



Mary, the Perfect Woman

At the beginning of this last school year, three young women posed a question that has dominated my thoughts and really my entire prayer life ever since. They wanted to know why young men are viewed as magnanimous or chivalrous for entering the seminary right after high school while young women are seen as overly religious or bluntly, a little wired for entering the convent at eighteen. Now this question can be answered in many ways and when speaking about it with some of the Sisters I received a variety of opinions. Some felt it was because a seminary is seen as more of a transition, discerning phase while the convent is seen as a more permanent step, one that has already been discerned. Others thought that the seminary is perhaps just seen as college and not necessarily a “life change.” Additionally, the religious life is very misunderstood by society and even much of the Catholic society. The priest and his life are more visible than a sister hidden in her chapel or cell. Now these two ways of life are of course not opposed but work together with the laity for the good of the whole, therefore I think there is more behind this question. The key difference is perhaps not priesthood and religious life but male and female and I think these three girls hit on something which is at the core of many of the problems in today’s society: What is the true role of the woman? Is she to be a simple homemaker, yielding to her husband in all things, asking no questions except what he wants for dinner or is she to demand her rights, wanting to be equal not only in dignity but in all areas to the point of denying her own physical gifts and makeup? Well, as with all things Catholic and virtuous, the answer lies in the middle and tonight I’d like to examine this debate.

To begin, any good study of the nature of womanhood must look at Eve and Mary, Our Blessed Mother. These are the two women who were created perfectly and came into this world without sin. And so this is where we will begin. Eve, of course, was a perfect woman in an unfallen world and by perfect I mean whole, one of integrity, or completely ordered to her purpose. She marred her perfection however, and now we have a fallen world, God’s “Plan B” if you will. Mary, in turn, was redeemed before her conception making her the New Eve, a perfect woman in a fallen world. I’d like to look to some of the similarities between Eve and Mary in order to form a

view of this womanly perfection so I’ll set the stage by reading the second creation story. (Gen 2:7, 15-25)

To begin with, we see that Adam was created first in a wild land and he was given the task to tame it and name the animals. Eve was created second in a land that was already tamed and named and ordered. Adam was created from dirt and Eve from a living being. Adam is given a task, to tame and name, and a command, not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden, but this still leaves him unsatisfied. He seeks companionship. That is until he sees Eve and then announces “At Last...” What’s interesting is that from the very beginning Eve seems to be held in greater honor than Adam. She is equal in dignity with him, for she was taken from his rib and not his foot or head, but there is something special about her. She is created last in a world where order is very important. She was created from a being and for another’s happiness, to be something, not do something. While Adam tames and seeks, Eve is made to be a suitable partner and receives Adam’s desire.

Before Eve even came into existence, Adam was given a job, a duty, to tame creation. He was also given the physical strength to carry it out. As a result men are stronger than women. This also shows that men are oriented to their tasks or jobs. What they do is very important to men. They ask themselves “how.” How does this work? How do I do this? Who can I use this rock to break a coconut? This is why men are apt not to read the instructions or ask for directions. They want to figure it out themselves. You might remember brothers or nephews taking things apart just to see how they work. This is why men like tools – “how can I use this hammer to accomplish my task?” Men are also very concrete. They see black and white for the most part, very objectively, not taking into account emotion. We see this in God’s command to Adam – eat the fruit and you will die!



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Now women do not stand in contrast to this task-orientation of men, but their orientation is a different “shade” if you will. They are different sides of the same coin. Eve was made to be a suitable partner for Adam and therefore women are more focused on relationships. Just like men were given the strength to accomplish their tasks, women are given beauty to attract. She might not have big muscles, but she doesn’t have ugly facial hair either! Now the three major relationships of a woman’s life are those of daughter, spouse and mother. She first finds herself as a daughter, learning how to relate with others in the basic unit of society, the family, and then moves on to spouse and mother as she matures. This relationship orientation was also very true for Mary. Her first and foremost relationship was with God, and unlike Eve, she stays faithful to this. Her interior purity and beauty was such that it attracted God Himself. She truly was the obedient daughter to God the Father, faithful and loving spouse to God the Holy Spirit and mother to the Incarnate Son of God. However, she was also daughter to Sts. Joachim and Anne, spouse of St. Joseph and mother of Jesus. I’m not implying that she has a split-personality but being perfect or whole; her natural relationships were correctly ordered to her supernatural ones. And for women, this is the major challenge of our lives. Male or female, our relationship with God must come first, but women have this pull to our earthly relationships. Our children or spouses cannot become our idols, but they are to help us in our search for holiness as we help them in theirs.

Now while men ask “how” women ask “who, what, when, where and why.” This is why women are more prone to gossip and why the average woman speaks 20,000 words a day versus 10,000 spoken by the average man. We all know from experience that this is very true and to be quite honest, I’m surprised that women only speak twice as much as men. And I know my dad, having a wife and five daughters, is surprised as well. But why do women speak more? They seem to take a more holistic view of things, seeing with body and soul, more subjectively with emotion and less concretely. If God were to give the command about the fruit to Eve she would have wondered why? Is it poisoned? Who made it bad? Who has the scoop on the tree? Who can I tell about the poisonous tree? Have you ever wondered why Eve was at the tree in the first place? I bet she was trying to figure it out when the devil showed up! I’ve come to see this holistic view in my teaching. Girls’ handwriting in general is better than boys’. I once had a boy who had horrible

writing and I could barely read it. I spoke with him about it one day and he said “Sister, I can’t help it! Boys write with a different font than girls.” I thought that this was very insightful. I still took five points off of his assignment, because I couldn’t read it, but it was very insightful. Girls have this unconscious thought that their handwriting reflects who they are, or what kind of mood they are in while a boy sees writing only as a means to an end, to get the job done. Women are also more emotional and empathetic than men. We really feel as others feel, or we better show it anyway. This again becomes very clear in a high school hallway. A girl could be dutifully getting her books out of her locker during passing period and if another girl comes up to her all excited because George just asked her to the prom, girl #1 better get excited too, otherwise she just lost a friend! This makes emotional shocks very difficult for women as well. I remember the day Pope Francis was elected. It happened during my sixth hour class so of course we were watching it. The white smoke billowed out of the chimney and then we had to wait before his name was announced. During this wait, the girls were glued to the TV. A papal election is so huge that the girls were overcome with the excitement and anticipation of it all. The boys however were either doing their homework or some were wrestling in the corner. They cared, but they were able to do other things while we waited, like wrestle. I remember thinking that I should probably stop them, but I too am a woman and was to overcome to really care.

We see all of these aspects in their perfection in Mary. She uses her holistic view to praise the Lord during her visit to Elizabeth. Luke records the Magnificat: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my Savior.” It is a great prayer of praise that rises from the depths of Mary’s spirit. She also uses her focus on detail to help St. Joseph when he is asked to lead the Holy Family. Take for instance the Flight into Egypt. The angel appears to St. Joseph telling him of Herod’s plot to kill baby Jesus. Now have you ever wondered why Joseph? There was the Son of God and Our Blessed Mother, but the angel goes to Joseph! Why? Because Joseph’s role is to figure out “how” not the “who, what, when, where and why.” Joseph’s emotions would not have grasped his heart as tightly as Mary’s did hers. If the angel would have come to Mary she



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probably would have been too worried about those other poor mothers to act quickly. If she is anything like the women in my family she would have inundated the angel with questions like what about the others? When are we to leave? How long are we going to stay? Do I need to pack sheets? Far from being a defect, this high emotional state and notice of details is also why we can call Mary the Queen of Martyrs. She takes this same concern and holistic love with her as she witnesses the rejection, torture and death of her Son. This perfect womanly heart withstood the emotional shock of the loss of her only child. Truly a martyr's death supernaturally! And probably any mother could attest that the greatest suffering for a mother's holistic heart is caused directly or indirectly by her children. Whether it is watching them make poor life choices or making good ones for that matter and leaving home or watching her children battle through the struggles of life, suffering seems to go hand in hand with motherhood. Not to say that a father doesn't feel these sufferings as well, but it is going to affect a woman on a more emotional level, more at her core, and will be more all consuming. But on a joyful note, the joys of motherhood affect the woman at her core as well!

We also see Mary's other womanly qualities in the Gospels as well. Take the Wedding Feast at Cana. Mary empathizes with the couple as they run out of wine. Running out of wine back then would have been very embarrassing, but in all honesty they were probably on their second or third day of partying and running out of wine would not have been the end of the world. In fact it probably would have been a great signal for everyone to go home! However, as insignificant as it might have been, Mary still feels the couple's embarrassment as her own and simply goes to her Son, "They have no wine." And when speaking to the servants she gives us her last recorded words in the Gospels, "Do whatever He tells you." A great call to obedience for us all and is the very opposite of Eve who leads her husband into disobedience. Now Mary speaks only six times in the Gospels and that in itself is a lesson on silence, but Joseph isn't recorded as speaking at all. And if the average woman speaks twice as much as men, Mary, the perfect woman, speaks six times as much as her husband!

I'd like to return for a moment to Genesis, and the moment when Adam sees Eve for the first time. He sees her and exclaims "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman for out of her man this one has been taken." So

Adam sees Eve and gives her his desire, his seeking ends with Eve. His attraction is stimulated by what he sees. Eve, in turn, hears Adam's "at last" and receives his desire. She is attracted by what she hears. So Adam gives and Eve receives, and when this is expressed physically, new life is brought forth. Their union is made fruitful *in Eve*. Adam's self worth lies in the exterior – how to do things, work, using things. Eve's self worth lies in being acceptable for relationship because relationship is how she bring forth *life*. Now Mary hears God's Word at the Annunciation and she receives this Word by her obedience, "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word." Through *receiving* God's Word she brings forth life, the Incarnate Son of God. Now her greatest self worth was not found in being acceptable for relationship with Joseph, but for God, the Holy Spirit. She was made acceptable for this relationship by her interior beauty, by her vow of virginity. It is amazing that precisely through her virginity, she is made fruitful! Now all women, regardless of their vocation are called to these daughter, spouse, and mother relationships. In one vocation it is expressed physically, naturally and in the other it is spiritual, supernatural, but real all the same.

Alice von Hildebrand says "Every woman carries within her a secret, something mysterious and sacred." This ability to produce life is the sacredness of women. It makes her very God like. God touches the child by breathing in a soul within the mother's womb. Her body has been touched by God and is therefore sacred. This is what makes women fairer and perhaps the most honorable part of creation. I also believe this is why Mary is pictured with a veil. A veil points to consecration or being set apart. Brides wear veils because they are set apart for their husbands. Chalice are veiled because they are only for the Blood of Christ. Sisters wear veils because of their consecration to Christ. And women used to wear veils because *they* are sacred, not lesser.

When women forget this honor the greatest evils are allowed to wreck havoc on the world. Instead of bringing forth life, mothers want to destroy it. Instead of receiving from the man, she rejects and contracepts. "I'll accept what gives me



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pleasure but no more.” Instead of making herself acceptable for relationship she makes herself acceptable to be used. It’s unfortunate that many women will do anything to have the feeling of a relationship. Instead of veiling what is sacred, she exposes herself for all to see. Women must recognize their honor and not reject it by making themselves men. We are not men. We complete them and they us; be it a human man or a divine and human one. We must all, man or woman, look to Our Lady, because it is only through her nurturing guidance and womanly influence that we will learn our value. It is also a call to look to St. Joseph, how we related to Our Lady in their marriage, but I’ll leave that for tomorrow. Let us end with a prayer begging Mary’s intercession to enlighten the women of our age to see the truth about themselves.

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