

St. John Paul II's 'Letter to Women' at 25: 'Feminine Genius' Affirmed

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“What does it mean to be a woman?”

It was 1995. I was a college sophomore, walking across a tree-lined campus, flanked by red-bricked Georgian buildings. And all around me, young people were racing to and from class, laughing, shouting out greetings, and talking about the things college kids talk about.

But not me. I wrestled with my thoughts as I walked, asking myself for the first time what it meant to be a woman. What constituted femininity? What, besides anatomy, made me different from a man?

A million other people had asked the question before. But not me. It had never occurred to me. All my life, the only thing I'd been told was that men and women were the same and I could do anything a man could do. Suddenly, however, at 19, I wasn't so sure.

I was asking good questions. But at a secular university, with friends more interested in the Dave Matthews Band than philosophy, I didn't know where to look for answers. So, I looked around me, at the women on my campus, in magazines and on television, who men seemed to find attractive. They were all beautiful women, sexy women, thin women. Femininity, the culture seemed to say, was bound up with sexual desirability. I also looked for guidance from the Protestant church I attended. It taught that women were meant to be quiet, meek and mild.

At that point, I concluded I wasn't a very good woman by anyone's standards — church or culture. No one would ever describe me as a beauty, and sexy was not my vibe. I also had intelligence and opinions in spades, but there wasn't an ounce of mild in me. By every measure of femininity, I seemed to fall short. Except for one.

While I could never be beautiful, sexy, quiet or mild, I was thin — a little too thin, actually. In 1995, I was already in the early stage of an eating disorder, and my confusion over the meaning of femininity only reinforced my quest to be as thin as possible. It sounds crazy now, but somehow my 19-year-old self believed she could fool people into thinking she was meek and mild and therefore “feminine,” if she could hide her intelligence and opinions behind a delicate, fragile frame.

It didn't work. I fooled no one. My opinions are hard to miss. But I did spend the next five years trying to conform, in the only way I knew how, to what I thought it meant to be a woman. Then, in December 2000, at the end of the Great Jubilee, I returned to the Catholic Church. There, thanks to my encounter with the man who had called for the jubilee, Pope St. John Paul II, everything changed.

A Letter for Women

As both pope and philosopher, John Paul II had a singular focus: to affirm the God-given dignity of every person. In the human person, he recognized the image of God. He also recognized that behind every great conflict of our age lay a failure to recognize that dignity — or a desire to deny or destroy it.

John Paul II saw that same failure in sexism and radical feminism. In 1994, at a United Nations' conference on population control, those feminists had nearly succeeded in defining abortion as a universal human right. John Paul II's gentle but concerted advocacy against that was widely credited for thwarting their efforts.

A year later, however, another U.N. conference, this time on women, was scheduled to take place in Beijing. The same abortion-rights advocates would be there, pushing the same agenda. So, in 1995, the very year that I was wrestling with what it meant to be a woman, John Paul II went on the offensive. First, he declared 1995 “The Year of the Woman.” He then began talking and

writing consistently about the struggles women face and the dignity we possess. The most important of those writings was his [“Letter to Women.”](#) Published on June 29, 1995, it laid out a different understanding of women and feminism than the one proclaimed by the world. At the outset, John Paul II explained that he wanted to “speak directly to every woman, to reflect with her on the problems and prospects of what it means to be a woman in our time” (1). And about the Church’s understanding of women’s dignity, he left no doubt: Man and woman both were created in the image of God, different but equal, not in competition with one another, but complementary to one another. He also lamented the world’s failure (and at times, the Church’s) to recognize women’s dignity, noting, “This has prevented women from truly being themselves, and it has resulted in the spiritual impoverishment of humanity” (3). He further lamented the world’s insistence on reducing a woman to her body and condemned “the widespread hedonistic and commercial culture which encourages the systematic exploitation of sexuality.”

The Feminine Genius

When I read those words, five years after they were published, I found peace and the beginning of healing. I was more than a number on a scale. I also wasn’t less feminine for my intelligence, opinions or strength. Those, John Paul II helped me see, were gifts from God, meant to be used to serve others — my family, yes, but also the Church and the world.

Likewise, the Pope’s letter helped me make sense of my vocation. At the time, although I longed to be a wife and mother, I wasn’t. John Paul II affirmed the goodness of that desire, but also affirmed that I wasn’t less of a woman for not being married with children. In Christ, he explained, every woman has dignity, and in the Church, every woman has a place, regardless of whether she is married or single, fertile or infertile, a woman who works in the home or a woman who works in the world.

His words to women who had been abused or exploited or who aborted a child were the words of a father, offering consolation to some, forgiveness to others.

And his words calling all women to spiritual motherhood answered the question I'd asked five years earlier: What does it mean to be a woman? The answer John Paul II gave was simple. A woman is called to be a mother — sometimes in body, always in soul.

And as mothers, our job is to see every person we meet as the image of God, to nourish and nurture life all around us, to encourage, affirm, heal, teach, welcome and pay attention to every person God sends our way. It's also to challenge people, helping them become who God made them to be, but doing so gently, controlling our strength, never breaking the bruised reed. We are to love tenaciously, sacrifice joyfully, and advocate persistently for the little and the least. And we're to do it all with an eye to heaven, trusting God's grace to work through all our own efforts, so as to lead people to everlasting life.

In short, women are people who love others to holiness, prioritizing the person over all other goods and seeing the greatness of each individual soul.

That is our "feminine genius." That is the vision of woman John Paul II gave the world 25 years ago. And it's a vision so many still need to learn.

But each of us who hears the call issued to us in "Letter to Women" can make that possible. The more we say Yes to Jesus and become the women he made us to be, the more we can join John Paul II in revealing to women and the world "the beauty — not merely physical, but above all spiritual — which God bestowed from the very beginning on" us all (12).

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