

Colleen Campbell
Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston
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Lady Wisdom: A Catechetical and Moral Model for Feminine Identity and Discipleship

At this present moment, our culture is full of different expectations for womanhood.

Women, Catholic women especially, often find themselves struggling to reconcile cultural norms for femininity with God's plan for them as women. In this climate, confusion of identity as a woman (much less identity as woman of Christ) is likely to become a part of a girl's emotional, physical, and spiritual experience from an early age. In this culture, what would it look like to provide women with a renewed vision of womanhood that comes from an ancient source?

While the examples of the Blessed Virgin, saints, and holy sisters and laity have proven helpful throughout the history of the Church in times where traditional femininity was adopted without question, these examples, on the whole, have seemed to be ignored by the modern secular world in regards to shaping a definition of womanhood. In these times, the Church needs a new catechetical vision for approaching female identity, especially for the purpose of forming radical, life-giving female disciples to renew the Church at a time when they are most needed. As the representation of Christ to the entire world, the Church rests on this auspicious moment in our culture; we, as a Church, have the opportunity to help women recognize their value and identity in Christ. Most especially, as catechetical leaders and those entrusted with the task of passing on the faith, we have the opportunity to renew the earth with an authentic hope that is a light for the world in the darkness of any cultural situation:

In this world catechesis should help Christians to be, for their own joy and the service of all, "light" and "salt." Undoubtedly this demands that catechesis should strengthen them in their identity and that it should continually separate itself from the surrounding atmosphere of hesitation, uncertainty and insipidity. (Catechesi Tradendae, 56)

As the medium through which humanity discovers the intermingling of God's identity and our own Christian identity, Catechesis is the point of departure at which female Christian discipleship can be best articulated. With the catechetical charge of enlivening the human being's fundamental identity in Christ, the Church must seek to take advantage of the opportunity to reach women through a medium that is able to wrestle with cultural expectations of womanhood and challenge godless femininity.

It is therefore necessary to consider a renewed vision for feminine discipleship. The Catholic tradition is full of feminine imagery that has been employed successfully throughout Church history; however, to address the current cultural climate of women and girls, the Church needs to draw from her tradition an example of womanhood that is adaptable to Catholic women in the present moment. This renewed vision of femininity would be a catechetical tool that aimed to empower women and girls to seek God boldly through the identification and practice of their own individual gifts, discernment of how to use their gifts in their vocation, and discipleship through service to the human person. Most importantly, this vision would enable female disciples to affirm their own dignity as women in order to serve Christ, the Church, and the world. I offer, then, the renewed vision of radical, feminine discipleship and identity in the person of Lady Wisdom as both a catechetical and moral model.

Who is Lady Wisdom?

Often called "Dame Wisdom", "Woman Wisdom", "Woman of Valor" or "Woman of Virtue", Lady Wisdom is a recurring presence within the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament. She is the personification of the creative and redemptive powers of God, and is simultaneously self-emptying, sustaining, stable, agile, subtle, and possessing all things. Lady Wisdom proceeds from God and is guided by Him in all things. The attributes and actions of Lady Wisdom, like

women, are creative in nature, deriving all life giving powers from God Himself. Because of her closeness and intimacy with God and love for His people, Lady Wisdom operates both on transcendental and incarnate levels. In the book of Wisdom, Solomon, the assumed author, writes the praises of Lady Wisdom, honoring her as “Wisdom, the artisan of all” (Wisdom 7:22). Lady Wisdom is responsible for Solomon’s intimacy with God, inspiring him with life-giving counsel, virtue, and righteousness; in addition, she is also is a main cause of the birth and continuation of the spiritual life among those whom she encounters.

In chapter 7 of the Wisdom of Solomon, Lady Wisdom is explicitly spoken of by the use of 21 striking attributes to describe her divine characteristics. In these attributes and the subsequent descriptions of Wisdom’s identity and action in Chapter 7, there is a radical call to dignified, moral femininity:

For in her is a spirit
intelligent, holy, unique,
Manifold, subtle, agile,
clear, unstained, certain,
Never harmful, loving the good, keen,
unhampered, beneficent, kindly,
Firm, secure, tranquil,
all-powerful, all-seeing,
And pervading all spirits,
though they be intelligent, pure and very subtle. (Wisdom 7:22b-23)

From this list, readers can grasp the simultaneous intensity and gentleness of Lady Wisdom. Her ways require discipline, purity, integrity, and fortitude. Lady Wisdom is also not a passive, timid, or mindless character; her spirit actively seeks the goodness of God in all of His creation, prudently avoids obstacles, and tirelessly labors to attain pure virtue. The words used to describe Lady Wisdom should be used when catechizing women about their female identity, as they are words that can handle the challenge of the paradigm of cultural expectations of femininity, yet reiterate classical Catholic understanding of woman. Encompassing all points of the spectrum of

femininity, Wisdom is able to appeal to many different women of different experiences. Lady Wisdom's attributes are an excellent moral model for women because they promote strength, intelligence, and holiness, but also recommend tranquility, love, and kindness. Most importantly, they speak to Wisdom's individuality given to her by God. These 21 attributes identify Lady Wisdom's gifts, a model necessary for present day catechetical initiatives towards women.

Importance of Recognition of Individual Gifts

Like Lady Wisdom's litany of unique attributes given to her by God, it is also necessary for women to identify and develop the gifts, attributes, and talents given to them by God. Each human being, whether female or male, has been given unique gifts for creativity, service, and leisure. Because of God's intimate creative action in the world, each human being is known deeply by a God who desires communion with her by bestowing certain talents and gifts on her. The Catholic tradition has always affirmed the importance of expressing these individual gifts and talents in service of the world as a way by which man and woman know themselves and God more intimately: "This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself" (Gaudium et Spes, 24). Therefore, in a type of catechesis that seeks to empower women to be disciples of Christ, it is necessary for women to be formed to identify their gifts so that they not only are able to give themselves fruitfully to the service of the world and Church, but are also steeped in an understanding of their God-given dignity. In other words, when women are able to identify their gifts, they are able to become more solidified in their understanding of their identity in Christ, as He reveals woman to herself by her exercise of talent and gifts. After being guided to identification of these gifts and their divine origin, women, like Lady Wisdom, can be led to discovering their vocation.

A Mirror of God: Identifying the Feminine Vocation

In the subsequent description of Lady Wisdom after the articulation of her unique gifts, her vocation is revealed:

For Wisdom is mobile beyond all motion,
and she penetrates and pervades all things by reason of her purity.
For she is a breath of the might of God
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled can enter into her.
For she is the reflection of eternal light,
the spotless mirror of the power of God,
the image of his goodness. (Wisdom 7:24-26)

Wisdom's vocation is to mirror God: to be the image of His goodness in the world. Because of her beauty, dignity, and adaptability, Lady Wisdom is able to act in many ways and places in the world. Wisdom originates from God and goes forth from Him to permeate the world with creative action.

What would the effects be of instructing women about their dignity using Lady Wisdom as a moral model? Possibly, women could begin to see the incredible power and gift that comes with being female: the call to take part in God's creative power and bring forth His light in the world. How many strong women and girls, solidified in their inherent dignity, would be formed in the Catholic Church? Morally, Lady Wisdom exemplifies the feminine vocation.

This vocation to bear God in the world takes many forms, but is discerned by the woman out of her individual gifts (vocation here meaning career/leisure) and the capacity for creating physical and spiritual life (vocation here meaning call from God). Catechetically, Lady Wisdom models a process that includes women identifying their gifts so as to more clearly decide how to manifest God to the world through their contributions to the humanities, sciences, healing professions, arts, and humanity as a whole. In conversation with their individual gifts, women

must also be formed to honor their physical and spiritual ability to give life, which can be carried out through physical or spiritual motherhood.

Living the Female Vocation and Beginning Formation as Disciples

Continuing to articulate the feminine vocation, this giving of life is shown further in verse 27:

Although she is one, she can do all things, and she renews everything while herself perduring; passing into holy souls from age to age, she produces friends of God and prophets. (Wisdom 7:27)

Here, Lady Wisdom is shown to be a powerful force entrusted by God with the ability to affect every area of life and every people at every point in time. In other words, Wisdom is a unique spirit that is capable of directing and redirecting history; this capability is due to her simultaneous self-emptying and self-sustaining qualities. Lady Wisdom freely gives all of herself to all of creation, while still herself enduring. In this paradoxical description, the female reader again discovers another key element in her vocation to holiness:

So she finds herself again in the very fact of giving herself ‘through a sincere gift of herself’ when she is accepted in the way in which the Creator wished her to be, that is, ‘for her own sake’, through her humanity and femininity... Let us add that this finding of oneself in giving oneself becomes the source of a new giving of oneself. This grows by virtue of the interior disposition to the exchange of the gift and to the extent to which it meets with the same and even deeper acceptance and welcome as the fruit of a more and more intense awareness of the gift itself. (Mulieris Dignitatem, 71)

In Lady Wisdom’s complete self-gift that is given through individual gifts, women can identify the creative power that comes forth from the surrender of self. Not only does the labor of self-sacrifice and self-emptying bear the fruits of a deep knowledge of self, it also brings forth spiritual and physical new life. Able to direct and redirect the course of history through her creative power, Lady Wisdom is responsible for the cultivation of physical and spiritual life in every generation. In chapter 10 of Wisdom, Solomon describes Lady Wisdom as actively

directing the course of the entire history of the Jewish people. Here, Wisdom is not just depicted as using her creative power to generate physical new life; Lady Wisdom gives birth to and nurtures the seeds of truth, righteousness, and relationship with God (Wisdom 10:1-11:16). By allowing God to be her ultimate guide, Lady Wisdom herself guides, protects, and enlightens all of those entrusted to her care: “Ultimately, she is a manifestation of God’s creative and salvific activity in the world. In other words, God acts and chooses to act through Wisdom” (Glicksman, 182). The birth and maturation of salvific activity throughout many generations is possible only by Lady Wisdom’s cooperation with God, and His choice to act through her. Like Lady Wisdom, women must collaborate with God to generate new physical or spiritual life, and are only able to proceed with God’s condonance. From this unification of cooperation and authorization, the responsibility of spiritual and physical regeneration is born. This is the female vocation: creative union with God. From this union, women are both spiritual and physical mothers in each generation; with the guidance of God, they not only give birth and care for new physical life, but also are a crucial witness to the birth and maturation of the Divine life within every person all of the time.

The creative union with God in which women participate forms them for Christian service to all humanity, but especially the poor and vulnerable. Since they are created to enkindle the gift of life, women have the capacity for great acts of service to humanity. God entrusts the human race to women, as they are, in a unique way, a manifestation of Him in the world:

A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting, strong because of the fact that God “entrusts the human being to her,” always and in every way, even in the situations of social discrimination in which she may find herself. This awareness and this fundamental vocation speak to women of the dignity which they receive from God himself, and this makes them “strong” and strengthens their vocation” (Mulieris Dignitatem, 30)

This entrustment of the human person by God to women allows them to serve the Church and the world. Catechetically, Lady Wisdom serves as a model for Christian discipleship in service to the human person, especially in the poor and vulnerable. Morally, Lady Wisdom calls women to radical charity towards every human being by living out her vocation to bear God in the world.

Lady Wisdom in Relation to Christian Discipleship

Lady Wisdom, although most explicitly named in the Old Testament, is intimately related with the role and Person of Jesus Christ. Christ, the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24), is similar to Lady Wisdom in that He is a manifestation of God; however, Christ, as the son of God, brings the manifestation of God through Lady Wisdom to its fullness by His incarnation.

Therefore, while Lady Wisdom is a feminine catechetical and moral model for discipleship, she should always be employed in relation to Christ, the fullness of Divine Wisdom. Paradoxically, in Christ, women find the fullness of their feminine identity: “In the Spirit of Christ, in fact, women can discover the entire meaning of their femininity and thus be disposed to making a ‘sincere gift of self’ to others, thereby finding themselves” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 31).

Women are called to discipleship by living out incarnational spirituality. While still called to the same expectation of holiness as men, women have a special ability to enact this incarnational spirituality because of their God-given gift of care for the human person. Because of their capacity for great care for the human race, women take part in Christian discipleship through becoming Christ to all of those that they meet, especially the vulnerable. Christian discipleship according to the catechetical model of Lady Wisdom includes identifying individual gifts, vocation, and ways in which to serve the world, Church, and humanity at large.

Challenges of Use of the Moral and Catechetical Model of Lady Wisdom

Using the model of Lady Wisdom in catechetical ministry does provide challenges. Because she is very much a fluid theological metaphor, integrating and articulating her to the average Catholic in ministerial situations would require prudence, especially when relating her back to the person of Christ.

Further Questions Concerning Using Lady Wisdom as a Moral and Catechetical Model

Questions that I pose for my own further research, and the consideration are as follows:

- What is the best process for women to recognize their gifts? Would it be a practical course or workshop such as *Living Your Strengths*, or a more spiritual process through spiritual direction and personal reflection?
- At what age is it best to introduce Lady Wisdom? Is adolescence too early, or is this the proper time to begin introducing young girls to the concepts that Lady Wisdom articulates?
- Can using the catechetical model of Lady Wisdom increase women's roles and involvement in the Church?
- Can Lady Wisdom be employed to help women better understand and practice Catholic Social Teaching?
- How can Lady Wisdom be used to teach sexual virtue and Catholic teachings on sexuality?
- How can Lady Wisdom help the Church articulate a theology and spirituality of masculinity?

Conclusion

In our current cultural climate, Lady Wisdom is a possible catechetical tool to help form women to recognize their inherent dignity, identify the blessings given to them by God, equip them to choose how to best reveal God to the world, and mobilize them to serve humanity.

Employing Lady Wisdom's model would not eliminate the traditional examples of the Church's

understanding of what it means to be a woman in the Catholic sense; rather, Lady Wisdom would be the foundation on which the contemporary woman understands her dignity and role as a female disciple, and the way by which she would be further lead to Wisdom's characteristics present in the lives of the Blessed Virgin and female saints. This catechetical and moral model can help the Catholic Church practically articulate a theology of woman that is not only able to challenge cultural expectations of women, but overcome them. Through the model of Lady Wisdom, catechetical leaders can begin not only to form strong women who are aware of and empowered by their dignity and vocation, but also follow the example of Pope Francis by advocating for the further articulation, participation, and evangelization of women in the Church:

Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed. The church cannot be herself without the woman and her role. The woman is essential for the church. Mary, a woman, is more important than the bishops... We must therefore investigate further the role of women in the church. We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman. Only by making this step will it be possible to better reflect on their function within the church. (Pope Francis, America Magazine)

Perhaps, Lady Wisdom is a step in the right direction towards this profound theology. In employing Lady Wisdom as a moral and catechetical model, the Church has the possibility to form radiant women, who, empowered by their call to Christian discipleship, will transform the world by being who they are.

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About the Author

Colleen Campbell is a 22 year old catechetical apprentice in the Echo program at the University of Notre Dame. Through Echo, Colleen is in her first year of studying for a M.A. in Theology while working in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston at Christ the Redeemer Catholic Church. At Christ the Redeemer, her main responsibilities include coordinating Home-based Catechesis, assisting with Elementary Sacramental Preparation, and being a 6th grade catechist.

Colleen received her B.A. in Pastoral Ministry with an emphasis in Catechetics from the University of Dallas. Through an undergraduate internship and current role as a catechetical apprentice, Colleen has two years of leadership experience in catechetical ministry.

Colleen is originally from Greenville, South Carolina. Her academic and professional interests include catechetical initiatives directed towards women, the Wisdom books of the Old Testament, the spiritual formation of children and adolescents, sacramental preparation, and the formation of catechists.