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## **Womanhood in Light of the Theology of the Body**

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WOMANHOOD IN LIGHT OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

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For Emily McCall

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## Introduction

The sexual revolution involved an increase in casual attitudes toward the meaning of one's body and sexuality. With the new availability of contraception, people were able to engage in sexual activity for pleasure without the potential consequence of pregnancy. Psychologist Wilhelm Reich believed that a casual attitude toward sex would provide more happiness for people than Catholic limitations on sexuality. In response to this, from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Pope Saint John Paul II gave a series of talks that proclaimed the goodness of the body. The pope presented the idea that sex was meant to be a radical self-gift of two persons to each other, as opposed to merely a pleasurable, casual activity.<sup>1</sup> Given the goodness of human sexuality, and the fact that sexual activity is experienced through the body, it follows that the human body is unequivocally good. John Paul II thus offered an account of the goodness of human sexuality and the body from a Catholic theological perspective.<sup>2</sup>

According to John Paul II, when the man sees the woman for the first time and exclaims, "this one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,"<sup>3</sup> the man is saying that through the woman's body, he recognizes her humanity. In other words, the body reveals the person.<sup>4</sup> Since men and women are made in the image and likeness of God, which means that they are made to be like God, it follows that men's and women's bodies reveal not only realities about their personhood, but about God Himself.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Waldstein, "Introduction" in *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006). 163.

<sup>3</sup> Gn 2:23.

<sup>4</sup> TOB, 164.

<sup>5</sup> Gn 1:27.

The differences between men's and women's bodies necessarily reveal that there are differences between manhood and womanhood, and that God reveals different things about Himself through each. In reference to the human body, John Paul II states,

Thus, in this dimension, a primordial *sacrament* is constituted, understood as a sign that efficaciously *transmits in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden in God from eternity...*The sacrament...is constituted...through his [mankind's] "visible" masculinity and femininity. The body...is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.<sup>6</sup>

The body is thus a sacrament, as it is a visible sign of supernatural truths about humanity and God. Given the bodily differences between men and women, the body reveals supernatural truths about masculinity and femininity. This thesis will focus specifically on the sacramental meaning of a woman's body.

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<sup>6</sup> TOB, 203.

## Chapter 1: Woman and Her Genius

### The Definition of Woman

Given modern society's complicated views regarding sex, one must provide a definition of woman before engaging in a project that ponders her mystery. For this, one can turn to Abigail Favale's careful language on the subject. She states, "a woman is a human whose body is organized around the potential to gestate new life."<sup>7</sup> A human ultimately has this potential if her body is designed to be a source of large gametes (eggs). Gamete production is the basis of discerning a person's sex, because the differing gametes correspond to either the male or female role in reproduction.<sup>8</sup> She argues that even if a woman has had a hysterectomy, has hormonal imbalances, is infertile, etc., and, for whatever reason, she is not able to (or chooses not to) actualize her potential of physical motherhood, her potential to do so indicates that she is a woman. The same can be said of a man, in that his potentiality to produce small gametes (sperm) is what indicates that he is a man.

Critics argue that there are people who are, from birth, not clearly male or female and thus cannot be included in the Theology of the Body, since the sex binary is its foundation.<sup>9</sup> However, even if one's sex is not immediately discernable, the person is always either male or female; there has never been a case in which a person is capable of producing both large and small gametes.<sup>10</sup> Even in the rare cases of ovotesticular disease, a congenital condition of sexual development (CCSD) in which the person has both ovarian and testicular tissue, humans always either produce only large or small gametes, and are thus always either male or female.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory* (San Francisco California: Ignatius Press, 2022), 120-121.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 128-129.

<sup>9</sup> Katie Grimes, "Theology of Whose Body? Sexual Complementarity, Intersex Conditions, and La Virgen de Guadalupe," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 32, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 83-84.

<sup>10</sup> Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 129.

Since sex is defined through potentiality and not actuality, the Theology of the Body applies to all human beings. Any theological reflection on the characteristics of a particular sex thus includes all people of that sex, because a condition that interferes with the typical bodily presentation or experience that occurs as a result of the fall cannot change God's intended design for the sexed body. Furthermore, while God did not intend for people to suffer from CCSDs, people with these conditions are integral members of the diverse body of Christ.<sup>12</sup> With the clarification that all people, and, especially in the context of this project, all women, are included in the Theology of the Body, we can proceed to reflect on the spiritual realities that the sexed body reveals.

### **Man and Woman: Equality and Distinction**

From the beginning, God created men and women to be equal in dignity and importance, and also united. In the first creation account, the author of Genesis states that "God created mankind in his image and his likeness, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them."<sup>13</sup> This verse affirms men and women's equality, and also their distinctiveness. Since the image of God is defined as male and female, both men and women have an equal role to play in revealing the fullness of the image of God through their union. The author's deliberate distinction between male and female, however, indicates that there is a fundamental difference between the two.

In the second creation account, there is also evidence of equality and difference between the male and female. There is not explicit mention of man and woman being made in the image of God, but their communion suggests that they are made in His image and likeness.<sup>14</sup> When the

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 137-139.

<sup>13</sup> Gn 1:27.

<sup>14</sup> TOB 1:9 162

man refers to the woman as “flesh of my flesh and bones of my bones”<sup>15</sup> he recognizes that they are of the same essence, which means that they are equal in this sense.<sup>16</sup> While they share the same essence, the author’s recognition that one is “man” and the other is “woman” makes clear that there is a difference between the two, just as the differing titles of each sex did in the first account. The second account also describes the woman as being created from the rib of the man,<sup>17</sup> which serves as another indicator of their equality amidst their differences, since her being taken from the side points to companionship rather than domination.

After the fall, when the world becomes disordered, the author of Genesis explicitly states that God addressed the man and the woman separately,<sup>18</sup> which emphasizes that their separation is not what God intended. Furthermore, the fact that the spiritual shift of the fall prompts the separation of the feminine and masculine demonstrates that femininity and masculinity are ultimately issues of spiritual significance.<sup>19</sup> The fall creates a rupture between man and God and also within the male-female relationship. Through this corruption, humans rejected their likeness to God, as God is Perfect Love. However, they continued to be His image, as Evdokimov states, “After the Fall, we rejected our likeness, but we did not cease being ‘in the image.’<sup>20</sup> Since the fall is marked by a rupture of the relationship between God and humanity and man and woman, all vocations, whether it be single, married, celibate, or religious life, are aimed toward restoring these relationships, and therefore restoring the human’s likeness to God. We can thus look to

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<sup>15</sup> Gn 2:23.

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 8:4.

<sup>17</sup> Gn 2:24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:16-17.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Evdokimov, *Woman and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, trans. Anthony P Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994), 142-146.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

marriage, which restores the male-female relationship, to reflect on the similarities and differences among men and women.

In his letter to the Ephesians, Saint Paul reflects on the equality and differences among men and women in the context of married life. He describes Christ as the head of the Church, and the Church as the body of Christ, and extends this to husbands being representatives of Christ, and women of the Church.<sup>21</sup> While describing Christ as the head of the Church makes clear that He is the source of the Church's work, this metaphor ultimately affirms the equality between the two. Both the head and the body are equally necessary and important in order for the same organism to function. As the quotation attributed to St. Teresa of Ávila goes, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours."<sup>22</sup> Even though the Church is rooted in Christ, the members of His body are the ones who actualize His ministry. Both the head in the body thus play an equal role in the salvation of the world.

This equal importance of Christ and the Church applies to the husband and wife, as their representatives. St. Paul starts his reflection on marriage by saying that both husbands and wives should submit to each other in order to honor God, which establishes their equal dignity, and then describes the particular roles of each in correspondence to the roles of Christ and the Church. While husbands are called to be the heads of their wives as Christ is to the Church, wives are called to be submissive to their husbands as the Church is to Christ.<sup>23</sup> The word submission, when broken down, means "under the mission." Women are thus called to be under the mission of their husbands as the Church is under Christ's mission. This can be taken as a

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<sup>21</sup> Eph 5:21-33.

<sup>22</sup> Pat Marrin, Kirby Hoberg, and Clare McCallan, "Christ Has No Body on Earth but Yours," National Catholic Reporter, accessed November 27, 2022, <https://www.ncronline.org/spirituality/soul-seeing/soul-seeing/christ-has-no-body-earth-yours>.

<sup>23</sup> Eph 5:21-33.

statement of degradation toward women when looked at alone. However, when one considers that, as representatives of Christ, husbands are called to give their lives for their wives, it becomes clear that there is an equal submission between the husband and the wife. Paul Evdokimov states, “a wife is subject to her husband in the way that the Church is subject to Christ...only when the husband *truly* represents the Lord, and is willing to give himself for his wife.”<sup>24</sup> There is equality in the husband and wife’s self-emptying, yet the way that they give themselves to one another are distinct.

These similarities and differences found in the married couple’s role are clearly post-fall, because the willingness to die for the other would not have been a thought to the original couple. Nonetheless, while the fall corrupted the human mentality to go from being wholly united to “I am mine and he is his,”<sup>25</sup> the mutual submission found in married couples and spiritually nuptial relationships redeems this adulteration of relationships. The Song of Songs, which is a poem that is symbolic of the marital relationship between man and woman and between God and humanity, points to this reality, as the woman in the poem says, “I belong to my lover, and he belongs to me.”<sup>26</sup>

An additional way to understand the relationship between men and women is what Angelo Cardinal Scola refers to as “asymmetrical reciprocity.”<sup>27</sup> Men and women, as sexed persons, point to the existence of the other, and thus exist in relation to each other. Each reveal “a different way of being a person” to the other, which means that the various relationship

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<sup>24</sup> Evdokimov, *Woman and Salvation*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>26</sup> Song of Sg 6:3.

<sup>27</sup> Angelo Cardinal Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás, (Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 92.

statuses between men and women are reciprocal.<sup>28</sup> However, the “otherness” that is integral to these relationships demonstrates that they are asymmetrical.<sup>29</sup> While the male and female exist in a reciprocal relationship, they are not “two halves of a lost whole;”<sup>30</sup> the other always remains as the “other,” and there is a constant revelation of this otherness that exists in the plurality of possible male-female relationships.<sup>31</sup> In the unity of man and woman, they realize the image and likeness of God in its fullness, but this is only possible because of their asymmetrical, reciprocal relationship, in which they each continue to exist as individuals: “even in the ‘one flesh’ union, the ‘other’ remains ‘other.’”<sup>32</sup> These persistent and integral differences between men and women is what ultimately allows for their relationship to be fruitful,<sup>33</sup> and allows them to participate in the mystery of the union of the distinct Persons of the Trinity.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, one can see that while men and women are ultimately made for relationship with each other, and that they have equally important roles in that they each exist as the “other,” the mysteries of masculinity and femininity continue to exist independently amidst their union on a physical and spiritual level.

While modern man may be receptive to the equal dignity and importance of men and women, the idea of their differences can be difficult to accept, since they run the risk of imposing limits on each sex. The distinctions between men and women are complicated and must be thought of in general terms so as not to disregard the individuality and complexity of each human heart. While there are patterns that can be categorized into being typical of men or women. No two men nor women are the same; there will always be particular differences. However, given

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 103.

that Catholics consider the Bible to be the Word of God, the idea that there are differences between men and women, which is clear throughout scripture, must be legitimate, and deserve attention.

### **A Focus on Women**

Since man and woman are each integral to realizing the fullness of the image of God,<sup>35</sup> there is always more to discuss and ponder in reference to femininity and masculinity. As beings who are made for each other, as revealed through their bodies, “femininity in some way finds itself before masculinity, and masculinity confirms itself through femininity.”<sup>36</sup> However, since men and women, even in their union, maintain their ‘otherness,’<sup>37</sup> this ‘otherness’ of each sex, in itself, deserves contemplation. With the reverent acknowledgement that femininity points to masculinity, this project will focus primarily on women and their privileged gifts, which reveal divine realities.

Proposing that certain gifts are manifested in a privileged way to each sex runs the risk of thinking of people stereotypically. Lisa Cotter makes the distinction between “stereotypical” and “typical.” Stereotypes categorize people into extreme and precise expectations and disregard their individuality. However, one can still recognize that certain gifts are common to each sex, while acknowledging that there is not a typical way in which men and women experience them and live them out.<sup>38</sup> It is therefore possible to recognize patterns of each sex while still accounting for the uniqueness of each person.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>36</sup> TOB, 166.

<sup>37</sup> Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 95.

<sup>38</sup> Lisa Cotter, *Reveal the Gift: Living the Feminine Genius* (West Chester, PA: Ascension, 2022), 17.

A term that describes the unique capacities of women is “feminine genius.” Pope Saint John Paul II states,

The Church gives thanks *for all the manifestations of the feminine "genius"* which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all *the fruits of feminine holiness*.<sup>39</sup>

While this quotation reveals John Paul II’s reverence for the feminine genius, he does not ever define it.<sup>40</sup> This fact in itself demonstrates the complexity of the term, which indicates that it is not meant to impose stereotypes, but rather honor the individuality of each woman. However, Sister Prudence Allen offers a definition that provides clarity to the concept. She states, “The phrase ‘genius of women’ refers to a way of being, acting, and loving in the world, which manifests a unique creativity in human relationships. Women’s acts of genius reveal a particular feminine sensitivity.”<sup>41</sup> This definition is broad and is inclusive of the various ways that women manifest their feminine genius. While it would be impossible to list all of the charisms that a woman possesses as a result of her genius, Cotter points to receptivity, maternity, sensitivity, intuition, and generosity as examples of feminine gifts.<sup>42</sup> All of these attributes ultimately flow from a woman’s underlying “capacity for the other,”<sup>43</sup> to which her body immediately points.

One must emphasize the diversity with which women will live out these gifts. A woman may prioritize providing maternal care to the family she was born into, friends, students, etc.,

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<sup>39</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, August 15, 1988, (sec. 30), [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html).

<sup>40</sup> Lisa Cotter, *Living the Feminine Genius*, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Sister Prudence Allen, RSM, *The Concept of Woman: Volume III: The Search for Communion of Persons, 1500-2015* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 475.

<sup>42</sup> Cotter, *Living the Feminine Genius*, 16.

<sup>43</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and Angelo Amato, *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), 13. [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20040731\\_collaboration\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040731_collaboration_en.html).

over having children of her own. She may prioritize being generous with her time and talent over her money. She may also identify with certain gifts more than others. Regardless of the degree and manner that women live out the feminine charisms of their geniuses, one can still understand them to be typical of women.

While these gifts are intimately related to a woman's genius, as seen in her "capacity for the other," Cotter emphasizes that they are "not exclusive to women."<sup>44</sup> In fact, one should think of these charisms primarily as human gifts, of which women are the privileged representatives. After reflecting on the importance of feminine values, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger emphasizes the idea that they do not exclude men, as he states,

It is appropriate however to recall that the feminine values mentioned here are above all human values... it is only because women are more immediately attuned to these values that they are the reminder and the privileged sign of such values. But, in the final analysis, man or woman, is destined to be "for the other."<sup>45</sup>

With this being said, one can see that in addition to the idea that women live out the gifts of their geniuses in different ways, men are also capable of and called to these "human" gifts. However, one can gain an understanding of these charisms when pondering the mystery of women, who are the privileged signs of them. Women's diverse, privileged representations of these gifts can be seen in patterns throughout history, especially in many of the female saints, which Cotter reflects on throughout her book, *Reveal the Gift: Living the Feminine Genius*. This project will reflect on how a woman's body points to the gifts of her feminine genius, which are ultimately "human gifts."

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<sup>44</sup> Cotter, *Living the Feminine Genius*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> Ratzinger and Amato, *Letter to the Bishops*, 14.

## Chapter 2: The Body of a Woman in Light of the Theology of the Body

In his essay “Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas,” Fr. Donald Calloway reflects on the four main points of John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, which are that the body is a gift, the body is nuptial, the body is fruitful, and the body is essential.<sup>46</sup> This chapter will follow a similar model, but will focus specifically on the ways in which a woman’s body reveals these four aspects of the Theology of the Body. After establishing that a woman’s body is a gift, one will be able to see how women live out the gift of their bodies through nuptiality and fruitfulness. Then, we will reflect on the idea that a woman’s feminine body is essential to her person. For each point, there will be a discussion of John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, with reflections on how it specifically applies to women and reveals their feminine charisms.

### A Woman’s Body is a Gift

God, in His infinitude, does not gain anything from creation. All that he created, then, is a gift, and “every creature bears within it the sign of this original and fundamental gift.”<sup>47</sup> Human beings, as made in His image, are central to His “plan of sheer goodness.”<sup>48</sup> John Paul II states, “man appears in creation as the one who has received the world as a gift, and vice versa, one can also say that the world has received man as gift.”<sup>49</sup> The genesis of the human thus makes apparent that God’s purpose in creating the world is one of sheer donation, and it is through his creation that the element of “gift” becomes a reality. The other living beings, *animalia*,<sup>50</sup> could

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<sup>46</sup> Donald H. Calloway, “Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas,” in *The Virgin Mary and Theology of the Body*, ed. Donald H. Calloway (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2007), 45.

<sup>47</sup> TOB, 180.

<sup>48</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from the Editio Typica* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), par 1.

<sup>49</sup> TOB, 181.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 159.

not be conscious of the donative reality of the world in the way that the human could, as a being made in the image of God.

Despite God giving the world to the human, he ultimately realizes, through his body, that he is alone as the only human in the world,<sup>51</sup> and he is thus incapable of experiencing the relationship that he is made for on earth. The author of Genesis emphasizes the human's original solitude when God presents him with the animals, and none of them are a suitable help to him.<sup>52</sup> John Paul II states, "None of these beings (*animalia*), in fact, offer man the basic conditions that make it possible to exist in a relation of reciprocal gift."<sup>53</sup> Since the original human could not live out the union that he was made for, God puts him to sleep, and he ultimately wakes up as "male" and "female."<sup>54</sup> The creation of the two sexes allows for them to experience a *communio personarum*, or communion of persons.<sup>55</sup> He can thus only experience the full meaning of being a gift with the creation of another being who is like him, namely, woman.

When she is created, the woman immediately realizes that she herself is a gift because she is given and received as a gift. God not only creates her to be a gift to the man, but the man makes clear that he is receiving her as a gift, as he shows joy for the first time in the second creation account through his exclamation,<sup>56</sup> "this one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."<sup>57</sup> While the male and female ultimately receive each other as a gift, the author of Genesis emphasizes that the woman is a gift to the man through the man's exclamation. She is

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 152.

<sup>52</sup> Gn. 2:20.

<sup>53</sup> TOB 181.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 162.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>57</sup> Gn. 2:23.

the one who makes him realize the fullness of his grace-filled essence.<sup>58</sup> John Paul II reflects on the implications of this experience of the first woman. She realizes that as an embodied gift, she was willed for herself, and through this, she “comes to the innermost depth of her own person...the whole dignity of the gift is ensured through the offer of what she is in the whole reality of her body and her sex, of her femininity.”<sup>59</sup> Since the man recognizes, through her body, that the woman is a gift from God,<sup>60</sup> the author of Genesis emphasizes that a woman’s body, which reveals her femininity, is a gift to the cosmos.<sup>61</sup>

Despite this reality in Genesis, one may have a difficult time understanding that the body of a woman is a gift in the modern world. Simone de Beauvoir pessimistically reflects on the various challenges that women face because of their bodies. She claims that while man’s fertility allows him to remain as an individual, a woman’s fertility keeps her bound to her body, since her offspring attaches to her.<sup>62</sup> Since, for de Beauvoir, “it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal,”<sup>63</sup> women are necessarily always restricted from realizing the fullness of their humanity. The repetitive nature of the woman’s fertility makes it impossible for her to invent and create in order to progress society, and she is thus kept at the level of the animal.<sup>64</sup> Since women are tied to their bodies, de Beauvoir claims that a woman’s body is not a gift, but a burden, which is why she uses words such as “crisis” and “curse” to refer to female fertility.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Katrina J. Zeno, *Discovering the Feminine Genius: Every Woman's Journey* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2010), 32.

<sup>59</sup> TOB 196-197.

<sup>60</sup> Gn. 2:23.

<sup>61</sup> “Cosmos” refers to the totality of creation.

<sup>62</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H. M. Parshley (New York, NY: Knopf, 1983), 22.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 32.

This mentality that a woman's body consists of crises and curses is dominant in the contemporary world. The hormonal birth control methods for women are an exemplar of this mindset. When a woman shuts down her cycle for the purpose of preventing pregnancy, she ultimately rejects the gift of her feminine body;<sup>66</sup> the gift that, in Genesis, the first man had so happily received. While one can understand that it is a burden for women to deal with the demands of their reproductive role, the emphasis on the woman's body being a gift in Genesis affirms the particular gift of the feminine body, and thus, femininity, to the cosmos.

In light of the knowledge that gift is an essential element of humanity, "man cannot come to find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."<sup>67</sup> In other words, man discovers who he is through becoming a gift to others. While the modern world views the demands of a woman's body as a curse to be eliminated, from a Catholic perspective, one can see that while the suffering that women experience is undeniable, the demands of their bodies ultimately invite them to be a total gift. A woman's entire body is designed to receive and nourish others, which is why one can refer to receptivity and generosity as charisms of the feminine genius. Since a person finds himself or herself through a gift of self, one can see that woman discovers that she, herself, is a gift, through her own gift-oriented body, as it immediately reveals itself to be nuptial and fruitful.

### **A Woman's Body is Nuptial**

God reveals men and women as gifts through the original unity of the first couple in Genesis. As noted in the previous section, the first suggestion in the second creation account that

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<sup>66</sup> Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 65.

<sup>67</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution, Vatican Website, December 7, 1965, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html), II.24.

something about God's creation is not good is in reference to the human's solitude.<sup>68</sup> Through the emphasis on the need for communion, "he [God] affirms that, 'alone,' the man does not completely realize this essence. He realizes it only by existing 'with someone'—and... 'for someone.'"<sup>69</sup> The human, alone, realizes that he is made for a nuptial relationship with another one similar to him; there is not a "help" suitable to him among the *animalia*,<sup>70</sup> which emphasizes that unlike other living beings, the relationships between humans have personal significance. The Hebrew word that the author of Genesis uses for "help," "ezer," means "rescuer" or "ally."<sup>71</sup> John Paul II reflects on the meaning of this relationship, as he states, "the concept of 'help' ...expresses...reciprocity in existence, which no other living being could have ensured."<sup>72</sup> The helper, with whom the man will have a nuptial relationship, is ultimately a companion of equal dignity. Only in the reciprocal relationship of the man and woman can they become the fullness of image of God, who is an eternal communion of Persons.<sup>73</sup> As Angelo Cardinal Scola states, "There is not a single man (or woman) who can by himself alone be the whole of man."<sup>74</sup> The masculine and feminine together encompass the human image of God, which means that in their nuptial union, the man and woman reveal the fullness of His image.

The marital act is the most concrete expression of nuptial love for married couples. Women typically tend to value the intimacy that accompanies their sexual experiences more than men,<sup>75</sup> which points to the importance of human relationships in women's lives. The physical

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> TOB, 182.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>71</sup> Hebrew Word Lessons, "Helper: Defining the Ezer Woman," Hebrew Word Lessons, May 25, 2021, <https://hebrewwordlessons.com/2018/05/13/helper-defining-the-ezer-woman/>.

<sup>72</sup> TOB 163.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 7.

<sup>75</sup> Letitia Anne Peplau, "Human Sexuality: How Do Men and Women Differ?" in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12, no. 2 (2003): 37–40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20182831>.

pleasure of intercourse contributes to its unitive meaning. When a couple gives themselves to each other in the marital act, “the pleasure that accompanies it is a genuine perfection of this activity and a means to deepen the couple’s communion with one another.”<sup>76</sup> Just as mystical experiences in prayer aid in bringing one closer to God, the experience of sexual pleasure deepens the bond between the couple.<sup>77</sup> Even if the marital act is not always ecstatic, the complete self-giving of the couple to each other just as they are is, above all, a recalling of the covenantal relationship that they established with their wedding vows,<sup>78</sup> and is therefore a profoundly intimate experience. The intimacy of the couple in the marital act is nuptial because it allows them to encounter the mystery of the other, and also realize that their union is only possible because of their differences, which allows them to imitate Trinitarian love.<sup>79</sup>

While one might be able to grasp the concept of nuptiality in light of its physical reality between married couples, the nuptiality of one’s body is also a spiritual reality. Fr. Donald Calloway states, “the body is meant to be given away to another in spousal love, either through sacramental marriage or through the choice to respond to God’s call of consecrating one’s body to the Lord through the vow of chastity.”<sup>80</sup> This is why Scola explains that in both states of the Christian life, marriage and virginity, “possession in detachment” is integral to the nuptial meaning of the body.<sup>81</sup> There can only truly be love between a couple if they exist detached from each other, so that they can welcome the other as mystery, and thus participate in the Mystery of the Trinitarian communion, which consists of distinct Persons.<sup>82</sup> While men and women who

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<sup>76</sup> Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue*, 68.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, 69.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, 68-69.

<sup>79</sup> Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*,

<sup>80</sup> Calloway, “The Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas,” 57.

<sup>81</sup> Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 105-106.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*.

forego marriage do not live out the nuptial meaning of their bodies through their sexuality, the service that they partake in with their bodies results in a spiritually nuptial reality. John Paul II emphasizes the point that those called to vocations to priesthood or religious life live out the nuptial meaning of their bodies, as he states, “If a man or a woman is capable of making a gift of self for the kingdom of heaven, this shows in turn (and perhaps even more) that the freedom of the gift exists in the human body. This means that this body possesses a full ‘spousal’ meaning.”<sup>83</sup> Those who are live in the state of life of virginity thus express the full meaning of “possession in detachment,” and live out the nuptial meaning of their bodies in this distinct way.<sup>84</sup>

Men and women who are called to religious life express the nuptial meaning of their bodies through giving themselves completely to God. While all people, married or not, are called to relationship with God and are thus called to spiritual nuptiality, those who dedicate themselves to religious life choose to exclusively live out the nuptial meaning of their bodies in this way. The experience of St. Teresa of Ávila proves the reality of spiritual nuptiality. Through her nuptial union with God in her interior life, God granted her a sensational foretaste of heaven. Her reflection on this experience illuminates the connection between sexual experiences and eternal ecstasy. She states,

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> TOB, 190.

<sup>84</sup> Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 106.

<sup>85</sup> David Lewis, *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila* (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2006), 226.

While this is not the experience of every person in religious life, the ecstasy of St. Teresa provides an understanding of the reality of spiritual nuptiality. Just as the marital act is a renewal of the couple's wedding vows, those who live in a state of virginity express their nuptial relationship with Christ through prayer. The mystical feeling that may accompany both of these experiences is not required, but when it does occur, it deepens the union<sup>86</sup> by making the person more acutely aware of the reality of his or her nuptial body. Those in religious life focus exclusively on the nuptial meaning of their body in the spiritual sense, and through this complete "possession in detachment," their mystical experiences are radical, in that they are rooted in supernatural realities.

Woman's biological receptivity points to her charism of receptivity as a part of her feminine genius. One can realize this most concretely when considering that in physically nuptial relationships, the woman receives the man. While both men and women are receptive to Christ through their spiritually nuptial relationships, women's charism of receptivity may allow her to be more receptive to God than men. Paul Evdokimov emphasizes that "*in the spiritual domain, it is the woman who is the stronger sex.*"<sup>87</sup> While one could assume that Satan targeting the woman when tempting humanity proves that she is spiritually weaker than men, Evdokimov argues that this, instead, proves that she is stronger. He states, "Once the being that was most receptive, the most sensitive to the communion between God and the human being, was afflicted, the rest would take care of itself."<sup>88</sup> Satan targeting the woman thus implies that she is the biggest "threat" to evil. While, as human beings, men and women alike are made to be receptive to the

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<sup>86</sup> Grabowski, *Sex and Virtue*, 68.

<sup>87</sup> Evdokimov, *Woman and Salvation*, 157.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

Lord, women's charisms allow her to experience nuptial relationships with Christ more naturally, which could explain why St. Teresa's spiritual experience of ecstasy contained such profundity.

Nuptiality, in both the physical and spiritual sense, leads to fruitfulness. The Father and the Son, in a non-sexual way, give themselves to each other completely out of love, and the Love between them is the Holy Spirit.<sup>89</sup> By participating in the fullness of the image of God, the love of the man and woman also bears the fruit of a potential new child. In this way, bodies are fruitful, and a woman's body bears a privileged and obvious sign of this fruitfulness. Just as there is physical fruitfulness from physical nuptiality, there is spiritual fruitfulness from spiritual nuptiality, and women's bodies are a sign of what it means to bear this fruit.

### **A Woman's Body is Fruitful**

Procreation is a distinct quality of human beings that makes us God-like. While almost all creatures participate in procreation, human procreation carries with it a deeper meaning than that of animals. John Paul II emphasizes the importance of fatherhood and motherhood as revealing the meaning of what it means to be a man and a woman. He states,

Already now, however, we should observe that in Genesis 4:1<sup>90</sup> *the mystery of femininity manifests itself in its full depth through motherhood, as the text says, "who conceived and gave birth."* The woman stands before the man as mother, subject of the new human life that is conceived and develops in her and is born from her into the world. In this way, what also reveals itself is the mystery of man's masculinity, that is, the generative and "paternal" meaning of his body.<sup>91</sup>

According to John Paul II, the ultimate mysteries of femininity and masculinity are revealed through the identities of fatherhood and motherhood. Whether or not the fruitful meaning of the

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<sup>89</sup> Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 103.

<sup>90</sup> Gn 4:1, "The man had intercourse with his wife Eve, and she conceived and gave birth to Cain, saying, "I have produced a male child with the help of the Lord."

<sup>91</sup> TOB, 210-211.

body is manifested physically or spiritually, paternity and maternity are rooted in the very essence of each man and woman.

The central identities of fatherhood and motherhood for men and women are thus a reflection of their God-like essence, because every time spouses create a new human being, through God's grace, they renew God's original creation.<sup>92</sup> The woman plays a particular role in recognizing the link between God's creation and human procreation,<sup>93</sup> since the first woman says that she "produced a male child with the help of the Lord."<sup>94</sup> According to John Paul II, this confirms that the woman is not only aware of the mystery of creation that human generation renews by creating new human beings made in His image and likeness, but also that the child is a gift from God.<sup>95</sup> One can attribute the first woman's awareness of these connections to her particularly involved role in procreation.

A woman's body is designed to nurture a child before and after birth. John Paul II emphasizes the significance of this reality as he points out, "The whole exterior constitution of woman's body, its particular look, the qualities...*are in strict union with motherhood.*"<sup>96</sup> He explains that scripture honors the maternal nature and physical characteristics of motherhood, such as "the womb that bore you and the breasts from which you sucked milk."<sup>97</sup> He describes this praise as "a eulogy of motherhood, of femininity, of the feminine body in its typical expression of creative love."<sup>98</sup> From a Biblical perspective, the nourishment that a mother's body provides for her children is worthy of deep reverence and reflection.

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<sup>92</sup> TOB, 213.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Gn 4:1.

<sup>95</sup> TOB, 213.

<sup>96</sup> TOB, 212.

<sup>97</sup> Lk. 11:27.

<sup>98</sup> TOB, 212.

In her book *Theology of the Womb*, Christy Bauman reflects on the time that she was in the NICU for her baby, River. When she was looking at all of the machines that were sustaining her baby outside of the womb, she realized that her body alone was capable of doing everything the machines were doing, and was in awe of everything that God had made her body capable of doing in order to provide nourishment for her son.<sup>99</sup> To a pregnant mother, providing physical maternal care for her developing child is as natural as her beating heart. As Favale puts it, the body of a woman welcomes life before the conscious will.<sup>100</sup> The gift of maternity is thus engrained into the body of women in their potential to be physical mothers, and, in light of the Theology of the Body, is constitutive of their persons. A woman's fruitfulness "open[s] the body to the body of another."<sup>101</sup> Maternity involves welcoming and nourishing life, which can be lived out in various creative ways physically, spiritually, and socially.

Physical motherhood is tied to the menstrual cycle, as it is a necessary process to bring about a new life. Since a woman's cycle is a process, it naturally involves waiting on many fronts. Whether she is waiting for her period, or waiting for the cervical mucus that confirms ovulation, she waits for her body's natural processes.<sup>102</sup> In this way, one could consider women to be a privileged sign of patience, which reveals the patience of God. We know that God is patient since God is Love, and "love is patient."<sup>103</sup> Given the demands of maternity, one can see that "the human being is entrusted by God to women in a particular way,"<sup>104</sup> and the integration of patience into a woman's biology seems reveals the necessity of patience in regards to rearing human beings. Just as God is patient in order to bring humanity to new life, women are patient

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<sup>99</sup> Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 46.

<sup>100</sup> Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 112.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 129.

<sup>103</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:4.

<sup>104</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, sec. 30.

with their cycles in order to bring new life into the world, which reveals that patience is a part of her gift of maternity.

In addition to revealing her patience, a woman's cycle connects her to the world and the Church, in which cycles are essential. Evdokimov expresses this reality for woman, since, "In her very being, she is linked to the rhythms of nature, attuned to the order that rules the universe."<sup>105</sup> The lunar cycle occurs monthly, and is thus strikingly similar to a woman's cycle. The earth itself exists as a cycle between day and night, the four seasons, etc. This ultimately shows that women are closely tied to the order of the world, and this knowledge of its order corresponds to God's wisdom in the complexities of creation.

A woman's cycle also connects her to the cycles of the Church. The Holy Week in itself is a cycle. Bauman explains this connection, as she states, "The womb imitates the cycle of Holy week, Maundy Thursday (preparation), Good Friday (bleeding), Holy Saturday (waiting), and Resurrection Sunday (life)."<sup>106</sup> Even if women do not ever conceive a child, the menstrual cycle (or, the potential of having a menstrual cycle), "*reminds us [women] that we have an organ capable of creating life, and the process requires walking through the Via Dolorosa.*"<sup>107</sup> The cycle in a woman's body that allows new life to enter the world involves times of pain and sacrifice; "when the lining of the womb is shed, women are invited to be reminded of the sacrifice that it takes to create life."<sup>108</sup> While Holy Week allows Christians to participate in Christ's passion and resurrection for a week, a woman's body is constantly participating in the

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<sup>105</sup> Evdokimov, *Woman and Salvation*, 184.

<sup>106</sup> Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 126.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 128.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid* 129.

various stages of the cycle of Holy Week, and she thus has intimate knowledge of its significance.

The menstrual cycle thus reveals a woman's God-likeness, because she is invited to participate in a similar journey of sacrifice and new life as our Lord did in His passion. Through her own body, she is able to participate in God's sacrifice and also in His creativity, and her body recognizes the link between the two. While suffering is an inescapable part of the human condition and both men and women thus experience it, bleeding, which is symbolic of suffering, is both normal and healthy for women. This suggests that women may have an intimate knowledge of the human experience, and since it is a part of the process that precedes conception, she can understand its merit.

A woman's fertility also demonstrate what Ratzinger describes as God's "law of excess or superfluity."<sup>109</sup> For Ratzinger, "Excess is God's trademark in creation."<sup>110</sup> This excess is evident in salvation history, since "God, in an incredible outpouring of himself, expends not only a universe but his own self in order to lead man, a speck of dust, to salvation."<sup>111</sup> One can also see this principle of excess when Jesus turns water into an abundance of wine at the wedding feast at Cana.<sup>112</sup> God's trademark of excess is also evident when considering the amount of water in the oceans, the stars in the sky, the blades of grass in fields, etc. When considering the Theology of the Body, the man's production of around thirty to 500 million sperm<sup>113</sup> in the marital act is a clear example of God's trademark of excess. Women, too, reflect this trademark

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<sup>109</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J R Foster and Michael J Miller (San Francisco, CA: Communio Books (Ignatius Press), 2004), 257.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, 262.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>112</sup> Jn 2:1-11.

<sup>113</sup> Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2018), 44.

of abundance in their bodies. A woman is born with about 400,000 premature eggs in her ovaries, and she ends up releasing around 400 mature eggs throughout her reproductive life.<sup>114</sup> With her roughly 400 periods, she experiences an excessive number of reminders of her call to motherhood, whether it be spiritual or physical.

One can also see Ratzinger's law of excess in a woman's capacity to breastfeed. Bauman describes a time when she reflected on how much breast milk she had produced as a mother of three children when her son, River, asked her how much milk was inside of her. When she calculated the amount of milk that she had produced for her three children, she realized that her body had made over two thousand ounces of it.<sup>115</sup> A woman's capability of producing an abundance of breastmilk in order to nourish her children reflects God's trademark of excess in His creation.

Breastfeeding demonstrates that physical motherhood does not merely involve a child developing in the womb. After the baby is born, she is called to continue to have a loving and nurturing relationship with the child, as seen in her potential to produce breast milk. There is a plethora of phenomena that occur in the mother-infant relationship through breastfeeding. Fr. Basil Cole states, "unlike other mammals, a face-to-face relationship occurs during human nursing; the baby can see about nine inches, just enough to see the mother's face."<sup>116</sup> This natural interaction separates the maternal relationship between human beings from that of animals. The fact that mothers and their infants form a personal relationship that goes beyond the biological process of breastfeeding makes clear the ways in which human relationships differ than those of

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Bauman, *Theology of the Womb*, 47.

<sup>116</sup> Basil B Cole, "Mary's Virginity, Theology of the Body, and St. Thomas Aquinas," in *The Virgin Mary and Theology of the Body*, ed. Donald H. Calloway (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2007), 76.

animals. Given this personal relationship between the mother and infant, one can start to understand the personal relationship between God and humanity.

Breast milk is deeply symbolic of the nurturing nature of God as Mother. When describing how people come to understand love, Hans Urs Von Balthasar compares the mother's smile to her infant (which is possible when breastfeeding only for human infants) and the infant learning to smile back as God loving His people, who learn to love him in return.<sup>117</sup> The way that women nourish their children both physically and emotionally through breastfeeding provides a glimpse at to how God nourishes humanity. In the Bible, breastfeeding is always seen as a blessing from God;<sup>118</sup> breast milk "is a gift, and a grace, bestowed by the Holy Spirit."<sup>119</sup> Church Fathers describe breastfeeding as an icon of God's nourishment for humanity, and also the love between the persons of the Trinity.<sup>120</sup> Ultimately, for these reasons, "the nursing mother is an icon of God."<sup>121</sup> Women are thus God-like in the effort and love that they put into nurturing their children.

Some women experience their maternal identity spiritually rather than physically. Even if a woman never conceives a child, her call to spiritual motherhood is still ever present. In Matt Fradd's interview with Sr. Miriam James Heidland, in which they were speaking of the experience of women in religious life, Fradd says to her, "It must be such a different experience, if you don't mind me saying, because a man doesn't have a monthly reminder that he is meant to...father a physical child in the way that a woman does."<sup>122</sup> After acknowledging the

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<sup>117</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 76.

<sup>118</sup> Terri and Mike Aquilina, *Catholic for a Reason IV* (Ohio: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2007), chap. XII, location 111, Kindle.

<sup>119</sup>Ibid, location 100.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., location 89.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., location 145.

<sup>122</sup> Matt Fradd, "The Healing Christ Wants for You w/ Sr. Miriam James Heidland," *Pints with*

challenges that she experiences in giving up physical motherhood, she replies, “you forsake your own for all...it is a supernatural reality that the Lord takes your motherhood and breaks your heart open so wide that everyone has a home in your heart.”<sup>123</sup> While the spiritual fruits of these vocations cannot be quantified, spiritual motherhood is ultimately the most radical form of motherhood in that, as Sr. Miriam conveys, it involves the motherhood of all.

One might be able to see that teaching, on a less intense level than a vocation to religious life, also involves opening the heart for many. A woman’s intimate maternal calling that is written in her body may explain why a high percentage of teachers, especially for younger children who require more direct, nurturing care, are women. The article “Characteristics of Public School Teachers” demonstrates that women consistently make up the majority of teacher positions in public schools, especially in younger grades. From 1999-2000, eighty-eight percent of public school teachers who taught elementary school were female, and in 2017-2018, the percentage was eighty-nine percent. Both studies also showed that about three-fourths of all teachers are female.<sup>124</sup> A woman’s body suggests that she is called to be a maternal figure, even if she never gestates life. This could explain why women in particular gravitate toward jobs that involve parental-like relationships with children.

Understanding the meaning of being a child is important for the Christian, as Christ says that in order to enter the kingdom, you must be like a child.<sup>125</sup> Balthasar reflects on this by saying that children’s hearts are completely open and unguarded; they feel everything completely

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*Aquinas*, 1:14:20, July 5, 2021, <https://pintswithaquinas.com/the-healing-christ-wants-for-you-w-sr-miriam-james-heidland/>.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> “Characteristics of Public School Teachers,” Coe - characteristics of Public School Teachers (National Center for Education Statistics), accessed November 17, 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/clr/public-school-teachers>.

<sup>125</sup> Mt 18:3.

and do not suppress their emotions before their caregivers.<sup>126</sup> Whatever they are feeling becomes their most important reality, and they demand the attention of their loved ones in these moments of crisis. Being around children when they are experiencing these heightened emotional episodes can help others to understand just how authentic God wants people to be with Him in prayer. In addition to being God-like in their care for children, woman's inclination to be around children as they are developing sheds light for them on what it means to be a child of God.

The authors of the Bible primarily refer to God as "Father," and use the pronoun "He." However, there are some instances when God is described as "Mother;" for example, when God says, "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you."<sup>127</sup> God ultimately transcends masculinity and femininity, and thus cannot be referred to as male nor female. The same can be said in reference to God's Fatherhood and Motherhood; describing God in this way helps one to understand God's relationship to the world, but cannot capture it. Nonetheless, one might wonder why Fatherhood is the main term that describes God's relationship to the world, and what this says about Motherhood. Despite the discrepancy in terminology, "human motherhood corresponds to divine Fatherhood."<sup>128</sup> Evdokimov states that "the feminine soul is closest to the sources of creation," given her spiritual sensitivity.<sup>129</sup> The close tie between femininity and the spiritual is clear in the fact that St. Paul describes his spiritual fatherhood in maternal terms,<sup>130</sup> as he states, "My children for whom I am going into labor until Christ be formed in you!"<sup>131</sup> St. Paul also reflects on humanity's relationship with God the Father in his reflection that it is "in

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<sup>126</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*, trans. Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2006), 182.

<sup>127</sup> Is 66:13.

<sup>128</sup> Evdokimov, *Woman and Salvation*, 154.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, 152.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>131</sup> Gal 4:19.

*him* we live and move and have our being,”<sup>132</sup> and a pregnant woman is the human image of this reality.<sup>133</sup> Despite God being referred to as “Him” and “Father,” women partake in revealing God as Father through their maternity.

The fruitfulness of women’s bodies ultimately reveals her charisms of receptivity, maternity, generosity, and intuition. She receives her child in her womb, and provides maternal care through her own body. The demands of her cycle, pregnancy, child birth, and breastfeeding show that her entire body is made to be generous to her children. Her body’s natural care for her developing child reveals her intuitive ability to recognize the needs of others. These charisms are thus a part of the spiritual reality of her feminine genius, and in the world, women live out these gifts in creative ways. While the bodily demands of women will cease in heaven, her feminine body, which reveals her charisms, will remain with her for eternity.<sup>134</sup>

### **A Woman’s Body is Essential**

John Paul II makes clear that the body of a human being is essential to his or her personhood. For historical man, man after the fall in the temporal world,<sup>135</sup> there is a tension between his body and his soul. The heavenly man, man of the resurrection,<sup>136</sup> however, will not experience this tension, because the spirit will “fully permeate the body.”<sup>137</sup> As Father Donald Calloway puts it, “The Resurrection, due to its being the perfection of the human person, means that the human body will be perfected and brought to a state that reveals the full glory of the

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<sup>132</sup> Acts 17:28, *emphasis added*.

<sup>133</sup> Favale, *The Genesis of Gender*, 113.

<sup>134</sup> Calloway, “Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas,” 51.

<sup>135</sup> TOB, 143.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, 407.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 391.

human body.”<sup>138</sup> Man will thus be able to experience the fullness of his essence through the resurrection, since his essence is rooted in the unity of his body and soul.

The end of God’s glorification of the human body deserves contemplation. Upon immediate thought, one might wonder what the purpose of having a body after death might be, especially considering the fact that husbands and wives do not continue to be married in heaven as they were on earth,<sup>139</sup> because the earthly union of husband and wife is a symbol of the eternal union of God and the saints in heaven. The marital act is unitive and procreative,<sup>140</sup> and in eternity, there is already total, free union among God and the saints, so there would not be a need for procreation, because humanity will be complete.<sup>141</sup> In heaven, the couple no longer participates in the symbol of heaven, but in its reality. There is also not a need for food and drink, since the resurrected body will be immortal and will thus not need to be sustained, and their pleasures would not be necessary since they are already experiencing the Beatific vision.

Since there is reason to believe that these bodily functions will not be needed in the same way in heaven as they are on earth, the resurrected body must have a deeper, essential function: “to serve as the instrument of human thought, love, and the communication of thought and love to other persons.”<sup>142</sup> The symbolism of the human body, even in heaven, expresses the spiritual reality of love. Fr. Benedict Ashley states, “there will still remain the complementarity of the sexes...in the sense that each individual will retain his or her personal identity, of which sexuality is an essential feature.”<sup>143</sup> The sexed body is essential and will continue to be present

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<sup>138</sup> Calloway, “Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas,” 50.

<sup>139</sup> Mt 19:30.

<sup>140</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae vitae* (sec. 12), July 25, 1968 [https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_25071968\\_humanae-vitae.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html).

<sup>141</sup> Benedict M. Ashley, *Theologies of the Body: Humanist and Christian* (Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1995), 597.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.

once it is resurrected, because it is what informs a person's identity as a human being made in God's image, which is rooted in love and communion.

Woman's immortal identity cannot be separated from her feminine genius. Her body is not only made for a nuptial relationship, but also to have a pivotal role in developing and nourishing her child. Since her body bears this privileged sign of existing in relationships, in light of the Theology of the Body, this reveals that women have particular attentiveness to human beings and relationships. While the way that women live out the gifts of their feminine geniuses is distinct to each woman, her genius is revealed in her body and is integral to her person. Her body expresses her essential genius of love, and for this reason, she will always remain an embodied creature. A woman can thus know that her body is not accidental, but constitutive of her person, in this life and the next.

### Chapter 3: The Blessed Mother's Body: The Fullness of Femininity Revealed

Although each woman's body is a gift, nuptial, fruitful, and essential, as the Theology of the Body reveals,<sup>144</sup> through his essay, Fr. Donald Calloway demonstrates that the superabundant truth of all four of these ideas is present in Mary.<sup>145</sup> Just as Jesus reveals the fullness of masculinity, the Blessed Mother reveals the fullness of femininity, as the new Adam and the new Eve.<sup>146</sup> Fr. Benedict Ashley states, "the Catholic understanding of Mary in the plan of salvation is, as it were, a summary of the theology of the body."<sup>147</sup> One can thus look to Mary's life in order to understand the Theology of the Body, and in particular, the theology of the female body. Given that Mary is symbolic of the Church,<sup>148</sup> the entire Church can learn the meaning of their vocations as Christians through contemplating the mystery of the theology of Mary's body.

Mary receives her body as a gift, as she accepts her role in salvation history through her "fiat."<sup>149</sup> Fr. Donald Calloway states, "The gift of the Immaculate Conception serves as our model of how to accept the free, gratuitous gift of our embodiedness and cooperate with God in our salvation and the salvation of others."<sup>150</sup> Human bodies are a gift from God; through our bodies, we participate in the work of evangelizing the world. Mary literally brings Christs into the world, and is thus the prime example of what it means to make a gift of one's own body out of love of God. Her acceptance of her female body allows her to become the mother of God, which is an ultimate gift not only to herself, but to all of humanity. Her receptivity to this gift demonstrates that "if a person accepts and cooperates with their God-given body and sex, they

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<sup>144</sup> Calloway, "Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas," 45.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>146</sup> CCC, 411.

<sup>147</sup> Ashley, *Theologies of the Body*, 536.

<sup>148</sup> CCC, 507.

<sup>149</sup> Lk 1:38.

<sup>150</sup> Calloway, "Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas," 56.

will bear fruit for eternal life.”<sup>151</sup> As the prime example of femininity, women can look to Mary to understand that they can cooperate with the grace of their bodies and bear fruit in heaven and on earth by receiving others, just as Mary received Jesus, and the entire Church, into her maternal embrace.

Mary’s body is the exemplar of the nuptial meaning of the body. While she did not ever engage in a sexual relationship, she lived out the nuptial meaning of her body through her perpetual virginity.<sup>152</sup> Her Immaculate Conception made her totally free from sin, enabling her to live with complete self-possession. Mary’s perfect “possession in detachment”<sup>153</sup> allows her to give herself away completely to God as the spouse of the Holy Spirit.<sup>154</sup> The Holy Spirit, who is the love between the Father and the Son,<sup>155</sup> is the uncreated Immaculate Conception, while Mary is the created Immaculate Conception.<sup>156</sup> St. Maximilian Kolbe notes that just as a wife takes the name of her husband to symbolize that they are one together, so does Mary take the name of her spouse.<sup>157</sup> Mary becomes one with the Holy Spirit through her “fiat”<sup>158</sup> and brings Christ into the world, which compasses the Christian mission to become one with God, and evangelize the Gospel as the body of Christ. Her life provides the ultimate example of the nuptial meaning of the body, and how this nuptiality bears abundant fruit.

Cardinal Newman contrasts the fruits of the virginal experiences of Eve and Mary. Eve, in her virginity, submits to Satan, and bears the fruit of death and sterility. Mary, in her virginity,

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 57.

<sup>153</sup> Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 106.

<sup>154</sup> Calloway, “Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas,” 56.

<sup>155</sup> Scola, *The Nuptial Mystery*, 103.

<sup>156</sup> H. M. Manteau-Bonamy, *Immaculate Conception and the Holy Spirit*, trans. Richard Arandez (Libertyville, IL: Franciscan Marytown Press, 1977), 3.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>158</sup> Lk 1:38.

submits to the will of God, and the fruit of her “fiat” is the Christ, who brings immortal life into the world.<sup>159</sup> Mary’s physical motherhood of Jesus, in itself, demonstrates the holiness of physical maternity, in that God Himself has a physical mother. Mary’s own body nourished Him when He was developing in her womb, from the Annunciation to the Nativity. Theologians Mike and Terri Aquilina also infer that Jesus reflected on her maternal care while on the cross. They point out that when Jesus says, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as He is dying, He is ultimately finding comfort in Psalm 22. While what he says is an abbreviated version of the Psalm in his shortened breaths, in later verses, the Psalm says, “For you drew me forth from the womb, made me safe at my mother’s breasts. Upon you I was thrust from the womb; since my mother bore me you were my God.”<sup>160</sup> In his final moments of life, Jesus remembered His mother’s loving care,<sup>161</sup> which He experienced through her maternal body.

Mary’s maternal body corresponds to both her physical and spiritual motherhood. In addition to her physical motherhood of Jesus, Mary is the spiritual mother of the Church. In the Gospel of John, “Jesus saw his mother and the disciple there whom he loved, he said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son.’ Then he said to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother.’”<sup>162</sup> This makes clear that Mary, who is a symbol of the Church, is also given to Christians by Jesus as their spiritual mother. All Catholics can trust in her spiritual maternity, as the “Memorare” prayer says, “Remember, O most gracious Virgin Mary, that never was it know that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy help was left unaided...I fly unto thee...my mother.” Mary’s maternity is radical, as she is truly the mother of all; she is the new “mother of

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<sup>159</sup> Nicholas L Gregoris, “Newman's Mariology,” in *The Virgin Mary and Theology of the Body*, ed. Donald H. Calloway (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2007), 151.

<sup>160</sup> Ps. 22:10-11

<sup>161</sup> Aquilina, *Milk and Mystery*, location 259.

<sup>162</sup> Jn 19:25-26.

all the living,”<sup>163</sup> including God Himself. As the physical mother of Christ and spiritual mother of the entire Church, and through the physical and spiritual reality of her body, she is the exemplar of fruitfulness.

Mary’s Assumption into heaven demonstrates the fact that her body is essential to her identity. If it were not for her womanhood, she would not have been able to be the mother of Christ, and it is her maternal receptivity that enables her to receive all members of the Church as her children. While we have to wait until the resurrection of the body until we possess our bodies again, Mary’s soul never separated from her body. Mary’s Assumption ultimately demonstrates that God made the human body something that is integral to one’s identity, and will thus continue to exist after death.<sup>164</sup> Mary continues to bear her body, the sign of her maternity, in heaven, as she offers her embrace to all of humanity as our spiritual mother.

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<sup>163</sup> Gn 3:20.

<sup>164</sup> Calloway, “Theology of the Body and Marian Dogmas,” 61.

## Conclusion

In the podcast “Abiding Together,” Sr. Miriam James Heidland brings up a profound insight that she once heard from a speaker. When reflecting on human and divine relationships, there are three instances of the most profound intimacy: husband and wife in the marital act, mother and child in pregnancy, and a Catholic and Jesus in the Eucharist.<sup>165</sup> When examining these bodily experiences, the woman is the privileged active recipient. While both men and women receive the Eucharist, in the marital act, the wife’s body is made to receive her husband, and in pregnancy, she receives and nourishes the child in her womb. When a woman is pregnant and receives the Eucharist, her body is the home of three persons: herself, her child, and Jesus. This profound reality points to the radical receptivity that her body enables and thus reveals about her person. Mary is the exemplar of this receptivity, as she receives not just any spouse, but the Holy Spirit, and not just any child, but Christ; she is receptive to the point of being able to “contain the One who cannot be contained.”<sup>166</sup>

Mary is ultimately the model of humanity, as she is the only person who has ever existed who is not divine, yet also totally free from sin. Christians can thus look to her to understand the ultimate meaning not just of femininity, but of humanity itself. As Ratzinger puts it, the Virgin Birth “is first and last a theology of grace, a proclamation of how salvation comes to us...[it] is not a product of human history but a gift from above.”<sup>167</sup> God chose to save the world through entering the world as a human, born of a human mother. The feminine “capacity for the other”

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<sup>165</sup> Heather Khym, Sr. Miriam James Heidland, Michelle Benzinger, Season 6 Episode 5 “Eucharistic Amazement: May We Never Lose Our Wonder” in *Abiding Together*, 16:40 October 7, 2019, <https://www.abidingtogetherpodcast.com/podcastarchive/s06-e05-eucharist-amazement-may-we-never-lose-our-wonder>.

<sup>166</sup> Evdokimov, *Woman and Salvation*, 222.

<sup>167</sup> Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 277-278.

ultimately brings about the salvation of the world. In line with Evdokimov's claim that it is the woman who is the spiritually stronger sex since she is the most receptive,<sup>168</sup> the woman, who is an icon of the archetypal femininity of Mary, is a clear, embodied icon of what it means to not only be receptive to other people, but also to the love of God. God gave us the gift of His mother as the ultimate model of how to exist in relationship to Him, and every woman, through her femininity, shares in this gift. Let us pray that, like the original man,<sup>169</sup> the contemporary world may exalt and honor the gift of women.

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<sup>168</sup> Evdokimov, *Woman and Salvation*, 157.

<sup>169</sup> Gn 2:23.

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