

THE FEMININE GENIUS AND ITS ROLE IN BUILDING THE CULTURE OF LIFE

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John Paul II does not address women directly in *Evangelium Vitae* (EV) until close to the very end. In Section 99 (out of 101), the Holy Father tells the women of the world that our role is unique and crucial in building a culture of life, that we must "promote a new feminism, which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination' in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence, and exploitation." (*Evangelium Vitae*, 99) John Paul then goes to make an urgent appeal, telling women that our task is to "reconcile people with life," and to "Bear witness to the meaning of genuine love." (EV, 99)

In this short essay, I attempt to address two questions, if only briefly. First, what is the culture of life which women are being asked to build, and what does it mean to call ours a culture of death? Second, why does John Paul end this, his longest encyclical, with an appeal specifically to women? What is it about women that convinces him that ours is a unique and necessary role in conquering the culture of death? In order to begin to answer these questions, let us look to one issue as an example: abortion.

Until very recently—in fact, for the vast majority of all human history—abortion was commonly acknowledged and understood as a horror. There have always been abortions, of course. But until the very recent past, every culture understood that for a woman to abort her unborn child was an unspeakable grief, a most terrible thing.

According to the Holy Father, we now inhabit a culture which looks at abortion and sees, not the death of a defenseless human being, but rather the exercise of a woman's right to choose the sort of life she wants. As John Paul says, "... a new cultural climate is developing and taking hold, which gives crimes against life a *new, and if possible, more sinister character*, giving rise to further grave concern: broad sectors of public opinion justify certain crimes against life in the name of the rights of individual freedom, and on this basis they claim not only exemption from punishment but even authorization by the state, so that these things can be done with total freedom and indeed with the free assistance of health care systems." (EV, 4: italics John Paul's)

The condition which makes the culture of death possible is the darkening of the human conscience. Remember that John Paul wants us to begin by thinking about the story of Cain and Abel. The first murder was a fratricide. The first question asked after the first murder was asked by Cain: "Am I my brother's keeper?" It is a question about relationship. As many contemporary feminists have argued, women have been the primary caretakers of relationships for nearly all of human history.

Women's' great strength has been our refusal to see other human beings as instruments or as things. An instrumental view of human beings is at the core of the culture of death, and women have the genius to see past such a view.

What, specifically, is meant by "an instrumental view of human beings?" Why is it a peculiarly male vice to take such a view? Why would women be in a position of particular

strength to reclaim the human person from such a death-dealing view? Let us turn to those questions, and attempt to answer them.

The French Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel wrote a book entitled *Being and Having*. As a diagnostic text for the ills of the twentieth century, it is a brilliant work. Marcel's main thesis is that ours is a culture that has confused "being" with "having," and fallen into the trap of thinking of ourselves and of other persons as things to have and to use instead of what we are: creatures who simply *are*, whose goodness lies, not in our being useful but in our simply *being*¹. John Paul writes extensively about this fact in his series of homilies later published as *On the Original Unity of Man and Woman*. In that series of talks, the Holy Father looks to the book of Genesis in order to understand who the human person is. In so doing, he is being countercultural. How so?

Ours is a culture that tries to explain what a human being is by looking at the animal kingdom: Why do we behave, or think, or feel as we do? Conduct an animal experiment and find out. Look at rats, and understand ourselves. As helpful as such procedures can be in medical situations, for example, it is not the way to see the human person for who she really is. In order to do that, as John Paul realizes, we must look to the story of Genesis, and remind ourselves in Whose image and likeness we are made. We must look up, and not down, in order to fully understand who we are. Who are we? First of all, we are persons: free, rational, and *willed for our own sake*. God willed us to be out of love. We are beyond use. To be the beings we are meant to be, to *be* the image and likeness of God, we must be persons, persons who give themselves to others in acts of love, persons who will the good

¹ See Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having*, Trans. Katharine Farrer (Westminster, London: Dacre Press, 1949).

of the other, who will the other *for his own sake*. As John Paul puts it in EV: "The life which God gives man is quite different from the life of all other living creatures, inasmuch as man, although formed from the dust of the earth, *is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory*. This is what Saint Irenaeus of Lyons wanted to emphasize in his celebrated definition: 'Man, living man, is the glory of God.' Man has been given *a sublime dignity*, based on the intimate bond which unites him to his Creator; in man there shines forth a reflection of God Himself." (EV 34, italics John Paul II's)

Genesis claims that human beings are made in God's own image and likeness, but even before that, Genesis states that "male and female He created them." God did not create one human person that imaged Him and then created a spare; rather, it is male and female *together* who image God. Together, man and woman are the "saying" of what a human person is. When Adam sees the first woman he cries out for joy: "Here at last is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones!" He realizes that here is a creature who *is like him*—and yet not like him, in a very intriguing way.

Rather than see the beautiful symphony of difference and equality at work in the relationships between women and men, our culture refuses to value a woman's way of being in the world, insisting that the male way of being in the world is the only truly valuable one. Men, because of the kind of beings they are, will react to the world, at least initially, in terms of rules, principles, order, objectivity, competition, and technique. They need women to remind them of the value of cultivating in themselves also the values of nurture, relating, cooperating, and subjectivity. They need women to remind themselves that not all things are amenable to technique. As John Paul understands, men learn to develop and sustain their ability to form loving relationships by following the example of the women in their

lives. One of John Paul II's central claims in EV is that the culture of death is the result of a culture which has embraced male values and rejected feminine values.

John Paul II is a complementarity philosopher. He sees the fact of female embodiment as revealing women's close connection to the mystery of life. Our special ability to relate to other persons as persons makes us less likely to fall into thinking of other persons as problems. Women are less likely to slip into the trap of thinking that all things can be resolved by the right technique, that technology can, or ought to, solve every problem.

Sadly, it is often women themselves who have forgotten about this genius of theirs, and have bought into the culture's vision of male virtues as superior. Worse than that, John Paul II thinks, is this fact: not only have women rejected their own feminine genius; rather than insist that men learn from them the virtues they model, women have allowed men to form a culture which celebrates male vices.

Take, for example, contraception. Contraception is nothing if it is not an attempt to convince women that the only path to fulfillment and equality is to make their bodies as much like men's bodies as possible. Women have become increasingly convinced that they must work to find a way to walk away from sexual encounters as easily as men can. In so doing, women are buying into a worldview which encourages them to deviate down to men's lowest selves instead of insisting that men aspire to their highest selves.

Recall yet one more time that story of Cain and Abel which is so central to this encyclical. When confronted by God over the killing of Abel, Cain replies by asking God "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer to that question is yes. Traditionally, women have known that; we have been in a privileged position to understand the dangers of a culture which devalues the weak and the voiceless. At least part of the reason for this is the fact

that women have historically been the voiceless, the oppressed. Human history can be viewed as a record of atrocities committed against women: rape, battering, and sex-based infanticide, just to name a few. It is a sad irony that women have not used their special knowledge of oppression to help to end it, but have instead attempted to gain rights for themselves by turning around and trampling on the rights of others, up to and including their own unborn children. The culture of life will be reclaimed, says John Paul, by heroic women. Women are the natural protectors of life. Women have the task of assuring the moral dimension of culture. John Paul sees this fact implied both in God's decision in Genesis that 'It is not good for man to be alone' and in the fact that God entrusted the human being to a woman.

John Paul calls all women, then, to reclaim themselves as women, as embodied in a certain way and possessed of important virtues to teach the world. Those virtues are the most powerful weapon against that culture of death. The Holy Father goes out of his way to say, several times in *EV* that women have another important weapon in this battle: the hearts of men, where the natural law is written. What is called for is no less than a cultural transformation; as he puts it, "The first and fundamental step towards this cultural transformation consists in forming consciences with regard to the incomparable and inviolable worth of every human life." (*EV*, 96) That is precisely what our culture has forgotten: that every human life is a gift, indeed a treasure beyond price. We use each other in order to gain pleasure and self-fulfillment; we have children to reflect well on ourselves and treat them as either possessions (if we want them) or burdens to eliminate (if we do not). We look at older people who are no longer functional and wonder what possible use they serve. We think of ourselves as complicated organisms who seek quality of life, a quality most often defined in terms of productivity and possessions—having, not being.

John Paul never loses hope for this culture because of that fact of the natural law. The truth of the human person is real, objective, and available to all. We are creatures, bound by our nature and commanded to act in certain ways if we are to flourish. As he says, "The Church knows that this *Gospel of Life*, which she has received from her Lord, has a profound and persuasive echo in the heart of every person—believer and non-believer alike—because it marvelously fulfills all the heart's expectations while infinitely surpassing them. Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree." (EV, 2) By our very nature, human beings are inclined to respect and care for life. This respect has been lost through a darkening of human conscience, but it is still there. It is darkened but not lost.

Ours is a culture that behaves as if human beings are complex organisms. We are not; we are beings willed for our own sake, made in the image and likeness of God. As John Paul sees, there is hope in the fact that ours is a starving culture. The more human beings act as if we are organisms, the more desperately unhappy we become. Mother Teresa called us "the poorest of the poor" for a reason. Every disordered act of the culture of death breaks a number of human hearts. Out of that broken-ness can come the healing of the culture, but it first has to be acknowledged. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir is famous for arguing that women can only claim their dignity as human beings once they stop having children. As de Beauvoir saw it, reproducing is something that any animal can do, and when women do it, they are acting as animals. Far better to spend a life doing the sort of work that only human beings, as rational beings, can do: write poetry, build a skyscraper, do

metaphysics. ²What de Beauvoir missed, and all the feminists who followed her, was the truth that to make a human being is NOT to do what animals do, because human beings are not merely animals. Human life is intrinsically, eternally valuable. Abortion and euthanasia, to name just two current attacks on human life, destroy beings of intrinsic and eternal value. This fact is still available to the human heart. It may be revealing itself now in the emptiness and sterility of a broken world and a consumerist culture, but it is still available.

Women are in a special place to recognize the full import of God's "yes" in response to Cain because women know that all human beings live in relationship. We are rational, free beings, but that freedom is itself relational: "[E]very man is his brother's keeper, because God entrusts us to one another. And it is also in view of this entrusting that God gives everyone freedom, a freedom which possesses an inherently relational dimension. This is a great gift of the Creator, placed as it is at the service of the person and of his fulfillment through the gift of self and open-ness to others; but when freedom is made absolute in an individualistic way, it is emptied of its original content, and its very meaning and dignity are contradicted." (EV, 37)

The culture of death is pervasive. The temptation to despair is strong. Where to begin to reclaim the culture of life? John Paul exhorts women to begin this battle. How? First, by celebrating and rejoicing in the fact of being women, by refusing to 'buy into' a world that demands as its entrance fee a forswearing of their natures as women. For example, I am a female professor of philosophy. In practicing my vocation as a philosopher, I must refuse to 'ape' a male way of doing it, instead adding a complementary vision of what it means to be a philosopher.

² See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (Vintage Books, USA, 1989).

Second, women can reclaim the culture of life by celebrating the beauty of family, and insisting on laws which protect and defend the family. Most important, women are called by the Holy Father to be "living lessons" of the culture of life. Women must reclaim their special sensitivity to the precious value of every human life in no way lessens the value of our existence in time; it takes it and directs it to its final destiny: I am the resurrection and the life... whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." (EV, 38)