

# IMPRINT

A PUBLICATION OF THE SISTERS OF LIFE SPRING ISSUE

## THE BEAUTY OF A WOMAN'S HEART



Sr. Michela with Cristal, a woman with a deep maternal heart who has sacrificed in more ways than can be counted for the sake of her two children.

Several years ago, a woman who had lived with us returned to visit, and was bubbling over with good news. She had just graduated with honors in nursing (a degree she had dreamed of having since childhood) and was confident and ready for her first job. She had a new apartment she loved, mostly because she had taken the time and effort to decorate it beautifully. She was happy, and more herself than ever. As she went on describing how her life was unfolding, she paused and then said, "You know, it's funny: I'm just beginning to experience myself as the person you always knew me to be!"

This is the power of maternal love: the power to reach the hidden potential and goodness of another, to grow the good in spite of incredible obstacles, to draw another into relationship with the Lord and change lives forever. It generates and regenerates spiritual life.

# A WOMAN'S HEART

## Made for Maternal love

### What is this maternal love?

It's a love that sees beyond my failures and mistakes to the good in me. It's a love that is able to see who I really am, and what I could be. It's a love that is willing to sacrifice for me, so that, I, too, can come to believe that possibility. The experience of maternal, spiritual love cuts right through the subconscious fear that can lurk in hearts, that deep down, there is something un-loveable about me. Maternal love brings the other to life and sets him or her free to join the living chain of heroic love.

Every woman, regardless of her state in life and whether or not she has physical children, has the power to love in this revolutionary way. This way is revolutionary because it turns the old order of sin and shame on its head. Once people experience that they are loved, they can begin to give that same experience to others. Cardinal O'Connor hoped the work of the Sisters of Life would bring this life to those who were pregnant and in need. He would tell the Sisters that we were to "mother the mothers of the unborn so that they could mother their children."

### What we've learned walking with women

We've come to learn that this spiritual love is not about *doing* more but about allowing oneself to first be moved in delight by the good of the other, and then outwardly manifesting that delight. This idea can sound simple enough, but do we truly live in this way? Do we love like this? Are we open to receive another person, allowing our hearts to be moved by some goodness we see and notice in them – such as beauty, strength, vulnerability, generosity? And then do we mirror that back to them, before acting, giving advice or stepping in to help, so that they experience being confirmed in their own goodness?

The emphasis is so important, otherwise the other person may feel as if I love them only because I am good (or because I "have to" since I am his or her parent), and not because of any goodness I see within *them* that is moving me. *It is the goodness of the other which is the cause of my delight.*

This true affirmation of another is not always easy. It takes faith, courage, and fortitude. Sometimes I have to work to let go of myself in order to be open to receive the other and allow my heart to be moved in delight. Sometimes I see the beauty, but it takes the other person a very long time to see what I've seen in them. It takes commitment to consistently look beyond repeated mistakes and to love another with constancy, perseverance, courage and delight. But it's worth it.

*This Spring as we witness evidence of new life everywhere in our world, may the graces of Easter be for you, a well-spring of charity which has the power to change the world.*

In Jesus our Life,  
*Mother Agnes*  
Mother Agnes Mary, SV  
Superior General of the Sisters of Life

# SPIRITUAL MATERNITY



Spring-break retreatants with Sr. Agnus Dei, Sr. Sophia and Sr. Filumena (two novices) and Jordan (postulant)



"When Sister spoke I realized I am made for so much more ... I never have to settle." - Cynthia

### Evangelization mission:

"Somehow people recognize that we are for them, that we meet and love them wherever they are. We seek to help people understand that they are infinitely loved by God and are made for greatness. Each person we meet on the road is a unique reflection of our Creator, and we hope to encourage them in their own dignity and goodness."  
- Sr. Virginia Joy, S.V.

"I've never known love like this. This child has changed my life forever." - Alicia

### Mission to serve pregnant women:

"In our work with pregnant women, we want her to freely choose love, goodness, and life for herself and her child. It is a journey as we carry her spiritually and experience deeply with her whatever she goes through. Ultimately we hope she encounters the Person of Jesus Christ, serving these beautiful women is a gift and mystery."  
- Sr. Grace Dominic, S.V.



During the day of prayer and healing retreatants are invited to write their child's name in the "Book of Life".

It's a love that sees beyond my failures and mistakes to the good in me. It's a love that is able to see who I really am, and what I could be. It's a love that is willing to sacrifice for me, so that, I, too, can come to believe that possibility.

"I lived the lie too long. The truth is NO ONE is beyond God's Mercy."  
- Shannon

### Hope and Healing Mission after abortion:

"We gather each woman close to our hearts – her sorrows become our sorrows. And when she comes to know God's immense mercy and love, we rejoice with her; her joy is our joy. Over time we get to know each woman and guide her to the merciful heart of Jesus. It has increased my own faith to see each woman's tangible encounter with His mercy and love, and I witness the ways He transforms her. Sometimes a woman will call back years after we've walked with her, knowing that we are always here for her."  
- Sr. Mary Teresa, S.V.

# THROUGH A MOTHER'S EYES

## what children teach us

[An interview with Helen Alvare]



### How has your experience of being a mother changed you?

I stand before you a woman convinced that children *made* me, in the sense of rendering me the half-way decent person I can claim to be. I also know that without them, I would be bored to tears by life in this world. They make me laugh every day and give me 100 reasons to be interested in the goings-on in the world around me. Without them, I am fairly

sure that even given my multiple statuses of wife, daughter, sister, friend, and professor, I would have devolved into an even more selfish person than I am. I would also, undoubtedly, be even less patient.

I REALLY had to learn that what I had initially feared – that it's not all about me and what I want to do but it's really about other people – was truer than I could ever imagine. It changed my heart in a simply-put way: I learned that life is about the **other** - God, my husband, my children, other people's children... and that that would mean everybody else. I came to be so happy about that fact, for reasons I still cannot explain. I am so incredibly happy that life is about loving others as the main thing. It means it is not a game of "how great do I need to be?" but, "how well do I love?" And progress on that last road is sooooo good when it happens.

I am naturally driven and love to work myself to the bone. My favorite past-time is reading really great insights on controversial topics... and then trying to communicate some new insight or synthesis in a convincing manner. When I became a mother, I had to learn to focus more on people, and less on books. I also had to learn to be really incompetent at many things, like breastfeeding, taking really slow walks, playing soccer and baseball, and writing college essays... and accept that this was part of a normal life.

### Has maternity affected your outlook on life, on others, on your marriage?

It has done nothing less than provide me with the path for understanding Jesus' way, the Golden Rule – the path to understanding that salvation, love, happiness, and freedom lie in learning to love. How did that hit me over the head? Just from growing in relationships with my children over the years.

I have realized how intensely bored my husband and I would be without all that children have opened us to. Watching another person develop, and listening to how children react to the world around them, and having the chance to watch them choose to be unselfish, or even generous, and reach out for a relationship with God is the coolest thing.

It has given me the freedom to drive a seventeen-year-old truck, and a seven-year-old van, and not only remain firm in the conclusion that my priorities are rightly ordered, but *like* the way I live. I can cry about and pray over the losses and reversals of friends and neighbors because I have learned to enter more genuinely into the sufferings of people other than my own little self.

I can see qualities in my husband – unselfishness, determination, wise planning – I would not likely otherwise have seen. Before we had children, we lived beside one another beautifully, but still we did not seem integrated enough. It was as if there was something missing in my belonging to him and him to me. I began to think that this might change in the presence of a child who was ours. That this would be a qualitatively different kind of togetherness as distinguished from all of the other things we did together – talk, entertain, read, visit families, commute, shop, and so on. Now I see new and amazing things in this man who had previously been only my husband, but is now also a father.

### Is there something you would tell a woman struggling through maternity?

Everyone struggles. In this world, people struggle especially with letting go of self-development and turning attention to the other, particularly the child with pretty much 24/7 needs for lots of years. People legitimately fear the loss of money, time, career development, looks ... The world emphasizes these to such a degree, you really have to work hard to side-step obsessing over them.

I wish I could tell you that once I had opened my heart and my mind to children all went well. But instead it was pretty darn awful. My pregnancies either ended in miscarriage (more than a few) or were very easy. But the first attempt at parenting was hard, very hard. We struggled with breastfeeding every day for months.

The next child, though, was an easier adjustment. But what I remember most is the moment when he was just six or seven weeks old, and it occurred to me that I was officially open for more children in a very, very positive way. That I didn't want to count or calculate anymore – I just wanted a family community with more life in it, whatever we could reasonably manage. Why did this happen? Surely I was a more relaxed parent, thank God. This allowed me to see my baby boy as he was, and not any longer to see only my own incompetence. Basically it was a leap of faith followed by God sending me joy, followed by another leap of faith.

### What lessons have you learned through being a mother?

I have come to see that I have good things to share in large part *because* of the ability to love that children have provoked in me. St. Thomas Aquinas was right: "Lord, in my zeal for the love of truth, never let me forget the truth about love." How does this work? In practical terms, of course, one discovers that she can get off the couch at 11 p.m. to pick up a child somewhere, simply because that child needs a ride. Maybe most importantly, however, one learns how to communicate with other people, to decide in advance to give them "that look of love they crave" once you begin to see them as other people's children.

### John Paul II taught that people can truly find themselves only in a sincere gift of themselves to another. Have you experienced this to be true?

Almost twenty years into this journey, I understand that practically speaking, living for myself – or as a couple living for ourselves – would be a terrible temptation toward materialism, ego, and selfishness. Self-giving to a sacrificial extent is just more likely to happen when it's in your face, in your house, where you get relentless opportunities to rise above your own self-interest, your own weaknesses, and to take care of others for decades, not hours. I now understand the attitude of wanting to avoid children because of the demands they make as the temptation to refuse the basic human vocation to love. It is tempting to resist that whole finding-oneself-in-losing-oneself way of life that the last two popes in particular are always talking about. We don't want to experience the trials associated with the Christian way of life: self-gift, for as long a time as parenting takes. Have children made me truly "good"? Only God can say, but I am sure that I am thereby at least better than I would otherwise have been.

When I came to the realization that all my students could be my kids, as could the guy at the checkout counter, as could the garage attendant who is inexplicably cheerful despite his not-cheerful job, it opened my eyes to the power of love in the world. The power I have been given to give it (because God loved me first), and the power to receive it too.

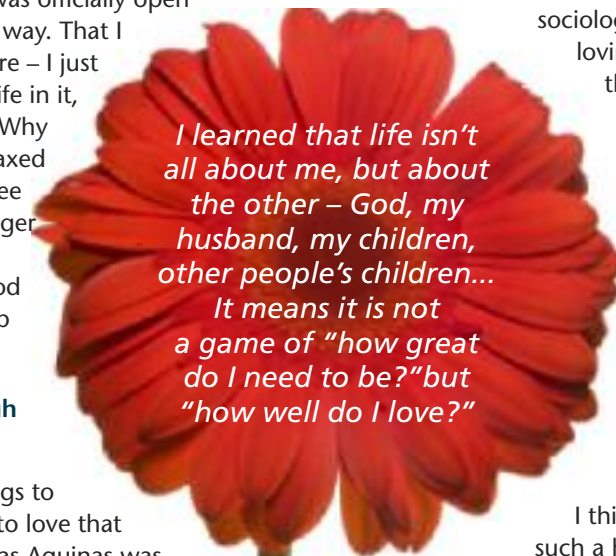
### Today many fear making a life-long commitment to another. What would you say to someone in this situation?

The evidence seems to be just in on this in the sociological and psychological literature – loving others IS the stuff of life, IS the path to a sense of freedom, security, and meaning. God has set it up that most people will not grasp the meaning of life unless there are people in your house, under your nose, in the kitchen at 6 am, whom you love and who love you back.

### In your experience, what is unique about the love of a mother?

I think it's that you have handed over such a huge part of yourself to another for them to dispose of – your body, your happiness, your path and future. But you wouldn't have it any other way.

Helen Alvare is the editor of *Breaking Through: Catholic Women Speak for Themselves*. Check out the website: [womenspeakforthemselves.com](http://womenspeakforthemselves.com)



# MEN'S GIFT TO UPHOLD



*There are none so capable of upholding women in the gift of their maternity, than men. Over the years we have seen the transforming grace that comes to the women we serve through the reverent and humble service of male lay volunteers, or as we like to call them, St. Joseph Workers. Offering vital support to mothers in need, their strength and inspiration to serve come from the same source – behind each of these good men is the presence of a great woman, a mother who not only bandaged their scraped knees, but through steadfast faith, revealed God's love and the call to bring that love to others.*

*"I want you to know, I really believe in what you are doing."*

The Sisters had spent several months encouraging Laura\*, and made every effort to put into place the practical supports she needed. And yet, she still deliberated about whether to continue her pregnancy. Meanwhile, a man contacted the Sisters of Life, eager to "fix things, or build a crib," to support the Sisters' mission to pregnant women as a St. Joseph Worker. Upon learning he was a lawyer, the Sisters asked if he would be open to offering legal counsel should the need arise. Within days, Laura called the Sisters and asked if they knew anyone who could offer her legal advice as she was facing a potential custody battle with the father of the baby. The Sisters quickly connected Laura to the lawyer, and they scheduled a time to meet. Though grateful for the support and the opportunity to learn about her legal rights, she arrived to the meeting tired, discouraged, and overwhelmed. As their time together came to a close, the St. Joseph Worker found himself moved by her courage despite all she faced, and felt compelled to tell her. Before she got up to leave he looked at her and simply said, "I want you to know, I really believe in what you are doing."

When Laura arrived home she called the Sisters. She was totally transformed. For the first time, she spoke with joy, acceptance, and excitement about her pregnancy. Despite the pressures she was receiving from the father of the baby to have an abortion, and the long road of challenges she knew would be ahead, she was determined to continue the pregnancy and give life to her child.

This St. Joseph Worker initially thought his assistance to pregnant women would be to do something - fix things, build a crib, or deliver needed material goods. Rather, through his supportive presence and a few heartfelt words he stepped into his God-given capacity to confirm and uphold a woman in one of her greatest gifts – that of giving life. Not only that, but he uncovered what so many fears, challenges, and discouraging voices were stifling – the incredible strength she possessed, both as a woman and a mother, to love.

\*Name changed for anonymity.



*St. Joseph's Workers help in a multitude of ways. Moving pregnant women into new locations, putting together cribs, delivering items - you name it!*

*"Twenty years ago I wouldn't be talking to you the way I am now, Sister. It really was her prayers." - Patrick*

As another full day came to a close at the Sisters of Life Apostolic Center in Manhattan, the Sisters gathered their things and took off down 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave to enjoy their five-block commute home to Visitation Convent. As they walked and breathed in the cool October air, a loud Brooklyn-accented voice cut through the noise of the busy street. "Sisters! Hey, Sisters!" The Sisters looked over to find that a man had pulled his car up to the curb amidst the evening traffic, and was trying to get their attention.

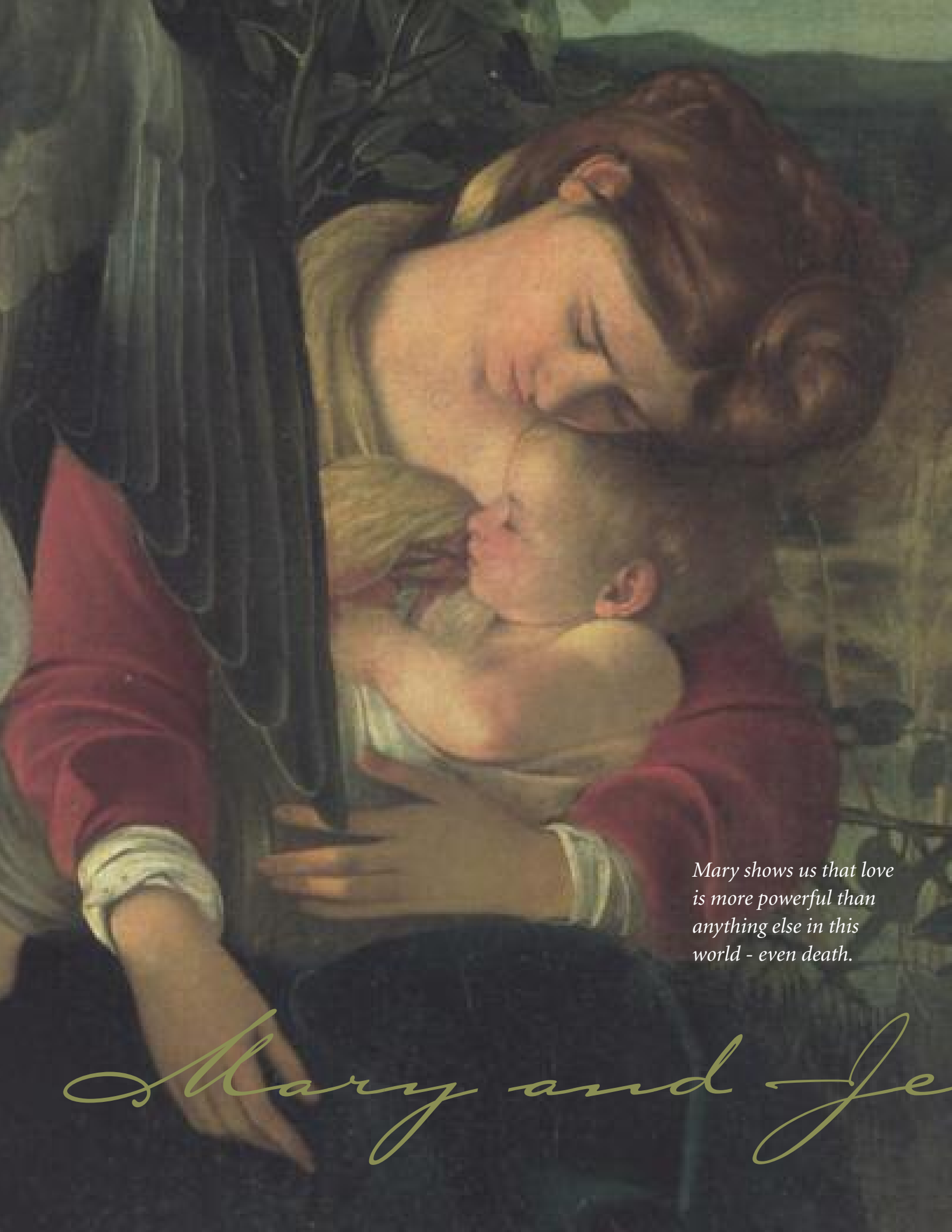
Introducing himself he said, "My name is Patrick. I just wanted to give you a donation. I try to do a good deed everyday, and this is my good deed." The Sisters smiled, touched by his generosity and thanked him. Before pulling away however, Patrick asked, "Who are you Sisters?" The Sisters shared they were the Sisters of Life and mentioned that among other works and a life of prayer, they serve vulnerable pregnant women. "No kidding!" Patrick exclaimed. "My mother was very pro-life. She is a big reason why I have my faith today. She passed away in February. The reason I try to do something good every day is to honor her. I would love to help you Sisters in whatever way I can."

After telling Patrick about the thousands of lay volunteers that support the Sisters' mission to pregnant women in need, he quickly joined the ranks by attending a Co-Worker of Life Formation Day the following week and began to serve in any way he could. He attributes his desire to give of himself to his mother: "She always believed in me. My mother was always the silent prayer warrior, always praying for me. She had a very strong faith in Jesus Christ, went to Mass all the time, and constantly prayed the rosary. She was always there for us whenever we needed any help. When I was younger and away from the Lord, she

would mention to me time to time how much my life would be better if I wasn't drinking and if I came back to the faith." He continued, "Twenty years ago I wouldn't be talking to you the way I am now, Sister. It really was her prayers. I'm grateful that I received God's grace and I got the gift of sobriety. I was able to bring a lot of peace and joy into my mother's life. God answered her prayers in my case. When my mother died she saw me as a sober man for 20 years. That was a big relief for her. I was able to be there for my mother, and that I see as a real blessing."

When asked how the memory of his mother inspires him to live, Patrick responded, "I try to live my life like she did, praying the rosary, thinking of other people first, and trying to be caring and forgiving – to be the best person that I can be, doing things that are pleasing to God and knowing He is with me."

Whether delivering needed practical items, or welcoming a young pregnant woman and her family into an empty apartment he owned, because she refused to have an abortion and was therefore forced to leave her apartment, Patrick is simply grateful to spend himself in a way honoring God and the beloved memory of his mother. "When I think of my mother up there looking down on me, seeing what I am doing, I think she must be smiling saying, 'Wow!' I know she is really proud of me."



Photos: fotolia / Ruzanna Arutyunyan, Dreamstime / Jiri Hera, Fotolia / ptphof

# MARY'S GAZE

*She is looking at you*

- Excerpt from Pope Francis

Mary's gaze! How important this is! How many things can we say with a look! Affection, encouragement, compassion, love, but also disapproval, envy, pride and even hatred. Often a look says more than words; it says what words do not or dare not say.

At whom is the Virgin Mary looking? She is looking at each and every one of us. And how does she look at us? She looks at us as a Mother, with tenderness, mercy and love. That was how she gazed at her Son Jesus at all the moments of his life – joyful, luminous, sorrowful, glorious – as we contemplate in the mysteries of the Holy Rosary, simply and lovingly.

When we are weary, downcast, beset with cares, let us look to Mary, let us feel her gaze, which speaks to our heart and says: "Courage, my child, I am here to help you!". Our Lady knows us well, she is a Mother, she is familiar with our joys and difficulties, our hopes and disappointments. When we feel the burden of our failings and our sins, let us look to Mary, who speaks to our hearts, saying: "Arise, go to my Son Jesus; in him you will find acceptance, mercy and new strength for the journey".

Mary's gaze is not directed towards us alone. At the foot of the Cross, when Jesus entrusted to her the Apostle John, and with him all of us, in the words: "Woman, here is your son" (Jn 19:26), the gaze of Mary was fixed on Jesus. Mary says to us what she said at the wedding feast of Cana: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). Mary points to Jesus, she asks us to bear witness to Jesus, she constantly guides us to her Son Jesus, because in him alone do we find salvation. He alone can change the water of our loneliness, difficulties and sin into the wine of encounter, joy and forgiveness. He alone.



"Blessed is she who believed!" Mary is blessed for her faith in God, for her faith, because her heart's gaze was always fixed on God, the Son of God whom she bore in her womb and whom she contemplated upon the Cross. In the adoration of the

*You bring our needs to Jesus*

Blessed Sacrament, Mary says to us: "Look at my son Jesus, keep your gaze fixed on him, listen to him, speak with him. He is gazing at you with love. Do not be afraid! He will teach you to follow him and to bear witness to him in all that you do, whether great and small, in your family life, at work, at times of celebration. He will teach you to go out of yourself and to look upon others with love, as he did. He loved you and loves you, not with words but with deeds".



*You know a mother's heart*

O Mary, let us feel your maternal gaze. Guide us to your Son. May we not be Christians "on display", but Christians ready to "get our hands dirty" in building, with your Son Jesus, his Kingdom of love, joy and peace.

*Mary shows us that love is more powerful than anything else in this world - even death.*

*Mary and Jesus*



*Mary, you know our sorrows and carry them with us*

# Meeting Mary

We've all had the experience of sharing news with a friend or family member and hearing their reassuring response, "Oh, I'm praying for you!" It's what loved ones do, and how comforting that is.

Now picture waking up in heaven. What might your experience be? For the first time you meet your extended family – the Communion of Saints. So many men and women who came before you and who have been cheering you on these many years, without you ever knowing it. Have they been praying for you too? Of course they have, they're family!

And who might be the first to welcome you? Who but the one closest to Jesus – His mother, Mary, who is not just an historical figure, but is very much alive and waiting to embrace you as only a mother can. Mary understands your human heart. She knows the joys and sorrows, hardships and cherished moments of family life. Jesus desires us to always be under the protecting gaze of a mother, so He entrusted each of us to Mary, with His words from the Cross: "Woman, behold, your Son... Behold your mother." -Jn 19

This is Mary. She looks upon you and loves you deeply. She is your mother.



*"You work out your faith as you build a relationship with Mary." - PATRICE*

My relationship with Mary really came through my Mom. Growing up I was never a fan of church, I used to go kicking and screaming, and I laugh about that now. My Mom taught me the rosary and took me to Mass. But after Confirmation I fell away.

When I was in college, my Mom told me that it's a good practice to speak to the Virgin Mary, because Jesus never refuses her anything. That hit me and pretty much started me praying to Mary. After my Mom moved away, I had the idea of praying the rosary with her over the phone. We offer up our petitions together before each decade.

I've definitely seen Mary's help in trying times – I mean especially as far as my relationship with my father. Speaking with a priest and praying the rosary every day for all I needed to get through, helped me receive healing. Looking back now, if it weren't for those trying times and the relationship I have with the Virgin Mary, my faith wouldn't be where it is now. I've come a long way.

I love to work out, and I think of faith that way too – you work out your faith as you build a personal relationship with Mary. That's what I've been doing. After daily Mass I pray the rosary and pray through difficult situations at work. And I feel like I am protected.

My mom always knew that I would come back to my faith. And I did...through Mary. -Patrice

**ABOUT PATRICE:** *Patrice is a firefighter in NYC. The Sisters of Life in Manhattan have become good friends with Patrice and the devoted men of Engine 54/ Ladder 4.*



*"She guides me in raising my son." - KATHLEEN*

I've always prayed to Jesus in the past, but lately I've been praying to the Blessed Mother too. I thought, maybe this is what I need in my life, maybe I need the nurturing love that I never had growing up – the strong relationship I never had with my mother, that I need to give my son. As I began to pray to Mary, I became more aware of her presence in my life.

There's a motherly calmness that comes when I pray to Mary. She's taught me patience. It's challenging being a single parent, and so I pray to her to help guide me in raising my son. I ask her to help me stay strong as a woman so that I can maintain that precious gift I've been given to nurture. I talk to Mary from the heart. There are times when I'm like, "This is exactly who I need to pray to right now..." And it works! - Kathleen

**ABOUT KATHLEEN AND NICHOLAS:** *The Sisters of Life have been tremendously blessed to have known Kathleen and Nicholas from the time Nicholas was still in the womb. Kathleen's faithfulness inspires us all to live lives of goodness – faithful to our own vocation in love.*

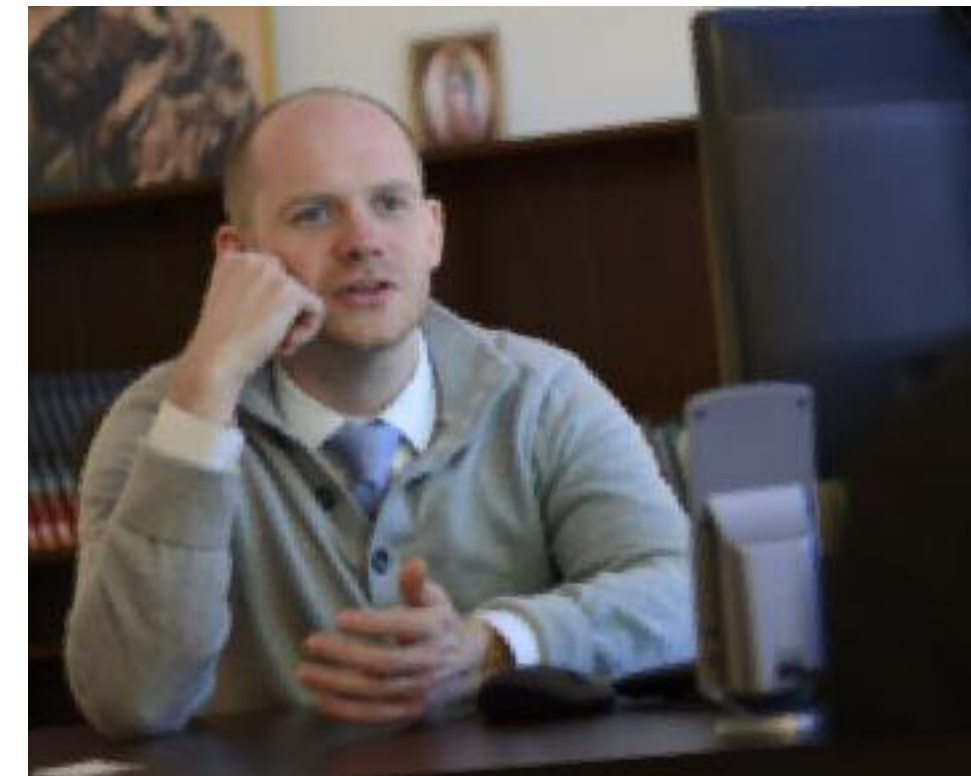
*"It was an initial fire and I knew it was her." - COLIN*

I had a powerful encounter with Mary my sophomore year in college. Long story short I started to suffer through many different things and prayed that they would be taken away. I found this book of my Mom's about Our Lady of Fatima and after reading it, I felt Our Lady's love in a very powerful way just being poured into my body. It was an initial fire, and I knew it was her. This was a time when I felt unlovable and she was pouring her love into me. Ever since then my relationship with her has grown.

Once when I was afraid, I heard her in my own heart say, "Are my eyes not fixed on you?" And an incredible peace came over me. I thought, "Of course, her gaze is always fixed on me, so what am I fearing? Whatever I may be going through, there is nothing to fear."

I love the Total Consecration to Mary by St. Louis DeMontfort. There is such freedom in putting everything in Mary's hands. -Colin

**ABOUT COLIN:** *Colin works with the Sisters of Life in the Family Life/Respect Life Office at the Archdiocese of New York and is the Director of Young Adult Outreach.*





Columbia University graduate students in New York City: Leah Estrada (middle), a Co-worker of Life with her friends Melissa and Matt

# Living **single** living it well

By Kate Sweeney

"Kate, are you married?" they asked...

**The other night** I was volunteering with teen girls at the homeless shelter. "Kate, are you married?" they asked as we began a lesson on love. No, I'm not. "Well, do you have a boyfriend at least?" No, I'm single. "Awwww. Sorry girl!" one replied. She felt so bad for me, and she even gave me one of those it's-really-going-to-be-okay smiles I've come to dread. Her sister even kindly offered to teach me a new hair style. Ouch.

And when it isn't pity – it seems that others want to give me some type of over-compensation in the confidence department. "I do NOT understand why someone as amazing as YOU is possibly still single," they'll say. And, Amazon tried to recommend "The Single Woman's Sassy Survival Guide" to me last week. I didn't click.

### We all hunger

I'll admit it. Being single isn't easy. But the difficulty doesn't come because of the pity others feel for me, the least of whom is my own mother. It doesn't come because I'm not very good at being "sassy" either. The difficulty lies in the deep hunger and desire written in my heart for love. I'm created in God's image and likeness, literally made for communion. And while I even sometimes forget it, the ache in my heart in this single state is ultimately an ache for infinite communion. Only Love Himself can ever truly satisfy this hunger. On this journey of life, this single journey so far, I know I'm created for love. And while I long to meet that perfect "other," – I know that my feminine heart's longing for love needs to be lived here and now. I was created by love, for love, to love, and to be loved. Just because my life is yet un-given in a definitive way, it doesn't mean that I can't love.

### What is the Feminine Genius?

Blessed John Paul II coined the term "feminine genius." I remember reading it for the first time in college and looking up from my computer to ponder the phrase. In my heart I had always understood that women and men have their own special gifts for the world, so when I read John Paul II's explanation that women have an exceptional and particular way of loving, which he called our feminine genius, it resonated instantly with me. Our specific way of loving, our feminine genius, is best defined as our unique "capacity for the other" or our ability to "make room for another." This is especially clear in my biology as a woman. Each of us has a womb, a literal space for another. Many women will become biological mothers, actualizing their wombs for the growing baby within them. And for various reasons and states of life, some of us may not become biological mothers. But regardless of physical motherhood, all women are created with this unique space for another within them.

In John Paul II's Theology of the Body, he reminds us that the physical body reveals the spiritual reality of the person. Thus, the deeper understanding of our feminine genius is our specific spiritual capacity to "make room for the other." Our feminine biology speaks to our spiritual make-up, and we as women have a particular ability to make room for others in our hearts. The feminine genius, our particular way of loving, can be unpacked in so many ways. We have a unique sensitivity to love through receptivity, generosity, empathy, and spiritual maternity. When I look at my life as a single woman, I realize that nothing about my state of life prevents me from living all of these gifts!

*As women  
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When I look at my life  
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these gifts!*

## Living single, living it well continued

### A Real-Life Spiritual Mother

This story about my friend exemplifies what it looks like to live out our feminine genius in our daily lives.

Vanessa teaches 4<sup>th</sup> graders. Recently she was about to begin a lesson when she recognized that one boy, Johnny, was upset. She could tell that something was really bothering him, and the sorrow in his body language was almost crying out to her. Immediately she went over to see what was wrong, but he just looked away and said he was fine. Her heart sank to see him suffering so much. Johnny was a sensitive soul, a student whose joy for life could fill the whole room.

She scanned the room, and her eyes fell on Thomas, the known trouble-maker in the class. Thomas always seemed to be stirring things up. While he had some behavioral issues, he was creative and quick-witted and enlivened the whole class. With just a look, she understood that something had happened between the two boys at recess. She could tell that Thomas' face was heavy, and that he had done something wrong out on the playground. But since she had no idea what had really happened, she began the lesson. As the students started working on problems on their own, Thomas came up to talk to Miss Vanessa. He asked if they could go out into the hallway, indicating he needed more privacy for the conversation. Thomas started crying and wiping his nose as the tears came pouring out. "I did something mean to Johnny at recess," he informed her through his sobs. He looked up at her, stuck his chin out and said, "Please punish me!" He tightly squeezed his eyes shut as he awaited her reply. She looked at his sorrowful face and sincere tears. She replied, "Ok, you need to apologize to Johnny for what it was that you did. And you have to include him in whatever game you play tomorrow at recess." In shock, Thomas wiped his nose with his sleeve and looked up at her. "Is that all?" he asked in disbelief. Relieved, he broke into a smile and excitedly agreed to the assigned "punishment."

The next day after recess Vanessa was met by the shining faces of both Johnny and Thomas. The hurt, shame, and tears of the day before had been transformed into forgiveness and friendship.

Vanessa never did find out what had happened during recess that day, and in fact that part didn't matter at all. But in living her spiritual motherhood, she brought about a fullness of life within her students.



I love this story because it shows so many layers to the feminine genius. By allowing enough "space for others" in her heart and life as a teacher, she was able to generously receive the gift of each student and see their own unique goodness – whether it was sensitivity or quick-wittedness. She was open enough to recognize that something was not right in the hearts and souls of her students. And rather than over-managing the situation, she continued to leave a "space for others" in her manner and demeanor, so much so that Thomas wanted to come to her to remedy his sufferings.

She lived empathy as she suffered with Johnny in his wounded heart – and with Thomas in the sorrow he bore for what he had done wrong. But she never stayed in the wounds or sorrow.

In her spiritual maternity, she helped bring the boys to life. She simply loved Johnny and Thomas and sought to aid them in reaching the fullness of life for which God had created them. Her care and her wisdom in guiding these little men led them both to a place of greater happiness. Her spiritual motherhood helped bring all of this about; she understood the goodness in each of the boys and desired and worked for this goodness to reign. She brought forth life in the souls entrusted to her!

### Well-fed Love

To me this summarizes the response I can make to the hunger for love and life in my own journey as a single woman. I was created with this unique capacity for love, but it is up to me every day to live it out and transform the world around me – or not. Unfortunately,

I can close off this space for others, fill it with myself, my problems, and my issues so much so that I block out all room in my heart for others. Only that kind of lack of love is deserving of my teen friend's, "Awwwww. Sorry girl!" pity.

But today, in my life as a sometimes-sassy single Catholic woman, I have a thousand little opportunities each day to be generous, to suffer with others in their pain, to receive others into my heart, and to be a life-giving spiritual mother. This is a full life! The challenge is ours to embrace. We are uniquely created for this kind of love!

*-Kate Sweeney is the Director of Programs at Endow, a Catholic educational program for women. Endow (Educating on the Nature and Dignity of Women) transforms the minds and hearts of women through the joy, freedom, and dignity that comes from living authentic femininity in Christ.*

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WE WERE BORN TO  
FIND GOODNESS AND  
BEAUTY EVERYWHERE  
AND TO SHARE IT  
WITH THE WORLD...  
*the feminine heart.*



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*“Motherhood is the art of finding potential, and fostering it. Motherhood is the craft of focusing on the good and trusting that the rest will fade away. It is the penetrating beauty of unwavering hope, and unflinching love ... The feminine genius is the practice of literally growing goodness in spite of incredible obstacles.*

*We need to find pockets of good—echoes of truth—and foster them. We need to refute what is evil—undoubtedly. But we also need to cultivate every possible inroad of beauty, if we ever hope for a re-flowering of Christian culture...*

*“Beauty,” reflected Dostoevsky, “will save the world.” There is nothing more beautiful than a mother loving her child into goodness—and nothing we need more urgently.”*

-Archbishop Samuel Aquila

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