

chapter two

AN ACT OF CONTRITION

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. WOMAN'S PLIGHT

I know of course that simply saying thank you is not enough. Unfortunately, we are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. Certainly it is no easy task to assign the blame for this, considering the many kinds of cultural conditioning which down the centuries have shaped ways of thinking and acting. And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 3.1–3.8

Key Points

God created man and woman to love one another.

In the beginning, at the dawn of creation, our first parents lived together in perfect harmony. The "battle of the sexes" didn't exist during those first days in Eden. Adam didn't seek to use Eve, and Eve didn't seek to manipulate Adam.

Instead, each looked on the other with total trust, recognizing that the other was what John Paul II called "a second I"—another made in the image of God.⁹ Each gave completely of himself and herself, free from lust and jealousy. "The man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed," Genesis tells us (2:25).

God intended it to be this way. "From the very first pages of the Bible, God's plan is marvelously expressed," said John Paul II in 1995. "He willed there should be a relationship of profound communion between man and women, in a perfect reciprocity of knowledge and the giving of the self."¹⁰

This was God's original design for man and woman: a loving, trusting, giving complementarity, with each sex bringing out the

⁹ John Paul II, "Wednesday General Audience" December 19, 1979. Published in *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, ed. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006) 173.

¹⁰ John Paul II, "World Day of Peace Message," January 1, 1995, no. 3. Published in *The Genius of Women* (United States Catholic Conference, 1997).

best in the other, and each rejoicing in the other's strengths. God never meant for the differences between man and woman to divide us; He meant for them to unite us.

Original sin corrupted God's design for man and woman

In the Garden, one rule and one rule alone existed: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. 2:16–17).

In issuing that one rule, God didn't simply want Adam and Eve to obey Him. He wanted them to trust Him. He wanted them to love Him enough to believe that He had their best interests at heart.

But, when the serpent appeared in Genesis 3:3, Adam and Eve failed to trust God. The serpent whispered lies to the woman—"You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"—and Adam and Eve believed him, not God.

The first couple's failure to trust God shattered the original harmony of creation. Death entered the world. Man and beast became enemies. Work became difficult. Childbirth became painful. And the once clear understanding between man and woman—that they were created to be a gift to one another—was lost. It became difficult to love and easy to use (Gen. 3:14–19).

We have inherited the consequences of our first parents' sin.

When Adam and Eve failed to trust God, they lost His most important gift to them: sanctifying grace, which was God's own life in their souls. They didn't just lose it for themselves, though; they lost it for all their descendants. Every human person since Adam and Eve—with the exception of the Blessed Virgin Mary—has come into the world with a metaphorical hole in our soul. Where sanctifying grace should be, there is nothing. We call this lack of divine life "Original Sin" (CCC, 405).

With the coming of Christ came a remedy for Original Sin: baptism (CCC, 1263). Baptism fills us with sanctifying grace and incorporates us into the Body of Christ. But, like Adam and Eve, we too can lose the gift of divine life. Every time we freely sin in serious ways—choosing our will over God's—we lose the gift of sanctifying grace.

Sacramental confession can restore this life; but, neither it nor baptism can take away our tendency to sin. This tendency is called "concupiscence" (*CCC*, 418). Concupiscence, like Original Sin, is something we've inherited from Adam and Eve. Every human being has it. For each of us, doing good is harder than it should be, and doing evil is easier than it should be.

That's why we spend too much money on ourselves and don't give enough to those in need. It's why we stretch the truth to our own advantage rather than deal with the consequences of honesty. It's why we cheat, why we gossip, why we speak ill of others, and why we mock those who behave more virtuously than us. It's also why men and women fail to honor one another as we should. Those are the consequences of Original Sin, and in turn, concupiscence.

Bringing It Home

Sin surrounds us. It exists in our communities, our homes, and our hearts. The older we get, the more familiar we become with the consequences of Adam and Eve's terrible choice: envy, greed, lust, anger, sloth, pride, and gluttony.

And yet, for all our familiarity with sin, it can still surprise us and wound us. This is especially true when a fellow Christian sins. When we learn about a priest who has abused a child, when someone who works for the Church mistreats us, or when a fellow Catholic disrespects us as women, the offense strikes us as far worse than if someone else—someone outside the Church—had done it. After all, the person is betraying the very moral law they were charged with teaching or claim to believe. They're someone who should be on our side, helping not harming.

As John Paul II reminds us here, though, faith is not a remedy for concupiscence. Christ is perfect. His followers are not. For all the divine graces that pass through the Church to us, the Church herself still consists of flawed human beings who have contributed to many number of social ills, including the oppression and subjugation of women.

The challenge for us is to grow in Christian maturity so that we can recognize both the perfection of the Church and the imperfections of her members. It also is to extend the same mercy to those imperfect members that we ask God to extend to us. That's not necessarily easy or something that can happen overnight, but it is necessary. "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt. 6:14-15).

Discussion Questions

1. How have you seen “the battle of the sexes” played out in your own life and community? Have you contributed to that battle in any way? If so, how?
2. John Paul II believed that “man’s tendency to dominate” and “woman’s tendency to possess” are at the heart of the battle of the sexes (see note below). What do you think he meant by that? Have you seen examples of this in your own life? If so, describe them.
3. Do you struggle to forgive members and leaders of the Church for their failings? How has this affected your faith? What has helped you in your efforts to forgive them?

*Certain new theologians dispute original sin,
which is the only part of Christian theology
which can really be proved.*

— G.K. Chesterton



Note: For more about this please refer to Pope Saint John Paul II's Theology of Body, a series of Wednesday Audiences that John Paul II gave in his early pontificate. You will find his meditations on this specific topic in Talk 30 given on June 18, 1980 and Talk 31 given on June 25, 1980. Michael Waldstein's translation of the Theology of the Body is recommended. You can also find the above talks in this online version, on pages 76–81: https://d2y1pz2y630308.cloudfront.net/2232/documents/2016/9/theology_of_the_body.pdf.

II. THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS CHRIST

When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself. Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love. As we look to Christ at the end of this Second Millennium, it is natural to ask ourselves: how much of his message has been heard and acted upon?

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 3.9–3.12

Key Points

Life for women in the Roman Empire of Jesus' day was often short and always difficult.

History tends to glorify and romanticize the Roman Empire, which ruled Israel during Jesus' lifetime. In that, however, it also neglects to show us how badly the Romans treated women.

In his landmark book, *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark chronicles the ancient world's real "war on women." During the years Jesus walked the earth and for centuries afterwards, many women never lived more than a day. Most fathers considered their daughters burdens, not blessings, and possessed the legal right to kill or abandon their girls within hours of birth. Archaeologists' findings—including the ancient Roman sewers, which were clogged with the bones of dead infant girls—reveal that Roman fathers not only had that right, but also frequently used it.¹¹

One ancient letter, sent from a traveling Roman citizen, Hilarion, to his pregnant wife, Alsi, makes clear just how routine female infanticide was: "*Know that I am still in Alexandria. And do not worry if they all come back and I remain in Alexandria. I ask and beg you to take good care of our baby son, and as soon as I receive payment I shall send it up to you. If you are delivered of a child [before I come home], if it is a boy, keep it, if a girl discard it.*"¹²

¹¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997) 97, 118.

¹² Ibid., 97–98.

Those girls whose father took a different approach than Hilarion and instead let them live were typically married off by age twelve, often to men decades older than themselves. Throughout their lifetime, women received little or no education, could never own property, could never vote, and were routinely forced by their husbands to either abort unwanted children or abandon their own newborn daughters. If wives were abused, abandoned, or otherwise mistreated, they had no legal recourse.¹³

Jewish women fared better than their Roman counterparts, but not by much.

Jewish law forbade abortion, contraception, and infanticide, so more Jewish women lived past birth. Jewish customs also expected husbands to treat their wives kindly, and women had recourse to the law if they did not.

Daughters and wives, however, were still considered the legal property of their fathers and husbands. Women could not proclaim the Scriptures or teach them publicly; they had to worship apart from men; and they were not allowed in the temple's inner court. On the days women menstruated, they were banned from the temple entirely; anyone who touched them was considered unclean.

Likewise, education for Jewish women was more limited, and their husbands could divorce them at will. If a woman sinned sexually, she typically bore the legal and social consequences alone—meaning that the man was not punished—and if a woman was raped, the law required her to marry her attacker.¹⁴

Jesus' treatment of women radically rejected both Roman and Jewish customs.

Throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus honoring and respecting women in unprecedented ways. As the Gospel writers tell us, Jesus numbered two women, Mary and Martha of Bethany (see John 11:5), among His closest friends. As He traveled, women traveled with Him, caring for Jesus and His Apostles and supporting them (Matt. 27:55).

¹³ Ibid., 106.

¹⁴ See Susan Ackerman's essay "Women in Ancient Israel and the Hebrew Bible," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Religion*. Available at <http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-45>.

And after Jesus' Resurrection, He appeared first to a woman, not a man, then sent that woman to share the news of His Resurrection to others (see John 20:15). That's something Jews of Jesus' day never did; legally speaking, a woman's word was worthless. Only a man's word had legal weight.

Well before then, however, Jesus defied other Jewish social conventions—touching (and healing) a bleeding woman, speaking with an adulterous Samaritan woman, and defending a woman caught in adultery (see Mark 5:25; John 4:7; 8:7). By Jewish law, touching a bleeding woman made Jesus unclean. Speaking to a Samaritan woman and drinking from the ladle she offered Him broke Jewish purity laws. Protecting the woman caught in adultery defied Jewish legal codes, which called for any woman guilty of sexual sin to be stoned to death.

Jesus, however, cared for those women regardless. He healed them, talked with them, and protected them, upholding their dignity as daughters of God. In doing so, He also made clear that the salvation He brought was for all—Jew and Greek, man and woman. Reflecting on His behavior, the great British novelist Dorothy Sayers summed up the wonder of it, writing:

Perhaps it is no wonder that the women were first at the Cradle and last at the Cross. They had never known a man like this Man—there had never been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, who never flattered or coaxed or patronized; who never made arch jokes about them, never treated them either as "The women, God help us!" or "The ladies, God bless them!"; who rebuked without querulousness and praised without condescension; who took their questions and arguments seriously, who never mapped out their sphere for them, never urged them to be feminine or jeered at them for being female; who had no ax to grind and no uneasy male dignity to defend; who took them as he found them and was completely unselfconscious.¹⁵

¹⁵ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Are Women Human? Penetrating, Sensible, and Witty Essays on the Role of Women in Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1947) 47.

Bringing It Home

As mature Christian women, we have to choose daily how we will see ourselves.

Will we see ourselves through the eyes of women's magazines and the pornography industry, which tell us that our value lies in our bodies, our beauty, our youth, and our sexual experience?

Will we see ourselves through the eyes of our teachers, employers, and co-workers, who tell us that our value lies in how successful we are, how much money we make, and how much power we exercise?

Or will we see ourselves through the eyes of Christ? Will we see ourselves as valuable, important, and loved, possessing a God-given dignity that no one can take away?

That was the message Jesus communicated to the women of His time. He walked with them and talked with them, calling them out from the crowds and looking at them with eyes of love. No matter what they had done, no matter how broken or wounded they were, He saw them as precious. He defied the world to help them see that too, and if we let Him—if we spend time with Him in prayer and before the Blessed Sacrament—He'll show us just what He showed them: our true value.

Discussion Questions

1. What damage do we do to ourselves when we choose to see ourselves not as Christ sees us, but rather as the world sees us?
2. The Church is often portrayed as anti-women. Why do you think that is and what can you do to help change the general perception?
3. Is there any one particular woman in the New Testament, including those mentioned above, to whom you can relate? Who and why? How does Jesus' treatment of her affect your relationship with God?

There are many injustices in the world; one of the greater among them is the perception that the Catholic Church and Pope Saint John Paul II are not friends of women.

— Dr. Janet Smith

III. BURIED HISTORY

Yes, it is time to examine the past with courage, to assign responsibility where it is due in a review of the long history of humanity. Women have contributed to that history as much as men and, more often than not, they did so in much more difficult conditions. I think particularly of those women who loved culture and art, and devoted their lives to them in spite of the fact that they were frequently at a disadvantage from the start, excluded from equal educational opportunities, underestimated, ignored and not given credit for their intellectual contributions. Sadly, very little of women's achievements in history can be registered by the science of history. But even though time may have buried the documentary evidence of those achievements, their beneficent influence can be felt as a force which has shaped the lives of successive generations, right up to our own. To this great, immense feminine "tradition" humanity owes a debt which can never be repaid. 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!

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 3.13–3.19

Key Points

John Paul II's understanding of the obstacles facing women is rooted in his own experience.

As a priest and bishop, John Paul II didn't live his life in isolation from the souls he shepherded. Rather, he built close friendships with young people and married couples. He dined at their houses, went camping and hiking with them, and counseled them in the midst of their struggles. Likewise, as a philosophy professor at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland, he taught and worked alongside of some of his country's brightest young women.

In both contexts, the future pope saw women's gifts that at times were denied or suppressed by the people they sought to serve. Accordingly, he went out of his way to support women whose talents he believed deserved recognition.

One person who benefited from his help was Natalia Tsarkova, a Russian-born painter, who first met John Paul II in the early 1990s when she was an art student. At her school, the Moscow Fine Arts Academy, Tsarkova studied under a director who believed, in her words, "that women belonged in the kitchen and the nursery and not in the painting studio."¹⁶

¹⁶ Lucy Gordon, "John Paul II's Portraitist," *Inside the Vatican* (April 2005): 54–57.

Tsarkova was the lone woman in her class, and only with great effort could she get the director to recognize her talent. For her, it wasn't enough to be as good as her male counterparts. She had to be better. And she was. So much so, that John Paul II eventually commissioned her to paint his official portrait. Some have speculated that she is the woman behind John Paul II's reference here to "women who loved art and culture."

Historians of women's history owe a great debt to the Church.

In recent decades, scholars have dug through historical archives looking for women who made forgotten contributions to history. Long before this work began, however, the Church was already actively preserving the history of strong, vibrant, dynamic women: the saints.

Catholics have never had to look hard to find examples of great women scholars; the Church has long celebrated Saint Paula, who helped Saint Jerome translate the Bible into Latin, and Saint Hildegard of Bingen, who penned lengthy treatises on medicine, liturgy, and theology. Nor do Catholics need to struggle to find stories about women who were wise and generous leaders; for centuries the Church has honored the saintly queens Margaret of Scotland and Elizabeth of Hungary.

Other stories of strong, fearless women abound in Church history. While Roman men killed their baby girls, Christians found inspiration in Saint Perpetua's account of the days leading up to her martyrdom. Saint Joan of Arc demonstrated women's bravery by leading troops into battle. And Saint Marie of the Incarnation was the first of hundreds of women religious to cross an ocean to help evangelize the New World.

Tragically, the stories of many amazing women have been buried. But thanks to the Church's belief that holiness is holiness, regardless of sex, many other amazing stories have been remembered.

Women are subjects, not objects.

Objects are things we use: knives, cars, sweaters. Their worth is determined by how well they do the job they were made to do. A good knife stays sharp. A good car runs dependably. A good sweater keeps us warm.

Because of that, when those objects stop doing what we need them to do, we discard them. We have no use for knives that don't cut, cars that don't run, or sweaters full of holes. And that's okay. They're objects. Their worth is in their usefulness.

As John Paul II points out here, however, for too long many people have confused women with knives, cars, and sweaters. Both men and women have treated women like objects, seeing our usefulness in our beauty, fertility, and sexual desirability. And like knives that don't cut and cars that don't run, when we stop being beautiful, fertile, or sexually desirable, we get cast aside.

But women aren't objects. Women are subjects, with a dignity and value that has nothing to do with our usefulness. Denying that reality has far-reaching consequences. As Helen Alvare, a consultant for the Pontifical Council of the Laity, explains, such behavior can both "make it impossible to see the gifts women hold in common with men" and "render impossible an appreciation for women's particular gifts for attention to and care for persons."

She concludes, "It is predictable then, if a woman is understood merely as an object to own . . . it can lead to the crushing of her instincts to care for another person."¹⁷

¹⁷ Helen Alvare, "The Objectification of Women, 20 Years after *Mulieris Dignitatem*," delivered at Pontifical Council for the Laity, Office for Women (Vatican City, Feb. 2008). Available online at: <https://www.scribd.com/document/38417846/Objectification-of-Women>.

Bringing It Home

History remembers battles and political coups, scientific discoveries and brave journeys into the unknown. Those events have shaped our world and our lives. But none of them have shaped our world or our lives like the love of wives, mothers, sisters, aunts, and friends.

Who we are—how we see the world and relate to it—depends much more upon the people who loved us and love us still than it does on any one discovery or battle. In fact, the discoveries and the battles themselves depend upon the people who first loved those doing the exploring and fighting. Love makes the man (or woman). Lack of love unmakes them.

When we love another person as God calls us to love them, we shape lives and history. History might not record late nights walking the floor with a baby, thousands of dinners cooked, or countless words of encouragement spoken. Scholars won't remember the day you sent your best friend flowers or stayed late at the office so a co-worker could go home to a sick child. Afternoons babysitting grandchildren or anonymous checks to a family in need won't go in the history books. But those loving, selfless acts shape the world just the same. They matter. We matter. No matter how much the world may forget us, we live on in the lives of those we've loved.

Discussion Questions

1. Name one woman who has helped make you the woman you are today. Describe how she helped you.
2. Have you encountered obstacles in developing your own gifts and talents? If so, how did that encounter affect you?
3. How does the culture encourage women to think of themselves as objects, not subjects? How does thinking of ourselves this way hurt us? How does it hurt our relationships with others?

*One can already perceive the
immense dignity of women by
the sole fact that God's eternal
Son chose, in the fullness of time,
to be born of a woman, the Vir-
gin of Nazareth, the mirror and
measure of femininity.*

ANGELUS GIVEN ON JUNE 25, 1995

Pope Saint John Paul II



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.