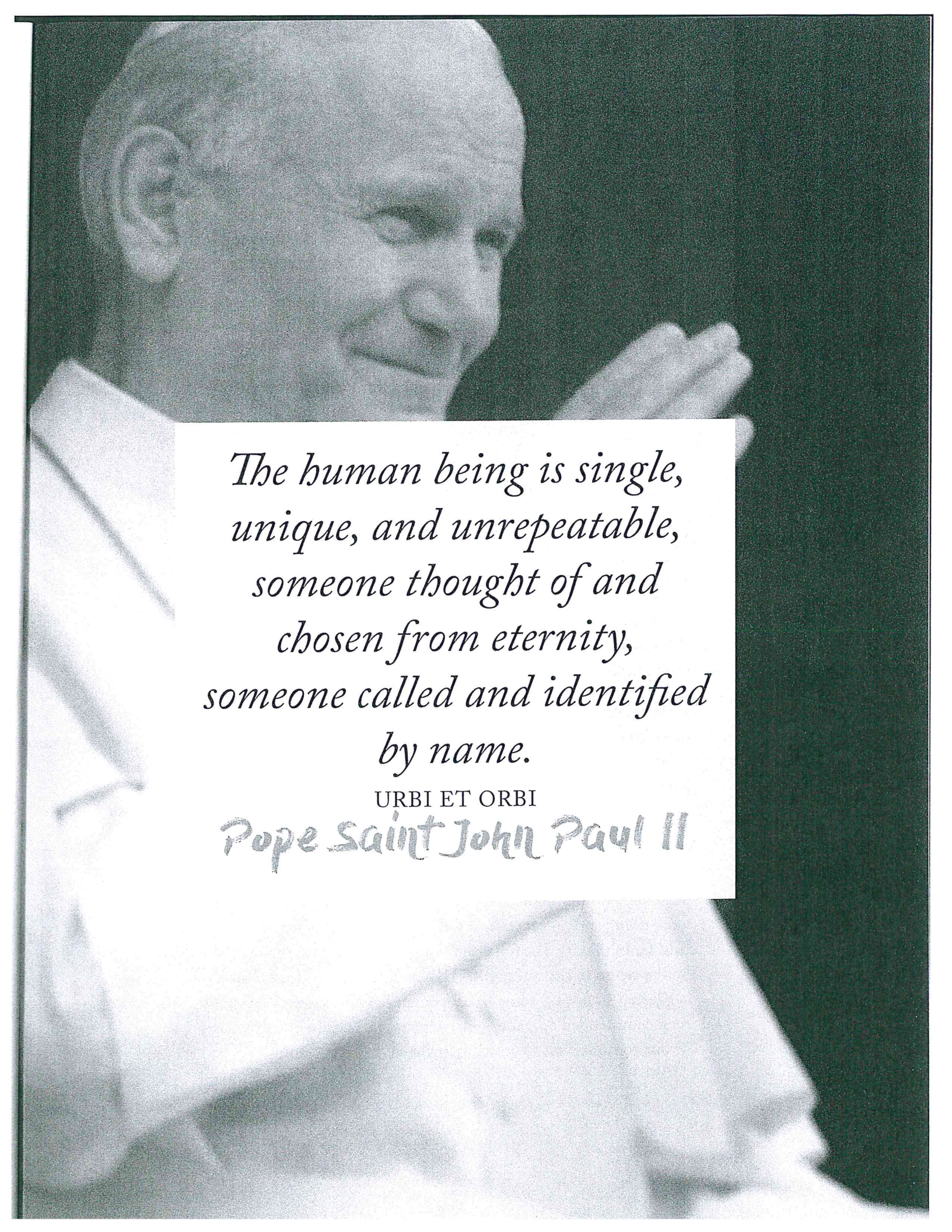
This is what happened in the wake of the Cairo conference. The media remained silent about what John Paul II had to say on the dignity of women and the beauty of sexuality and instead presented the Church as an enemy of women. John Paul II feared the same thing would happen not only in the wake of the Beijing conference, but in the many years and decades yet to come, as proponents of the sexual revolution continued to advance their agenda.

Accordingly, with this "Letter to Women," he attempted to circumvent those outside voices and speak directly to the women of the world. Through the letter, he continues to speak to women today. He speaks directly to you and me. He wants us to know what the Church believes about women. He wants us to know our dignity and worth.

This is his personal letter to us. Our task, throughout this study, is to read it as such.

Discussion Questions

1. In what things, apart from God, am I tempted to find my dignity or self-worth?
2. Why is this dangerous? How, when I've given into the temptation to find my self-worth from God, has it harmed others or me?
3. Who are the people whose dignity I am tempted to ignore? How should I treat them?



*The human being is single,
unique, and unrepeatable,
someone thought of and
chosen from eternity,
someone called and identified
by name.*

URBI ET ORBI

Pope Saint John Paul II

II. THANKSGIVING

This "dialogue" really needs to begin with a word of thanks. As I wrote in my Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem, the Church "desires to give thanks to the Most Holy Trinity for the 'mystery of woman' and for every woman—for all that constitutes the eternal measure of her feminine dignity, for the 'works of God,' which throughout human history have been accomplished in and through her" (No. 3).

2. This word of thanks to the Lord for his mysterious plan regarding the vocation and mission of women in the world is at the same time a concrete and direct word of thanks to women, to every woman, for that they represent in the life of humanity.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 1.

Key Points

Saint John Paul II's "Letter to Women" takes the form of an examination of conscience.

In an examination of conscience, we review our thoughts, words, and actions, taking account of things that please God and noting the things that offend him and hurt us and others.

In the fifteenth century, Saint Ignatius of Loyola (the founder of the Jesuits) put forth a simple method to help us perform that examination. It involves five steps:

1) Thanking God for all He has given us; 2) asking God for the grace to perform a good examination; 3) reflecting upon our day, noting both our faults and improvements; 4) asking God's pardon; and 5) proposing ways we can change our lifestyle to grow in virtue.

Ignatius recommended that we lay the foundation for this examination early in the day, by beginning each morning with a prayer in which we ask God for the grace to please Him in all that we do. Later, around noon, Ignatius recommended we stop whatever we're doing and reflect on how we've honored (or dishonored) God thus far in the day. The full examination of conscience then follows before we go to sleep at night. To keep ourselves on track, Ignatius suggested imposing some small penance on ourselves. Above all, he recommended diligence—never growing slack in our devotions or our commitment to growing in virtue.

“Experience proves that in this life peace and satisfaction are had, not by the listless but by those who are fervent in God’s service,” he once wrote. “And rightly so. For in their effort to overcome themselves and to rid themselves of self-love, they rid themselves of the roots of all passion and unrest.”⁵

Women are a sacred “mystery.”

When the Church uses the word *mystery*, she doesn’t mean a puzzle or problem that needs to be solved. Rather, she means a truth or reality that needs to be contemplated.

Think, for example, of other uses of the word: “the Paschal mystery,” “the mystery of the Incarnation,” or “the mystery of God’s inner life.” We can never fully understand the Incarnation or the Trinity, but through meditating upon these realities, we come to know God and ourselves better.

Similarly, women too are a “mystery.” This is because we are made in the “image” and “likeness” of God (Gen. 1:27). In the ancient Greek translation of that passage from Genesis, the word used for “image” is *icon*. So women (and men) are icons of God. We make “visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine,” both resembling and reflecting our Creator.⁶ Much as a daughter is like her natural father, we are—in some ways—like our Heavenly Father. There is, spiritually speaking, a family resemblance.

Because of that, by contemplating our own nature—how we love, create, learn, live, and give—we discover not only who we are, but also more about who God is. Through meditating upon the mystery of the daughter, we learn about the Father.

As women, we have a common vocation.

A vocation is a calling from God. It is an invitation. Some Catholics think of vocations exclusively in terms of the priesthood or religious life, but many other vocations exist.

⁵ Ignatius of Loyola, *Letters of Saint Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. William J. Young, SJ (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959) 123–124.

⁶ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, ed. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006) 19:4.

First, there is the universal vocation to holiness; God calls each of us to sainthood. "The vocation of humanity is to show forth the image of God and to be transformed into the image of the Father's only Son," explains the *Catechism* (1877).

Second, there is a primary (or spousal) vocation. In this life, God calls us to make a complete gift of ourselves to another: priests to Christ's Bride, the Church; husbands and wives to each other; and consecrated individuals (religious and singles) to Christ (see *CCC*, 1583, 1603, 2233).

Finally, there are secondary (or situational) vocations—calls to follow God in a particular way: a vocation to suffering, a vocation to missionary work, a vocation to serve the poor, etc.

The feminine vocation falls into this last category. As women, God calls us to give of ourselves in a way that only women can. This giving isn't a "what"; it's not about our work or what we do. Rather, it's a "how"; it's how we exist in the world as women—how we love, how we work, how we create. "The world doesn't need what women have," famously said the twentieth-century philosopher, saint, and martyr Edith Stein (Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross). "It needs what women are."

Note: For more meditations on vocation, please listen to the podcast episode "You Have a PERSONAL Vocation: A Conversation with David Clayton" on the Endow podcast.

Bringing It Home

When we're thanked for something we've done—when our boss thanks us for our work, when our husband thanks us for doing his laundry, or when our daughter thanks us for making cookies for her—we learn something about who we are. We learn we are appreciated. We learn we are valued. We learn we can do good. We are affirmed in who we are.

In a similar way, that's what John Paul II does by beginning his "Letter to Women" with words of thanks. He wants each of us to know that we are valued. He wants each of us to understand that we are appreciated by him and the Church.

Through that thanksgiving, he helps us understand who we are: God's beloved daughters. He also helps us see that we are capable of great things, not in spite of our femininity, but rather because of it.

Discussion Questions

1. As a woman—as a wife, mother, daughter, sister, or friend—how do I image God?
2. What does "a vocation to holiness" mean for me? What would (or does) pursuing that vocation look like in my life?
3. Do I believe that my femininity really makes a difference in my work and relationships? In other words, do I think there is such a thing as a "feminine vocation"? Why or why not?

Whatever [woman] does, she does as a woman, not as a genderless creature.

— Dr. Pia de Solenni

III. A LIVED VOCATION

Thank you, women who are mothers! You have sheltered human beings within yourselves in a unique experience of joy and travail. This experience makes you become God's own smile upon the newborn child, the one who guides your child's first steps, who helps it to grow, and who is the anchor as the child makes its way along the journey of life.

Thank you, women who are wives! You irrevocably join your future to that of your husbands, in a relationship of mutual giving, at the service of love and life.

Thank you, women who are daughters and women who are sisters! Into the heart of the family, and then of all society, you bring the richness of your sensitivity, your intuitiveness, your generosity and fidelity.

Thank you, women who work! You are present and active in every area of life—social, economic, cultural, artistic and political. In this way you make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture which unites reason and feeling, to a model of life ever open to the sense of "mystery," to the establishment of economic and political structures ever more worthy of humanity.

Thank you, consecrated women! Following the example of the greatest of women, the Mother of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word, you open yourselves with obedience and fidelity to the gift of God's love. You help the Church and all mankind to experience a "spousal" relationship to God, one which magnificently expresses the fellowship which God wishes to establish with his creatures.

Thank you, every woman, for the simple fact of being a woman! Through the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 2.2–2.7

Key Points

Men and women are made for communion; we're made for relationship

Through Revelation, we know that God is an eternal communion of self-giving Love. From all eternity, the Father lovingly pours out everything that He is and has to the Son. In turn, the Son lovingly receives everything the Father offers and gives it right back. And, because the gift of self between Father and Son is so complete, it too is a person: the Holy Spirit (see CCC, 238–256).

We can never fully comprehend the mystery of the Trinity. But we do know, because God made us in His image, that He also calls us to give of ourselves and live in communion with one another.

“Man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude,” John Paul II explains in his *Theology of the Body*, “as in the moment of communion.”⁷

This communion takes place within concrete relationships. For women in particular, we’re called to imitate God’s sacrificial, life-giving love as mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, aunts, friends, and co-workers. We can’t imitate the life-giving communion within the Trinity apart from these roles. Self-gift doesn’t happen in a vacuum.

Spiritual motherhood is at the heart of women’s self-gift.

The Church sees physical motherhood as a great blessing. To bring a child into the world is woman’s singular privilege. Motherhood, however, involves more than giving birth to a baby. It also involves nourishing and nurturing a child with love, comfort, attentiveness, encouragement, and wisdom. It involves listening to stories about school, kissing scrapes and bruises, walking the floor at night with ailing babies, and teaching children to say “please” and “thank you,” share their toys, put away their laundry, and play nice . . . first on the playground and then on social media. Motherhood involves a million different tasks that care for the child’s body and soul.

As such, John Paul II recognized that motherhood is more than a physical reality. It is, even more importantly, a spiritual reality. Spiritual motherhood, he taught, is the end to which all physical motherhood must point. It’s also the end for which all single and consecrated women must strive. In his *Theology of the Body*, he explains:

[S]pousal love that finds its expression in ‘continence for the kingdom of heaven’ must lead in its normal development to ‘fatherhood’ or ‘motherhood’ in the spiritual sense...in a way analogous to conjugal love, which matures in physical fatherhood and motherhood. . . . On its part, physical generation also fully corresponds to its meaning only if it is completed by fatherhood and motherhood in the spirit.

All women—young, old, married, single, divorced, or widowed—are capable of exercising spiritual motherhood. In his “Letter to Women,” John Paul II acknowledges that truth, referencing all the ways women

⁷ Ibid. 9:3.

live out that vocation—how, as aunts, sisters, daughters, friends, employees, or employers, we nourish and nurture others with spiritual and intellectual food. To teach, pray, encourage, serve, listen, challenge, help, and love are all expressions of spiritual motherhood.

Healthy societies depend upon the presence of women in all areas of life.

The Church believes that women have invaluable contributions to make in the home and family. It also believes women have invaluable contributions to make in business, art, politics, law enforcement, urban planning, engineering, and underwater basket-weaving.

Those contributions hinge on the truth that women image God in a particular way, in a way men don't. Who we are—our ability to exercise spiritual motherhood, our capacity for empathy, our attentiveness to the whole person, and our desire for integration—enrich everything we do.

"Women's intrinsic value can work in every place and thereby institute grace," said Edith Stein. "Everywhere she meets with a human being, she will find opportunity to sustain, to counsel, to help."⁸

As the Church sees it, an authentically feminine presence in every aspect of society is an essential part of building a culture where people matter more than policies and where human dignity is prioritized above bureaucratic efficiency.

⁸ Edith Stein, "Women's Value in National Life," *The Collected Works of Edith Stein, Volume 2: Women* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987) 258.

Bringing It Home

Women are talented at many things. Unfortunately, one thing at which many of us are a little too talented is comparing ourselves to others. Single women compare themselves to married women. Married women compare themselves to single women. Childless women compare themselves to mothers of large families. And stay-at-home moms compare themselves to working moms.

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In the midst of all that comparing, it's tempting to feel like we're not doing enough, like we're not good enough, like we're just not enough. It's also tempting to think that there's only one way of living the feminine vocation or one way to follow God as a woman.

By thanking us for all the manifold ways we love, serve, and give, however, Saint John Paul II unmask those temptations for the lies they are. He also asks us to stop comparing ourselves or holding up false measuring sticks and see that regardless of our career or state in life, we can love and help those around us. Every relationship, every day, every situation is an opportunity to image God by making a gift of ourselves.

Discussion Questions

1. Am I guilty of comparing my life to others? How can or do I make a gift of myself right now, in the state and place God has put me?
2. Who is one woman who has been a spiritual mother to me? What made her a spiritual mother and how did that help me?
3. How do I feel about the Church's call to spiritual motherhood? Do I embrace it or struggle with it? Why?

*The world doesn't need what women have; it
needs what women are.*

*— St. Teresa Benedicta
of the Cross (Edith Stein)*



Closing Prayer

THE MEMORARE

Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary,
that never was it known
that anyone who fled to thy protection,
implored thy help, or sought thine intercession
was left unaided.

Inspired by this confidence, I fly unto thee,
O Virgin of virgins, my mother; to thee do I come,
before thee I stand, sinful and sorrowful.
O Mother of the Word Incarnate, despise not my
petitions, but in thy mercy hear and answer me.
Amen.

Saint John Paul II, pray for us.