

# A PLACE TO BELONG

Letters from Catholic Women



Edited by Corynne Staresinic



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*To Nick and Eloise*



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# Letter from the Editor

Before I converted to Catholicism, upon discovering my interest in the Church, one of the common responses from my Evangelical loved ones was something like, “Corynne, how will you ever fit into the Catholic Church? That is where women go to be oppressed.” As an eighteen-year-old woman who had only known a small handful of Catholics growing up and had only just started to learn about Catholicism, I would be lying if I were to say that I didn’t share some of their concerns. Before I came to see the Catholic Church as anything other than an evil, man-made institution run by power-hungry men, my understanding of what the Church professed about women could have been boiled down to this: a woman is created to be either a stay-at-home mother with many (many!) children or a stern, legalistic nun with a ruler in hand, looking for a child to slap. Regardless of which path she took, a woman would never be called to leadership, and she was to keep her thoughts to herself, particularly in the presence of men.

Needless to say, I never imagined the Catholic Church as being a place—*the* place—to which every woman was meant to belong and to call home. Of course, I would soon realize that my personal understanding of what it meant to be a woman really wasn’t much better than the ideas I attributed to the Church. Over the course of my teenage years, I had internalized the message that being a woman was about being *attractive*. In order to live up to this image of the ideal woman, I thought I had to look beautiful at all times (while appearing blissfully unaware of it and carefree), all the while maintaining an air of mystery around me. This perception of myself led to frequent self-objectification, effectively reducing my own personhood to appearance. I began to resent my body because I often felt that I wasn’t attractive enough.



Quite unexpectedly, my conversion to the Church was what would help free me from this tangled web of expectations. Through a long series of events, I eventually started RCIA and was confirmed at age nineteen. I had found a home in the Church: in the unity of her teachings, in the Eucharist, in the sacraments. I had come to see the Catholic Church as the one Body of Christ, the Church Jesus began (see Mt 16:18) centuries ago. Many of the concerns initially raised by my loved ones about the Church's teachings regarding women, however, still remained with me. But, at that point, I knew enough about the Church to see that Catholicism was very different from what I had initially made it out to be. I had also been wrong about many of the Church's teachings before, so I was aware that I might not have the full picture.

Soon enough, I began to make friends with more actual, living, breathing Catholic women. As one might guess, they were very different from what I expected! Some of the women, however, did struggle with me to understand who we were as Catholic women and our place in the Church. Within my particular Catholic cultural context, I was bombarded with talks on dating chastely and the importance of dressing modestly (with little focus on modesty as a virtue that impacts other aspects of life). I heard a strong cultural emphasis on the need for women to submit to men in relationships, with an underemphasis on Saint John Paul II's (and Saint Paul's!) call for men and women to *mutually* submit to each other within marriage.<sup>1</sup> The women's conferences and retreats I attended often revolved around themes such as knowing we're beautiful in God's eyes or discerning a vocation to married or religious life. Though some of this is not necessarily wrong or bad, what was communicated to me was that a woman's purpose in the world is reduced to her looks, her relationship to men, and the function of her biology. This view was remarkably similar to the understanding of womanhood that I knew from growing up in my Evangelical communities. Unfortunately, I heard little focus on a woman's unique ability to lead and to protect human life. And the lives of strong women saints like Joan of Arc or Hildegard were rarely discussed. I felt a disconnect between the actual teachings of the Church and the expectations placed upon women within this particular Catholic cultural context.

The turning point came when I sat down one evening to read Saint John Paul II's *Letter to Women* for the first time. If I could, I would quote the entire letter because



it's so liberating. But these passages were the ones that have really helped me distill the Church's understanding of woman from the cultural expectations of women that I had experienced:

### *On Asking for Forgiveness for Members of Church Who Have Contributed to the Oppression of Women*

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. . . . 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 that goes back to the *attitude of Jesus Christ himself*.

### *On the Dignity of Women and Their Impact on the World*

Women have contributed to [history] as much as men, and more often than not, they did so in much more difficult conditions. . . . To this great, immense feminine "tradition" humanity owes a debt that can never be repaid. Yet how many women have been and continue to be valued more for their physical appearance than for their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity; in a word, the very dignity of their being!

### *On the Need for Women's Presence in Society and the Church*

It is thus my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the "*genius of women*", not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God's plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

As I read, I started to find clarity. Though it was just a start, I began to realize that the meaning of womanhood is not found in the way a woman looks, or in her docility to any given man, or simply in her ability to birth children.

After finishing *Letter to Women*, I read *Mulieris Dignitatem, On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* (a similar, but longer, and more theologically extensive text from Saint John Paul II); I also began to study Catholic social teaching and learn more about the lives of the saints. All this led me to a series of breakthrough moments like the one I had experienced when I first read *Letter to Women*. I began to understand more fully the richness of the Church's teaching in regard to the meaning of womanhood. Eventually, I felt called to start The Catholic Woman, a multimedia platform dedicated to inspiring millennial Catholic women to find belonging in the Church and to live out their faith by illustrating the many faces and callings of women in the Church, through things like documentaries, interviews, and letters.

Along this journey, the witnesses of saintly women like Mary, the Mother of the Church; Catherine of Siena; Saint Joan of Arc; Saint Hildegard of Bingen; and Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross have helped me to discover that embracing femininity is ultimately about cultivating a God-given disposition of openness toward the human person and living it out in whatever way we are called by God. To be a woman is to live a disposition of open attentiveness to the human person in a unique way—a sign of which we can see within our own bodies and therefore express in a uniquely feminine way. If we choose to embrace our feminine disposition, or our “feminine genius” as Saint John Paul II calls it, we can carry it wherever God calls us, whether into marriage, motherhood, the convent, the workplace, or somewhere else.

Womanhood, from the Church's perspective, can't be reduced to a specific set of traits to which each of us must aspire. Many of us feel this way, however. We feel that if we don't live up to the unspoken or spoken expectations around us that there won't be room for us in the Church. But womanhood is about *being*. It's about embracing and accepting who we already are and called to be by God and living that out in light of the Gospel. At the heart of our absolutely essential place in the Church is a call to cultivate belonging within her, to *be* belonging within her, and to invite others to know the love of God within her.

## Setting Expectations

In the coming pages, this anthology explores the many different ways we live out our unique attentiveness to the human person as women in the context of the Catholic faith. You'll find personal letters from twenty-five Catholic women, from all sorts of backgrounds, interests, and states in life. You'll hear from mothers, religious sisters, entrepreneurs, artists, activists, and authors. In each letter, the writer will share a personal story that illustrates how she lives out her attentiveness to the human person within her unique identity and call from God. In order to provide a framework that helps illustrate the ways this feminine ethos can unfold and develop, the letters are organized thematically in five sections: receive, create, protect, lead, and nurture.

My hope is that these letters will inspire you to more fully live out your unique call as a woman, wherever God calls you, whether it be in your home, in your community, or in your career. As Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross once wrote:

Only subjective delusion could deny that women are capable of practicing vocations other than that of spouse and mother. . . . [I]ndividual gifts and tendencies can lead to the most diversified activities. Indeed, no woman is *only* woman; like a man, each has her individual specialty and talent, and this talent gives her the capability of doing professional work, be it artistic, scientific, technical, etc. Essentially, the individual talent can enable her to embark on any discipline. . . . The participation of women in the most diverse professional disciplines could be a blessing for the entire society, private or public, precisely if the specifically feminine ethos would be preserved.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, in the coming pages, we'll see twenty-five examples of this feminine ethos lived out in Catholic women's lives today.

Before I conclude, two disclaimers! First, every woman featured in this book could have written a letter for the other four featured sections. For instance, any of the writers truly could have been featured in the "lead" section. I mention this simply because the point of this book is not to box women into different categories nor to indicate that only some women are called to be receptive while others are called to be

creative. Rather, the intention is to examine the different characteristics of the feminine ethos and how these characteristics might be carried out amid different circumstances and states in life. That said, it's still helpful to view these women's stories through each category's lens as it illuminates certain aspects of God's movements in their lives. It certainly has helped me to get a sense of the different ways that femininity may be lived out in the context of our great faith.

Second, because each woman is unique, there's a diverse range of stories and viewpoints in the letters ahead. As you read, you'll likely find women to whom you relate with great ease, and others with whom you don't—and that's perfectly okay. When letters feel unfamiliar, I invite you to prayerfully lean in and ask God to reveal his grace to you within that woman's voice and story. All the different letters in this book demonstrate the variety and beauty found among Catholic women and in the Church herself. The diverse chorus of women's voices in the pages ahead echoes something unified, something mysterious and clear about woman herself and also about the Church herself. The Church is both one and universal; in our difference we are called to unity in her. These letters also serve as a testament to how God's grace can be found in any circumstance, including your own.

Finally, dear reader, I pray that this book—through letters, women saints' wisdom, quotes, reflection questions, and prayers—will leave you inspired to reflect on the ways God is calling you to live out your femininity along the path of your own unique vocation. And if you've ever questioned your place in the Church or are not even sure you want to be a part of it anymore, I pray that you will discover in this book a rich, pulsing mosaic of odd-tales, human heartache, vulnerability, sincerity, and joy—pieced together only by God's grace. Listen carefully because as these women pour out their letters, bleeding and beating as one, you might also hear them whisper into your heart, "You belong here too."

Onward and upward,

— *Corynne*

## Nurture

Providing hospitality for a group of new friends

Buying coffee for a homeless person

Being a supportive presence to a family member in need

**I**n this section, we'll examine how femininity can be expressed through a nurturing presence and showing care for others. In these letters, Catholic women reflect on how they have come to embrace their capacity to nurture and to be attentive to those around them in their own unique ways.



### *Abby Ellis*

Abby describes the sense of belonging she found in the arms of her mother at her family's dinner table and how this experience of belonging helped her return to the Church.

### *Justina Kopp*

Justina shares how becoming a mother of quadruplets and her family heritage have profoundly influenced how she lives the art of nurturing.

### *Leticia Ochoa Adams*

Leticia shares how her son Anthony's suicide has shaped her understanding of what it means to truly love others.

### *Sister Helena Burns*

Sister Helena shares an experience of spiritual motherhood with a young teen that had extraordinary results.

### *Andrea Polito*

Andrea shares how, as a consecrated woman, she cared for a friend who was dying and in doing so discovered the beauty of simply being present.



## Patron Saint

# Teresa Benedicta of the Cross

Born in 1891 to a Jewish family in Breslau, Prussia, Edith Stein was a remarkably intelligent and precocious child. She would eventually pursue a doctorate in philosophy, an unusual path for a woman in that time. Though she was a professed atheist since age fourteen, she became interested in Catholicism after reading Saint Teresa of Ávila's autobiography. When she was thirty, Edith was baptized and entered the Church. About a decade later, she entered a Carmelite convent in Cologne, Germany, and took the name Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.

Aware of what was happening to Jewish people in Nazi Germany, Sister Teresa Benedicta felt called to intercede to God on behalf of her people. Like Queen Esther, God called her to plead to her king on behalf of her nation.<sup>4</sup> Just a couple of months after the brutal violence of *Kristallnacht* on November 9, 1938, Sister Teresa Benedicta's prioress had her smuggled across the border to the Netherlands.<sup>5</sup> In a letter to her

prioress on Passion Sunday in March of 1939, Sister Teresa Benedicta heroically requested permission to offer her life to Jesus as a sacrifice for true peace.<sup>6</sup>

Just a few years later, her request would be heard. On the morning of August 2, 1942, Sister Teresa Benedicta and her sister Rosa (who had also become Catholic) were arrested by the Gestapo in the convent chapel and taken to Auschwitz. One of the last people to witness Sister Teresa Benedicta at Auschwitz wrote this account of her actions before her death:

Among the prisoners who were brought in on August 5, Sr. Benedicta stood out on account of her great calmness and composure. The distress in the barracks, and the stir caused by the new arrivals, was indescribable. Sr. Benedicta was just like an angel, going around among the women, comforting them, helping them, and calming them. Many of the mothers were near to distraction; they had not bothered about their children the whole

day long, but just sat brooding in dumb despair. Sr. Benedicta took care of the little children, washed them and combed them, looked after their feeding and their other needs. During the whole of her stay there, she was so busy washing and cleaning as acts of loving kindness that everyone was astonished.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after, Sister Teresa Benedicta and her sister Rosa were murdered in the gas chambers.

In the darkest of circumstances, Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross loved and nurtured those around her. Thus, she is a model of the beauty of the feminine gift of presence to those in need of God's love. In the coming letters, you'll find examples of women who have loved others to the point of suffering, not out of any kind of self-hate but out of a love for themselves, for God, and for others.

