

“No matter their vocation, women are called to bring hearts of love to others; they incarnate the love of God in the midst of the Church and nurture the gift of life.” –Bishop John Folda

## Trusted Sisters

It has often been noted that the majority of those who carry out the works of the Church are women. Most of our parish staff members, most of our Catholic school teachers, and most Catholic health care workers are women. And women typically outnumber men when it comes to volunteering for Church projects and activities. From my personal experience as a pastor and now as a bishop, I know how indispensable women are to the life and mission of the Church. But this isn't just because women are hard workers. It's because women have a specific and irreplaceable role in God's plan of salvation history, a role that isn't just functional but uniquely spiritual and grace-filled.

A number of years ago, Pope St. John Paul II wrote a letter called *Mulieris Dignitatem*, and a subsequent “Letter to Women” several years later. He spoke of what he called the “feminine genius,” the unique perspective and gifts that women bring to every aspect of life and faith. In a time when the cultural elites are trying to blur the distinctions between the sexes, the Church reaffirms the unique character of women (and men), recognizing the beauty of God's plan in the complementarity of women and men. The dignity of women is forgotten and denigrated in so many ways through pornography, human trafficking, and sexual violence, so more than ever must the Church remember and celebrate the feminine genius in God's beautiful plan of creation.

On the last weekend of March, the Diocese of Fargo will once again sponsor a Redeemed Conference for Women, this time called “Trusted Sisters.” One of the keynote speakers will be Helen Alvare, a remarkable leader in the pro-life cause, a co-worker and consultant to the bishops of the United States, a professor of law, a wife, and a mother. She is just one example of the powerful role that women have in the life of the Church and the life of this nation. Having heard her speak on several occasions, I know she will have much to tell us at this year's Redeemed Conference. The conference itself is dedicated to bringing women together to share the gift of their Catholic faith and to support one another in their calling from our Lord. They are “trusted sisters” to each other and to all the members of the Church. But most importantly, they are trusted sisters to our Lord, beloved and cherished just as Mary and Martha were.

In the Gospels, we read of the close friendship that Jesus had with Mary and Martha. Martha is often recalled as the busy one who was anxious and upset with her sister. But she was striving above all to welcome Jesus into their home, and we shouldn't forget that she also makes a profound statement of faith after the death of their brother, Lazarus: “I have come to believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world.” We should also never forget that Mary Magdalene stood at the cross beside Jesus, and later announced his resurrection to the apostles on Easter Sunday. In their own way, these women proclaimed the Gospel and were witnesses to Christ. They were models of missionary discipleship for us all.

As the chief catechist of our diocese, I often think of the many women who serve as catechists in our parishes. Where would we be without them? In a true act of spiritual motherhood, these dedicated women give generously of their time and energy to share the life of Christ with young people, and help them grow as children of God. A similar story could probably be told in every apostolic endeavor in the life of the Church. Pope Francis often mentions the important place of his grandmother in his own faith formation. She was a key personality in passing along the faith to young Jorge Bergoglio, who would one day be called to lead the Church and proclaim that faith to the world.

No matter their vocation, women are called to bring hearts of love to others; they incarnate the love of God in the midst of the Church and nurture the gift of life. Whether as wives, mothers, dedicated single women, widows, or consecrated women religious, women have a profound capacity to influence our culture and to build the culture of life in our society. Their awareness of the needs of others and their receptivity to God's grace enables them to love sacrificially and to create a culture of life wherever they are.

Of course, we can always look to our Blessed Mother as the perfect example of discipleship, as a mother and sister to us all. Her entire life was lived in communion with God, and in faith she received the Son of God as her own son. She is “blessed among women,” and she offers a pattern for holiness to women of all times and places. Mary is the model of feminine genius that John Paul II spoke of, the one who exemplifies the dignity of all women in God’s divine plan.

I invite all the women of our diocese to this year’s Redeemed Conference for Women: “Trusted Sisters.” The event will be held on March 27–28 and will be an opportunity for women of all ages to gather as sisters in Christ, to pray, to celebrate, and to support one another in the journey of faith. This conference would be an excellent spiritual exercise for Lent, and a great preparation for the upcoming celebrations of Holy Week and Easter. I hope to see many of you there, and I look forward to praying and celebrating with you.