

Fully a Woman

*Self-giving, open to the Spirit,
responsible, and reserved*

by Dorothy Ranaghan

“The holier a woman is, the more she is a woman.”

Leon Bloy

Most children are sooner or later asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I vividly remember staring nobly into the eyes of one such questioner—fresh from reading a book on a saint’s life—and responding, “I want to be a mature Christian woman.” Since that is not the usual 16-year-old’s response, a strained look that said, “How nice,” ended the discussion. Yet as the years go on, I see this as the ultimate vocational response. It is our common, highest, and most challenging goal.

At age 16 I was not fully mature, fully a Christian, or fully a woman, but with biological certainty, I felt time would take care of all three. From my present vantage point, I see that all three are lifetime tasks, and of the three, I expected becoming a woman to be the least

challenge. I assumed that it just happened.

My life in Jesus is a gift, a given. I certainly didn’t earn it. Yet at many points in life I have been asked to affirm the gift, to say yes again to Jesus and his life in me, to allow that life to grow, to allow the Father to bring the image of his Son to fullness. So too, our



womanhood is a gift, a biological given. But we need to affirm the gift, to say yes, to surrender completely to all that it means to be a woman.

In this age, answers abound to the question, "What is a woman?" But they are conflicting answers, confusing answers, and so the task is complicated. My own college days were spent in the wake of the radical feminists. They spoke a truth about distorted images of womanhood found, particularly, in the media. You need only look at television commercials to see that two main stereotypes still exist: the erotic woman who "takes it all off" for her man, and the inveterate laundry sniffer whose joy in life hinges on whether anyone will notice how clean the clothes smell.

But when the iconoclastic feminists have smashed all the caricatures of woman, an even more severely distorted picture remains, one that reduces her to and identifies her exclusively with man. The picture of God is similarly distorted in the process, since it was he who created them "male and female" (Gen. 1:27).

MAKING A PLACE

In those impressionable early college days, a statue found its way into my home as a gift from a friend. It was called *Ad Sum* and was made at Grailville, a women's retreat center in Ohio. This starkly simple statue portrays a woman kneeling, head bent, hands open, palms up, in an attitude of supreme openness, yieldedness, availability, submission. It is Mary's surrender, her yes to the will of God. Both as a work of art and as a spiritual statement on womanhood, it has always moved me deeply. As I have meditated on it over the years, I have seen that all women, like Mary, are called to "make a place" for the work of the Spirit and that our response precisely as women is in total and complete adaptability, submission to the will of God.

A look at the origins of renewal, in prayer group after prayer group, reveals the influence of a woman's prayer and desire for renewal. This is no accident. From Azusa Street to the Duquesne weekend, we will find God's women, open and available, seeking the Lord and making a place for the work of the Holy Spirit. And this isn't surprising. Mary's sensitive, maternal nudge made a place at Cana for the miracle only her Son could perform. Like the women who went to minister to the Lord in the tomb, women often first sense the good news of God's action, preparing the way for the apostles who affirm and establish the good news among us.

THE BIRTH OF GOD'S PLAN

We are called to make a place for the Spirit in many ways. We are called to let God's plan come to birth in us, in the church, and in the world. Wherever we serve—in schools, offices, factories, and hospitals, in professions of all kinds, and in our homes above all—we are called to nurture and foster the plan of God. For all women, whether married or single, this birth of God's plan in us and in our environments is the logical outcome of our acceptance of who we are before God. Childbearing is a biological possibility for most women. But even when, by chance or choice, that possibility is not realized, this central reality of womanhood determines our presence in the world.

The child in the womb expands the mother's body, changing its dimensions. As her body yields, so do the borders of privacy and selfishness. Her very existence gives to another. If we look around us at the women we most admire, we will often see that they give and give and give of themselves, that they seem to have boundless time, energy, and service to give. They are not private persons, but are surrendered and available to care for others.

Pregnancy teaches a woman that others have a claim on her very person for the service of life. Rather than annihilating her, pregnancy makes her a new person, radiant and strong: a mother. As Gertrude von le Fort has said so tenderly in her book, *The Eternal Woman*, to be a mother "means to . . . incline lovingly and helpfully toward everything on earth that is small and weak." Or as Bishop Fulton Sheen wrote in *The World's First Love*, "[a woman] cannot look at a limping dog, a flower overhanging a vase, without her heart and mind and soul going out to it, as if to bear witness that she has been appointed by God as the very guardian and custodian of life."

What we kiddingly refer to in common conversation as our "maternal instincts" are, in fact, part of a very natural response to the reality around us and to the will of God within us. Yet this response is under attack in recent days as unworthy of a woman's abilities. Nursing the sick, care of the elderly, and nurturing children, for example, are devalued, and portrayed as the limitations of a past culture on a woman's service.

Does God want such a confused and conflicting picture of womanhood? Like every other piece in his amazing plan of salvation, he has not left us to our own answers, devices, or searching. He has revealed himself and his will to us.

Though slightly humorous, and unflattering in the

extreme, two verses from the book of Proverbs helped me understand the many scriptural descriptions of the woman of God. "It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a contentious woman" (Prov. 25:24, *RSV*) and, "Like a gold ring in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion" (Prov. 11:22). One thing registered vividly: I wanted no part of contentiousness, and whatever discretion was, I knew I really desired it.

RESERVED AND RESPONSIBLE

Discretion has at least two major aspects: caution or reserve in speech, and good judgment—the ability to make responsible decisions. According to the word of God, reserve and good judgment should characterize a woman's very being. As I looked through the passages that speak of a woman's behavior, these two qualities recurred, focusing and refocusing my vision.

"Women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly. . . . Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness" (1 Tim. 2:9, 11). "The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things" (1 Tim. 3:11). "[A widow] must be well attested for her good deeds, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the feet of the saints, relieved the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way" (1 Tim. 5:10). "Bid the older women likewise to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be sensible, chaste, domestic, kind, and submissive to their husbands, that the word of God may not be discredited" (Titus 2:3-5). "Let not yours be the outward adorning . . . but let it be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious" (1 Peter 3:3-5).

Whatever is precious to God is all that our hearts should desire. Some segments of our society teach that true advance will only come about from an argumentative, belligerent, aggressive stance toward my rights, my will, my work, my life, my, my, my . . . ! But self-seeking is not a gospel response in men or women. The woman of God described in Scripture is a sensible, serious, stable, supportive, reliable, disciplined, temperate, faithful, self-sacrificing doer of good. The strength to stand faithful and firm and to make responsible decisions is to be found in cautious reserve, modesty, silence, and submissiveness. It stems from a quiet and gentle spirit

that declares, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). It stems from a peaceful, ordered life.

THE HOLY EXPERIMENT

Okay, you say, I'll begin to write into my definition of what I am supposed to look like these new words—submissive, modest, domestic. Even if they don't sound like the me I know, I'll be willing to try them on for size if they are part of what the Lord wants. Now, what does it mean?

It is easy to jump to silly conclusions from this kind of meditation. Am I saying women must abandon all initiative, speech, and outside activity? Not at all. But we can allow each of these words of Scripture to become fully incarnate in our behavior, attitudes, conversation wherever we find ourselves.

We can also learn to cherish the place God has given us and let our womanly responses flourish there. One of my friends struggles with the fact that she wants to be at home full time, but at the moment the Lord clearly has her carrying out the responsibilities of an outside ministry. Another friend is often tempted to be discouraged because she is at home all day with two small babies and few outside activities. As for me, I am at home with our children most of the day but have a ministry which takes me outside about 15 hours a week. God is teaching us all a lesson that he taught St. Paul: "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content" (Phil. 4:11). Yielding in this way brings contentment, quiets our spirits, makes us precious to the Lord, and makes a place for the work of his Spirit.

My daily joy now comes in the holy experiment of learning to become more womanly. With the support of many sisters in the Lord, I am learning to delight in all that is domestic, kind, serious, reverent, and maternal. The desire of my heart still lies in becoming a mature Christian woman. My hope of attaining that fullness has grown immeasurably since—if I may change Leon Bloy's quote around—I've learned to believe that "the more womanly a woman is, the more she will become holy." ■



Dorothy Ranaghan is a member of the People of Praise, a Christian community in South Bend, Indiana. She is a member of the National Service Committee of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of the United States.