

Of Pillars and Spores: The Genius of Woman

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Perhaps

Your first reaction to the title of this essay ~~maybe~~ was something like this: "What have pillars and spores got to do with the genius of woman?" Pillars and spores are images used by Saint Edith Stein (1891-1942) in one of her essays on woman. The woman who becomes or is becoming who she is meant to be, Stein explains, is "like a *pillar* to which many fasten themselves, thereby attaining a firm footing."¹ Further, women who are on their way to becoming whole persons can, in turn, help others to realize their personal fulfillment. In this way, Stein argues, women are like "healthy, energetic *spores* supplying healthy energy" to all whom God puts in their path.² In my essay I will demonstrate how the metaphors of pillar and spore provide easy-to-remember associational images of how Stein defines the constitutive nature, vocation, and genius of woman.

I will be reinforcing Stein's philosophy of woman with congruent teaching from Pope John Paul II. Fortuitously I happened to be reading the second volume of the *Collected Works of Edith Stein (Essays On Woman)* at the same time that I was studying John Paul II's encyclical, *Dignitatem Mulieris (The Dignity of Women)*. It is reasonable to argue that the writings of the Pope who has consistently exhibited interest in phenomenological thought would be influenced by Edith Stein, a student of Edmund Husserl and Max Scheler and an acclaimed devotee of phenomenology. Whether their similarity of vision regarding the human person and womanhood is merely a matter of coincidence or of studied intent or both, I believe that cross-pollinating their ideas produces a vigorous hybrid.

From her reading of Genesis and her general observation of people, Edith Stein concludes that the

¹ L. Gerber and Romaeus Leuven, O.C.D., *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, Vol. II: *Essays on Woman*, 2nd edition (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1996) 260.

² *Ibid.*

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species of humanity, *homo sapiens*, is further divided into the double species of man and woman. Pope John Paul II teaches the same when he describes mankind as a bifurcated race. To be a member of the human race, the Pope insists, means being so as a male or a female. Between the two sexes, Stein

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insists, "[T]here is a difference not only in body structure and in particular physiological functions, but also in the entire corporeal life."³ The male-female bodily dissimilarities have implications for the distinctive way the male body relates to the soul of a man as opposed to the way the female body relates to the soul of a woman. Stein believed that women and men have distinct psychosomatic identities. Furthermore, femininity or masculinity also leaves its mark on the person's soul. Consequently, intellectual faculties, or spiritual "organs" of the male and female soul—the emotions, intellect, and will—develop differently.

The feminine species expresses a unity and wholeness of the total psychosomatic

personality and a harmonious development of faculties. The masculine species strives to enhance individual abilities in order that they may attain their highest achievements.⁴

The feminine species has two essential characteristics, Stein explains. First, woman is, by nature, person or subject-focused rather than thing or object-oriented. Quite simply, the woman embraces the personal aspect of life; i.e., she is interested in living, breathing people and in all of their human needs. A woman manifests this natural feminine quality in a desire to assert her own identity and in her interest in the identity of other persons. In a statement that obviously arises from a similar insight, the Pope insists that, because of a woman's moral and spiritual strength, God entrusts the human being to the woman in a special way.⁵

Second, woman tends naturally to wholeness and self-containment. This characteristic manifests itself in a woman's desire for her own wholeness and also in her desire to help others to become complete persons. At one point, Stein defines a woman's self-containment as an integrity of her inner life which no extraneous intrusions can imperil. Here again the metaphor of a pillar helps us to understand the implications of the woman's desire to attain wholeness of being. Such

³ *Essays*, 187.

⁴ *Essays*, 187-88.

⁵ *Dignitatem Mulieris*, 30.4.

self-possession is essential for someone who is called upon to be a stabilizer for another who might be in need of a support and a surer footing. Pope John Paul II points out that a woman can be a source of spiritual strength for other people as they discover the great energies of her spirit.⁶

Because the woman yearns for optimal perfection in herself—emotionally, volitionally, and intellectually—she also desires that same psychosomatic wholeness for others with an equal intensity. In this sense, Stein compares a woman to spores or “potent seeds of germinating power.”⁷ She is capable of generating beings like herself whose personal development is complete.

These two essential characteristics of woman—attraction to the personal and to wholeness—point to another hallmark of the female species. Whether it’s an awareness and a sensitivity toward her own personal being or that of others, it’s the centrality of a woman’s emotions that is responsible for this feminine kind of holistic knowledge and discernment. According to Stein, without the emotions the soul of a woman could never know itself or others in their totality. Each woman perceives her own being in the stirrings of her emotions. Through her emotions each woman

comes to know who she is and how she is. Through her emotions, a woman also grasps the relationship of another being to herself.⁸

A natural offshoot of her strong emotional life is a woman’s sensitivity to moral and aesthetic values and a natural desire for God the source of those values. This hunger

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for God, John Paul II points out, is evident in woman’s connaturality for the things of God, a true resonance for the divine in the mind and heart of woman.⁹ The sensitivity to things good, true, and beautiful is a woman’s built-in natural safeguard. It protects her from being seduced by anything low or mean or from “the dangers of seduction and of total surrender to sensuality.”¹⁰

Of what does woman’s vocation consist? Corresponding to the threefold distinction that characterizes every woman—nature, womanhood, and individuality—Stein teaches that there is a corresponding tripartite feminine or masculine call that comes from God.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.6

⁷ *Essays*, 96.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *DM*, 15.3.

¹⁰ *Essays*, 78.

From her analysis of Genesis, Stein concludes that, as human beings, our vocations are threefold: to be an image of God, to bring forth posterity, and to be masters over the rest of creation.¹¹ As men or women, we will be called to realize this basic vocation in different but complementary ways. The primary vocation of a man, Stein explains, "appears to be that of ruler" and, secondarily but still integrally, that

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of a father or parent. Woman's primary vocation is that of a mother and "her role as ruler is secondary and included in a certain way in her maternal vocation."¹² Each individual woman is called to live out her human and gender vocations according to her particular gifts and temperament. As Stein points out, ". . . individual gifts and tendencies can lead to the most diversified activities."¹³

It would make sense that amongst the attributes of a woman's vocation we would find the correlates of woman's primary qualities—her predilection for wholeness and self-containment (summarized in the image of pillar) and her attraction to the personal

and the living (summarized in the image of a spore). "Human development," Stein says, "is woman's most exalted mission."¹⁴ Any kind of lifeless matter is of interest only if it serves the personal. A woman will always be drawn intuitively and emotionally to the concrete rather than conceptually and analytically to the abstract.

The vocation to human development is a twofold mission, that of being a wife and a mother. Relying heavily on the creation story of Genesis, Stein describes the vocation of being a wife as standing alongside her husband as a partner or companion. Again Stein's image of pillar is apposite. A wife, she explains, is someone her husband can lean on. She does this by sharing the life of her husband—his suffering, work, and difficulties. She interests herself in areas of knowledge and concern that, except they are those of her spouse, would ordinarily not engage her mind. The Pope, too, explores the notion of woman as companion and helper. He shows how Genesis teaches that of all the living creatures surrounding the first man, only the first woman is a helper suitable for him.¹⁵ In this important sense, man and woman are called to exist mutually "one for the other."¹⁶

Stein believes that, as a mother, the woman demonstrates a germi-

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁵ *DM* 6.4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.4.

nating, spore-like quality as she gives life, care, and encouragement to her child, forms the child's God-given gifts, surrenders herself to the child's needs and then, when the child has matured and is able to pursue his own life, quietly withdraws. A woman is called primarily to guard and teach her own children, but her basic maternal vocation also fosters life and growth in her husband and in every person with whom she associates.¹⁷

Given her own state in life both as a single woman and later as a religious, Stein repeatedly reminds her readers that the maternal quality of woman also includes a vocation to spiritual motherhood, a call to nourish others in the divine life and to lead them to God. The Pope emphasizes that the motherhood of woman is not only physical but also spiritual. It expresses a profound listening to the Word of God and safeguarding it.¹⁸ Whether exercising physical or spiritual maternity, Stein insists that a woman's mission is universally toward being rather than having, toward community and humanity rather than toward possession and power.

Accordingly, woman is called to develop her genius by exercising her unique gift of discernment. With her ability to grasp the concrete and the living, woman is naturally strong in her receptivity toward others. John Paul II explains

that it is the woman's "readiness to accept life which marks her 'ethos' from the 'beginning.'"¹⁹ She is naturally capable of adapting herself to the inner life of others, to their goals, and to the way they intend to

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meet those goals. With her discerning heart, she is sent to human souls to show that the universal desire for union with God reveals the highest meaning of each person's life and course of events. With her gift of discernment, a woman can uncover the hidden burden laid on every heart and help to carry it; she can search every heart for the treasure lying within it and bring it to its best use for the individual and the community.

Woman is called to develop this intuitive gift of discernment by responding to her call to develop the kind of soul that will capitalize on this aspect of her genius. The soul of a woman is called to

. . . be *expansive* and open to all human beings; it must be *quiet* so that no small weak flame will be extinguished by stormy winds, *warm* so as not to numb fragile birds; *clear*, so that no vermin will settle in

¹⁷ *Essays*, 46.

¹⁸ *DM* 19.4.

¹⁹ *DM* 14.2.

dark corners and recesses; *self-contained*, so that no invasions from without can imperil the inner life; *empty of self*, in order that extraneous life may have room in it; *mistress of itself* and also of its body, so that the entire person is readily at the disposal of every call.²⁰

Stein suggests that in working toward this "total condition of the soul," it can best be thought of in terms of complete surrender to God. God's grace can effect these qualities in a soul. Consequently, a woman is strengthened in her call to love self, others, and God, each in their proper way.

Concretely, Stein advises that no matter how busy a woman is, she needs to give the first hour of the day to the Lord if she hopes to develop her genius of discernment and spiritual maternity.

The duties and cares of the day ahead crowd about us when we awake in the morning (if they have not already dispelled our night's rest). Now arises the uneasy question: How can all this be accommodated in one day? When will I do this, when that? How shall I start on this and that? Thus agitated, we would like to run around and rush forth. We must then take the reins in hand and say,

"Take it easy! Not any of this may touch me now. My first morning's hour belongs to the Lord. I will tackle the day's work which He charges me with, and He will give me the power to accomplish it."²¹

Stein prescribes liturgical prayer as a further means to help a woman purify herself and become a fit instrument in God's hand.

For Stein, the formation of a woman takes place fundamentally in her soul. There the spiritual powers of intellect, will, and emotions, like spores, "must grow and ripen into the perfect gestalt . . ." ²² or character. In every woman, although there's an "embryo of the ideal feminine soul," it (her soul) requires a very specific and consistent "cultivation if it is not to be suffocated among weeds rankly shooting up around it."²³ Only a process of continual purification activates the germinating power of a woman's gifts and leads to what Stein calls a vocational ethos. Appealing to the metaphor of spores as descriptive of the qualities of a woman's nature, she reflects,

[T]here are potent seeds of germinating power therein, and life in them is stirred into tremulous motion through the ray of light which comes from the other side of the clouds.

²⁰ *Essays*, 132-33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

²² *Ibid.*, 98.

²³ *Ibid.*, 133.

But it would be necessary that the gross clods be cultivated in order for the light to penetrate to the seeds.²⁴

Perhaps a good place to start in the necessary working up of the soil, rooting up of weeds, and planting of good seeds is for the woman to overcome the tendency to excessive concern for her personal worth. To accomplish this, a woman must work to be free of a fixation on herself, to be free of a vanity that tends to center both her activities and those of others about her own person, and to be free of craving for praise and recognition.²⁵ And it's not enough to make these changes on one's own power alone. Stein counsels that "[O]nly in daily, confidential relationships with the Lord in the tabernacle can one forget self, become free of all one's own wishes and pretensions, and have a heart open to all the needs and wants of others."²⁶

Second, woman must overcome the tendency to fixation on others. This perversion of the woman's natural desire for the personal can manifest itself in "an excessive interest in others as in curiosity, gossip, and in an indiscreet need to penetrate into the intimate life of others."²⁷ This misplaced concern for others and their development frequently ends up with an abject kind of surrender that leads to er-

rors of judgment and will. It is a part of woman's nature to want to surrender herself to another and to possess the other completely. But Stein points out that such total giving over to another can become "a perverted self-abandon and a form of slavery" when it is directed toward a human person rather than toward God.

Third, woman must overcome the tendency to a unilateral emotional development to the exclusion of the intellectual and spiritual. The goal for her own human development as well as that of others is to become a whole person. That is, she should strive to be a well-integrated woman who recognizes that her body ought to be governed by well-developed spiritual powers and her entire body-soul unity ought to be subject to God's governance. A respect for the hierarchy of spiritual faculties means that she recognizes that emotions are not the only spiritual organs that need to be developed and exercised. "The libidinous drive is controlled by the will; the intellect, the eye of the soul, guides the will" and the individual "along life's path."²⁸ Therefore, exercise of her faculty of emotions together with her intellect, will, and interior senses is essential in the woman's quest to realize her genius, her ability to give and receive love in her distinctively feminine way. ✠

²⁴ Ibid., 90.

²⁵ Ibid., 47.

²⁶ Ibid., 56.

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸ Ibid., 230.