

# John Paul II and the Femininity of Holiness

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Introduction For all his ground-breaking insights, among the bolder statements of John Paul the Great was his insistence that woman “is the representative and archetype of the whole human race: she represents the humanity which belongs to all human beings, both men and women”<sup>1</sup> and, again, “all human beings—both women and men—are called through the Church to be the ‘Bride of Christ.’”<sup>2</sup> Reading the first few pages of scripture gave this philosopher-pope a theological anthropology unmatched in the history of Christian thought. Of the many contributions of this past pontificate, perhaps it was John Paul’s opening up and developing the Second Vatican Council’s understanding of the person as ‘gift’ which will have the most lasting influence. In particular, it may be his insights into woman’s special role in defining this anthropology which will prove to be the most radical of his reflections on the human person.

This essay accordingly lays out how and why John Paul II concluded that woman best signifies creaturely completion and holiness. It will become clear how he identified three essential tasks in Eve’s very being, or as he wrote, “the dignity and role of woman is... the guarantee of what ‘feminine’ humanly symbolizes: acceptance, care of man, generation of life.”<sup>3</sup> First, she inaugurates not only a profound understanding of the human but an entirely new way of being human. She signifies a personal orientation, a necessary turning toward and acceptance of the other. Secondly, Eve receives and is thus called to care for another in a way unavailable to Adam. Her receptivity allows man to understand himself in a way his solitude could never have allowed. Thirdly, humanity has been entrusted to the woman because only she is able to embody the other, a maternity, the Pope made clear, not relegated simply to pregnancy but to that “feminine genius” which characterizes every woman’s way of being.

Before we turn to his writings in order to understand these three aspects of femininity more deeply, let us first address how John Paul II brought such truths to light. In his many writings, the full meaning of the human soul’s embodiment as well as the beauty of human sexual expression have finally become a matter of serious theological reflection. He began his pontificate by bringing all of us back to the Book of Genesis, to “the beginning”, because he realized that millennia of sin and stereotype have only distorted the truest meaning of man and woman.<sup>4</sup> He returned to Eden where the sexes enjoy their truest splendor, to a place where domination and manipulation have not yet marred who we are and how we treat one another. In doing so, he was able to argue that “each person bears within him the mystery of his beginning”, and all people carry deep inside them the truths of this primal story.<sup>5</sup> So, let us now turn to John Paul’s study of Genesis and discover the role of the feminine in God’s good creation.

## Oriented Toward the Other

In Adam's solitude, nothing satisfies. Though sinless, Adam fails to find any affinity. Composed of both the earthy ground and the divine breath, this angelic animal finds no friendship in the merely material creatures and he likewise finds no incarnate companionship in the heavenly Trinity. John Paul writes:

Right from the first moment of his existence, created man finds himself before God as if in search of his own identity. It could be said he is in search of the definition of himself. The fact that man is alone in the midst of the visible world and, in particular, among living beings, has a negative significance in this search since it expresses what he is not. Nevertheless, the fact of not being able to identify himself essentially with the visible world or other living beings (animalia) has, at the same time, a positive aspect for this primary search.<sup>6</sup>

In Adam's search, neither animal nor angel will do. He is in search of another self: one who is both identical yet different. In the moment of Eve's appearance, then, human recognition and receptivity begin.

Unlike Adam who is placed in the Garden in a moment of supreme solitude, Eve arises only in relation to the other. From the beginning, human acceptance is thus emblazoned with a feminine stamp. With her genesis, comes human inter-relationality, mutual reciprocity, and personal communion. Woman's very presence proclaims the sterility of the self-in-isolation. The self-in-communion, in contrast, is characterized by orientation toward another, for it is only with Eve that Adam can finally exclaim, "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). Eve mirrors Adam's enfleshment and teaches him that his life's beatitude will lie in neither mere sensation nor in a false spiritualism, but only in the act of incarnate love. She acts as a trustworthy reflection of his own embodied personhood. She helps to complete Adam's search, thus proving to be a mirror of man's dual nature, an image of his divine dignity.

Eve thus signifies how humanity is complete in two unalterable genders. She reminds us that there are two ways of being distinctly human: male and female he created them. Here John Paul made good use of a Hebraic word shift lost on most of us. At Genesis 1:27 we read, "God created man (adam) in his image, in the divine image he created him, man (is) and woman (issah) he created them." Notice how at Genesis 1:27a, adam is alone and is simply "human", not yet distinguished as male. Only with the appearance of Eve at Gen 1:27b, does adam realize that he is a man: is and issah he created them. The person of Eve simultaneously defines and complements Adam and in so doing, offers him a new self-awareness into both the longing of humanity and the meaning of gender.<sup>7</sup>

Eve is the icon of Adam: the reflective other whose presence shows him at once who he is and who he is not. An image both unites and differentiates. Made in

the divine image, the human person will find no completion apart from communion with God, but such participation in the divine nature consummates, never corrupts, his humanity. It is in this way that Eve's turn toward Adam shows him who he is. As Adam sees in Eve another self, he also sees one who is irreducibly different; as divine images, men and women see in God the one like whom and for whom they have been created but also see the one who is and who remains wholly other. Sexual differentiation thus becomes a propaedeutic for learning about human and divine communion. In Eve's embodiment, humanity catches a glimpse of its worth as the closest creature to God on earth: "The body which expresses femininity manifests the reciprocity and communion of persons. It expresses by means of the gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence. This is the body—a witness to creation as a fundamental gift, and so a witness to Love as the source from which this same giving springs."<sup>8</sup> John Paul sensed deeply how such truths needed to be proclaimed at the turn of the twenty-first century. As artificial birth control and abortion define the other as something to be destroyed or defended against, or as in-vitro fertilization and cloning treat the person as a commodity which can be manufactured and marketed, the body of woman reminds man that our eternal dignity is realized precisely in our embodiment and not despite it. Eve's incarnation teaches the solitary Adam how the human body is not some autonomous vehicle but precisely how the infinite life and dignity of each person is made manifest.

### Receiving the Other

Woman is created to receive the other. She accepts Adam never to possess him but to stand before him to welcome him. Although it took the sensitivity of John Paul II to draw out the role of woman here more explicitly, this is nonetheless the key anthropological insight of the Second Vatican Council: the human person has been created so as to become a gift of self. In a line that John Paul never tired in quoting, we read that there is "certain similarity between the union of the divine persons and union of God's children in truth and love. And this similarity indicates that the human, the only creature on earth whom God willed for its own sake, can attain its full identity only in sincere self-giving."<sup>9</sup> John Paul's entire theological anthropology can be summed up by the two central truths contained here.

First, the human person is the only being on earth whose existence is not subordinated to another creature. Lower beings exist for the sake of the higher—grass for cows, cows for hungry humans—however, men and women exist for no other reason than God's own delight. God rejoices in his images on earth and has ordered them to nothing except his own goodness. Secondly, made in the divine image, men and women must actively reflect the Trinity in order to become fully human and this means they must give themselves away in a constant communion of love. Self-gift fulfills personhood: true for us because it is first true for God. That is, we reflect the triune love of God because as the Father gives himself wholly over to the Son, the Son receives and gives himself completely

back over to the Father, and the love who is the Spirit unites and distinguishes the two, we have been made to find our truest self in a communion of persons as well. This how John Paul consistently maintained that through her gift of self, Eve teaches Adam how humanity is to find its fullest realization.

This is also why holiness has a uniquely feminine character. In the creation of woman John Paul saw the primal human vocation of receiving the other. Eve accepts and responds to Adam and in so doing, shows all of humanity its essential task: to welcome and take on the other. Eve opens herself in an unmatched act of transparency and trust. Standing before each other, the nakedness of Adam and Eve represents this reality:

Interior innocence in the exchange of the gift consists in reciprocal acceptance of the other, such as to correspond to the essence of the gift. In this way, mutual donation creates the communion of persons. It is a question of receiving the other human being and accepting him or her. This is because in this mutual relationship, which Genesis 2:23-25 speaks of, the man and the woman become a gift for each other, through the whole truth and evidence of their own body in its masculinity and femininity. It is a question, then, of an acceptance or welcome that expresses and sustains, in mutual nakedness, the meaning of the gift. Therefore, it deepens the mutual dignity of it. This dignity corresponds profoundly to the fact that the Creator willed (and continually wills) the human person, male and female, for his or her own sake.<sup>10</sup>

Eve teaches Adam how to go out of himself and thus find himself: how to become a loving gift of self. Their mutual nakedness honors their co-subjectivity; sinless, neither is willing to reduce the other to an object. Whereas lust reduces the other to a mere extension of one's own desires, an apparatus to fulfill one's own fallen cravings, true love sees the other as she or he is—a unique and irreducible other.

Eve shows Adam what it means to be given to another, to receive another without any pretense or demands. That is why from the beginning God entrusts woman to man, “to his eyes, to his consciousness, to his sensitivity, to his heart... [and] he must in a way, ensure the same process of the exchange of the gift, the mutual interpenetration of giving and receiving as a gift. Precisely through its reciprocity, it creates a real communion of persons.”<sup>11</sup> John Paul saw that through her orientation toward Adam, Eve initiates human receptivity. She is creation's first act of donation and in the giving of herself, allows Adam to make of himself a gift as well. Without Eve, humanity would never discover that to be a person is to enter into loving communion.

Hers must therefore be the way of tenderness, of embracing the other, and of allowing oneself to become vulnerable. Like the Creator, she lives for the other

and thereby risks her own woundedness. Nowhere is this more evident than in the punishment meted out after the Fall, that place where the nakedness which once bespoke trust and mutual self-gift now becomes an object of shame and concealment. Whereas Adam's object of punishment is a project, Eve's is again a person. Adam's punishment distances himself from his body as he uses it merely as a tool to conquer the unyielding hardness of the earth. Eve, on the other hand, must internalize the consequence of her actions in the painful bringing forth of human relations. This brings us to the third aspect of what the feminine brings creation and to our understanding of Christian holiness: the incarnation of human life.

### Embodying the Other

In her unique role, woman is the only being able to give enfleshed life to another. Because Eve has been made toward and receptive of the other, John Paul saw in her a sensitivity to life unmatched by other creatures. He located such sensitivity in the way of being a woman and in a spiritual maternity which is not reducible to the biological. That is, John Paul never limited motherhood to the physical but rather defined it as a woman's "readiness to be poured out for the sake of those who come within [her] range of activity. In marriage, this readiness, even though open to all, consists mainly in the love that parents give to their children. In virginity this readiness is open to all people, who are embraced by the love of Christ the Spouse."<sup>12</sup> In this pouring out of self, men and women complement each other but woman enjoys a certain priority or preeminence due to the inescapable fact that God entrusts her with the life and care of the other in a way that a man cannot experience.

This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude toward human beings: not only toward her own child, but every human being, which profoundly marks the personality of the woman. It is commonly thought that women are more capable than men of paying attention to another person, and that motherhood develops this predisposition even more. The man, even with all his sharing in parenthood, always remains outside the pregnancy and the birth of the baby; in many ways he has to learn his own fatherhood from the mother.<sup>13</sup>

John Paul claimed that women are more perspicacious, more attentive to others than men generally prove. This is not based on some outdated caricature but on what Genesis reveals about the nature and inter-personality of the first human couple. Simply, life has been entrusted to Eve. Her makeup bespeaks God's trust in co-creating alongside him in the intimate generation of new life. Because God has entrusted the human person primarily to the woman, her sensitivity toward life enables Adam to understand his fatherhood as well.

There is much more than just biological reproduction at play here. The psychosomatic make up of woman is marked by a certain maternity: physical and

spiritual. Why so? Eve is created so as to be oriented toward another because in her alterity, the other is defined and never dominated. That is, while the possibility of possessing the other exists for both Adam and Eve, from her very beginning Eve has learned to allow the other simply to be. Whereas Adam is created alongside an external call to dominate and subdue the earth (Gen 2:15), Eve is created with a silent gaze toward the human person. This is why each man must “learn his fatherhood through the mother.” The baby beholds the face of the other, the face of the mother, and slowly learns the identity of self and the uniqueness of the other.

In the beginning there is no external pressure, no projects to complete, but simply the enjoyment of being. Woman’s singular strength arises from her awareness that God entrusts other eternal subjects to her and even where modernity has resulted in a “gradual loss of sensitivity for man, that is for what is essentially human”, maternal love must “ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human!”.<sup>14</sup> In this way, woman became the basis of John Paul’s “personalism”—where love is the only proper response to another human person, or as he says in his letter on women: “Only a person can love and only a person can be loved... Love is an ontological and ethical requirement of the person. The person must be loved, since love alone corresponds to what the person is.”<sup>15</sup> Eve’s sensitive receptivity to and embodiment of the other teaches us all that a person may never be reduced to efficiency or pleasure but must always and everywhere be loved.

Such openness is no doubt oftentimes painful, physically and emotionally, but the feminine pours itself out in order to receive another, to open the human heart so wide that its fissure becomes fertile. Because of such a life-giving vulnerability in loving the other, John Paul has rather beautifully argued that woman,

has a genius all her own, which is vitally essential to both society and the Church... she is endowed with a particular capacity for the human being in his concrete form. Even this singular feature which prepares her for motherhood, not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually, is inherent in the plan of God who entrusted the human being to woman in an altogether special way.<sup>16</sup>

The maternal face consequently becomes the material manifestation of the infinite longing for each human person, the visible reminder of each human person’s being wanted and desired, of each person’s infinite value and worth regardless of output or production.

The Femininity of Holiness.

Holiness is essentially “feminine” for John Paul II. As Eve stood before and was oriented toward Adam from the very first moment of her life, the human person must likewise come before and enter into communion with the divine. From the start we must make clear, however, that supernaturally women have absolutely

no natural or inherent advantage over men in the spiritual life. Nonetheless, as this essay has argued, a key component in understanding John Paul's anthropology is seeing how holiness manifests a feminine structure to which all human persons are called. Again, this is not to say that women have special graces simply because of their femininity—in Christ there is neither male nor female (cf. Gal 3:28)—but that very femininity can be offered to God in order to allow woman to enter into divine communion with such attentive receptivity that it becomes the image upon which John Paul patterned all created holiness.

The three characteristics of Eve become consecrated and permanent in Mary and are thus offered to all her children, both man and woman. Attentiveness to the other, humble reception of the other, as well as a loving generativity are all signs of Christ's life in each of the baptized. Every creature has been made so as to turn toward, receive, and incarnate the divine life. On the natural level, woman best embodies this call to holiness. Mary's "let it be done unto me" ought to reverberate through the "yes" of millennia of created souls. These three marks of holiness are "feminine" characteristics not because they are limited to women but because they became possible only with the presence of Eve before Adam and because they now become eternally significant wholly sanctified in the Second Eve.

This is precisely what the Incarnate Son brings about in his own humanity: he confirms the femininity of holiness by using the natural and finite to point us to the infinite and eternally worthy. In his person, Christ recapitulates all that created femininity forfeited in the Fall. In Christ alone does the feminine structure of holiness become real: he literally pours his blood out for the sake of another, he literally lays his life down to bring forth the life of another, he literally opens up the table of his own body to feed and calm another.

John Paul saw how women can continue Christ's selfless love in a way that teaches the world the meaning of holiness and true human happiness. Yet while his pontificate has come to an end in a moment of universal catechesis, his understanding of the uniqueness of the femininity of holiness will be, thankfully, continued and developed. For example, when Pope Benedict XVI was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he penned the recent *On the Collaboration of Men and Women*, concluding that feminine values are "above all human values: the human condition of man and woman created in the image of God is one and indivisible. It is only because women are more immediately attuned to these values that they are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values... 'femininity' is more than simply an attribute of the female sex. The word designates indeed the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other."<sup>17</sup> While there are passing reports on how John Paul II devalued women, his teaching provides a truth the media are simply unwilling to understand. He discerned in holiness a feminine structure because he saw in woman how all are called to turn toward God, receive the divine, and thereby give birth to the life of Christ. The natural makeup of femininity teaches us what it

means to be both spouse and mother of God, what it means to be a Christian, what it means to be human, and, ultimately, what it means to be holy.

- [1]1. On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman §4.
2. On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman §25.
6. Original Unity of Man and Woman, Oct. 10, 1979 ; TOB, 36-37.
7. Cf. General Audience, Sep 19, 1979 ; TOB, 29-32.
8. General Audience, Jan 9, 1980 ; TOB, 61-62.
9. Gaudium et Spes §24; trans., Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils II, ed., Norman Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 1083-84.
10. Original Unity of Man and Woman, Feb. 6, 1980 ; TOB, 70.
12. On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman, §21.
13. On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman, §18.
14. On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman, §30.
15. On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman, §29.
16. Angelus, July 23, 1995 .
17. On the Collaboration of Men and Women, May 31, 2004 , §14.