

chapter four

EQUAL IN DIGNITY

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. AUTHENTIC FEMINISM

My word of thanks to women thus becomes a heartfelt appeal that everyone, and in a special way States and international institutions, should make every effort to ensure that women regain full respect for their dignity and role. Here I cannot fail to express my admiration for those women of good will who have devoted their lives to defending the dignity of womanhood by fighting for their basic social, economic and political rights, demonstrating courageous initiative at a time when this was considered extremely inappropriate, the sign of a lack of femininity, a manifestation of exhibitionism, and even a sin!

In this year's World Day of Peace Message, I noted that when one looks at the great process of women's liberation, "the journey has been a difficult and complicated one and, at times, not without its share of mistakes. But it has been substantially a positive one, even if it is still unfinished, due to the many obstacles which, in various parts of the world, still prevent women from being acknowledged, respected, and appreciated in their own special dignity" (No. 4).

This journey must go on! But I am convinced that the secret of making speedy progress in achieving full respect for women and their identity involves more than simply the condemnation of discrimination and injustices, necessary though this may be. Such respect must first and foremost be won through an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 6

Key Points

Feminism has undergone a radical change through the centuries.

Feminism in the US today is not what feminism was one hundred years ago. Nor is feminism today what feminism was fifty years ago. Rather, as Father Francis Martin explains in *The Feminist Question*, scholars have identified three distinct "waves," or phases, of feminism.

The first wave emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Led by women such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, these early feminists focused on winning women the full rights of citizenship: the right to vote, own property, and pursue an education. They opposed abortion, saw marriage and motherhood as great goods, and supported social causes that they believed would benefit family life, such as the temperance movement.

In the first decades after World War II, the second wave of feminism emerged. Father Martin explains, "While the first wave . . . was characterized by action in the realm of politics, the second wave, which

often used the expression 'women's liberation,' was directed more to securing a greater place for women in society's life as a whole."³⁰

Unfortunately, second-wave feminists believed that securing that place required denying the good of marriage. Feminist writers such as Shulamith Firestone, Simone de Beauvoir, and Betty Friedan depicted men as oppressors and argued that true female liberation could only occur once women lived their lives independently of men. That attitude found its most popular expression in the phrase, "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle."

During this second wave, support for contraception, abortion, and "free love" also became synonymous with the feminist movement. The idea that women's professional success requires liberation from marriage, monogamy, and child-bearing has since been enshrined in American law through Supreme Court rulings such as *Roe v. Wade* and, more recently, the Obama Administration's mandate that all employers, regardless of religious conviction, pay for their employees' contraceptive coverage. Likewise, thanks to the efforts of groups such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation, these same beliefs have dominated the United Nations, which has supported aggressive population control programs across the Third World and routinely sought to deny the importance of motherhood. For example, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women criticized the country of Belarus for its celebration of Mother's Day.³¹

Third-wave feminism is even more extreme than the second wave.

The third wave of feminism emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s. This contemporary wave has focused on "gender ideology"—arguing that the concept of *gender* is distinct from biological sex. Until the 1970s, the word *sex* was used to denote the biological, physical, and genetic differences between men and women, while *gender* was a grammatical term, which distinguished between masculine and feminine nouns, pronouns, and adjectives.³² With third-wave feminism, however, *gender* took on a new meaning, and now most commonly refers to "learned" masculine and feminine behaviors.

³⁰ Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in Light of the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994) 155.

³¹ Wendy McElroy, "A Family Crisis at the United Nations," Foundation for Economic Freedom (October 1, 2001). Available at: <https://fee.org/articles/a-family-crisis-at-the-united-nations/>.

³² Bernice Coles, "New Feminism: A Sex-Gender Reunion," *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism* ed. Michelle Schumaker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004) 55.

This current generation of feminism sees gender as something fluid and socially constructed—something that can be learned and unlearned though cultural conditioning. It denies the reality of masculinity and femininity, and insists that a person's gender need have nothing to do with their biological sex. It also contends that dozens of different “genders” can exist (in 2014, Facebook listed fifty-eight for its users to choose from), and that a person can choose their sex, sexual orientation, and gender.

Assessing both the merits and consequences of third-wave feminism's gender ideology, German sociologist Gabriele Kuby writes:

The gender perspective recognizes no essential or innate differences between men and women, although each cell of the human body is male or female. It represses and ignores the results of brain research, medicine, psychology, and sociology, which prove the different identities of men and women in the brain structure, hormonal balance, psychological structure, and social behavior . . .

*Once the biological sexual identity of men and women has been destroyed, nothing can prevent the deconstruction of social roles and institutions. Because no sector of life is free from the influences of bipolar sexuality, all areas of social life are targeted for deconstruction: marriage, family, fatherhood, motherhood, education, language, work, culture, religion.*³³

John Paul II called for a New Feminism.

In his “Letter to Women” and elsewhere, John Paul II responded to these developments in the feminist movement by calling for a “new feminism”—one that embraced the worthy goals of earlier waves of feminism, but rejected the more problematic beliefs.

As John Paul II envisioned it, this “new feminism” would champion women's rights, while upholding the inherent dignity of the human person. It would recognize the real differences between men and women, but applaud the complementarity of the sexes, all while rejecting “the temptation of imitating models of male domination.”³⁴

³³ Gabriele Kuby, “Gender Mainstreaming—The Secret Revolution,” CatholicCulture.org. November 2008. Available at: <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=8555>.

³⁴ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), 99.

The pope also hoped that a new feminism could combat the materialism at the heart of the Culture of Death. More specifically, he wanted to see new feminists counter the Western focus on consumption and profit, with, instead, an emphasis on relationships and the good of the human person.

Last but not least, John Paul II hoped this new feminism would ground itself in reality, defending life, marriage, God's plan for sexuality, and woman's unique role as mother. As Helen Alvare noted, "A new feminism...remembers that it is a waste of time to rail against objective realities. Trying to be free of our bodies' reproductive capabilities or of the emotional consequences of promiscuity is as futile as trying to be free of gravity."³⁵

³⁵ Helen Alvare, "A New Feminism: The Holy Father's Call to Christian Women," *Liguorian* (May 1997): 4-11.

Bringing It Home

Complaining comes naturally to many of us. When we see something wrong, we respond by voicing our frustration. Talking about our problems isn't always a bad thing. It's how many of us process the world around us and grow in our understanding of the problems we face. But complaining—as opposed to simply processing—has its dangers. We can complain so much, that problems are all we see. Our vision narrows, and we miss the good that still surrounds us. Alternately, our complaints can become idle. We can let the complaining trick us into thinking we've taken action about a problem, when all we've really done is grumble.

That may be why John Paul II's proposed response to the obstacles facing women isn't simply condemning the oppression of women or enumerating threats to our dignity. Rather, his response calls for positive action—actively championing women's dignity and helping people to realize the beauty and gift of femininity through a new feminism.

Ultimately, however, the success of this new feminism depends upon individual women. It depends upon us recognizing our own dignity, living in accord with it, and helping other women come to the same recognition. That's much more difficult than complaining...but also much more fruitful.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think it has been so difficult for the Church to counter the radical gender ideology in the culture? What are some ways you can or do counter that ideology through your own witness in your everyday life?
3. What do you think about John Paul II's call for a "new feminism"? What would that "new feminism" look like in action?

For this reason, John Paul II devoted years to meditating upon Genesis 1—3 in his Theology of the Body: a series of 133 Wednesday audiences, delivered between 1979 and 1984. Many people who have heard of the Theology of the Body, associate it with the Church's teachings on human sexuality and married love. And John Paul II did reflect beautifully on those aspects of life in the Wednesday audiences, in the process helping the Church more fully grasp the meaning and dignity of sexual intimacy.

But John Paul II's reflections in the Theology of the Body on Genesis 1—3 do much more than construct a theology of sex. As Michael Waldstein, editor of the definitive English translation of the Theology of the Body (*Man and Woman He Created Them*) explained, "John Paul II's catechesis illumines the entirety of God's plan for human life from origin to eschaton with a splendid supernatural light."³⁸

By meditating "on the beginning," John Paul II recognized he could penetrate "the very purpose and meaning of life."³⁹ This section of "Letter to Women" gives us just a taste of what the Theology of the Body does in much greater depth.

The creation accounts are not fairy tales.

Some people dismiss the opening chapters of Genesis as mere myths, which is understandable. Talking snakes, God conversing with man, fruit that gives eternal life: much about Genesis 1—3 strikes the modern mind as fantastical.

Other people insist that we must take every detail in Genesis 1—3 literally: God creating the world in seven twenty-four-hour days, Eve coming from Adam's rib, a snake chatting with a woman. From a Christian standpoint, that's also understandable. After all, Genesis 1—3 is the Word of God, and God doesn't lie.

The Church, however, strikes a balance between those two approaches. To start with, she takes these opening chapters seriously: she doesn't call them mythology or fairy tales. As John Paul II says in the passage quoted above, they are "profoundly true." Likewise, writing in *Humani Generis*, Pope Pius XII emphasized the importance of believing in a

³⁸ Michael Waldstein, "Preface," *Man and Woman He Created Them*, xxvii.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

historic Adam and Eve, explaining that the doctrine of Original Sin only makes sense if it “proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own.”⁴⁰

At the same time, though, the Church doesn’t insist that people read Genesis 1—3 with slavish literalism. As the Church understands it, those chapters don’t tell a story like a history book or a documentary film tell a story; instead, they tell a story like a painting or a poem tell a story. They use what the *Catechism* calls “figurative language” to affirm “a primeval event, a deed that took place at the beginning of the history of man” (CCC, 390).

We are made in God’s image and likeness.

One of the most important things we learn from the opening chapters of Genesis is that God made us in His “image” and “likeness” (Gen. 1:27). When the Bible tells us this, it doesn’t mean that men and women look like God. We don’t have His nose, His ears, or His great head of hair. Rather, to be made in God’s image means that we have something of His nature in us. Like Him, we can reason, love, create, serve, choose right from wrong, and make a gift of ourselves to others.

Scripture actually only pairs the words “image” and “likeness” together twice—once to describe man’s relationship with God, and once to describe Seth’s relationship with his father, Adam (Gen. 1:26–27; 5:3). What that tells us is that to be made in God’s image is, in a sense, to be His children. It is to be like Him. It implies “sonship.”

This, in part, is what sets the human person apart from the rest of creation. While everything in the world, in some way, reflects its Creator, only man images Him. The oceans may testify to God’s power and sunsets may bear witness to His glory, but God shared the breath of His divine life with man and man alone (Gen. 2:7).

⁴⁰ Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, August 12, 1950, 37. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html.

III. MALE AND FEMALE

We are then told that, from the very beginning, man has been created "male and female" (Gen. 1:27). Scripture itself provides the interpretation of this fact: even though man is surrounded by the innumerable creatures of the created world, he realizes that he is alone (cf. Gen. 2:20). God intervenes in order to help him escape from this situation of solitude: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him" (Gen 2:18). The creation of woman is thus marked from the outset by the principle of help: a help which is not one-sided but mutual. Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: men and women are complementary. Womanhood expresses the "human" as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way.

When the Book of Genesis speaks of "help," it is not referring merely to acting, but also to being. Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the "masculine" and the "feminine" that the "human" finds full realization.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 7.6–7.14

Key Points

Man has authority over creation.

In addition to implying "sonship," the Hebrew word used in Genesis to describe man as the "image" of God—*selem*—also implies "authority."⁴¹ Part of the idea behind *selem* is that the image makes present the authority of what it represents. So man, as God's image, as His *selem*, makes God's authority present on earth. We are, in a sense, His representatives.

God Himself tells us this in a more explicit way in Genesis 1:28, when He commands man and woman to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

Together, that word (*selem*) and that passage (Gen 1:28) tell us that men and women aren't just another part of creation. We are creation's stewards. Created in God's image, only we possess reason and free will. Because of that, only we can exercise God's loving,

⁴¹ Francis Martin, "The New Feminism: Biblical Foundations and Some Lines of Development," *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, 142.

reasonable, freedom-respecting authority as we care for the world entrusted to us. We do that when we tend to it, protect it, and use it to give glory to God. From growing gardens to stopping forest fires and developing cures for deadly diseases, man's stewardship of creation is a singular thing, which no other creature in existence can even begin to imitate.

Woman is created as man's equal and shares with him authority over creation.

When we read Genesis 1:27 in English, we hear God say, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." The use of the word *man* in that passage bothers some women, who feel that the Book of Genesis is implying that half of humanity isn't made in God's image.

When we read that same sentence in the original Hebrew, however, we can see that's not the case. In Hebrew, the word used for *man* is *'ādām*, which literally means "earth" or "from the earth." Unlike the proper name Adam (which doesn't appear until Genesis 3), *'ādām* doesn't denote maleness. Rather, it references humanity in general—both man and woman.

Accordingly, as the Church understands Genesis 1, there are two ways of being *'ādām*, of being human: male and female. As *'ādām*, both men and women image God. Both possess reason and free will. And both are called to exercise God's authority on earth. As such, both are equal in dignity and deserving of respect. The *Catechism* reaffirms this, noting, "Man and woman have been created, which is to say, willed by God: on the one hand, in perfect equality as human persons; on the other, in their respective beings as man and woman. . . . Man and woman are both with one and the same dignity 'in the image of God'" (369).

The "help" woman gives man does not make her less than man.

Just as some readers of Genesis 1 object to the use of the English word *man* in the passage mentioned above, many readers also object to the description of woman as "a helper fit for man" (Gen. 2:18).

Helper, however, as used in Genesis 2, doesn't mean "assistant" or "servant." Rather, the word *helper* is actually the English translation

of the Hebrew word *'ezer*. This noun occurs nineteen times in the Old Testament, and fifteen of those occurrences reference divine assistance.⁴² For example, in Psalm 46:1 we read, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help [*'ezer*] in trouble."

So, just as the almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing God of the universe is humanity's *'ezer*, woman is man's *'ezer*. The term isn't pejorative. Rather, it suggests something glorious, some great kind of desperately needed assistance. And that kind of help, Genesis tells us, is what woman gives to man.

Remember, in Genesis 2, God describes just one thing as "not good"—the fact that man is alone. God is a communion of persons, so man can't truly image God until he too is a communion of persons, until he is not alone. The creation of the woman makes that possible. Together, through a life-giving communion of persons, man and woman help each other more fully image God.

⁴² See Manfred Hauke, *Women in the Priesthood*, trans. David Kopp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988) 201–203.

Bringing It Home

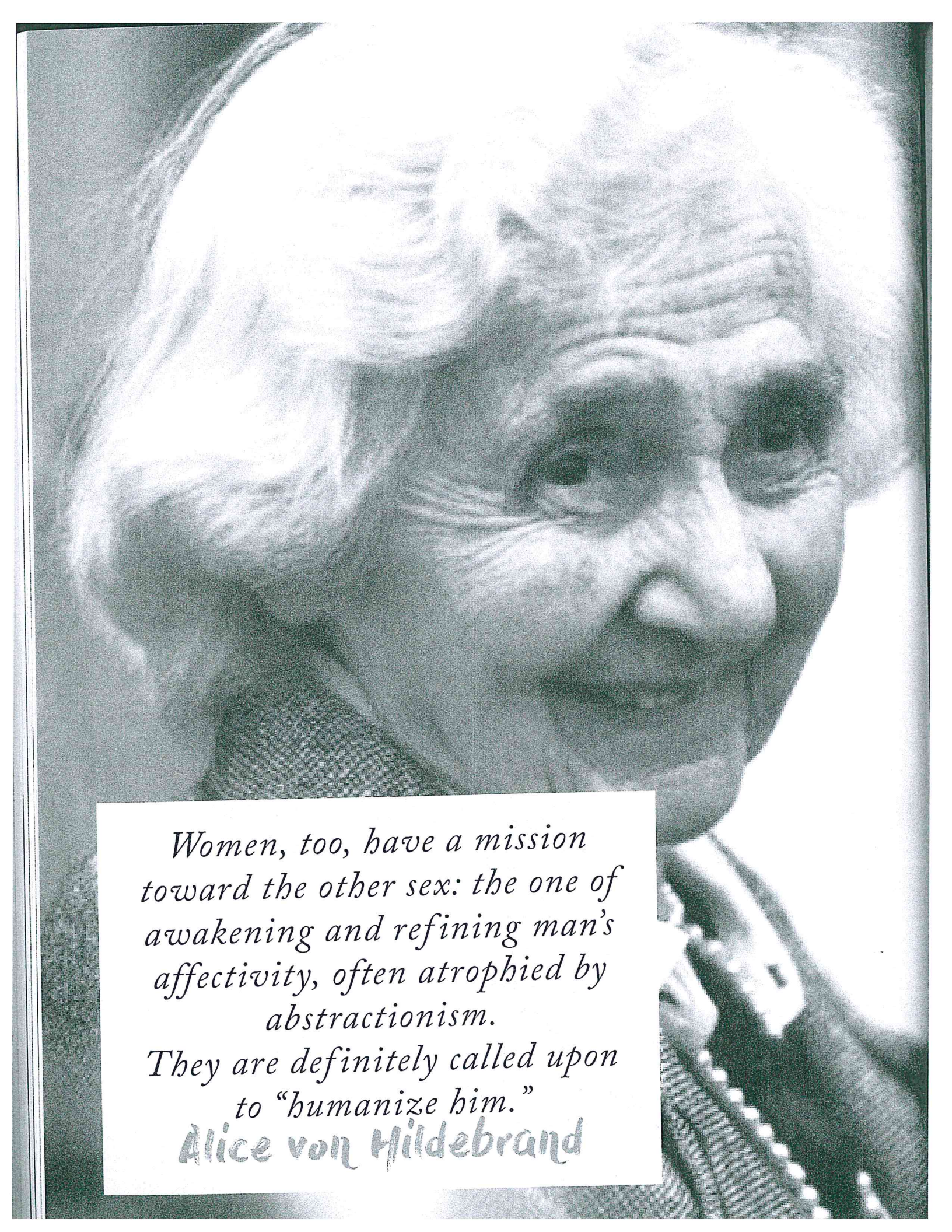
Oftentimes, when we think of “help” in marriage, we think of physical forms of help: assisting with chores or shuttling kids around. Other times, we think of psychological help: a listening ear or a well-timed joke. Those types of help are important. They’re crucial to a good marriage. But they’re not the ultimate help spouses give to each other.

In Eden, Eve helped Adam by helping him become more like God. She helped him image God more truly, because with her, he could be a communion of persons. That help, however, flowed both ways. In giving herself to Adam, Eve became more fully the image of God she was meant to be. He was her helpmate, just as she was his.

The same holds true for our marriages (or, for those of us who are unmarried, in our relationships with boyfriends, male friends, fathers, and brothers). The best gift the men closest to us can give us isn’t help with the garbage. It’s wisdom, prayers, and encouragement to grow in virtue. That’s also the best gift we can give them. Suffering and praying for and with the men we love is how we help them grow in holiness. It’s how we help them become the men God made them to be. There is no greater help than that.

Discussion Questions

1. How does humanity today exercise our authority over creation? How do you specifically exercise your authority over creation?
2. What are some of the ways we help others to be “more human”? Describe how someone has helped you be “more human.”
3. What strengths do you bring to your marriage (or for those not married, to your close relationships with a male friend, boyfriend, or brother)? What strengths does he bring? How do you both benefit from the complementarity between the sexes?

A black and white portrait of Alice von Hildebrand, an elderly woman with short, wavy white hair. She is looking slightly to the right with a gentle expression. She is wearing a dark, textured jacket or sweater. The background is dark and out of focus.

*Women, too, have a mission
toward the other sex: the one of
awakening and refining man's
affectivity, often atrophied by
abstractionism.*

*They are definitely called upon
to "humanize him."*

Alice von Hildebrand

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.