

WHAT WOMEN WANT

'Buffy,' the pope & the new feminists

Cathleen Kaveny

In his 1995 *Letter to Women*, Pope John Paul II calls for a dialogue about the situation and challenges facing women. He addresses himself to all women, not just those who are Catholic, and still less to that subset of Catholic women who agree with his formulation of a "new feminism." The pope's feminism celebrates the advances women have made in the economic and political spheres even as it promotes traditional ideas about the nature and vocation of women, which are rooted in his conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the perfect exemplar of the "feminine genius" so desperately needed to humanize the world today.

The pope's tone is not crabby and defensive, but open-minded and appreciative. In fact, the letter begins with a litany of gratitude to and for women who occupy a wide variety of roles in their families, their communities, and the world. Who would be a good dialogue partner, within the context of American culture, for those Catholics who wish to explore the pope's new feminism? I would like to propose Buffy Summers, the protagonist of the popular television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.

I'm not kidding. *Buffy*, which ended a seven-season run in May, is not mere mind candy. (Four seasons are now available on DVD, and a fifth is due in December.) Philosophers, theologians, literary critics, and scientists write about *Buffy* (see Maxine Phillips, page 38). Secular feminists and conservative Catholics argue passionately about what *Buffy's* extraordinary popularity may mean. The brainchild of the talented Joss Whedon (a writer of *Toy Story*), the "Buffyverse" (the metaphysical and moral world of the show) operates as an extended metaphor for the problems faced by middle-class teenagers, particularly girls. Whedon knows that high school and college are not the carefree prelude to real life as popular culture generally portrays them. Rather, they are real life's most intense and dangerous phase: negotiating them successfully requires a strong moral character, the loyalty, honesty, and compassion of friends and family, and sometimes a bit of supernatural grace. As it turns out, we all live in the Buffyverse, no matter what our age.

Why is *Buffy* an important interlocutor for the "new feminism" inspired by John Paul II? Because the two have enough in common for the discussion to be fruitful. The pope rejects

sexism, as well as both "sameness" and "separatist" feminism, for the same basic reason: they undermine the dignity of women because they are untrue to the complex reality of the nature and situation of women. So does *Buffy*, but with snappier dialogue and better clothes.

Spending some quality time in the Buffyverse would also help the pope and the new feminists avoid three pitfalls marring their work. First, in their efforts to escape the distortions of the old feminism, such as its dismissive attitude toward traditional female roles as caregivers or mothers, some new feminists have come close to embracing the old sexism. Second, in attempting to highlight the positive aspects of the church's teaching on sexual matters in a culture that alternately glorifies and trivializes sexuality as a form of self-gratification, new feminists sidestep the dark and raw doubts about passion, love, and commitment that are increasingly part of the experience of many young people. Third, in their promotion of the dignity of the vocation of women, in particular the vocation of many women to motherhood, those championing the pope's views perpetuate several false dichotomies about the character traits associated with women, the roles available to them, and even the meaning of vocation itself.

The basic challenge for a new feminism—for any Catholic feminism—is to transcend these dichotomies. It needs to show how one and the same woman can be both strong and



She likes her stake well done.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY FOX

Cathleen Kaveny teaches law and theology at the University of Notre Dame.

sensitive to the needs of others, and in particular how being a good mother does not exclude (and in fact may require) a tough-minded independence and worldly competence. It also needs to proclaim unambiguously that a vocation is a personal call, given by God to each person, freely to embrace—and freely to create—her own destiny, which will involve both self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment in service to others. A true vocation is not an impersonal demand to conform to the cookie-cutter requirements of outdated conceptions of particular roles, whether nun, mother, teacher, or engineer.

Gender & pretty pink bows

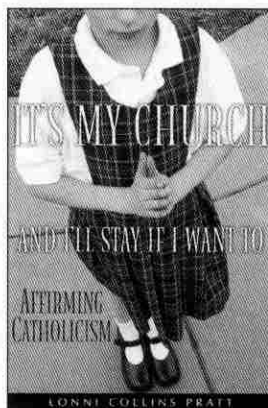
Buffy Summers has such a vocation. She is also a delicate-looking blonde who attends high school (and later college) in Southern California. She has every qualification necessary to be prom queen. Her problem, you might say, is that she is *overqualified*; she also happens to be the Slayer, the one girl of her generation endowed with the supernatural strength and speed necessary to fight vampires, demons, and other evil forces (how else to describe the social pressures of high school?) preying on human beings.

Being the Slayer can drastically interfere with social life, particularly if your hometown is set directly over a hellmouth, an entrance to the underworld ruled by all variety of demon life. Not only does Buffy have to spend a lot of time patrolling dark and dank cemeteries, resulting in disheveled hair and missed dates, but she needs to run through the whirling blades of a double-edged set of preconceptions. On the one hand, her fragile appearance, and even her name, do not correspond well with her vocation as a vampire slayer. On the other, her powers haven't proved to be a guy magnet. Even basically decent boys in the Buffyverse tend to resent strong girls, or at least to shy away from them.

Despite her unique vocation, Buffy's problem is not unique. It is the problem of many young women attempting to come to terms with the various and complicated facets of their personalities. In an effort to avoid sex-based stereotypes, an earlier generation of feminists proposed the norm of "mutuality" (reciprocal respect and care) as a way to evaluate relationships among all people, including between men and women. The norm played down the significance of sexual differences, in order to highlight character traits that men and women were acknowledged to hold in common, some of which (such as intelligence and determination) were previously associated only with men.

Yet for many young women today, the norm of a gender-free "mutuality" fails to account for the deep sense of attraction—and difference—they experience with respect to men. The norm also seems constraining, especially coming from a movement dedicated to the liberation of women, because it suggests that strength and success require the renunciation of all traditional feminine behavior and interests.

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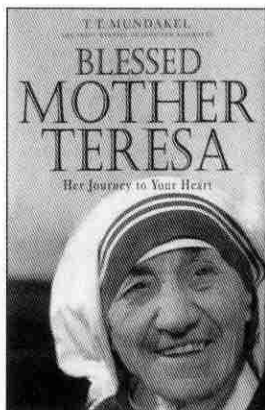
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Is there a feminist alternative? In the abstract, the notion of gender “complementarity” embraced by John Paul II seems (and is) very attractive. Gender complementarity emphasizes that men and women are different but that they need each other. Frequently (though more frequently in the writings of the new feminists than in papal writings), it goes one step further, attempting to define a set of corresponding and mutually exclusive “masculine” and “feminine” traits.

It is this aspect of “gender complementarity” that may seem useful to girls like Buffy, who take for granted their equality with men but worry about preserving their attractiveness to them. Buffy knows that from time immemorial, for reasons now inscrutable, the Slayer must be a young woman. She therefore knows the deep and real compatibility of her femininity and her strength, but she learns from experience that some boys can be so threatened by the latter that they cannot see the former. In their eyes, her strength means their weakness, their weakness means their lack of masculinity, and their lack of masculinity means her lack of femininity. Frustrated by the fragility of the male ego, Buffy wonders whether her love life would be more satisfying if she could become a stereotypically feminine “fancy girl.”

In “Halloween,” an episode from *Buffy’s* second season, she gets the chance to find out. The nature of a “fancy girl” is symbolized by the eighteenth-century dress that Buffy rents from a costume shop, in the wistful hope that her boyfriend Angel (a “good” vampire—he has a soul—who lived his mortal life during that era) would like her better. Truly, the dress is nothing short of fabulous: a satin-and-lace confection in shades of rose and pink, with pretty pink bows adorning the ivory lace framing its bodice. “Princess” Buffy is one fancy girl, but there is a catch. The costumes from that particular shop are cursed. The wearer *becomes* the stereotypical character symbolized by the costume, her own personality trapped and muted, because it is frozen inside the constraints associated with rigid and traditional notions of gender complementarity.

In the “feminine” world of lacy outfits and pretty pink bows, the character of a woman is primarily defined by what she *may not be* (anything stereotypically associated with men), rather than by what she herself *is*. One way to get a handle on what is at stake when women play this role is revealed in a passage from a recent book titled *New Woman* (Circle Press), in which the new feminist Gloria Conde attempts to give substance to the ideal of gender complementarity. Quoting Judith M. Bardwick, she writes:

The “masculine” is equivalent to the objective, analytical, active, inclined to thought, rational, indomitable, interfering, one who obstructs, independent, self-sufficient, emotionally controlled, and self-assured. With his mind, the man distinguishes, analyzes, separates, and perfects. The “feminine” corresponds to the subjective, intuitive, passive, tender, sensitive, easily influenced, docile, receptive, empathetic, dependent,

emotional, and conservative. Her mind picks up relations, she possesses intuitive perception of sentiments, and she tends to unite rather than divide.

Not even an introduction by Mary Ann Glendon, the Harvard law professor who headed the Vatican’s delegation to the Fourth UN Women’s Conference in Beijing, can save *New Woman* and the narrow stereotypes it celebrates. Real women do not fit into the binary categories of Gloria Conde. For a woman to force herself to conform to such expectations is self-destructive and dangerous. “Princess” Buffy finds that out the hard way. Without protection by a man who is both strong *and* virtuous, a “fancy girl” is incredibly vulnerable. Dependent and subservient, “Princess” Buffy is nearly ravished by the costumed alter ego of a football player she had previously vanquished.

Later, “Princess” Buffy quivers before the vampire Spike, who remarks: “Look at you. Shaking. Terrified. Alone. A lost little lamb. I love it.” Then, as he prepares to bite Buffy, the spell is broken: she gracefully arises and deftly fends him off, signaling her rejection of a dependent and vulnerable role. Yet, in a recognizably contemporary twist, she retains her femininity in the fight; the beautiful dress survives intact. Picking up her stake again with relish, she remarks, “It’s good to be me.”

Yet we also know that sometimes it’s not so great to be this new kind of woman. The strength of *Buffy* is its refusal to rest easy with *any* pat response, even a politically correct one. At the end of the episode, Buffy’s boyfriend Angel reassures her that he found the women of the eighteenth century to be “simpering morons.” We have no reason to think he’s lying. Yet how representative of today’s twenty-year-old men are Angel’s enlightened views? A few years later, when Buffy is in college, her mortal boyfriend Riley, who also fights demons, leaves her. He leaves her in large part because he is unable to deal with the fact that she is better at their job than he is. Being the Slayer—being strong, being responsible—*can* be bad for your love life. It’s just that the alternative—stifling your gifts, denying the fullness of your vocation—can be worse for your life as a whole.

Sex, love, & bad boys

Only the willfully blind could fail to acknowledge the real agonies that the sexual revolution of the 1960s brought in its wake. As with any revolution, the brunt fell on the most vulnerable: divorced, middle-aged women suddenly found themselves without resources in a culture where the rules of matrimony had changed midstream; many children were raised in the acrimony and instability of a crumbling or broken marriage; and adolescents were expected to navigate their way to sexual maturity and a stable, intimate relationship in a world that extolled the freedom of sexual expression but ignored its emotional and psychological dangers.



Who wouldn't want to find a way to make these demons go away? Some Catholics, like seminary professor Christopher West and theologian Mary Shivanandan (*Crossing the Threshold of Love: A New Vision of Marriage in the Light of John Paul II's Anthropology*, Catholic University of America Press), believe they have found the answer in the "theology of the body," which they have developed out of the phenomenological anthropology proposed by John Paul II. One might call it the sexual ethics of the new feminism. The theology of the body integrates key features of Catholic sexual teaching (especially the prohibition against contraception) into a full-blown anthropology centered on the complete complementarity of men and women on the physical, psychological, and social levels. Equal but distinct, man and woman are created by God with the capacity to give themselves totally to one another, body and mind, heart and soul. This capacity for mutual self-gift is perfectly fulfilled in an act of sexual intercourse between husband and wife that is open to the creation of new life. By living your married life according to Catholic teaching, you can harmoniously integrate pleasure and procreation, friendship and desire, commitment and contentment. There are no sharp edges, no loose ends.

Of course, those retailing the theology of the body acknowledge that not everyone's life or marriage corresponds to this idealized picture. They chalk a good portion of this fact up to personal sin. The solution? Get married young,

never use contraception, accept your God-given sex role, and your life will be better—your lovemaking will be better; your relationship with your spouse will be better; and your metaphysical identity as a man or woman will be better. Sounds good, but what if things are not better? Or what if the ineliminable consequences of your own sins, the sins of other people, bad luck, or bad timing mean that you can never live this lovely picture of metaphysical and sexual harmony?

The theologians of the body have an answer. Tightly grasping that picture of sexual harmony and existential bliss in one hand, they gesture awkwardly to the need for suffering and the way of the cross with the other. In their idealized world, sin, suffering, grace, redemption, and the possibility for self-sacrifice may somehow coexist, but they are never intermingled. And therein lies the problem. In real life—especially in real marriages—they intermingle all the time. Our sense of brokenness can give rise to an unholy as well as holy longing; our restless stirrings can both animate our contentment and threaten to destroy it. Traditional Catholic realism has always known this. We do not know our heart's desire, and we do not have the strength, or sometimes even the will, to grasp it when we think it fleetingly appears. Yet, in the strangest moments, in the oddest situations, we can experience some wisp of peace, some taste of the possibility of redemption. Divine grace follows God's plans, not ours.

A compatible realism is at work in *Buffy*. *Buffy* is not *Gidget*. The teenagers and twentysomethings on the show do

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have sexual relationships, but unlike most television shows these days, *Buffy* does not pretend that those relationships are without consequence, especially for the moral character of those involved. On her seventeenth birthday, Buffy loses her virginity in a night of passion with Angel, who, after losing his soul, reverts at sunrise to his old demonic self, in accordance with a gypsy curse that prohibits him from experiencing true mortal happiness.

Other characters are similarly denied both the "happily ever after" they desire in a sexual relationship, and the capacity to extinguish that desire once and for all. Prompted

even for *Bad Boys*. In the series finale, we find the vampire Spike (yes, *that* Spike), now ensouled, now redeemed, and now sacrificing himself, his arms stretched out cruciform, to prevent the apocalyptic victory of the First Evil. His was not a straight road. Over the course of time, his raw desire to possess and dominate Buffy sexually was transformed into a dark and unstable love (he once tried to rape her), which in turn, with his acquisition of a soul, was painfully deepened and purified, finally becoming, in this instant, a selfless love of good—the same good for which his beloved Buffy has sacrificed herself on so many other occasions.

To encourage young people to believe that with a lot of hard work and a little bit of suffering, they too can have a relationship like the one between prelapsarian Adam and Eve is deceptive and cruel.

by the ghosts of his own parents' unhappy marriage, Buffy's mortal friend Xander leaves his fiancée Anya at the altar, propelling her to resume her former identity as a vengeance demon. The powerful witch Willow, possessed by grief and anger when her lover Tara is senselessly murdered, sets out on a mad plan to destroy the world. In the end what saves her, and the world itself, is not eros, but agape: the unconditional and selfless love shown her by Xander, a regular mortal guy, a carpenter, and her friend since kindergarten. As the episode ends, with a bleeding Xander comforting a broken Willow, we hear Sarah McLachlan in the background, softly singing the Prayer of St. Francis.

This isn't to suggest that *Buffy* is some sort of racy after-school special, dramatizing a bourgeois caution about the dangers of sexual intimacy in a way calculated to appeal to today's youth. As Thomas Hibbs has perceptively noted, the show has deep roots in film noir with its recognition that separating the light from the dark in human hearts is harder than it looks. The show does not shrink from an honest exploration of the roots of our choices in the restless and sometimes contradictory longings of hearts and souls.

BUFFY: I have to get away from that Bad Boy thing. Hello to the pain.

WILLOW: The pain is not a friend.

BUFFY: But I can't help thinking, isn't that where the fire comes from? Can a nice, safe relationship be that intense? I know it's nuts but some part of me believes real love and passion have to go hand in hand with pain and fighting.

Buffy draws us straight into the darker realms of sexuality and relationships that the theology of the body works so hard to keep at a distance. Yet, as Catholic faith also assures us, those realms are not devoid of all hope of redemption,

Like the denizens of the Buffyverse, most people have some sense of how intimately—and sometimes unexpectedly—sin, sorrow, grace, and hope intertwine in the realms of sex and love. Would the theologians of the body be able to have an honest, open conversation with them? I have my doubts. Most seem to demand conversion, not conversation. For example, Christopher West's response (www.christopherwest.com) to Luke Timothy Johnson's recent critique of the pope's theology of the body (*Commonweal*, January 26, 2001) boils down to the claim that Johnson "just doesn't 'get it.'" According to West, "Johnson can't see the original experience of the body, but the pope can and does." If only Johnson had "tapped into those 'echoes' in his own heart" of that experience, he would agree with the pope. Case closed, at least for West.

It's worth spending some time thinking about *why* it seems so difficult to engage some theologians of the body in an honest conversation. It would not be wrong, I think, to say that they are too naively romantic, or too lost in the tributaries of philosophical idealism, or too fixated on church teaching on contraception. Still, the fundamental problem, in my view, is squarely theological: they make the mistake of eliding the original state of grace with the state of redemption. The touchstone for the theologians of the body is the relationship of men and women *before* the Fall. West, for example, chides Johnson for being "locked in his fallen view and unable to cross the threshold back to 'the beginning.'"

We are not called to retreat to Eden, but rather to move forward in pilgrimage toward the New Jerusalem. Redemption does not erase sin; it transfigures it. Redemption does not gesture distantly at brokenness; it conscripts it into the service of salvation and new life. To encourage young people to believe that with a lot of hard work and a little bit of suffering, they too can have a relationship like the one between prelapsarian Adam and Eve is deceptive and cruel. It is also the road to despair. Transfixed by the illusory promises of a return to the purity of creation, they may be blind to the possibilities for a gritty but real redemption in their own lives.

Vocation & false choices

The struggle over women's roles—middle-class America's very own Thirty Years War—is not over yet. According to a recent survey by the Center for the Advancement of Women, a large percentage of women say that stay-at-home mothers and working mothers "often" or "sometimes" look down on each other. There is no shortage of wounds, or salt to rub in them, on either side.

Early on, it seemed that the most prominent new feminists wanted to call a truce: Mary Ann Glendon and fellow Vatican delegate and Norwegian politician Janne Matlary emphasized the talents, concerns, and vulnerabilities common to both sides. They also put the debate in a broader perspective: after all, most women around the world were worried about sheer survival, not about deciding whether to stay home or go to work. Their focus was pragmatic: build a coalition to make a better world for everyone, especially the most vulnerable.

Lately, though, it seems that the new feminists have moved away from coalition building in order to enter the fray. Why? Blame it on metaphysics. In *Women in Christ* (forthcoming from Eerdmans), the first major academic anthology of new feminism, several authors focus on Edith Stein's philosophical reflections on feminine nature or Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological reflections on the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the perfect woman. The new feminists enthusiastically embrace passages from both mid-twentieth-century thinkers that come too close to old gender stereotypes for comfort. The practical upshot is clear: Women—all women—should make a choice. Either they can be mothers, primarily concerned with home and hearth (at least while the children are young), or they can be virgins (lay or in religious life), primarily concerned with humanizing the secular world. Both ways are acknowledged to be equally valid expressions of a woman's vocation, although the principal merit of the life of virginity seems to be that it allows a woman to be a mother in a more generalized way. Mixing and matching, however, is strongly discouraged. One Virgin Mother is all that is allowed; one Virgin Mother is all that is needed.

The irony of this dogmatically metaphysical new feminism is that it is susceptible to precisely the same charge that Glendon levied against old-line secular feminism such as that of Betty Friedan: it subordinates the complexities of real women's lives to its own ideological goals. At best, the authors in *Women in Christ* will play quietly and unnoticed with the pretty concepts in their metaphysical dollhouse. At worst, they will lead many working mothers to conclude that the church doesn't appreciate their lives, their attempts to be faithful to their own *unique* vocations in Christ, because they don't fit—and don't want to fit—the metaphysical picture concocted by philosopher-theologians like Stein and

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von Balthasar. For these new feminists, if working mothers are working because they have to, they are to be looked upon with pity; if they are working because they want to, they are to be looked upon with suspicion.

In fact, some new feminists strongly imply that a woman who voluntarily assumes substantial work outside the home is selfishly sacrificing her children for her career. To put the issue this way is to distort what is at stake, especially for Catholics. It's not about *career*. It's about *vocation*, which both the modern world and the church agree involves both self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment in the service of others. Is it possible that many a woman has a vocation with two distinct poles of concern, one directed toward her own family, the other more broadly toward the community? Is it possible that at least some of the inevitable difficulties of being both a mother and a job holder, the robbing Peter to pay Paul, the exhaustion—are rightly endured, because they are the side-effects of fidelity to a complicated calling?

How can anyone have a vocation that incorporates some elements traditionally associated with virginity and others traditionally associated with motherhood? Here is where Buffy can be helpful, can show us a way to mix and match. Like many American women her age, she qualifies—at least literally—neither as virgin nor as mother. Yet no one could be further from the stereotypical “selfish” secular feminist implicitly criticized by the pope and others. The series is *about* vocation; it explores what it means for Buffy to *be* a vampire slayer, not merely to slay vampires for fun or profit. It shows her struggling to live up to the demands of the role, sacrificing the usual teenage pleasures to meet her unusual responsibilities. It also shows her growth in competence, wisdom, and confidence, and her eventual realization that the sacrifices are worth it. In exploring the meaning of vocation, the show suggests ways of overcoming several dichotomies that hamper a creative and humane response to the contemporary situation of women.

The most fundamental dichotomy the series overcomes is between being chosen and choosing. Just as a brilliant scientist or a phenomenal athlete chooses to acknowledge and to accept responsibility for developing her innate gifts, Buffy *chooses* to accept her calling and the responsibilities involved. In this way, the show deftly calls into question our society's entrenched opposition between unchosen responsibilities and self-determination. It demonstrates how impoverished, how unimaginative it is to think that women who want to develop their talents and who prize their autonomy are merely self-regarding. We are each called to an individual vocation, not to the identical vocation.

Moreover, Buffy's true response to the vocation of the Slayer changes essentially—but also authentically—what it means to *be* the Slayer. Her commitment to her vocation, her embodiment of the virtues proper to it, enable her to develop to meet the changing needs of those whom she is

called to serve. Like a woman lawyer, doctor, or minister, Buffy helps redefine her profession. According to ancient prophecy, the Slayer must forgo all connection to family and friends, all home of intimacy and warmth. Only then will she be able to fight the forces of darkness effectively. In other words, she must be the female equivalent of the Marlboro Man: strong, independent, and solitary. But over the course of the series, Buffy figures out how to get the job done in another way. She loves both her family and her friends. Far from being a hindrance to her work, they become indispensable in her fight against evil. For example, in one episode, Buffy allows her own physical strength to be combined with the superior mind, heart, and spirit of her friends, in order to defeat an otherwise invincible foe. Carol Gilligan could not have done a better job promoting the feminist value of collaboration. Still, Buffy recognizes that each of us is alone in responding faithfully to our call.

In living out her vocation, Buffy also transcends the dichotomy between virginity and motherhood. Her independence and strength of character do not undermine her ability to nurture; in fact, they support it in difficult situations. When the pope, and many of the new feminists, speak of motherhood, they seem to be romantically focusing on babies and small children. What about caring for adolescents? Successfully raising a teenage girl to fulfill her own vocation requires a remarkable combination of strength and restraint, challenge and affirmation—an independence and self-possession typically associated with the life of virginity. Buffy knows this from both sides; she battles with her mother, who struggled to accept the fact that her daughter was the Slayer, and later on, she battles with her younger sister Dawn, whom she was left to raise alone after her mother's death.

The show does not shy away from conflicts between Buffy's role as the Slayer and her role as Dawn's sister/mother. Nowhere are these more acute than at the end of season 5, where Buffy seems to face an impossible choice: sacrifice her sister, or allow the entire world, including Dawn, to be overrun by demon dimensions of reality. Buffy simply refuses to choose. She willingly forfeits her own life in order to save Dawn.

In Buffy's free gift of herself, we see the dichotomy between self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment overcome; we glimpse the true meaning of vocation. There is no bitterness, only active acceptance. Buffy wants Dawn not to be haunted by her sacrifice, but to go on in freedom to accept her own vocation. Her parting words to her sister embody the ethos of the series. “I love you. I will always love you. But this is the work that I have to do. You have to take care of them now. You have to take care of each other. The hardest thing in this world...is to live in it. Be brave. Live...for me.”

The pope himself might have said these words. The task of the new feminism that he has inspired is to show how they might be truly spoken by any woman who responds faithfully to God's call, no matter what the shape of her individual vocation. □

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