



Cabrini Notes

Volume 8 Number 2

January 13, 2018

Woman, the Summit of Creation St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Church of the Annunciation January 13, 2018

(I wrote this talk to be given at the Women's Breakfast on Jan. 13, 2018 at Our Lady of the Americas Church in Rochester, NY. However, due to a snow-storm the breakfast was postponed until Jan. 27. I was not able to be present; the talk was read by Gail Buarschmidt. Sr. Theresa Rutty)

Let me read to you what the Council Fathers said to women at the end of VCII, in Dec. 1965:

Reconcile men with life and above all, we beseech you, watch carefully over the future of our race. Hold back the hand of man, who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy human civilization...Women of the entire universe...You to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for you to save the peace of the world." (1)

If this was true fifty years ago, how much more true is it today? I would like to place this in the perspective of the creation story, Mary as our model, and today's society. We want to look at the gift God has given us as women, his call and our mission. And then some obstacles we face in fulfilling this mission as well as some solutions.

When we look at the story of Creation we see that God began with inanimate objects: light, sun, moon, stars the sea, etc. Then he made fish, creeping and crawling creatures, birds. On the sixth day, the last day, God created the animals and humanity. Humanity is the masterpiece of God's creation, the summit of his creation.

In the first story of creation God creates human beings male and female in his image and likeness. For years I thought of this image and likeness to God as the soul, because God does not have a body, so how is the body in the image and likeness of God? Well, we will see how that is.



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At the end of each day of creation God saw that everything was--good. At the end of the last day he saw that everything was very good. When we reflect on the second creation story, the part of Adam and Eve, we see that God created Adam out of the earth. But he created Eve out of Adam's side. God created woman for man, as a helper.

Our body, the womanly body, reveals our reason for being and reflects the creator in a special way. God created all of creation for humanity out of love. God so desired to share his beauty and love with his creatures that he created the whole universe and everything in it to reveal himself, Love, to us.

As we have seen, humanity is the masterpiece of God's creation, the summit of his creation. And, even more so, woman is the summit of his creation being the final work of his creation. As a painter begins with small simple pieces and comes to his masterpiece, or fireworks begin with small designs and at the end there is a grand finale, so with God. Woman is his masterpiece.

When we think of our body we recognize that there is a space in the very center, a space to be filled, the womb. The tasks that God gave to Adam in the garden were to cultivate it and keep it. His mission was to work the garden, help it grow and protect it. To Eve was given the task of bearing life, nourishing it and nurturing it with her own body. We see that in the beginning the man and the woman did not know they were naked, they felt no shame. They were totally innocent. They had God's favor, they were created with sanctifying grace; that is to say with a loving relationship with God.

At the beginning of the story Adam calls his helper "the woman"--flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone. The word "woman" is a thread through the whole Bible.

After their disobedience God questions them and they each blame someone else. God speaks to the serpent and says, "I will place enmity between you and the woman, between you and her offspring. They will strike at your head as you will strike their heel." GN 3:15. (2)

Who is the woman? Well, not Eve because she has disobeyed God and Satan knows it. We know "woman" refers to Mary, she who was conceived without sin, she has crushed the head of Satan in her Son Jesus. ~~~but "offspring" is plural, therefore all of the redeemed are included.



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When you read the Gospels, notice what is written and said, but also notice what is not written. Several times we see the word "woman" used to refer to Mary. At Cana when Mary notices that they have no wine, Jesus answers her saying, "woman, what has that to do with you and me?" We might wonder why he uses this form, why not say, "Mother"? We know from Scriptural studies that this was not a disrespectful manner of speaking, as we might think today. I think it also has another layer of meaning as we will see. In John's gospel we see Mary at the cross. Jesus says to her, "Woman, behold your son." and to John, "Behold your mother." and from that moment the disciple took her into his home. I think that *his home*, indicates more than his physical house, I think it means his heart. The Church teaches that Jesus was giving his mother to all mankind as our Mother. Each one of us is that disciple when we take Mary into our heart. When we read Revelation, Chapter 12, we see the woman clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet. Certainly this is Mary. The red dragon waits to devour her son, but she and her son are caught up to heaven. So Satan pursues her other offspring who keep God's commandments. Who are these? Faithful Christians, of course.

In each of these instances it is clearly Mary who is referred to. However, in Scripture words often have several layers of meaning. The "woman" may also refer to the Church. And so by extension, every member of Christ's Body, the Church and especially women.

This high standard that God presents to us through Mary, contrasts greatly with the thinking of the world today. We often hear something like this: "It's my body so I can make my own decisions about my body." St. Paul tells us we are not our own, but rather we live we live for the Lord, and we die we die for the Lord, so whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. We also hear women saying that they are equal to men, and want to do all things men do. God created each person with the dignity of a human person; we are equal before God. But he gave us each distinct tasks and roles, as well as different talents and natural gifts. God did not create man and woman to be in competition with each other but to respect and appreciate and love one another. When we are in competition, the respect, appreciation and love fail.



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We as women have a gift, a call and a mission. The gift is our authentic femininity. [I find it interesting how different feminine spirituality is from masculine spirituality. As I give the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and listen to people's prayer experience I see a great difference. Typically, the men analyze the passage, take it apart word for word, compare it to life now and then finally to their own life. It takes much more time for them to get to the heart of it. Women will take one phrase, dwell on that and be at prayer with God. It's much easier for women to move from head to heart.] As women we have a care and concern for others, an awareness of those around us. Think of Mary at Cana. Our body, too, is structured to love, to receive, to bring forth new life, to nourish it and nurture it. We are called to be relational as women. Notice how chatty we are; how we want to know how others are getting along, how we want to tell our stories. A man talks on the phone to his friend for five minutes makes arrangements for golf and that's it; the woman talks for 25 and knows all about her friend's family.

It is within the woman where the seed of life grows; she gives of herself physically to her child within as her body changes to adapt to the baby's needs. She gives of herself emotionally through those nine months that the baby is growing within her. And finally there is a bond of love with that child stronger than any umbilical cord.

Just as we are made to be physical mothers we are called to be spiritual mothers. Ours is a call to influence a tormented world. We are called to love and to bring to life at all levels.

We are called to be daughters, sisters and mothers, physically yes, but also spiritually. We are daughters of God the Father and of the Church; we are sisters to all who need us; we are mothers to the needy and the lost.

Let me read from Caryll Houselander on the Motherhood of Mary which also speaks to our spiritual motherhood:



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That which stands out in the divine infancy is how completely dependent the infant Jesus was on his Mother for his life and for everything...In Bethlehem, in the desert, what had Christ to sustain his life but his Mother? she was so much more to him than one who wrapped him in swaddling bands, one who rocked his cradle and prepared his food. she was herself his warmth, his cradle, his food. The Mother is the trustee of God's love to her baby. Yes, but she is even more than that --she is God's love to him, giving her to him, God gives himself. What a mystery it is, as unimaginable as the Blessed Sacrament, that Christ as man was first given God in the world by a woman!

Motherhood is the intimate contemplation of God. How could anyone learn more of him than she does who learns, not from books and sermons and meditations, not from the secret manifestations or from the blindness and uncertainty of human thought, but from the secret manifestations of God's love in her own being.

Many people think that in order to be contemplative we must be unnatural...Those who think in this way have not yet pondered the showing forth of God in all that is closest at hand in everything that is around us, above all in human nature.

Human nature is made in God's image. That image burns in its dark heart as the distant star burns in a deep well far below it.

In so far as human beings retain or recover the primitive purity of their human nature they learn the secrets of God from their own hearts. (3) (Maginificat Jan. 2018 pp27-28)

This reminds me of what my nephew said to me a few months ago. I was visiting the family at the time of six month old Rebecca's Baptism. She was laying on the floor, smiling at us and chewing her toes. Dan said, "she is a miracle, a real miracle. It's awesome really awesome."

There is a Latin word, "munus" which means a divine task; it may be difficult but it is an honor and a responsibility. We reflect on Mary at the Annunciation. God invites/ asks and Mary gives her Fiat.



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Sometimes we might ask, "could Mary have said no?" I've given some thought to that question. My conclusion: She could have said no, but she wouldn't say no. In fact she didn't. Let me give you an example: A young man and woman are dating, they have been going together for over a year. They often talk about their likes, dislikes, values, their background, etc. They have met each other's family. Their relationship is much more than going to dinner and a movie. Now the young man decides to propose. He chooses the right moment and place. On bended knee he tells her he loves her, he wants to spend his whole life with her. Will you marry me? ...And she? Is she free to say no? Does she? If she is in love with him as much as he is with her, she will say yes, and throw her arms around him. (so it is in the movies) I think that's how it was with Mary and God. The Israelites, the devout ones were waiting, longing and praying for the Messiah. Mary had been praying, reading the scriptures, and the psalms; her heart is open to receive the fullness of God when Gabriel arrives. So she says yes.

And, God works with us in similar ways--probably he will not send Gabriel, but he could. He has a "munus" (or divine task) for each of us. God waits for the moment we are ready, the precise moment. He calls us according to our ability, talents and circumstances. you may be answering his call already without being aware.

We must have the dispositions that Mary had. We must be receptive to the action of God, like Mary at the Annunciation. We must trust in the Providence of God--as did Mary and Joseph when they fled to Egypt with the infant Jesus. And surrender to his will as Mary did at the foot of the Cross.

We are not Mary; I am not Mary. How can I answer such a call? God does not call us to do the same things Mary did. But to imitate her; she is the first disciple of Jesus, the first to hear of the Incarnation, the Good News. She is our Mother, our Queen. She intercedes for us. So how do we respond, how can we?

The first thing is prayer. We always begin with prayer. Real prayer transforms us into the disciples Jesus desires. Prayer is Adoration, it is contrition, it is Thanksgiving and Supplication (or petition.) We need to pray and to be faithful to prayer. This is the starting point.



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When we begin to have an inkling that God wants us to move in a certain direction, we pray. Maybe there is a situation about which we are concerned but can do nothing--or don't know what to do. Pray and keep praying until it is clear. Maybe God is calling you to pray and someone else to do the work.

One such call is to intercessory prayer. Intercessory prayer is when we pray for others in God's will. Really it is standing in the breach, between the person and God and pleading for the person's good, be that health, material goods, or his/her spiritual good. Sometime ago I heard about someone who did a study on families where the children remain Catholic through several generations. The common thread all of those interviewed was that someone was praying for the children and grandchildren--a mother, a grandmother, an aunt.

Secondly we must be obedient. Obedient to our state in life fulfilling the duties that state requires; to the commitments we have already made; to Church discipline. Sometimes we hear someone say that they don't agree with this or that church regulation. Maybe we don't understand it. Look at it this way: maybe it IS a small thing and does God really care? We can't say for certain, but God does want us to obey. For example: how I distribute the Blood of Christ--saying "The Blood of Christ" correctly and not adding or changing anything, (as adding the person's name). The regulations for the Liturgy indicate that we say, "Blood of Christ." So although I may think it friendly or nice to include someone's name I don't; I obey the regulations.

As we are consistently obedient in small things, we will become aware of the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and learn to obey them, also.

Let me give you an example: I received two magnets for Christmas with a lovely photo, scripture verse and the months of the year around the edge. I really don't have a place to display them at home, and the calendar is such tiny print it is difficult for me to read. However, they are nice gifts. So I decided to take them to work and put them on Fr. Bob's free table. As I walked in the hall, I decided to give one to one of the other workers. Doubt entered my mind, would she like it? The print is small, maybe she would have problem reading it as I did. Even so, I walked to the mailboxes and put it in her box.



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About an hour later she came into my office and asked if I had given it to her. She loved it; It's my favorite scripture passage, I needed this, it's been a difficult holiday time. WOW! that was the Holy Spirit and I am grateful I followed through.

We need wisdom. there is a natural wisdom we gain as we age and through experience. But the wisdom of God, is his very Spirit. We receive wisdom from God by seeking it, praying for it. Pray for understanding. Ask God questions--the answers come! Sometimes we have people who are knowledgeable whom we can ask. But many times that isn't the case. But answers come in what we read, what we might hear on Catholic radio or in a homily, for example. Answers may come when we are not looking. One day I noticed that on the chasuble the priest was wearing I saw the Jerusalem cross. I knew it was called that, but what does it mean? That day when I went in to work I was sorting a few holy cards. I happened on one that had the Jerusalem cross and this explanation: the large cross in the middle signifies that Christianity began in Jerusalem and the four smaller ones signify that it has been carried to the four points of the earth.

We come to wisdom when we study: reading the Bible, God's word, lives of the saints, Church documents, etc. Spiritual direction is helpful when we need to talk things out and we need someone to help us discern the course we should take. All this may seem like a lot but we take one step at a time.

And remember, we are not the Blessed Mother; we do not have her special privileges. We are fallen creatures, but loved sinners. Here is an important place to start: asking forgiveness when we are aware of our sins. I recommend frequent confession. For a long time I did not think I needed frequent confession. I would go once a year or so. It happened that in preparing for the first sessions of Discovering Christ, on a retreat day we had the opportunity to confess. After confession, I felt so good I decided to go to confession once a month. It took some "shopping around" before I found a good confessor. But I have found it most helpful in my spiritual life. Many important things happen when we confess frequently. I will share 4 that have affected my life.



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First of all, the very act of telling our sins to a priest takes humility. We come to recognize who we are and who God is, whom we have offended. This spills over into our daily life. We become more humble.

Secondly, we become more aware of our sins and we desire God's forgiveness more deeply.

Thirdly, we become more aware of God's grace in our lives. It seems things go better...God is helping us. Not that there are not difficulties, or problems but we have God's help through them. Maybe it's that we have a better attitude and can handle them better.

The last one I will mention is that we become willing to do his will, to be his servant. St. Paul uses the word slave. In the Greek and Roman cultures the word for slave was similar to instrument or tool. A slave was an instrument that talks. That seems pretty degrading to think of another person that way. However, the saints thought of themselves this way: like a pencil in God's hand, St. Bernadette said she was his broom--he uses her for a certain purpose and then puts her behind the door; St. Theresa, the Little Flower, said she was the ball in the Child Jesus' hand. He could play when he wanted or leave her in a corner. The saints learned to surrender completely to God's will.

Another factor that often impedes us in letting God use us in his mission is that we have been sinned against. It may be that we have been made to feel inferior; we have not been respected as the person we are or for the dignity that we have as women. We may have experienced sexual harassment or abuse. This diminishes our sense of being loved as a daughter of God the Father.

My parents divorced when I was very young. I was raised by beautiful Catholic couple. They were older and their own children all adults living in other cities. When I was about 12, Jim came home and greeted me saying, "there's the young Lady!" It made me feel good, grown up. Maybe no one else noticed that I was growing up. Later, when me niece, only seven years my junior, was a teen-ager, I heard Jim say the same thing to her. For a moment I felt jealous, but seeing her beaming face I was happy for her. This is a wonderful example of honoring a young girl who is becoming a woman.



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By contrast, as a teenager I lived with an aunt and uncle. As I developed into a young woman he teased me about my blossoming figure, commented on getting fat. (In pictures from that time I am not fat.) I felt ashamed of my body; I became fearful of men, even to the point of becoming fat so that men would not look at me. My spirit was so wounded that it took years and much prayer, before I was healed enough to be comfortable in the presence of a man.

From my own experience and observation of our society it would seem that few women escape these wounds completely.

When this is the case, there is need for inner healing--to heal the wounds of the heart. Prayer is a first step; you can ask others to pray with you for healing. Sometimes counseling is also necessary. Forgiving the one who has done harm is very important. This is difficult but to be willing to forgive or at least have the desire to forgive is a beginning. Forgiveness is a decision in our heart and does not depend on the other person.

Here are a few questions to help us determine if we have hidden wounds. Just listen and let your heart tell you.

- 1. Do I find myself repeating the same sin over and over again?**
- 2. Is there an unhealthy pattern of behavior or thought that recurs in my life?**
- 3. Do I overreact (either externally or internally) in some types of situations?**
- 4. Do I walk around with a cloud over my head--a cloud of fear or anxiety, gloom and doom, depression or tension? Or do I often feel like nothing can make me happy?**
- 5. Have I exhausted the natural and supernatural means of defeating the problem, and still found that nothing has helped?**



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We are wonderfully made, and called to a wonderful mission. We are daughters of God the Father, called to be Mother to his children who are hurting or lost.

What happens when women surrender their lives to God, accepting his call? We convert ourselves in vessels of grace, bearers of healing, comfort, encouragement and strength for a tormented world. Far from being passive, the woman actively embraces the will of God, actively seeks those who suffer and those who are lost and actively brings the healing love of God to others. If we accept the call of God to be authentically feminine, which is our role, in the words of the Closing Message of VCII, we are called to nothing less than "to help humanity to not fall." We should completely embrace the identity that God has given us. (4)

Foot Notes:

1. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, par. 61 as quoted from Full of Grace: Women and the Abundant Life, by Johnette S. Benkovic, p18; Published by St. Anthony Messenger Press, Cincinnati, Ohio; copyright: 2004
 2. Saint Joseph Edition of THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE, Revised Edition, copyright 2010.
 3. (*Magnificat Jan. 2018 pp27-28*)
- (4) from a CD by Patrick Reidy, Los 12 Misterios de la Mujer; Published March 22, 2015 by Augustine Institute and found at Lighthouse Catholic Media. (I could only find it in Spanish; the translation is mine.)



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