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THE GOSPEL'S VISION FOR WOMEN AND THE *FEMININE GENIUS*

The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution, which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess. I think, for example, of the special concern which women show to others, which finds a particular, even if not exclusive, expression in motherhood.¹

The heart of every woman is stamped with a special intuition and sensitivity that helps her not only ascertain the needs of others but also empathize with the human condition in a motherly way.² John Paul II calls this ability the *feminine genius*. In his Pastoral Letter, *Letter to*

This article is a revised part of my Master's thesis entitled *Unlocking the "Feminine Genius" with Edith Stein*, directed by Dr. J. Marianne Siegmund and defended at Holy Apostles College and Seminary in Cromwell, Connecticut, in 2017.

¹ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World *Evangelii Gaudium* (Nov 24, 2013), § 103.

² John Paul II and Edith Stein describe "the distinctiveness of women as a particular attention to and concern for actual concrete human beings and their holistic development and flourishing. One might call this a maternal care or motherliness. Such motherliness is not simply biological—and both warn that if one focuses on the biological version too simply or quantitatively, one will misunderstand true motherliness . . . Rather, by motherliness, they mean a particular personal orientation." Sarah Borden, "Edith Stein and John Paul II on Women," in *Karol Wojtyła's Philosophical Legacy*, ed. Nancy Mardas Billias, Agnes B. Curry, and George F. McLean (Washington, DC: The Council for Research in Values in Philosophy, 2008), 266.

Women, he calls women the heart of family and society.³ The Holy Father recognizes the necessity and power of the *feminine genius* to cultivate a civilization of love and a culture of life;⁴ he calls this woman's capacity to humanize society.⁵ For John Paul II, the *feminine genius* is the ability of women to make a sincere gift of themselves to others due to their maternal nature and vocation. By expressing their *feminine genius*, women can heal humanity and humanize society.

In order to understand the power of the *feminine genius*, it seems most appropriate to dialogue with John Paul II's Pastoral Letter *Letter to Women*, dedicated and directed to women, whatever their walk of life. I draw my attention to *Letter to Women*, because it is uniquely directed and dedicated to women throughout the world. In this Pastoral Letter, John Paul II enters into dialogue with women who are mothers, women who are wives, women who are daughters, women who are sisters, women who work, women who are consecrated—every woman! I will also draw from his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* and various other homilies and reflections given throughout his Pontificate during which he addressed women and discussed their vocation in the Church, family, and society in order to get a fuller picture of his teachings on this topic.

The family and society direly need the maternal and healing embrace of women. In his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II asserts that it is generally accepted that women, more than men, are

³ "Into the heart of the family, and then of all society, you bring the richness of your sensitivity, your intuitiveness, your generosity and fidelity." John Paul II, Pastoral Letter *Letter to Women* (June 29, 1995), § 2.

⁴ For more on the culture of life, see Pope John Paul II, Encyclical on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life *Evangelium Vitae* (March 25, 1995). See also John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, § 29, 30.

⁵ A "greater presence of women in society will prove most valuable, for it will help to manifest the contradictions present when society is organized solely according to the criteria of efficiency and productivity, and it will force systems to be redesigned in a way which favors the processes of humanization which mark the 'civilization of love'." John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, § 4.

more attentive and sensitive toward other persons, and this disposition develops even more in motherhood.⁶ As Stein puts it, “How could it be otherwise than that our great holy mother the Church should open her arms wide to take [the] beloved of the Lord to her heart? [For] this she needs human arms and human hearts, maternal arms and maternal hearts.”⁷ Nevertheless, before women can offer strength and healing to the brokenhearted, they need to first realize the beauty, mystery, and power of their specific feminine nature and vocation, out of which their *feminine genius* flows. Once women recognize the beauty, mystery, and power of their mission as women, they will be able to protect and promote the dignity of life in and out of their homes.

I will break this article down into three sections. First, I will analyze the Holy Father's answer to the question: what is the ultimate anthropological basis for the dignity of women? Secondly, I will describe the grounds of his claim that the family and society need to uphold the dignity of women and to take action against the abuses and obstacles that have prevented women from fully expressing their *feminine genius*. Thirdly, I will show that, in order to fulfill their role as the heart of the home and the heart of society, women need to recognize the power of their *feminine genius*.

The Dignity of Women and their Mission in the World

What is the ultimate anthropological basis for the dignity of women? The Holy Father tenderly invites women to explore this question with him, “Dear sisters, together let us reflect anew on the magnif-

⁶ “Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb . . . This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings—not only towards her own child, but every human being—which profoundly marks the woman's personality.” John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year *Mulieris Dignitatem* (Aug 15, 1988), § 18.

⁷ Freda Mary Oben, *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint* (New York: Alba House, 1988), 73.

icent passage in Scripture which describes the creation of the human race and which has so much to say about your dignity and mission in the world.”⁸ The Pope points to the beginning, to Genesis, for the answer to this question of paramount significance. From the creation story we learn that “God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Thus, womanhood expresses man, i.e., the human being, as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way.⁹

Their most natural relationship, a relational ‘uni-duality’, which enables each to experience their interpersonal and reciprocal relationship as a gift which enriches and which confers responsibility . . . To this ‘unity of two’ God has entrusted not only the work of procreation and family life, but the creation of history itself.¹⁰

The Holy Father makes it clear: the human being can only find full realization through this duality of the masculine and the feminine.¹¹

Reflecting on the Genesis creation account, the creation of Adam, the first man, is marked by a longing for a helpmate, while the creation of Eve, the first woman, is marked by the principle of help. What does it mean for woman to be a helpmate? Before the creation of Eve, Adam’s heart panged with solitude. God intervened: “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). Eve, in a sense, comes to the rescue of all humanity, for she comes to the aid of Adam, who at that point in time was the only human being in existence. Eve, as the first woman and mother of the living, stands for all women and reveals the feminine vocation. God’s creation of Eve is the answer to Adam’s original solitude; she is, out of

⁸ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, § 7.

⁹ See *ibid.*, § 7–8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, § 8.

¹¹ For John Paul, neither man nor women alone can represent the perfection of humanity. Moreover, the masculine and the feminine cannot be understood in terms of inferiority and superiority. Rather, “womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological . . .” *Ibid.*, § 7.

all creation, his only fitting helpmate. Moreover, Eve, as the mother of all the living, is an icon of Mary, the new Eve. While Eve is the witness of the beginning of creation of man, made in the image and likeness of God, Mary is the witness of the new beginning of the dignity and vocation of persons, and, particularly, of women, by returning to that beginning in which one finds the woman as she was intended to be in creation. "In Mary, Eve discovers the nature of the true dignity of woman, of feminine humanity. This discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life."¹² Like Eve, women are called to answer humanity's cry for a companion and helpmate.

How do women help humanity? Women, beginning with their daily relationships with people, offer to humanity the richness of their sensitivity, intuitiveness, generosity, and fidelity. The Pope says, "Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge the person, because they see persons with their hearts. They see them independently of various ideological or political systems. They see others in their greatness and limitations; they try to go out to them and help them."¹³ The Pope calls this contribution of feminine gifts to the human community the "genius of women."¹⁴ By acting on their *feminine genius*, women "exhibit a kind of affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood which has inestimable value for the development of individuals and the future of society."¹⁵ It is absolutely essential to carefully reflect on and understand the "genius of women" in order that this genius be more fully expressed in the life of the family, the Church, and of society as a whole.¹⁶

Touching on the fittingness of women to accompany, serve, and aid humanity, the Pope asserts, "[The] contribution [of women] is pri-

¹² See John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, § 11; and John Paul II, General Audience on the Meaning of Man's Original Solitude, (Oct 10, 1979), § 5.

¹³ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, § 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, § 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, § 10.

marily spiritual and cultural in nature, but socio-political and economic as well. The various sectors of society, nations and states, and the progress of all humanity, are certainly indebted to the contribution of women!”¹⁷ Although women have contributed to the advancement of science and technology, the progress of humanity cannot only be measured by scientific and technological criteria. More important than these criteria are the social and ethical dimensions, through which spiritual values and human relations come into play.¹⁸

The *feminine genius* is not tied solely to the spousal dimension. As remarked earlier, we learn from Eve not only what it means to be the helpmate of a specific man, but, more importantly, of all of humanity. Mothers, sisters, daughters, grandmothers, aunts, cousins, nieces, friends—all are called to be helpmates. It is precisely through service, when it is carried out with freedom, reciprocity and love, that the noble calling and ‘royal’ nature of women is expressed.¹⁹ We learn what it means to be a helpmate from the Queen of Heaven and Earth, who called herself the “handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38). Mary is the highest expression of the *feminine genius*, for she gave herself and continues to give herself in a service of love to God and to all of humanity.²⁰ For her, “to reign” as Queen is to serve.²¹

In imitation of Mary, women throughout history have made an impressive and beneficial mark on history. The *feminine genius* is not just expressed by the famous heroines of the past and the present, but also by ordinary women who place themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives. In doing so, these women reveal the gift of their womanhood and fulfill their deepest feminine vocation every day. These women, by making a complete gift of themselves to their family and to society, express their wifeness and motherhood not only in but

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, § 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, § 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, § 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*

also outside of their home. The Pope foretells, “The life of the Church in the Third Millennium will certainly not be lacking in new and surprising manifestations of ‘the feminine genius’.”²²

Removing Obstacles to the *Feminine Genius*

In light of his anthropological understanding of the dignity of women, defending and upholding their dignity was close to the Holy Father's heart. On June 29, 1995, with the approaching Fourth World Conference on Women²³ that would take place that September, Pope John Paul II wrote his Pastoral Letter *Letter to Women* as a sign of his solidarity and gratitude for the promotion of women's rights. He explains his purpose for writing *Letter to Women*,

The Church desires for her part to contribute to upholding the dignity, role and rights of women . . . by speaking directly to the heart and mind of every woman . . . to reflect with her on the problems and the prospects of what it means to be a women in our time [and] in particular to consider the essential issue of the

²² *Ibid.*, § 11.

²³ The United Nations organized four World Conferences on Women; these took place in Mexico City in 1975, Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985, and Beijing in 1995. The 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing marked a significant turning point for the global gender equality agenda. 189 countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, an agenda for women's empowerment that has been considered the key global policy document on gender equality. Focusing on 12 critical areas of concern, it set strategic objectives for the advancement of women: women and poverty; women and education; women and health; women and violence; women and armed conflict; women and the economy; women in politics; women and institutional mechanism for her advancement; women and human rights; women and the media; women and the environment; women as girl-children. The Fourth World Conference of Women is still relevant today. In 2015, marking the 20th anniversary of the conference, the United Nations Economic and Social Council requested the Commission on the Status of Women to review and appraise implementation of the Platform for Action in a session known as Beijing+20 with its motto “Empowering Women. Empowering Humanity.” Prior to 2015, the General Assembly for the World Conferences on Women, also had follow up review sessions in 2000, 2005, and 2010.

dignity of and rights of women, as seen in the light of the word of God.²⁴

Revealing his paternal heart, the Holy Father expresses his grief over the unfortunate historical conditioning which has been an obstacle to the progress of women, whose dignity has often gone unacknowledged and whose rights have been forsaken to the point of societal marginalization. He argues that it is precisely this marginalization that has prevented women from truly being themselves, leading to the spiritual impoverishment of humanity.²⁵ He is not quick to point fingers;²⁶ such a task is not easy since there are multicolored kinds of conditioning which have tailored our ways of thinking and acting toward women. Nevertheless, it is the task of the whole Church to transform this regret into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision, i.e., the adoption of Jesus Christ's attitude toward women, in order to set women free from every kind of exploitation and domination.

In this sense, the triumph of humanity depends on a renewed commitment to the Gospel vision. The role and vocation of women in the Church and in society finds its fundamental inspiration in the Gospel and in the history of the Church. Our Lord's attitude toward women, one of openness, respect, acceptance, and tenderness, transcended the established norms of his culture.²⁷ The word and example of Christ is the necessary and decisive point of reference when considering the role and vocation of women in the family, in the Church, and in society.

The Holy Father says that "from the evidence of the Gospel, the Church at its origin detached herself from the culture of the time and

²⁴ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, § 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, § 3.

²⁶ The Holy Father asks women for forgiveness on behalf of the Church: "And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry." *Ibid.*

²⁷ See John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, § 15–16, for a beautiful rendition of all the women that Jesus meets in the Gospels.

called women to tasks connected with spreading the gospel.”²⁸ In the Biblical account of the early Christians, we see women accompanying Jesus in his public ministry (Lk 8:2–3), present at the foot of the Cross (Lk 23:49), assisting at the burial of Christ (Lk 23:55), receiving and transmitting the message of the Resurrection (Lk 24:1–10), praying with the Apostles in the Cenacle awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14), and taking on various roles in the primitive Christian community (Rom 16:1–15; Phil 4:2–3; Col 4:15; 1 Cor 11:5; and 1 Tim 5:16).

Both in her earliest days and in her successive development the Church, albeit in different ways and with diverse emphases, has always known women who have exercised an oftentimes decisive role in the Church herself and accomplished tasks of considerable value on her behalf. History is marked by grand works, quite often lowly and hidden, but not for this reason any less decisive to the growth and the holiness of the Church. It is necessary that this history continue, indeed that it be expanded and intensified in the face of the growing and widespread awareness of the personal dignity of woman and her vocation, particularly in light of the urgency of a “re-evangelization” and a major effort towards “humanizing” social relations.²⁹

There still remain too many obstacles that in so many parts of the world keep women from being fully integrated into social, political, and economic life, areas which need the sensitive and person-oriented human vision of women.³⁰

Women help to humanize society by transforming it into a civilization of love. The Pope makes a heartfelt appeal, on behalf of such a priceless gift, to the world at large, and specifically to national governments and international institutions to make every effort to ensure that

²⁸ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World *Christifideles laici* (Dec 30, 1988), § 49.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, § 4.

women regain full respect for their dignity and role.³¹ The secret to precipitating progress in the area of women's rights involves more than simply condemning discrimination and injustice:

Respect must first and foremost be won through an effective and intelligent campaign for the promotion of women, concentrating on all areas of women's life and beginning with a universal recognition of the dignity of women. Our ability to recognize this dignity, in spite of historical conditioning, comes from the use of reason itself, which is able to understand the law of God written in the heart of every human being. More than anything else, the word of God enables us to grasp clearly the ultimate anthropological basis for the dignity of women, making it evident as a part of God's plan for humanity.³²

The injurious obstacles which have prevented women from fully living out their calling as women—to serve humanity with their feminine gifts—need to be removed. John Paul II exhorts with warning, “This is a matter of justice but also of necessity.”³³ Even though the majority of women's achievements have not been recorded, they have not been lost to history. Rather, “their beneficent influence can be felt as a force which has shaped the lives of successive generations, right up to our own.”³⁴ Humanity is indebted to this feminine tradition.

The Holy Father asks a provocative question that is very much relevant today: “As we look to Christ at the end of this Second Millennium, it is natural to ask ourselves: how much of his message has been heard or acted upon?”³⁵ The Pope points to a tremendous irony, “We need only to think of how the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than rewarded, even though humanity owes its very survival to

³¹ *Ibid.*, § 6.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, § 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, § 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

this gift.”³⁶ There is an urgent need to prevent the discrimination against women who have chosen to be wives and mothers and to realize equality for women in every area of life.³⁷

Yet, despite facing all of kinds of obstacles, women all throughout history have swam against the current and have contributed to the history of humanity, “they were frequently at a disadvantage from the start, excluded from equal educational opportunities, underestimated, ignored and not given credit for their intellectual contributions.”³⁸ He expresses deep admiration for those women who have devoted their lives to defending the dignity of womanhood. By fighting for their basic social, economic, and political rights, these women demonstrated courageous initiative at a time when this kind of striving was considered “extremely inappropriate, the sign of a lack of femininity, a manifestation of exhibitionism, and even a sin!”³⁹

Women: The Heart of the Home, the Heart of Society

In the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* (1988), which addressed the vocation and mission of the laity in the Church and in the world, the Pope highlights two great tasks entrusted to women. First, she is called to uphold the full dignity of marriage and parenthood by helping the husband-father overcome forms of absenteeism. Man can be involved in the family life in a significant interpersonal communion “precisely as a result of the intelligent, loving and decisive intervention of woman.”⁴⁰ Secondly, she is called to assure the

³⁶ *Ibid.*, § 4.

³⁷ The Pope lists some specific personal rights that need to be promoted: “equal pay for work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties in a democratic State.” *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, § 3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, § 6.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, § 51.

moral dimension of culture,⁴¹ namely “a culture worthy of the person.”⁴² Why is this the special role of women? Because, although it is true that every human being is entrusted to each and every other human being,

in a special way the human being is entrusted to woman, precisely because the woman in virtue of her special experience of motherhood is seen to have a specific sensitivity towards the human person and all that constitutes the individual’s true welfare, beginning with the fundamental value of life.⁴³

The moral dimension of culture, at the inevitable risk of dehumanizing human life in the area of science and technology, needs the *feminine genius*: “How great are the possibilities and responsibilities of woman in this area . . . above all when it would demand a more intense love and a more generous acceptance.”⁴⁴ The Pope sees the indispensability of women in striving to solve the serious problems of the future, such as social services, migration, health care, bio-ethics, ecology, quality of life, and, even, leisure time. He confidently asserts:

In all these areas a greater presence of women in society will prove most valuable, for it will help to manifest the contradictions present when society is organized solely according to the criteria of efficiency and productivity, and it will force systems to be redesigned in a way which favors the processes of humanization which mark the “civilization of love.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ “This moral dimension of culture is directly connected with the participation of the lay faithful in the kingly mission of Christ: ‘Let the lay faithful by their combined efforts remedy the institutions and conditions of the world when the latter are an inducement to sin, that all such things may be conformed to the norms of justice, and may favor the practice of virtue rather than hindering it. By so doing, they will infuse culture and human works with a moral value.’” *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, § 4.

The Holy Father's love and gratitude for women bursts through his letter as he takes the time to give thanks to women for expressing their *feminine genius* in their respective vocation. He begins, "thanks to women, to every woman, for all that they represent in the life of humanity."⁴⁶ He thanks mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, workers, the consecrated, in short, all women! He exclaims, "Thank you, every woman, for the simple fact of being a woman! Through the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic."⁴⁷

Women bring the richness of their sensitivity, intuitiveness, generosity, and fidelity into the heart of the family and the human community at large.

This intuition is linked to women's physical capacity to give life. Whether lived out or remaining potential, this capacity is a reality that structures the female personality in a profound way. It allows her to acquire maturity very quickly, and gives a sense of the seriousness of life and of its responsibilities. And sense and a respect for what is concrete develop in her, opposed to abstraction which are so often fatal for the existence of individuals and society. It is women, in the end, who even in very desperate situations, as attested by history past and present, possess a singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life.⁴⁸

These feminine gifts make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture that promotes a culture worthy of persons by helping make human relations more honest and authentic through the marriage of reason and feeling. In this sense, women, with their gift of nur-

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, § 2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World (May 31, 2004), § 13.

turing interpersonal relationships, can heal humanity and humanize society through their expression of the *feminine genius*. Women, essential cooperators in the mission of the Church, in the family, in professional life, and in the civil community, are called to serve the Church and society by putting to work their feminine gifts in order to cultivate a culture worthy of persons.⁴⁹

Conclusion

John Paul II's teachings on the *feminine genius*, i.e., women's contribution of their feminine gifts to the human community, attest to the indispensability of women to cultivate a civilization of love and a culture of life. Women, beginning with their daily relationships with people, offer to humanity the richness of their sensitivity, intuitiveness, generosity, and fidelity. The family and society, the Holy Father says, direly need the maternal and healing embrace of women. As Edith Stein puts it, "How could it be otherwise than that our great holy mother the Church should open her arms wide to take [the] beloved of the Lord to her heart? [For] this she needs human arms and human hearts, maternal arms and maternal hearts."⁵⁰ Men and women need to recognize the power of the *feminine genius* and the inestimable value of spiritual motherhood for the development of individuals and the future of society.⁵¹ The spiritual impoverishment of humanity is directly tied to the marginalization of women that has prevented them from fully expressing their *feminine genius* in both the home and in society. What is needed to remove obstacles to the *feminine genius* is the adoption of the Gospel vision for women and the espousal of Jesus Christ's attitude toward women. By showing openness, respect, acceptance, and tenderness to-

⁴⁹ "The gift that is her very dignity as a person exercised in word and testimony of life, gifts therefore, connected with her vocation as a woman." John Paul II, *Christifideles laici*, § 51.

⁵⁰ Oben, *Edith Stein: Scholar, Feminist, Saint*, 73.

⁵¹ John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, § 9.

wards women, the feminine gifts will make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture that promotes a culture worthy of persons, a world in which human relationships are more honest and authentic.

THE GOSPEL'S VISION FOR WOMEN AND THE *FEMININE GENIUS*

SUMMARY

The spiritual impoverishment of humanity is directly tied to the marginalization of women that has prevented them from fully expressing their *feminine genius* in both the home and in society. What is need to remove obstacles to the *feminine genius* is the adoption of the Gospel vision for women and the espousal of Jesus Christ's attitude toward women. By showing openness, respect, acceptance, and tenderness towards women, the feminine gifts will make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture that promotes a culture worthy of persons, a world in which human relationships are more honest and authentic. Women, beginning with their daily relationships with people, offer to humanity the richness of their sensitivity, intuitiveness, generosity, and fidelity. The family and society, as John Paul II noted, direly need the maternal and healing embrace of women.

KEYWORDS

Gospel vision for women, *Feminine Genius*, culture of life, authentic human relationships, spiritual motherhood.

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