

“EDITH STEIN ON WOMAN AND MAN”

Passages from an article by Freda M. Oben

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Stein considers “the true nature of man and woman in relationship to God the Creator.” She “tells us that ‘all of the defects of a person’s nature which cause him or her to fail in their original vocation are rooted in a perverse relationship to God’ (*Essays*, 72). And their attitude of ‘I will not serve’ before God causes their perverted relationship to all others....Not only is harmony destroyed between man and woman, but there is loss of personal integrity.”

“ ‘Man and woman are destined to live one life with one another like a single being’ (*Essays*, 65)...Yet the effect of the Fall reduced their relationship to that of master and slave, the man using the woman for his service and his lust. The woman has been placed in subjugation to him as punishment for trying to seduce and therefore rule him. As a result,...woman attempts to dominate man to make compensation for being under him....Degenerate relations between man and woman also cause degenerate relations with the children....Becoming too self-indulgent, the woman may shirk her maternal duties just like the man shirks his.”

“The feminine nature is to stay by another human being’s side, participating in his life with love, fidelity, and readiness to serve....She is psychically equipped to do so in and out of the home. Wherever she helps a lonely person in need she is a companion. And wherever she helps a child to develop, she is a mother. The care and development of human life and humanity are woman’s specific duty. Her natural vocation is that of wife and mother....She complements the man by her basic desire to reflect God by a wholeness of personhood. She helps him to counteract the danger of masculine nature which is to strive to image God by the perfection of a specialized ability. She sees that he is not too absorbed in his profession, that his humanity and fatherhood are not stunted.”

“The man is responsible to care for and to protect the woman. She is given the primary duty in procreation and raising of children, but he has the

responsibility to help her in her duties and to help the children make good...; his primary vocation is to rule, and secondary is his role as parent. For the woman her maternal role in primary—to rule is secondary....She has special powers of endurance and self-abnegation. She is directed to the concrete, the individual, and the personal.... Working outside the home does not violate the orders of nature and grace. But the woman must manage the home and should not go beyond the limits which jeopardize family life....Woman is meant to stand side by side with man over creation. She has a special gift to bring to society: her love which fights evil and serves others in their personhood....Stein writes, 'Everywhere the need exists for maternal sympathy and help, and thus we are able to recapitulate in the one word "motherliness" that which we have developed as the characteristic value of woman.' "(Essays, 258)

"It is part of woman's spiritual nature to participate in society, and society needs her spiritual gifts." Stein "urges women not to wait for other people to solve the problems, but to get involved themselves." Woman is " 'a jointly responsible member of the whole nation' (Essays, 141)....It was the nineteenth century attempts to protect women from exploitation that created a social attitude which established the motive and principles for the Feminist Movement....Too often the working wife feels great conflict and stress because of feelings of inadequacy regarding children and husband....Most broken marriages can be traced to the woman's failure to keep the family together, because it is her strength which must do so...."

"Stein stresses the importance of prayer and a Eucharistic life for the busy woman ...In a short essay, 'Ways to Interior Silence,' she describes the ideal condition of the woman's soul as expansive, quiet, empty of self, warm and clear.... 'When she awakes and is immediately ready to pounce upon the problems, she says "Take it easy!" Let everything wait. Make yourself still and empty. Pray for an hour—go to Mass and offer yourself, asking, "Lord, what do you want of me?" Then you can go on to your duties energized, encouraged, gladdened. The soul will become great and expansive through entry into the divine life. You will be enkindled by love in order to enkindle others...' (Essays, 132).... 'By noon we are feeling harassed again. It is necessary to pause for a return of calm. The best thing is to go before the Tabernacle or to rest at home....The day will continue peacefully even if you are tired. In the evening you suffer all kinds of embarrassment with thoughts of failure. But lay it all in God's hands as an offering.' (Essays, 132). The woman finds her way of

keeping that vital bond with God through contemplation, spiritual reading and the liturgy. For woman must lead a Eucharistic life if she is to live a life of love. Married or single, she becomes the spouse of Christ and brings Him to others....Her higher faculties of mind and will must control not only her emotional life, but also the life of the senses, or she can be lost.”

“Stein emphasizes that the natural vocation of woman is that of spouse and mother. There can be no greater joy for her than to participate in divine creativity by bringing new creatures into the world and helping to fashion them in grace for their Maker....Her power of inventiveness and self-sacrifice is irreplaceable....The future of the child depends more on her than on anyone else....She should never do or say anything harmful or offensive in front of the child....Her job is to teach the child ‘the right relationship to other people and to God.’ The child asks constantly, ‘why is this?’ And the mother leads him to God, the source of values, by teaching the child to pray and to trust in God....I think Stein would be most horrified by the condition of children all over the world today. She gave all her strength to the formation of the young in order to create a better world....She urges that sensitivity and understanding be shown to the young in their plight, for they have suffered so much!”

“Stein pioneered an enlightened Catholic understanding of human sexuality and the teaching of that understanding to the young...: Sexuality is a unity of total personhood, embracing not only gender but humanity and individuality. Hence, man and woman are human beings with a unique masculine or feminine character.” Over sixty years ago she developed an understanding of sexuality that includes psychological, pedagogical, and pathological perspectives—the independent thinking of a phenomenologist and the contemplation of a holy woman. She recognized the importance of a healthy personalist sexuality in professional and religious life as well as in marriage. Stein challenges our generation to a new awareness of the goodness of humanity by which to restore the initial equality and balance between the sexes, with harmony between man and woman, humanity and God. “The more a man and a woman individually cooperate in Christ’s redemptive action, the more harmony there will be in their collaboration and exercise of roles.” When we apply her recognition of the excellence of human being in our relationships with others, “we create only goodness.”

POSTSCRIPT ON MARY

Woman's mission, like Mary's, is to struggle against evil and to prepare for the spiritual restoration of life in souls before Christ's second coming. God has endowed woman with a capacity to love His creatures and to serve Him by nourishing and sustaining them....Stein also offers Mary as an example for professional women. By projecting "the ethos of Mary," the professional woman can bless society. The model is Mary at Cana. "She quietly sees the problem and quietly remedies it. She does not draw attention to herself." Similarly, the professional woman discreetly offers her services without placing herself in the limelight....Every woman can be confident "that wherever she is functioning authentically as a woman, Mary collaborates with her....Only God can meet woman's great capacity for self-giving in love. Sex is not the final answer. To love purely is the answer, to love the other for God. If she can love as Mary does, love others in God, for and with God, she can be happy. If she loves in the drive to possess the other for herself, she cannot be happy....In her relationship with Jesus and Joseph, Mary illustrates the right spiritual focus of woman's natural vocation, and of marriage itself as a vocation from God."

--John Gueguen (2004)