

## Ethos of Woman's Professions (1930)

*Edith Stein*

### 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 in 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.

---

**The text is taken from**

Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, Second Edition, Revised. Translated by Freda Mary Oben, ICS Publications, Washington, D.C., 1966, pp. 50-51.

From the Editor's Introduction to the First Edition, *Ibid.*, p.19: *The essay consists of the text of the lecture given by Edith Stein under the same title at the autumn convention of the Association of Catholic Academics. The meeting was held in Salzburg [Austria], August 30 to September 3, 1930; its topic was Christ and the Vocational Life of the Modern Person. Edith Stein gave her paper "The Ethos of Women's Professions" on September 1, 1930.*

---