

## Spiritual Essay

# 'THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN'

## New Wine and Old Wineskins

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### *Introduction*

AS A TOPIC FOR DISCUSSION, virtue has become more and more popular in recent years.<sup>1</sup> No doubt this renewed interest is due, in part, to a perception that our society seems singularly lacking in this arena. But it may also be due to our growing realization that much past talk about virtue was perceived as unattractive and irrelevant. In particular, the term 'virtuous woman' conjured up a vision of a dull, non-assertive, non-self-possessed 'goody-goody' – the polar opposite of what many Christian women were striving to become.

Further, traditional understandings of virtue, grace and sin are heavily dependent on the experiences of men, making them potentially problematic and even dangerous for women.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, women have begun to attend to their distinctive experiences of grace, sin, God and virtue. With time and perseverance, the data of women's experience will become part of the Christian tradition, no doubt altering it in significant ways. While every person's experiences are unique, the inclusion of women's experience along with a fresh assessment of men's experience will surely produce a truer, more cogent and compelling Christianity.

In this article I explore ways in which traditional ideas about virtue have been detrimental to women; suggest some avenues for the recovery of a truer, more appealing understanding of virtue; and discuss four particular virtues that are important both for women and for the whole Church at this moment in our history.

To begin, what is virtue? Virtue can be defined as a characteristic way of behaving that brings good both to the individual and to the community. Ultimately, the practice of virtue leads to the fullness of our humanity (i.e. holiness) that has been fashioned in the image and likeness of God. I use the term 'pseudo-virtue' to describe those behaviours that *appear* on the surface to be virtue, but that in fact are counterfeit. How has the exclusion of women's experience of virtue affected women, and the community's ideas about virtue? Getting some clarity about the problems will aid in our attempts at solutions.

### *The problem*

What are some of the effects on women of the Church's teaching on virtue and vice? As we have noted, because our ideas are based primarily in men's experience, women find it difficult to discover what their experience really is.

Too often men's experience of virtue and vice is projected onto women. Some of these projections contain qualities men reject in themselves – what psychologists call the 'dark side', e.g. lust and promiscuity. In this case, male lust is projected onto women who are then described as prostitutes or 'loose women'. As a result, women are not seen adequately by men or by themselves as individual, real, embodied, historical persons – agents in the complex struggle of the virtuous life. Instead, women are identified with impersonal 'types'. Ironically, the two most common 'types' assigned to women are diametrically opposed – a woman is seen either as Eve or as Mary, in the gutter or on a pedestal. In significant ways, these associations reflect men's perceptions of women and do not emerge from women's actual experience.

This state of affairs creates significant dangers for women. We have what we might call a 'reversal', that is, what the Church often presented as virtue, in fact functioned in some women's lives as its opposite – pseudo-virtue, or more strongly, vice. Likewise, what we heard about vice, e.g. pride, often described qualities that, *in some form*, would be virtuous for women to develop. As the following example will show, when women followed the Church's directives about virtue, the very opposite often resulted.<sup>3</sup> These faulty perspectives jeopardize women's ability to enter fully and authentically into the very dynamics of the spiritual life, and to participate freely and responsibly in the redemptive process. As a concrete example of this reversal, let us look briefly at the virtue of generosity.<sup>4</sup>

In many ways, the virtue of generosity has become associated in special ways with women. Generous behaviour is a wonderful gift possessed by many women, but it is also a virtue that can become deeply problematic for women's moral development. Generosity is an especially attractive charism in the human community. It is frightening to imagine a world without it. And women are good at it. But because it almost always 'looks good' on the surface, it can be difficult to see its potential dark side for women.

The constant exhortation to and reinforcement of the virtue of generosity leads some women to become deeply identified with it. It becomes a vested interest, to be protected at all costs. The 'generous persona' involves cultural and personal expectations of what it means to be a 'good wife', a 'good mother', a 'good sister'. To suggest that a woman is selfish is often received as the highest insult. But if one is attending closely to women's experience, one realizes that often the foundation that would enable women *freely* to choose to be generous is lacking. Thus, women often act generously primarily because society and the Church expect it and not because they are freely choosing it.

The results are debilitating. First, it prevents women from exercising the gift of generosity toward themselves. The needs of others are so central and so necessary to their 'persona' that they cannot risk saying no to others' needs in order to attend to their own. Second, women's generosity can become a camouflage for real identity, stemming from society's assignment to women of the role of serving others. This leads some women to find their primary identity and meaning in pleasing others. A healthy ability to own and dispose

of their own life is blocked, and their sense of value and well-being rise and fall primarily on the responses of others.

Third, recipients of pseudo-generosity sense – often in a vague, undifferentiated way – that they are being manipulated, thus alienating women from the very persons they love most. On the surface the generous act appears to be in the interest of the receiver – loving and authentic – when in reality, it is not. As adults, children of mothers who practise pseudo-generosity may articulate the confusion they feel about the mixed messages of love and ‘duty’ received from their mothers. Because the social expectation that women be generous is so strong, and in many cases has been interiorized, it is easy to act generously for reasons of false self-interest, e.g. to protect one’s image as the quintessentially generous person.

Fourth, un-free generosity nurtures in many women what the French call *ressentiment*. The English ‘resentment’ is an approximation that needs to be supplemented with terms such as bitterness and anger. Too many women end up regretting their generous giving, feeling that life was a one-way street in which they gave and gave and gave – and almost no one gave back or said thank you.

The point of this reflection on the virtue of generosity is to elucidate how patriarchy has caused women to understand virtue and sin in particular ways. These ways prevent women firstly from getting in touch with the truth of how they betray both themselves and the covenant of love; and secondly from seeing how they can practise genuine virtue, and assume full responsibility for their own holiness. The insights of psychology have been most helpful to women in sorting out these behaviours and assessing whether they are supportive of women’s full humanity and holiness or working against them. But the Church should also be a primary resource in this area. This can happen only if we are willing to understand and accept the ways in which many traditional presentations of virtue and vice have been singularly unhelpful for women. We need to be committed to finding new and creative ways to listen and truly to take women’s experience into account when we talk about virtue and vice.

The foregoing material has provided the setting in which to ask our primary question. What are some of the specific virtues that women are called upon to develop at this particular point in history – virtues that will serve not only women themselves, but also the Church and society? What are the ways in which women can refuse to be ‘typed’ so that they may become free, loving ‘agents’ of virtue? Out of many possibilities, I choose four: the act of speech, attending to relationality, courage and hope.

### *Women’s virtues*

Each of us needs to consider this particular historical moment and ask about its demands, individually and as a community of women and men. These virtuous gifts have the potential to help us develop unrealized possibilities for the whole community to live in the fullness of the body of Christ. The

particular virtues identified below are human virtues that belong to all Christians, even though I think that, at the moment, they pertain to women in distinctive ways.

Individual women (and men) may or may not find themselves in this portrait. It is partial and probing, not exhaustive or prescriptive. Every woman and man must discover her or his unique kaleidoscope of individual virtues, unique gifts and failings that emerge out of particular personalities and histories.

#### *Hearing into speech*

This famous phrase of Nel Morton nudges women to attend to their experience, to listen to themselves and other women, and to speak. Having a voice is necessary if we are to be visible actors in our own journey toward holiness and in the journey of the common good. True speech can be both difficult and dangerous. Women are called to overcome the safe silence for which we are rewarded. We are called to persevere when the right words are simply not yet available or when our words are ignored or dismissed, or cause anger. We are called to practise the virtue of true and honest speech.

Women can prayerfully reflect on why they are afraid to speak; or why they speak only in private rather than in public; or why they feel they cannot speak with authority; or why they allow speech to deteriorate into uncharitable gossip and back-biting. One can meditate on the written words of great and holy women from the past. Listening to their words can provide models and inspiration for our own speech.

#### *Relationality*

Much of the data that has been gathered about women's experience reveals that many of us value and understand ourselves in terms of relationships. Even though valuing relationships can pose problems for women, it is still a virtue much needed by Church and society. Women have a long and illustrious history in which they have entered deeply into the world of 'connections' – bonding, supporting, and bridging gaps that keep persons apart from each other, from nature and from the world.

Appropriately, there is much discussion about the need for women to become autonomous and free, able to stand on their own against the strictures of dependence set up by patriarchy. This emphasis reverberates with the value western Christian culture has always placed in a vision of the human person who is loving, reasonable, independent, free and self-directing. Our entire ethical system is based on the premise that everyone should have access to the means that lead to the fullness of humanity. But we have also become sensitized to the ways in which social structures prevent entire groups of persons from attaining this ideal, and to the ways in which this ideal has been abused. The penchant to 'do my own thing' leaves little room or motivation to think about and act for the common good. Yes, women need to practise the virtues of self-esteem, autonomy and freedom, but in new and creative ways in the context of our commitment to relationships.

In particular, women have the opportunity to offer leadership in the special arena of relationships with strangers. Western Christian ethics has been less than successful in mobilizing our ability to embrace the 'other', the 'stranger', the 'foreigner'. The present ethnic and racial struggles in our own country and around the globe attest to our failures. In most societies, women experience themselves as 'other'. Norms and values are predominantly white, male and middle-class, and the rest of us fit in as we can. Women make up one group of cultural outsiders.

Are there ways in which women can use this experience of marginality to develop virtue and contribute to the common good? Our own experience teaches us about the destruction that is visited on those who are forced to the periphery of life. As we struggle to move to the centre, let us not forget life at the margin. Let our remembrance of the margin keep our hearts full of understanding, love and compassion for anyone who suffers from being an outsider or a stranger.

Concretely, pregnancy is an experience of many women that can provide a particularly profound, physical, spiritual and emotional experience of having 'another' as part and parcel of one's very being. Women's making room in their bodies for another while nurturing their own identity and later that of the child is a wonderful paradigm of authentic, inclusive loving. Likewise, making room within one's world for the one who is different strengthens simultaneously healthy autonomy and the bonds of community.

### *Courage and risk*

We find ourselves at an important moment in history – a time replete with fresh possibilities. But new thoughts, attitudes and behaviours do not come without struggle and risk. One thinks of the realistic courage of the prophets who were clearly and unabashedly on the side of the oppressed, willing to wager their settled world and peace of mind so that something better might emerge. Courage is often a virtue culturally associated with men, particularly men at war. In the spiritual texts of the Christian tradition, women who are noted for their strength of virtue (e.g. martyrs and mystics) often assume or are given a male persona, engaged in battle with the forces of evil.<sup>5</sup> I suggest that this is an important time for us to reflect upon the distinctive contours of female courage. What does it look like? feel like? How should we speak of it?

Like all virtues, courage is ultimately a gift of faith. It is the ability to affirm life and existence in the face of death and 'non-being'.<sup>6</sup> Many Christian women have a profound experience of 'non-being' in the faith community. It is a truism to say that courage is required of all Christians who desire to fulfil their destiny of being created in the image and likeness of God. For women to affirm that image after millennia of being marginalized from the sphere of the divine is a challenge of enormous proportions.

At this juncture of women's struggle for greater inclusion in the Christian story, it is easy to get tired of the hassles, the defeats, at times even the ridicule, that accompany the recovery of women's place in Christianity. Too

many women feel isolated, without the support necessary to endure. Other women are timid, not practised in the virtues that are being called forth from them. Women who are addicted to dependent patterns of relating struggle to be with others in mutual and interdependent ways. Still others do not know what to do or say. For women whose lives have been limited to the private sphere, it can be terrifying either to confront the destructive mores of home or to enter into the public arena, ready to suffer its slings and arrows, and to shoulder the responsibility that inevitably accompanies public speech.

But women have a further challenge. Given their history, it takes courage for them to discover themselves and become full human beings, individuals who think and act in their own right. But, as we have seen, female autonomy must reflect the identity and value that emerges from the truth of our experience, which is overwhelmingly relational in character. Female autonomy cannot ape the kind of rugged individualism that leaves relational values in the dust. Rather it must conserve the values both of the community and of the individual in creative tension. These values are not polar opposites that cancel one another out, but a paradox that cries out for mutual inclusion in a higher integration. Women are in an excellent position to contribute to the creation of this new reality.

In the past, courage has been identified with the vitality and power of life. It is the power to create beyond oneself without losing oneself.<sup>7</sup> It is the ability to envision a future community – and one's positive and creative role within it – that is dramatically different from the one we have known. Women are being called to attend to the distinctive contours of this life force within. How do women experience the kind of power that engenders courageous action? In what settings are we called upon to step forward, speak up, become advocates for relationships of mutuality and respect – marriage and family, social gatherings, education, business, politics? Those women who are practising the virtue of courage by articulating a new vision of the Christian life that includes their experience and places their power at the disposal of the wider community, are models for the entire Church.

### *Hope*

Connected to the virtue of courage is the virtue of hope. Hope is grounded in the conviction that God's grace is destined to prevail, not only beyond history but now, within it. Embedded in hope is the ability to imagine a future that is characterized by love, dignity and mutual respect among all persons, the confidence that such a reality is possible, and the conviction to work tirelessly to bring it about.

In one of Charles Péguy's poems, God voices an ease in understanding faith and love but sees hope as a wonder, a miracle, a mystery, an unexpected sight . . .<sup>8</sup> Genuine hope is different from a superficial optimism that it will not rain tomorrow or that things will be all right. True hope emerges in limited situations, in times of trial, darkness, illness, war and exile. These experiences make fullness of life seem impossible, beyond our grasp. Yet in hope we long

for deliverance. Hope is our response to darkness; hope is that strange mysterious light which illumines the abyss. Hope is born of the conviction that God's love cannot fail, that, as Julian of Norwich reminds us, 'all will be well'.

Hope is indeed a gift, a disposition that perdures, grows and is purified. Hope gradually settles deep in one's being as a more or less permanent disposition and way of perceiving reality. It perdures and maintains its glow in the midst of failure and set-backs. It clings to life when one comes close to giving up; when one realizes that changing two thousand years of history is a task too enormous to imagine, much less undertake; when one knows how much and yet how little is likely to take place in one's lifetime; and when one contemplates the uncertainty of a successful outcome.

Women's struggle for freedom reveals many faces of hope. One's hope is nurtured by the growing consciousness of the truth of our situation; by women's solidarity with one another; by examples of mutual co-operation with men; by gradual changes in Church and society that recognize the dignity of women. But from other vantage points, one is plagued by doubt and tempted to despair. History reveals the sustained exploitation of women and our own time is no exception.<sup>9</sup> One weeps at the suffering of half the human race, suffering visited upon women because they are women. And one cannot but wonder in sadness at the poetry, art, music, leadership, invention and genius that was lost or never created because it was housed in female bodies.

But hope allows us to face the future with quiet confidence and joy regardless of the outcome of our present efforts. And rather than tempting us to diminish those efforts, it provides energy to increase them in ever more thoughtful and creative modes. This kind of inner freedom is witnessed to by the saints both living and dead. Its source is located in their communion with God, the reservoir and promise of final victory. The saints claim certitude because, in a real sense, they see with God's eyes.

Those who have opened themselves to this extraordinary gift are important to the entire community. They provide a prophetic presence which calls us continually to our truest, most creative selves. Each time we encounter a person of hope and joy, we find our own hope renewed, our determination and commitment rekindled. Hope leads us to step out again, to speak, to risk, to put ourselves on the line, to dare to live virtuous lives – together.

Paul captures the essence of the struggle when he says to the Romans, 'I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us' (8:18). Part of the good news of the gospel is the conviction that this eschatological vision is to be realized in part here and now. Women and men are not forever destined to practise virtue in isolation from one another, and certainly not at odds with one another. The vision of virtuous women and men working together in respectful mutuality for the good of the world is what must sustain us. 'For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons *and daughters* of God . . . because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Rom 8:19-21).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Lee H. Yearly's 'Recent work on virtue' in *Religious Studies Review* 16/1 (1990), pp 1–9; Donald Capps, *Deadly sins and saving virtues* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Judith Schklar, *Ordinary vices* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Henry Fairlie, *The seven deadly sins today* (South Bend IN: University of Notre Dame, 1978); Stanford D. Lyman, *The seven deadly sins: society and evil* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1978); Karl Menninger, *Whatever became of sin?* (New York: Hawthorn, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> See Patricia A. Lamoureux, 'Deadly vices and redeeming virtues: a feminist perspective', *New Theology Review* 8/2 (May 1995), pp 6–20; Delores S. Williams, 'A womanist perspective on sin' in Emilie M. Townes (ed), *A troubling in my soul* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993), pp 130–49; Rebecca Chop, 'Feminism and the theology of sin', *The Ecumenist* 1 (1993), pp 12–20; Constance Fitzgerald OCD, 'Impasse and dark night', and Joann Wolski Conn, 'Women's spirituality: restriction and reconstruction' in *Women's spirituality*, edited by Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), pp 287–311 and 9–30; Judith Plaskow, *Sex, sin and grace: women's experience and the theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1980); Wanda Warren Berry, 'Images of sin and salvation in feminist theology', *Anglican Theology Review* 15 (1978), pp 25–54.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of this discussion see Christine M. Smith, 'Sin and evil in feminist theology' in *Theology Today* 50/2 (July 1993), pp 208–19.

<sup>4</sup> Men can identify some of their own pseudo-virtues, e.g. the virtue of responsibility has the potential to turn into a messiah complex in which men feel that they have to 'take care of everything'.

<sup>5</sup> The English word 'virtue' is derived from the Latin term *virtus* which means 'strength', 'manliness', 'virtue'. The root word is *vir*, the Latin term for 'man', from which the English 'virile' derives.

<sup>6</sup> See the work of Paul Tillich for a discussion of the meaning of courage in existential terms: *The courage to be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 81.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Péguy, *Le porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu* (Paris), pp 15–23.

<sup>9</sup> Many feminists consistently include in their theory the struggles of race and class across the globe. This inclusion is born out of a conviction that the struggle of North American women for freedom and the fullness of humanity must contribute to, and be enriched by, the worldwide struggles against war, poverty, drug-abuse, apartheid and genocide, etc.