

Catechetical Series:

## To Serve is to Reign: a Look at Vocation and the Ministry of Women in the New Testament

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### WHAT IS VOCATION? WHERE DO WE SEE VOCATION AND MINISTRY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?



In parish life, *vocation* seems to be one of the "buzz words" among different ministries, but it is often the word is used without being familiar with what it is. It is helpful to enter into a deeper understanding of what this really means. Traditionally the word "vocation" has been used in reference to the state in life (marriage, priesthood, or religious life) to which a person has been called to devote oneself. The word itself comes from the Latin *vocare* which means "to call". But who does the calling? --God! A vocation must first be understood as something received from the Lord, a gift that must be received, accepted and treasured. But a vocation, as with any gift, requires also a response. When we are called, it is to fulfill some purpose, to fulfill the particular mission for which God created us. Each of us receives a vocation from the Lord, call from the Lord to "cooperate in the spreading of this Kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and

grace, of justice, love and peace"<sup>1</sup> in the form and state of life He desires.

We see this throughout the Bible, in the calling of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets, Mary, and the Apostles to name just a few. God reveals Himself and His plan for a particular soul and invites that soul to respond, to cooperate with Him in the plan of salvation by fulfilling a mission entrusted to that soul. In the case of Abraham, it was to set out to a foreign land to become the father of many nations and in a special way the father of Israel. In the case of the Blessed Virgin Mary, she was invited to receive and bring into the world the Messiah who would bring salvation to mankind.

A vocation is something personal, given to a particular soul. While there might be general patterns and ways to live a vocation out (e.g. the priesthood), the Lord always speaks to a soul in the midst of daily life and the realities of that soul. Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow Him while they were fishing or mending their fishing nets (Mt 4:18-22; Mk 1:16-20; Lk 5:1-11). He called Matthew while he was sitting at his customs booth (Mt. 9:9-13; Mk 2:14-17; Lk 5:27-32). We also Jesus invite the rich young man of Mark's Gospel to "Go, sell what you have, and give to [the] poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." (Mk. 10:21) He sees the reality of our hearts and what we are lacking in order to sincerely follow Him and extends to us what we need to respond, we only have to accept it.

Within a given vocation, there can be different missions -- teaching CCD, serving the poor, visiting the sick, music ministry, etc. We see this as well in the life of the Apostles and those close to Jesus. Jesus sent the disciples out on mission to "Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons" (Mt. 10:8; cf. Mk 6:7-13; Lk 9:1-6) Paul himself, as the Apostle to the Gentiles, recognizes the particular mission the Lord entrusted to him and the mission entrusted to Peter. He writes "for the one who worked in Peter for an apostolate to the circumcised worked also in me for the Gentiles" (Gal 2:8).

In the book of Acts, these missions become even more distinguished. Matthias is chosen as an Apostle to succeed Judas; deacons are appointed to minister to the poor and the widows; Paul sets out on his missionary journeys, etc. Yet, as the missions become more active, we also get another glimpse of the women who aided in the mission of spreading the Good News. Now, those women who we saw even in the life of Jesus who gathered around Him and served Him, begin to be recognized for their importance in the ministry of the early Church. This short series will introduce us into the ministry of the women in the Gospels and Apostolic times, so that perhaps we may gain a better understanding of what the authentic ministry of women looks like in the Church today.

*"Where does mission originate? The answer is simple: it originates from a call, the Lord's call, and when he calls people, he does so with a view to sending them out."*

*- H.H. Francis, Homily, July 7, 2013*

<sup>1</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Homily, August 20, 1989



## THE VOCATION AND SERVICE OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

As we begin our foray into the ministry of women as it is presented in the New Testament, it is only right to begin by looking at Our Lady. She, of all women, manifests the fullness of the feminine vocation and mission in the Christian life. While her particular vocation was a preeminent one--to be the Mother of God--she models for us what it is to be spouse, virgin, and mother. As Blessed John Paul II writes, in Mary we see the "fullness of the perfection of 'what is characteristic of woman', of 'what is feminine'. Here we find ourselves, in a sense, at the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women."<sup>2</sup>

One of the first things we should note is that in her response to the angel's message at the Annunciation, Mary identified herself as the "handmaid of the Lord." (Lk 1:38) While many understand the role of "handmaid" to be a menial and undignifying position, the Blessed Virgin Mary did not hesitate to use this phrase referring to herself before the Lord. What does this mean to say? She was at the service of the Lord -- for whatever He needed. Shouldn't this be the fundamental attitude of any disciple of Christ? We see years later in Christ's public ministry that He Himself elevates those who place themselves in positions of service and availability to God's will. "The last will be first, and the first will be last." (Mt 20:16); In his instructions for sitting at table as guests (cf. Lk 14:10); "Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave. Just so, the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mt. 20:26-28). These are just a few of the examples from Christ's teaching that elevate the humble servants.

"Putting herself at God's service, she also put herself at the service of others: a service of love...For her, "to reign" is to serve! Her service is "to reign"! This is the way in which authority needs to be understood, both in the family and in society and the Church. Each person's fundamental vocation is revealed in this "reigning".<sup>3</sup> Thus, in her service, Mary, the Mother of Jesus, points out to all of humanity, but especially to women who share her femininity, the fundamental vocation of service -- service to God and the Kingdom and service to our brothers and sisters.

There are a several instances recorded in the Gospels that reveal to us particular dimensions of Our Lady's service to God and humanity (Lk 1:39-56; Lk 2; Jn 19 to name a few), but one in particular calls to be examined in the context of our discussion. In the Gospel of John, the Apostle recounts for us the miracle at the Wedding in Cana. He relates that Our Lady noticed that the wine ran out. No one had yet noticed that there was no more wine, but she went and spoke with Her Son, asking Him to provide. Jesus seems to resist saying His "hour had not yet come" (cf. Jn 2:4), but then yields to the confident persistence of His Mother. She then tells the servants at the feast "Do whatever He tells you." (Jn. 2:5) Here



we see something distinctive about Our Lady's service. "Mary takes her place within Christ's messianic service. It is precisely this service which constitutes the very foundation of that Kingdom in which 'to serve ... means to reign'.<sup>4</sup> She intercedes for the couple with Her Son, but then she also directs herself to the servants and exhorts them to be attentive to what Jesus asks for. Our Lady is demonstrating the attentiveness, trust, and sensitivity to relationships that are particularly characteristic of women. This was the beginning of Jesus' signs in Galilee as he turned water into wine, but there is an even deeper significance to Mary's mediation. John closes this passage by saying that "his disciples began to believe in him." (Jn. 2:11) Mary's mediation that manifested so many feminine characteristics in the end brought more people to believe in Jesus. Is this not the task of the Christian? This passage through the gestures and words of Our Lady demonstrate the need for women to live the gifts of their "feminine genius"<sup>5</sup> and lace them at the service of the Kingdom to bring more hearts to Christ.

*"Women ... reveal the gift of their womanhood by placing themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives.  
For in giving themselves to others each day women fulfill their deepest vocation."*

*- Bl. John Paul II, Letter to Women*

<sup>2</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* no.

<sup>3</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Letter to Women, no. 10

<sup>4</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* no. 5

<sup>5</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Letter to Women, no. 10



## THE PRESENCE AND MINISTRY OF WOMEN IN THE GOSPEL

In addition to the preeminent role of the Virgin Mary in the Gospels, there are other women who are present in the life and ministry of Jesus. In contemplating their relationship with Christ and how this relationship is manifested in their service, we can better understand the service the feminine genius is called to give to the Church of today.

### **The Women at the Foot of the Cross**



Perhaps one of the places one would least expect to find women in the Gospels would be during the cruel and gruesome Passion of Jesus. Yet, here is where we really see that there were more than just a few women who had come to believe in Jesus. St. Luke recounts that along the Way of the Cross "many women who mourned and lamented him. Jesus turned to them and said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep instead for yourselves and for your children." (Lk 23:27-28) and then both St. Mark and St. Matthew give similar accounts, although including a few different women by name, saying "There were many women there, looking on from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to him. Among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." (Mt. 27:55-56). While at first glance, the presence of so many women during Jesus' Passion might be surprising, Bl. John Paul II explains that "in this most arduous test of faith and fidelity the women proved stronger than the Apostles. In this moment of danger, those who love much succeed in overcoming their fear."<sup>6</sup>

### **Mary Magdalene**

Mary Magdalene has always been a somewhat mysterious woman. She has often been identified with the adulterous woman who was nearly stoned to death but for the intervention of Jesus. She has also been identified with the sinful woman who broke the alabaster jar of ointment over Jesus' feet or the sister of Martha and Lazarus. It is not clear that these identifications can really be made. What we *do* know of her is that Jesus cast seven demons out of her (Lk 8:2) and that she followed Jesus closely, even going to the foot of the Cross as is recorded in each of the four Gospels. Mark's Gospel also notes that she ministered to Jesus, bringing a personal tone to her service. One of the most significant elements of Mary Magdalene's ministry was her mission to bring the news of the Resurrection to the Apostles. Tradition has often referred to her as the "apostle of the Apostles" precisely because she was sent by the Risen Lord to announce to them that He had been raised. This shows the trust that the Lord placed in women to bear such important news--and the receptivity He found in a feminine heart to appear to her before he appeared to the Apostles. She was there at the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, revealing her love and concern for Him even after He was dead. We truly see the gift of herself in this act since she would apparently no longer receive from Him, but she still desired to give. Bl. John Paul II writes of Mary Magdalene and the other women at the tomb that morning that "women show to him and to his mystery a special *sensitivity which is characteristic of their femininity*. It must also be said that this is especially confirmed in the Paschal Mystery, not only at the Cross but also at the dawn of the Resurrection. The women *are the first at the tomb*. They are the first to find it empty. They are the first to hear: "He is not here. *He has risen*, as he said... [this event] crowns all that has been said previously about Christ entrusting divine truths to women as well as men."<sup>7</sup>

### **Mary and Martha**

Perhaps one of the most powerful confessions of faith in the Gospels is made by Martha in the Gospel of John when Jesus arrives after Lazarus has died. Martha cries out, "I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day...I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world." (Jn 11:24, 27) She confesses boldly and clearly her faith in Jesus. She is the one who was anxious about serving and getting things done when Jesus visited their house and Mary was sitting, listening at the feet of Jesus. These two personalities actually speak a lot to us about ministry and a relationship with Jesus. Martha, always busy serving, but she grows envious that her sister is not helping. It is important to serve -- but remember to serve out of love. It is also important to remember that our hearts must be nourished by the Word before we can take that Word to others through our service. In these two sisters at Bethany, we see the dynamism between prayer and service and service and prayer.

*"Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honored the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love."*

*- Bl. John Paul II, Letter to Women*

<sup>6</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* no. 15

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* no. 16



## THE MINISTRY OF WOMEN IN ACTS AND ST. PAUL'S LETTERS

This glimpse into the life and ministry of women in the New Testament is really just that -- a glimpse. There are other women who reveal much about woman's status both in society at the time of Jesus and the early Church, whether they are given names or remain unidentified. Among these there are Joanna and Susanna "who provided for [the Apostles] out of their resources." (Lk 8:3) the Samaritan woman, the woman with the hemorrhage, and the different women that Jesus met during His public ministry. Yet, the countercultural approach to women that Jesus had (speaking to women, ministering to them and allowing them to follow Him). carried on into the early Church with the Apostles. Often, women were not even written about,<sup>8</sup> which is already quite a cultural contrast from what we see in both the Gospels and the Letters of St. Paul. St. Luke even writes a genealogy of Jesus through Mary's lineage rather than through His earthly father. As we move into the other New Testament writings, we see the pattern continue.



### **Phoebe**

Phoebe is a figure who appears to be quite important and who plays a leadership role in the "church at Cenchreae" as well as having been a benefactor of St. Paul's and of others. She is a fairly controversial figure, since some translations refer to her as a "deaconess". What does this mean? The Greek word is a bit ambiguous, but it could just seem to mean that a woman has the *ministry* rather than the *office* of distributing food and other goods to the poor,<sup>9</sup> since this is what the first deacons had been assigned to do. Considering the climate of much of the discussion in today's society, this distinction between office and ministry is important.

### **Chloe**

Although we only hear of Chloe once, we can get an idea of her active service based on this one reference. St. Paul writes, "For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by Chloe's people, that there are rivalries among you." (1 Cor 1:11). First of all, Chloe was in direct communication with St. Paul, which could not have been an easy task. It speaks of her authority and leadership. It is also thought that her house became one of the "house churches" where early believers gathered.

### **Tabitha**

Another briefly mentioned woman who is clearly identified as a "disciple" is Tabitha. St. Luke's account of her in Acts describes her as "devoted to good works and acts of charity." (9:36). She, through her own life was witnessing to the Gospel. For Jesus Himself had said that "your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father." (Mt 5:16). Through her good works she was bringing glory to the Father and evangelizing by giving testimony with her life.

### **Lydia**

Again, not much is mentioned about Lydia in Acts 16, however we do know that she was converted to the faith by Paul's preaching. Although "freeborn women simply did not engage in work outside the home,"<sup>10</sup> Lydia dealt in expensive purple goods. While we do not know how she handled her profit, we do know from the same passage in Acts that she opened her home to receive the Apostles.

### **Priscilla**

Priscilla and her husband Aquila are perhaps better known than many of the women mentioned in the New Testament. This dynamic evangelizing couple first appears in the book of Acts, but also appears several other times, revealing their activity. (cf. Acts 18:2; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tm 4:19.) They are referred to by Paul as his "co-workers" (Rom 16:3). One of Jesus' countercultural traits has carried over to Paul's treatment of this couple in that he "almost always refers to them [Priscilla and Aquila] with the wife's name first."<sup>11</sup>

*"Christ is calling you and the world awaits you! Remember that the Kingdom of God needs your generous and complete dedication... Know the greatness of this mission... Be fully aware of carrying out a mission that cannot be replaced."*

*- Bl. John Paul II, February 2, 1989*

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Reed, Jonathan L. 2007. *The HarperCollins Visual Guide to the New Testament*. HarperCollins: New York.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. House, H Wayne. 1988. "A biblical view of women in the ministry." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145, no. 580: 387-399.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 27



### THE WITNESS OF WOMEN IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Having concluded our brief survey of the women named in the New Testament, it seems only necessary that we also look at the women who indeed gave their lives in testimony to the faith, thus contributing greatly to the mission of the Church through the shedding of their blood. The role of women in the Church would grow and evolve over the years, especially since the Church stretched across different cultures and countries. It is said that because of this diversity, "every woman negotiated her roles within the fledgling church in terms of the larger Jewish or gentile society's options and expectations"<sup>12</sup>

#### **St. Agnes**



St. Agnes was martyred, according to scholars, under the persecution of the emperor Diocletian around the year 300 AD. She was a young girl of around 12 years old when she was arrested for her faith. We see a particular dimension of the power of her testimony in the response of St. Ambrose as he writes about her martyrdom. As we had mentioned last week, during the Apostolic age, it was uncommon for women to be written about at all. Now St. Ambrose, also writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, sings in awe the praise of the courage and purity of such a young martyr. "But what can I say worthy of her whose very name was not devoid of bright praise? In devotion beyond her age, in virtue above nature, she seems to me to have borne not so much a human name, as a token of martyrdom, whereby she showed what she was to be."<sup>13</sup>

#### **St. Cecilia<sup>14</sup>**

St. Cecilia was martyred around the year 230 AD under the emperor Alexander Severus. She had vowed her virginity to the Lord when she was young, but her parents had forced her to marry. Her witness of life ended up bringing her husband to believe and he converted as did his brother. The three were martyred within days of each other.



#### **St. Agatha**

St. Agatha was probably martyred under Emperor Decius around the year 250 AD. She is perhaps "One of the most highly venerated virgin martyrs of Christian antiquity."<sup>15</sup> The details of her life have been greatly embellished over the centuries with legendary elements, but she was tortured and eventually martyred because of her persistent defense of her purity and faith.

#### **Sts. Perpetua and Felicity**

The story of these two saints is quite impressive. They were martyred at the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century under emperor Severus. Felicity was pregnant and Perpetua had a small child, but both persevered in their testimony of faith. Despite the pleading of their families, neither would renounce their faith. After some time in jail, they were sent to the arena to be attacked by wild beasts where they died of their wounds.

*"In this moment of danger, those who love much succeed in overcoming their fear."*

*- Bl. John Paul II, Mulieris Dignitatem*

### THE SERVICE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH TODAY

Having delved a little more deeply into the powerful witnesses and testimonies of women in the history of the Church -- beginning from the very birth of the Church itself -- perhaps we get a better perspective with which to understand the precise mission that has been entrusted to women in this era. Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa explained that the women at the foot of the Cross "followed for reasons of the heart, and these did not deceive them. Because of that, their presence at the side of the Crucified and the Risen One contains a lesson that is vital for us today. Our society, dominated by technology, needs a heart if humankind is to survive without becoming totally dehumanized. We need to give more room to "reasons of the heart" if, while the globe is physically warming, we do not want the planet to fall into an ice-age of the spirit. The big crisis of faith in our modern world is rooted in the fact that people don't listen to the reasons of the heart but only to the twisted reasons of the mind."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> As cited in MacDonald, Margaret Y. 2012. "Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life." *Church History* 81, no. 2: 412.

<sup>13</sup> St. Ambrose, Doctor of the Church; *De Virginitate*, regarding St. Agnes, Virgin and Martyr

<sup>14</sup> Taken from Vol. III of "The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs and Other Principal Saints" by the Rev. Alban Butler.





Women of today have an impressive heritage to follow in looking at the women in the New Testament who gave whatever resources were accessible to them to the service of the Kingdom. It is time to truly rediscover what it means to be a disciple, to live the "feminine genius" that has been entrusted to women and exercise all its gifts for the glory of God.

"God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). Created in the image of God, man and women are to participate in the creative work of God. The spirit of competition that is the result of original sin and wounds must be put to rest so that men and women can truly begin to cooperate and place their characteristic gifts at the service of the Church, building up the Kingdom in communion with each other. This is the benefit of learning from holy women who have gone before -- to see how they have placed their feminine fortitude, sensitivity, and capacity for relationship; their logic of love and of the heart, at the service of God and others. This is what the Church's daughters must do today. They must rediscover their identity as disciples and allow this identity to inform their femininity to be lived to its fullness, just as Our Lady's was.

"The Church sees in Mary the highest expression of the "feminine genius" and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration."<sup>17</sup> Women of today must be inspired by Our Lady to discover and live their feminine genius as a disciple of Christ, which is their truest and fullest identity as Christian women. In whichever vocation, and in the many missions she is called to serve, she will bear more fruit for the Lord if she lives who she is called to be: a woman at the service of God's Kingdom.

*"At this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling".*

*- The Second Vatican Council's Message to Women, December 8, 1965*

<sup>15</sup> Kirsch, Johann Peter. "St. Agatha." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 1. New York: Robert Appleton

<sup>16</sup> Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, Homily, April 6, 2007

<sup>17</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Letter to Women, no. 10

