

chapter six

THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY— *The Highest Expression of 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. MARY'S FREEDOM

It is thus my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the "genius of women", not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God's plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church. This subject came up frequently during the Marian Year and I myself dwelt on it at length in my Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem (1988). . . .

The Church sees in Mary the highest expression of the "feminine genius" and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration. Mary called herself the "handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38). Through obedience to the Word of God she accepted her lofty yet not easy vocation as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth. Putting herself at God's service, she also put herself at the service of others: a service of love.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 10.1–2, 10.5–10.8

Key Points

Mary freely chose to obey God.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the earliest glimpse of the woman described by John Paul II as "the highest expression of the feminine genius." We first meet her as a young girl, during one of the most important moments in salvation history: the moment where God makes His entire plan of salvation contingent upon the choice of a woman. "Without her, there is no story of redemption," said Archbishop Charles Chaput. "Without Mary, the woman of faith, there is no Jesus, the Son of God."⁵¹

Given the importance of that occasion, it can be tempting to downplay Mary's part in it, to think of her as simply a passive recipient of an unimaginable grace. Mary, however, possessed intellect and free will, just like every other person on earth. Although God knew from the beginning of time He would choose her as His mother, and give her all the grace she needed to say "yes" to His plan, technically, she didn't have to go along with it. She didn't have to consent to God's proposal. God doesn't force Himself on anyone, not even when the salvation of the world hangs in the balance (CCC 488).

But, Mary did say "yes." When the Archangel Gabriel appeared before her and announced that the Lord wanted to give her a Son,

⁵¹ Charles Caput, O.F.M., "World, Work, and Family: The Role of Women in Building a Culture of Life." Delivered October 19, 2003 at the Catholic University of America. Available online at <http://archive.wf-f.org/03-4-Chaput.html>.

the Blessed Virgin responded with humility: "I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). The Church calls that response Mary's *fiat* (a Latin word that translates as "let it be").

Mary's *fiat* testifies to her active participation in salvation history. It also reminds us of one of the most basic truths about the feminine genius: living it requires a "yes" to God. God lets each of us choose if we will be who He made us to be and do what He made us to do.

Mary's freedom was complete because she was without sin.

God gives each of us free will. Every human person has the freedom to choose between right or wrong, God or self. Sin, however, prevents us from exercising this free will perfectly. We aren't truly free to love God and do as we ought, because our own selfish desires and weaknesses get in the way. In effect, they hold us captive. That's the ongoing curse of Original Sin and its aftereffect, concupiscence (see CCC, 1739).

Mary, however, didn't have this problem. Sin never held her captive. She was always, from the moment of her conception, truly free. That's what the term *Immaculate Conception* means (see CCC, 491). From the dawn of human existence, Mary was the first and only human person conceived without sin.⁵² God's life—His sanctifying grace—permeated her being from the very first second of her existence, making her "the most perfect image of freedom and of the liberation of humanity."⁵³

This doesn't mean, though, that Mary didn't need God's grace or that Christ didn't save her. She did, and He did. As the Second Vatican Council explains, Mary "stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently await and receive salvation and receive salvation from Him."⁵⁴

The difference between Mary's redemption and our own is that the grace she received was prevenient, meaning it preceded or anticipated the historical completion of her Son's redeeming work.⁵⁵ Christ was still the source of that grace she received; it was all on His merit. It's

⁵² If there is any confusion on this point see CCC 456–483, specifically paragraph 480 which says: "Jesus Christ possesses two natures, one divine and the other human, not confused, but united in the one person of God's Son."

⁵³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation, March 22, 1986, 97.

⁵⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, 55.

⁵⁵ Pope Pius XI, *Ineffabilis Deus*, December 8, 1854; Acta, pars I, 616.

just that God, who exists outside of time and has all times before Him, didn't wait to apply the effects of these saving graces of Christ to Mary. He judged it best to save Mary at the moment of her conception.

While Mary was protected from the stain of sin, she was not protected from the consequences of Original Sin. Mary still experienced the discomforts and sufferings of earthly life. Both Sacred Scripture and the Church's Tradition reveal this to us. In the Gospel of Matthew, when the Holy Family is told to flee to Egypt because "Herod is going to search for the child to destroy him" (Matt. 2:13), we see that danger and uncertainty were a part of Mary's life. Similarly, Mary's suffering is narrated in Luke's Gospel during the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The wise Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce her heart "so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:35). Like the Scriptures, the wisdom of the Church gives us a day to commemorate The Seven Sorrows of Our Lady in a special way every September 15th.

Realizing that Mary, while being left stainless, nonetheless endured the harsh sufferings of the world, is a beautiful way to encourage our devotion to her. We can ask her to help us accept and apply the graces that God presents and offers us each day so as to not choose sin in our own lives. In his New Testament book, St. Jude encourage us in his benediction: "To the one who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you unblemished and exultant, in the presence of his glory, to the only God, our savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord be glory, majesty, power, and authority from ages past, now, and for ages to come. Amen" (Jude 24—25).

Mary's freedom manifested itself in her attentiveness to others.

Sacred Scripture tells us that throughout Jesus' childhood, Mary reflected prayerfully on the events which unfolded around her: she "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart," and "marveled at what was said about [Jesus]" (Luke 2:19, 22, 51). Then, decades later, in the midst of a large, busy wedding, Mary alone noticed that the bride and groom would soon run out of wine (John 2:1–11).

Through these Gospel passages, the Holy Spirit gives us a glimpse into Mary's heart. We see, said Pope Francis, that "Mary is attentive to God. She listens to God. However, Mary also listens to the

the events . . . she is attentive to reality itself. . . . Mary is the mother of listening, of attentive listening to God and of equally attentive listening to the events of life.”⁵⁶

Mary’s total trust in God enabled her to look away from herself and look to how God’s hand was moving in a particular situation. Rather than focusing on herself—rather than being distracted by worries, fears, offenses, and insecurities—Mary focused on others. She saw what others missed, and understood what others failed to understand. That seeing and understanding enabled her, as John Paul II wrote in the passage above, to lovingly serve others.

⁵⁶ Pope Francis, Address for the Conclusion of the Marian Month of May, May 31, 2013, 1. Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/may/documents/papa-francesco_20130531_conclusione-mese-mariano.html.

Bringing It Home

Mary could say “yes” to God, see the needs of others, and then meet those needs, because of her freedom. She could do what so many of us can’t—forget about herself and see the world clearly—because she was truly a liberated woman—liberated from all the weaknesses, fears, and sins that trap so many of us in our own minds. That freedom made it possible for her to be the example par excellence of the feminine genius. The freedom Mary experienced, however, differs from the type of freedom many people in twenty-first-century America value: negative freedom. Some people refer to this modern brand of freedom as “freedom from”: we want to be free from rules, free from constraints, free from authority. Anything that impinges upon our ability to do what we want—commitments, vows, promises, rules, obligations, even basic biology—is considered an obstacle to our freedom.

Mary, however, experienced the type of freedom the Church wants for each of us: positive freedom. Positive freedom is “freedom to”: freedom to love, freedom to serve, freedom to choose the good and become who God made us to be. The extent to which we can follow in Mary’s footsteps is determined, in part, by the extent to which we see freedom as she did. Our freedom is determined by the extent to which we seek to conform our hearts and minds to God’s. When we live in reality and accept laws, commitments, and obligations—from lifetime vocations to a set schedule of prayer—we progress on the road to holiness.

Discussion Questions

1. What did Mary’s *fiat* say about her relationship with God? Do you ever struggle to give God the same ready “yes”? If so, why do you think that is?
2. What are some of the consequences of failing to be attentive—of failing to see and listen to the people around you? What is something you could do to help you grow in attentiveness?
3. As you’ve grown closer to Christ, how have you become more free? How could something that the world sees as a restriction—a vow, a commitment, an obligation—help you become even freer still?

*We must, as Mary did, treasure all things in
our hearts, for it is really what happens in our
hearts and through our hearts that is of the
utmost importance.*
-Dr. Janet Smith



II. MARY'S REIGN

Precisely through this service Mary was able to experience in her life a mysterious, but authentic "reign." It is not by chance that she is invoked as "Queen of heaven and earth." The entire community of believers thus invokes her; many nations and peoples call upon her as their "Queen." For her, "to reign" is to serve! Her service is "to reign"!

This is the way in which authority needs to be understood, both in the family and in society and the Church. Each person's fundamental vocation is revealed in this "reigning," for each person has been created in the "image" of the One who is Lord of heaven and earth and called to be his adopted son or daughter in Christ. Man is the only creature on earth "which God willed for its own sake," as the Second Vatican Council teaches; it significantly adds that man "cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self" (Gaudium et Spes, 24).

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 10.9–10.15

Key Points

Mary was a woman of prayer and action.

In the Gospel of Luke, we read that Mary, while pregnant with Jesus, made the arduous journey to her cousin Elizabeth's home. She made that journey not for herself, but rather to help Elizabeth during the last months of her pregnancy (see Luke 1:39–57). Later, in the Gospel of John, we see Mary at a wedding in Cana, taking action to save the bride and groom the embarrassment of running out of wine (see John 2:1–11). Later still, at the end of Jesus' earthly life, Mary walked the way of Calvary with her Son, and stood by His side, beneath the cross (see John 19:25). She then kept company with the Apostles, in the Upper Room, after His Resurrection and Ascension (see Acts 1:14).

In all those instances, we see that while Mary was humble and receptive, she was never passive. The same freedom that enabled her to actively say "yes" to God's plan for redemption, also enabled her to actively participate in her Son's life and the lives of those He loved. She served them, helped them, and made sure their needs were met.

Describing Mary as "the woman of listening, of decision, of action," Pope Francis reflected on Mary's willingness to act, noting:

It is difficult in life to make decisions. We often tend to put them off, to let others decide instead; we frequently prefer to let ourselves be dragged along by events, to follow the current fashion; at times we know what we ought to do, but we do not have the courage to do it, or it seems to us too difficult because it means swimming against the tide. In the Annunciation, in the Visitation and at the wedding of Cana, Mary goes against the tide...she does not let herself be swept away by the moment, she does not let herself be dragged along by events. However, when she has clearly understood what God is asking of her, what she has to do, she does not loiter, she does not delay, but goes "with haste."⁵⁷

The Church doesn't understand authority like the world understands authority.

When most people today think of hierarchies and authority, they think of power. They think of the lesser serving the greater or of the people lower down on the "food chain" meeting the needs, interests, and desires of those above them.

The Church, however, doesn't understand authority like that. In the Kingdom of God, authority is ultimately oriented towards service. The greater must serve the lesser, and the first must be last (see CCC, 904, 2235). Jesus, the Son of God, modeled this for us by washing the feet of His disciples (see John 13:1-17). He also told us He came "not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10:45).

Like her Son, Mary's authority—her "queenship"—is expressed through acts of service to God and man. That was true in her earthly life, as seen in the visit to Elizabeth and her intervention at the Wedding in Cana. Now it's true in her heavenly life, as she mothers all God's children with her prayers. All the authority Mary possesses, in heaven and on earth, serves one purpose: helping God's children become holy.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2-3.

⁵⁸ See Pope Pius XII, *Ad Caeli Reginam*, October 11, 1954, 42.

As Christians, we have the same task. Like Jesus and Mary, we're called to reign through service, using whatever power we have to help lead others to God. That service may look different depending on where we offer it—at home or work, in the community or in the parish—but it serves the same end: the good of the human person and the holiness of all (see CCC, 1901).

John Paul II credited the Virgin Mary with using her authority to save his life.

On May 13, 1981, John Paul II entered St. Peter's Square to deliver another installment of his Theology of the Body. He never made it to the microphone, though. Instead, as his car entered the square, four shots rang out. One hit his right arm and another his left hand. The other two bullets struck him in his intestines. The pope had enough presence of mind to gasp three words: "Mary, my mother." Then, he collapsed.

The papal guards raced the bleeding John Paul II to the hospital, where five hours of surgery saved his life. But those watching the events of that terrible day say that the pope never should have made it to the hospital. He should have been dead before he even exited St. Peter's Square. The assassin, after all, was not a lone mad man; he was a trained professional, an expert mark. He shot four times at the pope from close range.

Yet two bullets went slightly off course, and the other two missed vital organs by mere millimeters. Had one flown just a fraction of an inch truer, the pope would have breathed his last. But it didn't. And no one but John Paul II knew why.

Two years later, however, when John Paul II visited his assassin in prison, the pope shared his explanation for his miraculous survival. When his assassin put the question to him—"Why didn't you die?"—the pope answered simply, "One hand fired the shot. Another guided it."

The guiding hand to which he referred was the Blessed Virgin Mary's. May 13, the day of the assassination attempt, is the Feast of Our Lady of Fatima. And on that day, as proof of her motherly love and queenly power, John Paul II believed that she reached out and guided the bullets off course.

In the years that followed, John Paul II visited Mary's shrine in Fatima three times to thank her for her motherly intervention. And on one visit, he gave the shrine a special gift: the bullet that had come within millimeters of ending his life. Today, visitors to Fatima can see that bullet ensconced in the crown of the shrine's statue of Our Lady.⁵⁹

*Mary . . . is the model of the full
development of woman's vocation, since,
despite the objective limits imposed by
her social condition, she exercised a vast
influence on the destiny of humanity and
the transformation of society.*
— Pope Saint John Paul II

⁵⁹ See George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 397-436; Pat Gohn, "A Bullet in Our Lady's Crown," Patheos Online (May 11, 2011). Available at: <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Bullet-in-Our-Ladys-Crown-Pat-Gohn-05-12-2011>.

Bringing It Home

Mary was and is the ultimate servant, but her ability to receive was even greater than her ability to give. From God, Mary received the Christ Child. She received Him into her body and into her life. She also received grace—the grace to love, serve, see, and believe. And, unlike the rest of humanity, she received that grace fully and perfectly, with no hesitation or reservation. Mary never fell into the trap of thinking she could do things on her own or that she didn't need God's help. She depended on Him in every moment for her every need.

As His children, God calls us to imitate Mary and reign through service. But prior to that call, He calls us to imitate Mary and practice receptivity. God wants us to receive, even more than He wants us to give. He wants us to receive His love, grace, help, correction, and wisdom. He wants us to depend upon Him to meet both our smallest and greatest needs, looking to Him, not to ourselves, when bank accounts run low, patience wears thin, understanding grows dim, or energy runs out.

Learning that lesson isn't necessarily easy, but it is essential to imitating Mary and living the feminine genius.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it important that Mary didn't just listen to God, but also acted on what she heard? What does this tell us about living the feminine genius in the world?
2. How can an abuse of authority interfere with people making a "sincere gift" of themselves? How can an authority modeled on Mary's queenship counteract those consequences?
3. Do you struggle to receive help from God or from others? What are some of the consequences of that struggle in your life? What is one thing you could do this week to develop the habit of receptivity?

III. MARY'S VOCATION

The maternal "reign" of Mary consists in this. She who was, in all her being, a gift for her Son, has also become a gift for the sons and daughters of the whole human race, awakening profound trust in those who seek her guidance along the difficult paths of life on the way to their definitive and transcendent destiny. Each one reaches this final goal by fidelity to his or her own vocation; this goal provides meaning and direction for the earthly labours of men and women alike.

— Saint John Paul II, "Letter to Women," 10.16–10.18

Key Points

Mary gave herself completely to her vocation.

In her lifetime, Mary abandoned herself entirely to the will of God. She lived in union with His will every moment of every day. That wasn't easy. Or, more accurately, it didn't entail doing easy things.

Consider: Mary almost lost Joseph, her betrothed, after announcing her pregnancy (Mt 1:19). She gave birth far from home, in a stable (Luke 2:7). She lived in exile in Egypt (Matt. 2:13). And, she stood at the foot of the cross while her only Son suffered the most horrific of deaths (John 19:27).

Yet, through it all, Mary never wavered in her fidelity to God or the path He laid out for her. She trusted that He knew best. She trusted in His ability to work in all things for the greatest good. She didn't need to know or understand the reason behind every step God asked her to take. She simply walked the path laid out before her, knowing it would lead her to Him.

John Paul II explained:

To believe means "to abandon oneself" to the truth of the word of the living God, knowing and humbly recognizing "how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways" (Rom 11:33). Mary, who by the eternal will of the Most High stands, one may say, at the very center of those "inscrutable ways" and "unsearchable judgments" of God, conforms herself to them in the dim light of faith,

*accepting fully and with a ready heart everything that is decreed in the divine plan.*⁶⁰

We are part of Mary's vocation.

Moments before He died, Jesus spoke to His mother and the apostle John. "Woman," He said to her, "behold your son" (John 19:27). With those words, Jesus didn't simply entrust John to His mother's care. As the Church has always understood it, Jesus also entrusted all of His "beloved disciples" to her. At that moment, the Mother of God became the Mother of All.

For two thousand years, Christians have taken Jesus at His word and gone to Mary as their mother. They have asked for her prayers and her help. They have trusted her with their every need. Ancient Marian prayers testify to this, including the *Sub Tuum Praesidium*, which dates back to at least A.D. 250: "Beneath your compassion, We take refuge, O Mother of God, do not despise our petitions in time of trouble: but rescue us from dangers, only pure, only blessed one."⁶¹

Mary, ever faithful to her vocation, always responds to those prayers in love. She is our primary intercessor in heaven, our number one prayer warrior. When we ask her for help, she (like every good mother) goes to Jesus on our behalf. He is the source of whatever graces or blessings come our way, but she, as our mother in heaven, is the instrument or conduit by which they flow to us (see CCC, 969).

Our vocation is our path to Heaven.

Through Mary's fidelity to her vocation as Mother of God and mother of men, she demonstrated for all her children the surest and best way to God: to answer His call with a ready "yes" and follow the path He lays out for us. Her fidelity to her vocation led her to God. And our fidelity to our vocation does the same.

God has called each of us to holiness. He has also called each of us to a particular state in life and equipped each of us for a particular task. States in life can change. Old tasks can be completed and new ones given. But fidelity to seeking holiness through our state

⁶⁰ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, March 25, 1987, 14.

⁶¹ See David Mills' *Discovering Mary: Answers to Questions About the Mother of God* (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2009) 117.

in life and the tasks that come with it is always the surest and quickest path to heaven.

Honoring our vows, doing the dishes, changing diapers, filing reports, returning emails, saying our prayers, meeting deadlines, bearing trials without complaint, speaking encouraging words, commuting to the office—all these things and more are saint-making events when God is invited into them. They can become, through grace-filled obedience, stepping stones to sanctity.

“Either we learn to find the Lord in the ordinary everyday life,” said Saint Josemaría Escrivá, “or else we shall never find him.”⁶²

⁶² Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer* (Dublin: Ecclesia Press, 1972) 114.

Bringing It Home

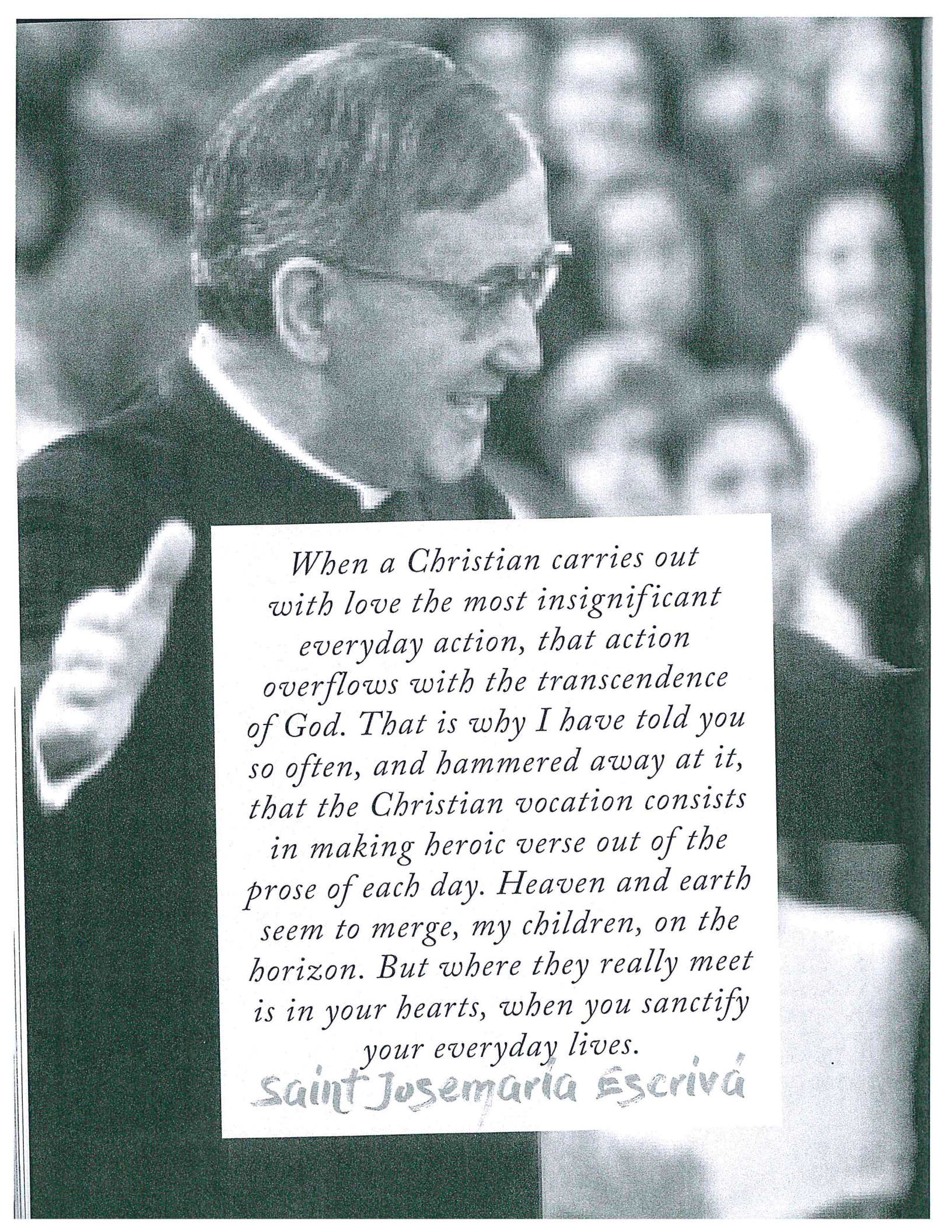
During her time on earth, Mary devoted herself to the people God sent her way: her husband, her Son, and the friends and family in their community. She didn't travel the world. She didn't write a book or make millions. She didn't seek fame or greatness. She just loved as God asked her to love. And that was her path to heaven. It led her, straight and quick, to her Son.

In a culture that values doing more than being, accomplishing more than loving, and success more than service, Mary offers us an invaluable witness. She reminds us that the mark of lasting greatness isn't how much we've done but rather how much we've let God transform us with His love. Likewise, she shows us that true success isn't measured by how much time we spend at the office, but how much time we spend nurturing our relationships with our loved ones. And she helps us see that a life well lived isn't determined by how many friends we have on Facebook, but rather how well we've loved the friends (and strangers) who cross our path daily.

Mary wasn't faithful to an occupation; she was faithful to a vocation. She was faithful to love. And if we want to imitate her, we must do the same.

Discussion Questions

1. How does contemplating Mary as the "highest expression of the feminine genius" help your understanding of that genius? What does her example teach you about the dignity and mission of women?
2. What is the most mundane task your work (whether inside or outside the home) currently demands of you? How can you invite God into that task and allow it to become part of your sanctification?
3. Do you ever fall into the trap of placing work or activities before the primary relationships in your life? What is one thing you could do this week to reset your priorities?



*When a Christian carries out
with love the most insignificant
everyday action, that action
overflows with the transcendence
of God. That is why I have told you
so often, and hammered away at it,
that the Christian vocation consists
in making heroic verse out of the
prose of each day. Heaven and earth
seem to merge, my children, on the
horizon. But where they really meet
is in your hearts, when you sanctify
your everyday lives.*

Saint Josemaría Escrivá

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.