

## *Franciscan University Presents*

### **“The Masculine Genius”**

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### **Is There a Masculine Genius?**

When Pope St. John Paul II wrote his Apostolic Letter *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* in 1988, he introduced into the Catholic tradition an entirely new category in the Church’s understanding of the human person: the so-called “feminine genius.” In that document, St. John Paul declares that woman’s genius is expressed in her unique yet natural tendency to attend, above all, to persons. He argues that this genius is grounded in the fact that all women possess the capacity to be mothers in either a physical or spiritual sense. And it is a quality that is found most perfectly in Mary, the Mother of God.

Since then, there has been much interest in these new insights and a great deal of faithful reflection on the significance and place women occupy in both the Church and society. The genius of women, as well as John Paul’s teaching on the complementarity that characterizes the relationship of man and woman, have become an integral part of the Church’s magisterial teaching and tenets of Catholic doctrine. Most recently, Pope Francis has called for a “theology of women,” reflecting the Church’s ongoing concern for these questions and her wish to affirm the contributions of women to community life.

And this is all to the good. But if we wish to arrive at a fuller account of the complementarity of men and women, it seems time to ask the obvious question: is there not also a masculine “genius”? And if so, what might that be?

First, let’s be clear – there most definitely is a masculine genius. We witness it every day in the presence of fathers in family life and the contributions made by men of all ages to our communities. What is missing is a deeper understanding of what that genius really is and where it originates. And as it turns out, another look at Genesis 2 reveals a point of departure for an account, not only of the feminine genius, but the masculine genius as well.

An initial point of interest is the fact that man encounters God first and is alone with Him in the Garden for some time, something that has implications for man’s role as head of the family. But also notable is that man’s first contact with reality is clearly of a horizon that otherwise contains only lower creatures, what we might call “things”; this is what leads God to conclude that the man is alone, and ultimately leads to the building of woman. But in the first instance, man is surrounded by the “things” God has made - and then tasked with naming all the creatures God brings him as they search for a suitable partner for him. *It is in naming them that he takes dominion over them.* St. Thomas Aquinas went so far as to argue that Adam must have received a distinct preternatural gift, a special kind of infused knowledge, which made it possible for him to name the goods of creation. It is here that we find the source and proper context of man’s well

documented (and often ridiculed) *natural* tendency to attend to things. It is found in the Scriptural account of the first man. And it is his special genius.

Even more revealing, it is man who, at Genesis 2:15, is put in the garden to “till it,” well before the fall puts him at odds with creation. This is his work. And his knowledge of “things” serves him well as he goes about his work there.

Thus to this genius, we can credit the survival of the human species, the building up of civilizations, and the preservation of families throughout the history of mankind. The radical feminist movement would have you believe otherwise, but the truth is, if it weren't for men, we would still be living in grass huts. The men in our lives are usually tireless workers (like St. Joseph) who have an amazing gift for taking the gifts of creation and putting them at the service of their families, their communities, the world. They deserve our gratitude and our respect.

But this should not be taken to mean that man is oriented *only* toward things. When the woman is brought to him, though he also names her, he knows immediately that she is *not* an object; she is a person. For upon encountering her, he says “This at last is bones of my bones, flesh of my flesh.” Through his encounter with the woman, the Lord God reveals to him the nature of the reciprocal relationship of the gift of self. And man must realize as well that his own gift – that of caring for and using the goods of creation – is a gift to be exercised in service to her authentic good and in their joint mission to have dominion over all the earth.

A brief word concerning the source of the feminine genius is necessary here because, though certainly St. John Paul II is right – that the maternal nature of woman is an expression of her genius – there is actually a prior point of departure for that reality. And it is found when we recognize that woman's *first contact with reality is of a horizon that, from the beginning, includes man, that is, it includes persons*. Upon seeing Adam, Eve recognizes another like her, an equal, while the other creatures and things around her appear only on the periphery of her gaze. Thus, in addition to her capacity to conceive and nurture human life, indeed *prior to it*, woman's place in the order of creation reveals that, from the beginning, the horizon of all womankind includes persons, includes the other. The genius of woman is found here. While man's first experience of his own existence is of loneliness, woman's horizon is different, right from the start. From the first moment of her own reality, woman sees herself in relation to the other. And woman is to keep constantly before us the fact that the existence of living persons, whether in the womb or walking around outside of it, cannot be forgotten, while we frantically engage in the tasks of human living. Woman is responsible for reminding us all that *all human activity* is to be ordered toward authentic human flourishing.

Of course, the fall changed everything and these two complementary gifts only reach their full expression through the saving action of Christ and full participation in the life of grace. But, as the Church teaches, it is this very complementarity that gives man and woman their *mission* – to create, not only human families, but human history itself. It is only together that woman and man can fulfill their destiny – to return all things to Christ.

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**Titles Mentioned on *Franciscan University Presents*  
“The Masculine Genius”  
with guest, Dr. Deborah Savage**

*Mulieris Dignitatem* (Apostolic Letter, “On the Dignity and Vocation of Women”) by Pope John Paul II. Available online on [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

*Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men* by Leonard Sax. Basic Books. Available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

*The Nuptial Mystery* by Angelo Cardinal Scola. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).

*Casti Connubii* (Papal Encyclical, “On Christian Marriage”) by Pope Pius XI. Available online on [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Available online on [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

Letter to Women by Pope John Paul II. Available online on [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

*Christifideles Laici* (Apostolic Exhortation, “On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful”) by Pope John Paul II. Available online on [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).

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