The Culture of Life and the New Maternity

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Abstract: Within the divergent streams of late-modern and largely Western feminism, the experience and ethos (and ethics) of motherhood and the significance of the “maternal body” have been hotly contested and problematic. What might be called “the maternal problematic” is also evident in the highly flammable touchpoints between Catholic magisterial teaching and secular feminism—especially in relation to women’s work, vocation and perhaps most contentiously, in relation to women’s fertility and pregnancy. This article mines Pope Saint John Paul II’s major encyclical letter of 1995, Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life) and his intervention into this charged milieu. The Encyclical is rightly viewed as an important exegesis and expansion on the traditional Catholic magisterial teaching upon the ethics of the “sanctity of life”. This article aims to demonstrate that the Encyclical also attempts a fresh line of departure, by weaving into the ethical discussion the importance of “the maternal” as a distinctive interpersonal experience and awareness. This enriches the pastoral and ethical voice of the Church’s witness to human dignity and human life. The Encyclical contains the seeds of what this article will call “a new maternity”, a type of meta-ethos, integral to the development of a “new feminism” which is also aligned and pivotal to the formation of “a culture of life”. The article will suggest that far from presenting a reductive, oppressive or constructivist view of women and maternity, Evangelium Vitae, when read in synthesis with the Polish Pope’s wider ressourcement of “theological anthropology,” explores three original themes: (a) the importance of maternal “creational contemplation” in women as a force for a humane societal ethos; (b) the invitational dramas of the maternal in understanding the Catholic ethos surrounding procreation; (c) the personal solidarity and iconic role of the Virgin Mary’s maternity in all expressions of women’s maternal vocation whether physical, existential and/or mystical.

Keywords: culture of life; maternity; mariology; theological anthropology; John Paul II

1. Introduction

In 1995, Pope (Saint) John Paul II, promulgated a weighty four-part encyclical\(^1\) Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life) in which he synthesized and re-articulated major threads of Catholic moral teaching and aspects of theological jurisprudence and cultural analysis, all underwritten by his own distinctive theological anthropology.\(^2\) In the final and programmatic section of the document, the Polish Pontiff insisted that it is incumbent upon women in a “unique and decisive” way to work in solidarity with each other to explore, articulate and promote “a new feminism” directed at promoting an authentic life-affirming human dignity and relationship.\(^3\)

This article will explore Evangelium Vitae’s provocative call for the development of a “new feminism” in which the energies and insights of women play a central role. The lineaments of

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\(^1\) A solemn teaching “letter” promulgated by the Pope to the whole Church and to wider audiences.

\(^2\) (John Paul 1995a, Evangelium Vitae (The Gospel of Life)).

\(^3\) Ibid., n. 99.
this “new” feminism will be discussed as a key to building an authentically humane “bioethics” that speaks from and to the distinctive experiential of women’s embodied orientation, bearing and nurturing the lives of others. The document also recognizes that women need, like men, authentic “inter-communion”, personal moral liberation and engraved redemption fulfilled by encounter with Christ. While “maternity” may seem to form a minor theme in the Encyclical, passed over because it is introduced late into the document—or it may appear to be a fairly conventional “meme”—Pope John Paul II rescores the discussion of embodied experience and the meaning of “maternal bodies” with original and authoritative weight. *Evangelium Vitae*’s “new maternity” deserves greater textual attention and exploration, within the development of “new feminism”, since it draws our attention to a richly synthesized existential, scriptural and mystical typology, the sources of which run deeper than mere cultural conformity, male-bias or “biological” reductionism.

It is also essential to read the considerable theological development in the highlighted Encyclical, within the wider corpus of Pope John Paul II’s thoughts. It is important to be mindful of rocky terrain which the topic of maternity inhabits within post-Christian society. Maternity as an experience, desire and ideal, is often a problematic and deeply conflict-ridden and fraught issue for women, as are expectations raised about autonomy and “ownership” of “selves” and bodies. This is true for Christians and as well women who view themselves as secular feminist theorists and cultural influencers. We will traverse some of this landscape briefly before considering the Pope’s insistence on a “new” approach and appreciation of maternity.

The feminist philosopher, Fanny Söderbäck identifies well a major fracture running across the experiences and the jagged theoretical shards and “waves” within modern feminism when she writes in understatement, “The state of the maternal has been disputed among feminists for quite some time.” In the same paper, Söderbäck defends the Bulgarian-French psycho-analyst and literary philosopher Julia Kristeva’s emphasis upon the poetic and psychic primacy of maternal experience and a primal maternal “semiotics.” In this, Kristeva’s work, opens upon “a second act” or with “second thoughts” for feminist conversation. While Kristeva is well known for dissociating herself from feminist “politics” (being called an “anti-feminist feminist”) her intriguing contributions on the psychic and embodied drama of “the maternal” and motherhood are difficult for feminism to dismiss. Furthermore, Kristeva’s Romanian and Orthodox roots leave her with a literacy in the “iconic” and the “affective/embodied” which provide a type of descent with the Polish Pope’s Eastern/Western sensibilities.

Kristeva has been charged with biological reductionism, a preserver of the “heterosexual matrix” and naturalism by both liberal and post-structuralist feminists such as Judith Butler and others. Indeed, the experience of maternity and its sources, meaning and consequences, which Kristeva explores, strike at the wound underlying the conflicting anthropologies from which secular and

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4 The narrative of historical “waves” of feminism from the early 1900s to the present, attempts to describe theoretical and political factors which influence the 1st–4th waves of feminism. This account is disputed, imprecise but often used as a “working handle” See, for example (Chamberlain 2017).

5 Söderbäck (2010).

6 Julia Kristeva (b. 1941-) is a complex figure, she was born in Bulgaria the daughter of a Bulgarian Orthodox family under Communist rule. In her youth she embraced Maoism and this evolved into structuralist and linguistic studies which placed her at the heart of Parisian radicality in the mid-1960s. Since then, she has worked as a psychoanalyst, novelist and as a public intellectual. Some of her ideas spark off resonances (but not agreement) with themes pursued in recent Catholic reflection. The study of signs. Kristeva’s work on semiotics proposes a pre-linguistic intentional expression arising from passions, eros and the body.

7 Other French women feminists in this “recuperative” trend are French–Belgian post-Lacanian analyst Luce Irigaray (1930–) and Algerian–French Hélène Cixous (1937–). Along with Kristeva, they refer to “sexual difference” not simply “gender assignment” or construction.

8 C.f. Schippers (2011) provides an interesting insight into this element of Kristeva’s “chiasmic” cultural thought (pp. 167–69).

9 Söderbäck offers a complex illustration of what she believes is Butler’s misreading of Kristeva and notes: “What Kristeva does call for, however, is a more integrated and balanced relationship between the two modalities of language: maternal and paternal, semiotic and symbolic. The interdependence between the two is, for her, a fact.” This suggests a critical (she might say playful) but definite recognition of the difference and inter-relationality, at least at the level of primordial language if not in embodied existence between the masculine and feminine.

10 Soberbeck 2010.
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post-Christian “feminisms” proceed. Theologian Margaret Harper McCarthy observes that these theoretical and political movements often revolve around different interactions with narratives (or perhaps theologies) about the human body: “there are those who make little of the body (liberal feminism, existential feminism, and radical feminism) and those who want to make much of it (postmodern feminism).”

Feminist writer, Emily Jeremiah, acknowledges the history of disenchantment and hostility towards maternity within feminist debate, and the impasse and contradictions which exist within the lives and thoughts of feminists themselves.

Feminists have demanded and gained new attention for the previously ignored problems of motherhood, but they have not arrived at consensus about how to redefine the concept or adjust the system. Many (but by no means all) women wish to refuse motherhood on the old terms without abandoning either the heavy responsibilities or the intense pleasures of bearing and raising children . . .

Kristeva expresses a concern that developing political strategies, by which to reclaim the moral, political and sexual agency for women, too often involves a radical devaluing of meaning in “the maternal” experience and its relational syntax. This can give rise to a presumption (and even a valorisation) of the de-mothered and self-constructed individual. Her analytic practice and literary studies provide Kristeva with evidence that what is conceived in academia and policy-rooms, trickles across into the imaginations, cultures and relationships of actual women. Women are severed from the solidarity of shared “maternal time” with each other in the present and from that of previous generations. They become radically cut off from the symbolic “voice” of their own somatic and psychic experience and thereby from an entrée to deeper ethical opportunity and response. These concerns, and her identification to her own life’s work as a “symbolic motherhood”, mark some parallels with Pope John Paul II’s intricate philosophical, theological and dramatic exegesis of “the body” and his ethos of inter-personal “gift”.

A different strand in modern-feminist cultures has been drawn to a theoretical and political repudiation of the organic language of motherhood and is strongly influenced by the prolific (and multi-layered) literary, political and philosophical output of the French existentialist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). Beauvoir’s substantial sociological and phenomenological history of “becoming” a woman, The Second Sex, became a charter for second wave feminism, and it documents, in sometimes visceral detail, the ways in which a woman’s biology of “maternity” threatens the authentic freedom of women. In this, the bodies of women (and often their aspirations for happiness) collude with the “mythologies” that males and masculinist institutions have spun about them. Heterosexual interactions are, for Beauvoir, dogged by the dichotomy between the human quest for sexual pleasure, personal autonomy (and moral adventure) so often granted to males but traditionally tied to a “biological destiny” and the weight of mothering for women and girls. Family and societal institutions are pervasively restrictive of female self-expression and freedom but so too is the relentless nature of women’s bodies: “It is against nature, and this ultimately—not just that pernicious socialization—that the woman resists and must resist.”

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11 So fractured are the boundaries about different “feminisms” that classification can only be general. (McCarthy 2014).
12 (Jeremiah 2006).
13 (Jeremiah 2006) citing Elaine Tuttle Hansen (Hansen 1997). It is telling that the approach to motherhood is framed as either “refusal” or its opposite. p. 22.
14 (Schippers 2011, pp. 92–93).
15 (Jeremiah 2006, p. 26).
16 (De Beauvoir[1949] 2012).
17 (De Beauvoir[1949] 2012).
18 (McCarthy 2014, p. 3). Here McCarthy is describing the “stalemate” in Beauvoir’s thought which opposes body (nature) and person (freedom).
Women's wombs, and even the human ova, are in Beauvoir almost emblematic of societies' reductive treatment of women as vulnerable, private, immanent and "embarrassingly passive".\textsuperscript{19} Men's bodies, by contrast, are vehicles for their self-expression, desire and risk-taking. Beauvoir's ethical and political concern for the recognition and development of women's agency, education, public participation and responsibility is in a real sense shared by Pope John Paul II in his insistence that the oppression of women and the denial of their dignity and opportunity is a betrayal of the Creator's "original justice". This betrayal leads to personal and political alienation rather than a human dignity in distinction yet reciprocity.\textsuperscript{20} The concentration upon "freedom of choice", which is the impoverished grandchild of existentialist freedom, has ironically contributed to the alienation and commodification of female bodies and women's self-image, female fertility and motherhood.\textsuperscript{21} In this decade, virtualised and globalised markets proliferate, which sell or rent out the lives and living bodies of women, as sites for reproductive or sexual services. Sometimes these markets utilize the slogans of women's choice in order to recruit support. This allows the wealthy or privileged to trade women as mothers (through surrogacy and ova sales) or as child/women for sexual consumption, remotely and conveniently othered and optionally gendered.\textsuperscript{22}

Julia Kristeva locates two extreme poles that arise in this commodified climate with its "calculating kind of consciousness".\textsuperscript{23} The psyche and cultures of modern women become infected by an: "Omnipotence and madness of mothers … (whose) desire for maternity at any cost goes hand in hand with the denial of pregnancy and the denial of maternity up to the crimes of infanticide … "\textsuperscript{24}

Kristeva is an agnostic anti-totalitarian humanist and is generally hostile to reactionary cultures which she thinks "freeze" the maternal into over-spiritualised, paternalistically controlled and a-temporal idealisations (or ideologies) of women or which lock iconic figures such as the Virgin Mary into a remote "eternity". Nonetheless, with her interest in the intuitive and lyrical in language and its symbolism, Kristeva concedes that sacramental Christianity is the "the most refined symbolic construct in which femininity [. . . ] is focused on Maternality."\textsuperscript{25}

It is interesting that in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI invited Julia Kristeva, the unbeliever, to address the assembled interfaith discussion on world peace, with her thoughts about a re-founded humanism for the 21\textsuperscript{st} century.\textsuperscript{26} In her address, she argued that humanism, as a Western movement, needed to be conscious rather than hostile to the transcendent so that it might be considered "beyond" itself. She titled Pope John Paul II "an apostle of human rights" who she said so vigorously exhorted the "Do not be afraid!" that he encouraged all people to oppose inhumanity and totalitarianism and to "dare humanism".\textsuperscript{27} Kristeva insisted that "Humanism is a feminism"\textsuperscript{28} but a feminism which authentically liberates the alterity and erotics of the "maternal" in women.\textsuperscript{29} In her Assisi address,
Kristeva stated that Western secularism flattens the “multiverse” of maternal dramatics and denies its “enigma”, especially when read through the lens of the predominate economic and social constructions: “the modern secularised state is the only civilisation that does not have a reflection about the unique relationship between the mother and child.”

It is also interesting that in the light of Pope Benedict’s invitation, that both he and Kristeva identify the secularising, global and “uncontrollable technological and financial” ontology undermining the cultural, ecological and existential grasp of the human (or humanum). Pope Benedict XVI sees a type of despair and self-loathing that strikes at the core of our hope for the future (including the hope of children) within what remains of post-modern consumerism that is being fed in part, by a betrayal and narrowing within Christianity of its own cosmological, anthropological and soteriological revelation so that it is itself converted to these atomising forces:

How could the idea have developed that Jesus’s message is narrowly individualistic and aimed only at each person singly? How did we arrive at this interpretation of the “salvation of the soul” as a flight from responsibility for the whole … how did we come to conceive the Christian project as a selfish search for salvation which rejects the idea of serving others?

For Kristeva, the life-world created by these forces tends to exile “motherhood” further, and she argues for a humanism re-founded upon the “more” and residual “sacred” offered by the primordial maternal meaning within women’s experiences.

Later, reflecting upon her Assisi speech, Julia Kristeva adds to her thoughts a humanist pastoral agenda: “In order that the desires of men and women may be rekindled, Humanism teaches us to take care of them. The loving care for each other, the care of the earth, the young, the sick, the disabled, the elderly dependents, constitute inner experiences that create new proximities and surprising solidarity.”

There is no further space here to explore Kristeva’s intriguing reflections about “feminine genius”, or “inner experiences” or her ideas about care-based ethos or eros. Her observations about the “dance” of motherhood, with its movement from a necessary inwardness and recognition of desire, towards a transformation and sublimation (“de-passioning”) of the raw maternal passions, so that the growing infant may find “space” for thought and development have great depth.

Kristeva’s explorations of this interpersonal transcendence are worthy of further interaction with other creative work in contemporary theological and sacramental anthropology.

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30 On the unresolved narcissism and atomism of secular culture she adds: “On the contrary, by turning all our attention on the biological and social aspects of motherhood as well as on sexual freedom and equality, we have become the first civilization which lacks a discourse on the complexity of motherhood.” (Kristeva 2013).

31 Pope Benedict offers his own distinctive evaluations of the cultures of death and life/hope and despair which interact with his predecessor’s thought as discussed below. For more on Benedict’s profound opposition to consumerised, static or individualised view of the person and by corollary, Catholic faith, see Antonio Lopez who observes: “In living out hope and the desires born from certainty of the future (in the) definitive company of Christ, it is not uncommon to set up one’s own idea of what the fulfillment of those desires might look like, instead of keeping the space open for what Christ himself determines. Because one’s own desires carry so much weight, it is also common to cherish one’s own images of their fulfillment above Christ’s presence (Mk 8:33; Mt 26:14–16)” (López 2008).

32 (Pope Benedict XVI 2007, Spe Salve (Saved in Hope), no. 16).

33 It is very clear that Kristeva is not ready to embrace Christian reliance (connection or participation) but she writes: “Between biology and sense, attachment and expulsion, love and hate, violent influence and generous transmission, maternal reliance is a surprising and necessary version of ethics we might call a heretic.” She thinks that maternal passion understood as “reliance” is perhaps the only passion that is not virtual and subject to spectacular manipulation. “Maternal Eroticism” (Kristeva 2013, p. 112 ff).

34 (Kristeva 2013). Some of these ideas have a surprising resonance with Pope John Paul II’s “ethos of care” in Evangelium Vitae discussed below.

35 These terms are discussed throughout this article.

36 Coming to mind here is the important work on sacramentality by Reformed theologian, Hans Boersma, and the work on a concrete enfolded “mysterion” in (Sweeney 2018), in which Sweeney writes on the primordiality of analogy “… while a mother’s smile is not grace, it is nevertheless its important preamble and backdrop within Being.” (p. 229).
The existential and cultural problems raised by many post-Christian feminists, particularly from those who defend the significance of bodily/personal substantiality and “difference”, may provide clear-eyed insights for Christian theology. When these are considered in interaction with authentic Christian “sources of faith”, the prescience of these contributions for Christian women (and Christian men and institutions) is striking. They provide an unmasking of the fault lines of “progress” “modernity” and “freedom” which lie, often unnoticed, beneath the contemporary Christian experience of relationships, ethical decision-making, culture and worship. There are some fragile points of solidarity between Catholic ethics and theology.37

2. Cultural and Philosophical Divergences

Despite some promising lines of agreement, there remain at least three broad areas that impinge upon the “experience” and attitude to maternity which alienate feminists of many stripes from orthodox Christians (and from those in broadly theistic cultures) and vice versa. Furthermore, these key fault lines represent far greater and intractable fissures than broad religious affiliation would indicate.39

These areas of dispute interplay with each other:

(a) The dignity and value of maternal work within the familial and domestic sphere and the way this participates with work in other settings;40
(b) The practical ethics (and theology) of women’s fertility and pregnancy along with the dignity of unborn human life, and the importance to motherhood of (just and meaningful) spousal and familial relationship;
(c) The significance of the differences between male and female embodiment and experience in vocational opportunities both in the wider society and within the Church.

For decades there has been a type of feminist hegemony, which in addition to sidelining any “ontology” of motherhood within nuptiality, forecloses and occludes possible symposium in the three areas mentioned above. For example, the American sociologist Kelsy Krestner discovered in her study of movements and counter-movements that the heated and dogmatic unexceptionalism of the abortion “rights” position came relatively late but forcefully to the platform of the 20th century feminist movement. She notes, “support for abortion rights became settled doctrine within the feminist movement, dissenting organizations faced difficult choices about conforming to the new consensus or being pressed out of the movement’s boundaries.”41

Susan Stabile, in discussing the divergence between Catholic feminism and secular feminist legal theory, locates the roots of the problem in deeper differences over personal freedom, the striving for authenticity, the authority and nature of truth (especially that inspired by canonical Revelation) and the meaning of sexuality and the family. She writes that traditional Christianity rests on a working philosophical and theological conviction that: “We are born into relationship, bound to each other in covenant, not in contract.”43

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37 Tracey Rowland provides an insightful overview of some of these “fragile” meeting points: (Rowland 2015).
38 Be they liberal, post-structural or eco-feminists. It is therefore legitimate to speak of “feminisms” rather than a unilateral feminism.
39 Pew Research polls and dinner conversations reveal how far the Trinitarian Christian and traditional communitarian roots of sexual anthropology have been eclipsed among many, if not a majority of the baptised. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese points out, many of the apparently progressive Catholic feminist theologians are themselves firmly on the secular feminist arm of these disagreements. Their demands begin with the sexual liberation of women, grounded in the right to abortion, and extend to women’s ordination to the priesthood, in (Fox-Genovese 2004, p. 300).
40 This is evident in the idioms of the day. Women who work as full-time carers and managers of “the home” often say in conversation that they “stay at home” or “don’t work”. Labour in the home is often completely ignored in terms of communal economic renumeration and “job” recognition.
41 (Kretschmer 2014, p. 894).
42 She seems to mean here Catholic feminism, which is “pro-woman” and also largely in agreement with the mainlines of Catholic sacramental ontology and anthropology.
43 (Stabile 2006, p. 439).
After researching women confronted by unplanned or difficult pregnancy, the Eastern Orthodox writer, Frederica Matthews-Green, concluded that once the issue of autonomy and “freedom of choice” is interrogated honestly, the “enigma” and ambiguity of maternal passion, as Kristeva calls it, become evident. Matthews-Green notes that decisions about the “fate” of the pregnancy are not staked on a pristine philosophical insight, but upon questions of existential and social “survival”. Abortion is often chosen because it seems to be the least self-annihilating trade-off when balanced against familial demands, workplace pressures, reputation or in the face of a problematic (or non-existent) relationship with a male partner.44 Early in her research, Matthews-Green captured this in a memorable way: “No woman wants an abortion as she wants an ice-cream cone or a Porsche. She wants an abortion as an animal, caught in a trap, wants to gnaw off its leg.”45

The anguish over this situation, and the pressure and promise of being able to safely “un-mother” oneself, leads many people, especially feminists, to consider the status of the unborn to be at best secondary but always overshadowed by a woman’s right to self-determination. In this view, abortion becomes a necessary (though many admit an unlovely) “women’s health” solution.46 Despite what has become the routinisation of medically or chemically induced abortion, there are many who would argue that the depth of the “event” of maternity and the relational ethics it provokes are not so easily annulled or silenced.47 Dissident “feminist” voices have attempted to point to the evidence within many women’s lives of the ambient lack of authentic freedom they have when faced with a troubling event of pregnancy. Some have pointed to the lack of knowledge about the body and fertility, the logic of atomising isolation, the weight of coercive expectation, the foreclosure of choice and the absence of mutuality in relation to prospective parenthood. They also point to the destructive aftermath of medically terminated pregnancies in the lives of women.48 These insights have scarcely been admitted, are still less welcomed by the medical and healthcare establishments, and they remain highly controversial within feminist debate.

The weighty disagreement over the ethics and expectations of maternity itself, as has been suggested, rests upon deeper and older philosophical influences, some of which are structurally grafted onto various forms of feminism. Historian Brooke Deely comments upon the troubled “inheritance” of many forms of contemporary feminisms:

> The problematic was an inheritance, not of the feminists’ making, in that feminism found itself entangled within philosophical dualistic presuppositions so construed (or misconstrued) as to privilege the male side of every dualism, such as male/female, public/private, culture/nature, active/passive, and rational/nonrational.49

These foundations have influenced not only secular discussions about maternal ethics, the social acceptance of motherhood and maternal economics but also lie at the heart of longstanding debates within Christianity. There is related loss in “sacramental imagination” and in the sacramentality of both sexuality and motherhood. Instead, Christian women and their families must contend with a

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44 This acceptance of abortion within certain difficult and highly privatised contexts rather than “abortion on demand” (regardless of the reason) represents a common and (fuzzy) ethical position within the population of many Western societies. This is documented and discussed in the Australian context by Selena Ewing and others in Common Ground? Seeking an Australian Consensus on Abortion and Sex Education (Fleming and Tonti-Filippini 2007).

45 (Matthews-Green 1995) citing an article she had published in Policy Review (Matthews-Green 1991, p. 9).

46 (De Cathelineau 2011, Op. cit., p. 179).

47 Unlike parenthood for most other creatures, or for the male humans we call “fathers”—“Only in being a mother does one experience in a full way the necessary link between biology and relation”—and this lasts for a woman’s whole life in a way that “engages and disturbs the most profound and inexpressible sentiments and desires,” so writes Italian journalist Eugenia Roccella in “The Dark Side of Maternity” (Roccella 2011, p. 179).

48 Some of these dissidents are younger, more articulate and more agile on the platforms of social media, a small number have defected from the “reproductive rights” industry itself. C.f. (Nash 2018), Australian medical ethics researcher, Selena Ewing (2007).

49 (Deeley 2004, “Introduction”, p. 2).
noisy market of utilitarian cultural and economic *logoi* and “liturgies” which have formed Churches and communities themselves.\(^{50}\)

Any attempt to hear the “primordial” voice of the maternal body and experience (as a “creational” ontology) on the one hand or to locate the obstacles to authentic freedom within mothering and maternal experience (in transcendence and ethics) remains fraught because, in many respects, maternity itself throws up what Kristeva calls the “multiverse” that includes in complex ways a self-shattering encounter with dependent developing other.\(^{51}\) Women are also alienated by their own moral and personal failures. The experience of both motherhood and the maternal is also overlaid by other disintegrating existential and cultural elements that are endemic to post-modern Western living. These include: the chronic sense of time-pressure, the disconnection from the tradition which allows access to the “inner life” or indeed recollection, a Hermeneutic of suspicion against an ethos of receptivity (is it a virtue or a vice?), the hyper-privatisation of moral discernment, an absolutizing and “fetishizing” of subjective will, “the loss of the distinction between bodily representation and bodily reality.”\(^{52}\) and an increasingly bureaucratic management of “appropriate” behaviour and the expression of “discourse.”

At this point, some features of a developing theological anthropology that heeds the subjectivity and context of maternal experience, while also noting the challenges and genealogies of post-modern existence, will be outlined. One important magisterial text will be examined with an eye to this theme, and read (as space permits) inter-textually, with the wider contributions of the Polish (and now canonised) philosopher/mystic, Pope John Paul II (1920–2005).

That document is of interest here, because it demonstrates that in 1995, the question of the personal and political aspirations of women was uppermost in his mind, and because it revisits the living Christian tradition, whose roots reach down into the rich soil of the iconic, symbolic and ethical “maternal memory”. This is certainly work in progress and a very broad and interdisciplinary task.\(^{53}\) Against this vast world of concern about maternity, both as lived and as an existential and ethical capacity, the Pope, in no small measure, has contributed to a current of “Catholic feminist” thought since he encouraged, with some vigour, women to take up key roles in recovering and articulating a personalist ethics and “theological anthropology” for the Church and for contemporary times.\(^{54}\)

3. Evangelium Vitae—Advent of a Maternal Ethos

The Encyclical Letter, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), published in 1995, includes an overt “call out” to women to engage with the important themes around which the Encyclical is written: social teaching, moral theology, bioethics, legal philosophy and the Pope’s many decades of philosophical and pastoral reflection upon the human person.\(^{55}\) Less overt, but underlying the entire document is a theology of “creational” anthropology, part of which includes culminating themes related to maternity and motherhood.

The Encyclical was published 17 years into John Paul II’s 27-year and epoch-making papacy. It appeared four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, after the attempt upon his life, and during a year

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\(^{50}\) This recognises the psychological and the theological intentionality not only of conscious thought, but of all that is implied by the “heart”—the less predictable, less deductive more evaluative and eruptive world of desires and the orientation of the heart to bodily habituation. This has received notable attention by writers retrieving the Augustinian tradition in theology.

\(^{51}\) One reason for this that maternity itself is so fraught and complex down through history, but particularly in contemporary secular contexts since it “…mixes desire and denial, life and death, feelings of omniscience and devastating inadequacies.” (Roccella 2011, p. 178).

\(^{52}\) Gerl-Falkovitz (2004) identifies a number of these elements in “Gender Difference: Critical Questions concerning Gender Studies” (p. 3).

\(^{53}\) Swiss–American scholar, Michele Schumacher, acknowledges the enormity of the task ahead in the exploration of these themes: (Schumacher 2004a).

\(^{54}\) Pope John Paul II opens his more systematic reflection upon the dignity of women (John Paul 1988, no. 1). Op. cit. using the Second Vatican II’s The Council’s Message to Women (December 8, 1965) “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved.” (John Paul 1995a, *Evangelium Vitae*, no.99).

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of many tours (to Africa, the United States, the Philippines and East Europe) and public appearances, including an address to the United Nations.

Pope John Paul II chose the Feast of the Annunciation for its release. It was large (48,000 words) and the eleventh (of fourteen) encyclical letters which he had worked on for over four years. It was primarily a definitive response to the Cardinals of the Church, who at a Consistory in 1991, requested “Petrine” clarification and reiteration of ethical issues touching upon “human life” and then upon the method and principles of moral theology in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. Of special interest here, is that throughout the document, the Pope weaves into his ethical expositions, deeper reflections about the inherent relationality and covenantal nature of human life and society.

What is of interest in this present reading, and not immediately obvious, is evidence that the document also contains a “matrix” (that is a maternal setting) for the ethics of life. Closer textual study shows that the words “mother” and “motherhood” appear in different contexts over 60 times throughout the text. Each time the word is used, it serves as a reminder of the drama of the divine partnership with women in the origins, nurture and attention to human life. In the Encyclical, the Latin words “maternita/s” are translated into English as “motherhood”, which in some places denotes the concrete procreational meaning but in others to women’s orientation to the “other” person within womanly identity and embodiment. John Paul II provides, as it were, a fresh “starting point” from which to consider the theological permeability of humanity and society by also paying attention to the personal receptivity and agency of women, both as procreational mothers but also as women who serve mothers and life, no less “maternally” but in other ways.

The Pope proposes a background vision of maternal responsibility which transcends (but often attends to) the questions of “individuality, agency and rational autonomy” posed by liberal feminism and those of post-modern feminists who dissolve the grounds of maternal experience in order to attend to questions of cultural and embodied play. The personal is linked to the ethical, the ethical to the political, the theological to the global ethos.

In looking back five years after the publication of Evangelium Vitae, Pope John Paul II observed: “I started from a vision of hope for humanity’s future.” In pursuit of this hope he identified (as it were) three transcendentals for an authentic life affirming society, a polis formed around a “culture of life”:

Life, Truth, Love: words full of stimulating suggestions of human efforts in the world . . . these are rooted in the message of Jesus Christ . . . . But they are also impressed on the hearts and yearning of every man and woman.

In the Encyclical, the Pope represents the Church’s natural law tradition and broadens the Aristotelian–Thomist framework of post-Enlightenment Catholic moral teaching by framing his text

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56 The Gospel of St Luke (1:29 ff) provides the narrative of “the Annunciation”, the encounter between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary in the form of a dialogue of invitation and response. It is at this encounter that Mary of Nazareth conceives virgally the Child Jesus. The date has a dedicatory significance for John Paul II who consecrated himself and his pontificate to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

57 That is papal in the Office of St. Peter the Apostle.

58 (John Paul 1995a, Evangelium Vitae, # 5). At the Extraordinary Consistory of Cardinals in Rome (4–7 April, 1991) “The Cardinals unanimously asked me to reaffirm with the authority of the Successor of Peter, the value of human life and its inviolability.”

59 (Coats 2006, pp. 47–48).

60 Michele Schumacher notes how existential feminists, as well as post-Christian feminists like Mary Daly, reject the idea of receptivity which reeks to them a “self” alienating, false passivity and “surrender” Cf. (Schumacher 2004b, pp. 27–28).

61 John Paul II, Pope, “Discourse” in (de Dios Vial Correa and Sgreccia 2001, p. 6).

62 Ibid.
within the evangelical notion of *The Gospel of Life* which is Christo-centric but also affectively engaged with a fully personal and reciprocal feminine “other”.

The Church knows that the *Gospel of life*, which she has received from her Lord, has a profound and persuasive echo in the heart of every person-believer and non-believer alike—because it marvelously fulfills all the heart’s expectations while infinitely surpassing them . . .

The Encyclical represents more than a purely scholarly task for John Paul II, since at the time, he faced concerted hostility from Western aid agencies, “reproductive rights” politicians and their media outlets for his unequivocal articulation of Catholic teaching on matters such as population control, reproductive technology, euthanasia and abortion. Many of his opponents claimed feminist credentials for their opposition to him and to Church delegations.

The Encyclical is wide ranging in both its scope and style. It broaches a wide ecumenism in its critique of the vested interests of some transnational agencies, along with their agenda of overt secularisation of the ethos of life, sexuality and family. The Pope’s appeal had surprising effect: significant Christians, Muslims and leaders in developing lands gave support to his defence of the “inherent and inviolable dignity of human life”. As well as clarifying the norms which underlie particular “life issues”, the Encyclical also examines the factors which impinge upon ethical response to these issues, including economics, theodicy, existential matters and the need for a “new” witness “for” life (including conversion of attitudes, approaches, and foundations) in Christian pastoral and practical living.

The document reveals the Pontiff’s deepening attention to complex politico-ethical issues that form and are contextualised not only by antipathetic ideology, but by the dominant cultural logos around which modern societies are formed.

The Pope proposes the concerted formation of a “culture of life” which recognises that human life is not an abstract notion—it is sited within each unique and irreplaceable instance of a human being. That being is “both/and” spiritual and embodied, knowing and erotic, political and ethical, drawn to sin and failing but at the same time *imago Dei* and *capax Dei*. The Pope has already laid extensive

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63 The phrase is used over 50 times in the Encyclical. By it, the Pope intends to integrate three key revelatory sources behind the ethical commitment to the dignity of human life: “The Gospel of God’s love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of life are a single and indivisible Gospel.” EV no. 2.
64 In explaining its scope: “The Gospel of life is not simply a reflection, however new and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The Gospel of life is something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of the very person of Jesus.” EV no. 29.
65 The Pope italicizes the Gospel of Life in an early footnote. “...it is not found in Scripture. But it does correspond to an essential dimension of the biblical message.” ft. no. 1.
66 C.f. Weigel (1999) provides details of this confrontation with reproductive rights agencies and governments, including some particular incidents of personal conflicts with the Polish Pope and the members of the Vatican delegations (pp. 719–39).
67 His intended audience includes the whole Church but also everyone “of good will” and concern.
68 The Pope notes that the emergence of “bioethics” had encouraged an interfaith and intercommunion of ethical discussion: “…bioethics is promoting more reflection and dialogue—between believers and non-believers, as well as between followers of different religions—on ethical problems, including fundamental issues pertaining to human life”. EV no. 27.
69 “In its descriptive, normative and parentic modes, *Evangelium Vitae* is vigorously christocentric and decidedly evangelical” (Wojda 1996, pp. 54–55).
70 (Weigel 1999).
71 The interest in ecumenical Christian dialogue and collaboration was also to the fore for the Pope during this time, as his other encyclical of 1995 was Ut *Unum Sint* (That They May Be One).
72 C.f. (Rowland 2003, pp. 41–42).
73 Rather than the dualistic “either/…
74 The traditional creational belief, based on biblical revelation and philosophical reflection, that human beings are “made in God’s image” and therefore possess a spiritual, transcendent and responsive dignity. The Pope links this notion with his ethos of full life: “The Gospel of life, proclaimed in the beginning when man was created in the image of God for a destiny of full and perfect life (cf. Gen 2:7; Wis 9:2–3)” EV no. 7.
75 A capacity/receptivity to God. Related to imagining God, the human person is made to know, love and decide to respond to God’s life. In EV, it is Jesus Christ who fully restores this “capacity” EV no. 29.
foundations for this creational anthropology in his earlier work which was delivered in a week-by-week catechesis upon the sacramentality of the human body, sexuality and “adequate anthropology”.76

Central to John Paul II’s theological thought, is his desire to “re-evangelise” the dramatic existential texture and content of human corporeal, spiritual and affective experience and imagination. This also involves the “evangelisation” of organic relationships such as mother–child and father–mother.

Of particular interest in this catechesis is the sensosignificato of the body which uniquely “enters into the order of knowing, of conscious experience” and carries the meaning of the exclusive, faithful love, self-mastered giving and commitment that is implied in “spousality.”77 Spousality, or nuptiality, in John Paul II’s thought, highlights the meaning of human covenantal love (and marriage) but expands beyond this as concrete analogue or paradigm of Divine love, which invites freely given human response, and which is imaged (however distantly) in human knowledge, desire, transcendence and experience. Central to this is the Pope’s insistence that the human person, although a substantial and unique entity, is also always relational, to him or herself, to others, to the world and ultimately and always to God.78 The personal “identity and difference” of men and women, and their loving, life-giving and mutual potential is outlined in the “most organic expression”79 of this sense of nuptiality in the Pope’s Apostolic Letter, Mulieris Dignitatem (On the Dignity of Women), published seven years before this present document. The scriptural and theological foundations laid in the Letter, are built upon in the papal reflections upon maternity and “new feminism” in the Encyclical.

These earlier works give background to John Paul’s perennial and motivating concern, that the rejection of the Catholic teaching against contraception is based on a failure to see that this practice and its related consequences (for instance in harm to women, in blurring the contraceptive with abortifacient function, in eugenic and unjust control of vulnerable populations)80 derive not simply from moral “bad faith” but also from an illiteracy in understanding moral freedom and love-giving grammar of sexuality.81

4. Adequate Anthropology and a Full/New Feminism

Chapter IV of Evangelium Vitae is entitled: “As You Did It To Me: for a new culture of human life”82; the Pope exhorts both universal and important parties to this cultural transformation.

… this demands from everyone the courage to adopt a new life-style, consisting in making at the personal, familial, social and international level- on the basic scale of values: the primacy of being over having, of the person over things...83

In the earlier chapters of the document, the Pope locates an aetiology of human brokenness in relation to the “original” gift of life. The problem is not only moral, but is an existential, cultural

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76 A portmanteau term and direction in the thought of Pope John Paul II, not intended to convey, minimalism or the mediocre as “adequate” does at times in English, indeed “adequate” means for the Pope the exact opposite: what is fully apt and fitting. It is described in his Wednesday audiences as a demanding and on-going project to “understand and interpret” the human person in his or her fullness, to get to the core of the human, to understand the human person within Trinitarian and yet embodied origin, call and telos. It is not adequate to describe or evaluate the person in merely naturalistic or reductive terms, still less in over-spiritualised ways (John Paul 2006, c.f. nos. 13:2 & 55:2 ff).

77 From the Glossary prepared by Michael Waldstein in Man and Woman: He Created Them (John Paul 2006, p. 682).

78 John Paul II: “Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves living in relationship, in the relation to the other “I” (John Paul 1988, Mulieris Dignitatem, no. 7.)

79 (Scola 2005, p. 4).

80 Evangelium Vitae nos. 13 and 16.

81 This sense of a grammar or logic in human embodiment involves “more than mere sexual reactivity.” The Pope likens the sexual language of the person to the ethos and meaning/truth-carry conveying potential of human speech and thus “in the measure of the whole truth of their persons” (as man and woman) (John Paul 2006, Man and Woman, p. 632).

82 The Encyclic is divided into four main Segments, each of these further divided into chapters.

83 Ibid #98. Emphasis—the Pope’s. The choice of these words enabled the Pope to recall the words of Vatican II’s Gaudium et Spes #35 and his predecessor’s, while recapitulating his own personalist insights.
anthropological tragedy, a cosmic theodramatics. The Biblical narrative of the first and murderous rivalry of the “original” brothers is Cain and Abel, telling the story of human resentment, envy and violence. His exegesis of a scriptural text here (as in other works of his) is a key element in the Pope’s exploration of the depths of human ethical behaviour, both at the personal and social level, since though (or perhaps because) its form is archaic and mythological, the narrative is privileged as canonical “revelation” and it explores personality with profound and perennial insight, often neglected in the more reductionist human sciences.

The first breaking of covenant with God, (the distrust of the Creator’s motives by Adam and Eve in Genesis Chapter 3) transmutes into Cain’s sin against fraternity, parental love and the shared familial bonds of all humanity: “Brother kills brother. Like the first fratricide, every murder is a violation of the “spiritual” kinship uniting mankind in one great family.” Entire peoples and civilisations within history both grasp after and forget the significance of being itself as “first gift”.

Moral freedom loses its bearings, sometimes becoming a tyrannical idol and overlord. Moral freedom is orphaned from its matrix of authentic inter-dependent familial relationships. “If the promotion of the self is understood in terms of absolute autonomy, people inevitably reach the point of rejecting one another. Everyone else is considered an enemy from whom one has to defend oneself.” Power replaces responsiveness or responsibility towards others, creation or towards oneself. This captures something.

To forget and ignore the “original” gift of Creation and life, which despite sin, is a wondrous though sometimes arduous responsibility, is not only a moral fault but an ontological one. Sexuality, embodied identity and sociality and humanity’s interaction with creation becomes morally and spiritually problematic and is at times rejected and denied. The Earth, once considered “mother”, is reduced to mute and atomised stuff, ready for possession and manipulation. From the participation in the “garden of Eden” (Gen 2:15), a place of plenty, of harmonious interpersonal relationships and of friendship with God, the earth for the fallen, loses its “maternity” and becomes instead the “land of Nod” (Gen 4:16), a place of scarcity, loneliness and separation from God.

As a counter-sign to this “sad witness” of the violence of Cain, John Paul II proposes a “mobilization” which gives a priority to both the organic and prophetic initiative of women and of women working in a new way together. In transforming culture so that it supports life (both creational and human), women

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84 Theodramatics is apt for a Pope who was actor and playwright; it acknowledges his phenomenological focus upon human life, ethics and social life as “naturally” dramatic rather than static. This is because human beings live enfolded in time and their lives carry both weight and importance. In an analogous sense, the Trinitarian God is the origin: playwright, director and key actor within this drama. C.f. Major 20th century Swiss theologian Hans Urs Von Balthasar (1905–1988) and his five-volume study Theodramatics. This is explained succinctly in No Bloodless Myth: A Guide through Von Balthasar’s Theodramatics (Nichols 2000).

85 The “theology of the body” audiences consist of extended Biblical exegesis and the Encyclical previous to EV, opens with the narrative of the Rich Young Man’s encounter with Jesus. Veritatis Splendour op. cit. #5.3 the same document #28-9 explains the importance of Scriptural texts for John Paul II’s ethical thought.

86 In his moral theology Encyclical, Veritatis Splendour, the Pope observes: “In this way, moral theology will acquire an inner spiritual dimension in response to the need to develop fully the imago Dei present in man, and in response to the laws of spiritual development described by Christian ascetical and mystical theology”. VS #111.

87 In John Paul II’s theological anthropology, this provides existential texture to the traditional Catholic teaching on original sin with a focus upon the effects of the primordial “rejection of the gift” as the pivotal drama which touches human sexuality, spousality and therefore parenthood. Cf. Man and Woman He Created Them.

88 EV no. 8.

89 “... but when freedom is made absolute in an individualistic way, it is emptied of its original content, and its very meaning and dignity are contradicted.” EV no. 19.

90 EV no. 20.

91 (Schindler 2006, p. 188).

92 “Nature itself, from being “mater” (mother), is now reduced to being “matter”, and is subjected to every kind of manipulation.” EV no.22.

93 EV no. 7.

94 Ibid.
occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a “new feminism” which rejects the temptation to merely imitate models of “male domination”.\textsuperscript{95}

The Pope’s invitation for “a new feminism,”\textsuperscript{96} given the circumstances confronting the Church on the world stage, was provocative. The term is only employed once in the document, but when read with the insights of such documents as \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, it became a point of galvanisation for Christian and particularly Catholic women (as well as male scholars) who sensed that the Pope had recognised a range of their own concerns about the “blind-spots” of contemporary feminist movements.\textsuperscript{97} Those in the movement became part of an academic, pastoral, and active political presence which pursues \textit{ressourcement}.\textsuperscript{98} attentive to the sometimes just complaints of feminists but especially focussed upon identifying the secularising influences of philosophical and social systems bequeathed to much feminist thought. This \textit{ressourcement} feminist movement is open to a recovery of Christian sources, tradition and moral concerns.\textsuperscript{99} Cardinal Angelo Scola describes John Paul II’s constant refrain of a “newness” as a signal for the Pope’s life-long concern for an authentic return to the sources of the Faith and also to a courageous and attentive reading of the core of human experience. “New feminism” aims to interpret the creational “originality” of sexual as well as personal difference in the face of both sin and grace and to recover the authentic womanly identity as embodied and deeply relational (creaturely, filial, spousal, sisterly and maternal). It aims to avoid constructivist or monadic views of feminine creativity, agency or embodiment and it denies that women are in some immanent gnostic way “goddesses”.

In the Encyclical, the Pope appeals to the person-orientated “genius”\textsuperscript{100} he identifies as native to women which is evident in an awareness and outlook to the personal and the living which is part of this genius.\textsuperscript{101} This involves their ability to form and educate others about the essentials of human dignity.\textsuperscript{102} Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health.\textsuperscript{103}

As the “new feminist” philosopher, Sister Prudence Allen points out: “Clearly he (John Paul II) does not want to make the broad claim that women are better than men ethically or ontologically.”\textsuperscript{104}

There is a daunting array of sources which informs what the Pope means here. These include the

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid. no. 99.

\textsuperscript{96} It is useful to be aware that “new feminism” has also been used to refer to a very different type of movement of feminism, one associated with feminism in its “fourth wave” influenced by the predominately post-modern cultural and academic influences. This can refer to everything from the brashly revolutionary, such as the Pussy Riot movement, to the rise of “new Age” and neo-Pagan women’s movements and theologies.

\textsuperscript{97} One work which brings together the multi-disciplinary and international scope of the response is by Schumacher (2004b).

\textsuperscript{98} A French term probably coined by the Catholic convert theological poet Charles Péguy (1873–1914) which was adopted to describe a current of theological tradition and culture which aimed to return to the Scriptures, Patristics and mystical writings (and their writers) in order to restore and explore “the deeper tradition” of Christianity. Pope John Paul II was very sympathetic to the method and contributions of \textit{ressourcement} theologians he elevated as Cardinals: Henri De Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jean Danielou.

\textsuperscript{99} This process of re-evangelising is of course closely related to the re-discovery of the “original” blessing and mystery of creation which reveals a “nuptial” form to the creation of humanity as male and female which is considered below. cf. (Scola 2005, pp. 209–12).

\textsuperscript{100} A term adopted by John Paul II as early as the Marian Year 1988 (cf. John Paul 1988, \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem} op. cit. no. 30). In EV, John Paul II suggests that while all people and societies should respond lovingly and ethically to the intrinsic worth of living human personas, women have an intuitive and non-deductive “spiritual, ethical and interpersonal” capacity for this. He does not see this as a reductive “instinct” nor as inevitably developed or enacted in every woman, as both culture, experience and human freedom are still at play. Women are clearly in need of redemption and grace as are men.

\textsuperscript{101} There are other aspects of “feminine genius” which interrelate with the maternal according to John Paul II: filiality, mutual nuptiality, care of the personal ecology, etc. See (Krohn 2007).

\textsuperscript{102} In his \textit{Letter to Women}, John Paul II notes that, despite this essential contribution, women have often been excluded from culture, art, science and educational opportunities.

\textsuperscript{103} EV, no.99.

\textsuperscript{104} (Allen 2004b, p. 94).
Pope’s early (pre-papal) phenomenology of sexual love, his “theology of the body”, his analysis of freedom and “The Acting Person”, his consideration of working mothers both within the family and in outside employment, and his document on the *Dignity and Vocation of Women*. A key to all these contributions is the Pope’s understanding of the human body in its sexual difference as being a site of the sacramentality of human love and its expression.

A notable influence in developing this insight by the Pope was the German philosopher Saint Edith Stein, (Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) who, in her time, contributed so much original philosophy on the formation and education of women, on the role of women in professions, who brought her Jewish tradition to Christian Biblical narrative and also explored the ethically directed emotional capacities such as empathy, solidarity and conversion. In many ways Edith Stein was the mother to the “new” feminism as called for by Pope John Paul II.

The differences between men and women (on many levels, but certainly at biological, personal, spiritual and individual dimensions) are not merely “accidental” but highlight rather than obliterate their ethical and ontological “mutual” equality. Angelo Scola describes the creational drama which John Paul II highlights between human sexuality and human knowledge as opposed to a fixed bi-polar symmetry so often depicted within human cultures. The drama is rather to be considered within a concrete yet mystical theology of openness and difference as “asymmetrical reciprocity”:

Asymmetry consists in the fact that sexual difference, in a significant and immediate way, testifies that the other always remains “other” for me. . . to use the great expression of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the “one flesh” comes into being; and even in the one flesh the “other” remains “other” for me.”

In *Evangelium Vitae*, as in his earlier expositions, John Paul II attempts to correct the dualism which has infected thought (and unredeemed ethical attitude) towards male and female. In part, this dualism has contributed to the oppression or neglect of female dignity. By illustrating that divine participation, albeit asymmetrically and analogously, has a privileged place within the mutual “self-gift” of human spousal sexuality and parenthood, the Pope reminds Christians particularly that human parenthood, according to the “order of Creation”, in its “original” and rightful meaning, is not reducible to “reproduction” but is “pro-creation.” Despite the many violations, dangers and

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105. *As Love and Responsibility* (Wojtyła 1993).
106. (John Paul 2006).
107. *Familiaris Consortio* (John Paul 1982) John Paul II places the economic, social and spiritual primacy of the family as central, but lays down no stereotypes. He actively argues against isolating women in the private sector for the sake of the common good: “these roles and professions should be harmoniously combined if we wish the evolution of society and the culture to be truly human”.
108. (John Paul 1988).
109. For example: “Through gestures and reactions, throughout the whole reciprocally conditioned dynamism of tension and enjoyment whose direct source is the body in its masculinity and femininity, the body in its action and interaction . . . speaks.” (John Paul 2006, vol. 123, p. 4).
110. Saint Sister Teresa Benedicta Stein (1891–1942), German Philosopher, Carmelite Nun, martyr in Auschwitz) shared with John Paul II phenomenological formation, influences of the metaphysics of St Thomas Aquinas and a Carmelite spirituality. Clearly influential are her papers on the formation, constitution and vocation of women. These are collected in *Essays on Woman* (Stein 1996).
111. Her intellectual and life pilgrimage from agnostic Jewish woman, to personalist philosopher, to Catholic educator, then contemplative nun and mystical theologian and ultimately victim “for her people” in the hell of Auschwitz personifies a concrete, authentic and powerful ethical and spiritual “maternal” figure in contrast to other anti-maternal ideologies. Cf also (Cathey 2018).
112. (Allen 2004b, pp. 94–95).
113. (Scola 2005, pp. 94–95; also pp. 116–19).
114. By “. . . a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent . . . Women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented . . . ” (John Paul 1995b, Letter to Women, Op. cit. no. 3).
115. “procreation” is used 20 times in EV to emphasise the locus of new human life. Within anti-life cultures: “Procreation then becomes the “enemy” to be avoided in sexual activity: if it is welcomed, this is only because it expresses a desire, or indeed the intention, to have a child “at all costs”, and not because it signifies the complete acceptance of the other and therefore an openness to the richness of life which the child represents.” EV no.23.
inequalities to which original, structural and personal sin incline human beings, spousality/parenthood remains a locus of the original “participation” and collaboration in Creation and it offers echoes of the original polis/ethos of “the garden”\textsuperscript{116}. Male and female lovers, given to each other nuptially and as potential parents, are re-invited to authentic freedom and true mutuality in order to give and receive not only their authentic consent, but the rich and constitutive meaning of sexual embodiment, moral and personal maturity and spiritual sensitivity. Parents are always invited to:

cooperate with God the Creator in conceiving and giving birth to a new human being, we are not speaking merely with reference to the laws of biology. Instead, we wish to emphasize that God himself is present in human fatherhood and motherhood quite differently than he is present in all other instances of begetting on earth.\textsuperscript{117}

Throughout the Encyclical, it is clear that no response or attitude towards maternity is fully adequate until the coming of Christ. Christians are not therefore to “deify” or idealise the commonly fractured and distorted lens of some historical human experiences. Even the foundational relationships of family and motherhood must travel by way of the redeeming and healing self-giving love of Christ’s Cross. Jesus Christ directs all ethical and existential experiences to the Kingdom of God, Christ redeems spousality itself, making it available through faith and discipleship to the formation of a new people and a redeemed familial community, in which men and women do not deny their sexuality, but are free to “give it in love” within different faithful, fruitful and exclusive ways as eschatological signs for the Church and the world. In \textit{Redemptoris Mater}, John Paul reflects on what he calls “a new dimension” of motherhood, what he will name in his other writings “spiritual motherhood”.\textsuperscript{118}

There are three significant suggestions offered by John Paul II in \textit{Evangelium Vitae} for a transformation of the wider culture of “maternity” and maternal form. The first is that women need to recover the “genius” of their own ontological maternal capacity and this requires a recovery of a contemplative vision of the dignity and meaning of their own womanly experience and embodiment. From this can grow a compelling maternal “pedagogy” for the world and the Church. Secondly, in \textit{Evangelium Vitae}, the Pope widens and expands the notion of commitment to “the culture of life” or of being “pro-life” by considering Christ’s gift of “pleroma” or “fullness of Life”. This dramatically expands the scope of the mission of the Church in responding to the real dignity and needs of people, and particularly mothers confronted by “the culture of death”. In third place, as a synthesis of his earlier thought, John Paul II insists that the role of women in solidarity with each other is vital for the transformation of cultures and societies, and this includes a humble recognition of the inscrutable drama of imperfection and of grace. An iconic form for this in John Paul II’s mind is not a moralistic rivalry between the holy and fallen, between the pious and the rebellious females, but by the Blessed Mother Mary’s merciful embrace of Mother Eve. These three features of the “new maternal” will be briefly explored below.

4.1. Maternal Prophesy and Pedagogy

One of the key symptoms of the “culture of death” is what John Paul II calls in the Encyclical, the “darkened gaze” created by sin and perpetrated in relationships and societies. The restorative and alternative vision, the basis of a “culture of life”, makes “room” for the other; it steps aside to become attentive to the pathos, reality and weight of human life and then gently (but courageously) embraces it.\textsuperscript{119} In lyrical form, the Hebrew Scriptures reveal the way the Lord God aligns salvation to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{116} See discussion in (Gawkowska 2012).
\item \textsuperscript{117} EV no. 43.
\item \textsuperscript{118} (John Paul 1987, \textit{Redemptoris Mater}, no. 22) \ldots born from the heart of the Paschal Mystery of the Redeemer of the world. It is a motherhood in the order of grace, for it implores the gift of the Spirit, who raises up the new children of God, redeems through the sacrifice of Christ that Spirit whom Mary too, together with the Church, received on the day of Pentecost.”
\item \textsuperscript{119} EV no.98.
\end{itemize}
the gift of life, hope and being. God “visits like a dawn from high” in a direct but intimate way into the lives and maternal bodies of women. God chooses for the heritage of the People of Israel, women, especially those experiencing hardship and marginalisation in their maternity: those exiled in the desert, older women, women “cursed” by infertility or women suffering “ill-repute”. Job himself in the depth of his deprivation and suffering remembers that God has his hand on both life and death and that it was God who personally worked within his mother (who is not passive but receptive) and he reflects that the Lord “knit me together with bones and sinews” (Job 10:8–12). The prophets, psalmists and the whole people of Israel are drawn to wonder and praise: “Expressions of awe and wonder at God’s intervention in the life of a child in its mother’s womb.” Israel is called back to contemplative, doxological and ethical insight: “How can anyone think that even a single moment of this marvellous process of the unfolding of life could be separated from the wise and loving work of the Creator, and left prey to human caprice?”

What is meant by contemplative here, is the very opposite of abstracted, remote or unfeeling. Evangelium Vitae presents an invitation to all people, guided by women in their maternal experience and genius, to return to the “ethos of the beginning” to the gift of their own being. In pastoral terms this may involve a community of maternal presence which enables women to recover a type of conscious wonder in their “original dignity” before God, as Mary does at the Annunciation. It may be a culture orientated in awe towards the wonders of creation, yet humble in its recognition of its need for the saving grace of God. Mary in this event also recognises and proclaims the engraced and created core of her own dignity and identity. Contemplation is aligned to the gift of prophecy and in John Paul II’s thought, it is the ability through one’s words and one’s life to revere both “the mighty works of God” and the originality of each person. At the personal level it provokes “reflexive consciousness”, an opportunity for owning and mastering oneself and it throws down the challenge to recognise the “givenness” of Being and therefore God. The Pope illustrates the way God’s merciful and life-giving vision “against the reproach of men” is evident in the mother of the Maccabees and the Virgin Mary’s kinswoman Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist. Each woman, recognising the miracle of her own original maternal dignity, her own “inviolable interiority”, also protects her own enfolded receptivity as the locus and event of a child. In a world woven with challenge, pain and suffering, it is also an opportunity for grace and new life. It is also a responsibility for the Church, as a familial community, to recognise and defend this in practical and pastoral ways.

Each new “life” is a personalised gift from beyond the “self”, neither a “thing” to be dominated or violated (as it is in a deformed or “toxic” patriarchy) nor is it a doll-like “child” which is idolised and possessed so that it has no real “otherness” (as it might be in an overbearing matriarchal culture). Post-Christian cultures tend to alienate both the gift of life and the meaning of the body while rejecting

120 The Church and the Blessed Mother also share this suffering and hope: “Like the Church, Mary too had to live her motherhood amid suffering: “This child is set ... for a sign that is spoken against-and a sword will pierce through your own soul also—that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed” (Luke 2:34-35). EV no.103.
121 EV no. 44.
122 EV ibid.
123 Directed to giving “honour, praise and glory” to God in response to the Holy Spirit and through Jesus Christ.
124 Ibid.
125 Mulieris Dignitatem. Ibid. no. 14.
126 There is a sense in which this dignity is discovered in recognising difference and even naked “solitude” before God the Creator—as a distinct and unique personal being. This is an important aspect of psychological and moral “identity” and maturity. An important aspect of John Paul II’s exploration of the existential dimension of bodily meaning. It is explored in his “theology of the body” audiences. Ibid. 5:5 and also helpfully discussed in the context of “sacramental presence” by Conor Sweeney. Ibid. 233.
127 It is notable that an outstanding example of this type of support is offered by the consecrated women of the Sisters of Life, who spend half their time as contemplative sisters and the other half providing practical, emotional and “contemplative” space for pregnant women in crisis. See (Donovan 2011).
128 John Paul II meditates upon this Scriptural moment at length in Redemptoris Mater (John Paul 1987, #8–11).
129 On the “mater” or mother as “witness” (John Paul 1988, Mulieris Dignitatem, #16).
130 (Schumacher 2012, p. 472).
either the maternal or paternal for an indifferent (and even bored) fluidity. These cultures lean towards
an idolisation of the sterile “present” which is a negation of maternal presence and paternal engagement
even as it hungers after both of these.131

Creatational “contemplation” defies the atomisation of liberalism (which creates the illusion of
individual freedom) on the one hand, and it sees beyond the annihilation of personal uniqueness and
particularity by the collective (which denies the person in a false communality on the other. According
to the Pope, these distortions are associated with a correlative distortion of freedom and a loss of true
human rights.132 The Pope here prompts us to see that the collectivised state depersonalisles women’s
maternal bodies (their original uniqueness as persons is dissolved) so that they are treated merely as
organisms of production to serve the state.133 Other collective tyrannies view women’s maternity as
anarchic threats to the collective134 requiring regulation through population control regimens or by
“implanted” chemicals which “brand” women as sterile. By contrast, in the liberal polis, women are
expected to construct, purchase or trade their motherhood.135 They are expected to keep their wombs
“nice”—privatised, hygienic and empty, opened only if they can pass what John Paul II refers to as the
“quality of life” test. This becomes a “D.I.Y”136 eugenics, hidden under the guise of “freedom of choice”,
filtered through “economic efficiency, inordinate consumerism, physical beauty and pleasure, to the
neglect of the more profound dimensions – interpersonal, spiritual and religious- of existence.”137

It is interesting that there are two forms of “maternal” experience structured around contemplation
which spasically and intentionally makes room for the life and dignity of an “other”. One is the
stillness of the nursing mother. She needs to find a still point in both time and place so that she can
feed her child from her own body. She must, somehow, attune herself to another rhythm of time,
the rhythm of her own body and that of her child. She needs to form a peaceful resistance to the
outside with its patterns of commerce, consumption or struggle. She is attentive to the otherness of
the child and not only in directly conceptual ways. Her body is alert and intentional through touch,
senses and self-giving. The nursing mother’s “gaze” is the opposite of grasping, controlling, or of
objectification. The nursing mother is a sign of contradiction to the darkness of the “culture of death”.

Analogously, “nursing” applies authentically to the consecrated nursing sister who is tending
to a dying patient. She too is “nursing” the dignity, care and life of another from both a humane
and spiritual motivation directing to that person her womanly “genius”. She assumes a similarly
maternal presence to the “other” and once again adopts an ethos which opposes and overcomes the
manipulation and attempts to control or cut short the life of the dying person. In her compassion and
competence, the sister affirms the humanity of the other and nurtures that patient’s dignity.

Catholic tradition has many ranks of women who were (and are) not procreational mothers but
were outstanding for their holiness, creativity and leadership and therefore are nursing “Mothers” in
this latter sense.138 Despite the “reproaches” of society, men and other injustices, they too became
pioneering and original witnesses to the life and dignity of human person through their prayerful
presence, mystical love and insight. These are not simply passive or cosy encounters, as one thinks of
Saint Catherine of Siena nursing the condemned criminal during his beheading or the Virgin Mother
nursing the crucified and deposed body of her Beloved Son.

131 See a related discussion in (Sweeney 2018, p. 148).
132 EV #20.
133 This was evident in the “pro-natalist” utilitarianism of National Socialism.
134 Ibid.
135 Cf. (Schindler 2006). “In liberalism, the self is understood to be originally unbounded by and hence indifferent to others.”
(p. 193).
136 Term beloved of hardware chains but apt here “Do It Yourself.”
137 (John Paul 1995a).
138 This naming of “mother” is an organic and honorific not merely functional title; it has been used to apply to consecrated,
converted “fallen” women and those who were procreational mothers. It has been readily applied to anchoresses, abbesses,
missionaries, down to more recent examples such as Mother Teresa.
4.2. Women as Collaborators in Fullness of Life

_Evangelium Vitae_ expands a “humanism” of reverence and humility rather than one of a “neutral” managerial vision, which claims disinterest in the balancing of indifferent “rival” claims.\(^{139}\) For John Paul II is clear that a culture of life involves more than a moralism of “one single commandment”, still less is it to be regarded as an item of “corporate policy”.\(^{140}\) The Christian ethical position towards human “life” is that it is the beginning of all possibility and all freedom, but it is not a vitalism. Life is ultimately a penultimate preparation for “a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of . . . earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God.”\(^{141}\) It requires that all the other “goods” and the dignity of the person are also upheld, defended and highlighted. This is an exacting task but one motivated by recognition of the great dignity of the other as well as the love of God. John Paul II writes: “The gift thus becomes a commandment, and the commandment is itself a gift.”\(^{142}\)

John Paul II expands the “pro-life” position to include a concern about both local and global threats to human dignity. This demands a respect for the fullness of life in all people and he points out that just as the Old Testament prophets called for attention to the “stranger, widow and orphan,” Christ called all his followers to transform every stranger into a brother or sister. Respect “for life” extends from personal encounters to the ways international trade, treaties and economics are handled:

> Should we not question the very economic models often adopted by States which, also as a result of international pressures and forms of conditioning, cause and aggravate situations of injustice and violence in which the life of whole peoples is degraded and trampled upon?\(^{143}\)

He notes that many women who are mothers, especially those who endure hardship to protect the life of their children, unborn and beyond, are witnesses to the Gospel of Life and give “spiritual worship acceptable to God”\(^{144}\) very often without fanfare or public attention. They suffer travail and the burden of carrying their children, the danger and labour of birth and also suffer the dangers of physical, social and “cultural models” which make them forgotten, isolated or unimportant. “They share in the mystery of the Cross, in which Jesus reveals the value of every person, and how life attains its fullness in the sincere gift of self.”\(^{145}\)

John Paul II refuses to accept that women should “suffer” motherhood in isolation as if this is the “fate” or punishment of Eve or that women deserve to suffer the silent isolation and grief for their reproductive or sexual sins\(^{146}\). While not diminishing female agency, nor the gravity or the pain of such events, the Pope recalls the way Christ called women to be his disciples even in the depth of their dejection. Christ met these women by in the pith of their own cooperation in sin or he challenged their marginalisation caused by the sin of others. The suffering mothers themselves become, through the healing touch of Christ, witnesses to Truth and Love for life so that they become:

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\(^{139}\) David L. Schindler and many others point out the “liberal neutrality” merely allows an incipiently tyrannical thumb on the scales of this type of balancing.

\(^{140}\) Many in the media assume that Catholic teaching on “life issues” is based on board-room politics and the voluntaristic issuing of “new” policies.

\(^{141}\) EV #2.

\(^{142}\) EV no.52.

\(^{143}\) EV no.19.

\(^{144}\) EV no.86.

\(^{145}\) Ibid.

\(^{146}\) In MD no.9, the Pope writes: “But there is no doubt that, independent of this “distinction of roles” in the biblical description, that first sin is the sin of man, created by God as male and female. It is also the sin of the “first parents”, to which is connected its hereditary character”. However, he will reject as skewed a reading of Genesis Chapter 3 which portrays women or Eve as the chief cause of sin in humankind; he also rejects that the cursed “suffering of childbirth”, etc., is part of God’s deterministic punishment for women. Whatever suffering and danger which pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing presents, is rather a consequence of the broken covenant that is sin. In the Pope’s thinking it is a marker for renewed solidarity by women and men working in the family of the Church, or within the local family- towards support, healing and promotion of mothers and their children.
eloquent defenders of everyone’s right to life. Through your commitment to life, whether by accepting the birth of other children or by welcoming and caring for those most in need of someone to be close to them, you will become promoters of a new way of looking at human life.147

4.3. Iconic Maternity—Mothers in Solidarity

In Evangelium Vitae, John Paul II portrays the “way” that motherhood and maternal care stand in direct contrast to a culture which eclipses God and attempts to demote life in an anti-receptive, anti-contemplative, anti-ecological parody of the vocation of Adam/Eve in the Garden of the “beginning.” Both here and more systematically in his earlier Letter Mulieris Dignitatem, Pope John Paul redresses the caricature of Mother Eve as a “temptress” and as a “cause” of the downfall of Adam and through him all humanity. This systematic and time-honoured “blame game” is replaced by the Pope’s sense that there is a solidarity between men and women in sin but also in grace and redemption. He states “independent of this ‘distinction of roles’ in the biblical description, that first sin is the sin of man, created by God as male and female”148. Despite her shared rejection of the “original gift” with Adam, in John Paul II’s account, Eve nonetheless does not lose the vision of God’s munificence completely, she remains a “witness to life”. Directing attention to Genesis 3:5, 149 the Pope places the fallen Eve into radical solidarity across salvation history with the engraced Virgin Mary,150 one being “mother of all the living” and the other “the mother of the new creation”.

The Blessed Mother is above all in radical filial solidarity with the Lord God and with the work and mission of her Son, Jesus Christ. The coming of Christ reveals his solidarity with those who are fallen and embedded in their sin. Motherhood, too, in the dimension of the Kingdom of God and in the radius of the fatherhood of God himself, takes on another meaning. In the words reported by Luke, Jesus teaches precisely this new meaning of motherhood.151

The Mother of Jesus is both his mother according to the flesh and she is mother of the new Family (the Church) and she is also Christ’s “first disciple”152 who directs the disciples to contemplative listening and prophetic attention.153 She is in a unique way both a Mother and an encouraging sister to all fallen women (as well as men).

The Pope recognised that this rich understanding of the Virgin Mary’s maternity of believers, had become blurred or lost to vast numbers in the Christian community. As Cardinal Scola observes it, the entire pontificate of John Paul II was missionary ad extra but also ad intra, since he:

… challenges Christianity to reclaim its own fundamental notions and to reappropriate their original meaning, for the broader culture has often arrogated those notions to itself and repropessed them in a context totally alien to their native soil.154

Fullness of life is likewise “born” anew from the womb of the Church as Mother. The Church is not an androgynous global corporation, nor an isolated sect among other sects, but a universally embracing, contemplative and vigilant Mother,155 one whose vocation is witness to created wisdom as

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147 EV no.99.
148 MD nos.9 and 10.
149 Considered by the classical theologians as an announcement within the lines of Genesis of the coming of Christ and the role of his Mother: the protoevangelium.
150 (John Paul 1988, Mulieris Dignitatem, no. 11).
151 (John Paul 1987, Redemptoris Mater, no. 20).
152 Ibid. no.21.
153 Referring to the entrusting of his Mother to disciple John at the Cross (Jn 19:27), the Pope continues: “Entrusting himself to Mary in a filial manner, the Christian, like the Apostle John, “welcomes” the Mother of Christ “into his own home” and brings her into everything that makes up his inner life, that is to say into his human and Christian ‘I’: he “took her to his own home.” Ibid. no. 45.
154 (Scola 2005, p. 259).
155 He makes reference here both in his anthropology and ecclesiology outlined in the first encyclical of his pontificate. (John Paul 1979) Redemptor Hominis. “… in all the fullness of the mystery in which he has become a sharer in Jesus Christ,
a feminine disciple proclaiming Christ’s redeeming. Here, John Paul II sets a Marian and maternal ecclesiology as the backdrop of his exhortation for a “culture of life”. As a maternal community, Mother Church has a key place for women to become, as it were, the sacramental presence of a profound and counter-cultural ethical transformation. “A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness.”

Not only is the dignity of this Motherhood unique and unrepeatable in the history of the human race, but Mary’s participation in this Maternity through the work of the Blessed Trinity is a fulfilment of human response and action.

This reveals in an intimate, redemptive and personal way the definitive sacramental and not merely natural aptitude of human maternity. In a manner which reveals the “new” maternity uncovered by Pope John Paul II, English Dominican theologian, Aidan Nichols, writes in his reflections upon the rich poetry and iconography of the mystery of the Incarnation: “A mother does more than lend her body as a site for gestation” . . . she forms “her child’s life from her own flesh and blood, and forms their souls by her address and affection.” Catholics do not simply pray about Mary’s “womb” as if it were an ectogenic space, truncated from the mother’s agency or personal engagement or the warmth of her personal presence. They do not make the Virgin Mary’s courage or the prophecy of her maternity invisible or a euphemism. They adopt the words of the Angel Gabriel from Luke’s Gospel: “blessed is the fruit of THY womb” and in this they commit and challenge themselves to be in solidarity with her, Christ-bearers “for life.”

In recalling the Annunciation, there is a recognition of a profound encounter: “ . . . that is, participation in a love that the desires the other to be itself by abiding within that love.”

John Paul II concludes his large Encyclical with a Marian hymn and a tribute to a recovery of the maternal in Christian witness:

For this reason, Mary, “like the Church of which she is the type, is a mother of all who are reborn to life. She is in fact the mother of the Life by which everyone lives, and when she brought it forth from herself she in some way brought to rebirth all those who were to live by that Life”.

5. Conclusions

In this close investigation of the Encyclical Evangelium Vitae, it can be found that the Catholic tradition is neither offered a passing or minor call to encourage a “new feminism” nor is the document a charter for a glib sloganistic version of a “pro-life” stance. While the Encyclical does reaffirm the Catholic teaching on nuptial love and the ethics of procreation, life before birth and at the end of life, it also envisages a type of meta-ethos or culture which has the form of a maternal collaboration, within an ecclesial and societal matrix. In fact, when this Encyclical is read in depth, against the extensive backdrop of John Paul II’s theological anthropology, it is discovered to contain the fertile seeds for a theological, ethical, cultural renaissance of engaged “maternity” as an ethical, spiritual and social vocation for women in different settings. It is interesting that there is some resonance in

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156 This is illustrated in more depth in the Pope’s document (John Paul 1987) Redemptoris Mater, which he pairs with his first encyclical letter Redemptor Hominis. Here, the Pope gives priority to the baptismal vocation to discipleship mothered for all Christians by the Virgin Mary.

157 “Every individual, precisely by reason of the mystery of the Word of God who was made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14), is entrusted to the maternal care of the Church. Therefore every threat to human dignity and life must necessarily be felt in the Church’s very heart . . . “ EV no.3.

158 EV no.99.

159 Ibid.

160 (John Paul 1979). no. 22.

161 (Nicholas 1996, p. 339.)

162 (López 2008, p. 176).
these themes with the concerns of the anti-consumerist humanist, Julia Kristeva. This paper draws from *Evangelium Vitae* (EV), three interconnected invitational threads which encourage women to find within their “maternal” embodiment the signs for mystical discipleship/leadership—one which revives the contemplative and prophetic in the Church, one which calls for a creative pastoral practicality and solidarity with persons suffering the loss of true “fullness of life” and one which infuses the Church with attentive Marian rather than pragmatic or bureaucratic power.

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