

Chapter I

The Ethos of Women's Professions

INTRODUCTION: ETHOS, PROFESSIONAL ETHOS, ETHOS OF WOMEN'S PROFESSIONS

The literal meaning of the word "ethos" in its enduring sense must be understood in its relation to human action. By that I do not mean a decree imposed from without upon the person but rather something which is operative within himself, *an inner form*, a constant *spiritual attitude* which the scholastics term *habitus*. Such constant spiritual attitudes give a definite uniform character to changing behavioral patterns, and the attitudes manifest themselves through this character in external action. Temperament is an *inborn habitus*, a natural basic disposition of the soul such as cheerfulness or melancholy. There are attitudes acquired on the basis of natural tendencies; here all natural proficiencies and virtues are important. There is, finally, the established *habitus*: these are, above all, the divine virtues which constitute the holiness of a human being. And just as these virtues can be acquired, so can they also be lost; they do not belong to the soul permanently since they are modified easily.

Along with ethos, this general concept of habitus is made specific by focusing on *values*. To speak of ethos is to designate *habitus*, one or several, which possess positive value and satisfy certain objective requirements or prescriptions.

By *professional ethos* I mean to signify the abiding spiritual attitude or the totality of *habitus* which emerges from within as the

formative principle in a person's professional life. We are able to speak of this ethos only when the professional life demonstrates objectively a definite uniform character. Indeed, this character emerges as a moral force from within; it is not imposed upon the professional life from without either by the authenticity of the work itself or other regulations. Loyalty and conscientiousness are among such abiding attitudes which can be decisive for professional life. A person's attitude toward his or her profession clearly helps determine the results achieved in it. Whoever regards his work as a mere source of income or as a pastime will perform it differently from the person who feels that his *profession* is an authentic vocation. Strictly speaking, we can only accept the term "professional ethos" in this last instance.

Finally, we must recognize that every profession has an ethos peculiar to its own purpose. (This is somewhat like the helpfulness of the nurse, the circumspection and determination of the undertaker, etc.) The ethos can be displayed by the person's nature (that is, he has a natural inclination for his profession); or, it can grow in him through constant practice of its required activities; and then it can become a standard of behavior independent of external control.

When this evening's topic was suggested to me, it precluded two suppositions: first, that certain abiding attitudes are unique to the feminine soul and form woman's professional life from within out; second, that the very nature of woman draws her to certain professions. Let us now discuss these two points.

I. WOMAN'S NATURAL VOCATION AND ITS CORRESPONDING ETHOS

Are we able to speak of vocations which are specifically feminine? In the beginning of the feminist movement, the radical leaders denied this, claiming that all professions were suitable for

woman. Their opponents were unwilling to admit to this concept, recognizing only *one* feminine vocation, *woman's natural vocation*. Our subject requires discussion of both points of view. To begin with, we must ask: Is there a natural feminine vocation of woman? What spiritual attitude does it demand?

Only the person blinded by the passion of controversy could deny that woman in soul and body is formed for a particular purpose. The clear and irrevocable word of Scripture declares what daily experience teaches from the beginning of the world: woman is destined to be wife and mother. Both physically and spiritually she is endowed for this purpose, as is seen clearly from practical experience. However, it follows also from the Thomistic principle of *anima forma corporis* that such a spiritual characteristic does exist. Of course, woman shares a basic human nature, but basically her faculties are different from men; therefore, a differing type of soul must exist as well. Since the fundamentals of the typically feminine spiritual attitude are quite familiar to us, we will trace it only very briefly.

Woman naturally seeks to embrace that which is *living, personal, and whole*. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural, maternal yearning. Lifeless matter, the *fact*, can hold primary interest for her only insofar as it serves the living and the personal, not ordinarily for its own sake. Relevant to this is another matter: *abstraction in every sense* is alien to the feminine nature. The living and personal to which her care extends is a concrete whole and is protected and encouraged as a totality; this does not mean that one part is sacrificed to another, not the mind to the body or one spiritual faculty at the expense of the others. She aspires to this totality in herself and in others. Her theoretical and her practical views correspond; her natural line of thought is not so much conceptual and analytical as it is directed intuitively and emotionally to the concrete. This natural endowment enables woman to guard and teach her own children. But this basic attitude is not intended just for them; she should behave in this way also to her husband and to all those in contact with her.

This maternal gift is joined to that of *companion*. It is her gift and happiness to share the life of another human being and, indeed, to take part in *all things* which come his way, in the greatest and smallest things, in joy as well as in suffering, in work, and in problems. Man is consumed by "his enterprise," and he expects others will be interested and helpful; generally, it is difficult for him to become involved in other beings and their concerns. On the contrary, it is natural for woman, and she has the faculty to interest herself empathetically in areas of knowledge far from her own concerns and to which she would not pay heed if it were not that a personal interest drew her into contact with them. This endowment is bound closely to her maternal gift. An active sympathy for those who fall within her ken awakens their powers and heightens their achievements. It is a concerned, formative, and truly maternal function, precisely one which even the *adult* needs. This function will come into play also with one's own children, especially when they mature and the mother is released from their physical care.

Participation in her husband's life requires *subordination and obedience* as directed by God's word. It is in accordance with nature that man serve his concern directly. The wife serves his cause for his sake; thus, it is reasonable that this happen under his guidance. That the duty of obedience extends also to the wife's immediate domain—the household and the upbringing of children—is probably derived less from the feminine individuality than from the *natural vocation of man* as guide and protector of his wife. The natural vocation corresponds also to woman's natural tendency towards obedience and service: "Obedient I feel my soul, always most beautifully free."

At the onset, this presentation of the natural feminine individuality did not include any value judgment. It is evident without further elaboration that the purely developed feminine nature does include a sublime *vital value*. It is essential for this vital value as well as for *ethical value*, which we will soon consider, that the feminine nature be developed purely, and in no way does this come about as a matter of course. One can even go so far as to say that it is the case only under particular circumstances. For the feminine

disposition suffers from the joint flaw which human nature retains from original sin, which impedes her pure development, and which, if not opposed, leads to typical perversion. Usually, the *personal outlook* appears to be exaggerated unwholesomely; in the first place, her inclination to center both her activities and those of others about her own person is expressed by vanity, desire for praise and recognition, and an unchecked need for communication; on the other hand, it is seen in an excessive interest in others as in curiosity, gossip, and an indiscreet need to penetrate into the intimate life of others. *Her view reaching toward the whole* leads easily to the frittering away of her powers: her antipathy for the necessary objective disciplining of individual abilities results in her superficial nibbling in all areas. And in her relations to others, it is manifested in her complete absorption with them beyond the measure required by maternal functions: the sympathetic mate becomes the obtrusive mischief-maker who cannot endure quiet, reserved growth; and because of this, she does not foster development but rather hinders and paralyzes it. The dominating will replaces joyful service. How many unhappy marriages can be attributed to this abnormality! How much alienation between mothers and growing children and even mature offspring!

Were we to present in contrast the image of the purely developed character of spouse and mother as it should be according to her natural vocation, we must gaze upon the *Virgin Mary*. In the center of her life stands her son. She awaits His birth in blissful expectation; she watches over His childhood; near or far, indeed, wherever He wishes, she follows Him on His way; she holds the crucified body in her arms; she carries out the will of the departed. But not as *her* action does she do all this: she is in this the Handmaid of the Lord; she fulfills that to which God has called her. And that is why she does not consider the child as her own property: she has welcomed Him from God's hands; she lays Him back into God's hands by dedicating Him in the Temple and by being with Him at the crucifixion. Should we consider the Mother of God as spouse, we find a quiet, limitless trust which in turn depends on limitless trust, silent obedience, and an obviously faithful communion in

suffering. She does all this in surrender to the will of God who has bestowed her husband upon her as human protector and visible guide.

The image of the Mother of God demonstrates the basic spiritual attitude which corresponds to woman's natural vocation; her relation to her husband is one of obedience, trust, and participation in his life as she furthers his objective tasks and personality development; to the child she gives true care, encouragement, and formation of his God-given talents; she offers both selfless surrender and a quiet withdrawal when unneeded. All is based on the concept of marriage and motherhood as a vocation from God; it is carried out for God's sake and under His guidance.

How can woman attain this sublime ethos in thought and in deed when such powerful drives in her fallen nature oppose it and urge her to other ways? A good natural remedy against all typical feminine defects is solid objective work. This demands in itself the repression of an excessively personal attitude. It calls for an end to superficiality not only in her own work but in general. Because it requires submission to objective laws, it is a schooling in obedience. But it must lead neither to relinquishing of the good and pure personal attitude nor to a one-sided specializing and enslavement to a discipline which typifies the perversion of masculine nature. How extremely sufficient this natural remedy of objective work can be is seen in the maturity and harmony of many women who manifest a high intellectual formation or who were trained by the hardship of life in the discipline of strenuous professional work. Here we have the parallel to the image of the perfect *gentleman* which Newman sketches in *The Idea of a University*: a cultivation of personality which somewhat resembles true holiness. But in both cases it is simply a matter of *similarity*. The nature restrained only by the *influence of education* maintains its cultivated exterior only to a certain point; then it breaks through all bounds. Only the power of grace can uproot and form fallen nature anew; it happens from within, never from without. How this takes place in feminine nature we will consider later.

II. OTHER NATURAL FEMININE VOCATIONS

We proceed to the second basic question: Are there feminine vocations other than the *natural* one? Only subjective delusion could deny that women are capable of practicing vocations other than that of spouse and mother. The experience of the last decades and, for that matter, the experience of all times has demonstrated this. One could say that in case of need, every normal and healthy woman is able to hold a position. And there is no profession which cannot be practised by a woman. A self-sacrificing woman can accomplish astounding achievements when it is a question of replacing the breadwinner of fatherless children, of supporting abandoned children or aged parents. But, also, individual gifts and tendencies can lead to the most diversified activities. Indeed, no woman is only *woman*; like a man, each has her individual specialty and talent, and this talent gives her the capability of doing professional work, be it artistic, scientific, technical, etc. Essentially, the individual talent can enable her to embark on any discipline, even those remote from the usual feminine vocations. In such instances, one would not speak of a *feminine profession*. In using the term "feminine profession" significantly, it can only denote those objective tasks assigned by the feminine nature. This would mean all vocations depending on sympathetic rapport such as nursing, education, and social work; consequently, also included would be the vocation of doctor and nurse, teacher and governess, housemaid, and the entire range of contemporary social services. In scholarship it would be those branches dealing with the concrete, living personal element, i.e., the arts and positions wherein one may help and serve, such as translating, editing, and, possibly, guiding a stranger's work appreciatively. Basically the same spiritual attitude which the wife and mother need is needed here also, except that it is extended to a wider working circle and mostly to a changing area of people; for that reason, the perspective is detached from the vital bond of blood relationship and more highly elevated on the spiritual level. It is also true, of course, that there may be a lack of many of the natural motivating powers, those which exist in living

communion. A greater power for self-sacrifice is indispensable for this spiritual attitude.

However, over and above this, one may say that even the professions whose objective requirements are not harmonious with feminine nature, those termed as specifically masculine, could yet be practised in an authentically feminine way if accepted as part of the concrete human condition. An adjustment to dull material or abstract thought is demanded, as in work in a factory, business office, national or municipal service, legislature, chemical laboratory or mathematical institute. But in most instances, the work is conducted with other people, at least with others in the same room; often it is a division of labor. And with it an immediate opportunity is given for development of all feminine virtues. One can even say that the development of the feminine nature can become a blessed counterbalance precisely here where everyone is in danger of becoming mechanized and losing his humanity. In the spirit of the man who knows that help and sympathy await him in his place of employment, much will be awakened or kept vigorous which would atrophy otherwise. This is a way for professional life to be formed by the feminine characteristic; this differs usually from what the man does. There is another possibility. Everything abstract is ultimately part of the concrete. Everything inanimate finally serves the living. That is why every activity dealing in abstraction stands in ultimate service to a living whole. Whoever can take hold of this view of the whole and make it active will feel himself bound to it even in the dullest abstract employment. And this work will become tolerable by virtue of this view and in many cases even turns out to be obviously better than if one lost track of the whole because of the part. The man would perhaps aim at the most perfect juridical form in law or in ordinance; and, in so doing, he might give little consideration to the concrete circumstances which it would be good to settle; whereas woman, if she remains faithful to her nature even in Parliament or administrative service, will look for the concrete goal and adjust the means to the end.

Thus the participation of women in the most diverse professional disciplines could be a blessing for the entire society, private

or public, precisely if the specifically feminine ethos would be preserved. A glance toward the Mother of God becomes indicative for us again. For example, Mary at the wedding of Cana in her quiet, observing look surveys everything and discovers what is lacking. Before anything is noticed, even before embarrassment sets in, she has procured already the remedy. She finds ways and means, she gives necessary directives, doing all quietly. She draws no attention to herself. Let her be the prototype of woman in professional life. Wherever situated, let her always perform her work quietly and dutifully, without claiming attention and appreciation. And at the same time, she should survey the conditions with a vigilant eye. Let her be conscious of where there is a want and where help is needed, intervening and regulating as far as it is possible in her power in a discreet way. Then will she like a good spirit spread blessing everywhere.

III. THE SUPERNATURAL VOCATION OF WOMAN

We have surveyed the activity of woman in private and public life and have found it to be rich and fruitful. But in no way does this activity exhaust her potential. Today as in all times since Christ's Church first existed, the Lord calls from families and professional life whomever He has chosen for His holy service. Can the religious vocation claim to be a feminine vocation? Certainly the call is issued to men and women. And it is a *supernatural* vocation, for it comes from above, from the other world, summoning the human being to raise himself above the natural earthly level. And so it would seem that the natural differences between the sexes are irrelevant here. Yet, on the other hand, the axiom still holds true: "Grace perfects nature—it does not destroy it." Thus it may be expected that the masculine as well as the feminine nature is not abrogated in religious life but fitted into it in a particular way and thereby made fruitful. Beyond this lies the possibility that the religious vocation, similar to worldly professions, has unique requirements and fits both the masculine and feminine nature each in its particular way.

The religious vocation is the total surrender of the whole person and his or her entire life to the service of God. The one called is obligated to use the means suitable for fulfilling his vocation: renunciation of every possession, of every vital human tie and relationship, and even of his own will. This can be done in various ways; that is to say, the service which the Lord asks from His creatures can be of different kinds: quiet immersion in divine truth, solemn praises of God, propagation of the faith, works of mercy, intercession, and vicarious reparation.

Thus the unity of the monastic order is expressed by the diversity of its individual members. When we consider the various kinds of religious activities and participation in them according to sex, we see indeed that each kind of activity is carried on by both men and women: however, the relationship of the activity to the nature of the sexes is different. Essentially, we may well believe that contemplation and participation in the liturgy, a true angelic service, transcends difference of sex. The spreading of the faith, a priestly mission, is chiefly a masculine concern, although it is also carried on by women, especially in the teaching Orders. On the other hand, works of charity and sacrifice offered in the spirit of vicarious reparation are decidedly in keeping with feminine nature.

The rule of older Orders, which have a masculine and feminine branch, so divided the work that efficacious activities on the outside, such as preaching, giving missions, etc., fell mainly to men. Women carried out the silent apostolate of sacrifice and prayer; nevertheless, at an early stage, they were engaged in working with youth as an apostolic duty. And without exception, all the contemporary women's communities are concerned with educational and charitable activities. Thus today, since the work of the prevailing majority of feminine religious communities has an external efficacy, the activity of the Sister is materially scarcely distinguishable from the work of women "in the world." Where there is a difference, it can only be the formal one, that is, in religious life all must be performed in a spirit of obedience and of love for God.

Let us now examine how the essential elements of religious Orders relate to the feminine nature. The motive, principle, and end of the religious life is to make an absolute gift of self to God in a self-forgetting love, to end one's own life in order to make room for God's life. The more perfectly this is realized, the more richly will God's life fill the soul. Then, God's love is an overflowing love which wants nothing for itself but bestows itself freely; mercifully, it bends down to everyone who is in need, healing the sick and awakening the dead to life, protecting, cherishing, nourishing, teaching, and forming; it is a love which sorrows with the sorrowful and rejoices with the joyful; it serves each human being to attain the end destined for it by the Father. In one word, it is the love of the divine Heart. The deepest longing of woman's heart is to give herself lovingly, to belong to another, and to possess this other being completely. This longing is revealed in her outlook, personal and all-embracing, which appears to us as specifically feminine. But this surrender becomes a perverted self-abandon and a form of slavery when it is given to another person and not to God; at the same time, it is an unjustified demand which no human being can fulfill. Only God can welcome a person's total surrender in such a way that one does not lose one's soul in the process but wins it. And only God can bestow Himself upon a person so that He fulfills this being completely and loses nothing of Himself in so doing. That is why total surrender which is the principle of the religious life is simultaneously the only adequate fulfillment possible for woman's yearning.

Thus the divine life entering the being surrendered to God is love, ready to serve, compassionate, awaken and foster life; it corresponds thoroughly to what we have found to be the professional ethos required of woman.

What are the practical consequences of this? Must all women become religious in order to fulfill their vocation as women? Certainly not. But it certainly does mean that the fallen perverted feminine nature can be restored to its purity and led to the heights of the vocational ethos which this pure nature indicates only if it is completely surrendered to God. Whether she is a mother in the

home, or occupies a place in the limelight of public life, or lives behind quiet cloister walls, she must be a *handmaid of the Lord* everywhere. So had the Mother of God been in all circumstances of her life, as the Temple virgin enclosed in that hallowed precinct, by her quiet work in Bethlehem and Nazareth, as guide to the apostles and the Christian community after the death of her son. Were each woman an image of the Mother of God, a *Spouse of Christ*, an apostle of the divine Heart, then would each fulfill her feminine vocation no matter what conditions she lived in and what worldly activity absorbed her life.

I was not assigned to show how the described ethos could be formed in practical professional life. But if I were to end here, the requirements I have presented could appear to be eccentric idealism, so fearfully different are they from the average life of contemporary women. It is necessary to add a few words about how this can actually be put into practice.

Let us begin by calmly comparing the actual life of women as it generally is today with our requirements. Many of the best women are almost overwhelmed by the double burden of family duties and professional life—or often simply of only gainful employment. Always on the go, they are harassed, nervous, and irritable. Where are they to get the needed inner peace and cheerfulness in order to offer stability, support, and guidance to others? Even when there is mutual love and recognition of achievements, there are small daily frictions between a woman and her husband and children; this results in uneasiness throughout the entire household and a slackening of relationships in the home. Along with this, there are many superficial and unstable women who chase after pleasure to fill their inner void, who marry and are divorced; often the home and children are abandoned either to themselves or to domestics, strangers who are no more conscientious than the mothers themselves. If it is necessary for them to seek gainful employment, they do so only as a means to an end, i.e., to make a living and to grasp life's pleasures to the nth degree; in their case, one can speak neither of profession or of ethos. They are like shifting quicksand. The breakdown of family life and the decline of morals are actually

connected with the increase in number of such women and can only be checked by reducing their number; this can be done with the help of a qualified educational system for young girls. Finally, we would consider the group of women, by no means negligible, who choose a profession suitable to their ability and inclination. Among them may be found quite a few who discover, after their initial gratification, that their expectations are unfulfilled and they long to be elsewhere. Frequently, this is due to their having taken pains to fill their post "just like a man." They have neither searched for nor found the ways and means to make their feminine nature fruitful in professional life; and the denied, stifled nature asserts itself.

Even were we to look behind cloistered walls, we might discover that the average nun does not measure up to the ideal. Certainly in all times, there have been religious unsure of the full meaning of their vows or unable to maintain the total sacrifice required of their vocation after their first youthful ardor has declined; theirs is usually an agonizing existence, and the community is troubled by their presence. Moreover, there are difficulties first produced by modern living conditions: the twofold occupation of the nun who must meet contemporary requirements as a nurse, teacher, and social service worker while at the same time she must keep pace with the duties of her Order. Quite often, the right spiritual attitude is lost under the excessive load, in a way similar to that of the gainfully employed wife and mother.

Contrary to this sad image of the average woman, one can still find true heroines in all walks of life. They perform wonders on the job in families, professions, and the seclusion of the cloister. All of us are familiar with them from the church records and also from personal experience. There are the mothers who, radiating all warmth and light in the home, raise as many as nine children and impart to them full blessings for their entire lives; and these women are magnanimous as well towards all strangers in need. There are the minor instructors and officials who support an entire family from their salary and look after domestic affairs before and after the professional work; yet, they can also find time and money for different church and charitable functions. There are the

nuns who wrestle for endangered souls in nocturnal prayer, assuming voluntary penances for their sins. What is the source of their strength? How explain all their achievements which one might often declare to be impossible by nature? How account for that unruffled peace and cheerfulness even in the keenest nervous and emotional stress?

Only by the power of grace can nature be liberated from its dross, restored to its purity, and made free to receive divine life. And this divine life itself is the inner driving power from which acts of love come forth. Whoever wants to preserve this life continually within herself must nourish it constantly from the source whence it flows without end—from the holy sacraments, above all from the sacrament of love. To have divine love as its inner form, a woman's life must be a Eucharistic life. Only in daily, confidential relationship with the Lord in the tabernacle can one forget self, become free of all one's own wishes and pretensions, and have a heart open to all the needs and wants of others. Whoever seeks to consult with the Eucharistic God in all her concerns, whoever lets herself be purified by the sanctifying power coming from the sacrifice at the altar, offering herself to the Lord in this sacrifice, whoever receives the Lord in her soul's innermost depth in Holy Communion cannot but be drawn ever more deeply and powerfully into the flow of divine life, incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ, her heart converted to the likeness of the divine heart.

Something else is closely related to this. When we entrust all the troubles of our earthly existence confidently to the divine heart, we are relieved of them. Then our soul is free to participate in the divine life. Then we walk by the side of the Savior on the path that He traveled on this earth during His earthly existence and still travels in His mystical afterlife. Indeed, with the eyes of faith, we penetrate into the secret depths of His hidden life within the pale of the godhead. On the other hand, this participation in divine life has a liberating power in itself; it lessens the weight of our earthly concerns and grants us a bit of eternity even in this finitude, a reflection of beatitude, a transformation into light. But the invitation to this transformation in God's hand is given to us by God Himself

in the liturgy of the Church. Therefore, the life of an authentic Catholic woman is also a liturgical life. Whoever prays together with the Church in spirit and in truth knows that her whole life must be formed by this life of prayer.

Let us summarize. Every profession in which woman's soul comes into its own and which can be formed by woman's soul is an authentic woman's profession. The innermost formative principle of woman's soul is the love which flows from the divine heart. Woman's soul wins this formative principle through the most intimate union with the divine heart in a Eucharistic and liturgical life.

In closing, I would like to raise a question which comes to mind again and again: the convention program clearly designates the various kinds of professions (the doctor, the priest, etc.). What need was there for a special category of *women's professions*? Besides, why are there such frequent discussions on women's professions but hardly any on men's professions? Is not man like woman aware of the coexistence between individual and masculine tendencies and then eventually an opposition between them? Is it not also true of man that his nature is or should be a co-determining factor for the selection and formation of his vocation? Furthermore, do we not also find here the antithesis between nature made degenerate by the Fall and nature restored in purity?

I believe it would be very worthwhile if at some time these questions would be considered seriously and thoroughly. For a wholesome collaboration of the sexes in professional life will be possible only if both achieve a calm and objective awareness of their nature and draw practical conclusions from it. God created humanity as man and woman, and He created both according to His own image. Only the purely developed masculine *and* feminine nature can yield the highest attainable likeness to God. Only in this fashion can there be brought about the strongest interpenetration of all earthly and divine life.