

chapter five

THE FEMININE GENIUS

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. THE UNITY OF MAN AND WOMAN

After creating man male and female, God says to both: "Fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). Not only does he give them the power to procreate as a means of perpetuating the human species throughout time, he also gives them the earth, charging them with the responsible use of its resources. As a rational and free being, man is called to transform the face of the earth. In this task, which is essentially that of culture, man and woman alike share equal responsibility from the start. In their fruitful relationship as husband and wife, in their common task of exercising dominion over the earth, woman and man are marked neither by a static and undifferentiated equality nor by an irreconcilable and inexorably conflictual difference. Their most natural relationship, which corresponds to the plan of God, is the "unity of the two," a relational "uni-duality," which enables each to experience their interpersonal and reciprocal relationship as a gift which enriches and which confers responsibility.

To this "unity of the two" God has entrusted not only the work of procreation and family life, but the creation of history itself.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 8.1–8.7

Key Points

Man and woman are greater together than apart.

When John Paul II speaks of the "unity of the two" or "uni-duality," he references once again the complementarity of man and woman.

When thinking about male-female complementarity, it helps to remember that to complement a thing doesn't mean to complete it. Rather, it means adding something to that which is already complete and good, and then, through that adding, bringing both things to perfection. We experience this all the time with food. Milk complements chocolate chip cookies. Garlic mashed potatoes complement a good pot roast. A fine Burgundy wine brings out the best in a steak. The steak and wine are good on their own, but together they're perfection.

In a similar way, that's how the complementarity of man and woman works. Although women and men "are the illustration of a biological, individual, personal, and spiritual complementarity," Sister Prudence Allen writes, their "complementarity is always of a man and woman as two concrete human beings in relation and not as fractional parts of a man and a woman who in relation make up only a 'single human being.'"⁴³

⁴³ Prudence Allen, R.S.M., "Philosophy of Relation in John Paul II's New Feminism," *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, 67–104.

So, a good man comes together with a good woman, and together they become great. They bring out the best in each other, encourage each other, strengthen each other, sharpen each other. They complement each other, achieving together what they can't achieve apart. Again, it's like steak and wine: each is their own wonderful, whole, individual thing, complete in itself . . . but better together (see CCC, 372).

This, John Paul II tells us, is man and woman's "most natural relationship." It's how God meant for men and women to live together from the beginning.

Married love points toward Trinitarian life.

As Christians, we believe God is a life-giving Communion of Persons. The Father gives everything He has and is to the Son; the Son receives everything the Father gives and gives it right back; and the self-giving Love between them is so real, so complete, that it too is a Person, the Holy Spirit (see CCC, 2845).

This fruitful, life-giving exchange of love within the Trinity is echoed in the fruitful life-giving exchange of love between husbands and wives (see CCC, 383). In marriage, man and woman give everything of themselves to each other: they vow to love each other and sacrifice for each other, for richer or poorer, in sickness or health. That vow is permanent: "until death do us part." It involves the whole person, body and soul. And for a period, when everything works as it should, married love is literally life-giving; it brings new life into being.

Men and women can make gifts of themselves in other ways, and other types of love can be fruitful. But only the love of man and woman in marriage is, by design, permanent, faithful, total, and both physically and spiritually life-giving. That's why the Church teaches that it is the clearest and most powerful image of the inner life of God in this world.

Pope Francis explains, "When a man and a woman celebrate the Sacrament of Matrimony, God as it were 'is mirrored' in them; He impresses in them His own features and the indelible character of His love. Marriage is the icon of God's love for us."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, General Audience, April 2, 2014. Available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2014/documents/papa-francesco_20140402_udienza-generale.html.

Stewardship of the earth is man and woman's common task.

Stewards care for something that does not belong to them. They take responsibility for a good that someone else has entrusted to them. Good stewards, however, do more; they take what was given to them and make something greater of it. Think, for example, of the parable of the talents. In Matthew 25, the king rewards the stewards who took his talents (a form of money), invested them, and earned the king a five and tenfold return. But the king punishes the steward who merely sat on his talent, not losing any money, but not making any money either.

In his "Letter to Women," John Paul II explains that we face a similar challenge as stewards of creation. God has entrusted the world to us, and He expects us to do more than not destroy it. He expects us to make something of it, to care for it, tend it, and from it create a culture that reflects God and glorifies God.

Throughout his pontificate, John Paul II described this kind of culture as a "Civilization of Love" and a "Culture of Life." He used those terms as shorthand for a culture that recognizes, loves, and promotes—through politics, economics, education, and the arts—both the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the human person.

In contrast, he characterized our contemporary culture as a "Culture of Death." By that he meant a culture that, through its support for practices such as abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia, as well as an economy ordered more toward profit than the common good, undermines human dignity, marriage, family life, and authentic friendship.

Bringing It Home

When we hear the phrase “stewardship of creation,” many of us think of respecting the environment: recycling, not wasting energy, driving electric cars, etc. But stewardship means so much more than that.

Whatever God has entrusted to us—our abilities, our homes, our relationships, our work—requires our stewardship. Everything we have is a gift. Everything comes from God. Everything, including our lives, belongs to God. And we glorify Him when we take what He has entrusted to us and make the most of it, giving it back to Him in service and love.

We’re fallen human beings, so we won’t be perfect stewards. But the task of stewardship remains. It is the great project of our lives: to turn our blessings into blessings for others, to build up a home, a life, and a culture that reflects the truth of who we are, where virtue and faith can flourish, and ultimately, as John Paul II said, transforms the face of the earth.

Discussion Questions

1. God created marriage as a sign of the Trinity. What, however, are some of the attitudes spouses can struggle with that prevent married love from giving the witness God intended it to give?
2. What are some of the “talents” (or blessings) God has entrusted to you? How does your stewardship of them contribute to building up the culture?
3. Often it can feel impossible to be equally good stewards of our careers, homes, and relationships. How do you juggle the competing demands in your life? What demand usually wins out? Is that a good thing?

Man becomes the image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion.

— Pope Saint John Paul II

II. RIGHT PRIORITIES

While the 1994 International Year of the Family focused attention on women as mothers, the Beijing Conference, which has as its theme "Action for Equality, Development and Peace," provides an auspicious occasion for heightening awareness of the many contributions made by women to the life of whole societies and nations. This contribution is primarily spiritual and cultural in nature, but socio-political and economic as well. The various sectors of society, nations and states, and the progress of all humanity, are certainly deeply indebted to the contribution of women!

Progress usually tends to be measured according to the criteria of science and technology. Nor from this point of view has the contribution of women been negligible. Even so, this is not the only measure of progress, nor in fact is it the principal one. 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."

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 8.8–9.5

Key Points

Scientific and material progress isn't always progress.

Our culture teaches us to define progress in terms of wealth and material advancement. So, earning more money is "progress." Developing a new iPhone is "progress." Air-conditioning, self-driving cars, and complicated surgeries performed by robots all qualify as "progress."

In some ways, that's true; those are types of progress. And when it's 106 degrees in August, it's tempting to want to canonize Willis Carrier—the inventor of modern air-conditioning. But as valuable as material progress can be, John Paul II reminds us here that it's not the only type of progress. It's not even the most important type of progress.

Money disappears. iPhones break. Self-driving cars end up on the junk heap. All material comforts and scientific doodads are temporal. They don't last. And while they do, they can distract us and confuse us, tempting us to value things more than people.

In the end, material and scientific advancements only qualify as true progress if they serve the moral and spiritual progress of the human person. As Pope Benedict XVI once said, "The only thing

that lasts forever is the human soul, the human person created by God for all eternity.”⁴⁵

True progress in life is holiness.

God calls some of us to start businesses. He calls others to find cures for diseases or invent life-saving technology. But the Church teaches that the one thing to which God calls all of us is holiness. He calls each of us to become saints (see CCC, 1553).

The progress God really wants to see on earth isn't fancier phones and faster cars; it's greater love. He wants each of us to give more, sacrifice more, and serve more. He wants us to die to ourselves, so we can be truly free to love Him and others. The real purpose of our work and studies is to serve those ends.

“For when a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well,” wrote the fathers of the Second Vatican Council. “He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood, this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered.”⁴⁶

Practically speaking, this means that we have to ask ourselves, as we invent new phones, are we growing in virtue and love? As we pursue important research, are we putting God and family first? As we earn more money, are we also giving more to the needy?

⁴⁵ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), Pro Eligando Romano Pontifice, 18 April 2005. Available at: http://www.vatican.va/g.pII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html.

⁴⁶ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), 35: AAS 58 (1966), pp. 1053.

In the end, the only real progress the human person can make is progress towards Heaven. And no one gets to Heaven because of what technology they invent or what company they found—even if that technology saves lives and that company helps communities. We get to Heaven because of how much we love God and how much we let His love transform us (see CCC, 1026).

Women have a particular genius that can reorient our culture's understanding of progress.

John Paul II frequently wrote and spoke about the “genius of women” or the “feminine genius.” By this he meant that we women, by our very nature, have certain talents or gifts.

Chief among those gifts, in his words, is our ability for “accepting the human being in his concrete form”—that is, for welcoming “the other,” not generically, but particularly; not just in theory, but in practice.⁴⁷ We do that with our bodies, when we welcome children into the world, and we do that with our entire being when we welcome others into our lives and homes.

The pope also saw a tremendous capacity in woman's nature for prioritizing being over doing—that is, for caring more about who a person is than what a person accomplishes. He believed that, because of our receptivity, generosity, sensitivity, and maternal hearts, women more readily recognize that love is our only lasting accomplishment and are therefore more adept at prioritizing the human person.

Accordingly, John Paul II saw the feminine genius as an essential element in building a culture of life. He explained: “Without the contribution of women, society is less alive, culture impoverished, and peace less stable. . . . Woman has a genius all her own, which is vitally essential to both society and the Church.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ John Paul II, “The Feminine Genius,” *The Genius of Women*, 27–28.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Bringing It Home

Women may more naturally intuit the importance of people over things and moral progress over material progress, but that doesn't mean we don't struggle to live what we intuit. Our culture excels at distracting us from what matters most, and in the midst of work deadlines, household chores, Facebook debates, and soccer games, "doing" often takes precedence over "being."

To check that tendency, it helps to remember that spiritual gifts, like all gifts, need developing. They need nurturing. They require use and practice. If not, they atrophy and disappear. So, if we want to be good stewards of the feminine genius given to us by God, we need to nurture it.

We do that, first and foremost, by actively making time to sit with God and simply "be" with Him. We also do that by making time to be with the people we love. During that time, we need to put away cell phones, shut off computers and televisions, and make listening the priority. The more space we make in our life for God and others, the more the feminine genius entrusted to us can grow, thrive, and transform the world.

Discussion Questions

1. What's the most important thing you do every day? Why is it the most important?
2. Do you struggle to put "being" before "doing?" If so, in what way? What are the consequences of that struggle in your life?
3. Describe someone you know who exemplifies the feminine genius. What difference has that woman made in your life or others' lives?

None of us are really called to "do" so much as to "be." American society is obsessed with the work ethic, with the notion that only a day where much is done is a good day. This attitude, again, keeps us from simply being with and for one another.

- Dr. Janet Smith

III. MOTHERHOOD IN THE SPIRIT

Here I would like to express particular appreciation to those women who are involved in the various areas of education extending well beyond the family: nurseries, schools, universities, social service agencies, parishes, associations and movements. Wherever the work of education is called for, we can note that women are ever ready and willing to give themselves generously to others, especially in serving the weakest and most defenceless. In this work they exhibit a kind of affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood which has inestimable value for the development of individuals and the future of society. At this point how can I fail to mention the witness of so many Catholic women and Religious Congregations of women from every continent who have made education, particularly the education of boys and girls, their principal apostolate? How can I not think with gratitude of all the women who have worked and continue to work in the area of health care, not only in highly organized institutions, but also in very precarious circumstances, in the poorest countries of the world, thus demonstrating a spirit of service which not infrequently borders on martyrdom?

— Saint John Paul II, “Letter to Women,” 9.6–9.10

Key Points

The feminine genius reflects God’s love for the most vulnerable.

Both men and women image God, but we don’t image Him in exactly the same ways. The masculine genius reflects certain truths about God’s nature. The feminine genius reflects other truths, including God’s love for the most vulnerable.

In Sacred Scripture, we see God preferring to work through a small, powerless tribe of Semitic people—the ancient Israelites—rather than through large and powerful nations. We also hear God repeatedly proclaim the importance of caring for widows, orphans, the poor, and the lame. He blesses those who care for the little ones of the world and curses those who oppress them (see Exod. 22:20–26; Job 34:20–28; Isaiah 25:4–5).

Then, when God becomes Man, He chooses a young virgin, betrothed to a humble carpenter, as His mother. When He grows up, He chooses the poor and the sinful for His companions. He ministers to the sick. He welcomes little children. And He tells us that the blessed are not the rich and the powerful, but the grieving, the meek, and the poor in spirit (see Matt. 9:10–11, 19:14, 11:5, 5:3–11).

Through the centuries, women have gravitated toward caring for these same groups: children, the sick, the elderly, and the poor. Our great contributions to education, healthcare, social services, the Church, and our families testify to this. We have succeeded in other fields, too, but a disproportionate number of women have dedicated their lives to helping those considered less important by the culture. The world might consider that foolish, but as John Paul II saw it, women's concern for the weak is actually one of our greatest strengths, a beautiful expression of God's love for us.

John Paul II acquired his understanding of the feminine genius with the help of one particular feminine genius.

Before he became a bishop, John Paul II studied and taught philosophy in his native Poland. During that time, he became familiar with the work of Edith Stein, a twenty-first-century philosopher, Catholic convert, religious sister, and martyr.

Born in 1891, to a German-Jewish family, Stein grew up in what is now Wroclaw, Poland. Although her mother had a deep faith, Stein couldn't share it, and in her teenage years, left Judaism for atheism.

As a college student, Stein's brilliant mind quickly attracted the attention of her professors, and with their encouragement, she entered the doctoral program in philosophy at the University of Freiburg. There she studied under one of the greatest philosophers of her generation, Edmund Husserl, who founded the school of philosophy known as phenomenology (John Paul II was also trained in this school of philosophical thought).

In 1921, five years after Stein completed her doctorate, she wandered into a friend's library and on a whim, began reading their copy of Saint Teresa of Avila's autobiography. For her, the book changed everything. Baptized within the year, she quickly became one of the most preeminent Catholic thinkers of her day, writing and speaking on a number of important philosophical questions, including women's education, the nature of femininity, and women's role in society.

In 1933, eleven years after her conversion, Stein left academia for the Carmelite cloister. Under her new religious name, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, she continued writing, first in

Germany and then, out of superiors' concerns for her safety, in the Netherlands. By 1942, though, the Nazi's reach extended there as well, and both Stein and her sister (a fellow Jewish convert and Carmelite) were arrested and sent to Auschwitz. After Stein's arrest, a Dutch official offered to help her escape, but she vehemently denied his assistance: she wanted to give her life for her people, her Church, and the world.

Stein died just days later, on August 9, 1942, in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. In his homily at her canonization Mass in 1998, John Paul II paid tribute to the woman who had so profoundly shaped his understanding of the feminine genius, saying:

*Her mind never tired of searching and her heart always yearned for hope. She traveled the arduous path of philosophy with passionate enthusiasm. Eventually, she was rewarded: she seized the truth. Or better: she was seized by it. Then, she discovered that truth had a name: Jesus Christ.*⁴⁹

Religious women embody spiritual motherhood.

For nearly two thousand years, women like Saint Edith Stein, who consecrated themselves to Christ, have testified to the beauty and blessings of spiritual motherhood.

In the first days of Christianity, virgins like Saint Macrina the Younger offered counsel to bishops and priests. Later, cloistered religious like Saint Clare of Assisi offered prayers and sufferings for the good of the Church. Then, as the centuries passed, consecrated religious took on more active roles in society: founding schools and hospitals, taking in destitute women, and caring for the elderly poor. They also, from the earliest years of Christianity until the present day, offered their lives for their spiritual children, dying as martyrs in the streets of Rome, the gas chambers of Auschwitz, and the war-torn streets of the Middle East.

Through their prayers, their service, and their sacrifices, these women have ministered to the children of their beloved spouse: Jesus Christ. "The religious woman sees what she receives, Christ as her spouse, and all the peoples of the world as her children,"

⁴⁹ John Paul II, "Homily for the Canonization of Edith Stein," October 11, 1998. Available at: https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1998/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_11101998_stein.html.

writes Sister Timothy Marie, O.C.D. "Marriage to Christ did not free her from a family but for His family."⁵⁰

Consecrated women's willingness to love all Christ's children as their own is an ongoing witness to the truth, the power, and the beauty of the feminine genius.

⁵⁰Sister Timothy Marie, OCD, "How Is Your Soul: A Reflection on Spiritual Motherhood," *The Integrated Catholic Life* (May 20, 2014). Available at: <http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2014/05/carmelite-sisters-how-is-your-soul-spiritual-motherhood/>.

Bringing It Home

In a world that values doing more than being and material success more than spiritual success, many of women's most valuable and lasting accomplishments can seem small.

The caring and healing professions that attract so many women aren't nearly as glamorous (or lucrative) as careers in finance or politics. The love women give as spiritual mothers is often less tangible than the love mothers pour out on their children in their own homes. And the contributions of religious nuns, sisters, and consecrated virgins often remain hidden from the eyes of the world.

Given that, many of us struggle to fully appreciate certain aspects of the feminine genius. We can find ourselves looking down on women who pursue more traditionally feminine professions or become stay-at-home moms. We also can feel guilty for making those choices ourselves. Women not blessed with biological children can see ourselves as "less than" other women and not appreciate the opportunities for spiritual motherhood that surround us. And all of us can fail to see the beauty of religious life or consecrated virginity.

God calls us, however, to see not with the world's eyes, but with His. And wherever He sees women sacrificially loving and serving others, He sees something beautiful.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think God has such a preference for the little, the weak, and the vulnerable? Why do you think He asks us to have the same preference?
2. Who are your spiritual children? How have you been a spiritual mother to them?
3. Are you ever guilty of undervaluing certain tasks typically taken on by women or certain careers more often pursued by women? How does this affect your own choices about work and home?

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.