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Joyce A. Little

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**REDEMPTORIS MATER:
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF MARY FOR WOMEN**

Mary, it has frequently been said, is the conqueror of all heresies. What that means, in part at least, is that a correct understanding of Mary safeguards a correct understanding of other Church teachings. Certainly that has been especially true in the past with regard to two of the most important areas of the Catholic faith, namely, Christology and ecclesiology. With regard to Christology, for example, Mary's most important title in the Church, Mother of God, was affirmed by the fifth-century councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, by way of safeguarding our faith that Christ is both human (hence Mary is genuinely his mother) and divine in the unity of the Person of the Son of God (hence she is not just mother of Jesus, but Mother of God). With regard to ecclesiology, we have long recognized that what is said of Mary is generally said also of the Church. Hence, just as Mary is mother, so is the Church; just as Mary bore Christ into the world, so does the Church; just as Mary mediates Christ to us, so does the Church. So important is Mary's identification with the Church that Vatican II chose not to issue a separate document on Mary, but to include her within *Lumen Gentium*.

Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical on Mary, *Redemptoris Mater*, also identifies Mary with the "Life of the Pilgrim Church." Her role in this regard is strikingly summarized in a single passage of the document, where John Paul II notes:

It is precisely Mary's faith which marks the beginning of the new and eternal Covenant of God with man in Jesus Christ; this heroic *faith* of hers "*precedes*" the apostolic *witness* of the Church, and ever remains in the Church's heart, hidden like a special

heritage of God's revelation. All those who from generation to generation accept the apostolic witness of the Church share in that mysterious inheritance and *in a sense share in Mary's faith*.¹

This passage is particularly important for two reasons. First, the Pope identifies the inauguration of the New Covenant with Mary's *fiat*, thereby underscoring the fact that the covenant brought fully into existence by Christ's death on the cross is not solely his work, but also involves the complementarity and cooperation of the "woman" (Jn 2.4, 19.26-27).

Second, the Pope points out that Mary's journey of faith "precedes" the apostolic witness of the Church and is shared by all who respond to that witness. In so doing, the Pope suggests that Mary's "non-apostolic" role (in the strict sense of the term) not only precedes but also in some sense provides the necessary foundation for such witness. Those sent *out* to baptize all nations do so for the purpose of drawing all of humanity back *in* to the heart, that is, the faith, of the Church, which is, in reality, a share in Mary's faith. But in what sense does this encyclical shed light on the special significance of Mary with regard to women in particular?

When we turn to *Redemptoris Mater*, we find that this encyclical does indeed address the special importance which Mary's role in salvation has for women. Therefore, we shall take up, first, what the Pope has to say about the special significance of Mary in particular and of women in general, second, why it is that the female plays this special role in the New Covenant, and, third, what bearing this has on women, especially Catholic women, in today's society.

Mary and Women: The Importance of Motherhood

While we are now well accustomed to hearing about the faith Mary has in God, and how that faith serves as a model for all disciples, male and female, the Pope does not stop there. He goes on to make an extraordinary observation

¹RM, 27.

about God's relationship to Mary. First, he notes that the Church places great trust in Mary, and then adds:

For it must be recognized that before anyone else it was God himself, the Eternal Father, who *entrusted himself to the Virgin of Nazareth*, giving her his own Son in the mystery of the Incarnation.²

The Eternal Father entrusted his Son to Mary. This perspective is enormously important, since it enables us to view Mary's relationship to Christ in a new light and to see, in that part of her journey whereby Mary "precedes" the Church, some obvious, yet heretofore imperfectly recognized, elements of that relationship.

First, by her *fiat*, Mary undertakes to carry within her this child, who is both God's Son and hers, for those nine months from conception to birth, when every child is entirely dependent on his mother's care and protection. Furthermore, Mary's role as Mediatrix properly begins here at her Son's conception, since, in these first nine months of his incarnate life, she mediates to him, literally through her own body, all that he is able to learn during that time of the larger world into which he will eventually be born. And, once born, he will still look to her, especially in those early years which are formative for all children, to continue to mediate that world to him.

Second, during the first several years of his life, Christ must depend on Mary in a way that she cannot, as yet, depend on him. Nothing makes this clearer than the flight into Egypt. Mary cannot call upon Christ's strength during this dangerous time, for it is the Christ-child himself who stands in need of hers. As Fr. John H. Miller has pointed out, "The grown-up Jesus wasn't there to hold her hand and give her moral support. Only an infant was in her arms to be cared for and protected."³

²RM, 39.

³John H. Miller, "Courage in Womanhood," *Social Justice Review*, 78 (Nov.-Dec. 1987): 195.

Finally, in entrusting his Son to her, the Father entrusts to her the task of raising him up into the kind of man upon whom our salvation can safely rest. As Scripture twice notes, a mother is charged with bearing, not a child, but a *man* into the world (Gen 4.1; Jn 16.21). As I have noted elsewhere:

Motherhood is not, as we might say today, simply biological. It is more than just conceiving and giving birth to a child. It has to do with raising that child up to adulthood. And that responsibility has always been seen as lying much more with mothers than with fathers. Both Eve and Mary are rightly viewed as bearing men into the world.⁴

Did Mary prove trustworthy? Here we have the testimony not of the Father, who entrusted the Son, but of the Son himself, who at the culmination of his Hour, from the Cross, entrusts to her his fledgling Church.

When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, "Woman, behold, your son!" Then he said to the disciple, "Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home. (Jn 19.26-27)

It is significant that the beloved disciple, who stands for the community of believers, is entrusted to Mary before Mary is entrusted to him. As the Pope points out:

⁴Joyce A. Little, "Mary and Feminist Theology," *Thought*, 62 (Dec. 1987): 352. When Mary and Joseph find him in the temple at the age of twelve, going about his Father's business, we are told that he returned home and was obedient to them. Christ's obedience to Mary appears to continue right up to and even initiates, in John's Gospel, his public ministry when, in response to her request that he do something about the wine shortage at Cana, he inaugurates his "hour." Indeed, a careful reading of that event would indicate that Mary supplies to him the signal he is awaiting to begin his hour and that he embarks on his public ministry precisely in obedience to that signal. In entrusting his Son to her, the Father not only trusts that she will raise him rightly into manhood, but that she will also know when and be willing to release him to the work for which the Father has sent him.

The redeemer entrusts Mary to John because he entrusts John to Mary. At the foot of the cross there begins that special *entrusting of humanity to the Mother of Christ*, which in the history of the Church has been practiced and expressed in different ways.⁵

This theme of "entrusting" is, in the Pope's encyclical, important for the light it sheds on Mary's role in the life of her Son and in the mission of the Church. But it is also important for the light it sheds on the role women in general are called to play in the lives of their children and in the mission of the Church. For it is precisely as the one to whom God entrusted his Son that the Pope sees Mary as illuminating the value and significance of the female:

... 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 ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman.⁶

Entrusting: The Essence of Motherhood

Why does the Pope identify "entrusting" as that which defines the importance not only of Mary, but also of women in general? First, the Pope stresses the fact that Mary's vocation is defined by her motherhood. As he puts it, "Mary's Motherhood . . . constitutes the first and fundamental dimension of that mediation which the Church confesses and proclaims in her regard."⁷

Second, the Pope takes up the meaning of motherhood itself. According to him:

Of the essence of motherhood is the fact that it concerns the person. Motherhood always establishes a *unique and unrepeatable relationship* between two people: *between mother and child and between child and mother*.⁸

⁵RM, 45.

⁶RM, 46.

⁷RM, 39.

⁸RM, 45.

It is precisely because motherhood establishes a relationship between the mother and the child which is "unique and unrepeatable" that Mary's role in salvation can be characterized as "special and extraordinary."⁹ As his mother, she enjoys a relationship with Christ which cannot be duplicated in the life of anyone else. At the same time, however, and according to the Pope, her role as the mother to whom this child—and later the beloved disciple—would be entrusted, tells us what "entrusting" means. As John Paul II puts it, "such entrusting is *the response to a person's love, and in particular to the love of a mother.*"¹⁰

To say that God entrusted his Son to her is to say that he entrusted his Son to the love which Mary would give precisely as his mother. And to say that Christ entrusted all of humanity to her is to say that he has entrusted us to the love which Mary continues to give as a mother. It is remarkable to think of both the Father and the Son entrusting themselves to this woman, but, beyond that, the Pope's identification of motherhood with entrusting is extraordinary from another point of view. For it raises a very interesting question for us. If "entrusting" has to do with "the response to a person's love," why does the Pope specify that person as a mother? Why not identify that person either as a father, namely, the Eternal Father himself, who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3.16), or as Christ, who willingly underwent crucifixion out of love for us? The value and significance of Mary in particular and of women in general lies, I think, in the answer to that twofold question.

Entrusting: The Essence of Motherhood

Why is it that entrusting does not, at least in its most basic form, refer to the relationship which exists between a father and a child, or, more specifically, between the Eternal

⁹RM, 38.

¹⁰RM, 45.

Father in heaven and his children here on earth? To put it another way, what is the difference between fatherhood and motherhood which requires that we identify "entrusting" more with the love of a mother than with the love of a father? The answer, I believe, lies in the difference between that distancing which is implied by fatherhood, as contrasted with the immediacy which is associated with motherhood. As Walter Ong notes in his work on male consciousness, *Fighting for Life*, "Masculinity stands in the human psyche for a kind of otherness, difference."¹¹ For that reason, Ong observes with regard to God:

He is likened to the masculine not because he has a masculine physical constitution, but because he is a source of existence that is other, different, separated (*kadosh*, the Hebrew word translated *sanctus*, *bagios*, "holy," means at root "separated") from all his creation, even from human beings, though they are "made in his image and likeness."¹²

This otherness, or difference, is of course related to the fact that God is by nature pure spirit, whereas we are embodied or material beings. But distance, or so it would seem, in some fashion defines the Father, since even when God becomes human or embodied, it is not the Father who comes in Person, but the Son who is "sent" by the Father. The Father who "sends" remains, to some degree at least, in the distance.

Motherhood, on the other hand, is never directly attributed to God, but only to human beings. Indeed, both Eve and Mary would seem in some fashion to be defined in their very being as mothers, Eve as "Mother of all living" (Gen 3.20) and Mary as Mother of God. The revelation would indicate that the fullness of motherhood is properly found in women, whereas the fullness of fatherhood is found only in God ("Call no man your father on earth, for you

¹¹Walter J. Ong, *Fighting for Life* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1981), 175.

¹²*Ibid.*, 175-76.

have one Father, who is in heaven" [Mt 23.9]). The fullness of motherhood found in Mary corresponds to the fullness of fatherhood found, not in Joseph, but in God the Father.

The reason motherhood belongs properly to the creature rather than to the Creator seems clear. For, as Karl Stern, a psychiatrist and convert to Catholicism, has noted, "Woman, in her being, is deeply committed to *bios*, to nature itself. The words for *mother* and *matter*, for *mater* and *materia* are etymologically related."¹³

The statement, "The Father sent the Son," refers to that moment when the Son became incarnate. "The Father sent the Son" is simply another way of saying that the Father entrusted his Son to the *materia* or materiality of his creation in the only way he could be entrusted, by way of a *mater* or mother. Indeed, while it is true that Mary is unique because to her God entrusted his only-begotten Son, the fact remains that God entrusts to a mother every child he creates. For mothers provide the only entrance any child has into this world. Human fathers, on the other hand, necessarily share, to some degree, in the distance which separates God the Father from each human child. As Ong has pointed out:

Among higher forms of life, above the egg-laying species, the male's physical relationship to his offspring is distinctively distanced. The male reproductive cell becomes effectively reproductive when it is totally detached from the male's body and joins the cell that, in the higher forms of life, remains attached to the female. Fathers are essentially distant from offspring physically. They can even be dead and buried when the child is being formed and is born.¹⁴

¹³Karl Stern, *The Flight From Woman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, The Noonday Press, 1965), 23.

¹⁴Ong, *Fighting for Life*, 175. There is a tendency today to minimize the differences between motherhood and fatherhood. "Parenting" has become a popular word, in part at least, because it suggests there is no significant difference between being a mother and being a father. Even more striking is the growing tendency of young couples expecting a child to say "We are pregnant," as though the actual carrying of the child were

Because motherhood is bound up with materiality per se, the Pope is quite right to see Mary's *fiat* as the moment in which the New Covenant is inaugurated. For what distinguishes the New Covenant from the Old is, above all, the immediacy of God's presence among us from within the created material order itself. In this sense, the Old Testament is properly symbolized by the male patriarchs and prophets, while the New is best symbolized by Mary herself. For, as Stern notes:

The Prophetic—all that which *points towards* the Incarnation—is the male. In the Hebrew liturgy, the patriarchs are invoked, as the Blessed Virgin is in the Christian. The remote foreknowledge of that which one will neither see nor touch, is the paternal. . . . And it is with the Incarnation as an historical fact that the Blessed Virgin becomes the prototype of faith. Here, contrary to the faith of the prophets, faith achieves the immediacy of certitude, in that carnal link with being which is at the core of all womanhood.¹⁵

Motherhood lies at the center of the New Covenant, because the Father entrusts his Son to a mother. But, in point of fact and as noted earlier, God entrusts every child of his making to a mother. Each of us, by our very creation, is forced, as it were, to trust the mother to whom God has entrusted us. As Stern has observed, the paradox of being human resides in the fact that, while we are the summit of God's creation, each one of us must, in order to enter this life, pass through a period of "utter helplessness and depen-

somehow a joint venture. I have made it one of the tasks of my life to point out to such couples that "we are not pregnant," only *she* is pregnant. Even the well-intentioned efforts of the Right to Life movement to insist upon the equal rights of fathers and mothers in a pregnancy is, I believe, misguided. For nothing can erase the fact that, because only the woman gets pregnant, she clearly has a greater stake in the matter than the father, whose relationship to the child is necessarily more distant, less immediate.

¹⁵Stern, *The Flight from Woman*, 302-03.

dence." We must trust our mothers for the simple reason that we are given, literally, no alternatives. For that reason alone, as Stern points out, "faith grows out of the relation of child and mother."¹⁶ Father, whether divine or human, lies off in the distance, beyond mother.

If our relationship with God the Father does not supply the most basic instance of "entrusting," it is because we are material beings who must first be "entrusted" to a mother before there is any possibility of our coming to know our father, whether human or divine. And, for the same reason, of course, our relationship with Christ also cannot supply the most basic instance of "entrusting," inasmuch as we must also necessarily trust our mothers before we are in a position to entrust ourselves to Christ. We must, in other words, be born of flesh and blood before we can be born of water and the Spirit. No one can enter into the New Covenant by way of baptism who has not first entered into the world by way of a woman.

But what about the importance of motherhood *within* the New Covenant. Given the fact that the Son was sent precisely that he might mediate God to us in the material immediacy of his own humanity, surely no further maternal, material mediation is required. Surely, within the order of grace, entrusting ourselves to the love of Christ is the most basic instance of "entrusting" we now experience. Surely Christ, the one mediator between God and man, does not himself require further mediation.

As plausible as this might sound, it is not, of course, the position of the Church, nor of this Pope. Mary remains mother to us "in the order of grace," and entrusting, even within the New Covenant, according to John Paul II, continues to find its most basic expression in response to a mother's rather than to Christ's love. Why this should be so brings us, I think, to the core of the role the female is called to play in our salvation.

A child is entrusted to a mother for two basic reasons.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 188-89.

First, because vulnerable and dependent, the child's survival depends upon his mother, always in those months between conception and birth, and for most children in the first few years after birth. Second, a child is entrusted to a mother in order that he might, through her, come to know the larger world into which he must himself someday go. Motherhood is, in the strictest sense of the word, mediation, for mothers are always called to point their children beyond themselves, not only spatially, into the world, and relationally, into the community of other people, but also temporally, into the maturity of adulthood. Women are called to bear *men* and *women* into the world.

Mothers are therefore the first, and generally, the most influential guide children are given in this world. Children are entrusted to mothers, in order that mothers might enable children to entrust themselves to others, initially their fathers, and, of course, ultimately their Eternal Father. And, since not all people or things are trustworthy, children also depend on their mothers to inform them of and protect them from anyone or anything which might harm them. The child is entrusted to his mother in order that he might know, beyond her, what can and cannot be trusted. Although mothers may not have the power to command enjoyed by fathers, they are the primary mediators of reality in a child's life.¹⁷

Mothers, it might therefore be said, stand for the realm of trust, first, in the sense that the survival of children depends

¹⁷As Jean Guitton rightly notes, "The father's power is greater than the mother's yet his influence is less. In the family domain, position and influence are often of inverse importance. He who necessarily and visibly occupies the first place cannot properly have the function of *illumination*. There are two poles, as it were, in every society; one of authority, the other of illumination; the two co-exist and each supports the other. It is very noticeable in the government of the Church: in the apostolic age, Peter had the supreme authority, but in influence he was surpassed by both Paul and John" (*The Virgin Mary*, trans. A. Gordon Smith [New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1952], 48). Louis Bouyer concurs, noting that "masculine efficacy is rather in the domain of formal prescription, while feminine efficacy is above all in that of influence" (*Woman in the Church* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979], 98).

primarily on the trustworthiness of mothers, and second, in the sense that mothers, more than any other person in our lives, are expected to be able to distinguish, beyond themselves, what can be trusted from what cannot. Indeed, in a larger sense, the female per se would seem to stand for the realm of trust. This, at least, would appear to be the reason why, back in the garden of Eden, the serpent approaches Eve rather than Adam. For the serpent, as John Paul II points out in *Redemptoris Mater*, is the "father of lies" who sows "suspicion" in the heart of Eve. The serpent's intent is to direct her trust away from God's command and toward his own interpretation of that command. She is seduced into concluding that the serpent is more to be trusted than God, and Adam clearly relies on her judgment, to his grief and ours.

Mary, the new Eve, provides the antithesis to Eve's refusal. As John Paul II notes:

In contrast with the "suspicion" which the "father of lies" sowed in the heart of Eve the first woman, Mary, whom tradition is wont to call the "new Eve" and the true "Mother of the living," boldly proclaims the *undimmed* truth about God: the holy and almighty God, who from the beginning is *the source of all gifts*, he who "has done great things" in her, as well as in the whole universe.¹⁸

Mary, because she entrusted herself to the truth of God, was herself trustworthy. Hence the Father was able to entrust his only Son to her. Mary's *fiat*, however, was not an end in itself, but was directed ultimately to the Son being able to entrust humanity to her, as our mother in the order of grace. For, as the Pope points out, the entrusting of a child to Mary began with Christ but was ultimately for the sake of pointing others to Christ:

This filial relationship, this self-entrusting of a child to its mother, not only has its *beginning in Christ* but can also be

¹⁸ RM, 37.

said to be *definitively directed towards him*. Mary can be said to continue to say to each individual the words which she spoke at Cana in Galilee: "Do whatever he tells you."¹⁹

All of the great philosophers of the world have sought the truth of things. And, because they have identified truth with abstract knowledge, they have sought to reason their way to it. In so doing, they have bypassed the female. For abstract knowledge is neither personal nor material. It is abstract precisely because it has detached itself from both. And abstractions, as Karl Rahner observed, require no mother.²⁰

Christ, on the other hand, tells us that he is the truth—not, mind you, that he has the truth, but that he *is* the truth. The truth, therefore, the ultimate truth of things, is neither impersonal nor immaterial. And for this reason, the truth does require a mother.

By the same token, reason is not sufficient to bring us to the truth. For, in the final analysis, truth in the Person of Jesus Christ requires not just that we recognize it, not just that we make use of it, as we would of abstract knowledge, but that we surrender ourselves to it. We are called to entrust ourselves to Christ. But how is such entrusting possible? Reason alone does not suffice, for reason alone produces only impersonal knowledge. What we require is a different kind of knowledge, the kind of knowledge which arises not out of abstract reasoning, but out of the intimacy of personal relationship. This knowledge, connatural as opposed to rational, is essential if we are to recognize the truth of Jesus Christ. And, as Stern points out, "knowledge by connaturality originates in the child-mother relationship."²¹

Mary is our most reliable guide to Christ, the person in the best position to attest to the truth of Christ, precisely because she is his mother. She knows him as no one else

¹⁹RM, 46.

²⁰Karl Rahner, quoted by Leon Cardinal Suenens, "Mary and the World of Today," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, June 15, 1972.

²¹Stern, *The Flight from Woman*, 54.

among us possibly can. And because God was able to entrust his only Son to her, her Son has been able to entrust us to her guidance. When Mary counsels every one of us to "Do whatever he tells you," she is assuring us that we can entrust ourselves to him. By so doing, she is inviting everyone of us to do what is, in the created order, the supremely female thing, namely to surrender ourselves to another. As Stern has noted, "A woman's love, that divine surrender of her ultra-inner being which the impassioned woman makes, is perhaps the only thing which is not achieved by reasoning."²²

If Christ is the truth, then Mary is the trust. And the truth, because personal and material, cannot be efficacious in our world unless we entrust ourselves to him. For that reason, Christ requires the female mediation of his mother, for only a mother can offer us the assurance we require that we not only can believe what he says, but can also safely entrust ourselves to the Person he is. For that reason, Mary's motherhood can be said to extend to all of humanity, as all of humanity requires the assurance of this woman who is uniquely the Mother of God.

The Pope, however—and as we have seen, insists that all women share in this ministry which Christ has entrusted to Mary. What concretely does that mean for women today? What are women especially called to do.

The Role of Women in Today's World

We live in a world situated between the suspicion of Eve and the trust of Mary. Indeed, it might plausibly be argued that today we are situated much more closely to the suspicion than to the trust. As already noted, Karl Stern identifies faith or trust as arising out of the mother-child relation, adding that "Distrust appears as the foil, as it were."²³ To say this is to suggest that trust is the more basic reality, while

²²*Ibid.*, 25.

²³*Ibid.*, 189.

distrust is simply that which, by contrast, sets it off or enhances it. But, in fact, experience today suggests the opposite. Distrust would appear to be the name of the game.

The 1960s gave rise to the notion that no one over thirty could be trusted. Parents and children confronted one another across the generation gap, and children began to see themselves—as the title of one book made quite clear—as the very people against whom their parents had warned them.²⁴ And while the sixties are happily behind us, their effects live on. We face today, above all, as Max Lerner put it on an episode of *Firing Line* first aired several months ago, a “crisis of fragmentation.”

Distrust is nothing new. Indeed there is much, in this fallen world, which must rightly be distrusted. But distrust as a way of life is fatal. Ben Franklin, in his *Almanac*, advised that “Distrust and caution are the parents of security.” Had Mary believed this, she would clearly never have become the Mother of God. Our coins assert that “In God we trust.” I have, however, heard it said that the true intent of that expression was not to affirm the trustworthiness of God, but to deny the trustworthiness of anyone short of God. As one of the buttons in my collection puts it, “In God we trust. All others pay cash.” Had God accepted this point of view, he would never have entrusted his Son to Mary.

Today we are perilously close to that state described by Sartre, in which other people are hell. This is so, said Sartre, because other people always turn us into objects. Today we are seeing an almost systematic objectification of people. Women and children are objects to be exploited for sexual gratification. Drug addicts, compulsive gamblers, even compulsive shoppers, are objects to be exploited for monetary

²⁴Nicholas Von Hoffman, *We Are the People Our Parents Warned Us Against* (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1968). In an essay originally published in 1964, Diana Trilling noted the revolutionary character of the “current assumption that independence is a function of parentlessness, both personal and cultural” (“The Assassination of President Kennedy,” in Diana Trilling, *We Must March My Darlings* [New York/London: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1978], 11).

gain. Friends, associates and colleagues are, in today's "kiss and tell" books, objects to be exploited for notoriety and fame. Unborn children are treated as "products of conception" when we want to be rid of them, and as objects of financial transactions with surrogate mothers when we decide we have a right to them, as though they were like any other product which can be disposed of when unwanted or packaged and marketed when desired. Some women allow their bodies to be exploited for sex without babies, while other women allow their wombs to be exploited for babies without sex. Is it any wonder that trust should be today so rare and precious a commodity?

Before becoming Pope, John Paul II conducted a retreat for Paul VI, in which he suggests that the fall of Adam and Eve was simply the "first" among a series of falls which have carried the human race further and further from God. As he puts it, "Here [in Genesis] we have the beginning, or better still the origins of the temptation of mankind, the origins of a very long process that winds its devious way through history."²⁵ He later adds, "What is said in the third chapter of Genesis seems to lead all the way to the extreme form of denial, the one adopted by present-day man."²⁶ If the Pope is right that we are experiencing today "the extreme form of denial," and I think he is, it should not surprise us that this extreme denial produces extreme distrust. It may well be, as the Pope suggests, that the seeds of suspicion sown in the heart of Eve have taken this long to come to full blossom. Our crisis of fragmentation is simply the most obvious and logical symptom of that denial.

The distrust which has its human origin in Eve can only be overcome by the trust which has its origin in Mary. And that means that the battleground on which our faith must be defended today is primarily in the woman's domain, because trust and entrusting are primarily her responsibility.

²⁵Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), *Sign of Contradiction* (New York: The Seabury Press, A Crossroad Book, 1979), 31.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 34.

Just as distrust entered the human community by way of the female, so trust must be reinstated by way of the female.

Although whole hosts of issues could be discussed under the topic of the role of women in today's world, I would like to restrict myself to what it seems to me are the two most basic and urgent matters which women must immediately address. The first has to do with the trustworthiness of women themselves, the second with the trustworthiness beyond themselves to which women must be able to direct others.

With regard to the first, we have seen how God himself entrusted his Son to a woman. And, as we have also noted, God entrusts every child he creates to the care of a woman. This entrusting, however, is a two-edged sword, for it can be exercised either as concern for or control over that child. As Ong has pointed out, such control today, with the express sanction of the law, gives mothers "the power to decide arbitrarily whether or not to allow the unborn child to live or have the child killed: more total power over another is unthinkable."²⁷

Someone has said that every child born into the world is a sign that God has not yet given up on the world. We might also add that it is also a sign that God has not yet given up on mothers. But we must also admit that, with each passing day, women offer further evidence that mothers are not to be trusted. First we had abortion, then we had surrogate motherhood and today we face feticide, the deliberate, selective killing now accompanying multiple conceptions.

In *Familiaris Consortio*, or *The Role of the Family in the Modern World*, the Pope wrote:

Concern for the child, even before birth, from the first moment of conception and then throughout the years of infancy and youth, is the primary and fundamental test of the relationship of one human being to another.²⁸

²⁷Ong, *Fighting for Life*, 70.

²⁸John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Apostolic Exhortation on the Family, December, 1981), 26.

When we consider that the primary entrusting here has to do with the mother in her relationship to the child, we can safely conclude that our society is in deep trouble.

The feminist movement has done much to destroy this fundamental relationship, first, by suggesting that abortion is a woman's right, and second, by suggesting that motherhood is detrimental to a woman's independence and self-fulfillment. Feminist Jeffner Allen, in an article entitled "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women," claims that the oppression of women is directly linked to their "breeding" of children. She concludes, "I am endangered by motherhood. In evacuation from motherhood, I claim my life, body, world, as an end in itself."²⁹

If ever trust is to be restored in our society, it must begin with women, especially mothers. The battle to end abortion, surrogacy and feticide must be fought primarily by women, for the entrusting involved in conceiving a child directly involves women, not men. And, perhaps just as important, if the scourge of abortion is ever to be eliminated from the landscape, the strategy to end it must be reformulated. For, if the Pope is right, the wrongness of abortion has to do, in the final analysis, not primarily with the fact that no woman has the right to kill her own child, nor even primarily with the fact that unborn children have a right to live, but primarily with the fact that abortion is a violation of trust, indeed of the most basic act of trust, whereby God the Father entrusts to the care and protection of a mother every child he creates. Unless women can be gotten to view this most fundamental of human relationships from that perspective, we shall continue to find ourselves locked in a hopeless struggle over competing rights, with the general public more persuaded by the rights of the party they can see than by the rights of the party they cannot.

Women must be trustworthy, but they must also know,

²⁹Jeffner Allen, "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women," in Marilyn Pearsall (ed.), *Women and Values* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1986), 92.

beyond themselves, what can and cannot be trusted, for they have the primary responsibility for bearing adults into the world. Hence, women must be reliable guides for their children, capable of distinguishing between right and wrong, good and bad, the truth of Christ and the lies of the serpent. Every mother is called, with Mary, to direct her children to do whatever Christ asks of them. But this requires that her children be entrusted to a second Mother, the Church. For it is only by way of the female Bride of Christ and Mother of us all which, like Mary, has been entrusted with the task of bearing Christ into the world, that any child's faith can be nurtured by the Eucharistic presence of Christ and the familial support of the ecclesial community. And just as Mary's journey precedes that of the Church, but finds its culmination in the Church, so every mother's relationship with a child precedes that child's relationship with the Church, but finds its culmination in her.

In order for that to happen, however, women must first recognize the trustworthiness of the Church and entrust themselves to her. Unfortunately, the Church herself is under attack today, and that attack is spearheaded even more by women than by men. Once again, the feminist movement has done much to undermine our perceptions of the Church as trustworthy. The seeds of suspicion sown in Eden have issued here in a so-called "hermeneutics of suspicion" as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza characterizes it,³⁰

³⁰Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983), xxiii. Fiorenza insists that "Methodologically . . . it will be necessary to go beyond the limits of the New Testament canon since it is a product of the patristic church, that is, a theological document of the 'historical winners' " (*ibid.*, xv). Indeed, she goes so far as to assert that "feminist theory insists that all texts are products of an androcentric patriarchal culture and history" (*ibid.*, xv).

Rosemary Radford Reuther applies the same "hermeneutics of suspicion" to Church tradition and conciliar teachings as Fiorenza does to Scripture, with much the same results. The Christology taught by Chalcedon, according to Reuther, "is not the result of a consistent evolution out of the Hebraic understanding of the Messiah, but it represents a repudiation of key elements of a Jewish messianic hope and their replacement by

which allows feminists—in the name of women's liberation—to declare the structures, teachings, traditions and texts of the Church, especially including the Bible, to be products of a patriarchal hierarchy which has used the Church to oppress women.

The inroads this view of things has made in the Church are impossible to calculate, but they were exemplified to me very clearly a couple of months ago in a conversation I had with a young man in his last year of seminary training for the priesthood. His theological education in the seminary, he told me, was designed to suggest that the primary role of the priest is not to understand and defend the Church's faith, but to engage in incessant questioning of it.

Another young man of my acquaintance, also intent on becoming a priest, was recently told by the clinical director of a counseling center at which he underwent the testing necessary to enter the seminary, that he really does not have the qualities necessary in a priest today. This young man understands the Catholic faith to be what the Church teaches it to be, and that, it turns out, is what casts doubt on the authenticity of his vocation. What he ought to have been doing all along, according to this clinical director, was filtering out those teachings, making independent judgments about them. The message could hardly be clearer: the Church is not to be trusted. Indeed, the Church is not to be trusted to such a degree that this young man was actually told in effect that he ought not only to make his own pri-

ideas that Judaism continues to reject as idolatrous. Nor is it a faithful rendering of the messianic announcement of Jesus of Nazareth and his views of the coming Reign of God" (*Sexism and God-Talk* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1983], 116). The Church fares no better, for where ecclesiology and tradition are concerned, Reuther tells us that "A more radical break [than that supplied by feminist exegetical criticism] takes place when the institutional structures that transmit tradition are perceived to have become corrupt. They are perceived not as teaching truth but as teaching falsehood dictated by their own self-interest and will to power" (*ibid.*, 16). She cites the Reformation as the type of revolution required today to overcome the historical corruption of the Church and her tradition (*ibid.*, 17).

vate judgements about the faith, but also to regard them as more reliable than the ancient, public and apostolically-grounded witness of the Church.

If the men, especially the priests and the bishops of the Church, have not risen to the Church's defense quite as heroically as one might wish, we cannot entirely excuse them, but we can keep in mind the difficult position they are put in when those who attack the integrity of the female Church are themselves female. For that very reason, the ultimate defense of the Church today is, in my judgment, going to have to come from women. As part of the ministry of entrusting, exemplified by Mary and participated in by all women, the trustworthiness of the motherhood of the Church herself has been entrusted to the witness of women. If the men of the Church, including her priests and bishops, are to entrust themselves to her, they must have that trustworthiness affirmed, first and foremost, by the women of the Church. There is, I think, no more urgent task for women in the Church today than this one. For, as the Pope has pointed out, the maternal faith of Mary precedes the male witness of the apostles.

Conclusion

We are living through a very difficult time in the life of the Church. It is, as Cardinal Ratzinger has pointed out, "a confused period where truly every type of heretical aberration seems to be pressing upon the doors of the authentic faith."³¹ For that reason, the Cardinal concludes that "If the place occupied by Mary has been essential to the equilibrium of the Faith, today it is urgent, as in few other epochs of Church history, to rediscover that place."³²

Mary's central importance lies precisely in the fact that

³¹Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 105.

³²*Ibid.*

she occupies the heart of the faith. Women also share, or should share, that position with her. When women depart from the center, the entire faith loses its balance, for women supply that "equilibrium," to borrow Ratzinger's word, upon which even the hierarchy depends for the effective carrying out of its work.

Because women occupy this central position, they have, as Gertrude von Le Fort notes, a "natural capacity of leaping into the breach."³³ This is a part of the vocation or calling of women. But, as Le Fort adds, this highest aspect of the woman's vocation is exercised only rarely:

. . . she is called [to leap into the breach] only in extraordinary, even desperate cases. The highest vocation of woman is always by way of a last expedient, and we grasp the astonishing significance of a St. Catherine or a St. Joan only when we know who had already failed on the missions that later became theirs.³⁴

This age constitutes, I think, one of those extraordinary, perhaps even desperate, situations in which women are called to step into the breach of fragmentation created by the seemingly unprecedented distrust which, whether deliberately or not, has the effect of undermining both our society and our Church. This crisis, as Max Lerner noted, is not one of "access" [to opportunities, careers, positions of power] but one of "nexus" [connectedness]. Such connectedness cannot be restored by legislation, nor can it be arrived at by reason. Distrust has produced the fragmentation, and only a renewal of trust can repair it.

If the Pope is correct in locating "entrusting" in the mother-child relationship, then a renewal of trust must begin there and it must be initiated by women. Not only our children, but even the men of our society and our Church, look to the women for guidance in what can and cannot be

³³Gertrude von Le Fort, *The Eternal Woman*, trans. Marie Cecilia Buehrle (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1954), 31.

³⁴*Ibid.*

trusted. The servants at Cana sought out Mary, not because she could solve their problem, but because they trusted she would know where the solution could be found.

Today our world is looking desperately for solutions to scores of problems. In this situation, what is required are women able confidently to advise, "Do whatever he tells you," and to point to the Church as the place where we learn what it is he asks. Without this maternal, Marian trust and entrusting, there is no possibility at all that the truth of Christ can find a home in the hearts of humanity today.

JOYCE A. LITTLE, Ph.D.
University of St. Thomas
Houston, Texas