

## ABSTRACT

*“All That I Do is Done for the King”: Edith Stein on the Feminine Vocation with a Special Focus on Spiritual Maternity*

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Edith Stein is a name with many connotations—scholar, philosopher, convert, teacher, and saint. Raised an orthodox Jew, Stein lost her faith at a young age and eventually converted to Catholicism. After her conversion to Catholicism, Stein turned her philosophical pursuits towards answering the question of what it means to be a Catholic woman. In her collection of essays and lectures *Essays on Woman*, Stein claims that the feminine vocation is towards spousal love and motherhood. However, where does this leave women who choose virginity or cannot have children? In response to this concern, Stein says that such women are called to express the feminine vocation through spiritual maternity. In this thesis, I examine how Stein defines the feminine soul and the feminine vocation. Stein uses Scripture, tradition, psychology, and biology to argue for the feminine vocation of being a spouse and mother. In my final chapter, I will investigate Stein’s argument for spiritual maternity as a legitimate—and, in fact, the highest—expression of the feminine vocation. Throughout her philosophy of the feminine vocation, Stein upholds the Blessed Virgin Mary as the model for all women, but especially for spiritual mothers.

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“ALL THAT I DO IS DONE FOR THE KING”:  
EDITH STEIN ON THE FEMININE VOCATION WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON  
SPIRITUAL MATERNITY

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In the process of writing this thesis, I spent many late hours in the Memorial Senior Common Room. Thank you to Sarah Catherine, Courtney, Kate, Camille, Ashlyn, Rachel, and Casey for the laughter, support, and coffee.

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JMJ

DEDICATION

To Mother Petra

## INTRODUCTION

If one were to ask about Edith Stein's significance, the answer would depend on the circle. Ask a group of philosophers about Stein, and they would comment on her pioneering work in phenomenology and empathy. If there are phenomenologists among the group, they would likely know her most as the great Edmund Husserl's assistant and close friend. Ask a group of feminist historians, and they would probably promote Stein's early work in the suffrage movement and her impressive role as one of the first German women to earn a PhD.<sup>1</sup> Some feminist historians, however, may object to Stein's essentialist philosophy, which asserts that men and women have distinct essences and qualities which define their being.<sup>2</sup> Finally, ask a group of Catholics, and one would hear about Stein's remarkable conversion from Jew to Atheist to Catholic saint and her martyrdom in Auschwitz. Yet, Stein as a woman, scholar, mystic, and saint is a complicated figure. All these accounts, although they contain glimmers of the truth about Stein, forget the unifying aspect of her spiritual and philosophical work: her close study of the feminine soul. Understanding Stein's approach to the feminine soul and vocation can bring together the partial truths of other accounts into a whole. Perhaps it is the missing piece for gaining a complete view of the allusive Edith Stein.

In her collection of *Essays on Woman*, Stein outlines the feminine vocation and telos, especially for the Christian woman living the life of grace. This posthumously compiled collection of Stein's lectures and essays on the philosophy and spirituality of what it

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Bordeaux, "Edith Stein: Thoughts on Her Life and Times." (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1959), 18

<sup>2</sup> Linda Lopez McAlister. "Edith Stein: Essential Differences." *Contemplating Edith Stein*, Edited by Joyce Avrech Berkman (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 202

means to be a woman paints a coherent, compelling picture of woman. In particular, she tackles the question of motherhood and the feminine vocation. Stein takes a balanced approach to this delicate issue, avoiding the extremes of reducing woman to her reproductive functions or completely denying her maternal instinct. Ultimately, Stein comes to the conclusion that a Catholic, holistic view of motherhood is the key to understanding the feminine vocation. Woman was made to be a companion and mother, but this motherhood may not always take physical form. Stein devotes a considerable portion of her *Essays* to spiritual motherhood, which she considers the fulfillment of feminine genius. In this thesis, I will examine how Stein defines the feminine soul and vocation, why motherhood (both spiritual and physical) is the fulfillment of the feminine vocation, and how Stein viewed the Blessed Virgin Mary as the archetype of womanhood and motherhood.

In the first chapter, I examine the life of St. Edith Stein in order to show how her upbringing, early talent, conversion, and eventual martyrdom illustrate her fascination with the ideal feminine. Essentially, Stein strived to live the very feminine vocation about which she wrote and lectured so prolifically, demonstrating that she lived what she preached. Though she had no children of her own (she remained single until she entered religious life), Stein exercised spiritual maternity towards all those she knew.

In the second chapter, I focus on the general feminine vocation. Specifically, I compare what Stein considers the feminine soul to the masculine, the general strengths and weaknesses within the feminine soul, the unique body-soul union which women experience, and how Stein presents the Blessed Virgin Mary as the example for women

who give birth to physical children. This chapter is an overview of how Stein approaches the question of the feminine vocation.

In the third chapter, I delve more into the specific qualities of the feminine soul and vocation. In this chapter, I am still looking at the general feminine vocation as it applies to women in every state in life. To Stein, every woman is called to live out the qualities of expansiveness, quietness, warmth, clarity, and self-control; of course, no woman can live out these qualities without God's grace, as Stein reiterates throughout her *Essays*. In addition, I describe the specific vices into which women generally fall. Finally, I pull upon Stein's portrayal of an ideal day for a Catholic woman in the world to show Stein's firm belief in the importance of prayer.

In my final chapter (the capstone of this thesis), I answer the overarching question: how does spiritual maternity fit into the general feminine vocation, and is it a legitimate expression of the feminine vocation? In this chapter, I will define spiritual maternity as a woman mothering other souls spiritually as a fruit of her union with Christ through prayer and, in the case of religious life, consecration. This spiritual maternity can take the form of mentorship, counseling, good example, or, most preeminently, prayer and sacrifice for the good of others. Using evidence from Stein, I will argue that not only is spiritual maternity a legitimate expression of the feminine vocation; rather, it is the height of the feminine vocation. While all women are called to express this spiritual maternity to the degree which their vocations allow, some women choose to exercise spiritual maternity exclusively, either through the religious life or as a single woman in the world. Stein upholds the Blessed Virgin Mary as the ideal model for spiritual maternity, since she both retained her perpetual virginity and became the Mother of all Christians.

## CHAPTER ONE

### The Life of Edith Stein: An Example of Spiritual Motherhood

To understand Stein's philosophy of womanhood, we must first know the woman herself. Within her own life, Stein adopted and practiced the same principles of femininity and spiritual motherhood about which she philosophized and speculated. By studying her heroic life, we can gain insight into why Stein believed as she did and how she practiced what she preached. Her philosophies did not occur within a vacuum, and she wrote *Essays* only after a precocious childhood, a promising academic career, and a lifelong struggle with and conversion to Christianity.

Edith Stein was born in Breslau, Germany, on October 12, 1891.<sup>1</sup> She was the youngest of eleven children and filled the stereotypical role as baby of the family, doted upon and especially loved by her parents. Stein's father died when she was only two years old, so she grew up largely without a paternal influence. However, her mother acted as a more than competent matriarch. Indeed, Auguste Stein was a force to be reckoned with. After the death of her husband, she continued to run the family business and was a present, engaged mother to her eleven children.<sup>2</sup> She particularly encouraged Edith in her aspirations. Although Fraulein Stein could be rigid in her convictions and disciplines, she was willing to make accommodations for Edith. For example, recognizing Edith's academic aptitude at a young age, Fraulein Stein allowed her to neglect some household chores to devote more time to her studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A Biography*, translated by Fr. Bernard Bonowitz (San Francisco, California: Ignatius Press), 19

<sup>2</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 20

As Fraulein Stein recognized, Edith was a talented child. From a young age, she expressed an interest in books, academics, and the intellectual life. She was known for acting proud of her intellect, and she enjoyed being perceived as the smartest or most impressive person in the room. However, as she grew, this gave way to a quiet exterior with an intense interior life. In this interior world, Stein felt totally free, where she could create elaborate stories of her own imagination. However, this also came with a dark side. She grew extremely sensitive to the point where “the sight of a drunkard could haunt and plague [her] for days and nights on end.”<sup>3</sup>

Although Stein loved her family life, her main refuge was school. The young Stein always had a book in her hand, and she especially devoured her literature and history textbooks.<sup>4</sup> In fact, every morning when her mother brushed her hair, Stein would read a book. She even went so far as to say, “I almost believe I felt more at home there [at school] than in our house.”<sup>5</sup> At school, Stein felt like she could exercise her intellectual talents freely, without any condescending smiles from adults or underestimation. She did not shy away from intense intellectual work but rather thrived on it. While applying for the Obersukunda (secondary school), Stein had a heavy schedule of tutoring for the entrance exams. However, under a strain that would leave most students exhausted and despairing, Stein recalls, “This half-year of intense work I have always remembered as the first completely happy time of my life. That may be attributable to the opportunity given me a first time here: to have my mental powers fully engaged in a task to which they were

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<sup>3</sup> Edith Stein, “Edith Stein: Life in a Jewish Family,” in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, translated by Josephine Koeppel (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1986), 74

<sup>4</sup> Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 78

<sup>5</sup> Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 65

eminently suited.”<sup>6</sup> After primary school, Stein was excited at the prospect of finding a challenge to which she was suited: academia. Here, we can see Stein coming into her own, in a sense, and embracing her talents and calling as an intellectual.

Concurrently, as she embarked upon her intellectual career, Stein lost the faith of her childhood. Stein was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. Auguste Stein made sure her family practiced the Jewish feast days and customs, and she considered it a good omen that Edith was born on the Jewish Day of Atonement. Although Stein respected her mother’s faith and dedication, she found no compelling reason to remain Jewish and became an atheist by age thirteen. While away at secondary school, she “deliberatively and consciously... gave up prayer here.”<sup>7</sup> There is little research on what Auguste Stein thought of this loss of faith; indeed, it is uncertain whether Auguste Stein knew about it at all. Regardless, Edith chose to leave faith behind her and dedicate her aspirations to studies and philosophy.

#### *Higher Education and Beginnings in Philosophy*

For her undergraduate studies, Stein entered the University of Breslau in 1911.<sup>8</sup> At this time, Stein had a lively interest in psychology and literature. What motivated her exclusively in her studies was the burning philosophical question of how the soul is related to the body and the human person.<sup>9</sup> Her first semester, she signed up for courses in Introduction to Psychology and Natural Philosophy. She was deeply disappointed by the

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<sup>6</sup> Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 155

<sup>7</sup> Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 148

<sup>8</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 33

<sup>9</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 33

Psychology course, reflecting that the lectures reminded her more of a friendly classmate get-together than serious intellectual exercises.<sup>10</sup> However, she discovered something deeper in her Natural Philosophy classes. There, she felt like they were getting closer to the root of what it meant to be a person. Stein quickly realized that she was not going to find the answers to such deep questions through psychology alone.<sup>11</sup> Rather, she needed to think deeper, and she saw philosophy as an avenue to do that. At Breslau, Stein also learned about her interest in current events. Unlike her fellow students, who were mainly concerned with either chasing pleasure or acing exams, Stein believed that she had a responsibility to engage with her community, using the skills and knowledge acquired through her education. This emphasis on community would make a reappearance throughout her philosophical and later theological work.

Stein graduated from Breslau in 1913 and entered the University of Gottingen for graduate studies.<sup>12</sup> In her autobiography *Life in a Jewish Family*, Stein reminisces about the idyllic glories of Gottingen in the pre-WWI era, when philosophy flourished.<sup>13</sup> Here, she knew she wanted to study philosophy. While in Breslau, Stein had begun dabbling in phenomenology, a then-new philosophical school which tried to describe phenomena and their essences through a scientific methodology.<sup>14</sup> She was especially interested in Edmund Husserl, the pioneer of phenomenology. In fact, one of her main motivations for

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<sup>10</sup> Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 186

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Madden, "Moment of Truth—The Conversion of Edith Stein," *Irish Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 68, Issue 4 (2003), 326

<sup>12</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 39

<sup>13</sup> Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 239

<sup>14</sup> Madden, "Moment of Truth..." 327

attending Göttingen was the opportunity to work with Husserl, who held a professorship there. From her first meeting with Husserl, Stein impressed him. She had read Husserl's weighty *Logical Investigations* for personal enrichment. To this, Husserl responded, "'All of Volume Two? Why, that's a heroic achievement!'"<sup>15</sup>

At the time she met Husserl, he believed in absolute truth and consciousness as intention reaching out towards objective reality.<sup>16</sup> Stein was attracted by Husserl's early emphasis on an objective reality and "'the eternal measure which reality impresses on it (the mind).'"<sup>17</sup> However, Husserl would later depart from this objective approach and lean more towards the belief that subjective experience makes reality. This was a departure that would lead to Stein's eventual resignation as Husserl's research assistant, a position she held for several years.

In addition to Husserl, Stein met two other philosophers who would change her way of thinking: Max Scheler and Adolf Reinach.<sup>18</sup> Max Scheler was a colleague of Husserl's, but he took a less systematic and scientific approach to his philosophy. A Jewish convert to Catholicism, Scheler adopted a more mystical view of philosophy and its ability to answer the deep questions of humanity. Writing of him, Stein says, "One's first impression of Scheler was fascination... the light of a more exalted world shone from his large blue eyes."<sup>19</sup> In Scheler, Stein saw some of the genuine love for truth that she

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<sup>15</sup> Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 250

<sup>16</sup> Madden, "Moment of Truth..." 326

<sup>17</sup> Peter Wust quoted in Madden, "Moment of Truth...", 328

<sup>18</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 46-48

<sup>19</sup> Stein, *Life in a Jewish Family*, 259

desired and wanted to cultivate within herself. Furthermore, Scheler was an introduction to Catholicism and how one could meld philosophical pursuits with a deep faith. Adolf Reinach was a similar testament to a faith she never knew. He was another of Husserl's colleagues and lecturer. He was a Protestant and also was a stumbling block for Stein's view that people of faith could not seriously pursue intellectual work, that perhaps Christianity could not be entirely ignored.

In 1914, Stein's intellectual career was put on hold because of the First World War.<sup>20</sup> Motivated by her ideals for serving her fellow men, Stein volunteered as a Red Cross nurse. In this position, Stein was able to exercise her more maternal nature. She broke away from the ivory tower for a moment and threw herself into the depths of human suffering:

Here she learned in a new way the grandeur and misery of the human condition: heroism and cowardice, generosity and selfishness, seriousness and frivolity, tragedy and comedy and the usefulness of cigarettes and coffee<sup>21</sup>

On the battlefield, Stein showed a remarkable bravery and willingness to serve others.

Stein took the fruits from this experience and her already present interest in community into her doctoral studies.

In 1916, she submitted her doctoral thesis *On the Problem of Empathy* for review.<sup>22</sup> In this thesis, Stein investigates what empathy means within the phenomenological context. She wanted to answer the questions, "How do we truly empathize and connect with others' pain? Can we actually do so?" Stein used the phenomenological method she had

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<sup>20</sup> Madden, "Moment of Truth..." 333

<sup>21</sup> Madden, "Moment of Truth..." 333

<sup>22</sup> Madden, "Moment of Truth..." 328

learned from Husserl, but she wanted to take it a step further. While Husserl mainly focused on the individual's experience of phenomena (and how that experiencing creates phenomena in a sense), Stein took a more communal approach.<sup>23</sup> For Stein, no man is an island but can only thrive within a part of a community. She earned a summa cum laude for this dissertation, and it offers an insight into what would later become a defining aspect of her spirituality: the unrepeatable dignity of each human person and man's need for community. This dissertation was a blossoming of Stein's conviction that community is "a content of consciousness and operative in motivation."<sup>24</sup> Connection can only happen among a group of real people who intend to understand the experiences and consciousnesses of each other.

Stein's academic career reached a screeching halt when, after earning her PhD, she applied for a professorship at Gottingen. Despite her impressive qualifications, Stein was refused this job because of her gender and Jewish heritage.<sup>25</sup> However, in the midst of this disappointment, Stein embarked on a journey that would have eternal impacts.

#### *Conversion:*

A number of events and influences primed Stein's soul for her conversion to Catholicism. Before she could assent to faith, she had to understand the limitations of her own intellectual activity. This intellectual humility came through her early studies of psychology and her later dissatisfaction with Husserl's phenomenology. Instead, Stein encountered a living faith and sort of mysticism in Scheler and Reinach which she

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<sup>23</sup> Madden, "Moment of Truth..." 323

<sup>24</sup> Madden, "Moment of Truth..." 331

<sup>25</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 118

respected and desired for herself.<sup>26</sup> In addition, through her work as a WWI nurse, Stein encountered the realities and depths of human suffering and her own inability to totally vanquish it. Yet, there were two defining moments which sealed the deal for her conversion to Catholicism.

The first came with the tragic death of her friend and mentor Adolf Reinach, who died on the battlefield in WWI, leaving behind a widow. When Stein visited Mrs. Reinach, she expected the widow to be overcome with grief, yet that was not what she found. Although Mrs. Reinach was understandably grieving, she was hardly in despair. Rather, she held her composure and held onto hope for her husband's eternal life and resurrection.<sup>27</sup> This was something Stein was not ready for. As a former Jew and then atheist, she had lost nearly all prospects of meaningful life after death. Yet, before her there was a woman who carried the heaviest of crosses, a husband's death, with supernatural grace and strength. In her own words, "'my Judaism paled and Christ shone out: Christ in the light of the Cross.'"<sup>28</sup> This was the penultimate chink in her armor.

The final blow came courtesy of St. Teresa of Avila. One evening in 1921, Stein was staying with married friends, but they left for a night on the town, leaving Stein to her own devices.<sup>29</sup> While surveying their library, Stein stumbled across St. Teresa of Avila's autobiography. In this autobiography, St. Teresa outlines her conversion and rejection of worldly temptations to enter the cloister. Reading St. Teresa's autobiography stirred

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<sup>26</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 48

<sup>27</sup> Madden, "Moment of Truth. . .", 334

<sup>28</sup> Stein, quoted in Madden, "Moment of Truth...", 334

<sup>29</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 64

something deep within Stein. With divine immediacy, the storm of doubt raging within her ended, and she recognized the sweet strength of holiness in this book. St. Teresa wrote with a conviction and clear-minded mysticism that Stein could sympathize with. Not only did Stein find a kindred spirit; she found the truth. She read the autobiography in one night, and by the next morning she had decided to become a Catholic. She catechized herself through the Roman Missal and Catechism.<sup>30</sup> On New Year's Day, 1922, Stein was baptized, confirmed in the Catholic Church, and received her first Holy Communion.<sup>31</sup> After years of what she would later call 'radical disbelief' and darkness, she was home. She expresses her joy at conversion as follows:

[ I understood now] what it means for a soul to abide in truth in the presence of Truth itself. In this divine Truth I have come to know truths of the utmost importance--far better than if many scholars had explained them to me. . . the truth that I said was communicated to me is Truth in itself, truth without beginning or end. From it there spring all other truths, just as all love springs from this Love and all glory from this Glory. And compared to the clarity with which the Lord revealed it all to me, what I have just said is obscure indeed.<sup>32</sup>

Her dark night of the soul and inability to embrace faith was lifted and replaced by a deep desire for Christ. Faith enlightened her already brilliant intellect to see the truth, and Stein recognizes that even what she sees is, as St. Paul says, but through a dim mirror.

*Teaching and Post-Conversion Work:*

After her conversion, Stein's heart was set on the Carmel. She wanted to follow in the steps of her patroness and enter a life of contemplative prayer for the salvation of souls. However, this would not be easy. Under the guidance of her spiritual director, Stein

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<sup>31</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 73

<sup>32</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 74

decided to remain in the world a bit longer and continue her lecturing and public intellectual work. However, due to anti-Jewish prejudice she could not continue her higher academic career. To follow her spiritual director's advice to continue public ministry, she became a teacher for a Dominican girls' school, Saint Magdalena's, and persisted in her research and other intellectual work.<sup>33</sup>

At Saint Magdalena's, Stein was a favorite with her students and known for her tranquil personality. Immediately, students sensed that Stein was a woman with a deep interior life and impressive intellect. Yet this was not what impacted her students and colleagues the most. It was her personality. It was evident that she cared about her students, not just on a scholarly level but as human beings. She wanted to help them grow in virtue and faith, and they often confided in her about their lives and dreams. One student recounts her first impressions of Stein:

I had my first look at Fraulein Doctor Stein from the window of my classroom as she crossed the courtyard with a pile of books under her arm. Without having the faintest notion of who this person was, I was so impressed with her appearance that I can't forget it even today. . . With her you sensed you were in the presence of something pure, sublime, and noble, something that elevated you and brought you to its own level.<sup>34</sup>

Stein knew that, as a teacher, her job was to mold these young girls into devout, responsible women. Even years after their secondary school education, her students remembered her with fond memories and admiration for her virtues.

In addition to her teaching work, Stein engaged herself in charitable works and other intellectual pursuits. In 1925, she embarked on the impressive mission of translating

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<sup>33</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 75

<sup>34</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 77

Thomas Aquinas from the original Latin and translating the letters of John Henry Newman from English into German.<sup>35</sup> She translated Newman's letters with relative ease, but it was the Thomistic translation which would cause her trouble. She knew that, to understand Thomistic theology, she needed to go directly to the source. However, this task—a daunting one to even the lifelong Catholic—proved supremely difficult for Stein. Even with her expertise in Latin and incredible intellect, she had to submit herself to learning the scholastic method. Yet, thanks to her intellectual humility, she translated it.

However, her life during this time was not strictly intellectual. She spent what little free time she had helping the poor and the downtrodden through spiritual counsel or material help. Her colleagues and friends marveled at her ability to balance her exhausting teaching and research schedule with these works of charity. Her secret was always keeping prayer at the center of her life, which illustrates her entire philosophy about life. She said, "It all depends on having a quiet little corner where you can talk with God on a daily basis as if nothing else existed."<sup>36</sup> This reverence for silence and prayer would inform her philosophy of womanhood that she soon developed.

*Lecture Circuits and Essays on Woman:*

In these years of public work, Stein was in high demand for lectures and articles on woman's vocation and philosophy. In particular, she delivered a series of lectures on woman's vocation, spirituality, and education that would become one of her most influential philosophy and spiritual works, *Essays on Woman*. This anthology is a collection of various lectures and essays on the subject of the feminine soul and vocation,

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<sup>35</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 82

<sup>36</sup> Stein, quoted in Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 88

including such topics as the spirituality of the Christian woman and the particular vocation of women.

She lectured for the Association of Catholic Women Teachers and the Association of Catholic University Graduates, beginning in 1927.<sup>37</sup> Her primary focus in these lectures was on the vocation of woman and how the Catholic woman should respond to the challenges of the modern age. Specifically, Stein wanted to see how women should respond to the entrance of women into the professional world. With her characteristic prudence and clear-mindedness, Stein did not fall into either of the two extremes: thinking that it was intrinsically evil for women to enter professions or encouraging women to devote themselves entirely to careers, to the detriment of family life. Stein recognized that a married woman's decision to enter a profession was not a light one without consequences. However, she also encouraged women to nurture their talents, even if they lie outside of what may be stereotypically feminine.

Also in these lectures, Stein described the feminine soul. With her philosophical training and disposition, Stein was not content to offer a surface level description of woman; she wanted to understand the essence of woman, and what is a woman's telos. Despite her interest in an active apostolate and women's engagement in society, Stein never lost her love for silence and prayer. She implored women to always keep prayer and love of God at the center of their lives, regardless of how busy they were.<sup>38</sup> For women to be mothers to others, they needed something to give, a divine life which only Christ could supply.

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<sup>37</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 95

<sup>38</sup> Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, translated by Freda Mary Oben PhD, Vol. 2, (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2010), 143

*Entrance into the Carmel:*

After working as a secondary school teacher for almost a decade, Stein decided to pursue academia once again. She applied for a professorship at Munster in 1932 and got it.<sup>39</sup> However, she did not remain in this position for long. At this time, the desire to enter the Carmel still burned in her heart, just as it had at her baptism. Faced with a premonition of the coming Jewish holocaust and oppression, Stein decided that her time for public ministry was at an end. She felt that her “effectiveness had come to an end” as a teacher and lecturer in the world, and she wanted to pray and fast for the salvation of souls behind the walls of Carmel.<sup>40</sup>

Although her spiritual director approved of this decision, her mother did not. From the beginning, Auguste Stein had viewed Edith’s conversion as a slap in the face for both herself and the family heritage. Edith’s decision to enter the Carmel added insult to injury. Edith knew that no matter what she said or whatever reasons she supplied, her mother would remain inconsolable. Stein recounts an instance of her mother grieving Stein’s conversion and desire to enter the religious life:

My mother buried her face in her hands and began to cry. I stood behind her chair, resting her old, white-haired head against my chest. . . . After taking her upstairs and helping her to undress—for the first time in her life—I sat alongside her at the edge of the bed until she sent me off to sleep. But I don’t think either one of us got any sleep that night<sup>41</sup>

This cross was a heavy one for her to carry into the cloister. Despite this trial, Stein immediately felt consolation in the Carmel and knew that this religious life was indeed

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<sup>39</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 107

<sup>40</sup> Stein, quoted in Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 120

<sup>41</sup> Stein, quoted in Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 122

her vocation. After her novitiate, she took the religious name Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross.<sup>42</sup> Her choice of this name illustrates two things about Stein's character and spirituality. Firstly, "Teresa" is obviously an homage to her patroness and inspiration for conversion, St. Teresa of Avila.<sup>43</sup> Stein did not forget where she came from nor the movements of grace that brought her there. Secondly, her dedication to the cross shows an important part of her spirituality. Through her prayers and sacrifices, Stein wanted to be totally united to her Savior in the cross. She would have an opportunity to walk the road to Calvary unto completion in the next few years.

As the Nazis gained a greater foothold outside the cloister walls, Stein felt a calling from her Spouse for a certain mission. She wanted to unite her sufferings with Christ's for the salvation of the Jewish people and her newfound family in the Carmel.<sup>44</sup> Between 1938 and 1939, Stein fled to Holland to escape quickly approaching Nazis.<sup>45</sup> Here, she knew that she was still not completely safe. She even seemed to have a certain prescience about her coming death, as her journal accounts at the time show that she had submitted her death to God's will.<sup>46</sup>

On August 2, 1942, Nazi officers arrested Stein and her sister Rosa, who had also converted to Catholicism and was staying at the convent, sending them to a certain death in a concentration camp.<sup>47</sup> With remarkable courage and strength, Stein embraced her

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<sup>42</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 129

<sup>43</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 130

<sup>44</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 169

<sup>45</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 162

<sup>46</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 179

<sup>47</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 180

sister and said, “Rosa, we are going for our people.”<sup>48</sup> Here, Stein shows her desire to offer her sacrifices for the Jewish people and her belief that such sacrifices would mean something within the divine economy.

On August 9, 1942, Stein, alongside her sister and other Catholics, died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.<sup>49</sup> Until her last breath, Stein exercised her true spiritual motherhood. Stein cared for the children in the camp with her, whose mothers were frozen in shock: “It was to these [children] that Sister Benedicta gave her whole time and strength, washing, combing, feeding them, like a true Madonna.”<sup>50</sup> Despite the grave injustices she suffered and witnessed, she did not let anger overcome her. Instead, she adopted the attitude of the suffering Mother of God, the Mother of all Sorrows, as she watched her divine Son die at the hands of men.

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<sup>48</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 180

<sup>49</sup> Mary Julian Baird. “Edith Stein and the Mother of God.” (Marian Library Publications, 1958), 12

<sup>50</sup> Baird, “Edith Stein and the Mother of God,” 10

## CHAPTER TWO

### What is the Feminine Soul?

Before venturing into the specifics of spiritual motherhood (the fulfillment and the crown jewel of the feminine vocation), one must first understand a woman's general vocation. For Stein, this universal feminine vocation is the foundation for both physical and spiritual maternity. Following her Catholic formation, Stein believed that each soul is called to sanctity and union with God in this life and perfectly in the next. Every other aspect of the person (intellect, will, emotion, etc.) should be subject to this ultimate goal. However, she recognizes that this high vocation expresses itself differently in men and women. Since men and women have naturally distinct talents and dispositions, their vices are different as well.

At the heart of her philosophy of the feminine vocation, Stein makes a now-controversial claim. Ultimately, Stein believes that women fulfill their vocations through being a spouse and mother, whether physically or spiritually. She minces no words in stating this, asserting that "the clear and irrevocable word of Scripture declares what daily experience teaches from the beginning of the world: woman is destined to be wife and mother."<sup>1</sup> With this claim, Stein is not trying to restrict woman's potential or say that they have no talents beyond the home. Firstly, it is worth noting that this spousal and maternal relationship can manifest itself either spiritually or physically; in either manifestation, the underlying concept is a deep union with God which spills over into fruitful relationships with herself and others. Although this may seem like a hasty and

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<sup>1</sup> Stein, "The Ethos of Women's Professions," *Essays on Woman*, 45

narrow-minded claim, Stein systematically outlines the reasons for her philosophy—reasons which are rooted in Scripture, Catholic Tradition, philosophy, and even biology.

*The Masculine Soul:*

Before diving into the characteristics of the feminine soul, it would be helpful to understand woman's counterpart: man. Stein affirms the truth that men and women are equal in dignity and that, at Creation, they were endowed with the same ultimate mission: to bear the image of God, to be fruitful and multiply, and to subdue the earth.<sup>2</sup> Through the Catholic worldview, both men and women are called to holiness and conformity with God's will. They are called to a perfect charity towards God and each other. Prior to her entrance in the Carmel, Stein wrote in a letter to Sr. Agnella Stadtmuller on this matter: "Should we strive for perfect love, you ask? Absolutely. For this we were created. [Perfect love] will be our eternal life, and here we have to seek to come as close to it as possible."<sup>3</sup> Therefore, Stein recognizes that men and women share the same high calling towards Heaven.

Before the Fall, man and woman would accomplish this one vocation in different ways, but "their faculties in each individual were in perfect harmony as within one single being. . . with no possibility of conflict."<sup>4</sup> The Fall and the subsequent introduction of Original Sin damaged this harmony. These differences between men and women became a source of misunderstanding and tension between the sexes.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 61

<sup>3</sup> Stein, *Edith Stein: Selected Writings*, edited by Marian Maskulak, CPS (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016), 89

<sup>4</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 62

<sup>5</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 63-64

When Stein delineates between the masculine and feminine vocations, she does not speak for every individual man or every individual woman. Women can demonstrate more masculine traits, and men can have some feminine characteristics. Similarly, women are not immune to the more masculine vices, and vice versa. Stein is not trying to place anyone into a rigid box; rather, she writes on what she observed and studied about men and women's unique tendencies and vocations.

If there is a distinctly feminine vocation, it follows that there should be a masculine vocation. Stein affirms this and outlines how the masculine soul thrives and where things can go wrong. Generally speaking, a man's primary vocation is to possess and encompass the world around him. This desire comes from Adam's commission to subdue the earth and name the animals. Therefore, "man was called by his original God-given vocation to be master of the created world."<sup>6</sup> He has an active approach to life and a strong desire to pursue knowledge and external goals.<sup>7</sup> Stein claims that the masculine vocation is self-evident through the union between his body and soul: "Hence his body and soul are equipped to fight and conquer [nature], to *understand* it, and by knowledge to make it his own, to *possess* and *enjoy* it, and, finally, to make it in a sense his own creation through purposeful activity."<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, man is disposed towards going outside of himself and grasping hold of the world before him. In that desire to possess and fully understand things outside of him, the masculine nature has a more forceful side to it than the feminine. Yet, he is not entirely motivated by mere achievement and trophies, although

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<sup>6</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 70

<sup>7</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 70

<sup>8</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 71

these certainly play a factor in his decisions. Underpinning these other desires is a need to protect those under his care—in other words, to fatherhood, which Stein diagnoses as an integral part of the masculine vocation.<sup>9</sup>

In a world with original sin and fallen mankind, there are several pitfalls to the masculine vocation. Foremost among these, and one of the most frequently seen, is man's tendency to throw himself into his work. Man's penchant for ambition, if left unchecked, often "becomes a decadent aspiration in itself."<sup>10</sup> In such a "decadent aspiration," man forgets that his aspirations should ultimately bring glory to God and good for others. Instead, he overworks for his own vainglory or for distraction from other responsibilities. In addition, the masculine soul can pervert its God-given mission to master and subdue creation; rather than seeking to bring all of creation under the yoke of God's laws, "it seeks to master them in arbitrary fashion or permits the clarity of its spiritual vision to be clouded by desires and lusts."<sup>11</sup> In this disordered state, man places his own changing desires as the standard of all. Regarding sex, men more easily fall into the trap of wanting to separate the marital union from children and to make the act only about personal pleasure. This is in part because a man does not have as strong of an emotional and spiritual union with his body as a woman does.

As Stein would repeatedly argue, these shortcomings are not due to inherent flaws in the masculine. Instead, they are sad products of original sin and man's separation from God. Although men and women struggle with different areas, they both suffer from the

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<sup>9</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 73

<sup>10</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 71

<sup>11</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 71

crippling effects of original sin. Ultimately, the only thing that can reunite men and women to the God they rejected is through supernatural grace.

*General Qualities of the Feminine Soul:*

Though the feminine soul shares the same universal goal as the masculine soul—union with God—the feminine soul operates from a different standpoint than the masculine soul. While men naturally want to compartmentalize, specialize, and conquer, women are geared towards the harmonious, the personal, and the holistic.<sup>12</sup> As is the case with men, women’s “characteristically consistent and whole” vocation is evident through her very being. Every part of her body and soul is made for protecting and nurturing others. For the woman, “To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning.”<sup>13</sup> Yes, the masculine soul is also made to protect, but a woman does so in a different way. While men protect through more active means, the feminine soul is a place of refuge where weary souls can rest and find some comfort and wisdom.

*Strengths of the Feminine Soul:*

Like the masculine soul, the feminine soul has some strengths which come naturally to it. As one examines these qualities, he will find a common thread: motherhood. Even in the most interiorly or religiously focused qualities, there is a certain concern with mothering others and being a source of comfort and formation for them. That is not to say that the feminine soul is defined solely by what she can do for others. Rather, the spiritually healthy feminine soul has within it a natural impulse and desire to give of

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<sup>12</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” *Essays*, 73

<sup>13</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” *Essays*, 45

itself. For Stein, this selflessness should never be exercised to the detriment of the individual woman, since she affirms that the foremost task of one's life is one's own salvation.

One of the ways this maternal instinct expresses itself is through the feminine soul's desire and penchant for bringing things in order and raising them to a higher moral standard. In Stein's eyes, every woman naturally has an "abhorrence for all which is low and mean."<sup>14</sup> This deterrence from everything that is lower does not come from an inability to stomach it but from a heightened sensitivity to true beauty and goodness.<sup>15</sup> Connected with the feminine longing to support others' development is the desire to create an ordered, beautiful environment.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it would make sense that the feminine soul would detest everything that is antithetical to development and beauty.

In addition, Stein believes that the feminine soul is an inherently religious one. Contrary to some opinions at the time, which described women with condescending terms such as the "weaker sex," Stein posits that women are spiritual warriors. Because of their higher sensitivity, women are often more attuned than men to God's prodding towards conversion and holiness. Stein describes this as a "yearning for the divine" and "a sound and inwardly sustained conviction of faith."<sup>17</sup> Two things are notable in these statements. Firstly, Stein does not depict this predilection for religion as a dry or dead thing. Rather, it is a passionate yearning for the divine, as if the divine will fulfill a deep

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<sup>14</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 78

<sup>15</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 78

<sup>16</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 78

<sup>17</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman" and "Problems of Women's Education," *Essays*, pp. 78, 155

need in the feminine soul. Secondly, this desire is not flimsy; it is “sound” and a “conviction of faith,” something which does not change with the tides or is based upon external circumstances.<sup>18</sup> Within every woman lies the desire to give herself wholly to another, to live for something or someone beyond herself. Religiously speaking, this means that a woman desires a complete union with the Lord. Although this longing is marred and tainted by sin and attachments, women have a “readiness and desire to be completely fulfilled and guided by His love.”<sup>19</sup> This desire for a union with God could be the beginning of spiritual maternity, which has its roots in union with the divine.

Here, we see afresh the feminine soul’s willingness to give of herself and to surrender. This trait is not, as some would presuppose, the result of weakness or inability to stand up for herself. Rather, this quality comes from a willingness to consciously submit herself to the yoke of a greater good. Stein often alludes to mankind’s glorious state before the Fall. For the woman, she was meant to serve as a helpmate, but this mission was made all the more difficult since man separated himself from perfect communion with God. However, the impulse remains, as woman “is created by God to stand by her husband’s side. . . bound to him as the helpmate who corresponds to him in an enduring, indissoluble coexistence.”<sup>20</sup> Stein recognizes the truth of Hopkins’ exhortation to “give beauty, beauty, beauty back to God” in woman’s innate yearning to give herself back to God.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, this desire to give of oneself can go terribly awry

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<sup>18</sup> Stein, “Problems of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 155

<sup>19</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” *Essays*, 78

<sup>20</sup> Stein, “Woman’s Intrinsic Value in National Life,” *Essays*, 266

<sup>21</sup> Gerard Manly Hopkins. “The Golden Echo.” *Gerard Manly Hopkins Official Website*, <https://hopkinspoetry.com/poem/the-lead-en-echo-and-the-gold-en-echo/>, line 28

when it is not subject to God or when it is manipulated by others. Because of this desire for union and reciprocity, women can easily over-commit themselves to things or people that are not worth their energies. However, when this desire for union—a good in itself—is directed towards obedience to God, it is the greatest source of a woman’s happiness.

Another important feminine quality for Stein is the role as a pillar of family life. When speaking about the 20<sup>th</sup> century decline in family unity, Stein portrays the woman as the glue which holds families together. The woman—whether through the capacity of mother, daughter, or sister—has the power to smooth over difficulties when needed, to promote harmony, and to foster excellence in those nearest her. Referencing a study in *Family Life Today* which examines the lives of 138 German families, Stein says “it was mostly the woman’s merit which kept the family together.”<sup>22</sup> This portrayal of woman as mother is something that will pop up continually in the *Essays*, and a topic on which I will focus more exclusively in later chapters.

#### *The Body-Soul Union in Woman:*

As a learned Thomist after her conversion, Stein was very familiar with the philosophical and theological concept of body-soul union. Living in the post-Enlightenment era, Stein was certainly aware of Cartesian and immaterialist theories about the human person, which claim that there is no physical body or that the physical body does not affect the soul and vice versa. Stein staunchly disagreed with this assessment. Following in Aquinas and Aristotle’s footsteps, she affirms the positive connection and interdependence between body and soul. Regarding women, she reasons that they experience the intimate connection between body and soul more acutely.

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<sup>22</sup> Stein, “Problems of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 148

In her understanding of body-soul stasis, Stein follows Aquinas's *anima forma corporis* schema. In his Aristotelian commentary *Quaestiones de Anima*, Aquinas defines the soul as the body's form. Essentially, the soul and body are not separate, static things but are intimately connected, such that "a soul is united to its body without an intermediary."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the connection and interaction between body and soul goes deeper than a mere co-existence or working alongside each other. There is no intermediary to bridge the gap between them; as form (soul) and matter (body), they fulfill each other.<sup>24</sup> That said, it does seem that the soul is the animating factor of the body. As the form of the body, the soul "perfects a human being according to diverse levels of perfection, so that he is a body, and a living body, and a rational animal."<sup>25</sup> In other words, the soul is what gives a human being his unique life and his dignity as a distinctly rational animal. The soul has three primary functions related to the body: "(1) the esse (being) of a human being, (2) the actualization of the matter composing a human being, and (3) the unity of existence and activity in a human being."<sup>26</sup> Here, we see again the fundamental role that the soul plays in the human body. Contrary to a Cartesian dualism, the soul does not merely exist within the body as a hand in a sock puppet. Rather, the soul is that which gives the human body its human essence and status as a human body.

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas Aquinas. *Questions on the Soul=Quaestiones de Anima*. Translated and with an introduction by James H. Robb, (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1984), 127

<sup>24</sup> Aquinas, *Quaestiones de Anima*, 127

<sup>25</sup> Aquinas, *Quaestiones de Anima*, 129

<sup>26</sup> Jason T. Eberl, "Aquinas on the Nature of Human Beings," *The Review of Metaphysics* Vol. 58, Issue 2 (2004)

On a strictly physical level, human beings may resemble apes and other animals. However, according to Aquinas, those other animals do not have the same rational soul as a human person. Aquinas claims that the each human body is the way it is because of the soul; it is the soul which determines the body: “this is not to say that it is this kind of body because of another form, but rather that the body is the kind it is because of its soul.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, if there are inherent differences in the body (excluding differences from disability or disease), it follows that there are differences in the soul.

This is where Stein’s philosophy of femininity comes in. Stein rejects that femininity and masculinity are mere social constructs, strictly artificial and without inherent meaning. Instead, she affirms that men and women have different souls, though equal in dignity, and that the differences in men and women’s bodies reflect dimly the differences in their souls. Like Aquinas, Stein believes that the soul is what gives life and eternal significance to the human body. She writes in the *Essays*, “the body receives its nature *as body*—life, motion, form, gestalt, and spiritual significance—through the soul.”<sup>28</sup> In this quote, Stein describes five ways that the soul gives the body its nature. Most of the items listed are relatively self-explanatory (i.e. life, motion, spiritual significance), but she includes a foreign word in the mix: *gestalt*.

The term *gestalt* is a psychological and philosophical term which had its birth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenology movement, of which Stein was a member in her early academia days.<sup>29</sup> The word *gestalt* is German for “shape” or “form,” and this is, in a way,

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<sup>27</sup> Aquinas, *Quaestiones de Anima*, 133

<sup>28</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” *Essays*, 95

<sup>29</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. “Gestalt Psychology.” (Encyclopaedia Britannica),

what it is.<sup>30</sup> It is a way of looking at a whole as greater than its individual parts and was a reaction to what some considered the overly-sterile scientific approach to human experiences.<sup>31</sup> It describes how often the individual qualities of a thing meld into the whole, and this whole could look different than the individual parts of a thing. As a quality, gestalt is “the relationship, interaction, and interdependence between its parts, rather than the sum or random combination of its parts.”<sup>32</sup> Essentially, the gestalt is that which transcends and holds together the individual parts of a thing, including the human soul in Stein’s opinion. Though the body and soul may have different individual parts, when put together all those parts make a unified whole. Indeed, that finished whole gives a sense of unity to the parts that may not exist among the individual parts. What creates this gestalt, this oneness, in the human body? According to Stein, it is the soul. She uses the phenomenological language from her philosophical training to describe a deeply held Christian and Thomistic belief: that the human soul gives unity and meaning to the human body.

*The Uniquely Feminine Body-Soul Union:*

This emphasis on wholeness plays out in the feminine soul. As mentioned above, Stein believes in the intimate connection between soul and body, specifically in the Thomistic idea of the soul as the body’s form. However, Stein adds a secondary claim in relation to women. She believes that the natural bond between soul and body, which both men and women have, is more obviously evident in women. While the male relates to his

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<sup>30</sup> Stephanie Sabar, “What’s a Gestalt?” *Gestalt Review*, Vol. 17, Issue 1, 2013, 7

<sup>31</sup> Editors of Encyclopaedia, “Gestalt Psychology.”

<sup>32</sup> Sabar, “What’s a Gestalt?”, 9

body as “more profoundly the character of an instrument,” the woman has a greater emotional and spiritual connection with the body.<sup>33</sup> For Stein, the body is a sign of the interior and spiritual realities, and what happens to the body affects the soul.<sup>34</sup>

One of the ways that this intimate body-soul union shows itself is through woman’s role in childbirth. The female body has unique functions in childbearing, as the child grows and lives within her for nine months. This “task of assimilating in oneself a living being which is evolving and growing” is not small duty, and this capacity has an impact on the feminine soul.<sup>35</sup> While the male’s role in the reproductive process is relatively short, the woman feels and bears the growing of the child growing inside of her. This is one possible explanation for why mothers are often more connected to their children than fathers; mothers have an intimate connection from carrying their children inside their very bodies. Even when the woman is not pregnant, her monthly cycle attests to this capacity for childbirth. Her body follows a rhythmic cycle which prepares her body for pregnancy and affects the hormone balances; even when a woman is not pregnant, her body shows the prominent role that reproduction plays in her person.

However, where does this place women who cannot have children, either through infertility or vows of celibacy? Are they lesser women? Stein would say, “By no means!” The childless or celibate woman is also affected by the feminine union between soul and body. Each “woman’s body stamps her soul and visa versa. Women’s souls are

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<sup>33</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” *Essays*, 95

<sup>34</sup> N. Benton Parish. “St. Edith Stein’s Characteristics of Femininity and the Role of Faith and Reason in the Natural Development of Woman.” *Communication Research Trends*, Volume 40, No. 3 (2021): 31

<sup>35</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of Christian Woman,” *Essays*, 95

particularly empathic.”<sup>36</sup> Even if a woman never uses these reproductive functions or mothers a physical child, that physical capacity for nurturing new life also manifests itself in the woman’s intellect, psyche, and soul. In other words, the spiritually healthy woman retains that desire to be a spiritual home for others and invest herself in others’ wellbeing. The feminine psyche is naturally wired for greater emotional connection than the male psyche, regardless of whether a woman is a mother of ten children, a single professional, or a celibate contemplative nun. The feminine soul, through her very being, is receptive to the needs of others and exercises her ultimate vocation as spouse and mother.

This emphasis on the physical side of maternity is not to the detriment of the spiritual tasks of motherhood. A physical mother’s vocation does not begin and end with the birth of her child; in fact, it is only beginning. Just like the celibate woman, the physical spouse and mother must unite herself to Christ totally. Stein even takes this further, saying that “the wife and mother must also have this *virginity* of soul.”<sup>37</sup> The married woman should never make a god out of her husband and family, but should remember that her ultimate beloved is Christ and Christ alone. She is not exempt from becoming a *Sponsa Christi* (Spouse of Christ) within her own heart. This openness to and union with God will naturally make her a better mother and help her expand her maternal influence beyond her immediate family. This ability to mother souls without physically giving birth is an example of spiritual motherhood, which I will explore more in later chapters.

*The Blessed Virgin’s Physical Maternity:*

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<sup>36</sup> Rosalind M. Leggett. “Edith Stein, Her Life and Times, with Special Reference to Empathy in Women.” *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing* (2004), 29

<sup>37</sup> Stein, “Problems of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 202

Throughout her *Essays*, Stein sings the praises of the Blessed Virgin. Wherever Stein mentions ideal femininity in the *Essays*, references to the Blessed Virgin follow close behind. After her conversion, Stein understood what an important role Mary played, as the Mother of God, in the narrative of salvation. She held a staunch devotion to her and viewed the Blessed Virgin as the archetypical New Eve, who, through her birth of the Son of God, would help undo Eve's damage at the Fall. Although Stein lays great stress on Mary's role as spiritual Mother of all Christians, she also exalts Mary as the epitome and greatest testimony of physical maternity.

As the Mother of God, Mary takes physical maternity (the general, natural vocation of most women) and raises it to a new level. Stein writes, "in [Mary], motherhood was transfigured and physical maternity surmounted" and thus she is the model for forming the young woman.<sup>38</sup> Through Mary giving birth to Christ, she is the "instrument for His incarnation" and is the gate of Heaven through which Christ chose to pass into the world.<sup>39</sup> Like any good physical mother, Mary's motherhood did not end after she gave birth; she walked by His side, even to Calvary, constantly giving her entire being for her Divine Son. She fed Him, clothed Him, comforted Him, and wept for Him; she understood what it means to physically mother a child. Always practical, Mary is "fully surrendered to service" and "takes careful note of all words and signs which anticipate something of His future course."<sup>40</sup> In this way, Mary fulfills an important part of physical maternity: ensuring the development of her Child.

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<sup>38</sup> Stein, "Problems of Women's Education," *Essays*, 198

<sup>39</sup> Stein, "Problems of Women's Education," *Essays*, 198

<sup>40</sup> Stein, "Problems of Women's Education," *Essays*, 198

Through His supreme humility, Christ made Himself obedient to Mary as her child in His earthly life. She takes this task seriously, as the mother must “bring them [the children] to development.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, Mary embodies the sense of wonder and gratefulness that physical mothers must foster. For Stein, the ideal mother is not one who is greedy or domineering over her children. She does not take them for granted nor think that she owns them.<sup>42</sup> She recognizes that, even though she gave birth to her children, she did not ultimately give them their life or their souls. That unique creativity belongs to God alone. Therefore, the mother must hold onto her children with open hands, recognizing that she has certain responsibilities towards them but also remembering that they ultimately belong to God. The Blessed Virgin does this perfectly. She does everything within her power to protect and nurture her Divine Son throughout His life. As the New Eve, she stands beside Christ (the New Adam) in His work of redemption, and she is present with Him every step of the way. However, when His Passion comes, she recognizes God’s Will and steps aside. Just as she did at the Annunciation, she says in her heart “Let it be done to me according to Thy Word.”

On this matter of the Mother of God’s sharing sorrow with her Son, Stein writes,

If you think of Our Lady only as the maiden who is makeless or as the queen of heaven you will know only a part of her, you will miss the sublimity, you will also miss the pathos and the nearness of the mother of sorrows. It is because she suffered in such closeness to her Son that she had more than any other woman an understanding of the signs and the sorrows of the world, and a greater share than any other woman in the wisdom and pity of Christ.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” *Essays*, 109

<sup>42</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” *Essays*, 110

<sup>43</sup> Stein, quoted in Baird, “Edith Stein and the Mother of God,” 5

The physical mother, through her intense connection with her children and involvement in the child's development, knows a dim reflection of what Mary suffered in Her Son's passion. As a woman fulfilling a vocation, the mother is concerned with that which is personal and concrete, so she suffers deeply with her children.<sup>44</sup>

Another way in which the Blessed Virgin is the exemplary physical mother is through her union which gave birth to physical life. The Blessed Virgin achieved the paradoxical honor of becoming a physical mother while remaining a virgin. She gave birth to the physical Christ child without ever knowing a man. Like the average physical mother, Mary experienced a deep union which conceived a child in her womb. However, while the average mother is united with a man, Mary was united with the Holy Ghost, and thus Christ was conceived. Mary opened herself to complete union with the Divine, and therefore she was fruitful.

In her physical maternity, Mary is an example of Stein's ideal woman, and this is a theme which will continue. Mary's physical motherhood is a sign of her interior reality: her fiat and complete surrender to God's Will and plan. In the Blessed Virgin's case, this openness manifested itself in conceiving Christ through the power of the Holy Ghost. Even for women without children, Mary's physical motherhood communicates something deep and important about womanhood, especially in Stein's point of view. According to Stein, the deepest longing for a woman is union with another. For the Catholic Stein, no one else accomplished this feminine mission more perfectly than the Theotokos (literally translated to "God bearer").

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<sup>44</sup> Stein, "Woman's Intrinsic Value in National Life," *Essays*, 264

*Conclusion:*

Stein believes that men and women are different, and not just in a superficial way. Their physical differences speak to differences in the psyche, emotions, and the soul. While both men and women share the ultimate vocation of holiness and union with God, they have different secondary vocations. In addition, both the masculine and feminine souls are tainted and wounded by original sin and cannot attain anything close to their vocation without the assistance of divine grace. That said, according to Stein, the feminine and masculine souls are constituted differently, complete with natural virtues and vices. The masculine soul is predisposed to active, objective pursuits, which explains why men can often get lost in their work. They are concerned with the objective, external world often to such an extent that they can have difficulty forming deep emotional connections. In contrast, the feminine soul naturally takes a more holistic approach towards interactions and philosophies of life. While the masculine soul is satisfied with specialization and mastering his powers on specific tasks, the feminine soul is more content with gaining the whole picture of a person or an idea. This is not to say that women cannot engage in abstract or focused thought. In fact, Stein wants an education system which encourages objective, rigorous intellectual work for young women.<sup>45</sup>

Another difference between men and women in Stein's philosophy is the closeness that they feel between their bodies and souls. Following in her intellectual mentors' (Aquinas and Aristotle) steps, she affirms that there is an intimate connection between the body and soul. The relationship between soul and body follows the *anima forma corporis* schema, which states that the soul is the form of the body; it is what makes the human

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<sup>45</sup> Stein, "Problems of Women's Education," *Essays*, 217

body, human. While both men and women have this union between form and matter (i.e. soul and body), women experience this union more immediately than men. Stein claims that the soul is more evidently present in the parts of a woman's body and that this union affects the woman's psyche and soul, even if the woman never gives physical birth.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, this chapter examined how the Blessed Virgin exemplifies Stein's ideal of physical maternity. In Mary, the average wife and mother finds several parallels and points for feeling connected to her. Even though Mary retained the high honor of perpetual virginity, she gave physical birth to Christ because of her union with the Holy Ghost. Furthermore, Mary felt the intense suffering that only a mother can feel during her Son's passion, but she always maintained a humble spirit and recognized that Christ did not belong to her. In this way, mothers find an ideal model in the Blessed Virgin. Mary as the ideal is not something which will go away in the *Essays*. Mary will continue to be the ideal for all women in their vocations, whether to physical or spiritual maternity.

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<sup>46</sup> Maybelle Marie O. Padua. "Emotion: Woman's Strength or Frailty?" *Phenomenology*, Vol. 19 (2008)

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Specific Qualities of the Feminine Soul

In the previous chapter, I examined how Stein defines and distinguishes between the masculine and feminine vocations. Stein gives an overview of the general feminine vocation, but at times this survey can seem a bit vague and overwhelming. Realistically speaking, what does it look like for a woman to be ideal, to embody and live out the feminine vocation of union with God and, from the union, being a place of refuge for other souls? To counterbalance some of the fluidity in definitions, Stein describes several qualities as belonging to the ideal woman. For Stein, the ideal feminine soul perfected by grace is expansive, quiet, warm, clear, and mistress of itself. These qualities are not meant to be the end-all-be-all portrait of the feminine nor examined only individually. Rather, Stein intends for these qualities to be viewed as a whole, as a *gestalt*, of the feminine soul.

It can seem like a tall order for the ordinary woman to fulfill all these qualities. This premonition will only increase as one looks into the specifics of each quality; Stein expects a lot from women. However, she does not expect every woman to fulfill these qualities perfectly or to live out the feminine genius (as St. John Paul II would call the feminine vocation) without mistakes.<sup>1</sup> As a Catholic, she champions the absolute need for every soul to rely upon divine grace. She affirms that every woman is born with the stain of original sin and with a seed of the Old Eve in her. Thus, she needs the grace of God and the sacraments to overcome these obstacles and vices and to become what she was meant to be. Stein only believes these qualities can be lived through the life of grace

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<sup>1</sup> Alexandra Cathey, "Edith Stein on the Highest Expression of the *Feminine Genius*," *Studia Gilsoniana*, Vol. 8, No. 2, April-June (2019)

“when formation through grace accompanies the natural inner formation.”<sup>2</sup> Without the supernatural grace of God, no one can live a fulfilled life.

She says explicitly these virtues, as listed above, are “an ideal image of the gestalt of the feminine soul.”<sup>3</sup> By “gestalt,” she most closely means wholeness or unity, that impression or predominant quality which comes when all the individual parts of a thing are working together. Therefore, she does not expect every fallen woman to fulfill these qualities to perfection, especially in a fallen world. However, with her phenomenological background, she wants to focus on overall impressions and psychological impacts. While each of the qualities of a perfected feminine soul are important in their own right, what is most important is the gestalt they create when they are in harmony. Examining these virtues of the perfected feminine soul, and the resulting gestalt, can give some clarity and concreteness to Stein’s sometimes nebulous descriptions of femininity.

#### *The Specific Qualities of the Feminine Soul:*

The feminine soul is, firstly, expansive. The range of its love and graciousness extends far beyond itself or its own immediate concerns. It is not closed in upon itself, only seeking gratification for its own needs and desires. Rather, the feminine soul has a unique ability to pay attention to the stirrings of grace and emotions in others. However, this is not simply being a busy-body or meddling in others’ affairs under the guise of feminine expansiveness and concern. This would, rightly so, be called mere selfishness instead of genuine expansiveness. Without grace, the feminine tendency to care for others

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<sup>2</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 135

<sup>3</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 133

becomes “mere curiosity, mere desire to get to know people and their circumstances.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, expansiveness entails a going outside of oneself to understand the “well-known or hidden burden which is laid on every human soul.”<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the feminine soul is not just supposed to diagnose this burden in other souls but to carry it back to herself.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the feminine soul metaphorically plays the role of St. Simeon helping Christ carry the cross up Calvary. The feminine soul takes the struggles of those closest to her to heart, pondering them within herself like the Blessed Virgin.

This first quality has strong connections with the topic of Stein’s doctoral dissertation *On the Problem of Empathy*. In her dissertation, Stein applies the phenomenological method to what she calls the problem of empathy. Essentially, she wants to answer the question of how one can truly empathize with another’s experiences, or if one can do so at all. Ultimately, she concludes that empathy is the ability to recognize and feel another’s experiences, while still recognizing the inherent differences and “otherness” between two people.<sup>7</sup> To practice empathy like this, one must recognize that, while the other person may have similar experiences, he or she is not same person and vice-versa. This understanding is an exercise of the expansiveness that Stein describes. As is the case with empathy, one must have something to give before she can relate to another. Since empathy involves one opening up to another self and entering into their world, one must have a sense of self with which to relate to another. Applied to expansiveness, this means

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<sup>4</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 132

<sup>5</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 132

<sup>6</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 132

<sup>7</sup> Leggett, “Edith Stein, Her Life and Times. . .” 25

that a soul must be right with God and herself before she can effectively expand her horizons. To avoid giving herself to unworthy endeavors, the woman must understand that the only One who can fully accept and appreciate her surrender is God. Likewise, “only God can bestow Himself upon a person so that He fulfills this being completely and loses nothing of Himself in so doing.”<sup>8</sup> This is the crux of the feminine vocation for Stein: a woman has such a weighty calling towards that she can only accomplish it through complete union with God and dependence upon Him. Only He can give woman the strength and comfort she needs.

At first, this quality of expansiveness can seem restricted to only extroverted women, that it can require one to live in an interior unrest and be exclusively interested in others. However, this is hardly the case. Notice how a big part of expansiveness is taking back to oneself the treasure she has found in the other person.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, self-reflection is intertwined with the quality of expansiveness. Being open to others’ experiences does not preclude having an interior life; in fact, it is essential. Because the feminine soul brings home whatever she finds in other souls, she must expand her own horizons. Through going outside of herself, the feminine soul not only brings benefits and hope to other souls, but she also brings new life to her own soul.

The second ideal feminine virtue is quietness. This quality is necessary and connected to the first because “the life which it [the soul] must protect is timid and speaks only faintly.”<sup>10</sup> To practice the expansiveness which is characteristic to women, the soul

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<sup>8</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions” In *Essays*, 53

<sup>9</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 133

<sup>10</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 134

must be able to harbor new life in it. The feminine soul cannot do this if it is overcome with interior noise and tumult. Again, we see the theme that one cannot lead others to health if one is not healthy. Stein makes an interesting caveat regarding this quality. She says that this virtue comes the least naturally to women.<sup>11</sup> In Stein's worldview, women are more in touch with their emotional lives and thus can experience more interior tumult than men. They have a greater capacity for an emotional life than men and are more attuned to it.<sup>12</sup> Of course, this is not a slight against women or an instance of Stein falling into misogynistic beliefs. In fact, woman's emotional life is one of her greatest strengths when it is submitted to the yoke of reason and divine grace.

Women with this quality of quietness are "Those women in whom one takes refuge in order to find peace, and who have ears for the softest and most imperceptible little voices."<sup>13</sup> Here, Stein clarifies that what matters in the quality of quietness is the ability to regulate the inner noise. Even if this does not come naturally, the ability to regulate one's inner life is crucial to a healthy feminine soul. When Stein refers to quietness, she does not just mean an exterior, vocal silence; it goes deeper than that, to being content with God and oneself and therefore quiet in soul. However, this quietness does not exclude more outgoing, gregarious women from achieving the feminine *gestalt*. Women with bigger personalities are not excluded from the ranks of ideal feminine souls.

Warmth is a double-edge sword as a quality of the feminine soul. On the one hand, it is one of the qualities which comes most naturally to women. According to Stein, even

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<sup>11</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education," *Essays*, 134

<sup>12</sup> Padua, "Emotion: Woman's Strength or Weakness?" 145

<sup>13</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education," *Essays*, 134

the most secular woman has a natural disposition towards warmth or affection. Even a woman without any light of divine grace can relate to the feminine impulse to show affection and warmth for those she loves. However, when left to its own devices this impulse is often inconsistent and fickle, changing with emotions and circumstances. For the warmth to become clear and genuine, it must become subject to the deifying work of supernatural grace.<sup>14</sup> Left to its own devices, woman's natural warmth and concern for others is muddled and confused.<sup>15</sup> It lacks clarity. In this claim, Stein could mean that the soul's warmth lacks a specific aim or self-control to it. Instead of being directed towards a worthy person or cause, this vague, unclear sense of warmth could confuse the soul. Furthermore, this sense of warmth could be fickle when it is not subjected to reason or grace. For example, a secular, spiritually undisciplined mother would certainly feel natural warmth for children. However, if she is not careful and does not want to take up the real crosses of motherhood, this warmth could turn on and off at the command of her changing moods. Again, here we see a theme important to Stein's philosophy of womanhood: the need for supernatural grace.

Finally, there is the quality of simultaneous self-emptiness and self-containment. For Stein, one can only fulfill the feminine vocation of motherhood and companionship when one is empty of self. Yes, each woman is called to cultivate her talents and gifts, but this should never consume the entirety of her being. In her pursuit of personal excellence, the woman should never become self-absorbed. It is only when the soul puts the self to death

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<sup>14</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education," Essays, 135

<sup>15</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education," Essays, 135

that “there is room and quiet to make oneself perceptible to others.”<sup>16</sup> This is accomplished through surrender to God’s providence and will, recognizing that, ultimately, He is the One who controls everything and performs every act of grace within a soul. In her magnum opus *Finite and Eternal Being*, Stein touches upon this necessity of emptying oneself to make room for divine life: “In my own being, then, I encounter another kind of being that is not mine but that is the support and ground of my own unsupported and groundless being.”<sup>17</sup> Within each human soul there is an inkling and yearning for something beyond oneself, a belief that we are not alone and that we must surrender to that which is greater than us.

To become free, the soul must call upon God to make her so. Stein even says that it is “sinful theft towards God to give oneself completely to one other than Him.”<sup>18</sup> Thankfully, this kind of surrender comes more naturally to women than to men. For women, this task of saying, “Let Thy will be done” to God can seem more natural, since women are more wired to desire a deep, intimate union: “He has called women in all times to the most intimate union with Him.”<sup>19</sup> The ideal woman recognizes that she is not her own, and that is a good thing. She knows she is nothing herself, that she receives everything as a gift from God.

*The Vices of the Feminine Soul:*

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<sup>16</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 134

<sup>17</sup> Stein, quoted in Madden, “Moment of Truth...” 336

<sup>18</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education,” *Essays*, 134

<sup>19</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman.” In *Essays*, 84

Like the masculine soul, the feminine soul is also subject to certain vices and sins. At the Fall, the feminine nature, which was designed to reflect a unique image of God, became corrupted through Original Sin. No aspect of the feminine soul was left untouched by this destructive force. Therefore, every positive aspect or natural virtue of the feminine soul has a corresponding perversion or lack. However, as is the case with the masculine nature, “woman's diminished powers, which resulted from her attention to caring for the most primitive necessities of life, were ultimately caused by the Fall, and not by any innate limitations in woman's soul.”<sup>20</sup> Essentially, Stein is trying to take a balanced, realistic approach to both the masculine and feminine souls. She acknowledges that, in this fallen world, every person is flawed and has unique vices to which he or she is disposed and that by recognizing destructive tendencies, one may be more prepared to resist and conquer them.

Foremost among these vices is a tendency to subvert or challenge authority through manipulation. Concurrent with her belief that men and women have different souls is Stein's belief that the Fall affected men and women in different ways.<sup>21</sup> It damaged both men and women's relationship with God, but it also damaged men and women's relations with each other. There was now enmity between them, the beginning of that perennial power struggle between the sexes. For the woman, this meant a desire to try to undermine or shirk her husband's authority. It could result in a bitterness about his role as head of the household or a desire to have her own wishes fulfilled. According to Stein, after the

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<sup>20</sup> Jane Kelley Rodeheffer. “On Spiritual Maternity: Edith Stein, Aristotle, and the Nature of Woman.” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Vol. 72 (1998) 293

<sup>21</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” *Essays*, 74

Fall, woman mistrusted man's exercise of dominion over Creation, and for good reasons.<sup>22</sup> Both men and women had fallen and lost God, Who was their greatest fulfillment and joy. Thus, "already threatened by man's need of dominion, [woman's] free companionship by his side will be further undermined by her yielding to her own desires."<sup>23</sup> Women are prone to resenting man, while man is more prone to cruelly dominating other creatures, particularly women.

A second vice Stein warns women against is greed. Since warmth and generosity come naturally to women, it seems strange that women would be prone to greed. However, it makes sense once one looks at women's natural virtues, particularly her "reverent joy for others."<sup>24</sup> Since vices are simply perversions of virtues, the vice of greed is a perversion of recognizing the goodness in other things and people. Women are naturally focused on the personal aspect of things and have a predisposition for appreciating the beauty and order in things. However, when this admiration of the good things in the world is left unchecked, it can degenerate into greed. This greed can manifest itself in one of two ways: 1) hoarding of useless things, and 2) an idle, sensual life.<sup>25</sup> This fits in with another of the feminine vices according to Stein: a disposition to fall into mere sensuality, searching for the easy and "good life." Once again, this vice plays off woman's natural strength of desiring the beautiful and seeing it in her

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<sup>22</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 74

<sup>23</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 74

<sup>24</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 74

<sup>25</sup> Stein, "The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman," *Essays*, 74

surroundings. When this sensitivity to the beautiful and beneficial is left to its own devices, it can descend into merely wanting to enjoy those things for oneself.

Finally, Stein diagnoses what she calls “stark carnality” as one of the feminine vices. She introduces this vice with the preface that all vices, including this one, are born from mankind’s perverted relationship with God. Because of the disastrous effects of the Fall, woman in her natural state is not right with God or with herself, and this disunity is the result of that wrong relationship.<sup>26</sup> Stein also makes an interesting claim about the origin of woman’s predilection towards seduction. She posits that the original sin of Eve was first taking the forbidden fruit and then seducing her husband to partake of it.<sup>27</sup> Through seduction, Eve first exercised power over her husband and convinced him to sin. From this supposition, Stein reasons that every woman now has that particular stain, that knowledge that they can exercise power over men through seduction and the temptation to test that power. Stein is not saying that every woman is born a seductress, but that women are “more intensely exposed to the danger of descent into stark carnality.”<sup>28</sup> This is also a paradox because of woman’s exalted role because of the Blessed Virgin. God has “specifically enjoined [woman] to combat evil,” but because of original sin, women may not hear or heed that call to combat.<sup>29</sup>

These vices are by no means a death sentence for women’s development, nor are they a complete list. Each individual woman will naturally struggle with different vices.

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<sup>26</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” *Essays*, 75

<sup>27</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” *Essays*, 75

<sup>28</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” *Essays*, 75

<sup>29</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” *Essays*, 75

However, the pitfalls that Stein outlines are indicative of the general obstacles and sins women wrestle with.

*Woman's Emotional Life: Strength, Not Weakness*

According to Stein, a large part of the feminine soul and psyche is woman's emotional life. Whether it is in relation to women's education, faith, or relationships, Stein mentions the primacy of women's emotional lives throughout the *Essays*. The modern reader's first reaction may be to flinch. Images of fainting couches, dainty women, and patronizing terms such as "the weaker sex" may flash across one's mind. In today's world, it seems like an insult to women to claim that they are emotional. Underlying this fear is the belief that there is an inherent value difference between what we would call "reason" and "emotion," with emotion being on the lower end of the value scale. While Stein certainly upholds the importance of reason, she holds that woman's emotional life is not a weakness or deficiency, but actually a testament to woman's genius and intuition.

Using the Aristotelian model of the soul, the emotions impact the rational part of the soul, though they do not necessarily fall under this category. According to Aristotle's theory, there are three parts to the soul: 1) the nutritive part which is concerned with functions that lead to biological growth (i.e. reproduction, digestion, etc.); 2) the appetitive part, which includes emotions and perceptions; and 3) the rational part, which focuses on abstract reasoning.<sup>30</sup> This may seem confusing, since one often associates the logical part of the soul with the higher, abstract reasoning faculties of the soul. However, just because emotions fall under the appetitive category does not mean they are worthless

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<sup>30</sup> Paula Gottlieb. "Aristotle on Dividing the Soul and Uniting the Virtues." *Phronesis*, Vol. 39, No. 3, 1994, 279

or mean. Since emotions do not simply serve the lower appetites but supplies reason with information about one's own experiences and other people's, they are worthy of virtue.<sup>31</sup>

In addition, emotions involve a sort of self-awareness, since "through the emotions, [the soul] comes to know what it is and how it is; it also grasps through them the relationship of another being to itself, and then, consequently, the significance of the inherent value of exterior things."<sup>32</sup> Therefore, emotions are a part of the empathy that is so unique to women. It supplies the reason with personal information about one's surroundings and other people, giving a holistic view of reality. Stein was not alone in this view; her mentors and colleagues Husserl and Scheler both affirmed that emotions worked with the intellect, although they were of a different part of the soul.<sup>33</sup> This "personal information" could also be called intuition, which Stein holds as the particular wisdom of women. Intuition is, roughly speaking, an ability to know without first having facts. It is an understanding of why something is or a premonition for future events, an understanding which does not always proceed from an identifiable set of facts.

This intuition fits in with Stein's emphasis on woman as a creature focused on the personal and whole. For Stein, this heightened sensitivity to emotion is the reason that women are often attracted to what affects people personally and on a holistic level. Woman's emotional life is the avenue through which she learns about others and practices those feminine virtues of expansiveness and warmth. This knowledge gained through emotional connection is not of lesser value than the knowledge gained through

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<sup>31</sup> Rodeheffer, "On Spiritual Maternity," 295

<sup>32</sup> Stein, "Spirituality of the Christian Woman," *Essays*, 96

<sup>33</sup> Padua, "Emotion: Woman's Strength or Frailty?" 156-158

analytic reasoning. The main difference between them lies in the fact that intuition deals more with personal and the concrete. Intuition is a more personal form of knowledge because “intuitive intelligence is more intimately tied up with love than analytical intelligence. The ‘intuitive grasp of the living concrete, especially of the personal element’ is woman’s strength.”<sup>34</sup> Like analytic intelligence, emotional intuition does deal with external, real things, but these objects of perception (to borrow phenomenological language) are more personal.

#### *Women and Empathy:*

Closely tied with the idea of woman’s emotional lives is the concept of empathy. Indeed, empathy was a philosophical and psychological concept near and dear to Stein’s heart, as she completed her doctoral dissertation on the topic of empathy. She used the phenomenological method to analyze the phenomenon of empathy. I addressed this topic briefly while explicating the feminine virtue of expansiveness, but, if one is to gain a concrete view of the ideal feminine soul, a treatment of empathy is crucial.

According to Stein, empathy is the awareness and experience of another’s experiences. It is an “entering in” of sorts into another’s experiences. Stein does not think empathy is merely perception or an inference; rather, it is an experience.<sup>35</sup> When one exercises empathy, she recognizes that another is, in fact, a different person with her own distinct experiences and background. Yet, there is a connection between the two persons which transcends this difference. Zaner describes this tension between empathy and recognizing another’s individuality as a circumstance in which, “Although I cannot

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<sup>34</sup> Padua, “Emotion: Woman’s Strength or Frailty?” 162

<sup>35</sup> Richard M. Zaner. “Edith Stein, ‘On the Problem of Empathy’ (Book Review).” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Jul 1, 1966, 275

experience or know *his* subjective life, *his* living body, *his* ‘mental person’ and the like in the way in which I experience and know my own, therefore, is in no way to say that the other is not a genuine other (alter ego) for me.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, empathy ties back into the ideal feminine insofar as it allows for one to practice those idea qualities, especially those of warmth and expansiveness.

According to Stein, empathy comes more naturally to women than to men. While both men and women can and should exercise empathy, empathy comes more naturally to women, as it is an integral part of the vocation to motherhood. Stein even calls empathy one of the “feminine gifts” which allows woman “to participate, understand, and stimulate.”<sup>37</sup> One of the reasons that women are more naturally empathetic, according to Stein’s worldview informed by Aquinas and Aristotle, is because of the body-soul union.<sup>38</sup> The woman’s body is naturally empathetic, since it holds a unique ability to foster life within it.

#### *An Ideal Day for the Modern Catholic Woman:*

At first glance, the manifold qualities that Stein outlines for the women, along with the broader reflections on empathy, can seem overwhelming. With her precise, philosophical mind, Stein wants to provide a detailed account of what it means to be a woman. Her lectures in *Essays on Woman* were intended to be practical and applicable to the lives of women listening. Thus, she wisely provides a mock day-in-the-life of a

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<sup>36</sup> Zaner, “Edith Stein, ‘On the Problem of Empathy’...” 275

<sup>37</sup> Stein, *Essays*, 115

<sup>38</sup> Leggett, “Edith Stein, Her Life, and Times...” 29

Catholic woman striving to fulfill the feminine vocation of foremost loving God and, through the outpouring of that love, showing maternal care and companionship to others.

In her introduction to this lecture, Stein clarifies that women should not hyper-focus on any one quality. Rather, to employ the gestalt analogy, fulfilling the general feminine vocation entails a focus on the whole and harmony among the individual qualities. Stein wants women to focus primarily on the attitude of one's soul, as "it is not a matter of a multiplicity of attributes which we can tackle and acquire individually; it is rather a single condition of the soul."<sup>39</sup> True femininity is not checking off a laundry list of ideal virtues or characteristics. Instead, these virtues and characteristics are the fruit of a deep union with God and a right attitude towards oneself and others. She also makes it clear that this union with God and the resulting virtues are not born from one's own effort, but "must be effected through grace."<sup>40</sup> It is only up to the woman to "renounce [her] own will completely and give it captive to the divine will."<sup>41</sup>

In typical Stein fashion, her predominant emphasis in this hypothetical day is on prayer. A staunch realist, Stein recognizes that women shoulder many responsibilities and are faced with them at the beginning of each new day. This concern could lead one to "run around and rush forth" towards the daily responsibilities.<sup>42</sup> Instead of rushing into this concern, Stein advises women to begin the day with prayer and liturgy, thus laying all of her concerns at the feet of the Lord and begging Him for the necessary strength. By

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<sup>39</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education" in *Essays*, 143

<sup>40</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education" in *Essays*, 143

<sup>41</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education" in *Essays*, 143

<sup>42</sup> Stein, "Fundamental of Women's Education" in *Essays*, 143

beginning the day with prayer, the woman is not trying to escape or delay her duties; instead, she is exercising discipline over her worries and saying “My first morning’s hour belongs to the Lord.”<sup>43</sup> Here, Stein writes a beautiful reflection on the stirrings within the soul when she places herself before the “altar of God”:

So I will go to the altar of God. Here it is not a question of my minute, petty affairs, but of the great offering of reconciliation. I may participate in that, purify myself and be made happy, and lay myself and all my doings and troubles along with the sacrifice on the altar. And when the Lord comes to me then in Holy Communion, then I may ask Him, ‘Lord, what do you want of me?’ (St. Teresa). And after quiet dialogue, I will go to that which I see as my next duty.<sup>44</sup>

Here, we see the crucible of Stein’s ideal feminine: the surrender of oneself to God.

When one starts the day with prayer and Communion, it is not to engage in self-pity over the stresses of the day; rather, it is to “lay myself and all my doings and troubles along with the sacrifice on the altar.”<sup>45</sup> In addition, we see the quality of quietness played out in the “quiet dialogue” the woman has with her Lord. Only after one has drunk from the well of God’s grace in the liturgy can she accomplish what she needs. It fills soul with “holy joy, courage and energy” such that “it has become great and expansive.”<sup>46</sup>

Next, Stein describes the concrete tasks set before a woman. In this mock day-in-the-life, the woman works as a teacher or office worker; either way, she is operating as a woman in the secular world, yet not of it. She does not sugar-coat the realities of working, whether as a mother, single woman, or consecrated religious. After a few hours of rigorous work, the woman is tired and feels as if she has not accomplished everything

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<sup>43</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education” in *Essays*, 143

<sup>44</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education” in *Essays*, 143

<sup>45</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education” in *Essays*, 143

<sup>46</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education” in *Essays*, 144

she should. When speaking of the teacher's daily crosses, Stein describes such frustrations as "our own fatigue, unforeseen interruptions, shortcomings of the children, diverse vexations, indignities, anxieties."<sup>47</sup> She looks forward to the remaining hours in the day and laments how much more there is to do. Here, we see that, even when describing ideal femininity for the average woman, Stein does not lose sight of the fact that we are fallen. She recognizes that women are fallen creatures, and that, even after being filled with divine grace, they still fall short. Thus, amongst all the talk of ideals, Stein maintains a realistic worldview.

Yet Stein does not stop here, in a place of despair. Rather, she advises women to steal away at midday, even if for a moment, to pray and commune with the Lord. The best way to exercise this is "to shed all cares again for a short time before the tabernacle."<sup>48</sup> However, if this cannot be done, Stein recommends at least taking a moment alone or, if that fails, "a moment seal[ing] off herself inwardly against all other things and [taking] refuge in the Lord."<sup>49</sup> This little respite offers an opportunity for the soul to breathe and find some rest in the Lord, her heavenly Beloved. As the woman goes throughout the rest of the day, she can "continue, perhaps in great fatigue and laboriousness, but in peace."<sup>50</sup> Amidst the pressures and chaos of the outside world, the handmaid of the Lord can remember the peace of her Lord. To pull on the terminology of St. Teresa of Avila, the woman can enter the interior castle of her soul.

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<sup>47</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education." In *Essays*, 145

<sup>48</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education." In *Essays*, 144

<sup>49</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education." In *Essays*, 144

<sup>50</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education." In *Essays*, 145

Of course, Stein recognizes that this sort of schedule is not suited for every woman's state in life. For example, some women may not have access to daily Mass, or they may be engaged in different professions or no profession at all. However, there are still lessons for every type of woman. Foremost is the necessity of holy rest in feminine life. With what can seem like a laundry list of impossible feminine characteristics, women can easily think that the ideal woman has no time for rest, but it is precisely this type of rest that "permit[s] the soul to mature the more from year to year to the eternal Sabbath rest."<sup>51</sup> The ideal for the feminine soul is not a woman who is run into the ground by responsibilities. Rather, the image Stein presents is of a woman who finds her much-needed rest in God and can then share that joy and satisfaction with those around her.

*Conclusion:*

In this chapter, I examined the specific ways that Stein portrays the general feminine vocation. What does it mean for a woman to embody the feminine traits of openness, quietness, clearness, and self-control? Furthermore, I investigated whether Stein considers woman's emotions her strength or her weakness. Finally, I analyzed Stein's depiction of a grace-filled day for a Catholic woman in the world. In all of these considerations, one thing emerged: Stein's belief in the necessity of prayer and grace to fulfill the feminine vocation.

Without the divine assistance through contact with Christ in the Sacraments (especially the Blessed Sacrament), contemplation, prayer, and others. In addition, one sees the dual threads of motherhood and companionship interwoven throughout Stein's discussion of the distinctly feminine vocation. For Stein, the natural destiny of woman is to be a wife

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<sup>51</sup> Stein, "Fundamental Principles of Women's Education." In *Essays*, 145

and mother; however, not every woman gets married and has children, nor is every woman meant to. However, they are still expected to carry out the feminine vocation of motherhood in a spiritual way. Even if they never give birth to physical children, these spiritual mothers are called to exercise spiritual maternity. According to Stein, who takes notes from Aquinas on this matter, women's bodies and their design for growing and maintaining life is a testament to the motherly psyche of a healthy woman.<sup>52</sup> I will delve more into the specifics of this spiritual maternity in the final chapter

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<sup>52</sup> Leggett, "Edith Stein, Her Life, and Times..." 29

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### Spiritual Motherhood as the Height and Fulfillment of the Feminine Vocation

Now we come to the defining scope of this thesis. Until now, I have examined in detail Stein's view of the general feminine vocation, its relation to the masculine vocation, and its specific virtues and vices. In essence, Stein defines the feminine vocation as one oriented towards motherhood, spousal love, and expansive companionship for others. However, this leaves some questions for the discerning reader. Where does this emphasis on maternity leave women who are infertile or choose virginity? Are they not fulfilling the vocation and therefore not among the ranks of women who are fulfilling it? Stein asserts that this is certainly not the case. In fact, she affirms quite the opposite, saying that women who exercise spiritual maternity fulfill the feminine vocation in an even more real way. This notion of spiritual maternity can seem shadowy and elusive, even to one well acquainted with Stein's view of femininity. However, she holds it in the highest esteem, and it influenced her life.

In this final chapter, I will investigate whether spiritual maternity is a true expression of the feminine vocation. First, I will define spiritual maternity on Edith Stein's terms and its prominence within the general feminine vocation. Since spiritual maternity is born from an intimate spiritual union with the Divine, every woman is called to exercise spiritual maternity according to her state in life (i.e. married, single in the world, or consecrated). Next, I will look at the root of how spiritual maternity is rooted in what Stein calls the "Eucharistic life."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stein, "The Ethos of Woman's Professions," *Essays*, 56

In addition, I will investigate what spiritual maternity looks like in the most exalted, supernatural vocation: consecrated virginity, either expression as a celibate in the world or as a religious sister. The single woman in the world, through her toil and hidden life, express their feminine vocation through everyday contact with others and her renunciation of the attractions of the very world in which she lives. Consecrated religious are called to express spiritual maternity exclusively through poverty and radical abandon of one's whole self to prayer and the service of God. Specifically, I will argue that consecrated religious—through their prayer, sacrifice, and apostolate work—achieve the highest form of the feminine vocation. In a unique way, consecrated religious and virgins take the Blessed Virgin Mary as their model. Ultimately, through Edith Stein's understanding of femininity, I will argue that spiritual motherhood is not a mere "consolation prize" but a courageous, fruitful fulfillment of the feminine call towards expansive love and maternity.

*Defining Spiritual Maternity:*

Before one can understand spiritual motherhood's role in the feminine vocation, and the various ways it is exercised, one must understand what it is. Essentially, spiritual maternity is a way of caring for others and providing within their own souls and minds a place of spiritual refuge for others. It is not bound by whether a woman has given birth to physical children; instead, there is a distinction between motherhood and maternity. Maternity, especially spiritual maternity, is more akin to a set of virtues and willingness to sacrifice and care for others, and "the concept of maternity. . . extend[s] beyond reproductive abilities to social characteristics."<sup>2</sup> Concretely, these characteristics look

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<sup>2</sup> Lauren Nossett. "Impossible Ideals: Reconciling Virginity and Maternity in Goethe's *Werther*." *Goethe Yearbook*, North American Goethe Society, Vol. 23 (2016), 77-93

like charitableness and a willingness to sacrifice for others. An ideal example of this would be a woman who decides to take care of another's children or otherwise dedicating herself to education and care for the vulnerable. Religiously speaking, it looks like educating young souls in the truth, praying for their salvation and development.

It is a false dichotomy to place spiritual maternity in a separate, segregated camp from physical maternity. They are two sides of the same coin; both require the same feminine virtues of expansiveness, empathy, and selflessness. That said, the relationship between the two is still interesting. Stein argues that one cannot be an adequate physical mother without also exercising spiritual motherhood. Yet, one can exercise spiritual maternity exclusively without giving birth to physical children, as in the case of consecrated religious or celibate singles.

Going off of this, Stein's ultimate conclusion is that spiritual maternity is the overall vocation of every feminine soul. It is a worthy, spiritual expression of that general vocation towards motherhood; perhaps a better word would be motherliness, rather than motherhood. At its heart, as Leggett notes, "motherhood is a feminine way of interacting with the world."<sup>3</sup> This mode of interaction entails extending companionship, nurturing, and motherhood to everyone with whom one comes into contact. Thus, even physical mothers are called to show feminine care and healthy interest in the personal aspects of the lives of those outside their immediate family circle. They are "called to express their qualities of maternity and companionship with everyone with whom they come in

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<sup>3</sup> Leggett, "Edith Stein, Her Life and Times, with Special Reference to Empathy in Woman." 29

contact.”<sup>4</sup> These everyday interactions are primarily how women in secular society exercise their spiritual maternity.

In addition, women who are physical mothers must exercise spiritual maternity for their children and for others. After describing the sad reality of modern woman—overworked and “harassed, nervous, and irritable”—Stein describes what she calls the few remaining “heroines.”<sup>5</sup> Among these is the mother who is “radiating all warmth and light in the home, [raising] as many as nine children and [imparting] to them full blessings for their entire lives.”<sup>6</sup> As the one primarily entrusted with her children’s religious and moral education, the mother must pray for and educate her children in the Faith. Her motherhood does not begin and end with her pregnancy and childbirth. Instead, these events are only the beginning of the task of motherhood, which includes care for the children’s salvation. On this issue, Stein writes:

One should not interpret this differentiation of vocation as if in one case it were only the natural goal being considered, and, in the other case, only the supernatural one. The woman who fulfills her natural destiny as wife and mother also has her duties for God’s kingdom—initially, the propagation of human beings destined for this kingdom, but then also works for the salvation of souls; only for her, this lies first within the family circle.<sup>7</sup>

Here, we see that physical mothers are not exempt from practicing spiritual motherhood. However, their scope for “works for the salvation of souls” is narrower than others. There is nothing saying that physical mothers cannot extend their spiritual maternity and

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<sup>4</sup> Alexandra Cathey. “The Feminine Genius According to Edith Stein.” *Studia Gilsoniana*, Vol. 7 (2018), 297.

<sup>5</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” In *Essays*, 55

<sup>6</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” In *Essays*, 55

<sup>7</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” In *Essays*, 101

prayers towards those beyond their family circle; that said, the immediate family takes precedence.

In addition to prayers and good works for others, an integral part of spiritual maternity is companionship. For Stein, this is an expression of the feminine genius's orientation towards the personal and concrete. This companionship and mentorship is, so the speak, the tangible part of spiritual maternity. It is the external part that others can see and point towards as concrete examples of mothering. However, this companionship can also be spiritual through prayer. By praying for another's soul and offering oneself to God daily (through the daily offering prayer, for example) on the other's behalf, one can be his spiritual companion, helping the other in his walk towards holiness.

*Spiritual Motherhood: Born from Eucharistic Union:*

Since physical and spiritual maternity are deeply connected, they share some similarities. Essentially, physical motherhood is the tangible symbol of the deeper reality of a spiritual maternity and motherly approach to life. One of the similarities between a physical and spiritual expression of motherhood is the necessity of union. Just as the physical mother owns her motherhood to union with another, the spiritual mother is a mother because she experiences deep union with God. Because of the creative, life-giving nature of God, this union is fruitful in a spiritual way.

Stein is a firm believer in the principle that one cannot give what one does not have. Thus, for a woman to be a spiritual mother, she must have enough to give to others. If she does not have the divine life within her, she cannot give that divine life to others. As with most things, Stein recognizes that this cannot be accomplished through one's will power. Rather, it is the result of divine grace, of a "Eucharistic life" that consists in "daily,

confidential relationship with the Lord in the tabernacle.”<sup>8</sup> Here, everyone who puts herself before the Blessed Sacrament, trusting in His true presence, will gain the necessary strength to accomplish what is naturally impossible: loving another in a totally selfless way.

The underlying concept with spiritual motherhood is complete dedication to God. Even though the spiritual mother exercises her feminine expansiveness, she never forgets her first Beloved. She dedicates all she has to God first; she recognizes that “Only those who surrender themselves completely into the Lord’s hands can trust that they will avoid disaster between Scylla and Charybdis.”<sup>9</sup> The spiritual mother is not like that infamous woman who, as C.S. Lewis humorously says, “lives for others—you can always tell the others by their hunted expression.”<sup>10</sup> She does not exercise motherliness because of a need for self-affirmation because she needs to know that she is in fact a “good person.” Instead, she prays, offers up little sacrifices, and counsels others because of a deep union with God and her love for Him. Unlike Lewis’s archetype of the “unselfish” woman, the spiritual mother does not keep track of every good deed she has done and how those deed have, or have not, been repaid. Instead, she knows that “whatever is surrendered to Him is not lost but is saved, chastened, exalted and proportioned out in true measure,” and thus she does not need others to validate her love and efforts.<sup>11</sup> She knows that everything which she offers to God will not be lost but remembered by God Himself and

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<sup>8</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” in *Essays*, 57

<sup>9</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” in *Essays*, 79

<sup>10</sup> C.S. Lewis, “The Screwtape Letters,” *HarperCollins*, 1996, 145

<sup>11</sup> Stein, “The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman,” in *Essays*, 79

cherished. Her primary task is aligning herself with God's will and, from that submission to God's will, she has complete joy.

Always the lover of literature, Stein pulls from literary heroines in her description of spiritual maternity. The pagan priestess Iphigenia, for example, shows how powerful and noble spiritual maternity is, even if it is divorced from the work of divine grace.

Iphigenia, the heroine of Goethe's *Iphigenia at Tauris*, is a priestess for Diana who narrowly escapes death as a sacrifice to the goddess.<sup>12</sup> After she survives this ordeal, she continues in her service towards the goddess, and "feels that her life has become an exercise in self-forgetfulness."<sup>13</sup> She sees a respite from this self-forgetfulness through King Thoas's proposal of marriage; however, she refuses this offer because of her duty towards the goddess Diana. She is so completely used to aligning her own will to the divine that she does not want to cease that. Even though Iphigenia does not have the light of supernatural grace (since she worships pagan gods), she does show something important about spiritual motherhood. She exemplifies what it means to dedicate oneself totally to the godhead, towards something divine, and from that union be willing to sacrifice. She shows a single-hearted approach to life, which spiritual mothers must cultivate.

Essentially, spiritual maternity gains its strength and potency from a total surrender and reliance upon God. Since He is the "inexhaustible source of power" and is truly present in the tabernacle, He can give the spiritual mother the grace which perfects

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<sup>12</sup> Rodeheffer, "On Spiritual Maternity: Edith Stein, Aristotle, and the Nature of Woman," 298

<sup>13</sup> Rodeheffer, "On Spiritual Maternity: Edith Stein, Aristotle, and the Nature of Woman," 298

feminine nature.<sup>14</sup> Through “bridal love for Christ” the spiritual mother “strives to win human beings for God, to carry Him into souls, to beget and secure His children.”<sup>15</sup> From this prayerful union with God and desire to live for Him, the spiritual mother cannot help but be fruitful. This divine love is what separates spiritual maternity’s genuine concern for others from the self-aware unselfishness of a busybody.

*Veni Sponsa Christi: Spiritual Maternity in Consecrated Virginity*

Thus far, I have maintained a birds-eye-view approach towards spiritual maternity—what it means for every Christian woman, regardless of her state in life. However, as mentioned previously, the married woman’s scope for spiritual maternity is restricted. She is bound first and foremost by responsibilities to her immediate family and the education and raising of her children. However, there exists another way, another expression of the feminine vocation, wherein the woman dedicates herself completely to God and His service. This is not to disparage the vocation of marriage, which Stein affirms when she says, “There can be no loftier nor holier concept of marriage than that of our Church.”<sup>16</sup> That said, she also acknowledges that the vocation of consecrated virgins, whether in the world or in religious communities, is glorious.

One prominent question regarding the religious life is whether it is a distinctly feminine vocation. On the surface, it seems like the religious life is an inherently androgynous one, since it focuses on the supernatural life. Others take a more patronizing view of the religious life, seeing as a sort of consolation prize for a lack of a physical

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<sup>14</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” in *Essays*, 200

<sup>15</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” in *Essays*, 117

<sup>16</sup> Stein, “Mission of the Catholic Academic Woman,” in *Essays*, 267

husband and children. How can a woman truly thrive in a vocation which seemingly forces her to renounce what Stein would consider a natural desire: being a spouse and mother? Stein takes these questions into account and affirms that the religious or consecrated life is not only a legitimate expression of the feminine vocation but an even greater one. Taking the Thomistic view on the matter, Stein says that “grace perfects nature” rather than destroying it.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the feminine nature is not melted into a vague, androgynous mix of masculine and feminine natures. Rather, since the life of consecrated virginity is more perfect, it follows that the feminine nature “fit[s] into [religious life] in a particular way and thereby made fruitful.”<sup>18</sup> Here, one sees a recurring trend in Stein’s discussion of vocation—namely, that fruitfulness is a measure of whether one is fulfilling her vocation.

Under the umbrella of consecrated virginity, there fall two camps: religious life in community and virginity in the world. For those who cannot or choose not to enter a convent yet want to dedicate themselves and their virginity to the service of God, consecrated virginity in the world is the best option. Though such women remain in secular society and maintain professional careers, they still choose to dedicate themselves entirely to God. Stein does not mince words when describing the difficulties of this path. Without a religious community or a physical spouse for support, they face extraordinary opportunities for loneliness and isolation. It is, as Stein says, “in the long run a grueling, exhausting struggle.”<sup>19</sup> Looking at it from a purely natural level, no healthy, adjusted

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<sup>17</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” in *Essays*, 51

<sup>18</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” in *Essays*, 51

<sup>19</sup> Stein, “Mission of the Catholic Academic Woman,” in *Essays*, 267

woman could accomplish this. She would crumble under the weight of such a seemingly unnatural, lonely calling. However, the woman in this vocation is not alone in her struggle. Just like every soul, and specifically every feminine soul, the single woman can find great consolation and purpose in dedicating her virginity to God. Thus, her life will “be a spiritual maternity because of the love the bride of God embraces all the children of God.”<sup>20</sup> Stein affirms that the single woman, when she dedicates herself to God, will receive the necessary graces to not only live this life, but to live it well.

The more obvious example of complete spiritual maternity (and the one that most may think of), is religious life, and it fulfills the feminine vocation of spousal love and motherhood perfectly. In this state, the woman dedicates herself to God, renounces all earthly possessions, and lives in community with similar women. Through this radical abandon to the Will of God, consecrated religious “make an absolute gift of self to God in a self-forgetting love.”<sup>21</sup> When a woman takes religious vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, she agrees “to end [her] own life in order to make room for God’s life.”<sup>22</sup> This very emphasis on self-gift is at the heart of the feminine desire to give of herself and receive love in return. Though this feminine desire for union can go astray when it is directed towards lower things, the woman cannot go awry when it is fulfilled entirely in God. The nun is not alone in her struggle. Like the earthly bride, she has means of sanctifying grace offered to her through a sacrament: “in place of the marriage sacrament,

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<sup>20</sup> Stein, “Mission of the Catholic Academic Woman,” in *Essays*, 268

<sup>21</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” in *Essays*, 53

<sup>22</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” in *Essays*, 53

the liturgy of *virginal consecration* is granted as a particular means of grace for the strengthening of her vocation.”<sup>23</sup>

From a secular view, the religious life makes no sense. To the secular, it is a pity that beautiful, talented, promising young women (such as Stein was) could choose to live in a cloister. It seems so terribly restricting. However, the reality is that women who exercise spiritual maternity through the religious life enter into a larger family, not a smaller one. Since these spouses of Christ are united with God so deeply, they also share in His fruitfulness. Just as a physical mother gives birth through physical union, a consecrated religious exercises her spiritual maternity through her union with God. He welcomes her as his Bride and gives her spiritual children to nurture through her prayers and sacrifices.

For religious sisters, this takes several concrete forms. To name a few, Stein lists as integral to the religious life “quiet immersion in divine truth, solemn praises of God, propagation of the faith, works of mercy, intercession, and vicarious reparation.”<sup>24</sup> Stein marks a clear delineation between the business of religious sisters and mere social work. For her, the crucible of this difference is summed up as follows: “*’opera mea regi---*all that I do is done for the King.”<sup>25</sup> When the religious sister teaches or cares for the young and elderly, she does not do so for humanitarian motives or to create a utopia. Instead, she does so because she wants to bring souls to God’s kingdom. In addition, this care for others takes on a spiritual nature when it is subject to God. The nun has a love that:

bestows itself freely; mercifully, it bends down to everyone who is in need, healing the sick and awakening the dead to life, protecting, cherishing, nourishing, teaching, and

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<sup>23</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” in *Essays*, 122

<sup>24</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” in *Essays*, 52

<sup>25</sup> Stein, “The Spirituality of the Christian Woman,” *Essays*, 116

forming; it is a love which sorrows with the sorrowful and rejoices with the joyful; it serves each human being to attain the end destined for it by the Father.<sup>26</sup>

What distinguishes a nun from a secular teacher or social worker is her supernatural love. She does not just love because she believes in a better material future for those under her care; rather, she does so because she recognizes in each soul the “end destined for it by the Father” and wants to accompany this soul on that path.

In addition to the active apostolates of teaching and mentorship, nuns can exercise their spiritual maternity through hidden prayer and sacrifice. As evidenced by her own life and desire to offer herself as a sacrifice for the conversion of the Jewish people, Stein believed that prayer for others had real impact in the economy of salvation.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, she claims that these hidden works of charity and intercessory prayers are “decidedly in keeping with the feminine nature.”<sup>28</sup> There are several possible reasons for this. Firstly, Stein has already affirmed that the hallmark of femininity is the ability to maintain an interior quietness. Consistent with this is the idea that it is a distinctly feminine activity to, through her hidden and interior life, pray for others’ salvation. Nuns practice a feminine heroism in their contemplation and sacrifices which are offered for the salvation of the world. This contemplation is what Stein calls a “silent apostolate.”<sup>29</sup> When a contemplative nun prays matins in a dark chapel or keeps her silent contemplation in her cell, she is engaging in an apostolate which gives meaning to other’s active evangelization.

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<sup>26</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” *Essays*, 53

<sup>27</sup> Herbstrith, *Edith Stein*, 169

<sup>28</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” *Essays*, 52

<sup>29</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions,” *Essays*, 53

Essentially, through their contemplation and prayer, even cloistered nuns—with no contact with the outside world—can bring souls to Christ. They may never meet these souls on earth, but the fact remains that their efforts are not fruitless.

To return to the question of whether consecrated virginity is a legitimate feminine vocation, the answer for Stein is a resounding “yes.” Though she holds physical motherhood and spousal love in high esteem, she holds in even higher regard those women who freely choose to dedicate themselves to God and His service. They are not figures for pity, but true mothers. When consecrated virgins renounce physical marriages and children, they are not left desolate, since God is the ultimate provider and will not be outdone in generosity. Instead, they enter into a greater family through their union with Christ and gain opportunities to care for others as children of God. Since their hearts are free from earthly attachments, they have greater freedom to love and serve God exclusively as their Bridegroom.

*The Blessed Virgin as the Model of Spiritual Motherhood:*

Again, Stein upholds the Blessed Virgin Mary as the ideal of the feminine vocation. Since she remained a virgin yet mother, Mary can offer a specific example for women who exercise spiritual maternity exclusively. Stein asserts that “were each woman an image of the Mother of God, a *Spouse of Christ*, an apostle of the divine Heart, then each would fulfill her feminine vocation no matter what conditions she lived in.”<sup>30</sup> She is the model through her choice of perpetual virginity (as is the Catholic view), her complete fiat to God, and her now exalted position as the spiritual mother of all Christians.

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<sup>30</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Woman’s Professions,” 54

The Blessed Virgin is, foremost, a model for all virgins through her *fiat* to God's will. She is the model of virginity which is consecrated to God and for the sake of His kingdom. Through her choice to remain a virgin, she became the "prototype of the *Spouse of Christ*" which is the "highest form of life."<sup>31</sup> Though only a young girl, Mary opened herself to the Will of God through her exclamation of trust and submission to God's Will when the Angel Gabriel asked her permission to become the Mother of God.<sup>32</sup> Along with the joy of this proclamation, Mary also experienced some senses of alienation because of it. One of these alienations was the fact that, by choosing virginity, Mary goes against the traditional role expected for her. For God's sake, she "alienated herself from what was held up as woman's vocation by the tradition of her people."<sup>33</sup> However, Mary's assent to the Angel Gabriel's request is not a sterile, reluctant one. She freely chooses this mission, despite its manifold trials, and rejoices in it. Just like the single woman in the world or the religious sister, she derives her ultimate joy from conforming herself with the will of God.

In Mary, consecrated virginity in particular finds its model and fulfillment. The "feminine being" finds its "most perfect image" in the Blessed Virgin, who has standing by her side consecrated virgins who are ready to fulfill the work of God. Mary has a heart of steel, as she accompanied her Son throughout His life and even to His cross. Just as Mary accompanied Christ throughout all of His life, so is the spiritual mother called to walk with her spiritual Bridegroom.

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<sup>31</sup> Stein, "Mission of the Catholic Academic Woman," in *Essays*, 267

<sup>32</sup> Alexandra Cathey, "Edith Stein on the Highest Expression of the Feminine Genius," *Studia Gilsoniana*, Vol. 8, no. 2, 2019, 481

<sup>33</sup> Stein, "Problems of Women's Education," in *Essays*, 200

In Catholicism, one of Mary's many epithets is "Mother of all Christians." Scripturally, she was given this excellent title at her Son's crucifixion, when He turned to St. John and said, "'Behold your mother!'"<sup>34</sup> Yet, this maternity did not extend only to St. John; rather, in that moment she became the Mother of all Christians, then and future. For Stein, Mary is not a dead, ineffectual woman without influence over Christians' lives. She continues to be the one who intercedes for Christians. In her role as an intercessor to her Son, Mary is the prototype of spiritual mothers. Women who practice spiritual maternity exclusively spend most of their maternal energies in praying for others. As is especially the case with cloistered nuns, prayer and sacrifices are the avenues by which they nurture other souls to spiritual maturity. Though Mary spoke few words in the Gospels, she was a constant presence, following faithfully in the footsteps of her Son and taking care of every little concern.

*Conclusion:*

In this chapter, I have examined the question for whether spiritual maternity is a legitimate expression of the feminine vocation. While some may object that spiritual maternity is a mere consolation prize or unnatural vocation, Stein makes two claims. Firstly, she affirms that spiritual maternity is in fact the ultimate vocation of every feminine soul in any state of life. Every woman is called to exercise her maternal instincts in the spiritual realm through a genuine love of God and of neighbor. As always, this is not the result of one's own willpower or strength; it is all the work of grace. Stein calls this emphasis a need for the "Eucharistic life."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> John 19: 27, Revised Standard Version

<sup>35</sup> Stein, "The Ethos of Women's Professions," in *Essays*, 57

Although spiritual maternity is certainly the vocation for every woman, some women are called to express it completely. They are called to renounce marriage and children to make greater room for God's love and the spiritual maternity which comes from that divine union. Such women, generally speaking, fall into the categories of consecrated virgins in the world and religious sisters. Both women can express their spiritual maternity through a number of ways, such as prayer, sacrifice, charitable works, or education. However, Stein considers the hidden works of prayer and sacrifice as the epitome of the feminine vocation. Through these hidden acts of love and through their bridal love for Christ, these Christian heroines can bring souls to God.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I have approached the question of “what does it mean to be a woman?” through the philosophy of Edith Stein. Stein takes an essentialist view of women, claiming that women’s and men’s souls are intrinsically different in a way that “goes deeper than social conditioning.”<sup>1</sup> For Stein, what separates men from women is not mere societal convention, but a difference in essences and souls. Generally speaking, Stein asserts that the masculine soul is prone to the active pursuit of knowledge, external goals, and conquering the world around him. However, along with these positive traits come certain vices to which the masculine soul is susceptible, such as lust, dedicating oneself too much to work, and aggression.

Conversely, the feminine soul has her own characteristics. On this matter, Stein makes a somewhat controversial claim, saying that the feminine vocation is oriented towards being a spouse and mother, whether spiritually or physically.<sup>2</sup> The healthy feminine soul is geared towards that which is concrete, personal, and whole. The feminine soul naturally interests herself in the inner and external lives of others, while this does not come so naturally to the masculine soul. However, much like the masculine soul, the feminine soul is prone to her own vices, such as an overinvolvement in others’ lives and sensuality. To add some concrete elements to this discussion, Stein outlines several specific strengths and concurrent weaknesses of the feminine soul. The strengths, or virtues, are expansiveness, quietness, warmth, clarity, and self-control.<sup>3</sup> Throughout her

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Haney. “Edith Stein: Woman and Essence.” *Feminist Phenomenology*, Vol. 40, 2000, 214

<sup>2</sup> Stein, “The Ethos of Women’s Professions.” In *Essays*, 45

<sup>3</sup> Stein, “Fundamental Principles of Women’s Education.” In *Essays*, 132-133

discussion of these virtues, Stein distinguishes between true expressions of these virtues and their perversions, which include curiosity for its own sake and an overinvolvement in others' lives.

One of the interesting characteristics of the feminine *gestalt* (whole, unity of the individual parts) is woman's emotional life. Stein believes that women's emotional lives are naturally more active than men's, thus leading to woman's more empathetic approach to life. Stein refutes misogynistic claims that woman's active emotional life is a sign of weakness. Instead, she says that "The strength of woman lies in the emotional life... for the soul perceives its own being in the stirrings of the emotions."<sup>4</sup> Through emotion, the woman can perceive in a unique way the personal lives of others and thus practice empathy.

Operating with the Thomistic view of the body-soul union, Stein believes that the physical differences between men and women shows the inward reality of men's and women's souls. Though both men and women have a deep body-soul union, women feel it more immediately.<sup>5</sup> According to Stein, the female body's structure for reproduction has an impact on the woman's psyche, and vice versa. The female body's structure to carry and sustain new life is a physical illustration and manifestation of woman's maternal soul.<sup>6</sup> This remains true of the feminine body-soul union, even if a woman never gives birth to physical children because she chooses celibacy or is infertile.

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<sup>4</sup> Stein, "Spirituality of the Christian Woman." In *Essays*, 96

<sup>5</sup> Stein, "Spirituality of the Christian Woman." In *Essays*, 95

<sup>6</sup> Leggett, "Edith Stein: Her Life, Times,..." 29

*Spiritual Maternity: Crown Jewel of Feminine Vocation*

This leads us to Stein’s conception and portrayal of spiritual maternity as the height of the feminine vocation, which is the capstone of this thesis. Spiritual maternity is, in its essence, an expression of the specific feminine virtues and feminine vocation towards spousal love and motherhood. While Stein affirms that motherhood and spousal connection are indeed the feminine vocation, she also recognizes that not every woman gets married or has children. Whether through free choice of celibacy or external circumstances, many women never experience physical marriage and children. In these cases, Stein does not look upon these women with pity or contempt. Rather, she affirms that “in place of the marriage bond, there is offered the most intimate, personal communion with the Savior, the development of all faculties in His service, and spiritual maternity—i.e. the winning of souls and their formation for God.”<sup>7</sup>

Every woman is called to express this spiritual maternity to the degree that her state in life allows. Even if a woman is married with several children, she is still called to care for her children’s spiritual wellbeing (first and foremost) and to extend this care to those with whom she comes into contact. However, the mother is restricted just by virtue of her responsibilities and ties to her biological family. In contrast to what Stein calls the natural destiny of woman (i.e. physical marriage and motherhood), some women are called to exercise the supernatural vocation (spiritual maternity) exclusively.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman.” In *Essays*, 101

<sup>8</sup> Stein, “Spirituality of the Christian Woman.” In *Essays*, 101

Women who choose such an exalted vocation generally fall under two camps: celibate women living in the world and religious sisters. One of the primary questions Stein seeks to answer is whether the religious vocation could be considered distinctly feminine. Stein asserts that it is. When a single woman or religious sister chooses virginity for the sake of the kingdom and to make room for God's divine love in her heart, she does not lose the feminine nature. Rather, it is perfected. The spiritual mother does not lose any of her maternal nature by never giving birth to physical children. She is not something to be pitied, but a spiritual warrior.

Of course, this spiritual maternity is not the result of mere willpower. It is the result of a life perfected through divine grace. Only through a "Eucharist life" can the spiritual mother be efficacious in her vocation; every day, continuously, she must surrender herself to the divine will.<sup>9</sup> Just as a physical mother gives birth because of a union with a man, the spiritual mother gives birth through union with God through prayer and the Sacraments. From this divine life, the spiritual mother can fulfill her mission of "the winning of souls and their formation for God."<sup>10</sup> Through the light and joy which she emanates as a true *Sponsa Christi*, she can bring souls to herself and then bring them to the foot of the Cross.<sup>11</sup>

*Mary as the Model for Womanhood:*

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<sup>9</sup> Stein, "The Ethos of Women's Professions." In *Essays*, 57

<sup>10</sup> Stein, "Spirituality of the Christian Woman." In *Essays*, 101

<sup>11</sup> Stein, "Problems of Women's Education." In *Essays*, 200

The Blessed Virgin Mary held a special place in Edith Stein's heart, and an equally important one in her philosophy of womanhood. Stein upholds the Blessed Virgin Mary as the height of the feminine vocation.<sup>12</sup> Not only did she fulfill the role as perfect physical mother (through her birth and raising of the Son of God), but she also retained her virginity. Thus, she fulfilled the coveted role of the virgin-mother.<sup>13</sup>

Mary fulfills both expressions of maternity (i.e. physical and maternal), but especially spiritual maternity. In Mary, "as Mother of God and mother of all God's children . . . maternity itself is glorified through her."<sup>14</sup> Through giving physical birth to her Son and raising him to maturity, Mary offers an example and a place for connection with physical mothers. Mary knows what it is to love with an intense, uniquely maternal love and to watch her Son suffer. As the Mother of all Christians, she intercedes for them and, much like a spiritual mother, leads souls to Christ.

Indeed, for Stein and for all Catholic women, the Blessed Virgin is not an ancient, ineffectual, pious figure. Rather, "women should imitate Mary and trust that she truly does concern herself with our lives and our relationships, in the good times and the bad."<sup>15</sup> As Stein witnessed in her own life, the Blessed Virgin can teach women how to fulfill the feminine vocation because she is "the pure image of feminine nature."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cathey, "Edith Stein on the Height of the Feminine Genius," 481

<sup>13</sup> Stein, "Problems of Women's Education." In *Essays*, 203

<sup>14</sup> Stein, "Spirituality of the Christian Woman." In *Essays*, 119

<sup>15</sup> Cathey, "Edith Stein on the Height of the Feminine Genius," 485

<sup>16</sup> Stein, "Spirituality of the Christian Woman," in *Essays*, 119

Therefore, she can take women by the hand in their journey towards Heaven, where they will be completely united with their Christ, their Bridegroom.

*Implications of These Conclusions:*

One of my motivations for writing this thesis was a personal desire to gain a satisfactory answer to the question of what femininity is. I wanted to understand what it meant to be a woman in her essence. Everywhere I turned, I seemed to gain extreme answers in either direction. Some would assert that women are exactly the same as men, that there is nothing inherently different between them. On the other side of the spectrum lay the opinions that women are not only extremely different, but even lesser than, men. From my own experience and intuition, I knew neither of these solutions were correct. However, Edith Stein offered a balanced worldview on the woman question, one which asserted the unique dignity and manifold talents of women, while holding fast to Catholic worldview.

In a world divided on the question of womanhood, Stein offers a place of intellectual and spiritual refuge. She recognizes the inherent differences between men and women—between their souls, bodies, and vocations. Stein affirms the reality of the feminine vocation towards motherhood and the maternal instincts which women have. In fact, she makes the now-controversial claim that the feminine vocation is defined by this very desire to be a spouse and mother. Yet, she tempers this with the consideration that women can exercise this vocation either physically or spiritually. Whether a woman gives birth to many children, works as a single professional, or lives a hidden life as a cloistered nun, she is called to exercise maternity.

Ultimately, Stein offers a compelling account and defense of the feminine vocation towards maternity, especially spiritual maternity. Wherever a woman finds herself, she is called to imitate the Blessed Virgin and to offer herself and her works for the sake of the Kingdom.

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