

The model of woman represented by Mary clearly shows what is specific to the feminine personality.

MARY REVEALS TRUE FEMININITY

By Dwight P. Campbell

In 1995, in a letter to all the women of the special consideration to the recent thought and world on the occasion of the United Nations' Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, Pope John Paul II wrote beautifully of the Blessed Virgin Mary's example to all women: a life of service as an expression of love. He said

The Church sees in Mary the highest expression of the "feminine genius", and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration. Mary called herself the "handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38). Through obedience to the word of God she accepted her lofty yet, not easy vocation as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth. Putting herself at God's service, she also put herself at the service of others: a service of love. Precisely through this service Mary was able to experience in her life a mysterious, but authentic "reign". It is not by chance that she is invoked as 'Queen of Heaven and Earth' ...: For her, "to reign" is to serve! Her service is "to reign"!'

How Mary "reigns" through "a service of love," and how this loving service by Mary is a model for all women and underlies their true vocation, is what we shall consider here, giving the recent thought and writings of writings of Pope John Paul II. Additionally, we shall look at how radical feminism perverts true femininity by rejecting the notion of service in love, again, looking at the Holy Father's words on this subject. But in order to address these, issues, we first must consider two attributes which underlie Mary's loving service, and the whole notion of femininity: receptivity and fruitfulness.

MARY'S RECEPTIVITY AND FRUITFULNESS AS A BASIS FOR SERVICE TO LIFE AND LOVE

Mary's entire life, from the moment of her Immaculate Conception, reveals the unique feminine attribute of receptivity: She received: a singular grace from the Holy Spirit which preserved her from all sin and endowed her with a fullness of grace; and she was open and receptive to the will of God in all things -- in her call to be the Mother of the Redeemer, and her freely willed offering of her Son on the Cross to the Father.

Because both men and women are creatures, we all are "feminine" in relationship to God, our Creator, receiving our very existence, and any growth in holiness, from him. On the spiritual level holiness is, in essence, receptivity; and Mary is a model for us all in being receptive to God's grace and for growth in sanctity. But Mary reveals to women in a particular way the unique feminine attribute of *receptivity to life*, and the *fruitfulness* which, by God's design, flows there from. She said "Yes" to God and conceived Jesus, the Author of Life, whom the angel called the "*Blessed Fruit*" of her womb. Seen in this light, Mary's receptivity to life/motherhood and the fruitfulness which followed in the Incarnation are the foundation for her reign of service in love to God and others, as extolled by Pope John Paul II. Through Mary, God reveals to women that their vocation to a life of service in love is rooted in these same attributes.

All motherhood, by its very nature, is linked to receptivity and fruitfulness; and receptivity presupposes fertility. In the more traditional understanding of the spiritual/biological make up of the human person and its life-giving powers, men are "potent" (life is created outside of their bodies), and women are "fertile" (life is conceived within their bodies). With this understanding, we can see that the Original Blessing given by God to man applies in a special way to women: "*Be fertile*" (or, as some translations say, fruitful -- the result of fertility) *and multiply*" (Gen. 1:28). Mothers conceive new life -- the fruit of

Dwight P. Campbell – MARY REVEALS TRUE FEMININITY

the womb – as a result of being fertile and receptive to the love of a husband and to God's love, both of which are potentially life-giving.

Receptivity to life and fruitfulness in childbearing has been at the heart of God's "covenant plan" for the human race from the very beginning. This is revealed not only in Genesis; it is a recurring theme throughout the Old Testament: Fruitfulness – the extension of God's Kingdom, here on earth, and ultimately in heaven – is inextricably linked to the Covenant. When Noah came out of the Ark, God repeated the Original Blessing given to Adam and Eve: *"God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fertile and multiply and fill the earth' "*(Genesis 9:1). God later told Abraham, *"I will bless you abundantly and make your descendants as countless as the stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore"* (Genesis 22: 17).

The chosen People of God were fruitful and multiplied. This was one of the distinctive marks of the people of the Covenant, which separated them from the other nations. It was because the Israelites were fruitful in the land of Egypt that Pharaoh oppressed them as slaves (Exodus 1:9-10). And before entering the Promised Land, Moses instructed the people, *"As your reward for heeding these decrees and observing them carefully, the Lord will keep the merciful covenant which he promised on oath to your fathers. He will love you and bless and multiply you; he will bless the fruit of your womb. ..."* (Deuteronomy 7:12-13).

The Psalms are replete with references to the blessings of fruitfulness in childbearing: *"Truly sons are a gift from the Lord, a blessing, the fruit of the womb. Indeed the sons of youth are like arrows in the hand of a warrior. O the happiness of the man who has filled his quiver with these arrows!"* (Psalms 127:3-5); *"O blessed are those who fear the Lord and walk in his ways! ...You will be happy and prosper; your wife like a fruitful vine in the heart of your house; your children like shoots of the olive, around your table"* (Psalms 128: 1, 3). Psalm 107 speaks of the Lord who *"raises the needy from distress and makes families numerous as a flock. The upright see it and rejoice, but all who do wrong are silenced"* (vv. 41-42).

"Rejoicing" in fruitfulness, in children, was a mark of the People of God who were under the Old Covenant. As both Scripture and Tradition bear out, this holds true with the new People of God under the New and Everlasting Covenant beginning with Mary, the supreme model for women in receptivity and fruitfulness. At the Annunciation of the Incarnation, the Angel Gabriel told Mary to *"rejoice"* (Luke 1:28), and in the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise after having conceived Jesus, she says, *"my spirit rejoices in God my Savior"* (Luke 1:47).

RADICAL FEMINISM'S REJECTION OF RECEPTIVITY TO LIFE AND SERVICE IN LOVE

Our Holy Father wrote his letter to women to counter the forces and ideology of radical feminism which attempted to dominate the Beijing Conference. Radical feminism undermines true femininity by rejecting that which is unique to the feminine: fertility (receptivity to life) and fruitfulness. It regards children as a curse rather than a blessing, and scorns the "service of love" required of motherhood because it sees child bearing and child rearing as obstacles to the pursuit of self-interest: a career, material gain, and economic independence. This is precisely why radical feminism supports contraception and sterilization (the purpose of which is to render a woman infertile and thereby unreceptive to new life), and abortion (which renounces the fruit of love by killing new life).

Anne Mercedes Maloney, Ph.D, a professor of philosophy at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, Minn., wrote a superb article in response to the anti-woman, anti-child/family mentality prevalent at the U.N. Women's Conference in Beijing: *The Catholic Church & Women: Male & Female He Created Them*.² Therein she quoted the "foundress" of radical feminism, Simone de Beauvoir, who wrote "woman's misfortune is to have been biologically destined for the reproduction of life"³; and Shulamith Firestone, who has said that, "the heart of a woman's oppression is her child-bearing and child rearing roles."⁴ Such thinking reveals a deep-seated revulsion toward receptivity/fertility and the fruit of marital

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Dwight P. Campbell – MARY REVEALS TRUE FEMININITY

love, the child; and betrays a radical revolt against God, against his Original Blessing (given especially to women), and against a woman's very nature.⁵

One paragraph in particular captures the heart of Dr. Maloney's message, and is worth quoting in full:

The Catholic Church envisions a world in which woman's distinctive character and potential are acknowledged and valued as a model for all human beings. Many trendy thinkers see the male mode as the ideal. The path to liberation, according to such a model, is to make women as much like men as possible. Thus the move toward contraception, which tells women they cannot be equal to men unless they chemically or surgically alter their bodies to be more like male bodies. The implication is that the female body needs fixing. The contraceptive mentality further encourages women to sever their traditional tendency to invest themselves sexually only in relationships that promise commitment and longevity. When sexual relationships contain the potential to transmit life, women take care to give themselves only to those they can trust with their deepest needs. Rather than raise this attitude as the standard to which human beings should aspire, contraception makes such care unnecessary. Women can walk away from sexual encounters as easily as men. Thus, once again, the male model is offered as the paradigm. And when the contraception fails (as all forms do), the social culture offers a woman the "choice" to have her body surgically invaded and her unborn child torn from her womb so that she will not have to lose out in the public, competitive world -- the male world. The road to freedom, equality, dignity, says the contraceptive and abortive culture to young women, is to stop acting like a woman, and start acting like a man. Above all else, the culture adds, do not expect the world to respect what is distinctively female about you....⁶

Pope John Paul echoed these thoughts in a general audience of December 6, 1995, in which he pointed to Mary's life as revealing to women their true role in contemporary society. He said that

the role entrusted to Mary by the divine plan of salvation sheds light on the vocation of women in the life of the Church and society by defining its difference in relation to man. The model represented by Mary clearly shows what is specific to the feminine personality.

In recent times, some trends in the feminist movement, in order to advance women's emancipation, have sought to make her like a man in every way. The divine intention manifested in creation, however, though desiring woman to be man's equal in dignity and worth, at the same time clearly affirms her diversity and specific features. Woman's identity cannot consist in being a copy of man, since she is endowed with her own qualities and prerogatives, which give her a particular uniqueness that is always to be fostered and encouraged.

These prerogatives and particular features of the feminine personality attained their full development in Mary. The fullness of divine grace actually fostered in her all the natural abilities typical of woman.⁷

The Holy Father went on to say that in cooperating with God's will to become the Mother of the Redeemer, Mary reveals "the style in which woman must concretely express her mission. ...the Virgin makes no proud demands nor does she seek to satisfy personal ambitions. Luke presents her as wanting only to offer her humble service with total and trusting acceptance of the divine plan of salvation."

THE MASCULINE AS THE ONLY MODEL FOR THE HUMAN PERSON

The exaltation of the masculine as the only valid model for the human person permeates much of our culture. In television shows and movies, for example, seldom are women portrayed as full-time homemakers, as they were in the past. When the script does call for a mother with children, she is often a working mom. My own mother used to comment on how unrealistic was the old *Cosby* show, where the wife and mother of four, while holding a full-time job as a lawyer (with dad as a physician),

Dwight P. Campbell – MARY REVEALS TRUE FEMININITY

always had a spotless home. "Who does the cleaning, and the cooking of the evening meals?", she used to quip.

In our day TV and movies often portray women in traditional male roles -- doctors, lawyers, policemen and soldiers/warriors; or as young, independent career women -- either married or single -- with no children. The professional working woman is portrayed as tough, competitive, and aggressive -- attributes usually admired in men, and which come more naturally to the male, but which, realistically, do not come naturally to women and which (generally speaking) are unfitting for a truly feminine woman.

The push for females to assume male roles is also seen in the trend for girls to play contact sports: boxing, wrestling, and (yes!) basketball. These sports require an aggressiveness that is generally unnatural to most females, and must instead be *cultivated*. The breeding of aggressiveness in females works to undermine their natural sensitivity and is inimical to the loving tenderness required in child bearing and child rearing.

Can we realistically expect young women whose thinking and/or practical experience has been deformed into accepting the male as the paradigm, when they marry, to regard their husbands as head of the home and be submissive (in the proper sense of which St. Paul speaks) to their authority? Is it likely that they will consider motherhood, the nurturing of children, and homemaking -- lives of loving service to others in the family -- as fulfilling their highest vocation? Will they be able to see the incomparable value of having a large family and of caring for their husband and children on a full-time basis? And if, as in the case of so many women today, they are college educated or earn a higher degree, will they be willing to sacrifice their professional careers in order to bear more than one or two children, and to devote a good part of their adult years to serving their family? Not likely.

EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN SELFISH PURSUITS

And why not? Because the feminist mentality is deeply rooted in selfishness. It equates the "empowerment" of women with the "self-fulfillment" of a career, and rejects the notion of service to others in its most exalted place and where it is most needed: in the home and in the family. Therefore, say the feminist gurus, women -- especially educated, career women -- should not "waste" their talents and abilities at home raising children; instead, they should pay someone else to undertake this "menial" task.

In his general audience of July 20, 1994, Pope John Paul II criticized this way of thinking:

Unfortunately ...the value of motherhood has been contested and criticized. The greatness traditionally attributed to it has been presented as a backward idea, a social fetish. ...some have considered it as a limitation of the female personality, as a restriction on women's freedom and on their desire to take up and engage in other activities. Hence, many women feel compelled to forego motherhood ...to be able to devote themselves to professional work. Many even claim the right to suppress the life of their own child through abortion. ...⁸

The invention of the term "quality time" -- a purely mental construct, with no true basis in reality -- has conveniently been used to soothe the consciences of those mothers who, in selfish pursuit of their careers, delegate their God-given duties of child rearing to a third party. Quality time is based upon a number of absurd notions:

- 1) that one or two hours of time spent with one's children can make up for eight or ten hours away from them;
- 2) that children will suffer no detrimental effects from daily mother-child separation; and
- 3) that the character formation and education of children -- which is primarily an education in love -- can be done as well by someone other than the mother.

Both common sense and human experience should tell us that a mother's love, as well as the time she spends with her children, are irreplaceable; and that the daily care, attention and nurturing given by a mother to her children are of immeasurable value in the formation of their character, as well as

Dwight P. Campbell – MARY REVEALS TRUE FEMININITY

for their spiritual, psychological, and even physical well-being. Separating children from their mothers is unnatural, and cannot but be harmful to them. With so many children today being literally riddled with Ritalin, it is worth considering whether a link exists between the rise in working moms and the increasing number of hyperactive" children.

The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World), in discussing the parents' role in the upbringing of children, teaches, "*The active presence of the father is very important for their upbringing; the mother, too, has a central role in the home, for the children, especially the younger children, depend on her considerably.*"⁹ That children, especially younger children, depend considerably on their mother is an understatement. Children are naturally inquisitive, and constantly ask questions (the mind is made to know). The mother is the primary educator in matters of life and love, and her physical presence enables her to answer questions, to form the minds and hearts of the little ones whom God has entrusted to her care.

During his July 20, 1994 general audience, the Holy Father explained in a most beautiful way the "dual value" of motherhood: both in conceiving and giving birth to new life, and in the care given to children on a personalistic level -- the gift of self -- as being a reflection of Trinitarian love:

However much woman's roles can be multiplied and broadened, everything in her – her physiology, psychology, almost connatural habit, moral, religious, and even aesthetic sentiment, reveals and exalts her aptitude, ability and mission in bringing forth from herself a new being. She is much more disposed than man to the generative task. In virtue of pregnancy and childbirth, she is more intimately bound to the child, close to his whole development, more immediately responsible for his growth, more intensely sharing in his joy, sorrow, and risk in life.

Although it is true that the mother's task must be coordinated with the father's presence and responsibility, it is the woman who plays the more important role at the beginning of every human being's life. It is a role that highlights an essential characteristic of the human person, who is not meant to remain closed up within himself but to be open and self-giving to others. ...This orientation toward others is essential to the person by virtue of the highest source of Trinitarian love, from which man takes his origin. Motherhood represents an apex of this personalistic and community orientation.

Granted, in many cases today mothers are forced to work by reason of their circumstances: those who have been abandoned by their husbands; those courageous young single mothers who refuse to abort their children even when the fathers have been irresponsible and walked away; or wives whose husbands are not paid a living wage to support their families. In these unfortunate circumstances, where the lack of full-time care by the mother is unintentional, we must pray that God's grace may somehow supply for the love and attention that may be wanting for such children. But in the case of many professional, educated women, the feminist mentality has taken firm hold, which views the pursuit of a career and work in the marketplace as something to be valued over and above the care, formation and education of children; and children are viewed as an 'obstacle' to career pursuits. For women such as these, work outside the home is not necessary; it is preferred.

NOTHING CAN EVER COMPARE TO THE PRE-EMINENT DIGNITY OF MOTHERHOOD

Pope John Paul II, in his general audience of December 6, 1995, commented on this mentality, saying that "*an erroneous concept of freedom, which sees child care as a hindrance to woman's autonomy and opportunities, [has] obscured the significance of motherhood for the development of the feminine personality.*" And in his audience of July 20th, 1994 the Holy Father stated, "*Whatever may be the professional opportunities women enjoy in society, nothing can ever compare to the preeminent dignity that is theirs through motherhood. ...We see that Mary, the model woman, fulfilled the mission to which she was called in the economy of the Incarnation and Redemption by way of motherhood.*"

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Dwight P. Campbell – MARY REVEALS TRUE FEMININITY

Mother Teresa of Calcutta said, "*Faith in action is love, and love in action is service.*" Mary, the Woman of Faith, reveals to everyone, and especially to women, that in God's plan receptivity gives birth not only to life, but also to love -- love in the form of service to others. St. Luke tells us that immediately after uttering her "*Fiat*" and conceiving Jesus, Mary went "*with haste*" to visit her cousin Elizabeth and assist her in her need. The rest of Mary's life was spent in service to her Child, the Son of God made man; a service which entailed great personal sacrifice -- even unto offering her Son on the Cross; but a service above all motivated by love. Here Mary is the model for all mothers: they fulfill their highest vocation as women through service to their children by selfless love. And as our Holy Father says, "*nothing can ever compare to the pre-eminent dignity*" that is a woman's through the selfless service of love she performs in fulfilling her role as a mother.

More recently, Pope John Paul II discussed in detail the extraordinary value of a mother's work in the home, which is so often overlooked and not fully appreciated:

Mary's awareness that she was carrying out a task entrusted to her by God gave a higher meaning to her daily life. The simple, humble chores of everyday life took on special value in her eyes, since she performed them as a service to Christ's mission.

Mary's example enlightens and encourages the experience of so many women who carry out their daily tasks exclusively in the home. It is a question of a humble, hidden, repetitive effort, and is often not sufficiently appreciated.

Nonetheless, the long years Mary spent in the house of Nazareth reveal the enormous potential of genuine love and thus of salvation. In fact, the simplicity of the lives of so many housewives, seen as a mission of service and love, is of extraordinary value in the Lord's eyes.¹⁰

Dr. Alice von Hildebrand points out that the vocation of every woman is to be a mother -- even if not in the flesh, then spiritually -- through loving, sacrificial service to others. She says that if Satan can convince women to forsake this vocation and to join him in his cry, "I will not serve," then he will have won the battle and society will be doomed.

To assure that Satan will not prevail, priests, parents and educators need to reinforce and affirm in a most positive way, the great dignity of women precisely in their unique feminine gifts -- of fertility, of child bearing and rearing, and of loving service in the home and family -- which are being devalued by the selfish, anti-life and anti-child mentality so prevalent in our present-day culture. All women, especially girls and young women, should be taught the meaning of sacrificial love as it relates specifically to the feminine and to motherhood. They should be helped to see, as Pope John Paul II says, that the "*simplicity of the life*" of a housewife and mother, seen as a "*mission of service of love*," truly has "*extraordinary value in God's eyes*"; and that the procreation and education of children has an eternal value which far outweighs any material or economic benefit from work in the marketplace -- so much so that women should be willing to put their careers on hold to fulfill this noble and exalted task.

Dr. von Hildebrand tells the story of a woman who wrote to her after bearing her fifth child, saying, "I feel like Michelangelo." She wrote back, "No, you have done much better: Michelangelo's paintings will one day be gone; but your child will live forever!" In speaking with children and teens (e.g., in Confirmation classes) on the subject of vocations, I always make it a point to stress the incomparable value of children and great dignity of motherhood, and then to ask questions such as: "*Which is of greater value: a new house or car, or a newly-born baby?*"; and, "*In your opinion, which is more important for a woman to do: to work at a job or a career and make money; or to bear children, and to form and educate them for life on this earth, and for eternal life in heaven?*" I ask them to compare the work of a mother who cares for her children in the home, with the work of a father who is employed outside the home. Even though the father brings home a paycheck, which work is of greater value? By asking such questions, we can form the minds of young people and help them to value children, motherhood and loving service in the family, over material things and selfish career pursuits.

TRUE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Unfortunately, those who propound the radical feminist ideology fail to realize that real power lies in motherhood and in fulfilling the sublime role of child rearing. As the old saying goes, *'The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.'* Most of the great figures throughout history who have done good for their fellow man have been "products" of their mothers, who formed their character. George Washington said, *"I attribute all my success in life to the moral, intellectual, and physical education which I received from my mother."* On one occasion a London newspaper submitted to Winston Churchill a list of people who had been his teachers, and he returned it with these words: *"You have omitted the greatest of my teachers -- my mother!"* The English poet George Herbert once remarked, *"One good mother is worth one hundred schoolmasters."* And the American humorist Mark Twain wrote that, *"It is at our mother's knee that we acquire our noblest and truest and highest ideals."* God revealed to us the incomparable value of a child when his own Son began his human life on earth first in the womb of Mary, and then as a helpless, newborn infant, totally dependent upon his Mother. He revealed the glories of motherhood in Mary, who nurtured the God-man and spent herself in humble, loving service within the Holy Family. And in Mary he reveals that it is in motherhood where women, by God's design, can truly reign: *Mary now reigns as Queen precisely because she said "Yes" to God's call to become the Mother of his Son, and to serve him – during her life on earth, and now, forever in Heaven! .*

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¹ Pope John Paul II. *Letter to Women*, June 29, 1995 (*Catholic Post*, newspaper of the Diocese of Peoria, n., July 30, 1995) par. 10.

² In his general audience of May 8, 1996, Pope John Paul II translates the first word of the angel's greeting to Mary in Greek *chaire-as* "Rejoice"; saying that "rejoice is an invitation to joy" due to "God's presence among his people, the coming of the messianic King, and *maternal fruitfulness*." (Emphasis added.) *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, May 15, 1996.

³ Anne Mercedes Maloney, Ph.D. (United States Catholic Conference, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1995). This article was mailed to priests throughout the U.S. in a pro-life packet to prepare for Respect Life Month in October 1995.

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974) 72.

⁵ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*. (New York: Bantam, 1971), 72.

⁶ Philosophically, radical feminism (along with the existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre and his longtime mistress, Simone de Beauvoir) is linked to atheistic communism, which holds that man "creates" himself by the work he does, and which measures the value of the human person solely by his or her economic productivity. Back in the 1920s, Vladimir Lenin legalized abortion in the Soviet Union in order to "free" women from the burden of children so they could work outside the home and help to build the "worker's paradise." It is hardly surprising that Simone de Beauvoir praised Marxism and its view of the human person.

⁷ Maloney, op. cit., p. 3.

⁸ *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, December 13, 1995. 52.

⁹ *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, July 27, 1994.

¹⁰ For studies which show the harm done to children as a result of daycare, see my article, "Daycare as Child Neglect," *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* (October 1990). II Par. 52.

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