

## **Women in the Church: Power and Authority or Feminine Genius?**

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From ancient times, there has been an understanding of the Church as both Bride and Mother. She is bride of Christ, born from his side on the cross as he laid down his life in sacrifice for her, and she is Mother of Christians as they are born anew in her through the waters of baptism. The concept of the Church as mother is richly developed in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. St. Cyprian of Carthage famously wrote, “No one can have God for his Father who does not have the Church for his mother.”<sup>1</sup> As the Church is identified with these paradigmatic feminine qualities, it should follow that the role of women be central to the Church’s life and mission—she should, and does, have the heart of a woman.

In recent decades as the rise of militant feminism has caused a distortion regarding the true role and identity of women in general, and especially in the Church, there has been a growing misunderstanding of the Church’s attitude toward the role of women. Because women are not admitted to ordination and other hierarchical roles, many in our society, specifically in the United States, see her as oppressive, patriarchal and misogynistic.<sup>2</sup> In reality, however, The Church has always acknowledged a need for the presence of strong women who serve the Church by authentically living the qualities of their Feminine Genius. Because the Church is Bride and Mother, she is feminine, and from that feminine character, she calls women to live,

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<sup>1</sup> St. Cyprian of Carthage, *On Church Unity*, trans. Robert Ernest Wallis. From *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1886.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/050701.htm>, 6. (accessed July 14, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Monica Miglorino Miller, *The Authority of Women in the Catholic Church*, Emmaus Road (Steubenville, OH:2015), 14ff.

work, pray, and form her heart with all that their femininity offers by participating in her life-giving nature.

Taking the maxim, “The Church prays what she believes,” or “the law of prayer is the law of the Church,” we can look to the official prayers of the Church, Common of Holy Women in the Liturgy of the Hours to see how the Church expresses her understanding of the role of women in the Church.<sup>3</sup> The intercessions for evening prayer help us to understand that women through the entire history of the Church and in every state of life have a central role in the growth and mission of the Church.

Through all the women martyrs who conquered bodily death by their courage,

- strengthen your Church in the hour of trial.

Through married women who have advanced in grace by holy matrimony,

- make the apostolic mission of your Church fruitful.

Through widows who eased their loneliness and sanctified it by prayer and hospitality,

- help your Church reveal the mystery of your love in the world.

Through mothers who have borne children for the kingdom of God and the human community,

- help your Church bring all men and women to a rebirth in life and salvation.

Through all your holy women who have been worthy to contemplate the light of your countenance,

- let the deceased members of your Church exult in that same vision forever.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1124.

<sup>4</sup> Liturgy of the Hours, Common of Holy Women, Evening prayer intercessions.

We can see in these invocations reference to every state in life enjoyed by women in the life of the Church. One may note that absent from the above intercessions is any reference to virgins or consecrated women. This is remedied by looking at the intercessions for Evening Prayer in the Common of Virgins.

Christ, the holy virgins went out to meet you with their lamps alight:

- keep the fidelity of your consecrated handmaids burning brightly.

You have given your people joy in celebrating the feast of your holy virgin N.,

- give us constant joy through her intercession.

You have admitted the holy virgins to your marriage banquet:

- in your mercy lead the dead to your heavenly feast.<sup>5</sup>

If the prayer of the Church reflects the beliefs of the Church, then one can understand the Church's esteem for the role of woman reflected in these prayers. In an effort to counter the voices of many who say that the Church oppresses women we will present, here examples from scripture and history to show the great love and esteem with which the Church holds the women who have lived and loved, spending their lives in her service.

### **Women and Authority**

Before speaking of the role and authority to which women are called in the Church today it is helpful to define what is meant by authority. The Latin *auctoritas* from which we get our English "authority" has as its root, *auctor* meaning "author, founder, creator, or originator."<sup>6</sup> This points to an understanding of authority, specifically that of God's authority, not primarily from his dominion and rule, but rather from his role as creator of heaven and earth. He has authority because he brings life into being.<sup>7</sup> This, then can be a proper understanding of authority in the

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<sup>5</sup> Liturgy of the Hours, Common of Virgins, Evening Prayer intercessions.

<sup>6</sup> Leo F. Stelten, *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin*, Hendrickson: Peabody, MA, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Church, as she too, through the power of God, brings life through her Sacraments, particularly the Sacrament of Baptism.

The Church as Mother has feminine authority because she is the source of life, she is the source of the Sacraments. While many believe that the exclusion of women from the priesthood relegates women to the level of second-class citizen with no authority whatever in the Christian life, they are sorely mistaken. The Church is the source of the Sacrament which makes men priests. It is by the life-giving, feminine, nature of the Church that gives life to the priesthood. Without her, this beautiful institution brought about by Christ, there are no priests, there is no Eucharist, there is no life.<sup>8</sup>

There is more that can be said regarding feminine authority in the Church and others have expounded upon this subject.<sup>9</sup> For our purposes, it suffices to say that one must understand authority to be imparted to those who have the responsibility of serving life and bring about life. Authority in the Church is neither about ruling nor power, it is about serving the life of the Church that she might be built up in joy and ordered towards the Kingdom to which she is destined.<sup>10</sup> It is in that context that women throughout the history of the Church have given exercise to their feminine authority within the Church by nurturing her life through the witness of fidelity and obedience to Christ the head of the body which is the Church.

### **The Perfection of Woman: Mary Mother of the Church**

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 139-140, 153-154.

<sup>9</sup> For a thorough treatment on feminine Authority in the Catholic Church and the complementarity of men and women regarding the “maleness” of the priesthood and the “femaleness” of the Church see Monica Migliorino Miller’s *The Authority of Women in the Catholic Church* cited in full in footnote two. This work also treats the role of women in the Church today re: the Domestic Church as well as historically.

<sup>10</sup> Beniot-Dominique de La Soujeole, O. P. *An Introduction to the Mystery of the Church*, Catholic University of America (Washington, DC: 2014), 377.

In the Months leading up to the Second Vatican Council and during the Council itself there was much discussion amongst the fathers regarding the manner in which the Blessed Mother would be treated in the documents to come. There was a school of theologians who desired to pen a standalone treatise on the role and place of Mary in the Church and another school who felt this was giving Mary too much emphasis. The later, in fact, thought that perhaps a separate document would make it seem as though the Blessed Mother is in some way above or apart from the Church.<sup>11</sup> In the end, it was deemed most fitting to include the Church's document on the Blessed Virgin Mary as a chapter in the Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*.<sup>12</sup>

The Church has always viewed Mary through a variety of lenses. She is Mother of God, the New Eve, a type of the Church, and some today even are calling for a declaration of Mary as co-redemptrix with Christ.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately many see these titles as merely that, with no bearing on what that means for who she is as a woman in God's plan for man. Those who look for a more egalitarian role of women in the Church see Mary simply as, "a passive figure, following and not leading, who is ultimately defined according to her procreative powers...Mary's motherhood ties her to the hidden and domestic realm where there is little power and status."<sup>14</sup> This view of Mary is a far cry from the way in which the Church speaks of her in the culminating chapter of the Second Vatican Council's constitution on the Church—*Lumen Genitum*.

The chapter itself is entitled, "The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the Mystery of Christ and the Church."<sup>15</sup> This very title helps us to understand that the role of a woman, Mary,

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<sup>11</sup> Eduardo P. Hontiveros, "The Blessed Virgin Mary and the Second Vatican Council," *Philippine Studies* Vol.13, no. 3 (July 1965), 655.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 655-657.

<sup>13</sup> For an more extensive explanation and theological development of Mary as Co-Redemptrix see Dr. Mark Miravalle's *"With Jesus": the Story of Mary co-redemptrix*, Queenship Publishers (Goleta, CA: 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Migliorinio Miller, 91.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Ch. 8.

is intimately united with the life and Mission of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity made man. The opening words call the Church to, “In union with Christ the Head and in the unity of the fellowship with all His saints...in the first place reverence the memory ‘of the glorious ever Virgin Mary, Mother of our God and Lord Jesus Christ.’”<sup>16</sup> Not only is the Church as a whole body called to honor this most blessed of all women, but they are doing so in union with Christ, the Son of God. Mary as the model of all women is to be honored by all, *men and women* in the Church. While she does not wield power and authority in a worldly sense, that her virtue has earned for her such a high place—the highest in fact—in the order of mankind, should bring great joy to women everywhere that one of their own can be called was worthy to carry the Savior of all humanity in her immaculate womb.<sup>17</sup>

The document goes on to place Mary in the role of she who “gave Life to the world...Mother of the Son of God.”<sup>18</sup> If we go back to our understanding of authority as being tied to “giving life” as stated above, we see here that from the start, women clearly hold a unique authority in the Church as a woman gave birth to the One who established the institution of the Church. It was the obedience of Mary, undoing the knot of disobedience tied by Eve, that brought about the redemption of mankind in the birth of Christ. While Christ is the beginning of life—it is he who comes to save us—that possibility is intimately united in the obedience of a woman who *freely consented* in love to carry the Son of God in her virginal womb.<sup>19</sup>

From the times of the Old Testament, the salvation of mankind is intimately linked with the role of woman, from Genesis through the prophets there are references to the woman whose seed will crush the head of the serpent (3:15), and the prophets speak of the fullness of time

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 52

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 53

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>19</sup> Miligorino Miller, 94.

when there will be a “Virgin who shall conceive and bear a son, whose name will be called Emmanuel”—God with us (Isaiah 7:14).<sup>20</sup>

While the Council was careful to avoid any confusion regarding Mary’s role in the redemption, paragraph 56 of *Lumen Gentium* clearly acknowledges the key role of a woman, a creature—albeit completely free, by the grace of God, from Original Sin—was the vessel by which God made man came into the world to save and redeem mankind. The text states:

Thus Mary, a daughter of Adam, consenting to the divine Word, became the mother of Jesus, the one and only Mediator. Embracing God's salvific will with a full heart and impeded by no sin, she devoted herself totally as a handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her Son, under Him and with Him, by the grace of almighty God, serving the mystery of redemption. Rightly therefore the holy Fathers see her as used by God not merely in a passive way, but as freely cooperating in the work of human salvation through faith and obedience.<sup>21</sup>

Notice that the Fathers point to Mary’s cooperation “*under*” her son, but also “*with*” Him. While she recognized her role as handmaid, one who serves, she also performed her duty in accompanying her son in His redemptive work. This is the example women in the Church today can follow.

Christ did not come with power and authority as some members of the Jewish nation were expecting—coming to overthrow worldly powers and governments. He came first as an infant who needed a woman, a mother to be his hands and feet bringing him in her womb to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>21</sup> Dogmatic Constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium* (LG), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html), (accessed July 25, 2017), 56.

Elizabeth whose own unborn child recognized him. He chose to place himself in a situation where he needed a mother to nourish and nurture him both in the womb and after birth. This woman was Mary and though she did all of these things for him she did so with humility, recognizing that the one whom she served was he who came not to be served to serve (Matthew 20:28).<sup>22</sup> Mary, though, very much knew her role, power, and feminine authority as the Mother of the Redeemer.

If one looks closely at the Gospel account of the Wedding Feast at Cana, one recognizes that it was very much her recognition of a need which, when presented to her son, inaugurated His public ministry. The Church clearly recognizes this in the history of Marian studies and this is emphasized by the Council Fathers in *Lumen Gentium*, “In the public life of Jesus, Mary makes significant appearances... even at the very beginning, when at the marriage feast of Cana, moved with pity, *she brought about by her intercession* the beginning of miracles of Jesus the Messiah.”<sup>23</sup> Mary who had spent Christ’s hidden life “pondering these things in her heart” knew what it meant to inaugurate the “hour” of her son. She was aware that for herself the hour of the sword to pierce her own heart would also soon be at hand. But Mary was ever obedient in her role. She did not seek to control it by keeping her son with her, she recognized the time had come for her to let go and to make the sacrifice that is the call of every mother’s heart. To allow their children to return to God and do His will.<sup>24</sup>

Mary was with her Son at the beginning in Bethlehem, with him hidden in Nazareth, inaugurating his works in Cana, and she was there in the end at Calvary. Similarly, she was there

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 58. Emphasis mine

<sup>24</sup> Migliorino Miller, 96-97



with the Church in the beginning at Pentecost, she continues to be with the Church and her members, and she reigns for all eternity as Queen of Heaven.

Her presence at the beginning is notable for our understanding of her as Mother of the Church, and in relation to feminine power and authority in the Church. The Apostles were obviously frightened in those days as Scripture readily relates. One author places Mary as a center of comfort among the Apostles reeling after the death of their Lord.

Her Presence amongst them must have been an element in their condition which could never be forgotten, of an importance not to be exaggerated, of a fruitfulness and power ever fresh... They had been driven as it were, to her motherly bosom when the storm of the Passion had deprived them of our Lord... Each succeeding storm which swept over the infancy of the Church, had the same effect of bringing out in exercise the ineffably tender relations between the children and the Mother."<sup>25</sup>

Mary's maternity began with her *fiat* at the Annunciation and continued throughout the entirety of the earthly life of her son. It was extended to humanity when Christ entrusted her to the Beloved Disciple with the words, "Behold your Mother," (Jn. 19:26). She continued to nourish and nurture her children here on earth, as presented in the passage above, and does not cease interceding for them, serving as a safe haven amidst the storms of life, as she reigns in Heaven.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, she continues to be "the secret power which bore up, in its measure and kind, the life of the whole, and before which the spiritual foes of the Church [shrink] in dismay."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Henry James Coleridge, *The Mother of the Church: Mary during the First Apostolic Age*, (London: Burns and Oats, 1887), 23-24.

<sup>26</sup> LG, 62

<sup>27</sup> Coleridge, 24-25.

This is where we leave Mary or, rather, following her model of what it is to be a woman in the Church, take up her example and look to the ways in which women continue to influence the Church, nourishing and nurturing her in a variety of ways. The strength of women can be seen in Mary, imitated, and carried into the life of the Church today.

### **Nourishing the Church by Blood: Women Martyrs**

In the Liturgy of the Hours the Church prays, “Through all the women martyrs who conquered bodily death by their courage, strengthen your Church in the hour of trial.”<sup>28</sup>

To consider “courage” and what it often means to “conquer” hardly brings to mind an image of the feminine. These words however are clearly used to describe those women who offered their lives for the sake of Christ and in witness to the Faith. The women martyrs of the Early Church provided an example for many who would later draw strength from their witness as martyrs and, fulfilling the well-known words of Tertullian, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christians,” came to new life in Baptism. It is important to note that women martyrs continue to awaken a sense of faith and love for even in the modern Church.<sup>29</sup>

Saints Perpetua and Felicity are well-known third century martyrs of Carthage. We have, from the hand of Perpetua, a record of the events leading up to her “battle”, the rest has been finished by another hand which some claim to be Tertullian.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Liturgy of the Hours, Common of Holy Women Evening Prayer II Intercessions

<sup>29</sup> One can consider the life of St. Edith Stein, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, a convert from Judaism and Carmelite nun who was killed in the Nazi Concentration Camps. Also notable are the many unknown women who are remaining faithful despite persecution and the reality of possible death in countries currently occupied by ISIS.

<sup>30</sup> Gail Streete, *Redeemed Bodies: Women Martyrs in Early Christianity*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 50.

In her vision, Perpetua appeared in the ring to fight a battle and her “clothes were stripped off, and suddenly was a man.”<sup>31</sup> Perpetua won the battle and was given a branch of peace, and,

began to walk in triumph towards the Gate of Life. Then I awoke. I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil, but I knew that I would win the victory. So much for what I did up until the eve of the contest. About what happened at the contest itself, let him write of it who will.”<sup>32</sup>

It seems contradictory to hold up this Saint as an example of feminine virtue after a presenting a vision in which she fought and conquered in the way of the male sex. The story of her actual martyrdom, though, shows her courage and ability to conquer was carried out with a woman’s touch.

Perpetua’s companion martyrdom, Felicity, despaired of dying with her fellow Christians she was expecting a child during the time of her imprisonment and it was unlawful to execute a pregnant woman. In giving birth, Felicity was mocked by her guards. As she cried out in pain they scoffed, “you suffer so much now--what will you do when you are tossed to the beasts? Little did you think of them when you refused to sacrifice.”<sup>33</sup> Felicity quickly responded in faith, “what I am suffering now...I suffer by myself. But then another will be inside me who will suffer for me, just as I shall be suffering for him.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Passion of Perpetua and Felicity,” From *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, trans. Herbert Musurillo, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/maps/primary/perpetua.html>, (accessed July 24, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

Felicity went to her martyrdom a mother of new life here on earth and became a means of spiritual life to so many. The acts of martyrdom read, “Felicity, glad that she had safely given birth so that now she could fight the beasts, going from one blood bath to another, from the midwife to the gladiator, ready to wash after childbirth in a second baptism.” It is interesting to note the juxtaposition of birth and martyrdom. Both are a means of shedding one’s blood for the sake of another, both powerful means of life for the Church in different ways.

These martyrs went to their death with feminine strength, not overbearing, proud, eager to conquer and show force but, “joyfully as though they were going to heaven, with calm faces, trembling, if at all, with joy rather than fear... with shining countenance and calm step, as the beloved of God, as a wife of Christ...”<sup>35</sup> Both Perpetua and Felicity conquered death in their martyrdom with the power and life-giving authority of their feminine nature. They encouraged those with whom they were martyred and those who would follow after them saying, “You must all stand fast in the faith and love one another, and do not be weakened by what we have gone through.”<sup>36</sup>

The women martyrs did not “conquer bodily death” to “strengthen the Church in the hour of trial” by taking on the role of men and fighting with fists and weapons. These women conquered with their unfailing love of God, with maternal hearts that were selfless. With a generous spirit, these women gave their lives for Christ and handed their faith on to those around them, as we saw from Perpetua’s dying words to the catechumens.

The role of women in the Church is to bring life, to nurture that life and strengthen that life by a variety of means. Whether through a bloody martyrdom, or the martyrdom of every day fidelity, women in the Church are called to offer sacrifice and strengthen the weak. Pope Paul VI

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

affirms this vocation, and role of women, in his closing remarks of the Second Vatican Council as he says, “Women...who so often in history have given men the strength to battle unto the very end and to give witness to the point of martyrdom, aid them now still once more to retain courage in their grate undertakings...it is for you to save the peace of the world.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Nourishing the Church with Life: Holy Motherhood in the Church**

The intentions following upon the invocation of the prayers of Holy Women Martyrs relate to woman’s role as wife and mother Women are called, as members of the Church to offer the gift of themselves in motherhood, in order to build the Kingdom of God here on earth, The Church. St. John Paul II clearly points this out in his letter to women, where he says:

The capacity for motherhood is written into the biological structure of the woman’s body, “Motherhood as a human fact and phenomenon, is fully explained on the basis of the truth about the person. Motherhood is linked to the personal structure of the woman and to the personal dimension of the gift: "I have brought a man into being with the help of the Lord" (Gen 4:1) ...linked in a special way to "a sincere gift of self".<sup>38</sup>

In the Church, women exercise their role in their gift of self in the work of giving birth to, educating, and raising the People of God into full maturity in the Spirit. The Church, with her feminine character, needs the hearts of women working within her in order to complete her task here on heart.<sup>39</sup> St. John Paul II reminds us in *Mulieres Dignitatem*, “the motherhood of

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<sup>37</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Address to women at the close of the Second Vatican Council*, December 8, 1965, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_spe\\_19651208\\_epilogo-concilio-donne.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-donne.html) (accessed July 24, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> St. John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Mulieres Dignitatem*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1988/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19880815\\_mulieris-dignitatem.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html), (accessed July 25, 2017), 18.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Migliorino Miller, 150-151.

every woman, understood in the light of the Gospel, is similarly not only "of flesh and blood": it expresses a profound "listening to the word of the living God" and a readiness to "safeguard" this Word, which is "the word of eternal life" (cf. Jn 6:68).<sup>40</sup> Those women who are not biological mothers are called to live in the heart of the Church with a different kind of maternity, a spiritual maternity, whereby the gift of themselves is made through nurturing the spiritual lives of those around them, young and old.

The sensitivity natural to the woman's heart is especially needed and called for in today's Church where there is much suffering.<sup>41</sup> Recalling the words of Paul VI quoted earlier we hear him again,

Wives, mothers of families, the first educators of the human race in the intimacy of the family circle, pass on to your sons and your daughters the traditions of your fathers at the same time that you prepare them for an unsearchable future...  
And you, women living alone, realize what you can accomplish through your dedicated vocation... Not even families can live without the help of those who have no families.<sup>42</sup>

In *Lumen Gentium*, parents are called to create a "Domestic Church" within the home, fulfilling their responsibility as the "first preachers of the faith".<sup>43</sup> While this is spoken to both mothers and Fathers, St. Paul VI is clearly calling upon the natural sensitivity and generosity proper to woman to, in a special way, be the heart of the "Domestic Church" as wife and mother, and thus uniting her heart with the heart of Holy Mother Church.<sup>44</sup> It is through working together with the

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<sup>40</sup>St. John Paul II, *Mulieres Dignitatem*, 19.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Paul VI, "Address to Women".

<sup>43</sup> LG, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Much could be elaborated upon regarding the relationship of husband and wife and the "Domestic Church" and the implications this has for the aforementioned debates regarding the all-male priesthood. Again, Monica

complementarity of the gifts, charisms, and talents in which men and women enjoy different strengths, that husbands and wives, and men and women in the Church, can operate according to their gifts in cooperation with one another in the Church's mission.<sup>45</sup>

### **Nourishing the Church by Prayer: Consecrated Life in the Church**

Throughout the ages of the Church, those in consecrated life have “set about following Christ with greater freedom and imitating Him more closely through the practice of the evangelical counsels...”<sup>46</sup> This sign and witness has been especially powerful to the Church and the world in the persons of women Religious who in a special way are images of the Church, and imitators of Mary; both virgin and mother.<sup>47</sup>

The Church as Mother calls on those consecrated as images of her living in the world to the primary duty of “assiduous union with God in prayer.”<sup>48</sup> This prayer is meant to serve as a beating heart of the Church whereby graces may flow out to all her members. In this way those in consecrated life serve as mothers of souls, primarily through prayer and the sacraments, “[s]o refreshed at the table of divine law and the sacred altar of God, ...and living and thinking ever more in union with the Church, dedicate themselves wholly to its mission”—which is the Salvation of souls.<sup>49</sup>

The strength of women religious is well documented in the lives of the saintly founders of women's religious communities, especially here in the United States. The Catholic School

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Migliorino Miller, cited throughout, already, does a masterful job expounding upon the interplay of male and female authority in the Church pertaining to that subject which is outside the scope of our topic here.

<sup>45</sup> LG, 30.

<sup>46</sup> “Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*,” October 28, 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html), (accessed July 26, 2017), 1.

<sup>47</sup> St. John Paul II, “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: *Vita Consecrata*,” March 25, 1997, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_25031996\\_vita-consecrata.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031996_vita-consecrata.html), (accessed July 26, 2017), 34.

<sup>48</sup> Code of Canon Law 663 § 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 6.

System enjoyed by so many in our country today is owed to the tenacity and hard work of religious who journeyed across the ocean, and overcame many obstacles, to bring the love of Christ to the people of America. One can think of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Katharine Drexel, St. Theodore Guerin, and St. Francis Xavier Cabrini, as examples of strong women who fought for the needs of the Church in our country and have left a lasting legacy of prayer, spiritual enrichment, and Catholic Education carried on by their successors and followers even in our own time.

The Consecrated Spouse of Christ has a unique and privileged role in the heart of the Church. She is the model and example of the total gift of self in spiritual maternity. Pope Paul VI recognizes this gift in his closing remarks of the Second Vatican Council when he says:

Especially you, consecrated virgins, in a world where egoism and the search for pleasure would become law, be the guardians of purity, unselfishness and piety. Jesus who has given to conjugal love all its plenitudes, has also exalted the renouncement of human love when this is for the sake of divine love and for the service of all.<sup>50</sup>

Through profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, consecrated women have a certain freedom to image the Church in ways that differ from women in other states of life. This witness, especially that of chastity, "...symbolizes in a singular way the heavenly goods..." and, "[i]n this way they recall to the minds of all the faithful that wondrous marriage decreed by God and which is to be fully revealed in the future age in which the Church takes Christ as its only spouse."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Address to Women".

<sup>51</sup> *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.



The quality of authority is not that of power and authority, which many who perceive women to have a secondary role or place in the church believe, but, having one's own life nourished through prayer and intimate union with Christ who is the bridegroom of all souls, sharing that life with others to build up the Church in life and love. It is the witness of consecrated life that should serve to encourage and spur others on to greater fidelity in that quest.

Consecrated women hold a special role in the Church both in apostolic work (be it the Missionaries of Charity who work with the poorest of the poor, the Sisters of Life in New York who open their homes and hearts to mothers in crisis pregnancies and difficult situations, or any number of Dominican Sisters engaging in the apostolate of education and spreading the Gospel through the New Evangelization), but also through the contemplative life of prayer. Even at this moment thousands of contemplative cloistered nuns are keeping the heart of the Church beating with their prayers and the silent sacrifice of their lives for Christ, as they exercise their feminine, life-giving, authority and role in the Church.

### **Conclusion: The Feminine Genius Nourishing the Church Today**

Since the Second Vatican Council there have been many who claim that the Fathers did not go far enough in extending roles of authority and power to women in the Church.<sup>52</sup> More often than not this is a critique of an all-male priesthood; a critique which flows from a gross misunderstanding of the complementarity of male and female authority within the Body of Christ, which is the Church.<sup>53</sup>

The reality of the situation is that the Council very much recognized that both men and women have a large role to play in the Church today as they are, “invited to strive for the

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<sup>52</sup> Nadine Foley, O. P., “Women in Vatican Documents 1960 to the Present,” in *Sexism and Church Law: Equal Rights and Affirmative Action*, ed. James A. Coriden, (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 103-104.

<sup>53</sup> Migliorino Miller, 14-17

holiness and perfection of their own proper state.”<sup>54</sup> As we have shown, the example of Our Blessed Mother, Mary as well as the courage and tenacity of the women martyrs of the Early Church call all women to a special role, bringing life to the heart of the Church.

St. Pope Paul VI recognized this in his writings which were vastly expanded up on by his successor St. Pope John Paul II. The latter identified four characteristics of the “Feminine Genius” called to be brought into the Church today—sensitivity, generosity, maternity, and receptivity.<sup>55</sup> We saw these characteristics in Mary, the martyrs, the role of mothers, and the role of Consecrated religious. It is from these four means of feminine love and life that flow the power and authority of women in the Church. Not a power and authority that rules and dominates, but one that flows from lifegiving love.

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<sup>54</sup> LG, 42.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Jo Anderson, “Feminine Genius”, Catholic Answers Inc., accessed July 26, 2017, <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=6709>.

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