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“THE FEMININE VOCATION” IN
POPE JOHN PAUL II’S *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM*

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The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. . . .

. . . .

. . . It is a question of understanding the reason for and the consequences of the Creator’s decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man.¹

~Pope John Paul II

INTRODUCTION

It is audacious for anyone, in the contemporary global context, to address and interpret the meaning of “The Feminine Vocation.” Yet that is precisely what Pope John Paul II did in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* in 1988. In the previous year, the Synod of Bishops had focused on “The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World Twenty Years after the Second Vatican Council.”² The Synod recommended “further study of the anthropological and theological bases that are needed in order to

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1. Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [*Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women*] ¶ 1 (1988) [hereinafter *Mulieris Dignitatem*], reprinted in *THE DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II* 732, 733 (Walter M. Abbott ed., Joseph Gallagher trans., 1966) (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Pope Paul VI, Message to Women at the Closing of the Second Vatican Council (Dec. 8, 1965).

2. *Id.*

solve the problems connected with the meaning and dignity of being a woman and of being a man.”³

The Pope did not simply encourage others to take up this task. He swiftly contributed to it, building upon almost ten years of his public audiences that were rooted in scholarly reflection on the Theology of the Body, the meaning of marriage and human sexuality, and major contemporary developments challenging integral relationships.⁴ His personal experience as priestly mentor to young women and men in Poland, his penetrating understanding of human life in desperate conditions of war and persecution, and his poetic sensitivity to human relationships enabled him to apply theological insight, prayerful wisdom, and philosophical acuity to urgent human questions. He perceived a particular need for “the vocation of women [to be] acknowledged in its fullness.”⁵

As a basis for understanding his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* in its profundity, this paper will first discuss two essential aspects of the document: first, the universal breadth of its approach; and second, the terminology employed in developing this reflection on the feminine vocation. With these in mind, I suggest that understanding three basic elements of *Mulieris Dignitatem* assists one in receiving Pope John Paul II’s self-described “meditation” on the feminine vocation.⁶ The three elements are the centrality of Divine Revelation, the communion of opposites, and an understanding of the embodied person as *gift*.

I. UNIVERSAL CONTEXT

In chapter two of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II expressly interprets the “feminine vocation” within a universal context—indeed, a *cosmic* context—extending from the creation of human life to the end times.⁷ The chapter opens with the Pauline text from *Galatians* 4:4: “When the time had fully come, *God sent forth his son,*

3. *Id.*

4. See, e.g., POPE JOHN PAUL II, THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY (1997) [hereinafter THEOLOGY OF THE BODY]; see also Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* [*Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*] (1981).

5. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 1.

6. *Id.* ¶ 2 (“[I]t seems to me that the best thing is to *give this text the style and character of a meditation.*”).

7. See *id.* ¶¶ 3–5.

born of woman."⁸ In that proclamation, St. Paul indicates that a preparatory period—indeterminate in the human measuring of time—had reached the point of readiness for the Incarnation. The Pope notes the significant fact that "St. Paul does not call the Mother of Christ by her own name 'Mary,' but calls her 'woman': this coincides with the words of the Proto-evangelium in the Book of Genesis (cf. 3:15)."⁹ Mary of Nazareth is *the woman*, present and completely given to the central salvific event marking what St. Paul called the "fullness of time."¹⁰ The Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity was *realized* in and through her, and it remains the key event of salvation history.¹¹ The phrase "fullness of time" designates the definitive self-revelation of God expressed humanly, bodily: the Second Person of the Trinity became incarnate in Mary's womb.¹²

Since *all* creation revolves around this event, and since, as John Paul avers, *every human question* pertains to it, he locates his approach to the "feminine vocation" in that perspective, describing his approach as *panoramic*.¹³ "Woman—Mother of God" is a reality, he says, that "*determines the essential horizon of reflection on the dignity and the vocation of women.*"¹⁴ In using the terms "panoramic" and "horizon," the Pope indicates that the meaning of the feminine vocation can only be understood within the totality of creation and within the *divine intent* manifested in the creation of humans as women and men.¹⁵ That divine intent is expressed most completely, he says, in the event which came in the fullness of time: the Incarnation at Nazareth, in which "*Mary attains a union with God that exceeds all the expectations of the human spirit.*"¹⁶

It is from that *universal* perspective that *Mulieris Dignitatem* is written. The vocation of the "feminine" and the specific vocation of every woman participate in a divine intent that reached its perfection in *the Woman, Mary*, who holds and expresses the mystery and potential of *every woman's* vocation. It is not surprising that John

8. *Id.* ¶ 3 (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting *Galatians* 4:4 (emphasis added)).

9. *See id.*

10. *See id.* (discussing *Galatians* 4:4).

11. *Id.*

12. *Id.*

13. *See id.*

14. *Id.* ¶ 5 (internal quotation marks omitted).

15. *Cf. Genesis* 1:27 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition) ("God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.")

16. *See Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 3.

Paul writes at the conclusion of chapter one, “[I]t seems to me that the best thing is to *give this text the style and character of a meditation*.”¹⁷ In this spirit, John Paul consistently comes to his delineations concerning woman and man (as Christ did) by looking to “the beginning,” to the divine intent for humanity.¹⁸

II. TERMINOLOGY OF JOHN PAUL II IN *MULIERIS DIGNITATEM*

Closely linked to the universal, cosmic approach in the Pope’s reflections, there is another factor that can influence the reception (or rejection) of *Mulieris Dignitatem*: the terminology the Pope employs. The ease with which John Paul moves among words such as “the feminine,” “woman,” “virgin,” “mother,” “daughter,” “creature of God,” and “handmaid” in the brief pages of chapter two could snag the sleeve of thought and distract from his insights. Individual academic disciplines attempt to define these terms with some precision that is appropriate to their focus. It is precisely John Paul’s universal, “panoramic” approach, however, that allows him the freedom to connect multiple aspects of the *mystery* of the feminine vocation. It is obvious that the very term “feminine vocation” bears a pejorative connotation for many in our present culture, but John Paul repeatedly links “vocation” and “dignity.”¹⁹ The apostolic letter even begins with the statement, “The *dignity* and the *vocation of women*—a subject of constant human and Christian reflection—have gained exceptional prominence in recent years.”²⁰

The title given to chapter two of *Mulieris Dignitatem* is “Woman—Mother of God (*Theotókos*).” To explicate the vocation of women, John Paul stood at the turning point of creation, *the Annunciation at Nazareth*—that “fullness of time” where woman is found and where the self-revelation of God is given.²¹ At the Annunciation, Mary became *Theotókos*, Mother of God.²² There is no

17. *Id.* ¶ 2.

18. *E.g.*, *id.* ¶¶ 7, 9, 12, 18, 20; *cf.* THEOLOGY OF THE BODY, *supra* note 4, *passim* (connecting Christ’s references to “the beginning” in *Matthew* 19:3–9 and *Mark* 10:2–12 with the opening words of *Genesis* (“In the beginning God created the heavens and earth.”), and looking to *Genesis* as a whole to ascertain a rightly grounded approach to the study of humanity).

19. *E.g.*, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶¶ 1, 5–6, 12, 16, 20, 29–31.

20. *Id.* ¶ 1 (emphasis added).

21. *Id.* ¶¶ 4–5; *see also* *Luke* 1:26–38.

22. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 4.

At the moment of the Annunciation, by responding with her “*fiat*,” Mary conceived a man who was the Son of God, of one substance with the Father. Therefore *she is truly*

greater totally human vocation, no greater human dignity. From that vantage point, John Paul turns to "the beginning" of creation—including the first turning of man and woman from their Creator, when the promise was made of *the* Woman who would crush the head of personal evil²³—and to the ultimate finality of humanity. At the fulcrum of creation, Mary of Nazareth, by her personal, *feminine response*—by her *fiat* in personal dialogue with a divine messenger—became *Theotókos*, God-bearer.²⁴ It is a title, John Paul wrote, that "also signifies the fullness of the perfection of 'what is characteristic of woman,' of 'what is feminine.'" Here we find ourselves, in a sense, at the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women."²⁵

Mary's supernatural union with God is unique. While hers is the *ultimate realization of union with God*, union with Divine Persons is also the ultimate finality of *every* human person, both in earthly life and in eternity.²⁶ In looking toward this ultimate fulfillment of all humanity, the Pope stressed that Mary is "the representative and the archetype of the whole human race."²⁷ In particular, the Pope stresses that Mary's union with God is "in a sense, . . . the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women."²⁸ "Woman—Mother of God," is the reality, he said, that "*determines the essential horizon of reflection on the dignity and the vocation of women.*"²⁹

When he speaks of the vocation of women, John Paul does not focus on a particular culture or moment of history. Rather, he delves to the roots of what it means to be created human: as image of God, called to communion of persons, even to union with the Trinity. All other specifics of a vocation find their source and meaning, their dignity, in that union. People look, says the Pope, for answers to

the Mother of God, because motherhood concerns the whole person, not just the body, nor even just human "nature." In this way the name "*Theotókos*"—Mother of God—became the name proper to the union with God granted to the Virgin Mary.

Id.

23. *Genesis* 3:14–15 (Douay-Rheims) ("And the Lord God said to the serpent: . . . I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel.").

24. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 4.

25. *Id.* ¶¶ 5.

26. See Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* [*Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life*] ¶¶ 1–2 (1995).

27. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 4.

28. *Id.* ¶ 5.

29. *Id.*

“those profound mysteries of the human condition which . . . stir the human heart.”³⁰ What is a human being? What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is goodness and what is sin? What of sorrow, true happiness, death, judgment, life beyond the grave? “What, finally, is *that ultimate and unutterable mystery which engulfs our being*, and from which we take our origin and towards which we move?”³¹

The answer, as Mary exemplifies, is a union with God that exceeds all expectations of the human spirit. It exceeded all the hopes of the People of Israel.³² Who would dare to envision the depth of the profound truth to which human persons are called? Intimate union with Divine Persons can seem a preposterous idea in contemporary daily life, in which women are interpreted in the media as sex objects, or are prompted by “handlers” in preparation for political discourse, or encouraged to fabricate alternate identities through avatars in fantasy worlds such as Second Life.³³ It is not the easiest of times to receive the truth and depth of Pope John Paul II’s letter.

Realizing that Pope John Paul II’s approach is at once panoramic, and easeful in employing terminology appropriate to his method, I now propose the first key to receiving John Paul’s understanding of the feminine vocation: understanding the meaning and significance of Revelation.

III. THE CENTRALITY OF DIVINE REVELATION

Revelation, in the deepest sense of the word, whether divine or human, means *personal manifestation*. Differing from mere information, authentic revelation means *making known what is essentially hidden*. Whether divine or human, revelation is entrusting, person to person, what can only be made known through a choice to reveal. Revelation, then, is not something that can be demanded as a right or “found out” through clever observation or scientific probing. Through the

30. *Id.* ¶ 3 (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* [Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions] ¶ 1 (1965), reprinted in THE SIXTEEN DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II 253, 255 (Nat’l Catholic Welfare Conference trans., 1967) [hereinafter *Nostra Aetate*]).

31. *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting *Nostra Aetate*, *supra* note 30, ¶ 1 (emphasis added)).

32. *Id.*

33. Second Life is a user-created 3-D virtual world community developed by Linden Lab and available on the Internet since 2003. Users of Second Life are termed “residents” and interact with each other through avatars.

inspired text of *Genesis* 1:26–27, the Divine Persons manifested in a foundational way the eternally enduring intent regarding the creation of human beings: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."³⁴ While this is the major theme of chapter three in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, it is necessary to recognize here that this revelation is the essential basis for understanding "the feminine vocation" or any individual vocation. Being created in the image and likeness of God is, as John Paul writes, "the immutable *basis of all Christian anthropology*."³⁵ Yet, no human person could discover this truth apart from Divine Revelation.

Incrementally, how long it took before there was a readiness in humanity to receive *what it means to be created in the image and likeness of God!* Only in Jesus Christ would that revelation be made known in its stunning fullness. On the night before his Passion, at the Last Supper, Christ brought the revelation of the inner life of God to verbal expression in the context of washing the feet of the Apostles and his total self-gift in the Body and the Blood.³⁶

What he revealed at the Last Supper is that the inner life of God (in our stumbling human terminology) is a Divine Communion of Persons.³⁷ Theologically, the term for designating the uniqueness of each Divine Person in One Unity is the word *relation*.³⁸ The inner life of God—that which every human person is called to image—is that of *relation through total, personal self-gift and the receiving of the self-gift of the other Persons*. It is, ultimately, from the abiding truth of Trinitarian life that the fundamental vocation of every human person derives as *imago Dei*.

The word "vocation," derived from the Latin *vocare* ("to call"), presumes a *someone* who calls and one or more who are personally addressed. No one can call oneself, nor give oneself a "vocation." A call comes from an "other." It is relational and invites response. Rather than a self-chosen goal, appointment, or career, a vocation is always a call from another—a call into relationship and the possible fruitfulness that can emerge, exceeding any preconceived plan.

This understanding of vocation contrasts sharply with some feminist theologies that place great emphasis on women's experience

34. *Genesis* 1:27 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition).

35. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 6.

36. See *John* 13:1–17:26; *Matthew* 26:26–28.

37. See *John* 13:31–17:26.

38. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ¶ 252 (2d ed. 1997).

or a reinterpretation of Scriptural texts with the intent of purging them of patriarchalism. For example, in summarizing feminist theology, Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza notes:

Feminist biblical interpretation must therefore challenge the scriptural authority of patriarchal texts and explore how the Bible is used as a weapon against women in our struggles for liberation. It also must explore whether and how the Bible can become a resource in this struggle. A feminist biblical interpretation is thus first of all a political task. It remains mandatory because the Bible and its authority has been and is again today used as a weapon against women struggling for liberation.³⁹

In recent times, some feminists, in order to strip religion of patriarchy, have encouraged women to prepare altars in their personal rooms, with a mirror in the center of the altar.⁴⁰ The meaning of relational *vocation* is then replaced by a turning inward on self in order to recognize and idolize the “goddess within.” When Scripture is perceived as hostile to women, personal experience and the depatriarchalization of texts takes precedence over (or outrightly rejects) the expression of a divine intent regarding women. Scriptural Revelation is then interpreted as a diminution, or even a threat, regarding women’s meaning. It is perceived as something foisted upon them to keep them in subjection. Such an approach negates the possibility of understanding the assertions that Pope John Paul II makes concerning “the feminine vocation.” There is, in contemporary “Western” culture, a concerted drive to be liberated from whatever seems to threaten or inhibit unrestricted self-determination and self-realization.

Another aspect of Revelation John Paul II contemplated in his Theology of the Body was “the original unity of man and woman” as portrayed in the *Book of Genesis*.⁴¹ In *Mulieris Dignitatem* he asks, “What, finally, is *that ultimate and unutterable mystery which engulfs our being*, and from which we take our origin and towards

39. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Will to Choose or to Reject: Continuing Our Critical Work*, in *FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE* 125, 129 (Letty M. Russell ed., 1985).

40. NAOMI R. GOLDENBERG, *CHANGING OF THE GODS: FEMINISM & THE END OF TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS* 93–94 (1st digital print ed. 2001) (1979); LaSara Firefox, *Make Your Own Love Altar*, *NEW WITCH MAG.*, Autumn 2002, available at <http://www.newwitch.com/archives/nw01/read/lovealtar.html>.

41. *THEOLOGY OF THE BODY*, *supra* note 4, at 156–61.

which we move?"⁴² In presenting union with God as the answer to this question, John Paul builds upon one aspect of original unity, namely the splendor of the human potential for growth through *becoming-in-relation*.⁴³ He particularly emphasizes the bodily dimension of human relations. For example, in his audience of January 9, 1980, Pope John Paul described Adam, upon awaking to Eve's presence, as crying out, "[S]he is flesh from my flesh and bone from my bones' (Gen 2:23) By exclaiming this he seems to say, *Look, a body that expresses the 'person'!*"⁴⁴ Further, "[i]n this 'knowledge,' man confirms the meaning of the name 'Eve,' given to his wife, 'because she was the mother of all the living.'"⁴⁵

In his universal, panoramic approach to the revealed vocation of women, John Paul saw three archetypal figures: Eve of Eden, Mary of Nazareth, and the Woman of the Apocalypse.⁴⁶ *Each is a mother, a life-bearer.* John Paul stresses the incomparable dignity of Mary as Mother of God, but in a manner that underscored the dignity and call of *every* woman. In fresh ways he expresses what St. Proclus of Constantinople said eloquently in the fifth century when he commented on the same text that John Paul would cite in the opening lines of chapter two of *Mulieris Dignitatem*: "When the time had fully come, *God sent forth his Son, born of woman.*"⁴⁷ St. Proclus exulted:

Let nature leap for joy, and let women be honored! Let all humanity dance For "where sin increased, grace abounded yet more." She who called us here today is the Holy Mary; the untarnished vessel of virginity; the spiritual paradise of the second Adam; the workshop for the union of natures; the market-place of the contract of salvation; the bridal chamber in which the Word took the flesh in marriage; the living bush of human nature, which the fire of a divine birth-pang did not consume; the veritable swift cloud who carried in her body the one who rides upon the cherubim; the purest fleece drenched with the rain which came down from heaven, . . . handmaid and mother, virgin and heaven, the only bridge for God to mankind; the awesome loom of the divine economy upon which the

42. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 3, (quoting *Nostra Aetate*, *supra* note 30, ¶ 1).

43. See THEOLOGY OF THE BODY, *supra* note 4, at 161–65; see *supra* text accompanying notes 31–32.

44. THEOLOGY OF THE BODY, *supra* note 4, at 181, 183 (emphasis added).

45. *Id.* at 210 (quoting *Genesis* 3:20).

46. See *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 30.

47. *Id.* ¶ 3 (quoting *Galatians* 4:4 (emphasis added)).

robe of union was ineffably woven. The loom-worker was the Holy Spirit

. . . The loving God was not ashamed of the birth pangs of a woman, for the business at hand was life.⁴⁸

Apart from the divine intent made known in Revelation,⁴⁹ the understanding of “women’s place” in the world can remain that of subjection to those who dominate, of bondage to the drive for adulation, or of willingness to undergo body-manipulation to gain approval. What Pope John Paul II, and St. Proclus long before him, held as the ultimate realization of human life, however, has to do with *the mysteries of the body-person*.

While no tribe or nation is immune to misunderstanding the divine intent in creating human beings, in our moment of time (so technically adept) there is increasing manipulation of human persons, so that contrived appearances replace reality. Ours is a time of neo-Docetism that rejects the basic truths of human embodiment.

Events at the recent 2008 Olympics in Beijing illustrate this. Worldwide, a billion television viewers saw the Chinese flag carried into the arena by a flock of costumed children, while the “Ode to the Motherland” was lip-synced by Lin Miaoke, a nine-year old girl who wore a microphone.⁵⁰ *The Washington Times* reported that little Miaoke “was billed as a ‘smiling angel’ by the Chinese press, and made the front page of the New York Times as a veritable icon of a kinder, gentler, more cuddly China.”⁵¹ The reporter went on to explain:

Miaoke was only mouthing the words; it was the voice of another child soaring over the spectacle. Bob-haired and in need of braces, Yang Peiyi was *not cute enough to represent the nation and was withdrawn from the performance minutes before it began*.

“The reason was for the national interest. The child on camera should be flawless in image, internal feeling and expression,” music director Chen Qigang said on Beijing Radio, noting that the switch was made upon request of a senior member of the Politburo.

48. Archbishop Proclus of Constantinople, Homily on the Holy Virgin Theotokos (Dec. 26, 430), *reprinted in* NICHOLAS CONSTAS, PROCLUS OF CONSTANTINOPLE AND THE CULT OF THE VIRGIN IN LATE ANTIQUITY 137, 139 (2003) (footnotes omitted) (quoting *Romans* 5:20).

49. *Cf. Genesis* 1:27; *Luke* 1:31–37; *Galatians* 4:4.

50. Jennifer Harper, *Olympics Lip-Syncing Hits Low Note*, WASH. TIMES, Aug. 13, 2008, at 1.

51. *Id.*

....

The excruciating care that China took in producing and marketing the Olympics took a tumble as journalists connected the dots for an eager public. All was not as it seemed. During the opening ceremonies, fireworks had been digitally enhanced, flags flew on a fake breeze, ticket sales were doctored.⁵²

Scriptural Revelation, as John Paul elucidates in his development of the feminine vocation, presents the *reality* of human embodiment as precious, not for self-seeking, but for the possibilities of union and service. He comments that "*Mary takes her place within Christ's messianic service*"⁵³ with "the Son of man [who] came not to be served but to serve."⁵⁴ He emphasized that he was "considering the reality 'Woman—Mother of God,'" and that "[t]his *reality* also *determines the essential horizon of reflection on the dignity and the vocation of women.*"⁵⁵

IV. COMMUNION OF OPPOSITES

Together with Revelation, a second key that is helpful in receiving Pope John Paul II's understanding of the feminine vocation is (to turn a phrase of Nicholas of Cusa)⁵⁶ an openness to *the communion of opposites*. The phrase "communion of opposites" refers to the dynamic integration of what seemingly defies union.

All reality, whether divine or human, involves a union between what, at first, seems disparate or opposed. Examples abound, such as Three Persons in One God, body and soul, virgin and mother, Divine Person and human nature. In our swift-paced, data-proliferated culture, there are two common ways of trying to resolve the tensions that accompany the union of "opposites." First, there is sometimes the conviction that these tensions may be overcome by denying the differences—*reducing all to sameness*. A second way of resolving the tension is to *eliminate or diminish one in favor of the other*—

52. *Id.* (emphasis added).

53. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 5.

54. *Mark* 10:45 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition).

55. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 5.

56. See RICHARD FALCKENBERG, *HISTORY OF MODERN PHILOSOPHY* 20 (A.C. Armstrong, Jr. trans., New York, N.Y., Henry Holt & Co. 1897) ("In many different ways [Cusa] endeavors . . . to develop fruitfully the principle of the coincidence of opposites, which had dawned upon him on his return journey from Constantinople . . .").

sometimes by force, sometimes by legal fiat. Both are deadly. As Buckminster Fuller, world-planner, once remarked, "When we don't know how to solve a problem, we kill."⁵⁷

Some of these tendencies were underscored in the 2004 *Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women*, issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith while Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger was still its prefect.⁵⁸ The letter noted that among the new approaches to women's issues was a strong emphasis on the conditions of subordinationism "in order to give rise to antagonism" so that women ("in order to be themselves") must make themselves men's adversaries and seek power in the face of abused power.⁵⁹ In the wake of this, the document said:

In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed *sex*, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed *gender*, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary. The obscuring of the difference or duality of the sexes has enormous consequences on a variety of levels.⁶⁰

In the divinely revealed call of woman, as developed in the apostolic letter of Pope John Paul II, however, there is no deconstruction of the *mystery* of woman-person, no attempt to reduce the uniqueness of women's call to a generic "humanness." Nor does John Paul propose a subjection of woman to man. Every person is a seemingly impossible communion of realities, unique to each.

From the outset, *Mulieris Dignitatem's* focus is the person of Mary, *Theotókos*, Virgin Mother of God. She is a unity of true virgin and true wife, true virgin and true mother, the new Eve, and Mother of All the Living who is "'full of grace' through God, . . . redeemed from the moment of her conception"⁶¹ through the Son she bore. Mary is fully human, yet already assumed *bodily* into eternal life,⁶²

57. R. Buckminster Fuller made this observation during a Synergetics Seminar the author attended at the Abbey of Regina Laudis, in Bethlehem, Conn., in 1971.

58. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women* (2004), in 34 ORIGINS 169 (2004).

59. *Id.* ¶ 2.

60. *Id.*

61. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, *supra* note 38, ¶ 491.

62. *Id.* ¶ 966.

for with God, nothing is impossible.⁶³ Pope John Paul II opened the mystery of every woman's vocation in light of Mary's archetypal, yet unique interplay of gifts. The specific vocation of *every* woman includes aspects of the Marian archetype to be lived integrally and appropriately at every moment of existence—from Eve of Eden to the Woman of the Apocalypse. This is possible because the communion of seemingly incompatible qualities does not take place in a general abstract *nature* or instead through the remaking of a woman's body, but in the *totality of each body-person*.

That is why Pope John Paul stresses the Greek title for "Mother of God"—*Theotókos*. That title reached dogmatic clarification at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431.⁶⁴ In simple terms, what occasioned the calling of the Council of Ephesus was the conviction of Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople and his followers that they could not affirm that Mary was Mother of God.⁶⁵ Rather, they held that she was only mother of the human Christ, or *Christotókos*.⁶⁶ Their error was misunderstanding what is termed *communicatio idiomatum* ("the communication of idioms"). They could not accept that *one Divine Person* integrated all aspects of divinity and humanity. Mary is *Theotókos*, "Mother of God," because she is mother of the one *Person*, the Divine Word, whom she bore in her womb, and from her body he was born.⁶⁷ "Therefore," says John Paul, "*she is truly the Mother of God, because motherhood concerns the whole person, not just the body, nor even just human 'nature.'*"⁶⁸ In the mystery of the Annunciation, the focal point of all creation, it is possible to perceive and enter (never totally encompass) something of the mystery that every woman is called to live in unique ways. In her body-person, in ways appropriate to her age, commitment, and

63. Cf. Luke 1:37.

64. This central dogma of Mariology was explicitly declared in the first of twelve *anathemas* that Cyril of Alexandria proposed, which were accepted by the Third Ecumenical Council (Council of Ephesus, in 431): "If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore that the holy virgin is the mother of God (for she bore in a fleshly way the Word of God become flesh), let him be anathema." Third Letter of Cyril to Nestorius (431), reprinted in 1 DECREEES OF THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS 40, 59 (Norman P. Tamer, S.J. ed., Sheed & Ward & Georgetown Univ. Press 1990) (1972) (footnote omitted); 1 DECREEES OF THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS, *supra*, at 37; see also ROCH KERESZTY, JESUS CHRIST: FUNDAMENTALS OF CHRISTOLOGY 240 (2002).

65. See 1 DECREEES OF THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS, *supra* note 64, at 37–38; Second Letter of Nestorius to Cyril, reprinted in 1 DECREEES OF THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS, *supra* note 64, at 44.

66. See Nestorius, *supra* note 65.

67. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 4.

68. *Id.*

integrity, every woman is called uniquely to live the call to be virgin, bride, spouse, and mother.⁶⁹

While the word “female” accents mainly the physical, embodied being of woman, and the word “feminine” refers generally to cultural, historical aspects of women in given societies, it is always the unique *person* who is called and in whom a communion of characteristics and gifts exists. In *Theology and Church*, Walter Cardinal Kasper says that a *person* is an end in his or her self “and that is the reason for [the person’s] always unique, unconditional and unfringeable dignity.”⁷⁰ He explains:

The person is *Da-sein*: the German word means existence, but its literal meaning is “being there.” The person is the “there” of being. Because in the person the whole of reality is “there” in a special way, the person can never be the means to what is considered to be a greater end.⁷¹

Kasper goes on to say that “Person” in God is “incomparably higher, more comprehensive and more profound [in] a way which for our ‘person-ness’ can be no more than an image and a simile. In this analogous, figurative way, the personal nature of God means that in him the whole of reality is present in an utterly unique way.”⁷²

“Because in the person the whole of reality is ‘there’ in a special way,”⁷³ it is possible to realize that *every* woman is called, as Mary was, to be virgin, bride, spouse, and mother through her unique gifts, commitment, and graces. In a panoramic sense, to be “virginal” is to be growing in self-possession of *who one is*, authentically and concretely.⁷⁴ Mother Shaun Vergauwen explains:

69. Mother Shaun Vergauwen, F.S.E., creatively laid foundations for an understanding of this sequence in the life-call of every woman. In presenting this sequence, she said, “I propose a sequence of living with the feminine reality as an organic and cyclic life process in four phases—not only in the primary meaning of body but in all the extensions of body analogically.” Mother Shaun Vergauwen, Address of April 1994, at 1–6 (on file with author).

70. WALTER KASPER, *THEOLOGY AND CHURCH* 28 (Margaret Kohl trans., Crossroad Publ’g Co. 1989) (1987).

71. *Id.*

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

74. Notice, analogically, how advertisers at times appreciate something of this truth in order to bolster their marketing of products. Ivory Soap, over many decades, acclaimed its product to be “99.4%” purely what it purports to be—unadulterated. Also, “100% Virgin Olive Oil” professes to be perfectly what it is supposed to be.

In order to see the constancy of the four phases in our lives [as virgin, bride, spouse, and mother,] we . . . suggest the meaning of virginity in its expanded, extended and analogical sense It can also be the untouched, yet ungiven part of each new cycle. *All the potential in us is still virginal. Each instance of relationship which is waiting for spousal exchange or consummation is virginal.*⁷⁵

Bridal phases of life are times of preparation for the capacity to make an enduring, faithful commitment. As in the above understanding of virginity, the bridal phase is also to be understood in an expanded, extended, and analogical sense. Christ was sparing in defining his identity through human titles, but he specifically spoke of himself as the Bridegroom, the divine spouse.⁷⁶ He likewise described the fruitfulness of his coming from the Father: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."⁷⁷ It is within that mystery of the human person that John Paul wrote that the fullness of grace in Mary "also signifies the fullness of the perfection of 'what is characteristic of woman,' of 'what is feminine.'"⁷⁸

Professor Stanislaw Grygiel, personal friend of Pope John Paul II, in a paper entitled *Virginity and Marriage*, writes that the "truth of the human person is difficult," that "comprehension is a gift," and "the gift is a call."⁷⁹ He continues, "Therefore, one must respond to comprehension with one's whole self Comprehension therefore requires that man be *apt* for that which has been given to comprehend."⁸⁰ Similar to John Paul, taking the context of the "horizon" while using "man" to mean all human persons, Grygiel says:

On earth, the real world shows itself . . . as a space outlined by the horizon. . . . Within this definition everything is in reference to the place in which the sky meets the earth: right to the horizon. . . . The horizon makes up the first and primordial response to the right question about man. The horizon responds by calling the man, who has posed that question [M]an is put in the face of the necessity to respond to a question-call addressed to him from the horizon. . . .

75. Vergauwen, *supra* note 69, at 2 (emphasis added).

76. See, e.g., *Matthew* 9:14–15, 25:1–13.

77. *John* 10:10 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition) (internal quotation marks omitted).

78. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 5; see also *Luke* 1:28 ("And [the angel Gabriel] came to [Mary] and said, 'Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!'").

79. Stanislaw Grygiel, *Virginity and Marriage: Two Expressions of the Spousal Sovereignty of Man 2* (Sr. Agene Hutchinson trans., n.d.) (unpublished paper, on file with author).

80. *Id.*

From man's part, to ask in this way already means to *entrust oneself*.⁸¹

Such an understanding of *person* and *call* does not derive ultimately from a sin-conditioned experience. John Paul noted that "[f]rom the first moment of her divine motherhood, of her union with the Son whom 'the Father sent into the world, that the world might be saved through him' (cf. *Jn* 3:17)," the woman, Mary, "takes her place within Christ's messianic service."⁸² "It is precisely this *service*," says John Paul, that "constitutes the very foundation of that Kingdom in which 'to serve . . . means to reign.'"⁸³ The reality, "Mother of God," determines what Pope John Paul II saw as the "essential horizon of reflection" for considering the dignity and vocation of women.⁸⁴

In so doing, John Paul equates women's dignity and vocation with "motherhood" and "service." That may seem a regression for many in Western nations who think of women's liberation and contemporary "call" in different terms. Jeffrey Kuhner, columnist for *The Washington Times*, sums up American contemporary culture in this way:

America's stoic, traditional culture is being replaced by one of rampant hedonism, moral relativism and self-indulgence. We are no longer able to distinguish what is important and meaningful from what is frivolous and inconsequential. We are suffering from what Pope Benedict XVI calls the "infantilization" and "entertainmentization" of our society. We live in a culture dominated by TV, tabloids and trash; Hollywood, sports, sex and pop music reign supreme. In short, we have become obsessed with games and entertainment.⁸⁵

Twenty years after Pope John Paul II wrote his apostolic letter, a vocation of "taking one's place in service" can seem improbable—the stuff of jokes or recrimination expressed in foul invective. In a penetrating article marking the fortieth anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, Mary Eberstadt indicates that a similar surface response met that watershed encyclical. She wrote, "'The execration of the world,' in philosopher G.E.M. Anscombe's phrase, was what Paul VI incurred

81. *Id.* at 4.

82. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 5.

83. *Id.* (emphasis added) (ellipsis in original).

84. *Id.* (emphasis omitted).

85. Jeffrey Kuhner, *Celebrity Contender*, WASH. TIMES, Aug. 17, 2008, at B3, available at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2008/aug/17/celebrity-contender/>.

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with that document—to which the years since 1968 have added plenty of just plain ridicule."⁸⁶ Yet, four decades later, Eberstadt writes:

[T]he document's signature predictions [have] been ratified in empirical force, [and] as few predictions ever are: in ways its authors could not possibly have foreseen, including by information that did not exist when the document was written, by scholars and others with no interest whatever in its teaching⁸⁷

For such reasons, it is helpful to approach Pope John Paul II's reflection on the feminine vocation in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, twenty years after its promulgation, from a third perspective: his understanding of the embodied person as *gift*.

V. THE VOCATION TO BE BODY-GIFT

Mulieris Dignitatem came sequentially after John Paul's intense series of Wednesday audiences on the Theology of the Body, which he began in 1979. As noted earlier, *Mulieris Dignitatem* was built on the foundation laid there. In a landmark audience of January 9, 1980, the Holy Father said:

The body, which expresses femininity "for" masculinity and, vice versa, masculinity "for" femininity, manifests the reciprocity and the communion of persons. It expresses it through gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence. This is *the body: a witness* to creation as a fundamental gift, and therefore a witness *to Love as the source from which this same giving springs*.⁸⁸

To enter more deeply into the meaning of the "feminine vocation," which John Paul stresses is exemplified completely in Mary, Mother of God, several questions must be asked. First, *why* is gift "the fundamental characteristic of human existence"? Second, *how* is the body intended "to be a witness to creation as a fundamental gift"? Third, is every woman called to *be* gift?

Why is gift the fundamental characteristic of human existence? In his January 2, 1980, audience, John Paul introduced what he called the

86. Mary Eberstadt, *The Vindication of Humanae Vitae*, FIRST THINGS, Aug.–Sept. 2008, at 35, 35–36, available at <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/07/002-the-vindication-of-ihumanae-vitaei-28>.

87. *Id.* at 36.

88. THEOLOGY OF THE BODY, *supra* note 4, at 181, 183.

“hermeneutics of the gift.”⁸⁹ *Gift* is at the heart of creation from the beginning, he said. Creation, as a calling out of nothingness, “signifies *gift*; a fundamental and ‘radical’ gift, that is, an act of giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothing.”⁹⁰ He adds later, “[C]reation is a gift, because man appears in it, who, as an ‘image of God,’ is able to understand the very meaning of the gift in the call from nothing to existence.”⁹¹

In developing the meaning of *Genesis*’s revelatory account of creation and the specific creation of man and woman in the *image and likeness of God*, John Paul emphasized, “In fact, the gift reveals, so to speak, a *particular characteristic of personal existence*, or even of the very essence of the person.”⁹² Ultimately, the very being of woman and man created “from the beginning” not only *signifies* being-gift, but, as an image of God, each comes into existence as embodied gift. The human person does not call self into existence from nothing nor determine human meaning from one generation to the next as the milieu and culture change. The reason *why* gift is “the fundamental characteristic of human existence” is that creation in the divine image of a Communion of Persons is the basis of human reality.

A second assertion by the Holy Father in this regard is that the *body* is to be “a witness to creation as a fundamental gift.”⁹³ From the beginning, the body was not an issue of indifferent configuration. Revelation is clear that a divine intent underlies humanity’s creation as male and female,⁹⁴ a reality marking the whole body-person. Whatever concerns the human person explicitly concerns the body. All creation and all humanity is created as gift; for women and men to *be* gift requires that the gift be lived-out bodily. John Paul avers that

the concept of “giving” cannot refer to nothing. It indicates the one who gives and the one who receives the gift, as well as the relation established between them. Now, this relation emerges in the creation account at the very moment of the creation of man. This relation is

89. *Id.* at 177, 179.

90. *Id.* at 180.

91. *Id.*

92. *Id.* at 182.

93. *Id.* at 183 (emphasis omitted).

94. See *Genesis* 1:27 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition) (“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”)

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shown above all by the expression, "God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him."⁹⁵

As John Paul would reiterate, the divine image is realized outwardly through the body which *expresses the person*. In the earliest (Yahwist) account of creation in *Genesis*, man "emerges in the dimension of reciprocal gift, the expression of which—by that very fact the expression of his existence as person—is the human body in all the original truth of its masculinity and femininity."⁹⁶ So in 1988, when the Holy Father came to reflect on the meaning of the "feminine vocation" in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, his insights were inextricably united to the fundamental meanings of body and gift. What constitutes an authentic embodied gift, in the image and likeness of God?

I suggest that gifts understood at this depth will have certain characteristics:

1. Genuine gifts must be truly "in possession" by the giver so that they can be freely given. One cannot give what is not one's own to give.
2. Gifts are unexpected. They have an element of surprise.⁹⁷
3. True gifts are bestowed person-to-person and are appropriate to the recipient, the giver, and the occasion.
4. True gifts bear within themselves something of the person of the giver. The greater the presence of the giver *in* the gift, the greater the gift.⁹⁸

How it is possible within the life of any woman to be an embodied gift depends upon her moment in time, her unique potential, her charism, and her commitment. Like Mary, this can mean giving and

95. THEOLOGY OF THE BODY, *supra* note 4, at 180 (quoting *Genesis* 1:27).

96. *Id.* at 183; *cf.* *Genesis* 2:7, 20–24.

97. One might recall in this regard the way Archangel Gabriel concluded his surprising message to Mary of Nazareth: "For with God nothing will be impossible." *Luke* 1:37 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition).

98. *Cf.* MARY TIMOTHY PROKES, *AT THE INTERFACE: THEOLOGY AND VIRTUAL REALITY* 150 (2004) (describing the "genuine gift" as gratuitously given, bestowed person to person, something that cannot be earned or demanded as a right, bearing elements of surprise, expressing love and relationship, and appropriate for the person and occasion).

receiving in ways that far exceed any preliminary human plans, for nothing is impossible with God.⁹⁹ Throughout chapter two of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the archetypical basis of women's vocation is identified closely with the ultimate realization of her person—being *mother*: from Eve, “Mother of the Living,” to Mary, Mother of all the living who are now opened to the possibility of salvation through her Son. Here, “mother” is not simply an honorary title. Rather, “[f]rom the first moment of her *divine motherhood*, of her union with the Son whom ‘the Father sent into the world, that the world might be saved through him’ (cf. Jn 3:17), *Mary takes her place within Christ’s messianic service*.”¹⁰⁰

The truth of self-gift, in and through the body, undergirds any individual vocation, whether for a man or for a woman. Here, as in regard to other aspects of the “feminine vocation,” the notion of body as gift—or even the authenticity of *any* gift—has come on challenging times.

In an address celebrating the anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Antonio Cardinal Canizares, Archbishop of Toledo, Spain, spoke of the current gender revolution “that rejects sexuality as a defining characteristic of the person,” so that “[t]he human being becomes the result of the desire of choice [T]he person—whether man or woman—‘can choose his or her gender’ and later on, modify the choice if so desired, taking on homosexual, heterosexual, transsexual or other lifestyles.”¹⁰¹ Cardinal Canizares spoke of Pope John Paul II’s letter as proclaiming that women and men “are created as persons in the image of God who is love, to live in communion.”¹⁰²

[F]rom this flows their reciprocity and that the person is called to exist for others, becoming a gift, he said. “It is not that God has made them ‘incomplete’” but rather that he has created them “for a communion of persons, in which each one can be ‘help’ for the other because they are at the same time equal as persons and complementary as masculine and feminine.”¹⁰³

99. Cf. Luke 1:37.

100. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 5 (first emphasis added).

101. Marta Lago, *Cardinal: A “Gender Revolution” Is Under Way*, ZENIT, Feb. 12, 2008, <http://www.zenit.org/article-21757?1=english>.

102. *Id.* (internal quotation marks omitted).

103. *Id.*

The call to be mutual gift, then, is at the heart of a vocation. Pope John Paul II has not presented a sentimental caricature of the fulfilled woman as mother. He succinctly illuminates the truth that every vocation involves the day-by-day capacity to conceive, bear, and nurture life out of one's own body-person, *to be mother of all the living* in ways appropriate to covenantal marriage, consecrated life, or a form of personal commitment that brings life to fullest possible fulfillment in others.

The Trinity, a Communion of Divine Persons in eternal mutual self-gift, found no greater way of communicating the meaning of perfection of self-gift humanly, bodily, than the truth of Christ's perpetual self-gift: "[T]his is my body given for you."¹⁰⁴ He proclaimed openly, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."¹⁰⁵

The "How shall this be?"¹⁰⁶ is for every woman the unique wonder and mystery of being called into a life of self-gift and communion. All of us know women who live or have lived this mystery in exemplary ways, becoming archetypes within the Archetype, but each in unique ways and circumstances. Think, for example, of Sister Dorothy Stang, who lived with the direly poor in the Amazon jungle, attempting to halt illegal logging and land abuse in the rain forests.¹⁰⁷ On a Saturday in February of 2005, Sister Dorothy set out for Boa Esperanca in northern Para, where a group of peasant farmers awaited her.¹⁰⁸ She carried a rain-soaked Bible.¹⁰⁹ Paul C. Carr, in his essay *The Amazing Grace of Sister Dorothy Stang*, wrote later:

While Sister Dorothy walked on toward Boa Esperanca, she heard taunts from men who had stopped alongside of her. The rain poured as she stopped and opened her Bible. She read to the men. They listened to two verses, stepped back and aimed. Sister Dorothy

104. Cf. *Luke* 22:19.

105. *John* 10:10 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition) (internal quotation marks omitted).

106. Cf. *Luke* 1:34.

107. Paul C. Carr, *The Amazing Grace of Sister Dorothy Stang* 1 (2007) (unpublished essay), available at http://www.elanguages.org/open_resource.php?resourceid=16487; see generally BRINKA LE BRITON, *THE GREATEST GIFT: THE COURAGEOUS LIFE AND MARTYRDOM OF SISTER DOROTHY STANG* 178–211 (2007). Carr's essay was distributed at a memorial gathering at St. Philip's Parish, Falls Church, Virginia, in 2007.

108. Carr, *supra* note 107, at 1.

109. *Id.*

raised her bible toward them and six shots were fired at point blank range. She fell to the ground, martyred.¹¹⁰

We know of other women who have given their bodied self-gift to the point of personal death so that the child they carried in womb could attain a stage of viability. Some women are called to care day by day for husbands, children, or parents who cannot carry out the simplest tasks of eating, walking, or bathing unless someone in faithful communion assists them. In a culture in which many live quite artificially, by “script-for-appearances’ sake” or hoping for their public “fifteen minutes of fame,” it is important to remember that most of life, *in its quiet splendor*, is lived simply. How relatively little is known of the personal life of Mary of Nazareth! From the journey to Jerusalem when Jesus was age twelve to the wedding feast of Cana,¹¹¹ nothing specific is known, yet each day was part of the reality of being Mother of Jesus Christ and spouse of Joseph. Fellow-townsmen would later scoff at Jesus: we know all about you, they assured him,¹¹² missing the communion between him and the “woman,” and the “carpenter.”

The truth of vocation, of self-gift in communion, as John Paul knew, was *relationship*. This spans every talent and potential of women. John Paul quoted Pope Paul VI in his introduction to *Mulieris Dignitatem*: “[I]t is evident that women are meant to form part of the living and working structure of Christianity in so prominent a manner that perhaps not all their potentialities have yet been made clear.”¹¹³

Spouse and mother, consecrated woman and mother, young woman growing into her potential—all are uniquely called in the mystery which takes fullest light in Christ and Mary.

When Sister Maura Eichner, an accomplished poet, received the Theodore Hesburgh Award for Excellence in College and University Teaching in 1986, the College of Notre Dame of Maryland celebrated the honor by presenting her with an endowment fellowship in her

110. *Id.*

111. *See Luke 2:41–52; John 2:1–11.*

112. *Mark 6:1–6; Luke 4:16–30; cf. John 6:41–42.*

113. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 1, ¶ 1 (internal quotation marks omitted) (quoting Pope Paul VI, Address to Participants at the National Meeting of the Centro Italiano Femminile (Dec. 6, 1976)).

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name.¹¹⁴ In her response, Sister Maura spoke not of herself, but of her students and *their* accomplishments. She was speaking into the *mystery* that Pope John Paul II would invite women to contemplate in *Mulieris Dignitatem*. As consecrated woman, Sister Maura pointed *as a mother* to the abundant life and accomplishments of the women she had taught, concluding her thanks for the endowment by saying, "I have borne you all, and I keep you in my heart."¹¹⁵

114. See *Sr. Maura Wins Hesburgh Award: Friends Contribute to Sr. Maura Fellowship*, COLUMNS (College of Notre Dame of Baltimore, Md.), Feb. 13, 1986, at 8, 11.

115. *Id.*