

(Address by the Reverend Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC  
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THE PLACE OF CATHOLIC ALUMNAE IN THE WORLD TODAY

"And the Lord God said to the serpent: I will  
put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy  
seed and her seed, she shall crush thy head and thou  
shalt lie in wait for her heal." (Genesis 3:14-15)

I would like to speak to you alumnae this evening about Christian womanhood. Our text is taken from the earliest pages of human history. To many it brings us in the simple majestic language of God's revelation some of the most basic truths and situations of life. Indeed, much of modern writing, and even more of modern living, is very much akin to these first pages of the Old Testament, insofar as it treats so incessantly of men and women and the tensions between them; of evil today and the hope of a better tomorrow. Throughout modern writers and modern life echo the same cries of human anguish that were first heard in the Garden of Eden. There is the same spirit of evil, disguised, of course, but still lurking behind every scene, the hiding from God, the shame of sin, the search for someone or something to blame, the visiting of punishment upon the guilty, the hope of a better tomorrow.

None of these human realities were present during the first five days of creation, nor would they ever have been present had God halted His

creation short of man and woman. It takes man and woman to have evil in the world, just as it takes men and women to have any conscious good. Only men and women, of all God's earthly creatures, can know, love, and glorify God, only men and women can know evil, can sin, and dishonor God.

The whole history of men and women since Adam and Eve has been a story of honor and dishonor, of virtue and vice, of glory and degradation. God knew what He was making possible when He created human beings of intelligence, endowed with freedom of choice. To make the heights possible, He allowed the depths. To arrange a sunrise of glory, He had to permit the blackness of night.

One would surmise, from reading these early pages of human history, that while good or evil are possible choices in human life, evil is the more likely outcome, especially when there is a powerful spirit of evil afoot. One might surmise further, if this first venture into evil is symptomatic of human life, that man will not be helped particularly by the companionship of woman, except insofar as Adam was helped into evil by Eve. Adam indeed seems to make this the substance of the first ironic masculine remark in all history when he blames the first sin on the helpmate God had given him. Says Adam: "The woman whom thou gavest me to be my companion gave me of the tree and I did eat."

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Even if I had courage enough to propose such a thesis to this audience, I would not presume to do so, for the truth of the matter is otherwise. True, the first recorded influence of the woman is for evil, but God immediately reversed the trend and pronounced as a divinely ironical punishment for Satan that he, the tempter, the spirit of evil, who had deceived the first man by the first woman, would himself, in time, be crushed by a woman. There would be a lasting enmity between the woman and the spirit of evil, between her seed and his seed.

Is there not in this first story of human drama a clue to the true place of woman in the world. Is she not destined, after the prototype of that greatest of women, Mary, the new Eve, to be the gateway of the forces of good, the death to evil, the great inspirer in this age-long struggle for the souls of men?

To the more sophisticated of modern women, all of this may appear somewhat irrelevant, unless you believe, as we do, that in these first chapters of the Bible, God is giving us some clear insights into the pattern of human life for men and women living today in the real world of good and evil.

This real world of good and evil is the world in which you ~~will~~ live. There is no other possibility, no matter where you go, no matter what you do.

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in the years to come. As a woman, you will have an important influence upon this world. But here, you do have a choice. Your influence on the whole will be for good or for evil. There is no in between unless you cease to live. Indeed, when your lives are finished, this will be the judgment upon your life, that the world will have been better or worse for your having lived in it.

Of course, this has been true of your lives thus far, but it will continue to be true for the duration of your lives. Your organization is predicated on the fact that you have had a special educational preparation for life. However you view the matter, your whole education was aimed precisely at this: to develop in you all of those qualities of mind and heart that will prepare you to live well, to be an influence for good. I would submit to you today that all of this preparation might be summarized in your present consciousness of your role in the world today as mature Christian women, and in your willingness and ability to accept and fulfill this role. We cannot overemphasize this conscious acceptance of your role as Christian women. The fact is that there are many conflicting opinions today as to what woman's place is, or even as to whether or not woman does have a special role in the world.

One of the most dismal commentaries on modern womanhood is the result of a recent survey in which a majority of the women questioned admitted that if they had the choice of being reborn, they would prefer to be reborn men. This would seem to indicate that either these women had no idea of the exalted role of woman, or else they had so low idea of the place of woman, that being a woman held no interest for them. What good could possibly come from such a pathological feminine attitude towards life.

It may be helpful at this point to sketch some of the actual modern attitudes towards womanhood, if only by contrast to delineate more clearly the Christian pattern which has been the substance of your education.

One prevalent attitude towards woman regards her mainly as an ornament. Her whole value, in this point of view, depends upon her physical assets. In the ancient pagan world, this was called the cult of Aphrodite among the Greeks, the Venus among the Romans. In modern parlance, it might be called the Hollywood attitude, but in any case, it can be reduced to the deification of physical values to the exclusion of all others. This attitude is nurtured in a thousand ways, by every means of modern communication. Glance at any newspaper or magazine or television program. Every portrayal of woman is dedicated to this

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proposition - that only physical beauty is desirable and must be attained at any cost. If it is not possessed naturally, it must be falsified by every contrivance of human art and fashion. This is the gospel of salvation by physical beauty alone. And beauty once attained may be used for any purpose. Feminine beauty has become the universal advertising prop that sells anything from class C movies to motor oil.

Are women helped by all of this, or are they actually cheapened, used as any chattal, or any harem girl, as a means to an end. And do women better themselves as persons, or better the world either, when they are seduced into spending **ten** times the effort developing their bodies as they spend on their souls, their minds, and their hearts?

You should understand that there is nothing wrong with beauty, even physical beauty. God, Himself, contrived the consummate bodily beauty of Eve, who alone captured the heart of Adam after he had viewed all the wonders of creation that preceded her. But God made woman more than a body. If not, you have wasted your college years in classroom and chapel, and could have used your days to better advantage in a beauty parlor.

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The main objection to the Hollywood version of woman is that it builds up the shadow at the expense of the substance, glories at the obvious beauty of the body and misses the more wondrous beauty of the soul within.

Given that inner beauty of soul, there will be a greater radiance of womanhood than all the cosmetics of the world can produce. Without this inner beauty of soul, woman is but a shell, glistening perhaps, but empty.

I can think of no better answer to the Hollywood attitude than the words of divine wisdom found in the Epistle of the Mass for married women saints - "Who shall find a valiant woman? far and from the uttermost coasts is the price of her. The heart of her husband trusteth in her, and he shall have no need of spoils. She will render him good and not evil all the days of her life....strength and beauty are her clothing....She hath opened her mouth to wisdom, and the law of mercy is on her tongue. She hath looked well to the paths of her house, and hath not eaten her bread idle. Her children rose up and called her blessed; her husband, and he praised her. Many daughters have gathered together riches; thou hast surpassed them all. Favor is deceitful and beauty is vain; the woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates."  
(Proverbs, 31:10-31)

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There is another, newer attitude towards the place of woman in the world. Perhaps it is less common, more difficult to categorize, but it, too, falls far short of the grand plan that God had in mind when He created woman. This second attitude uses man as the scale for evaluating woman. You might call it the Spartan or Amazon mentality. In a word, it views woman as the natural competitor of man. Woman is given a kind of exaltation if she can do everything a man can do. Some call it feminism; some call it emancipation, as though somehow woman had to be freed from being what she is, a woman, and somehow liberated to act the part of a man.

In more glamorized array, woman becomes the career girl, in less glamorized form, we find the girl in slacks sitting at a bar, as though there were some new dignity or preeminence in this. Strangely enough, although the woman who achieves this freedom may think herself in some way extraordinary, the fact is that she is lonely at heart, and often despised as only a man can despise a mannish woman. The whole picture brings to mind the humorous statement that twenty million women said that they wouldn't be dictated to by a man, so they went out into the world of business and became stenographers.

It is easier to deal with the competitive idea of feminism if we look



first to the truth that woman indeed is not a second-rate person, compared to man, a miscarried man as the Greek philosopher said. Woman is every bit as good as man, but in her own way, which is not the way of man, with her own high purpose, which is other than man's. But what is this true role of womanhood? Not, I think, in competing with man, but rather in complementing the work of man in this world. Together man and woman make this world. Let us admit that man alone would make a poor world, indeed no world at all, without woman.

Once more we can find a clue in the first pages of human history, in the story of the first man and woman. After all, if man were to be the only standard of human excellence, God might have done better to have stopped His creation with Adam. But the fact is, Adam was none too happy after his creation, when he was alone, a solitary human being on earth. God recognized this when He said: "It is not good for man to be alone: let us make him a helper like unto himself." (Genesis, 3:18) You will note that God did not say, "Let us make him a helper identical to himself, another man!" Eve, the woman, was designed by God Himself to fill up what was lacking in man. She was named the mother of all the living. She was not only made physically different from man,

but more importantly, psychologically different. True, she had all the qualities of mind and will that made Adam human, but she had them, ~~in~~, let us say, <sup>in</sup> a womanly way. There was to her that undefinable feminine spirit without which the world of man would be largely empty, barren, and loveless - a kind of monstrous cosmic Army barracks. You may have difficulty defining this feminine spirit, but no man has difficulty in imagining how dull the world would be without it. A man may not be able to define this spirit, but he will never mistake it or fail to need or recognize it. Cast the word "spirit" into another word and you have the best approximation of the role of woman in the world - inspiration.

It is rather easy to describe this work of inspiration in the womanly role of wife and mother, and sister. Take these functions out of the world of man and what is left - utter barrenness.

Try if you will to picture Constantine without Helen, Augustine without Monica, Clovis without Clotilde, Benedict without Scholastica, Pope Gregory without the Countess Mathilda, King Louis without Blanche of Castile, Dante without Beatrice, Francis of Assisi without St. Clare, the Dauphin without Joan of Arc, Columbus without Isabella, John of the Cross without Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales without Madame Jeanne de Chantal.

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Without these great women, these noble inspirers, you have men of lesser stature. But if you wish the classic example of woman's place in the world think for a moment of that greatest human person who ever lived, she who undid the work of Eve and left womanhood forever on a high pinnacle of glory.

It sounds startling at first, but without Mary we would not have Christ, Our Saviour, as we know Him, or His redemption, or the Church, or the Sacraments, or the divinely human love of Christ that we call the Sacred Heart. It was upon her fiat that the Word became flesh. It was flesh of her flesh in which God took human form and walked this earth and lived and died for us. What greater dignity or beauty or work than this? In the words of a priest-poet:

Mary, the Mother of Jesus  
A lady of high degree  
Sat by her cottage spinning  
In Nazareth of Galilee.

Busy her foot on the treadle  
And her wheel busily whirled  
As a child looked out from the doorway  
A child who had made the world.

Deftly she handled the distaff  
And happily whirred her wheel  
As the child came down from the doorway  
And ran at her side to kneel.

"Mother," He said as He watched her  
There while she sat and spun  
"Somethings are more fair than I dreamed them  
The day that I made the sun.

"And you are My heart of all beauty  
My star of all seas, of all lands -"  
"Hush, Child," whispered Mary, His Mother,  
Her tears falling down on His Hands.

(The Spinner, Rev. Charles O'Donnell, C.S.C. )

Is Mary too high an ideal for you Catholic alumnae? Failing her, what will you choose: the hard glittering garish beauty who is all poverty within, soulless; or the mannish, antiseptic career girl? Mary was a Virgin, a wife, a mother. No other woman can be all of these at once, but every woman can, in her own times and in her own way, be the gateway to good, the beauty within, the consecrated virgin or the devoted wife and mother. No woman can be less, and still realize the full potentiality of her womanhood, the grand plan of God in creating woman.

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I would call your attention to a touching editorial, in LIFE magazine, of all places. The Christmas issue spoke beautifully of Our Lady, Notre Dame, if I might be permitted a commercial - since without Mary there would have been no Christmas:

"In the Gospels, woman's great role is represented by Jesus' mother, whose joy this season celebrates. By her free assent to Gabriel's message, the Virgin Mary made it possible for Jesus to be the son of man as well as of God. Her lines in the Gospel are few, but so crucial and beautiful that they earned her the name of Queen of Heaven, 'clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet.' As Christianity spread, a special veneration grew around Mary, sweetening the harsh life of the Middle Ages, inspiring whole areas of the Renaissance. Even the American Puritan Henry Adams felt her Gothic power 'to the last fibre of his being.'

"The virginity of Mary is vulgarly received as a counsel of lifelong sexual perfection, as though it were the highest Christian calling. Of course it is not. Love is; and Mary represents the human capacity for love at its

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fullest. She represents that source and nursery of love, the human family, where man and wife, mother and child, father and son, brother and brother first learn the meanings of the great word.

"But much as one must praise the diverse accomplishments of saintly women, the inspiration of Jesus' mother is not for saints only and need not lead so far from home. If woman, 'the sum and complex of all nature,' has one role more important than her others, it is the one symbolized by Mary as a source of love. Only as women guard the art and guide the quest of love can mankind know all the kinds and heights of love of which they are capable. The art and the quest begin in the family and end at God's feet."

The simple truth is that, through woman, God has provided the harsh world of man with true beauty, the warmth of love, devotion, and inspiration. Without mature Christian womanhood, patterned after the timeless example of Mary, the world will lack the subtle sensitivity that has brought culture from coarseness, knighthood from brutality, honor from unregenerate manhood. Bad women have brought the opposite of all these finer human qualities; good women have restored these Christian values whenever they were in danger of being lost to mankind.

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In the end it comes to this, a bad woman will ruin a good man, and a good woman will redeem a bad man. The woman in the world is the difference. She is the barometer with whom the world rises and falls.

I know a girl who graduated from college some years ago, as most of you did. She did not know the potentialities of her womanhood at that time. I fear she had much of the superficial polish that we call culture today. Many of her gods were pagan, though in her heart of hearts she was a Christian, who had the notion, without the conviction of Christian womanhood.

She married a man who, despite his Catholic college education, showed much of the same preoccupation with triviality that her own Catholic college training had somehow left intact.

Motherhood brought her better qualities to the surface, as fatherhood did his. And then, like a budding flower, her Christian womanhood began to assert itself. The realization of Christian marriage with its deep spiritual values and graces so largely undeveloped became the passion of her life and his. Nor did her influence stop with her own marriage.

Soon they gathered other families around them in an ever-increasing

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Christian Family Movement. Today, the young couples who have been prepared for marriage in the pre-marriage conferences they organized must be numbered by the tens of thousands throughout many countries. The family retreats they first organized have reached into the depths of many other thousands of marriages, and have renewed them as the morning dew refreshes a tired and dusty earth. The family groups they organized have spread around the world to make countless homes a new sanctuary of peace and love in which children are welcomed as Jesus was into the arms of Mary and Joseph. All this has happened in a decade and is largely due to the influence of a woman who became conscious of her womanhood and used her womanhood to inspire in an area deeply needing inspiration.

The world today has, as we have said earlier, all the tensions between men and women, all the drama of the struggle between good and evil that existed in the Garden of Eden. The difference here is that much has happened since - Christ has come, a new Adam, and Mary, a new Eve. In Mary, and in all women who follow her, God has a chosen adversary against all evil, a powerfully inspiring force for good. You cannot cast all brutality from the world today, but you can soften it, if you will. You cannot cast out the coarseness that runs as an evil

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grain through modern life, but you can bring forth the gentle breath of Christian womanly influence, that like the sun in Springtime, brings radiant flowers from a muck field. You cannot deeply affect millions of women who degrade or defeminize themselves, but you can be the kind of woman who, in a thousand little ways, serves Christ as Mary did, and, in serving Christ, you will grant Him rebirth in all with whom you live and work.

The world, bad as it is today, can be much better tomorrow, if you carry forth <sup>into the world</sup> ~~from this place~~ this lasting lesson: a pride in your womanhood, a consecration to God's plan for you as a woman, and the spirit of Jesus and Mary in your hearts.