

PART ONE

DISCOVERING MYSELF IN CHRIST

A woman's dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love she gives in return.

—*Mulieris Dignitatem* 29

1. WHO AM I?

In God's eternal plan, woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root.

—*Mulieris Dignitatem* 29

On a cold but bright and sunny winter day, I was dressed in a frilly beautiful gown, satin shoes, and lacy socks—all in white, swaddled in a blanket, and driven to the church, I was quite a bundle—weighing in at a pleasantly plump ten pounds twenty-five days earlier at my birth. I know all of this because I have seen the photos and have been given the details. My parents, Eugene and Alexandra Cooper, and my godparents, Alfred Uzwiak and Bertha Barosky, attentively participated and spoke on my behalf so that I could enter the Church when the baptismal waters flowed over my head on December 18, 1955, at St. Mary Church in Stamford, Connecticut.

I was told I didn't cry at all, and it makes me happy to know that I was completely content during that sacramental celebration. Quite possibly there wasn't a peep out of me because my little tummy was full and I was sleeping away! My grandmother, Alexandra Uzwiak, was present,

too, as were many other relatives and my six older siblings, all congregating around the baptismal font, with some up on their tiptoes to watch. Afterward, they all gathered for a big party to celebrate my becoming an “official” Catholic at our home on Lockwood Avenue.

BEGINNING WITH OUR BAPTISMS

You know, we’re not Catholic because we know about the faith or even because we live the faith and participate in the Catholic Church by going to Mass. We are Catholic first and foremost because we were baptized. Baptism is a big deal! It’s not merely a nice tradition. It’s a sacrament that initiates us into the big Church with a capital “C.” Being baptized a Catholic is truly extraordinary. While most of us remember absolutely nothing about it since we were tiny babes when we experienced it, what actually happened to us at the moment of Baptism is indeed well worth pondering now. And those of us who were baptized as adolescents or adult have a wonderful story to share with the rest of us.

Baptism is truly a gateway to life in the Spirit, a “*vitae spiritualis ianua*,” the *Catechism* says (CCC 1213). Baptism frees us from sin and opens the gate to the other sacraments as it identifies us as true members of Christ, incorporating us into the Church. St. Gregory of Nazianzus superbly described the sacrament. He said,

Baptism is God’s most beautiful and magnificent gift. . . . We call it gift, grace, anointing, enlightenment, garment of immortality, bath of rebirth, seal, and most precious gift. It is called *gift* because it is conferred on those who bring nothing of their own; *grace* since it is given even to the guilty; *Baptism* because sin is buried in the water; *anointing* for it is priestly and royal as are those who are anointed; *enlightenment* because it radiates light; *clothing*

since it veils our shame, *bath* because it washes; and *seal* as it is our guard and the sign of God's Lordship. (CCC 1216)

Pope Benedict XVI has said, "Heaven opens above us in the sacrament of baptism. The more we live in contact with Jesus in the reality of our baptism, the more heaven will open above us" (homily, January 7, 2007). Baptism begins with signing the child with the Cross, signifying the grace of redemption won by Christ. Prayers of exorcism are said, freeing us from the power of sin and the evil one. Baptism is such a vital sacrament, such a powerful sacrament. It forgives all sins (original and personal) as well as all punishment for sin.

The sacrament imparts sanctifying grace on us that gives us supernatural life and opens us to the Holy Trinity. It indelibly marks us, very much like a brand to our soul, and because it does, it cannot be repeated. It never leaves us, even if we were to lose our faith. The waters of Baptism, as well as the holy chrism (perfumed oil consecrated by the bishop), used to anoint us when baptized, and the words by the priest bring us fully into the Church. Through Baptism, we permanently "put on Christ" through the Holy Spirit. And without this basic sacrament we are not able to receive any of the other six remaining sacraments.

Jesus himself, to set an example for us, submitted to Baptism by John, even though it was intended for sinners. He also instituted the sacrament of Baptism by commanding his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them (Mt 28:19).

Blessed Mother Teresa knew without a doubt that Baptism was an amazing sacrament that could bring someone straight to heaven. She ministered to the sick and dying in Calcutta, India, and other places as well. She offered the

dying what she notoriously called a “ticket to heaven.” She never pushed the life-transforming sacrament on anyone, but she asked each of them if they would like it before closing their eyes on this earthly life. She said no one has refused, and because of this we can imagine she has populated heaven with countless souls!

My mother, who weighed only a mere pound and a half at birth (at a time when incubators weren’t readily available), wasn’t dressed as stylishly on her baptismal day as I was for mine because she was immediately baptized in the hospital on the day she was born. I’m sure she was simply swaddled in her hospital blanket and the attending hospital chaplain did the honors of bringing her swiftly into the Church through the waters of Baptism. My grandmother didn’t want to take the chance of my mother dying without the precious sacrament. Although our Lord is certainly merciful, my grandmother wanted to be sure my mother would make it to heaven safely.

The cardboard shoebox, cotton, and hot water bottle that kept my mother’s wee body warm and safe really saved her life—that and, of course, her mother’s attentive love, care, and prayers. At the hospital, when the baptismal waters were poured over my mother, Alexandra’s, tiny head, she became a member of the Body of Christ, a sharer in the life of the Trinity. Thanks be to God my mother not only survived her miniscule birth weight but also grew up to marry and have eight children of her own.

My former spiritual director and dear friend (now deceased) Father Bill C. Smith preached that our baptismal certificates should be framed and prominently displayed in our homes. He said that our baptismal day in his opinion was especially important to celebrate, even more important than our birthday. So, perhaps it’s time to get those certificates out, dust them off, and hang them up! If you are a

mother or grandmother, frame each of your children's and grandchildren's certificates and hang them in their bedrooms or even in a common area of your home. Then you will be more aware of which special dates to celebrate. You can contact the parish where your child or children were baptized to get a fresh copy of the certificate complete with the parish's official imprinted seal.

My baptismal certificate is displayed in a lovely white frame in my bedroom, a constant reminder to me of that beautiful holy occasion. I make a point of pondering, praying, and meditating on the anniversary of my Baptism and asking our Lord to shower me with many graces on the remembrance of that pivotal day. Each family member's baptismal anniversary is a great reason to rejoice. Make a nice dinner or dessert, light a candle, make it special, and thank God for the blessing of becoming a child of his and an honored member in the Catholic Church.

During the last Angelus message of Christmas season 2011–2012, Pope Benedict XVI said, "Baptism is a new birth that precedes our actions. With our faith we can go to meet Christ, but only he can make us Christian and give to our will, to our desire, the answer, the dignity, the power to become children of God." He closed with a prayer to the Blessed Mother reminding us all that after being baptized we should demonstrate who we are in words and deeds. "To the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and all who believe in him, we ask you to help us truly live as children of God not with words, or not only with words, but with deeds" (January 9, 2012). How we can live out our Christian life in deeds is what we'll be exploring throughout this book.

YOUR DIGNITY AS A WOMAN

Somewhere beneath the surface of our lives exists an incredible God-given and magnificent dignity as a woman. I say that it's hidden because, for many women, when they recognize their true dignity, it is a sheer delight, perhaps even an unexpected surprise. Women have contended with incredible hardship throughout the centuries in a myriad of ways. Women have been discriminated against and pushed to the margins of society throughout history. Because of this, many women have had great difficulties holding their heads up high during all sorts of circumstances, experiencing low self-worth, feeling inferior to men, or just not feeling up to their divine calling as a woman.

When explaining Jesus' great love for women, in his *Letter to Women*, Blessed John Paul II wrote, "[Christ] honored the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love."¹ The key words here about our dignity in God's eyes are "always possessed." I'll discuss this in greater depth, but for now, let's look at some of the problems and origins of the confusion about women's dignity.

The world tries to push a false identity on women based on its corrupt values. Most of that comes to us through an onslaught of messages via the mass media and the culture, which is hard to escape. This naturally creates a kind of tension between God and the world with which women are forced to contend.

As we know, the sexual revolution and radical feminism of the sixties occurred in part because women revolted and wanted to embrace the same rights as men. Most of them simply wanted to free themselves from the shackles of perpetual abuse, but it unfortunately backfired on women.

Women felt compelled to embrace a very lopsided version of womanhood. Drove of women bought into the notion of radical feminism and ferociously pursued the work force, leaving their young children behind in day-care centers, while trying to prove their worth to the world. Women became progressively more depressed, many developing eating disorders. The family unit began to crumble. Pornography encroached insidiously upon family life, and the divorce rate skyrocketed as women became increasingly objectified. Human life was no longer regarded as precious and unrepeatable while countless abortions were performed to the tune of millions of dollars in blood money lining abortionist's pockets, under the deceptive guise of freedom of choice.

Before all of this happened, in 1968, Pope Paul VI prophetically outlined a warning in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (*On Human Life*). He pointed to the potential dangers ahead if society continued to accept a contraceptive mentality stemming from radical feminism and the sexual revolution in which abortion and contraception were viewed as rights and freedoms. He said,

Let us first consider how easily this course of action could open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards. Not much experience is needed to be fully aware of human weakness and to understand that human beings—and especially the young, who are exposed to temptation—need incentives to keep the moral law, and it is an evil thing to make it easy for them to break that law. Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere

instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection. (HV 17)

Those rights and freedoms that women were aggressively running after are the very things that have objectified them. And lest you think I am all gloom and doom, I'll remind you of what I said a bit earlier: *Somewhere beneath the surface of our lives exists an incredible God-given and magnificent dignity as a woman.* I'd like to suggest that the solution to the problems of objectification, exploitation, and mass confusion aimed at women is to earnestly and prayerfully seek to discover our true dignity as women, reveal it with great joy, and then do our part to assist other women to unearth their true God-given dignity.

But where do we possibly begin? I personally find it very comforting and healing to take to heart poignant words of wisdom from our Church, specifically Blessed John Paul II's brilliant and tender words in *Mulieris Dignitatem* and in his *Letter to Women*. In this letter he lamented and even openly apologized for the serious evils of inequality, oppression, discrimination, and exploitation of women. He knew that the ill treatment of women throughout the centuries was not Jesus' way. He was well aware of women's lofty dignity and expressed it so eloquently while also pointing out the remarkable work of women and their indispensable significance in salvation history.

I have personally seen many women turn misty-eyed upon hearing about their own God-given dignity through our former pontiff's honest, forthright, and tender words:

Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being

themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. Certainly it is no easy task to assign blame for this, considering the many kinds of cultural conditioning which down the centuries have shaped ways of thinking and acting. And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision. When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself. 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. As we look to Christ at the end of this Second Millennium, it is natural to ask ourselves: how much of his message has been heard and acted upon? (*Letter to Women*)

Isn't it nice to learn of such affirming words from our Church? We should prayerfully ask ourselves the question that Blessed John Paul II posed: how much of Christ's message has been heard and acted upon? It would appear that not all that much has been heard or acted upon. In addition to discrimination, exploitation, and objectification of women, there are all kinds of mixed messages from our culture and the mass media targeted at women that cause us confusion and discouragement. Many women feel a need to satisfy society's expectations for perfection, whether it is in their appearances, lifestyles, or whatever else. It's no secret that women are bombarded. And we can become conditioned by society's standards, rather than searching deeper