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EDUCATING FOR AN AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN WOMANHOOD

Sr. Thomas Augustine Becker, O.P.[†]

INTRODUCTION

In his 2006 commencement address at Hillsdale College, Professor Harvey C. Mansfield of Harvard University bravely trod where few men dare to go, speaking frankly about the defects of traditional feminism and the need for a new feminism. In the course of his remarks, he stated:

[W]omen have shown themselves capable in careers formerly closed to them, but seem no longer to enjoy the pleasures of being a woman. They know how to imitate men but are confused about how to remain women while doing so. Having started from the rejection of femininity, women's identity necessarily becomes a search without a guide. To see confusion in action, all you have to do is watch the television show *Desperate Housewives*.¹

In speaking of the rejection of femininity, he was referring to a phenomenon created by the feminists of the twentieth century. He observed, "Whereas before women were held back from the careers they could have attained, now they are pushed further than they may want to go. In this new situation women . . . need an identity . . ."²

The feminist movement has stolen an identity from several generations of women, and with it, not only the capacity to bring their feminine gifts to the world, but even the ability to "enjoy the

[†] Sr. Thomas Augustine Becker, O.P., is a member of the Dominican Sisters of Mary, Mother of the Eucharist located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is originally from New York and holds degrees in music, law, and education. At present she is teaching elementary school in Phoenix, Arizona.

1. Harvey C. Mansfield, *A New Feminism*, IMPRIMIS, June 2006, at 1, 2.
2. *Id.* (emphasis omitted).

pleasures of being a woman.”³ The theft took place in a sleight of hand that wiped away all of the markers on the board, using as a pretext the need to level the playing field for women. One writer referred to the alleged need for leveling the field as “the pretense that woman could make her best contribution toward human progress by being ‘equal’ to man, rather than being herself.”⁴ Rather than being herself, now she can be “just as good as a man,” and we have a situation where it really has become each man for himself. Yet somehow, it has not worked out the way anyone had expected. No one is really happy with the results. On one hand, the feminists—and I use the term broadly because there are many variations—are not satisfied and insist that more work of the same kind needs to be done.⁵ On the other hand, ordinary women, who are mostly concerned with living their lives and loving their families and friends, find that no one—including themselves—has quite captured an understanding of who they really are and what they really want and need, despite the undeniable progress that has been made by women in education, law, and politics. In a larger context too, there is the unavoidable sense that the increasing fragmentation and disintegration of modern culture is somehow related to this identity crisis at the core of what it means to be a woman.

At the root of the issue is the metaphysical question of the essence of womanhood. For centuries, the communication of that understanding took place from generation to generation through relationships among women—mother to daughter, grandmother to granddaughter, among sisters and girlfriends—woven into the fabric of daily life and social norms. When the fabric of daily life began to change, and with it social norms, so did the pattern of communicating the meaning of womanhood. At the same time, the focus of women’s concerns shifted almost entirely to the externals of career and educational opportunities, and this changed the substance of the communication. The foundational, intangible, and spiritual essence of womanhood was submerged under the weight of these concerns. In a world consumed by materialism and empiricism, it is no surprise that the mystery of woman, which is not visible or quantifiable,

3. *Id.*

4. GERTRUD VON LE FORT, *THE ETERNAL WOMAN* xviii (Marie Cecilia Buehrle trans., 1954).

5. There are some exceptions to the general idea in feminist circles that further change through traditional feminist approaches is needed. *See, e.g.,* Naomi Wolf, *Our Bodies, Our Souls*, *THE NEW REPUBLIC*, Oct. 16, 1995, at 26 (arguing for a change in the pro-choice movement’s rhetoric and consciousness about abortion).

cannot be acknowledged.⁶ However, in order for the world to acknowledge the feminine gift, women must possess an awareness and understanding of their feminine vocation. As Gertrud von le Fort observes, penetrating to the core of the challenge and expressing succinctly the truth that cannot be avoided, “[The image of woman] as reflected in the creative work of man, whether in its exaltation or in its debasement, is the very image that she herself presents to him.”⁷

Enter the late Pope John Paul II, who in the course of his magnificent pontificate provided us with a trio of documents specifically addressing the meaning of woman, the present cultural crisis, and the relationship between the two: *Mulieris Dignitatem*,⁸ *Evangelium Vitae*,⁹ and his *Letter to Women*.¹⁰ Together with his Theology of the Body, John Paul II laid before us a blueprint for the simultaneous recovery of the identity of woman and the cultural transformation that humanity greatly needs. This Article, celebrating the twentieth anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, considers anew the foundation this document laid, together with *Evangelium Vitae*, for the launch of a “new feminism.”

I. JOHN PAUL II’S VISION FOR WOMEN AND CULTURE

In the introduction to *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, Michele Schumacher begins by acknowledging that the work has barely begun in founding and articulating the new feminism first conceived by John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae*.¹¹ Though it is true the

6. FORT, *supra* note 4, at 32.

7. *Id.* at 45.

8. Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women] (1988) [hereinafter *Mulieris Dignitatem*].

9. Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* [Encyclical Letter on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life] (1995) [hereinafter *Evangelium Vitae*].

10. Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (1995), reprinted in POPE JOHN PAUL II ON THE GENIUS OF WOMEN 45 (Comm. on Women in Soc’y & in the Church, U.S. Catholic Conference ed., 1997).

11. Michele M. Schumacher, *An Introduction to a New Feminism*, in *WOMEN IN CHRIST: TOWARD A NEW FEMINISM* ix, ix (Michele M. Schumacher ed., 2004); see also *Evangelium Vitae*, *supra* note 9, ¶ 99.

In transforming culture so that it supports life, *women* occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to 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.

Id.

work has only just begun, collections of essays like those found in *Women in Christ* and, more generally, the ongoing philosophical and theological work of analyzing and synthesizing the thought of John Paul II have already achieved something. These works have brought us far enough along in developing a comprehensive and compelling anthropology based on the whole truth of the human person that we are ready not only to propose it to the world, but also to engage the world in concrete terms regarding a new feminist ethic. We must do so with the dual purpose of returning to women an awareness of the true beauty and dignity of their feminine vocation and of transforming the culture through this awareness. It is the work of education that stands at the intersection of the development and implementation of a new feminism and the transformation of culture.

Authentic Christian Womanhood is the name I have given to a proposed educational model for girls that is inspired by and founded upon John Paul II's vision, as articulated in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, of the dignity and vocation of woman and the call to embrace motherhood as being constitutive of the feminine vocation. Authentic Christian Womanhood also accepts John Paul II's invitation to women to transform culture, as can be found in *Evangelium Vitae*,¹² by living out fully their feminine vocation. I am going to look at the task from two perspectives: identity and capacity. The overall objectives are a pair: first, to introduce young women to the beauty and dignity of their vocation and to give them an identity they can embrace with open hearts because it corresponds to the truth of their being; and second, to cultivate their innate capacity to, in the words of John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae*, "bear witness to the meaning of genuine love" so that they may respond generously to the mission entrusted to them by John Paul II to transform culture.¹³ *Mulieris Dignitatem* is the source discussing the identity of woman, and *Evangelium Vitae* is the source discussing ways to think about the capacity and mission of woman. Obviously, identity, capacity, and mission all overlap and are interrelated, so this distinction is not a limitation, but only a vehicle to organize the ideas.

In thinking about how to develop an educational model faithful to John Paul II's ideas and vision, it is important to avoid any tendency to constrain the broadness of his thinking. This can happen very easily when dealing with something as concrete as education, even

12. *Evangelium Vitae*, *supra* note 9, ¶ 99.

13. *Id.* (emphasis omitted).

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more so when there is already a foil in play: the powerful influence that the various strains of feminism have had on our culture, especially in the field of education. The approach needs to be expansive. Thinking in terms of identity and capacity will provide a framework that both honors John Paul II's vision and guards against provoking claims of dwelling in the past or wishing to limit the development of a young woman's talents.

II. AN EDUCATIONAL MODEL FOR AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN WOMANHOOD

In an interview early in 2008, Angelo Cardinal Bagnasco, Archbishop of Genoa and President of the Italian Bishop's Conference, was asked why Pope Benedict XVI said the problem of education is first of all a problem of faith. Cardinal Bagnasco replied:

Because the announcement of Christ contains and makes explicit a conception of man that is complete. It brings together in a true humanism all that is human and at the same time all that is transcendent in us. And there is no pedagogy, *no possibility of education without a correct anthropology*.¹⁴

Again, there is "no possibility of education without a correct anthropology." Any model of education that purports to provide a genuine education must begin with a proper understanding of the human person. The truth of our being has to do with our origin as creatures made by God in his image and likeness—"male and female he created them"¹⁵—with the possibility of eternal life in communion with God. The fundamental problem with just about all models of education today is that they profoundly misunderstand the nature of man. Thus, education continues to veer further and further off course. It has lost its moorings and has essentially become disconnected from reality as it concerns the human person. So, first and foremost, this anthropology must provide a foundation adequate to the task at hand. *Mulieris Dignitatem* provides this foundation.

The next concern is to identify the possibilities for the realization of womanhood. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II acknowledged multiple ways to realize womanhood. In this regard, St. Edith Stein,

14. Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco, *The Church Is Not an Élite, but a People* (Davide Perillo ed.), TRACES, July / Aug. 2008, at 45, 46 (emphasis added).

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

who wrote extensively about women's education, states clearly that "there is not one fully undifferentiated goal for all women."¹⁶ This is very important in considering the aims and methods of women's education and is the fundamental reason why Authentic Christian Womanhood is based on the development of identity and capacity, rather than external factors measured by competition in the marketplace. Nonetheless, woman's maternal orientation and the "naturally spousal predisposition of the feminine personality" are at the core of what it means to be a woman, and therefore must be acknowledged, honored, and cultivated.¹⁷ Creating an environment that does so is the indispensable support for a model of education based on Authentic Christian Womanhood.

In examining the goal of education for women, St. Edith proposes a threefold approach that will serve substantially as the framework for this model. Briefly, she looks to the development of a girl's humanity, womanhood, and individuality. She writes, "A flexible variety of educational methods is needed to bring about a combination of an authentic humanity and womanhood with an unspoiled individuality."¹⁸ The goal is ambitious; it proposes to address both the ontological order—that is, the order of being where vocation is located—and the order of doing, which is where preparation for a career in the world is situated.

The obstacles are admittedly formidable. The late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese pointed them out with clarity and force in her essay *Equality, Difference, and the Practical Problems of a New Feminism*.¹⁹ She refers to the "daunting complexity of the cultural, political, and practical problems" of implementing a new feminism.²⁰ She truthfully points out that these have been largely avoided because the discussion to date has remained principally on a theoretical plane. She warns that there is a danger in remaining in the realm of theory and that "a viable new feminism must directly confront the realm of

16. EDITH STEIN, *ESSAYS ON WOMAN* 201 (L. Gelber & Romaeus Leuven eds., Freda Mary Oben trans., ICS Publications, The Collected Works of Edith Stein No. 2, 2d rev. ed. 1996) (emphasis omitted).

17. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 8, ¶ 20.

18. STEIN, *supra* note 16, at 202.

19. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Equality, Difference, and the Practical Problems of a New Feminism*, in *WOMEN IN CHRIST: TOWARD A NEW FEMINISM*, *supra* note 11, at 297 [hereinafter Fox-Genovese, *Practical Problems of a New Feminism*]; see also Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Catholic and Feminist: Can One Be Both?*, *LOGOS*, Fall 1999, at 11 (discussing why it is not problematic to be both a Catholic and a feminist).

20. Fox-Genovese, *Practical Problems of a New Feminism*, *supra* note 19, at 297.

practice.”²¹ The realm of girls’ education is indeed practical, and stepping into the arena of education with this new feminist ethic as the framework is a sure way to confront the status quo. It will not be for the faint of heart, precisely because the proposal is radical in both its scope and its objectives. It will challenge not only the dominant feminist agenda but the larger cultural context, which the feminist agenda has helped to shape and within which it comfortably resides. And above all, Genovese asserts, it must be able to answer the claims of the old feminism, mainly how to reconcile “women’s difference from men with their equality to them” and how this plays itself out in the world.²²

Here is where she expresses her doubts about new feminism’s ability to meet the challenge. I suggest her assessment falls short. In particular, she cites what she believes is the inadequacy of theories of gender complementarity, analogies of Christ’s relation to the Church, and the idea of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the archetype of woman. On the contrary, I believe that although the answers proposed by John Paul II and those who embrace his ideas may be rejected as unsatisfactory by feminists of just about every stripe, the reason has less to do with the adequacy of the answers than with the faulty paradigm from which they judge these ideas. Their paradigm is one of power, and no matter where one stands within that paradigm, John Paul II’s vision for women and culture—a rich expression of the Gospel—will never fit within it. We know, however, that the true paradigm is love, and it is not possible to embrace the answers offered by the new feminism from any other vista because, in the words of John Paul II, “the dignity of women is measured by the order of love.”²³ This may be the greatest challenge of all: effecting that paradigm shift in the hearts and minds of young women. In essence what we are talking about is conversion, but conversion never takes place without the action of grace, and we must not discount that vital ingredient. Authentic Christian Womanhood does not propose to create *ex nihilo*, but to allow the feminine vocation to surface and then guide the natural orientation to the truth through the cultivation of Christian virtue.

Nonetheless, there is real merit to Genovese’s concerns, and any program of education today unavoidably takes place against the

21. *Id.* at 300.

22. *Id.* at 299.

23. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 8, ¶ 29 (emphasis omitted).

backdrop of the powerful ways in which the old feminism has shaped our culture. For example, Genovese notes that feminism's strategies have

undermined . . . our ability to value and nurture human life in all its diversity, our respect for a uniform standard of justice, our willingness to honor any form of natural or divine authority . . . , our willingness to nurture children and protect childhood, and our ability always to see other persons as ends in themselves—never means to another end.²⁴

Even though the feminist establishment is not our main audience in the classroom, we will have to be prepared to give a comprehensive and truthful account of the reasons for the path to joy we propose, and to do so in a way that responds to their claims, which are present at least implicitly in the questions and confusion of today's young women.

We have some powerful and rich ways to respond to the confusion and new ways to think about the questions presented, thanks to John Paul II and those who have thoughtfully and prayerfully synthesized and expounded on his thought. The idea is to present to young women the beauty and dignity of their vocation as women so that they grow to know, understand, and love it. To give young women the reasoning skills and vocabulary to talk about who they are as women and to be aware of the insidious nature of the agenda to deconstruct gender and the implications for all social structures. To show them plainly how abortion is in fact the greatest possible enemy of women. To give them an understanding of equality and complementarity—integral gender complementarity may be a mouthful, but they need to be comfortable with both the term and the concept. To teach them how to lead men to a higher place by holding themselves out as the treasures they are and setting high moral standards for interactions among men and women. By proposing to them the nobility of their vocation as women and the great mission they have in the world “to bear witness to the meaning of genuine love”²⁵ precisely because of the gift of their feminine genius, so that they may become “fountains of living water in the midst of a thirsting world.”²⁶

24. Genovese, *Practical Problems of a New Feminism*, *supra* note 19, at 298–99.

25. *Evangelium Vitae*, *supra* note 9, ¶ 99 (emphasis omitted).

26. Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* [*Encyclical Letter on Christian Love*] ¶ 42 (2005).