

The Marian Style: The Feminine Genius in Evangelization

The Role of Women in the Ecclesial Movements and New Communities

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We are living at a unique time in history. It is a time of rapid secularization, of much darkness and confusion, but also of many encouraging developments and wonderful surprises of the Spirit. In this period of change it is good to recall the message of Pope Paul VI at the closing of the Second Vatican Council:

The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, 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.

One of the great fruits of the rediscovery of the charismatic dimension of the church at Vatican Council II has been the opening up of a greater space for the charisms of women to be manifested in the life of the church. In particular, women have played a prominent role in the rise of ecclesial movements and new communities since the Council. We can think of Chiara Lubich in Focolare, Carmen Hernandez in Neocatechumenal Way, Marthe Robin in the Foyers de Charité, and Patti Mansfield in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. Earlier, there was Dorothy Day in Catholic Worker movement. My own community, Mother of God, was founded by two young married women. Today many women are in leadership roles in the movements, and many more are on the front lines of evangelization. I believe this phenomenon represents a prophetic word to the church: a call to recognize and value the unique and indispensable gift that women bring to the church's mission.

St. John Paul II wrote more about women than any other pope. He coined the term the 'feminine genius,' by which he meant the unique capacity women have to uphold the primacy of the person and of love (*Mulieris dignitatem*, 30; *Letter to Women*, 12). Written into a woman's physiology, even if she never physically carries a child, is 'room for another,' an innate sensitivity to the supreme value of the person. Because of this, he said, women have an irreplaceable contribution to make in society and the church.

This contribution of women is all the more essential now, as John Paul II and his successors have been urgently calling the whole church to engage in a new evangelization. Pope Francis wrote in *Evangelii gaudium*, 103:

The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution that women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess.... I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because "the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace" and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.

What is this unique contribution of women with respect to evangelization? I would like to reflect on three biblical passages that I think help to reveal it.

The Visitation

Where in the New Testament do we find the first Christian mission, the first going forth to proclaim good news of Christ? Is it the apostles' preaching after being filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost? No. Is it Jesus' sending out of the twelve on mission during his public ministry, or later the seventy? No. Nor is it even Jesus' own initial preaching of the kingdom after his baptism in the Jordan.

No, the very first Christian mission is Mary's visit to Elizabeth, immediately after the annunciation, to proclaim the good news of the Messiah and Son of God who has become flesh in her. The visitation is the paradigmatic act of evangelization: Mary, personifying the church, goes forth to witness to Christ who has become present in the world through her. In fact, if we pay close attention to how Luke narrates the annunciation and visitation, we see that he depicts these events at the beginning of the Gospel as a preview of Pentecost at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles—a kind of proto-Pentecost.

The angel Gabriel announces to Mary:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

This is a clear parallel to Jesus' words to the apostles at the beginning of Acts:

But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses.... (Acts 1:8)

The pattern for the church's mission is established by Mary: as the Holy Spirit has made Christ incarnate in her, and she brings him forth into the world, so too the Holy Spirit makes Christ present in the disciples, who will bring him forth into world through their proclamation of the gospel. The whole church is Marian, and evangelization is Marian at its core.

She answers the angel, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; may it be to me according to your word' (Luke 1:38). We are familiar with the Latin translation of Mary's response: *Fiat*. But there is a nuance in the Greek that we may not be aware of. The Greek term translated *fiat* is *genoito*. It is a verb in the optative mood (a grammatical mood that does not exist in Latin), and it actually means not 'let it be so' but 'may it be so.' It indicates not just acceptance, much less resignation, but rather enthusiastic desire—in this case, Mary's embracing of the will of God with her whole being. Her response truly expresses the joy of the gospel, *evangelii gaudium*.

Then we notice how Mary immediately responds to being overshadowed by the Holy Spirit: Christ is in her, and she cannot keep him to herself. She has to share him! She goes in haste to visit her cousin Elizabeth to spread the good news. Just as will happen at Pentecost, the immediate effect of being filled with the Holy Spirit is evangelization.

When Elizabeth hears Mary's greeting—and we should note that Mary has not yet preached the gospel in words; she has not given a catechesis or an eloquent exposition of doctrine, just a greeting from a heart overflowing with the Spirit—the Spirit leaps, as it were, from her to Elizabeth and the child in her womb, and now they too are filled with the Holy Spirit and with messianic joy. The Spirit is contagious!

A second immediate effect of the Spirit is then displayed (again, just as will occur at Pentecost): overflowing praise. Elizabeth praises Mary, the Spirit-filled woman: 'Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.' Then Mary praises God in the Magnificat: 'My soul magnifies the Lord....'

In fact, virtually all the spiritual gifts that Luke displays in the Spirit-filled disciples in Acts and that Paul writes about in 1 Corinthians 12 are evident here:

- There are words of wisdom and knowledge: Mary knows Elizabeth is pregnant before she sees her (Luke 1:36), as Elizabeth somehow knows she is ‘the mother of my Lord’ (1:43); both of them speak with wisdom about God’s plan of salvation (1:42-45, 48-55).
- Faith: Mary believes the word spoken to her by the Lord (1:45).
- Healing: Elizabeth is healed of infertility (1:36).
- Miracles: the greatest miracle of all (until the Resurrection) occurs: the Word becomes flesh (1:35).
- Prophecy: Mary prophesies in the Magnificat (1:46-55); later Zechariah prophesies in the Benedictus (1:67); also Simeon (2:34-35) and Anna (2:38).
- Discernment of spirits: Mary discerns that Gabriel is an angel of God, and knows it is the Holy Spirit of God who has overshadowed her.
- Interpretation of tongues: John, a preborn baby who knows no language, recognizes Mary’s voice and interprets its significance by leaping in the womb (1:41).
- Tongues: in the very next scene, the birth of John the Baptist, Zechariah’s ‘mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed’ to bless the Lord (1:64).

What do we learn from these scenes so magnificently narrated by Luke? We learn that before evangelization is about words or even about acts of loving service, it is about *the Word himself*, present within us through the Holy Spirit. As Paul writes, ‘My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God’ (1 Cor 2:4-5). Therefore evangelization is not first and foremost a matter of plans and projects, but of being filled with the Holy Spirit, fructified by the Spirit, and allowing that divine life within to burst forth in both word and action. It follows that *there can be no new evangelization without a new Pentecost*. The church’s evangelizing mission can be fruitful only if we return again and again, with Mary, to the Upper Room to be filled anew with the Spirit, who makes Christ present and perceptible within us. This is the primary principle that Mary teaches us.

The Woman at the Well

A second significant Gospel story about evangelization is Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. This story shows both how Jesus himself evangelizes and how he creates an evangelist.

As readers familiar with the Old Testament know, when a man meets a woman at a well, it is more than an ordinary encounter: it is *bridegroom meets bride*. This theme appears in the stories of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 24), Jacob and Rachel (Gen 29), and Moses and Zipporah (Ex 2). We are thus prepared to recognize Jesus’ meeting with the Samaritan woman as a divinely appointed encounter, a meeting of love.

The woman comes to draw water at noon, the hottest time of day, not the normal time when women came to draw water. Why? As we find out later, she is a woman of questionable reputation. Perhaps she had experienced being hassled or ostracized by her neighbors, perhaps she felt rejected and ashamed. She is an outcast, a misfit, belonging to an outcast people. How many people to whom the Lord sends us today likewise experience this profound sense of isolation, of alienation from others? Jean Vanier, the founder of L’Arche, speaks of how the handicapped taught him that not only they but all of us are wounded in various ways.

It is striking to see how Jesus speaks to this lonely, hurting person. He approaches not ‘from above,’ to correct, or moralize, or judge, or even pity her; but rather ‘from beneath,’ as a beggar: ‘Give me a drink.’ He meets her thirst with his own divine thirst.

She is shocked at his initiative: ‘How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?’ Since Jesus has no bucket and no way of drawing water himself, we can infer from her reaction that a typical Jewish man would rather die of thirst than say a single word to a Samaritan woman.

Jesus answers her, ‘If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, “Give me a drink,” you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water’ (4:10). We can sense the longing in his heart: If you only knew how good, how all-satisfying, how inexhaustible is the gift I have to give you! He continues, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life’ (4:13-14).

What is the water Christ wants to give us? Later John tells us plainly: ‘Jesus stood up and proclaimed, “If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture has said, Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.” Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive’ (7:37-39). The living water is the Spirit, the love of God poured into our hearts in a perceptible, experienced way. As Paul explains, ‘Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us’ (Rom 5:5).

Now the woman is becoming intrigued and drawn to Jesus. She asks, ‘Sir (*Kyrie*), give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw.’ She still does not understand; her only goal is not to have to keep coming out to the well and risk running into other people. But the Lord says, ‘Ask and you will receive.’

But now he gives an unexpected reply: ‘Go, call your husband.’ Why this seeming digression? What does her husband have to do with it? As the divine physician, Jesus is probing the very place where she is wounded.

She answers evasively: ‘I have no husband.’

‘You are right, for you have had five husbands, and the man you have now is not your husband.’ With this simple word, Jesus exposes her whole life: her brokenness, her sin, her idols, her futile pursuit of security and comfort in the arms of one man after another. He uncovers the darkness in her heart, precisely so that he can heal it. She is cut to the heart, yet she senses his absolute lack of condemnation. She is looking into his eyes and sees only love and forgiveness—a love unlike what she has known from any other man.

At the culmination of the dialogue her heart is deeply stirred as she begins to wonder just who it is who is standing before her: can this be the Messiah? She says, ‘We have heard Messiah is coming... When he comes, he will tell us all things’ (4:25).

He answers, ‘It is I who speak to you’ (4:26). In Greek this is literally, ‘*I am* who speak to you’: it is the divine name revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Jesus is the Lord God, the true Bridegroom wooing her back to himself! It is an astonishing self-revelation. Jesus has not revealed himself this openly to anyone else in the Gospel. Even his disciples are not yet fully aware of his divine identity. Why is it given to her, a woman who is a nobody in the eyes of society—seemingly the person least worthy? Because all he needs is a heart that is thirsty and open to him.

The woman leaves her water jar, because she has now drunk of the living water. She runs back to her village full of joy, proclaiming the good news to all her townspeople. She has become an evangelist! In fact, in the Gospel of John she is the very first to proclaim the gospel publicly

(although Andrew and Philip have done so privately (1:40-42, 45). She does not have a sophisticated, polished message. In fact it is really a question: ‘Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Messiah?’ But that is all that is needed. The villagers have only to see the transformation of her countenance, the joy radiating from her. This woman, who used to be too ashamed to go out to the well when she might meet others, has been healed and set free.

The entire town comes to faith in Jesus because of her word. ‘Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did”’ (4:39). She is no longer an outcast. She has been restored to the joy of communion with God and with her people.

This story illustrates how Jesus forms an evangelist. It is very simple: there is a personal encounter with him; he heals, forgives and radically transforms the person; then she goes and tells others what he has done for her. How often we are tempted to complicate things.

Part of the genius of the ecclesial movements and new communities is that they go out to people, especially people on the margins, and bring them into that life-transforming encounter with Jesus. Women in particular are called to continually remind the church of the simplicity of this encounter, which is at the same time the great challenge of evangelization. Each encounter is with a person who is irreducibly unique and who must be approached with great sensitivity and respect for their individuality. Although programs can often be helpful, evangelization can never be reduced to a matter of programs and head-counts—a ‘cookie-cutter’ approach.

The Woman with the Alabaster Jar

A third Gospel episode that illustrates the feminine genius in evangelization is the story of the woman with the alabaster jar. In Mark’s account of this story (Mark 14:3-9), Jesus is invited to a dinner party with his disciples. A woman comes on the scene, uninvited, with an alabaster jar of ointment of pure nard. The nard is breathtakingly expensive: it is worth a year’s wages—in our terms, perhaps 20,000 or \$25,000 €. It is possibly her dowry. Totally unconcerned about decorum, or about the expense, she breaks the jar and pours it on the head of Jesus. She does not attempt to save a single drop for herself.

What does this gesture mean? On one level, it was a gesture of hospitality and honor that was common in that culture. She must have encountered Jesus before. Perhaps she had experienced his healing or his forgiveness of her sins, and wanted to express her love in return. It was her way of showing extravagant love, of giving Jesus the very best she had.

But on a deeper level, in Israelite tradition, to anoint someone with costly, fragrant oil was the way to crown a king (1 Sam 16:13), or to ordain a priest (Ex 29:7). The marvelous fragrance the anointing left behind was like an invisible crown, conferring an aura of holiness, signifying that the king belonged to God in a unique way. The very meaning of Messiah is the ‘Anointed One.’ This is the only time in the Gospel that Jesus is literally *anointed*, and it is just days before completing his messianic mission. In fact, it is likely that the scent of that ointment—the fragrance of royalty—lingered on him during the final days of his life. When he was on trial, mocked, scourged, stripped naked, and nailed to the cross, he had the aroma of a king.

This woman may have been only vaguely aware of the significance of her act, but Jesus recognized it. The disciples complained: ‘Why this waste? It could have been sold for 300 days’ wages and given to the poor!’ This may seem a reasonable response by human reckoning. Jesus, like the Old Testament, had taught the importance of almsgiving to the poor. But ‘waste’ means giving pointlessly, giving more than is due. Can anything given to Jesus be a waste?

How did her gesture affect Jesus himself? He was deeply moved. He said,

Let her alone; why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you will, you can do good to them; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying. (Mark 14:6-8)

The apostles were in favor of programs of social action with measurable results. But this woman, with her feminine genius, recognized the absolute priority of love for the person of Jesus himself. Her gesture is a prophetic word for the church: before all else that we do, we minister to him first. All social action, all that we do for the poor, is secondary—in fact, our service to others is fruitful only to the degree that we first and foremost serve *him*.

‘She has done what she could’—that is, she held nothing back, like the widow who gave her last two coins to the temple. The apostles were moderate, balanced, and measured in their response to Jesus. But she was extravagant: she poured out on him that which was most precious, without counting the cost. She proclaimed Jesus is worthy of *all*, of her whole life being poured out.

In fact, with her gesture she implicitly said yes to his passion, whereas the apostles, in contrast, had rejected the idea of the cross. When Jesus explained for the first time that his mission was precisely to suffer and die, Peter had rebuked him. Jesus was accomplishing so much good with his teachings, healings, miracles, and gathering of people to himself. The idea of a suffering Messiah made no sense (cf. 1 Cor 1:19); it seemed such a *waste*. This is one instance of the theme of the incomprehension of the disciples, because of which Jesus so often experienced the pain of being misunderstood. But this woman somehow understood.

‘She has anointed my body beforehand for burying’: what she did was a prophecy in gesture, foreshadowing what he himself would do. She broke and poured out her greatest treasure on him, as he would break and pour out his life for all humanity. Jesus is God’s alabaster jar, broken for us on the cross and now filling the world with his fragrance!

In fact, the next episode in the Gospel is another scene of table fellowship, the last supper, at which there is another ritual gesture anticipating Jesus’ paschal mystery (Mark 14:17-25). Mark deliberately places these scenes in parallel so that they comment on one another. In both, there is a reference to Jesus’ *body*, a mention of *memory*, and a solemn pronouncement, ‘Truly, I say to you....’

In this case he says, ‘And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her’ (Mark 14:9). It is a solemn pledge: her gesture will always be remembered as an essential part of the good news, exemplifying the perfect response to Jesus’ laying down of his life on the cross. Her act of love is a proclamation of the gospel! It will lead many others to do what she did—to ‘waste themselves’ on Jesus, without counting the cost.

This woman illustrates the natural gift that women have of seeing others with the heart, of empathy with them, of affirming what is truly valuable. Women have a deep awareness of the logic of the gospel, so different from human calculations. This is the great gift that women are called to bring to the new evangelization today.

Conclusion

As I began with a scene at the beginning of the Gospels, so I will end at the end. Here there is a deep irony: by Jewish law, women were disqualified from being witnesses because they were considered unreliable. But at the empty tomb, only the women are present. They are the first witnesses to Christ’s resurrection, the crowning moment of his victory over sin and death.

Jesus overturns that law! In fact, he puts women at the forefront of the church's mission; he makes a woman an 'apostle to the apostles.' He says to Mary Magdalene, 'Go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' (John 20:17).

Today more than ever, the world urgently needs women to fulfill their unique mission—to be at forefront of the new evangelization, pouring themselves out without counting the cost, affirming the value of others, and calling all human beings to their own deepest vocation to love.