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ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF MARIAN DEVOTION FOR THE FORMATION OF THE 'FEMININE GENIUS'

Danielle Peters, STD

There is only one *Theotokos*, yet all Christians are called to be God-bearers. There is only one *Fiat*, yet all the faithful are called to give constant and ever-deeper assent to the will of God.¹

—Francis Caponi, OSA

Introduction

It is commonly accepted that *devotio*, as an act of virtue of religion and distinguished from devotional practices, implies a stable interior disposition and readiness to serve God joyfully and generously. Accordingly, authentic Marian devotion equips heart, mind and will to be receptive for a deeper understanding and fulfillment of God's ways in imitation and through the intercession of Our Lady. *Marialis Cultus*, 34, denotes that "Devotion to the Blessed Virgin

¹ Caponi, Francis, "Becoming Christian in the 'School of Mary,'" *New Theology Review* 18, no. 4 (2005): 68-76.

must also pay close attention to certain findings of the human sciences.”²

Forty years after *Marialis Cultus* (MC) and twenty-five years after St. John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (MD)—on the dignity and vocation of women, this paper seeks to explore the anthropological dimension of Marian devotion (MC 29, 36, 37) in view and support of the formation of the “feminine genius” (MD 9, 10, 11). For this purpose we will—as our foundation—present the anthropological teaching of Vatican II.³ Next we will highlight how these anthropological concepts are exemplified in the Blessed Virgin Mary. Beginning with MC we will survey texts from the pontificates of Paul VI and of his successor John Paul II. The latter’s teaching in particular has shed light on the anthropological dimension of Marian devotion. During the Marian Year 1987/88, he gifted the Church with the Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater* (RM) in which he proposed anthropological aspects of Mary’s journey of faith as these relate to that of each Christian.⁴ At

² Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation for the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Marialis Cultus*, February 2, 1974. See also Letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Virgin Mary in Intellectual and Spiritual Formation*, March 25, 1988, 13.

³ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Written at the closing of the Marian Year, August 15, 1988.

⁴ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church, *Redemptoris Mater*, March 25, 1987.

the closing of the same year, John Paul II found it opportune to meditate on the dignity and vocation of woman by emphasizing that Mary's person and mission bear special significance for the feminine genius (MD 31) for which she is archetype.

It is this feminine genius which will occupy us for the rest of the paper. We seek to identify and clarify the meaning of the term feminine genius, its exemplary manifestation in the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the challenge for each and every woman to accept this gift. Moreover, we will pinpoint some obstacles and chances for the feminine genius to freely develop and bear fruit in the "the psycho-sociological field" (MC 34) of today. Finally, we hope to draw some conclusions for the formation of the feminine genius and thus to benefit the interior disposition and exterior expression of authentic Marian devotion today.⁵

⁵ Besides the papal letters MC and MD, I will draw from the proceedings of the conference held by the Pontifical Council of the Laity, *Woman and Man: the humanum in its entirety*, held on the twentieth Anniversary of John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*. February 7–9, 2008 (Rome: LEV, 2010); also, Pontifical Council of the Laity, *God entrusts the human being to the woman*, Study Seminar commemorating twenty five years after *Mulieris Dignitatem*, October 10–12, 2013. Available at <http://www.laici.va/content/laici/en/eventi/seminari-e-congressi/dio-affidarsi-essere-umano-alla-donna.html>.

I: Related Developments and Church Documents

A. Vatican Council II

The relationship between Mariology and anthropology was not addressed by Vatican II. The focus of *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Chapter VIII, was rather on Mary's relationship to Christ and the Church. The council, however, succeeded in abandoning the one-sided Neo-Scholastic approach to Mariology which tended to idealize and crown Mary with privileges. The portrayal of Mary in LG is based on the scriptural evidence of the Mother of Jesus, from which emerge other essential features of the historical person of the Virgin. Among them we note her dialogical rapport with the Triune God and the Son in particular (LG 53, 56-59), her relationships in solidarity with Jesus' disciples which continue after the resurrection (LG 58-59), and her pilgrimage of faith (LG 58) emphasizing her free and responsible adherence to the plan of God (LG 56) which positions her close to every Christian, man and woman alike.

The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA), published one year after LG, affirms the Blessed Virgin Mary as the perfect example of the spiritual and apostolic person since, "while leading the life common to all here on earth, one filled with family concerns and labors, she was always intimately united with her Son and in an entirely unique way cooperated in the work of the Savior."⁶

⁶ Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, November 18, 1965, 4.

Several reasons motivated the Council Fathers to reflect with great sensitivity on the anthropological dimension of theology and pastoral practice.⁷ As a result, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS)—a novelty, and unprecedented in the history of Church councils—presents a systematic account of Christian anthropology.⁸ In its first part, GS highlights “The Dignity of the Human Person” (12–22), “The Community of Mankind” (23–32), “Man’s Activity in the Universe” (33–39), and “The Role of the Church in the Modern World” (40–45). Concluding its rich discourse on the dignity and vocation of the human person, GS 22 emphasizes:

It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear ... Christ ... the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.
... Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare. For,

⁷ The main concerns of the Council Fathers were the materialistic conception of the human person in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the depreciation of the spiritual dimension on behalf of consumerism; the tension between freedom and responsibility; the right view of being versus having, and religious indifferentism. See, e.g.: Thomas McGovern, “The Christian Anthropology of John Paul II: An Overview,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 8, no. 1 (2001): 132–147.

⁸ Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, December 7, 1965.

by his incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man.

The very last article of the first part of the pastoral constitution (GS 45) again makes reference to Jesus Christ—”the perfect man”—who is the “the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the center of the human race, the joy of every heart, and the answer to all its yearnings.” For our purposes it may be profitable to know that these words flowed directly from the pen of Paul VI.⁹

The second chapter of GS draws the application by stressing a unique anthropological truth concerning the personal vocation and mission of every human being: “If man is the only creature on earth that God has wanted for its own sake, man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself” (GS 24). Thus our dignity as human persons created in the image and likeness of God stems from our being incorporated in Jesus Christ, who, by his being and actions, exemplified through his sublime gift of self the intrinsic human vocation to love.

In GS 4, the faithful are urged to be aware of the signs of the times. Part Two of GS expounds on some of these signs in the light of doctrinal principles—established in Part One—and on the human person living in the world. In his very last words directed to the Council Fathers, Paul VI reminisced:

⁹ Paul VI, General Audience, February 3, 1965.

It is necessary to remember the time in which it [the Council] was realized...it took place at a time which everyone admits is oriented toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than that of heaven; a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual, and seems, quite wrongly, to be prompted by the progress of science; a time in which the fundamental act of the human person, more conscious now of himself and of his freedom, tends to pronounce in favor of his own absolute autonomy, in emancipation from every transcendent law.¹⁰

Evidently, the pontiff sensed that the signs of the time did not point in the first place to a crisis of faith but rather a crisis of culture, with serious anthropological consequences. Indeed, GS 55 states that “we are witnesses of the birth of a new humanism,”¹¹ due to the profound social and cultural changes of post-modernity. Like every birth, the new humanism will be a gift; yet—as we already know from hindsight—it will not be exempt from challenges.

B. *Marialis Cultus*

With the promulgation of MC, Paul VI initiated the dialogue between Mariology and the signs of the times manifest in the cultural changes.¹² To further this dialogue, MC portrays Mary as a historical person, a woman within a

¹⁰ Paul VI, Address during the Last General Meeting of the Second Vatican Council, December 7, 1965.

¹¹ According to GS 54, this new humanism is necessary due to the profound social and cultural changes of post modernity.

¹² See: Donal Flanagan, “The Sign of the Virgin,” *Doctrine and Life* 44 (1994): 271.

concrete cultural setting. Paul VI proposes anthropology as one of four elements to be considered for the renewal of Marian piety, in close conjunction with a biblical, liturgical, and ecumenical sensitivity already introduced in LG 55–59 and 67. MC is the first magisterial document to present an anthropological dimension to Mariology. The innovation consists above all—according to Alfonso Langella—in the method which supersedes the historical-salvific approach of LG.¹³ Paul VI, in fact, takes his bearing from the scriptural account in order to establish the conditions for a correct understanding of Mary of Nazareth. He then boldly proposes that the “anthropological ideas and the problems springing therefrom” in our time can stand the comparison “with the figure of the Virgin Mary as presented by the Gospel.” In fact, Paul VI was convinced that “Mary can be considered a mirror of the expectations of the men and women of our time.”¹⁴

The pontiff’s method is unique through its individuation of a mariological anthropology and its attempt to eliminate the fractures between Mary and contemporary culture. MC 34, stresses that Marian devotion may not disregard “the discrepancy existing between some aspects of this devotion and modern anthropological discoveries and the profound changes which have occurred in the psycho-sociological field in which modern man lives and works.” Yet, any

¹³ Alfonso Langella, “Maria paradigma antropologico nella teologia postconciliare,” *Theotokos* 21, no. 1 (2013): 3–10.

¹⁴ MC 37.

specification concerning the domestic, professional, political, social, and cultural fields needs to beware of implicit risks when contextualizing a Galilean woman of the first century by inserting her in the cultural context of today.¹⁵ Paul VI anticipated this potential dilemma by clarifying that Mary is “an example to be imitated, not precisely in the type of life she led, and much less for the socio-cultural background in which she lived and which today scarcely exists anywhere.”¹⁶ In fact, the Church “does not bind herself to any particular expression of an individual cultural epoch or to the particular anthropological ideas underlying such expressions” since they may be “less suitable to men and women” of today.¹⁷ Rather, authentic Marian devotion will always appreciate the timeless reason for veneration and imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The document highlights her as a model of the spiritual attitude; she is the attentive Virgin, the Virgin in prayer, the believing and obeying Virgin-Mother, and the Virgin presenting offerings.¹⁸ MC 37 furnishes five examples significant for anthropological consideration and in particular for women.

1. Mary is a historical person, a humble Jewish woman, in dialogue with God and giving her active and responsible consent (cf. Lk 1:26–38);

¹⁵ MC 34.

¹⁶ MC 35.

¹⁷ MC 36.

¹⁸ MC 16–20.

2. Mary as virgin and mother portrays the vocational choice for each woman;
3. Mary is a woman who proclaims God's justice (cf. Lk. 1:51–53);
4. Mary is a woman of strength who mastered life (cf. Mt. 2:13–23);
5. Mary's "maternal role was extended and became universal on Calvary."

These timeless considerations concerning Mary of Nazareth—writes Paul VI—sum up “the most characteristic situations in the life of a woman as a virgin, wife and mother.”¹⁹ They give evidence that she is “the preeminent exemplar of life lived in accordance with the Gospels” and thus the “New Woman and perfect Christian” for our time. However, the stereotypical traditional descriptions of woman as “virgin, wife and mother” do not resonate well with those feminist theologians who furrow their brow when woman as an autonomous person is defined through man.²⁰

¹⁹ MC 36.

²⁰ See, among many, Els Maeckelberghe, *Desperately Seeking Mary: A Feminist Appropriation of a Traditional Religious Symbol* (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1991), 7–44; Cahal B. Daly, “Mary and the Vocation of Women,” *The Furrow* 25, no. 12 (1974): 647–659; Elisabeth Gössmann, “Mariologische Thesen in der Feministischen Theologie,” in *Maria, für alle Frauen oder über allen Frauen?* ed. Elisabeth Gössmann and Dieter R. Bauer (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989), 168.

C. Redemptoris Mater and Mulieris Dignitatem

Fast forward to the pontificate of St. John Paul II. Also dubbed Mary's Pope, he left us a rich Marian heritage, including a Marian encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Mater*, and an Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, delineating "the Dignity and Vocation of Women." The content and value of both documents can be presupposed here; in the context of our topic, we focus on their anthropological dimension.

1. Redemptoris Mater

As leitmotiv for RM the pope chose Mary's *pilgrimage of faith*. John Paul II clarified that despite her privileges Mary still had to walk every step of "her personal journey of faith."²¹ By tracing her life as it is revealed to us through the Scriptures we are led to discover "the interior history, that is, the story of souls."²² John Paul II discovered "in the expression 'Blessed is she who believed' ... a kind of 'key' which unlocks for us the innermost reality of Mary."²³ In her obedience of faith—the pope observed—Mary of Galilee fully recognizes who she is and her supreme calling by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His Love (cf. GS

²¹ RM 5.

²² Joseph Ratzinger, "The Sign of the Woman: An Introduction to the Encyclical 'Redemptoris Mater,'" in *Mary, God's Yes to Man: Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Redemptoris Mater* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 40; RM 6.

²³ RM 19; RM 6. Cf. Rom 6:17 which highlights the interiority of obedience as *obedistis ex corde*.

22).²⁴ And simultaneously, she fully finds herself through her sincere gift of herself (cf. GS 24).²⁵

2. *Mulieris Dignitatem*

In many ways MD is a milestone since never before was there a pontifical document entirely dedicated to the topic of women.²⁶ John Paul II's anthropological analysis established that in Mary there exists "a revelation commensurate with the mystery of the Redemption."²⁷ Mary is "the new beginning" of the dignity and vocation of women and implicitly of all humankind.²⁸ In her we can ascertain "the richness and personal resources" of a person according to God's image and likeness, "who discovers herself by means of a sincere gift of self."²⁹ John Paul II maintained that "this discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life."³⁰ And we may add that this holds true also for men who seek this union with the *Woman*.³¹

²⁴ RM 13–16, 18, 26, 29, 33, 36.

²⁵ RM 13, fn. 30. Cf. LG 56. Also see: RM 37.

²⁶ MD 4.

²⁷ MD 11.

²⁸ Cf. MD 11.

²⁹ MD 11. Cf. GS, 24.

³⁰ MD 11.

³¹ Cf. MD 22.

In this context John Paul II speaks of the *feminine genius!*³² Together with his call for a “new feminism,” it also requires thorough reflection.³³ Concerning this enterprise MD offers two helpful clues:

1. The law of the gift, described in GS 24, finds expression in two particular dimensions of the vocation of woman with “their loftiest expression in the *woman* of Nazareth: the Virgin-Mother.”³⁴ In the estimation of the pope these two manifestations of the feminine constitute “*the richness and personal resources of femininity*, all the eternal originality of the ‘woman,’ just as God wanted her to be, a person for her own sake, who discovers herself ‘by means of a sincere gift of self.’”³⁵
2. Another aspect sheds light on the feminine gift. It takes its bearing from the order of love that describes the life of the Triune God. John Paul II contends that the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root in woman. “The Bridegroom is the one who

³² MD 31

³³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life, *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, 99.

³⁴ MD 7.

³⁵ MD 11. According to John Paul II, Mary’s praises of all God has done for her in the *Magnificat* refers in the first place to her divine maternity, “but they can also signify *the discovery of her own feminine humanity*.” See also MD 18.

loves. The Bride is loved.”³⁶ Concretely this means in the words of Carla Rossi, the creation of the woman reveals to man that he is loved because her capacity to receive love analogously announces the love of God.³⁷

II. Anthropological Considerations Relative to the *Feminine Genius*

Although the post-conciliar epoch has quite naturally produced a Mariology with an anthropological dimension, it appears still difficult to insert the person of Mary in tracts of anthropological theology. The time has come, however, to offer proposals as to how Our Lady can make a contribution to theological anthropology, specifically to women, and from there derive aspects of an authentic Marian devotion attractive to men and women. What are the issues at hand?

A. Created in God’s Image and Likeness

Based on biblical anthropology, the identity and vocation of the human being, created “from the beginning” only as man and as woman, is to be God’s image and likeness. From deeper study of this revealed truth emerges the awareness that the gift-character of the human identity unfolds in two dimensions: the first story of creation stresses the *complementarity* of man and woman based on their equal dignity. The second creation account points to the vocation

³⁶ MD 29.

³⁷ Carla Rossie Espagnet, “Densità antropologica della figura di Maria nella *Mulieris dignitatem*,” *Theotokos* 21, no. I (2013): 49–65, esp. 52.

or mission of man and woman. They are called to *communion*, to help each other to achieve the fulfilment of manhood and of womanhood “not only biologically and psychologically, but above all from the ontological point of view.”³⁸ Reciprocity, mutual complementarity, and responsibility are gifts each one receives for the other.³⁹ Thus, the gift of uni-duality is eminently relational in being and action.⁴⁰ Its most profound spiritual dimension consists in the mutual responsibility to assist one another on the way

³⁸ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 8. Also see Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 32–34.

³⁹ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Participants in the International Convention on the Theme “Woman and Man: The Humanum in its Entirety,”* February 9, 2008. See also his *Christmas greetings to the members of the Roman Curia and Prelature*, December 22, 2008, and his *Address during the Visit to the Federal Parliament in the Reichstag Building, Berlin*, September 22, 2011.

⁴⁰ The God-likeness of the human being was defined by Martin Buber, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Emil Brunner, Karl Barth, Paul Jewett, and Jürgen Moltmann as the *analogia relationis*, i.e., spiritual substance between humans and God. None of them succeeded in proposing that the equality of man and woman consists in being complementary and therefore different. Brunner hoped that ‘real women,’ who understand their true feminine nature, will voluntarily submit to their roles, aiding men thereby to be their true masculine selves: Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950), 55–68. Also see: Rosemary Radford-Ruether, “Christian Tradition and Feminist Hermeneutics,” in Kari Elisabeth Børresen, *The Image of God: Gender Models in Judaeo-Christian Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 267–291, esp. 281.

to the eternal wedding feast.⁴¹ This of course holds true not only—though most prominently—for the married life but also for the Christian community in general, where mutual collaboration and equality benefit the social, economic, political, and ecclesial life as well as the human and spiritual formation of individuals.⁴² The difference between men and women is according to Sacred Scripture not a cultural concoction but is *ontological and inherently relational*. At its best it is meant to emulate the communion existing within the life of the Triune God.

B. Reflection of Divine Love

Within the communion of the Trinity is found complete unity, augmented by the simultaneous free unfolding of the attributes of each of the persons. It is exactly by pursuing their proper mission that Father, Son, and Spirit create and

⁴¹ Cf. LG 11; 41. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), art. 1641, (hereafter CCC).

⁴² This biblical reading of the complementarity of the sexes posits a stumbling block to those for whom it presents a tool serving women's regression or preventing the legalization of alternative lifestyles, such as same-sex couples. Helen Alvaré points out that "its neurobiological, psychological, evolutionary and philosophical bases are sharply contested, even while it is agreed that there has been little research done on complementarity in these areas because it is inherently difficult to study." Cited in Pontifical Council for the Laity, "Safeguarding the human being, created as man and woman; Fifteen years on from John Paul II's Letter to Women and from the 4th UN Conference on Women." Available at www.laici.va.

find harmony among one another.⁴³ Communion in freedom and distinctive differences within the Trinity are the result of love.⁴⁴ Human love in turn is made fruitful and invigorated when it participates in God's love, humanity's first and greatest Gift.

At the center of human life is thus the capacity to love.⁴⁵ Since this capacity cannot be separated from one's sex "there is a feminine way of living agape and there is a masculine way."⁴⁶ This allows woman in every dimension of her existence to be creative in her "fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other."⁴⁷ From here emerges the question: in what consists the specific gift a woman—married or celibate—is called to contribute to this

⁴³ Cf. Gisbert Greshake, *Der dreieine Gott. Eine trinitarische Theologie* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1997), 265.

⁴⁴ False freedom liberates itself from reality, nature, traditions, and from the distinctive feminine and male features inscribed by God in the distinctive anthropological composition of men and women. Any obstacle of a cultural or religious nature in the exercise of this freedom is regarded as discriminatory. Absolute freedom means to avoid the slightest commitment to self-giving!

⁴⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter on Christian Love, *Deus Caritas Est*, December 25, 2005, 17.

⁴⁶ X. Lacroix, *L'alterità uomo-donna e la sua portata spirituale* (Magnano: Biella, 1996), 27. Cf. John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 7.

⁴⁷ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, May 31, 2004, 14.

loving being with and for one another?⁴⁸ And what are the consequences should she lose or withhold her gift?⁴⁹

C. Woman's Cooperation in Salvation History

Great strides have been made to research this subject matter.⁵⁰ The anthropological and ontological study of woman, presented by St. Karol Wojtyła and developed by others, indicated that, in God's eternal plan woman is the one in whom the order of love—the intimate life of the Triune God himself—in the created world of persons takes first root.⁵¹ But this does not happen without her consent! The Annunciation scene is emblematic of God's respect for the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6: "Through this same spousal perspective, the ancient Genesis narrative allows us to understand how woman, in her deepest and original being, exists 'for the other' (cf. 1 Cor 11:9): this is a statement which, far from any sense of alienation, expresses a fundamental aspect of the similarity with the Triune God, whose Persons, with the coming of Christ, are revealed as being in a communion of love, each for the others. In the 'unity of the two,' man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist 'side by side' or 'together,' but they are also called to exist mutually 'one for the other.'"

⁴⁹ Cf. Marguerite A. Peeters, "Gender: an anthropological deconstruction and a challenge for faith," in Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, *Woman and Man: The Humanum in Its Entirety*, 291: "The deep anthropological truths we encounter in the story of creation are important today too, given the challenges of our times. Gender ideology claims that motherhood is a social construct and defies equality."

⁵⁰ Publications are multitudinous. See the enormous bibliography on Mary and Women's Studies at <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/b/bibliography-on-women-and-mary.php>.

⁵¹ MD 29.

dignity of the human person. “In ... a very real sense—[God] waits to be chosen himself.”⁵² Mary’s role in the drama of God’s new self-giving was crucial. “The concrete circumstances of history” demanded her reaction.⁵³ Mary’s self-gift is a fruit of her “virginal integral faith.”⁵⁴ Her complete self-emptying can only be understood through the fullness of the gift she had received at the beginning of her life. To be full of grace, however, does not in any way diminish the leap of faith involved each time when surrendering the gift. From her ensuing dialogue with the Angel we may conclude that Mary’s self-gift included her self-abandonment, “accepting fully and with a ready heart” that God could suspend with natural law and bestow on her a twofold vocation: virgin and mother. John Paul II was of the opinion that Mary’s “‘How can this be?’ ... affirmed her own virginity, and not only as a fact, but also, implicitly as her intent” to make of herself “a total self-gift to God through her virginity.”⁵⁵ Mary’s *fiat* gave expression to “her free will

⁵² Karol Wojtyła, *Sign of Contradiction* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 37. Cf. John Paul II, *The Trinity’s Embrace—God’s Saving Plan: A Catechesis on Salvation History* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2002), 46.

⁵³ RM 8. Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter in Preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, November 10, 1994, 2.

⁵⁴ John Paul II, *Theotókos: Woman, Mother, Disciple: A Catechesis on Mary, Mother of God* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2000), 225.

⁵⁵ RM 13–14. John Paul II, *The Spirit, Giver of Life and Love: A Catechesis on the Creed* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 1996), 198. John Paul II, *Theotókos*, 165–68.

and thus [she] fully shared with her personal and feminine 'I' in the event of the Incarnation."⁵⁶ Together with her sharing in the shocking mystery of Christ's self-emptying on Golgotha, Mary's self-gift, writes John Paul II, "is perhaps the deepest 'kenosis' of faith in human history."⁵⁷

In a singular way, Mary's gift of "interior readiness" to accept Jesus unites her with God on a physical level and also, in an archetypical way, on a spiritual level through grace.⁵⁸ "No one else has this bodily, psychological, social relationship to the Messiah!"⁵⁹ Mary of Galilee truly anticipates and comprehensively embodies what St. Paul describes in his Letter to the Galatians as the perfection of the Christian life: "[I]t is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

⁵⁶ MD 4. Cf. RM 13: "Tota sua persona humana, feminea." Also see: John Paul II, "Feminine holiness is indispensable. Message to World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, March 7, 2001," *L'Osservatore Romano* (Vatican City, weekly Eng. ed.), March 28, 2001, 5. For more information on John Paul II's contribution to a theology on the feminine, see John Saward, *Christ Is the Answer: The Christ-Centered Teaching of John Paul II* (New York, NY: Alba House, 1995), 41.

⁵⁷ RM 18.

⁵⁸ See MD 7. John Paul II, Message for the XXVIII World Day of Peace: "Women Teachers of Peace," January 1, 1995.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2003), 314.

D. Participation in the New Covenant

Mary's vocation as *theotokos* draws attention to "the fullness of the perfection of what is characteristic of woman."⁶⁰ The capacity of conceiving and giving life "which can only belong to the woman"⁶¹ constitutes in the mind of John Paul II "the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women"⁶² as well as "the fullness of what it means to be feminine."⁶³ Mary's motherhood is life-giving in a physical and spiritual sense. Indeed, "salvation begins with Mary's yes"; God begins a New Covenant with humanity.⁶⁴ As the human exponent of the covenant Mary finds herself in an intimate relationship with the Trinity, in particular to Jesus Christ, the fruit of her womb, to the Church, to each Christian, and especially to women.⁶⁵

Our Lady's role in the divine plan of salvation "sheds light on women's vocation ... by defining its difference in

⁶⁰ MD 5.

⁶¹ MD 4.

⁶² MD 5.

⁶³MD 5. See also Angelo Scola, "The Anthropological and Theological Bases of the Dignity and Mission of Woman in the Magisterium of John Paul II," in *The Logic of Self-Giving: International Meeting 'Women,' Laity Today* (Vatican City: Pontificium Consilium pro Laicis, 1997), 56, 69.

⁶⁴ Cited in Jason Byassee, "What about Mary? Protestants and Marian Devotion," *Christian Century* (December 14, 2004): 32.

⁶⁵ RM 46. Cf. John Paul II, *Theotokos*, passim.

relation to man” and by showing “what is specific to the feminine personality.”⁶⁶ John Paul II argues “each and every time that motherhood is repeated in human history, it is always related to the Covenant which God established with the human race through the motherhood of the Mother of God.”⁶⁷ If we can accept this assumption, then it may shed a significant ray of light on the feminine genius. Geneviève Honoré-Lainé observes: “A woman has become the partner of a new covenant which unites us in the Son eternally to God. In fostering a Marian attitude a woman should become a sign of the covenant.”⁶⁸ We can even develop this thought a step further and affirm: motherhood is indispensable to the divine-human relationship; each time a woman, like Mary, consciously and receptively speaks her *fiat* to conceive and bear a child, she representatively confirms and renews the commitment on behalf of humanity to the New Covenant: its permanence, unconditional love and support. The child of her womb, an immortal soul, is the concrete fruit and blessing of this covenant which will be sacramentally ratified at baptism. This indeed is woman’s sublime vocation! Can we also say conversely that a woman’s rejection of motherhood weakens the New Covenant?

⁶⁶ John Paul II, *Theotókos*, 45, 43.

⁶⁷ MD 19.

⁶⁸ Geneviève Honoré-Lainé, *La femme et le mystère de l’alliance* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1985), 136.

A divine-human covenant like motherhood is patterned through the law of the gift and is thus inherently relational. It establishes unique and unrepeatable relationships in the vertical as well as horizontal direction.⁶⁹ Moreover, the unique contact with the child developing in her womb makes a woman more attuned to human beings in general which profoundly marks her personality.⁷⁰ The Polish pontiff applied GS 24 to women, stating that they are called to give expression to the physical and/or spiritual dimension of their maternal vocation in the order of love.⁷¹ He argues that this concerns each and every woman, independently of the cultural context in which she lives and regardless of her spiritual, psychological and physical characteristics (e.g., her age, education, health, work, or whether she is married or single).⁷² Hence, “women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement.” The Church in turn

⁶⁹ Cf. RM 45.

⁷⁰ MD 18.

⁷¹ MD 7. To avoid stereotypical allusions, motherhood alone does not define the totality of what it means to be a woman, no more than fatherhood defines a man. Every woman is a complete human being with talents and aspirations, with rights and responsibilities, but motherhood does shape the way she lives her vocation as a person. An attack on motherhood is therefore an attack on what it means to be a woman.

⁷² See, e.g., MD 30. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World, *Vita Consecrata*, March 25, 1996, 58. John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 9–12.

longs to see “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.”⁷³

Women who embrace this vocation are, in the mind of John Paul II, “the indispensable prerequisite for an authentic cultural change.”⁷⁴ A woman’s authority rests in three interrelated areas, each informing the other: 1) her maternal ‘gift of self’; 2) the use of her particular ‘genius’; 3) her devotion to Mary of Nazareth.⁷⁵ As with all gifts, a vocation can be accepted and embraced or rejected. Given the strong contemporary cultural upheaval concerning male and female identity, woman’s gift to safeguard the uni-duality of man

⁷³ RM 46.

⁷⁴ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life, *Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, 99.

⁷⁵ Devotion in this context is defined as an act of the virtue of religion, expressed in veneration, imitation, and (self) education.

and woman is far from being unwrapped.⁷⁶ John Paul II begged women not to dispense with the riches of their feminine originality; he considered that approach the wrong path to achieving liberation from male domination.⁷⁷

In none of his discourses did John Paul II specify his understanding of the feminine genius; neither have his successors. Though initially disappointing and even frustrating, we can also discover an advantage in this ambiguity. We are free to ponder this question and we could even give it a name! If Mary is the prototype of women, then the feminine genius must be found in her! Gebara and Lucchetti have rightly argued that “a model, a way of being, cannot be eternalized—rather the historic figure Mary must enter into dialogue with the time, the space, the culture, the

⁷⁶ MD 7. If equality is reflected in reciprocity, the difference that must be safeguarded allows for the complementarity of a particular mutual ‘help.’ This help is not identical in both directions, but each one is in need of the other’s gift to become whole and holy. When a person is not valued for what s/he is, but only for what s/he can do, then s/he is objectified. Objectification prevents healthy relationships of giving and receiving—a mutual donation which is sacrificial. When a woman is loved as a commodity her capacity to be a gift of love can be easily distorted; she loses the glow in her eyes.

⁷⁷ MD 6. See also Peeters, *Gender*, 293: “If we deny the anthropological complementarity of men and women, trying to make all citizens radically ‘equal,’ claiming that motherhood is a social injustice, reducing men and women to their social functions, to being ‘partners’ joined by ‘contract,’ then we create a culture that hinders the fulfillment of our universal human vocation.” This argument is practically silenced by most or considered harmless by others.

problems, and the actual persons that relate to that figure.”⁷⁸ Consequently, the personified feminine genius will need to be defined within these parameters

III. Mary, the Personified *Feminine Genius*

The current related conversation in theology and among theologians moves in three directions:⁷⁹

1. The Blessed Virgin Mary should be interpreted in view of the emancipated consciousness of the present-day woman. This view emerged in the 1970s—more or less, with Mary Daley’s book *Beyond God the Father*, published in 1973—in response to some traditional mariological concepts. It developed rather radical views of Mary as liberator of the oppressed and of discovering in her the femininity of God. This view holds that the Immaculate Conception in particular and other Marian doctrines in general reflect a patriarchal construction idealizing Mary, assigning her to traditional gender roles, de-emphasizing her humanity (and sexuality), and therefore preventing

⁷⁸ Ivone Gebara and Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, *Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Poor* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 7.

⁷⁹ See Langella, “Maria paradigma antropologico nella teologia postconciliare,” 8–9.

the faithful, particularly women, from identifying with her.⁸⁰

2. A second variant focuses on the rapport between anthropology and Mariology which presents Mary as the anthropological model, a fully realized person who casts light on the constitutive elements of the person. This position concentrates on the relational dimension of Mary's life, showing how the Christotypical dimension led to her assimilation of Christ's person and mission and how the ecclesio-typical tradition not only points to her as part of the community of believers but also to a symbolic, "anthropomorphic" aspect. This model allows us to see Mary as a concrete woman—from her Immaculate Conception to her Assumption—who deserves to be called blessed also by our generation.⁸¹
3. A third position sheds light on both sides of the argument. Jason Byassee, in "What about Mary? Protestants and Marian Devotion," advocates that

⁸⁰ For a synthesis on this debate, see V. Ferrari Schiefer, "Donna," in *Mariologia*, ed. S. De Fiore, V. Ferrari, S. M. Perrella (Milano: San Paolo, 2009), 426–435; also, Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

⁸¹ Cf. Angelo Amato, "Maria di Nazaret, paradigma dell'antropologia cristiana," *Miles Immaculatae* 41 (2005): 37–61; S. De Fiore, "Paradigma antropologico," in his *Maria. Nuovissimo dizionario* (3 vols.; Bologna: EDB, 2006-), 2:1241–1269.

“God’s enfleshment in human history via a woman alone should be seen as a resource for feminism, if used carefully.” This would avoid the danger of treating Mary as a “blank screen, a perfect canvas for our projections” (citing historian Shari Thurar).

[Mary is] “the description of the archetypical Christian, the mother of believers. ‘We too are *virgins* who are incapable of bearing God,’ until God deigns to be born in our ordinariness as in Mary’s, argues Presbyterian theologian Cynthia Rigby.”

“Sara Coakley articulates a particular kind of mariological feminism by defending *kenosis*, self-emptying, against feminist objections. ... Coakley argues that self-emptying does not mean submission or loss of self; it means growing into the fullness of creation, becoming as radiantly full of the divine presence as was Mary at the ninth month of her pregnancy.”⁸²

Our search for the concrete expression of the feminine genius in our time cannot avoid current cultural trends. On the other hand, an authentic Christian proposal has to be an attractive alternative to the Scylla of biological determinism and the Charybdis of contemporary pervasive constructivism. Etymologically, genius is related to the Latin

⁸² Jason Byassee, “What about Mary? Protestants and Marian Devotion,” *The Christian Century* (Dec. 14, 2014): 28–32, esp. 26 (article also available in Religion Online as “Protestants and Marian Devotion—What about Mary?”).

gigno, genui, genitus; these translate as *bring into being, beget, give birth to, bring forth, and bear*—implying that a genius is at core maternal!

Philosophers have presented various definitions of “genius.” Hume stated that a person with the characteristics of a genius is looked at as a person disconnected from society, as well as a person who works remotely, at a distance, away from the rest of the world.⁸³ Kant proposed that “Genius is a talent for producing something for which no determinate rule can be given, not a predisposition consisting of a skill for something that can be learned by following some rule or other.”⁸⁴ Søren Kierkegaard contrasted genius with the apostle; while both are equal, they are “qualitatively different. ... Genius is immediateness. Genius is born. An apostle is not born: an apostle is a man called and appointed by God, receiving a mission from him.”⁸⁵ In the philosophical thought of Bertrand Russell, a genius possesses unique qualities and talents that make him or her valuable to the society. However, Russell maintained that it is possible for such a genius to be crushed by an unsympathetic environment during his or her youth. Russell

⁸³ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸⁴ Kant, Immanuel, *The Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1987, §46–§49), §46.

⁸⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age and Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

rejected the notion that he believed was popular during his lifetime: “Genius will out.”⁸⁶

Without affording the time for evidenced philosophical proof, we can conclude that a genius takes on a special—even at times indispensable—role for humanity; this role—prophetic in its kind—rarely, however, receives its proper recognition and appreciation, since its authority lies within! Applied to the feminine genius, John Paul II speaks of “a special kind of *prophetism* that belongs to women in their femininity.” In the order of love, a woman represents the bride “*who receives love, in order to love in return.*”⁸⁷ A woman’s *bridal* love, observes John Paul II, is kenotic; it “always involves a special readiness to be poured out for the sake of those who come within [her] range of activity.”⁸⁸ Because of the immense availability of a woman to spend herself in human relationships, “God entrusts the human being to her in a special way ... precisely by reason of her femininity—and this in a particular way determines her vocation” and genius!⁸⁹ In this context, the pope asked whether Christ does not look to women for the accomplishment of the “royal priesthood” (1 Pt 2:9).⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Bertrand Russell, *The Conquest of Happiness* (New York: Liveright, 1958), 91.

⁸⁷ MD 29.

⁸⁸ MD 21.

⁸⁹ MD 30.

⁹⁰ MD 30.

IV. The Signs of the Times

This perception of the feminine genius, however, stands in stark contrast to the signs of our time which replace the concept of mutual male-female complementarity with gender contract. Instead of identifying a woman's vocation as bridal and maternal, bio-politics defends her reproductive rights. There is no room for the service of love in a culture that thrives on empowerment. A narcissistic understanding of freedom liberates itself from reality, nature, traditions, and from the distinctive feminine and male features inscribed by God in the distinctive anthropological composition of men and women. Any obstacle of a cultural or religious nature in the exercise of this kind of freedom is regarded as discriminatory. Absolute freedom in this sense excludes the slightest commitment to self-giving! One of the most insightful analyses originates from Hans Urs von Balthasar who asserts:

But whenever the relationship between nature and grace is severed (as happens ... where "faith" and "knowledge" are constructed as opposites), then the whole of worldly being falls under the dominion of "knowledge," and the springs and forces of love immanent in the world are overpowered and finally suffocated by science, technology and cybernetics. The result is a world without women, without children, without reverence for love in poverty and humiliation—a world in which power and the profit-margin are the sole criteria, where the disinterested, the useless, the purposeless is

despised, persecuted and in the end exterminated—a world in which art itself is forced to wear the mask and features of technique.⁹¹

The anthropological impoverishment that this change implies cannot be ignored. The so-called reproductive, sexual, social, economic, and political rights of women are mostly ideologically driven, often setting the stage for men and women to desire a gift *for* themselves instead of making a gift *of* themselves.⁹² The root of contemporary ideology breeds the negation of things eternal, together with a metaphysical dimension of the human person as man and woman.⁹³ Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI argues that the order of creation contains language that, if held in disdain, can destroy human beings by creating a false sense of freedom

⁹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London: Sheed & Ward; Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1968), 114–15.

⁹² This ideology was generated in the 1950s within the context of the feminist movements and pro-homosexual activism, and was developed at universities in the United States with the creation of “Gender Studies” in the 1970s.

⁹³ John Paul II, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World, *Christifideles Laici*, December 30, 1988, 4-5, speaks of people who live as if there was no God, i.e., the last trace of relationship to God has disappeared, marking secularism; in such a world the concept of a divine order disappears, as well as of binding norms or even of prohibitions. Likewise, there is no interest in a metaphysical, even divine, order or design of humanity, of woman and man. Also see: Karl Rahner, David J. Bourke, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. 8 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 75.

and equality.⁹⁴ Hence, the Cultural Revolution is in essence an anthropological revolt.⁹⁵

Reminiscent of the 1993 thriller *L'uomo senza volto* (“The Man without a Face”), today the human face has lost its inner glow, the expression of its proper genius. Human persons in our culture seem to be deprived of a language that can articulate matters of the heart or speak of a home, feasts, memory, future perspectives, and ulterior motives.⁹⁶ Ignacio Sanna has coined the description of the neuronal and on-line human person and likens him or her to a chimera, robot, and photocopy—without natural, cultural, and, we can add, religious identity.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ See, e.g., Benedict XVI, Christmas greetings to the members of the Roman Curia and Prelature, December 22, 2008; also his Address during the visit to the Federal Parliament in the Berlin Reichstag Building, September 22, 2011.

⁹⁵ Michele Giulio Masciarelli, “Antropologia e mariologia dopo il Vaticano II. Come dire il mistero dell’uomo alla luce della teologia mariana,” *Theotokos* 21, no. 1 (2013): 129–67), esp. 140–153.

⁹⁶ Cf. Zygmunt Baumann, *From Pilgrim to Tourist—or a Short History of Identity*, 28. Available at: <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/tourist/Baumann-pilgrim-tourist.pdf>.

⁹⁷ Ignazio Sanna, *L'identità aperta: Il cristiano e la questione antropologica* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2006), 116–188. Already in 1954, Fr. Joseph Kentenich, founder of the international Schoenstatt Work, pointed to the same pathology. See Joseph Kentenich, *Maria, Mutter und Erzieherin. Eine angewandte Mariologie* (Vallendar: Schoenstatt Verlag, 1973), 340, translated in Jonathan Niehaus, ed. *Schoenstatt Covenant Spirituality* (Waukesha, WI: Lithoprint, 1992), 80.

How are we to respond to these signs of the time? We recall that Paul VI encouraged Mariology to contribute to the human sciences and contemporary ethos. Mary of Nazareth is the most human of all human beings because God's plan reached perfection in her. Her person and mission point to authentic freedom, beauty and harmony, a fruit of the law of the gift sustaining the divine-human covenant. Our Lady appears thus as a point of intersection between the vertical and horizontal dimensions of human existence. As the woman of the covenant she personifies the culture of encounter—proposed by Pope Francis as a remedy for today's disorder. Could it be that the feminine genius in our time is called upon to contribute to a culture of encounter? Woman's maternal and relational structure connects her—as we have seen—to the covenant, God's chosen way of encounter!

V. Educational Considerations

It seems fitting that our discourse on the anthropological aspects of Mariology and their application to the vocation and mission of woman be given further attention, in view of the formation of the feminine genius. The good news has to reach women and men with a language appealing to them. Speaking to members of the Mariological Society of America, I am confident to have found allies for this noble mission. Together, we need to ask what *intelligible language* are we obliged to learn and speak in order more prolifically to present Our Lady as exemplar and teacher of the feminine genius? The ultimate and most persuasive attraction, I maintain, stands with those women who have accepted their gift and, in its strength, succeed in being Mary for our time. Allow me to point to a few areas—albeit by far not

exhaustive—where our sensitivity and devotion could help bring to light that which already exists as a germ in women of today!⁹⁸

- Contemporary culture is what we breathe and what moves us; it is also the culture that educates us. We must get to know its force and influence on our being and actions.⁹⁹ The core program of Christian education and formation consists in embracing the principle that the masculine and feminine genius are meant for service (for washing feet) and not for seeking power or self-fulfillment. Its neglect implies a considerable anthropological and spiritual deficiency to the human person, as well as to the relationship between men and women.¹⁰⁰ A holistic anthropology must pay attention to both male and female gender construction and overcome the

⁹⁸ For a more comprehensive approach to many of the following points, see Prudence Allen, R.S.M., “Mulieris Dignitatem, Twenty Years Later: An Overview of the Document and Challenges,” *Ave Maria Law Review* (2009): Part VIII; available at: <http://legacy.avearialaw.edu/lr/assets/articles/ALMR.v8i1.allen.pdf>.

⁹⁹ The new world culture, e.g., tends to exclude from its language the words and concepts of mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister, spouse, complementarity, disinterested giving, love, communion, covenant, life sacrifice, and many other concepts of Judeo-Christian humanity. See Peeters, *Gender*, 297.

¹⁰⁰ See MD 19; CCC 2337.

polarization created by some representatives of women's studies and critical feminist thought.¹⁰¹

- The decision “to live above the dictates of the culture, needs to be seen for what it is—a radical alternative lifestyle.”¹⁰² The task of women to foster awareness of and thrive in their dignity and vocation is a foremost personal and spiritual endeavor. But one she cannot do alone!¹⁰³
- When Adam saw Eve he considered her a suitable partner! Women of postmodernity likewise deserve and long to be appreciated and respected for the gift

¹⁰¹ Ursula King, “Gender and the Study of Religion,” in *Religion and Gender*, ed. U. King (Oxford, UK: Cambridge; USA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 6.

¹⁰² Melinda Tankard Reist, *Dealing Girls a Raw and Racy Deal* (Perth, Australia, March 21, 2007; published at <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles>).

¹⁰³ The relationship between family and work, and the conviction that the contribution of woman and man together is necessary in every field, is a call whose realization still leaves much to be desired. If we, e.g., continue to insist on the integration of women into a business-driven world that does not allow for their dedication to the family, we prevent women from contributing their unique share to the formation of humanity. Much needs to be done concerning sound media education; women can and should prepare themselves for positions of responsibility and creativity in the media, not in conflict with or imitation of masculine roles but by impressing their own "genius" on their work and professional activity.

they embody.¹⁰⁴ Fathers and husbands play a key role in the development of a woman's gift!

- In MC 57, Paul VI teaches that Marian devotion leads to growth in divine grace and holiness. This is an invitation extended to all of us to offer or direct women to authentic spiritual formation in the school of Mary.¹⁰⁵
- Where is the self-gift taught if not in the family? Its educational effect on the child begins in the mother's womb. But woman's role in the rest of the formation process is just as important.¹⁰⁶ If the royal priesthood is entrusted to women, then the Christian home becomes the school for fostering the royal attitude of moral and spiritual integrity of each family member.
- A culture of encounter cannot exist without respecting and welcoming the feminine genius. It

¹⁰⁴ The question whether or not every woman automatically has the feminine genius is yet to be answered. At the same time, our deliberations on the feminine genius cannot leave aside the equally important reflection on the genius of man. There appears to be a root ontological aspect of man's identity in his being beneficent (giving good gifts) and benevolent (willing good gifts), donating spiritually and materially for the good of those within his sphere of influence.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. MD 19.

¹⁰⁶ Work must be done to provide training programs for lay leaders, women, youth, and families in the areas of marriage preparation and cultural projects that can present the truth, goodness, and beauty of Christian anthropology.

appears that woman's gift of "prophecy" is not yet fully listened to within the Church. For this to be fruitful, however, women need to adhere in conscious loyalty to the uniqueness of their femininity and of their particular mission compared to that of men and of the ordained ministry.¹⁰⁷

- Women deprived or depriving themselves of their genius are an impoverishment to humanity. Whoever supports this maneuver becomes objectively guilty argues John Paul II; he included the *Confession of Sins against the Dignity of Women* on the Day of Pardon during the Jubilee Year (March 12, 2000).¹⁰⁸ Every woman in turn must work to overcome her tendency to possess the gift entrusted to her. Thus, we are all invited to acknowledge and amend

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Kerry Alys Robinson, "Opening Doors: Women in Dialogue with the Vatican," *America* 209, No. 12 (October 28, 2013): 15–20. The author asks: "Must leadership in each and every instance require ordination? For symbolic reasons alone appointments to leadership positions in the Church would be stunning, but also the decisions would reflect how much the Church stands to benefit from such perspective and expertise. Strategies for evangelization would be significantly strengthened by the input of women."

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Klarstellungen. Zur Prüfung der Geister* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1971), 98.

wrongdoing, while at the same time we gratefully acknowledge God's gift to each and every one.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Three times a day church bells around the world invite us to call to mind the "fullness of time" (Gal 4:4). The *Angelus* prayer serves well as a summary and conclusion of our pondering on the feminine genius.

The Angel of the Lord declared unto *Mary*:

- God's Gift of his Love! *Mary* is "full of grace" (*kecharitomene*).¹¹⁰
- God's plan of salvation included her as the protagonist of the New Covenant.
- Her vocation as virgin and mother of the Lord embraces and nourishes all of humanity.

Mary's fiat expresses:

- her personal and feminine gift in return;
- her readiness to cooperate in the plan of salvation;
- the acceptance of her mission as Woman of the Covenant.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, "Warum ich als Frau in der Kirche bleibe," in *Auch Wir sind die Kirche: Frauen in der Kirche zwischen Tradition und Aufbruch*, ed. Veronika Straub and Anne Jensen (München: J. Pfeiffer, 1991), 113.

¹¹⁰ RM 8.

By praying the Angelus we recall “indeed a high point among all the gifts of grace conferred in the history of man and of the universe.”¹¹¹ It is for this reason that Paul VI happily confirmed that “the Angelus does not need to be revised.” He recommended that we “continue its traditional recitation wherever and whenever possible.”¹¹² We do so, mindful that the Angel of the Lord also seeks *Mary in our time*, one who accepts and embraces God’s gift to her and in the strength of her feminine genius continues to safeguard God’s covenant by giving birth to and serving Christ in and around her.

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¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² MC 41.