Pope John Paul II on...

The Dignity & Genius of Women

A publication of the Love & Responsibility Foundation, Cold Spring, New York - October 2003

"If You Knew the Gift of God"

May All Women Discover Themselves

The Incarnation [Christ's conception within Mary's womb]…this mystery is so great that no human mind can exhaust it. Not only does it illumine the greatness of God's love for His creatures...it gives to women an unheard of dignity. *(Dr. Alice von Hildebrand — PBW)*

> Mary is "the new beginning" of the *dignity and vocation of women*, of each and every woman. — John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, "The Dignity & Vocation of Women" *(MD)*

"At this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling." *— Closing Message, Second Vatican Council*

A particular key for understanding this can be found in [Mary's] words... after the Annunciation, during her visit to Elizabeth: 'He who is mighty has done great things for me.' These words certainly refer to the conception of her Son, who is the "Son of the Most High," but they can also signify *the discovery of her own feminine humanity.* *(MD)*

> *God..."has done great things for me" — this is the discovery of all the richness and personal resources of femininity,* all the eternal originality of the "woman," just as God wanted [Mary] to be, a person for her own sake, who discovers herself "by means of a sincere gift of self"… This discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life. *(MD)*

From the beginning of Christ's mission, women show to him and to his mystery a special *sensitivity which is characteristic* of their *femininity.* It must also be said that this is especially confirmed...not only at the Cross but also at the dawn of the Resurrection. The women *are the first at the tomb.* They are the first to find it empty. They are the first to hear: "He is not here. *He has risen,* as he said"… They are also the first to be called to announce this truth to the Apostles. *(MD)*

> From a supernatural point of view, women are actually granted a privileged position in the economy of redemption [the business of saving souls] *(von Hildebrand – PBW)*

The Gospels…highlight the fact that *women were in the forefront at the foot of the Cross*, at the decisive moment in Jesus of Nazareth's whole messianic mission. John was the only Apostle who remained faithful, but there were many faithful women...the Mother of Christ and "his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene" were present, but "there were also many women there, looking on from afar, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him." *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

The Stations of the Cross honor women… The holy women certainly envied [Simon of Cyrene]: how they would have welcomed the possibility of partaking physically in the sufferings of the one they loved so ardently… The holy women are all assembled at the foot of the cross. No woman was privileged to see Christ transfigured on Mount Tabor, but they were at the Crucifixion. *(von Hildebrand – PBW)*

The Annunciation

From the Gospel according to Luke —

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will call Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." Then Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

"In order to understand the greatness of a woman's mission, we must open our minds and hearts to...the supernatural." - AvH

> As we see, in this most arduous test of faith and fidelity the women proved stronger than the Apostles. *(MD)*
>
> Childbirth is also an event basked in sacredness… Just as Christ has suffered the agonizing pains of the crucifixion in order to reopen for us the gates of heaven, so the women has received the costly privilege of suffering so that another child made to God's image and likeness can enter the world. *(von Hildebrand – PBW)*

God Entrusts the Human Being to Women in a Special Way

From the "beginning," woman [Eve] – like man – was created and "placed" by God in this order of love. The sin of the first parents did not destroy this order, nor irreversibly cancel it out. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

The same Woman [Mary]...in the Book of Revelation... suffers because "before the woman who is about to give birth" there stands "the great dragon"... We can…see that the struggle with evil and the Evil One marks the biblical exemplar of the "woman" from the beginning to the end of history. It is also *a struggle for man, for his true good, for his salvation.* *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

> Is not the Bible trying to tell us that it is precisely in the "woman" — Eve-Mary — that history witnesses a dramatic struggle for every human being, the struggle for his or her fundamental "yes" or "no" to God and God's eternal plan for humanity? *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*
>
> The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way.* *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way — precisely by reason of their femininity — and this in a particular way determines their vocation. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting, strong because of the fact that God "entrusts the human being to her," always and in every way, even in the situations of social discrimination in which she may find herself. This awareness and this fundamental vocation speak to women of the dignity which they receive from God himself. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

Thus the "perfect woman" (*Proverbs* 31:10) becomes an irreplaceable support and source of spiritual strength for other people, who perceive the great energies of her spirit. These "perfect women" are owed much by their families, and sometimes by whole nations. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

In our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material well-being to a degree hitherto unknown... In this way, unilateral progress can also lead to a gradual *loss of sensitivity for man, that is, for what is essentially human.* *(MD)*

> Our time in particular *awaits the manifestation* of that "genius" which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human! — and because "the greatest of these is love." *(MD)*

It is, above all, by means of women that piety is first awakened and spreads its mysterious influence over society… Woman is one of the grand instruments of which Providence makes use to prepare the way for civilization… Should she prove false to her high mission, society would perish. *(Ratisbonne, quoted in von Hildebrand – PBW)*

Women Should Become Fully Aware of the Greatness of Thier Mission

The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable. As the declaration *Inter Insigniores* points out, "the Church desires that Christian women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission: today their role is of capital importance both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church." – Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*

The Dignity of Women and the Order of Love

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.'" *This mystery is a profound one.* *(St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, quoted in MD)*

The Letter to the Ephesians...[compares] the spousal character of the love between man and woman to the mystery of Christ and of the Church. *Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church – the Church is the Bride of Christ.* *(MD)*

This passage connects the truth about marriage as a primordial sacrament with the creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

The significant comparison in the Letter to the Ephesians gives perfect clarity to what is decisive for the dignity of women both in the eyes of God – the Creator and Redeemer – and in the eyes of human beings – men and women. *(MD)*

> In God's eternal plan, woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

The order of love belongs to the intimate life of God himself, the life of the Trinity. In the intimate life of God, the Holy Spirit is the personal [substance] of love. *(MD)*

Through the Spirit, Uncreated Gift, love becomes a gift for created persons. Love, which is of God, communicates itself to creatures: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." *(MD)*

> The calling of woman into existence at man's side as "a helper fit for him" in the "unity of the two," provides the visible world of creatures with particular conditions so that "the love of God may be poured into the hearts" of the beings created in his image. *(John Paul II — MD)*

Woman Can Only Find Herself by Giving Love to Others

When the author of the Letter to the Ephesians calls Christ "the Bridegroom" and the Church "the Bride," he indirectly confirms through this analogy *the truth about woman as bride.* The Bridegroom is the one who loves. The Bride is loved: *it is she who receives love, in order to love in return. (MD)*

> *The dignity of women is measured by the order of love*, which is essentially the order of justice and charity...
>
> A woman's dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected *with the love which she gives in return… Woman can only find herself by giving love to others. (Pope John Paul II — MD)*

"Woman can only find herself by giving love to others."

— Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical letter, Mulieris Dignitatem - On the Dignity & Vocation of Women

The passage from the Letter to the Ephesians...enables us to think of a special kind of "prophetism" that belongs to women in their femininity. The analogy of the Bridegroom and the Bride speaks of the love with which every human being – man and woman – is loved by God in Christ. But... it is precisely the woman – the bride – who manifests this truth to everyone. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

This "*prophetic" character of women in their femininity* finds its highest expression in the Virgin Mother of God. She emphasizes, in the fullest and most direct way, the intimate linking of the order of love — which enters the world of human persons through a Woman — with the Holy Spirit. At the Annunciation Mary hears the words: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you." *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

Christ is the Great Ally of Women

Jesus always showed the greatest esteem and the greatest respect for woman, for every woman, and in particular He was sensitive to female suffering.

> Going beyond the social and religious barriers of the time, Jesus reestablished woman in her full dignity as a human person before God and before men. – John Paul II, *Thoughts on Women – Address to Italian Maids, April 1979*

Woman Reestablished in Her Full Dignity

Christ's way of acting, the Gospel of his words and deeds, is a consistent *protest* against whatever offends the dignity of women. Consequently, the women who are close to Christ discover themselves in the truth which he "teaches" and "does," even when this truth concerns their "sinfulness." *(MD)*

> Women feel "*liberated" by this truth*, restored to themselves: they feel loved with "eternal love," with a love which finds direct expression in Christ himself. In Christ's sphere of action their position is transformed... Jesus is speaking to them about matters which in those times one did not discuss with a woman. *(MD)*

Perhaps the most significant example of this is the *Samaritan woman* at the well of Sychar. *Jesus* — who knows that she is a sinner and speaks to her about this — *discusses the most profound mysteries of God with her.* He speaks to her of God's infinite gift of love, which is like a "spring of water welling up to eternal life." He speaks to her about God who is Spirit, and about the true adoration which the Father has a right to receive in spirit and truth. Finally he reveals to her that he is the Messiah promised to Israel. *(MD)*

Christ Speaks about the Things of God

This is an event without precedent: that a *woman*, and what is more a "sinful woman," becomes a "disciple" of Christ. Indeed, once taught, she proclaims Christ to the inhabitants of Samaria, so that they too receive him with faith. This is an unprecedented event, if one remembers the usual way women were treated by those who were teachers in Israel; whereas in Jesus of Nazareth's way of acting such an event becomes normal. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

> Christ speaks to women about the things of God, and they understand them; there is a true resonance of mind and heart, a response of faith. Jesus expresses appreciation and admiration for this distinctly "feminine" response. *(MD)*

NFP: The Choice to be Free

> Dr. Janet Smith: Woman using NFP generally feel revered by their husbands since their husbands do not make them use unhealthy and unpleasant contraceptives.
>
> Men using NFP generally have greater self-respect since they have gained control over their sexual desires and can now engage in sexual intercourse as an act of love, not as an act of mere sexual urgency.

Using the natural method requires and strengthens the harmony of the married couple, it helps and confirms the rediscovery of the marvelous gift of parenthood, it involves respect for nature and demands the responsibility of the individuals.

At the global level this choice supports the process of freedom and emancipation of women and peoples from unjust family planning programs which bring in their sad wake the various forms of contraception, abortion and sterilization. *– Pope John Paul II, Address to NFP Instructors, 1996*

Natural Methods Strengthen the Harmony of the Married Couple

When couples, by means of recourse to contraception, separate [the unitive and procreative meaning] that God the Creator has inscribed in the being of man and woman and in the dynamism of their sexual communion, they act as "arbiters" of the divine plan and they "manipulate" and degrade human sexuality — and with it themselves and their married partner — by altering its value of "total" self-giving. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*

Thus the innate language that expresses the total reciprocal self-giving of the husband and wife is overlaid, through contraception, by an objectively contradictory language, namely, that of *not* giving oneself totally to the other. This leads not only to a positive refusal to be open to life but also to a falsification of the inner truth of conjugal love, which is called upon to give itself in personal totality. *(John Paul II — FC)*

When, instead, by means of recourse to periods of infertility, the couple respects the inseparable connection between the unitive and procreative meanings of human sexuality, they are acting as "ministers" of God's plan and they "benefit from" their sexuality according to the original dynamism of "total" self-giving. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*

> The choice of the natural rhythms involves accepting the cycle of...the woman, and thereby accepting dialogue, reciprocal respect, shared responsibility and self-control. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*
>
> To accept the cycle and to enter into dialogue means to recognize both the spiritual and corporal character of conjugal communion and to live personal love with its requirement of fidelity. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*

In this context the couple comes to experience how conjugal communion is enriched with those values of tenderness and affection which constitute the inner soul of human sexuality, in its physical dimension also. *(FC)*

In this way sexuality is respected and promoted in its truly and fully human dimension, and is never "used" as an "object" that, by breaking the personal unity of soul and body, strikes at God's creation itself at the level of the deepest interaction of nature and person. *(John Paul II — FC)*

There is no doubt that these [human] conditions [psychological, moral and spiritual] must include persistence and patience, humility and strength of mind, filial trust in God and in His grace, and frequent recourse to prayer and to the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation. Thus strengthened, Christian husbands and wives will be able to keep alive their awareness of the unique influence that the grace of the sacrament of marriage has on every aspect of married life, including therefore their sexuality. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*

But the necessary conditions also include knowledge of the bodily aspect and the body's rhythms of fertility. *(FC)*

> Accordingly, every effort must be made to render such knowledge [of the body and its rhythms of fertility] accessible to all married people and also to young adults before marriage, through clear, timely and serious instruction and education given by married couples, doctors and experts. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*

Knowledge must then lead to education in self-control: hence the absolute necessity for the virtue of chastity and for permanent education in it. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*

> In the Christian view, chastity by no means signifies rejection of human sexuality or lack of esteem for it: rather it signifies spiritual energy capable of defending love from the perils of selfishness and aggressiveness, and able to advance it towards its full realization. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*

The Hallmarks of NFP: Dialogue, Reciprocal Respect, Shared Responsibility, Self-Control

A man and a woman who have marital relations must know when and how they may become parents and regulate their sexual life accordingly. They have a responsibility for every conception, not only to themselves but also to the family which they are founding or increasing by that conception. — Pope John Paul II, *Love & Responsibility* (L&R)

Every woman can observe in herself the changes which occur in the relevant phase of the cycle… The factors which disturb the regularity of the biological cycle in women are above all of psychological origin. (L&R)

Fear then is a powerful negative stimulus that can destroy the natural regularity of the female sexual cycle. (L&R)

Fear of pregnancy also deprives a woman of that "joy in the spontaneous experience of love" which acting in accordance with nature brings. (L&R)

All this implicitly shows the decisive importance [of] two elements: readiness during intercourse to accept parenthood ("I may become a mother," "I may become a father"), and that readiness to practice continence which derives from virtue, from love for the closest of persons. (L&R)

It must be clearly stated that one basic method underlies all natural methods of regulating fertility: the "method" of virtue (love and continence). (L&R)

Contraceptives are of their very nature harmful to health. Biological methods besides causing temporary barrenness, may bring about serious and irreversible changes in the organism. Chemical means are in their very nature cellular poisons, otherwise they would not have the power to kill genital cells, and so they must by physically harmful. (L&R)

Mechanical means cause local injuries in the woman's reproductive tract, and what is more interfere with the spontaneity of the sexual act, which is something that women in particular find intolerable. (L&R)

> The only natural method of regulating conception is that which relies upon periodic continence. It demands precise knowledge of…the woman concerned and of her biological rhythm. (L&R)

A more important task for the man than adapting himself to the biological cycle of the woman is the creation of a favorable psychological climate for their relationship without which the successful application of natural methods is out of the question. (*Pope John Paul II — L&R)*

> If a man and a woman use these methods with full understanding of the facts and recognizing the objective purpose of marriage, natural methods leave them with a sense of choice and spontaneity ("naturalness") in their experience, and — most important of all — the possibility of deliberate regulation of procreation. (*John Paul II — L&R)*

Women Using NFP Speak Out —

We were always a close couple, but I can't believe how much closer we've become in the last three years since we started relying on fertility awareness. In fact, my husband told me that he feels we've grown more intimate during the past forty months than during all the previous years of our marriage put together. I agree.

When we first started using the method there was that longing for Phase III; now we are realizing a great happiness even during the abstinence... I feel like a young bride when I prepare one of his favorite meals and take walks in the new snow in the evenings followed by cuddling up in bed with a great feeling of being loved even though we are in a short time of abstinence.

Strange as it may seem, the abstinence has had a positive effect on our marriage. I feel that my husband has to love me deeply in order to abstain.

> I feel so secure and loved. My spouse loves me for me and not as a sex/bed partner. I know this because during our abstinence, he is still loving and faithful and has self-control.

I know my husband feels that NFP is highly satisfactory because he's so enthusiastic about it... Sometimes the abstinence period gets me down, but my husband has the ability to really get me through it and into the infertile phase. He makes the method worthwhile. At certain times my husband tends to treat me more specially — like a fiancée rather than a wife. He doesn't take me quite so much for granted, like a cookie he can have anytime.

Men Using NFP Speak Out —

My wife and I have romantic memories of many of our abstinence periods. We have almost no romantic memories attached to the years when Barbara was on the Pill. We have also learned that abstinence isn't always positive unless we really work at it.

> In the beginning we thought that if my wife went on the Pill, the freedom of having intercourse as often as we wanted would bring us closer together... But now that we are using NFP, our marriage is growing better every day. It didn't on the Pill. We've learned that there is more to marriage than sex.

Before using NFP, I spent many evenings thinking about how I was going to convince Joyce to have intercourse that night. Meanwhile, she was thinking about how she was going to convince me that we didn't need it that night. Now that we're using NFP, many nights are spent discussing problem areas in our marriage — ourselves, the children, etc. Overall, I would never trade NFP for any artificial method because it has helped us together. I'm also relieved that my wife is not in any medical danger from side effects of the Pill.

> Abstinence sharpens or rekindles my wife's attractiveness to me and prompts demonstrations of love and affection that I probably would neglect.

The biggest surprise to me was the fact that my wife found the abstinence terribly difficult. I thought that I would have the problems… I was terribly flattered to realize that my wife enjoyed relations with me so much. For years I have been grateful to her for always responding to my 'request' for intercourse. But after twenty-eight months of using natural methods, we finally see intercourse as something that we share and give to each other. She gives to me; I give to her.

— From Nona Aguilar's *The New, No-Pill, No-Risk Birth Control*

Motherhood – Sharing in the Great Mystery of Eternal Generation

> Motherhood is woman's vocation. It is an eternal vocation, and it is also a contemporary vocation. *(MD)*

"The Mother who understands everything and embraces each of us with her heart": these are the words of a song, sung by young people in Poland... The song goes on to announce that today the world is particularly "hungry and thirsty" for that motherhood, which is woman's vocation "physically" and "spiritually," as it is Mary's. – Pope John Paul II, Vatican Address, January 1979 (VA)

> All women, without exception, are called upon to be mothers. *(von Hildebrand – PBW)*

Motherhood: An Eternal Vocation

In her book *The Eternal Woman*, Gertrud von le Fort writes: "To be a mother, to feel maternally, means to turn especially to the helpless, to incline lovingly and helpfully to every small and weak thing upon the earth"... The very soul of the woman is meant to be maternal. *(von Hildebrand — PBW)*

Everything must be done in order that the dignity of this splendid vocation may not be broken in the inner life of the new generations...that the authority of the woman-mother may not be diminished in the family, social and public life, and in the whole of our civilization. (Pope John Paul II — VA)

> The one true God is the God of life; Christ is the life of the soul, and women, who have the sublime mission of giving life, intuitively weave this principle into their daily lives… There is a metaphysical bond between womanhood and life, and this is an honor indeed. *(PBW)*

A Woman's Joy

The angels have not been blessed with such a grace. They cannot share in God's creative miracle to bring new saints to Heaven. Only a human mother can. Mothers are closer to God the Creator than any other creatures. God joins forces with mothers in performing this act of creation... What on God's good earth is more glorious than this: to be a mother? – Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty

> At the moment of conception… at that very moment God creates the child's soul… God therefore "touches" the female body in placing this new soul into the temple of her womb. This is another incredible privilege that the creator grants to women. *(PBW)*

Motherhood implies from the beginning a special openness to the new person: and this is precisely the woman's "part." In this openness, in conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman "discovers herself through a sincere gift of self." *(MD)*

Today, when satanic forces are unleashed over the world, it is against the mystery of maternity that they are mostly directed… The evil one knows that once the woman is conquered, his victory over mankind is guaranteed. Eve ate the apple; Adam followed suit. To refuse maternity is to refuse to love; it is to refuse to suffer in order to give life. (PBW)

"I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord." This exclamation of Eve, the "mother of all the living" is repeated every time a new human being comes into the world. It expresses the woman's joy and awareness that she is sharing in the great mystery of eternal generation. The spouses share in the creative power of God! *(John Paul II — MD)*

> One day, all human accomplishments will be reduced to a pile of ashes. But every single child to whom a woman has given birth will live forever, for he has been given an immortal soul made to God's image and likeness. *(von Hildebrand – PBW)*

Parenthood — even though it belongs to both — is realized much more fully in the woman, especially in the prenatal period. It is the woman who "pays" directly for this shared generation, which literally absorbs the energies of her body and soul... *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

The "woman," as mother and first teacher of the human being (education being the spiritual dimension of parenthood), has a specific precedence over the man. *(MD)*

> Motherhood...expresses a very important creativity on the part of the woman, upon whom the very humanity of the new human being mainly depends. *(MD)*

Women in the Home — An "Irreplaceable Value"

The Church can and should help modern society by tirelessly insisting that the work of women in the home be recognized and respected by all in its irreplaceable value.

— Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio (FC)*

> While it must be recognized that women have the same right as men to perform various public functions, society must be structured in such a way that wives and mothers are not in practice compelled to work outside the home, and that their families can live and prosper in a dignified way even when they themselves devote their full time to their own family. *(FC)*

The mentality which honors women more for their work outside the home than for their work within the family must be overcome. *(Pope John Paul II — FC)*

This requires that men should truly esteem and love women with total respect for their personal dignity. *(FC)*

Virginity for the Sake of the Kingdom

By freely choosing virginity, women confirm themselves as persons, as beings whom the Creator from the beginning has willed for their own sake. At the same time they realize the personal value of their own femininity by becoming "a sincere gift" for God who has revealed himself in Christ, a gift for Christ, the Redeemer of humanity and the Spouse of souls: a "spousal" gift. *One cannot correctly understand virginity* — a woman's consecration in virginity — *without referring to spousal love.* It is through this kind of love that a person becomes a gift for the other. (*Pope John Paul II — MD*)

> Women, called from the very "beginning" to be loved and to love, in a vocation to virginity *find Christ* first of all as the Redeemer who "loved until the end" through his total gift of self; *and they respond to this gift with a "sincere gift"* of their whole lives. (*Pope John Paul II — MD*)

They thus give themselves to the divine Spouse, and this personal gift tends to union, which is properly spiritual in character. Through the Holy Spirit's action a woman becomes "one spirit" with Christ the Spouse. (*Pope John Paul II — MD*)

"Leave everything and follow Christ." This cannot be compared to remaining simply unmarried or single, because virginity is not restricted to a mere "no," but contains a profound "yes" in the spousal order: the gift of self for love in a total and undivided manner. (*MD*)

> A consecrated virgin is called upon to be the mother of millions of souls whose sorrows she carries in her heart and to whom she hopes to help give birth in eternal life. *(von Hildebrand — PBW)*

Guardians of the Gospel

In the history of the Church, even from earliest times, there were side-by-side with men *a number of women,* for whom the response of the Bride to the Bridegroom's redemptive love acquired full expressive force. First we see those women who had personally encountered Christ and followed him. After his departure, together with the Apostles, they "devoted themselves to prayer" in the Upper Room in Jerusalem until the day of Pentecost... These women, and others afterwards, played *an active and important role in the life of the early Church,* in building up from its foundations the first Christian community — and subsequent communities — *through their own charisms and their varied service.* (*Pope John Paul II — MD*)

The same thing is repeated down the centuries, from one generation to the next, as *the history of the Church* demonstrates. By defending the dignity of women and their vocation, the Church has shown honor and gratitude for those women who — faithful to the Gospel — have shared in every age in the apostolic mission of the whole People of God. (*Pope John Paul II — MD*)

> They are the holy martyrs, virgins, and mothers of families, who bravely bore witness to their faith and passed on the Church's faith and tradition by bringing up their children in the spirit of the Gospel. (MD)

Guardians of Peace

When women are able to fully share their gifts with the whole community, the very way in which society understands and organizes itself is improved and comes to reflect in a better way the substantial unity of the human family. Here we see the most important condition for the consolidation of authentic peace. The growing presence of women in social, economic and political life at the local, national and international levels is thus a very positive development…

> In order to be a teacher of peace, a woman must first of all nurture peace within herself. Inner peace comes from knowing that one is loved by God and from the desire to respond to His love.

History is filled with marvelous examples of women who, sustained by this knowledge, have been able successfully to deal with difficult situations of exploitation, discrimination, violence and war. – Pope John Paul II, Women: *Teachers of Peace, January 1, 1995*

Guardians of Purity

A contemplation of the female body can yield rich insights into the mission of women…the intimate organs are not visible. They are all "hidden" within her. In this she differs clearly from her male counterpart… What is hidden usually refers to something mysterious… The very structure of her body symbolizes a garden that should be carefully guarded, for the keys of the garden belong to God. It is His property in a special sense and is to be kept untouched until He allows the bride-to-be to give the keys to her husband to be. (von Hildebrand — PBW)

> The mysterious character of this garden is an emblem and repetition…of the greatest event that has taken place in history: The Incarnation — God becoming man. (von Hildebrand — PBW)

Not only are the female organs "hidden," they are also *veiled*. A veil symbolizes both mystery and sacredness… The veil of virginity is a very special female privilege… The biological make-up of women indicates that their reproductive organs are stamped by sacredness and belong to God in a special sense. *(von Hildebrand — PBW)*

> Hence, a woman's mission is to be the guardian of purity. *(von Hildebrand – PBW)*

When she betrays her mission, not only is God offended but in wounding herself spiritually she wounds the Church and society at large. *(von Hildebrand — PBW)*

> But...rich in mercy and hope, God can make all things new. *(von Hildebrand – PBW)*

Pray Unceasingly to the Holy Virgin Mary

In the hierarchy of holiness it is *precisely the "woman,"* Mary of Nazareth, who is the "figure" of the Church. She "precedes" everyone on the path to holiness; in her person "the Church has already reached that perfection whereby she exists without spot or wrinkle." (*Pope John Paul II — MD*)

The Marian dimension of Christian life takes on special importance in relation to women and their status. In fact, femininity has a unique relationship with the Mother of the Redeemer. — Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater (RM)*

The figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such by the very fact that God, in the sublime event of the Incarnation of his Son, entrusted himself to...the free and active ministry of a woman. It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. *(Pope John Paul II — RM)*

> In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement. *(Pope John Paul II — RM)*

"If You Knew the Gift of God"

"If you knew the gift of God," Jesus says to the Samaritan woman during one of those remarkable conversations which show his great esteem for the dignity of women and for the vocation which enables them to share in his messianic mission. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

The present reflections...have sought to recognize, within the "gift of God," what he, as Creator and Redeemer, entrusts to women, to every woman. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

> In the Spirit of Christ, in fact, women can discover the entire meaning of their femininity and thus be disposed to making a "sincere gift of self" to others, thereby finding themselves. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

The Church desires to give thanks to the Most Holy Trinity for the "mystery of woman" and for every woman — for that which constitutes the eternal measure of her feminine dignity, for the "great works of God," which throughout human history have been accomplished in and through her. After all, was it not in and through her that the greatest event in human history — the incarnation of God himself — was accomplished? *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

> Therefore *the Church gives thanks for each and every woman:* for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by a great social responsibility; for "*perfect*" women and for "weak" women — for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love. *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

…as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal "homeland" of all people and is transformed sometimes into a "valley of tears," as they assume, together with men, *a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity* according to daily necessities and according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself, in the bosom of the ineffable Trinity. *(MD)*

The Church gives thanks *for all the manifestations of the feminine "genius"* which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all *the fruits of feminine holiness. (MD)*

The Church asks at the same time that these invaluable "manifestations of the Spirit," which with great generosity are poured forth upon the "daughters" of the eternal Jerusalem, may be attentively recognized and appreciated so that they may return for the common good of the Church and of humanity, especially in our times. Meditating on the biblical mystery of the "woman," the Church prays that in this mystery all women may discover themselves and their "supreme vocation." *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

May *Mary,* who "is a model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ," obtain for all of us *this same "grace."* *(Pope John Paul II — MD)*

"John Paul II on the Dignity & Genius of Women"
2003 © Love & Responsibility Foundation
For information, call, or visit on the web:
(307) 635-4233 • www.catholicculture.com
www.theologyofthebody.net • www.endow.ws