

Celebrating the Feminine Genius

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2008 was a year punctuated by a trinity of anniversaries symbiotically celebrating the dignity and vocation of woman. July 25th, 2008 marked 40 years since Paul VI promulgated the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*¹ (*HV*); April 1st, 2008 feted 30 years since Dr. Thomas W. Hilgers and his colleagues inaugurated the Creighton Model Fertility Care System² (CrM FCS) and August 15th, 2008 commemorated 20 years since John Paul II publicized the apostolic letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (*MD*).

At the outset of this piece, I will investigate two seminal ideas pertaining to woman's dignity and vocation: the salience of recognizing feminine genius,³ a central thesis of *MD*, and the moral goodness of the natural regulation of fertility, the salubrious teaching of *HV*. To conclude, I will demonstrate how married women who access CrM FCS and field-test its family planning protocols are actively exercising and celebrating these respective themes.

Mulieris Dignitatem and the feminine genius

In *MD* John Paul II offers a comprehensive explanation of feminine genius. Not satisfied with probing the concept theoretically, the pope is also keen to demonstrate how women practice or exercise their genius in day-to-day life. Characterizing the *theoretical or foundational aspect of a woman's genius* as her ability to *discover the truth of her nature*, John Paul subsequently distinguishes the *practical or structural aspect of feminine genius* as a woman's capacity to *act on that truth*.⁴

Stated as a principle, this is John Paul's insight on theoretical feminine genius: the grounding of feminine genius is the woman's natural capacity to know, in the sense of having the ability to discover, what it means to be someone who is created in God's image and likeness. But what does John Paul mean by the

feminine capacity "to discover"⁵ and of what might this objective phase of a woman's self-knowledge consist?

I am convinced that the pope's idea of feminine discovery presupposes his extended reflections on the second creation story of Genesis⁶ with its primordial male/female "discovery" and its implications for embodied personhood and marriage. Hence, I think the pope is suggesting that whenever a woman compares and contrasts her own corporeal nature with that of every other embodied entity, she concludes (i.e., ingeniously discovers) that, unlike the "objects" of the rest of the created order, she is a "*subject*;" that, unlike the "*somethings*" of every other species of the animal and plant kingdoms, she is *someone*, a unique and unrepeatable "*I*"; that, unlike all other mammalian animal organisms that are intended to be used as a mere means to others' goals, she is a person, a being who, though she has been created *for her own sake*,⁷ is a *co-subject with the man* and cannot know her own subjectivity save by *making a gift of herself* to male persons.

The foundation of a woman's genius, then, lies in her capacity to know that she is an embodied, i.e., sexual, person whose essential nature is defined by her specific gifts of rational intelligence and freedom (self-determination or self-realization). Again and again, John Paul II underscores the point that feminine genius, fundamentally defined as every woman's capacity to know her personal truth, importantly, also reveals to the woman that she is man's "sister in humanity" and, therefore, equal in dignity to male human persons.⁸ And to every *married* woman—the focus of this investigation—theoretical genius reveals that she possesses a parity of dignity and personhood with her husband.

As God would have it, the ends of the foundational gifts of rational intelligence and freedom—knowing the truth and embracing the true good—succinctly define the woman's vocation, her *genius delineated in terms of praxis*. Within the rational act of discovering the truth of her nature and through the free act of making a sincere gift of herself—experiencing the gospel hermeneutic of finding self by

giving self away, each woman simultaneously discovers her natural feminine vocation: to know God and other human persons and to enter into a communion of love with them. Thus, in the natural, practical act of genius whereby a married woman discovers herself by giving herself away, she also discovers her *Ur-*vocation, precisely what she is called to do by nature of being a feminine person: to freely enter into society or communion with, in the first place, the Person of God and, secondarily, with the persons of her husband, children, and those within society who are within her sphere of influence.⁹

What's more, the feminine vocation to interpersonal communion is fulfilled in a married woman's everyday exercise of a subset of peculiarly female capacities which *complete* the structure of her feminine genius. The *practical face of her genius*, what John Paul II defines as a woman's capacity to *act on the truth of her being*, uses natural female inclinations—being a handmaid,¹⁰ mother,¹¹ liberated lover,¹² prophet,¹³ moral guide¹⁴ and a life companion¹⁵—to build on her foundational capacities of being a feminine person, a subject, an “I” who is created for “interpersonal communion.”¹⁶

As handmaid: The married woman evinces her practical genius when in a myriad of ways she serves and safeguards, in the sense of consents to and carries out, God's plan for her as a human person and a married woman. With Mary of Nazareth, every woman is ingeniously capable of uttering a “fiat” to her vocation to be genuinely human and genuinely feminine.

As mother: Every married woman who is blessed with children pursues her genius in being a mother. Created in the image of the Radical Giver, the married woman and her husband possess the heterosexual capacity to create a new human being, with the help of God. Exercising the fruitfulness so essential to her feminine genius, a mother mirrors the divine template of fecundity quintessential to the inner life of God. As John Paul describes it, woman-as-mother participates “in the eternal generativity of God.”¹⁷ Always standing ready to receive God's gift of the life of another human being, a married woman pays loving attention to, indeed, pours out her very life for the sake of, her children, whether biological or adopted. Having understood and wrestled with the mystery of evil and sin in both its “original” and personal manifestations, a mother is prepared to educate her chil-

dren, exercising her spiritual maternity in bringing to flower their personhood in wholeness and holiness.

As a liberated lover: A woman discovers her true liberation in the truth of Christ's teaching, particularly that demonstrated in his attitude toward and relationship with the women of his day. Like the fallen woman in the gospel who anointed Christ's body for burial, the contemporary woman exercises her practical genius manifested in the freedom that redounds to her from her acts of repentant, extravagant—that is, “wasted”—love. Like the women who remained with Christ throughout his agonizing death on a cross, married women of today exercise their genius in actively binding up others' wounds—those of family members, fellow-parishioners, and co-workers—with their acts of unswerving, unconditional love. Like the evangelizing love of the woman at the well who had a “special sensitivity to Christ, his mystery and his mission,”¹⁸ every married woman has the capacity for a disciple's love, ingeniously turning her children and those persons in her circle of influence toward Christ and his truth.

As prophet: Another facet of a woman's practical genius is to be a prophet: to fearlessly proclaim to her family, friends and colleagues that God knows us through and through, loves us despite our failings, and challenges us (just as the Incarnate God challenged the woman in the gospel) to “go, and sin no more.”

As moral compass: The practical feminine genius of receptivity to life and being “for” others mark the “ethos”¹⁹ of every woman. And, when these ethical dimensions are lived out in reference to God and others, they transform the married woman into a living moral compass capable of ingeniously guiding her family and friends to the true good. In turn, those in her ken, recognizing the woman's “great energies of spirit,”²⁰ not only “lean on” this feminine person for moral strength, but also tend to adopt her “ethos” for their life's journey.

As life companion: The genius of a married woman's spousal love flowing from her personal “I” brings her into a “unity of the two,”²¹ a nuptial communion, with the person of her husband. In this lifelong union in which she is a “suitable helper” or an equal partner to her husband, a woman's genius is best summarized in the term companion. With its Latin derivatives (*cum, panis*), companion defines

the woman as the person who *breaks daily bread with* her husband, the spouse with whom she is “equal in personhood and dignity.”²² The nuptial meaning of their interpersonal union—to exist not just side by side but “mutually ‘one for the other’”²³ all the while practicing “mutual subjection”²⁴—enables the married woman to love her husband like God loves within his Trinitarian family. In this manner, the woman ingeniously mirrors to the world “the communion of love that is in God,” a unity within diversity of persons.²⁵

The married woman, acting on her dignity as a feminine person, becomes a *handmaid* of God’s plan; a biological and/or spiritual *mother*, a *lover liberated* from bondage to sinful inclinations; a *prophet* proclaiming to each human being that, in and through Christ, they are the object of God’s love; a *moral compass* who guides others to spiritually battle the powers of evil in the world; and a life-long *companion* to her husband. In short, in her various practical activities, the married woman fulfills her vocation to be an embodied, intelligent, free and ingeniously feminine human being.

***Humanae Vitae* and the moral goodness of the natural regulation of fertility**

As its first priority, *Humanae Vitae* challenges the married woman and her husband to fulfill their lofty vocation to love each other as God loves.²⁶ Hence, just as the union of God’s love is at once life-giving and the generativity of his love at once unitive, so the interpersonal union of the love of a husband and wife demands, activates and defines its procreative capacity, and vice versa. In this way, just as God’s love manifests its perfection in giving life, so ought marital sexual love.

In the second place, *HV* challenges married spouses to plan their families in a way that cooperates with the natural truth of marital sexual love and its divine template, the fruitful love of God. The encyclical’s central teaching—natural methods used unselfishly help a couple plan their family in a moral way²⁷—invites all husbands and wives of good will to experience the healthful benefits of a natural means of fertility regulation, a means that, precisely because it always honors the basic human good of their fertil-

ity, fulfills them as male and female persons/spouses. Accordingly, as the Church tries to point every married couple to a natural method of family planning, *mater ecclesia* is attempting to insure that the trajectory of the couples’ love-making emulates God’s life-giving love.

Pope Paul VI refused to frame the issue of the regulation of fertility as some of his protagonists: viz., either the Church changes its teaching on the use of contraceptives, or she is guilty of condemning women to having endless numbers of children. In *HV* Paul VI insists that the real choice before a woman and her husband in the arena of family planning is between spacing children responsibly or morally (that is, with their acts of marital intimacy open to life and the basic good of fertility through natural methods) versus planning a family irresponsibly or immorally (that is, with their acts of intercourse closed to life and fertility through contraception). In other words, Pope Paul VI and his theological co-authors do not question the validity of limiting births for valid reasons,²⁸ but choose to use the encyclical to carry out their pastoral duty (a) to turn married women and their husbands toward a good means to the good end of achieving and avoiding a pregnancy as circumstances of their marriage dictate and (b) away from a bad means.

To understand precisely why *HV* endorses the morality of a natural system, it would help to examine the basics of one model of natural fertility regulation, the CrM FCS. What we see clearly is that, when a couple use this sort of natural method to plan their family, the man and woman always respect, rather than suppress, the gift of their fertility. That is—to borrow terminology from *MD*—they act in accord with their vocation and dignity as heterosexual persons called to a “unity of the two” through their mutual “gift of self.”

A woman records on a linear chart the fertile and infertile phases of her cycle. The days of menses are marked with red stamps; followed by infertile days marked with green stamps (indicating she does not observe either bleeding or cervical mucus); followed by fertile days marked with white baby stamps (indicating she observes cervical mucus at the vulva and, therefore, is fertile and could conceive); followed by infertile days marked with green stamps (when she no longer observes cervical mucus and,

hence, is infertile). In the fertile or ovulatory phase of her cycle, the woman observes a cervical discharge at the vulva that begins as sticky/cloudy or tacky/cloudy mucus and eventually becomes clear, stretchy or lubricative mucus. The presence of mucus tells the woman and her husband that they are fertile and in the periovulatory phase of their cycle. She marks the last day of her mucus discharge that is clear, stretchy, or lubricative with a "P" to indicate the Peak Day of cervical mucus and the Peak Day of the couple's fertility.

With this chart, the woman and her husband know their window of fertile days or the vulvar mucus cycle. They know that if their intent is to avoid a pregnancy for good reason, they need to honor the gift of their fertility by avoiding genital contact during their fertile phase (and confining their acts of intimacy to days of infertility). In other words, according to a natural system, the couple does not enter into fertile acts of sex and then directly render those acts sterile by something they do before, during or after the act. If the couple of normal fertility intends, on the other hand, to achieve a pregnancy, they honor the gift of their fertility by having intercourse during their fertile phase. This form of family planning is salubrious in its promotion of both physical and spiritual/moral health for the woman, her husband and their children.

In sum, when used either to avoid or achieve a pregnancy, a natural system of fertility appreciation like that of CrM is moral since couples who use it for either purpose (a) *never directly suppress the basic human good of their fertility* (the procreative dimension of their love) and, as a result, (b) *never threaten its correlative-linked unitive dimension* and, as a further result, (c) *never assault the integrity of their marital love* and, ultimately, the stability of their marriage.

CrM FCS: celebrating the genius (vocation and dignity) of woman

According to anecdotal reports, the Creighton Model Fertility Care System helps women who use it to *discover* the foundational dimension of their feminine genius: they are persons who are fearfully, wonderfully made. As one woman wrote, it takes "into account the clues that my body

seemed to be providing, and puts the pieces together [in] an effort to facilitate health [biopsychosocial well-being], not just pregnancy."²⁹

The Cr M System also creatively activates the practice of feminine genius in the woman using it:

As handmaid: The comprehensive versatility of CrM springs from the fact that it can be used by women in a variety of reproductive situations—avoiding pregnancy, achieving pregnancy, breastfeeding and infertility—and from the ingenious way that it networks procreative health with general health. In short, CrM FCS enables the woman to practice her genius of being a handmaid—a stewardess over her body's reproductive system, so that she is better able to fulfill God's plan for her as a sexual (feminine) person: to make a sincere gift of herself to the Person of God, her husband and her children.

As mother: The maternal-child affective bonds that are poignantly evident in the ingenious way a mother cradles and looks at her baby appear, to this observer, to be even stronger when the woman and her husband have achieved a pregnancy by means of a natural system of family planning. You see, the CrM FCS has provided the couple, especially the woman, sundry opportunities to intelligently and freely prepare for their child's conception, gestation and coming-out party. Cycle after cycle husband and wife evaluate the circumstances of their marriage—health, finances, demography—seek God's guidance in their reproductive plans, and decide, when the current circumstances of their marriage dictate, to use their fertile days to conceive a new human being. And then, with the added genius of spiritual maternity, the woman cements the maternal-child bond by spending a lifetime of educational mothering, i.e., generating, the spiritual and moral life of her child.

As liberated lover: Conversations with women who use the CrM FCS have taught me again and again how the system works its own graces. Ever so gently, the daily use of the Creighton System helps a woman disentangle herself from selfish attitudes and sinful inclinations; frees her from the enslavement of self-centeredness so as to be able to embrace, ever more readily, her vocation to be "for" others. In short, this natural method of family planning unleashes the woman's genius of becoming "one flesh" with her husband and becoming a gift to her children, friends and co-workers.

As prophet: The most effective means of advertising the CrM FCS is by word of mouth, one woman speaking to another. Female users of the system ingeniously prophesy to others about its usability, reliability and morality—testifying how they have experienced its use as something good for them and their marriage: a method that (a) confirms their personal feminine worth and (b) really works! In short, these female-users of the CrM FCS confidently encourage others to experience its “genius-friendly” benefits.

As moral compass: The CrM FCS helps to bolster the moral leadership of its female-user. The woman who invests substantive time and energy in finding and using a method of family planning that is moral—that is, in accord with her own good—is the woman who speaks volumes through her choice. She witnesses, by example, that as human beings we all need to be vigilant of choosing only those things that are truly good for us, including and especially that of a family-planning method that brings us closer to God. In this way, her decision to use the CrM FCS gives the woman an ingenious way of being a moral compass capable of helping others find, through their reproductive decisions, the way to a truly good life.

As life companion: It is reported that women who use a natural method like the Creighton System are less apt to divorce or, stated positively, are more able to practice their genius of being a *life* companion to their husbands. Of course, a statistic like this makes perfect sense and is entirely predictable. With the practice of the CrM, the woman and her husband day-in and day-out pay intellectual and volitional respect to the gift of their fertility and therefore to the integrity of their love and marriage. The more this is the case, the more likely is it that the bond between them as the “unity of the two” will endure. The more this is case, the more sure is the prospect that, as CrM users, the husband and wife will be breaking bread together until death do they part. ☩

ENDNOTES

1 *Humanae Vitae* subsumes the dignity and vocation of woman under the aegis of the couple's dignity. However, in section 17, the encyclical reminds us of the negative consequences of a contraceptive mentality, some of which do threaten the dignity of married women directly: “. . . it is to be feared that husbands who become accustomed to contraceptive practices will lose respect for their wives. They may come to disregard their wife's psychological and physical equilibrium and use their wives as instruments for serving their own desires. Consequently, they will no longer view their wives as companions who should be treated with at-

tentiveness and love.” (*HV* #17, quoted in Janet E. Smith, *Humanae Vitae: A Challenge to Love* [New Hope Publications: New Hope, KY] 1997, p. 39.) In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II underscores the injustice of a husband's discriminatory practices against women within, among other social circumstances, a contraceptive marital relationship: “The matrimonial union requires respect for and a perfecting of the true personal subjectivity of both [husband and wife]. The woman cannot become the ‘object’ of ‘domination’ and male ‘possession.’ . . . Burdened by hereditary sinfulness, they bear within themselves the constant ‘inclination to sin,’ the tendency to go against the moral order which corresponds to the rational nature and dignity of man and woman as persons” [10.2-3]. Even more directly, JPII counsels: “Consequently each man must look within himself to see whether she who was entrusted to him as a sister in humanity, as a spouse, has not become in his heart an object of adultery; to see whether she who, in different ways, is the co-subject of his existence in the world, has not become for him an ‘object,’ an object of pleasure, of exploitation” [*MD* 14.4].

- 2 Reviewing the thirty-year history of Creighton Model Fertility Care System, (the standardized ovulation method) from the view point of (1) teachers trained to instruct couples in its use or from the (2) women/couple users of the method, Hilgers and his faculty estimate that they have trained thousands of practitioners who, in turn, have provided instruction in CrM FCS to tens of thousands of women/couples nationally and internationally.
- 3 It is interesting to note that the Latin derivative for the English “genius” is *gigno* (*gignere, genui, genitum*) (originally *geno*) with its English translation of “to beget, bear, bring forth.” John Paul II mines the generative underpinnings of the concept of feminine genius in his favorite moral metaphors describing the “ethos” of woman: her vocation to be a spouse; to receive and give a spousal love; to make a sincere gift of self and to receive the other as gift; to enter into a *communio personarum*; and to be a person created “for” others.
- 4 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 6.1-2; 7.1-2; 7.4,6,7,8; 9.2; 13.8; 18.1; 30.3; 31.4.
- 5 *Ibid.* 7.5; 11.8-9; 31.2.
- 6 In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II summarily explicates the Yahwist account of creation (Gen. 2) and its implication for the original couple's discovery of the nuptial meaning of the body—a man and woman entrusted to each other—and the sacramentality of marriage, all of which he had previously explained, in systematic fashion, in his general Wednesday audiences between October 10, 1979 and April 2, 1980.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 7.6-7; 13.8; 18.1; 30.1.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 6.4-5; 12.3-4; 16.4.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 10; 21.2-3; 29.5.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 5.2.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 8.4-5; 13.1; 18.2-7; 19.1.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 10.3; 13.6; 15.1-3.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 16.2; 29.6.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 11.1-3; 30.2,4,5,6.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 6.4; 7.5.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 7.3.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 8.4-5; 18.5.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 16.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 7.3-5; 9.4; 14.2; 29.4.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 30.6.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 7.3-4; 10.2, 4; 11.5; 14.4; 23.2; 26.2; 29.2.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 16.3-4; 25.5.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 7.4.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 24.2,4,5.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 7.2; 16.4.
- 26 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (1968): 8.1.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 16.2-4.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 10.4; 16.2.
- 29 Jean Packard, ed. *Women Healed* (Pope Paul VI Institute Press: Omaha, NE) 2004, p. 99.