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Colleen Carroll Campbell:
Catholicism, Feminism, and Women Saints

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Colleen Carroll Campbell dares to venture where few modern women have ventured before. She seeks to reconcile Catholicism with the seemingly opposite views of feminism, a task that few modern women have achieved. As she entered adulthood, Campbell realized not only the important role that her Catholic upbringing had in her life but also her genuine concern for women's rights. Though Catholicism and feminism conflict in various ways, Campbell was determined to find a place for both belief systems in her life. Over the years, Catholicism and feminism have influenced her personal and professional lives, and today, the two subjects have become the topic of much of her writing, including her best-selling books, *The New Faithful* and *My Sister's the Saints*. With the inspiration of several women saints, Colleen Carroll Campbell has become a modern day role model for Catholic women and feminists.

Colleen Carroll Campbell attended college at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she discovered her passion for writing, her interest in women's issues, and the significance of her Catholic upbringing. In her recent memoir, *My Sisters the Saints*, Campbell describes the emotional struggles that she encountered during her college years; she explains how she felt stuck in the college party scene and as a result, felt lost, empty, and unsatisfied. When she realized that she needed a change, Campbell suddenly found herself confronted with a number of questions. She asks herself:

What is the source of that gnawing sensation inside me, and why does my pursuit of pleasure and success only intensify it? Is it true that there are no real differences between the sexes, or does my femininity – and female body – have something to do with my desires and discontent? If the key to my fulfillment as a woman lies in maximizing my sexual allure, racking up professional accomplishments, and indulging my appetites while avoiding

commitment, why has following that advice left me dissatisfied? (*My Sisters the Saints* 4-5).

Campbell demanded answers to these questions and though she admits that she was hesitant to associate herself with the “man-hating, bra-burning radical feminists,” she discovered a need for certain feminist principles in her life.

Campbell confesses that many aspects of her spiritual life had waned since starting college. She writes that in college, she felt it was better to be labeled “shallow, stuck-up, drunk, or debauched – anything but devout,” a notion that many college students today can relate to (*My Sisters the Saints* 22). However, when Campbell’s father was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease during her senior year, she knew her spiritual life had to change. She resuscitated her relationship with God, began attending mass again, and rediscovered her love for women saints, who her parents had taught her about as a child. After reading the biography of Saint Teresa of Avila, Campbell knew that the women saints would become her source of guidance, support, and friendship as she transitioned into adulthood.

The story of Saint Teresa of Avila not only reminded Campbell of the importance of her faith, but it also provided her insight as to how to practice her faith in light of being a modern woman. Campbell writes of Saint Teresa:

She came to understand that while God wants us to treat our bodies with respect, excessive focus on perfecting our bodies or indulging their insatiable desires distances us from God. The same goes for social status, popularity, and professional achievement, things that are not evil in themselves but that can wreak spiritual havoc when we value them more than we value God (*My Sisters the Saints* 18).

Early in life, Saint Teresa was distracted by vanity, superficiality, and a preoccupation with social status; all of which were distractions that Campbell

immediately related to. However, Saint Teresa found a way to express her femininity and freedom while simultaneously answering God's call. She discovered that she could respect her body without making it a priority above God. This example led Campbell to conclude that her journey toward becoming a modern day woman was intertwined with her journey toward God and that it was indeed possible to combine Catholicism with elements of feminism.

Since Campbell found immense strength and insight in Saint Teresa of Avila, she encourages Catholic women to similarly look toward female saints for guidance in the modern world. In a journal article entitled "The Genius of Women Saints," Campbell addresses the combination of Catholicism and feminism that she found possible. At a time when Catholic women are the focus of the media, for various reasons, Campbell reiterates Pope Benedict XVI's effort to revive the lessons that women saints have to offer modern Catholics. With the canonization of four women saints in 2012, Pope Benedict XVI followed in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II, who originally called for a "new feminism," primarily one that includes openness to God. Campbell supports this notion as she writes, "For women dissatisfied by the stale bromides of secular feminism and the frothy, girl-power messages peddled by today's pop culture, the wisdom of the women saints is a bracing and provocative antidote" ("The Genius of Women Saints"). As Campbell states, the clichés of secular feminism are lacking, especially for Catholic females. Campbell speaks from experience as she attempts to promote the message and relevance of women saints for modern day Catholic women.

In an article entitled "What Would Women Saints Say," Campbell continues to look for direction from the saints as she addresses recent controversies, including the debate on contraception and women's roles in the church hierarchy. In her article, Campbell provides insight as to how modern female Catholics should approach such issues. According to Campbell, most women saints would assert that a woman's liberation is rooted in her relationship with God and is not measured by quotas or the occupation of the same societal roles. Modern Catholic feminists need not concern themselves with achieving societal sameness, but rather on discerning the roles and gifts that God has bestowed on them as women. Again, Campbell suggests modern women, who are concerned or confused about their role in the Catholic Church, look toward women saints for guidance and understanding. Campbell writes, "Their wisdom is ageless. And their common conviction – that a woman's dignity is not a contingent proposition but an irrevocable gift from God – is as timely today as ever" ("What Would Women Saints Say").

In regard to modern day politics, Campbell recognizes that Catholic women are consistently being confronted with a negative view of freedom. The dominant perspective in today's culture is that "a woman's freedom is defined primarily by what she rejects: unwanted children, outmoded ideas about the importance and meaning of marriage and retrograde religious doctrines that call her to subordinate her desires to the demands of others" ("A Different Brand of Liberated Women"). For many feminists, an unplanned pregnancy is regarded as an opportunity for women to express their freedom; it is an "invitation to oppression," as Campbell conveys in her article, "A Different Brand of Liberated Women." Consequently,

Catholic females are being told that liberation is achieved in spite of church traditions, not because of them. Campbell attempts to dispel this notion by again taking the advice of women saints. For them, Campbell notes, faith and freedom are united. Catholic women can find modern day fulfillment by embracing “feminine distinctiveness and equal dignity, not denying either” (“A Different Brand of Liberated Women”). The truth in this statement is most prominent in the life and teachings of Saint Therese of Lisieux.

As Campbell struggled with her father’s diagnosis of Alzheimer’s disease, she found an important message in Saint Therese of Lisieux that was not only pertinent to her personal life at the time, but remains relevant to modern day Catholic women. Saint Therese is known for her “little way.” She focused on the “little ones” in society – the demented, the disabled, the frail, the unborn – and recognized that God’s greatest call is to love. By embracing her gentle femininity, Saint Therese found a way to express her feminine freedom through her faith. Campbell realizes, “If productivity, efficiency, and rationality are not the ways God gauges a human person’s value, then they are not the ways I should measure it either” (*My Sisters the Saints* 52). Since today’s society is increasingly focused on productivity and efficiency, Catholic women are constantly being tempted away from God’s call to love. For example, in an effort to be productive and efficient, countless women have chosen abortion over love. For Campbell, Saint Therese’s little way encouraged her to convert from pro-choice to passionately pro-life, providing modern women with a testament as to how influential women saints can be for today’s Catholics. Since

then, Campbell has taken a strong stance against abortion and has offered Catholic feminists an alternative solution to this controversial issue.

“Being pro-life is being countercultural. It’s almost a rebellion” (*The New Faithful* 210). In her book *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy*, Campbell quotes Brother Patrick Reilly of the Massachusetts Citizens for Life, who conveys that for young women today, a pro-life stance is revolutionary. The tenets of feminism pervade college campuses and a woman’s right to an abortion is among the most prominent beliefs of feminists. So what does this mean for young female Catholics? Can you be a feminist and oppose abortion? Campbell says yes. She claims that despite the prevalence of the feminist notion regarding the “right to choose,” pro-life feminism is the future. Catholic feminists are refusing to choose between having a future and having a baby. According to pro-life feminists, “the best way for a woman to defend her own dignity is to defend the dignity of each and every human person, including the one that grows within her womb” (“Pro-Life Feminism is the Future”). For young female Catholics, therefore, the pro-life feminist movement offers a way for them to assert the dignity of women in a manner that coincides with the Catholic Church’s teachings. By promoting pro-life feminism, Campbell paves the way for modern women to combine Catholicism and feminism.

A similar issue that Colleen Carroll Campbell has spoken out against in her recent writings is that of gendercide through sex-selective abortions. While the issue is most prominent in China and India, sex-selective abortions are not unheard of in America. In fact, undercover video footage of Planned Parenthood has

documented staff members coaching patients through the process of obtaining a sex-selective abortion (“A Bad Week for Planned Parenthood”). Perhaps equally as upsetting as sex-selective abortion is the nation’s response to the issue. Campbell explains:

Sadly, most American feminist leaders have remained silent in the face of this modern atrocity. Their refusal to brook any limits on abortion rights has led to one of the bitterest ironies of our post-feminist age: that the abortion license touted as the key to liberating future generations of women would become the preferred means of eradicating them (“The Bitter Irony of Sex-Selective Abortion”).

Furthermore, secular feminists considered support for a ban on sex-selective abortions as part of the “war on women.” Sex-selective abortions, as well as the response (or lack thereof) from feminists regarding the issue, are proof that some of the major beliefs of secular feminism are void of morality. In several articles, Campbell speaks out about this issue to not only draw attention to the perceived injustice but also to remind women of the importance of morality and religion in discerning feminist beliefs.

“I’d like to make a request of America’s political and media elites on behalf of America’s women: Stop lumping us together. To be more specific: Stop telling us ‘what women want...’” (“What Women Want”). Campbell takes a feminist stance in her 2012 article for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch as she asserts individuality for women in politics. Particularly regarding the issue of abortion, Campbell declares that not *all* women uphold the same beliefs and vote in the same way. In fact, she states that religion and marital status predict a person’s vote far more accurately than gender (“What Women Want”). Campbell conveys her message to society and specifically to politicians saying, “Pay attention to the complexity of women’s

experience and the diversity of our opinions” (“What Women Want”). In this article, Campbell expresses more than one important message for modern day women. From a feminist voice, Campbell asserts the diversity of women’s opinions and challenges politicians to refrain from clumping all women into one category. From the Catholic perspective, she explains that not all women are pro-choice and not all women support secular feminist beliefs. It is the combination of these two voices that makes Campbell an example for modern Catholic feminists.

After receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in writing-intensive English from Marquette University, Campbell’s faith and struggle with women’s issues continued to influence her life, both privately and professionally. She began working as a journalist, where she wrote editorials on various subjects, including politics, education, religion, and social issues. In the year 2000, Campbell was awarded a fellowship that allowed her to take a year off from her newspaper job and travel the country to investigate the spirituality of her generation, which culminated in her book *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy*. Around this time, Campbell also met her husband, John. Unlike the superficial relationships that Campbell described during her college years, John offered her something more – a mature understanding of love and commitment.

After deciding to pursue a doctoral degree in philosophy at Saint Louis University, Campbell’s life was dramatically altered by a surprising job offer. She was asked to be a speechwriter for President George W. Bush and though excited by this rare opportunity, Campbell toiled with her decision to accept or deny the position. She recognized that she would not only have to put off her doctoral studies,

but would also have to postpone her wedding to John. For the first time, Campbell found herself torn between love and her career. In *My Sisters the Saints*, she writes:

Like most women in my generation, I had heard enough horror stories about feminist workaholics to know that I did not want to sacrifice my personal life at the altar of an all-consuming career. I had heard even more warnings about the other sort of sacrifice: the surrender of professional success that women are prone to make in fits of passion or panic over their biological clocks, only to wind up dependent on unappreciative men (*My Sisters the Saints* 58).

Campbell struggled to find a balance between her feminist ambitions and her call to love and marriage. With the example of Sister Maria Faustina, Campbell asked for God's guidance and placed her trust in Him. Campbell accepted the job, becoming the president's only female speechwriter.

Throughout her time in the White House, Campbell struggled with being the only woman speechwriter and was forced to overcome instances of sexism in the office. About a year after entering the White House, Campbell again felt torn between love and her career and decided to leave the White House so that she could begin her life with John. She describes her decision saying, "It pushed me to decide how much I would trust God to care for my needs in the coming years, as I gradually exchanged my independence as a single woman for interdependence as John's wife" (*My Sisters the Saints* 90). At first, Campbell was concerned about the stereotypical feminist response to her decision to give up her prestigious job to pursue love. However, she recognized, with the help of Sister Faustina, that placing her trust in God was the only way she would be able to discern the direction of her future. She also knew that relinquishing her job in the White House for the pursuit of love did not dictate an end to her professional life or make her less of a woman.

In her article entitled "When Love and Career Collide," Campbell offers advice to women who may be facing dilemmas similar to the ones Campbell described in her memoir. She suggests that modern women consider less the opinions of others and focus more on what brings them greater internal peace. She notes that especially today, women feel not only reluctant but also guilty for choosing a man over professional plans. However, sometimes this decision is the most empowering one a woman can make. Campbell encourages modern women to listen to their deepest desires but never sacrifice their values, integrity, or self-respect. Furthermore, Campbell advises women to forget the "50/50" rule, which states each partner should only give as much as he or she gets ("When Love and Career Collide"). Despite the views of secular feminism, Campbell asserts that sacrifices are fundamental to love and marriage. They can offer women opportunities for liberation, if made for the right reasons and at the right time.

Particularly for modern young adults, the dating scene has been overtaken by today's "hook-up culture." This hyper-sexualized culture has blurred the lines for many young adults and especially for young Catholics, whose religion teaches chastity, temperance, and fidelity ("A Refreshing Alternative To the Hook-Up Culture"). As Campbell explored her generation's views on today's sexually driven culture, she was surprised to find that young Christians were captivated by the countercultural teachings offered by Christianity on sex and morality. In *The New Faithful*, Campbell writes:

For many young adults, the apex of unhappiness often follows a series of casual or failed sexual relationships. Reeling from the effects of a lover's rejection, an unplanned pregnancy, a sexually transmitted disease, or a nagging sense of emptiness despite frenetic sexual activity, they begin to

examine their behavior and its consequences. They reconsider the moral messages delivered to them by parents, peers, and performers. And many find themselves captivated by the countercultural view of sex articulated by Christian orthodoxy (*The New Faithful* 127).

As Campbell discovered, many young adults find the challenge of living morally in regard to sexual relationships a refreshing and beneficial alternative to the hook-up culture. However, Campbell recognizes that this is not an easy feat, especially for Catholic women, who are in the spotlight regarding issues of sex and contraception. By keeping in mind the Church's doctrines and by opposing the dominant views of today's society, young female Catholics can not only stand up for their faith but can also promote the respect of their bodies.

Campbell and her husband believed in the Catholic Church's teachings on contraception and so, for the first few years of their marriage, they used natural family planning methods to prevent pregnancy until they were ready to have children. However, as soon as they decided they were ready to start a family, Campbell received the devastating news that her chances of getting pregnant were slim. Campbell immediately began to question the paths she had previously taken in life. She writes in *My Sisters the Saints*, "If the ability to conceive and bear children is the defining biological fact of the female body, what did it say about me that my body had failed to fulfill its function?" (*My Sisters the Saints* 98). In addition to questioning her femininity, Campbell questions her faith saying, "Why had God given me these maternal desires if he never intended to fulfill them?" (*My Sisters the Saints* 101). As Campbell found herself struggling with both her female body and her faith in God's plan, she again turned to the women saints for support.

Initially, Campbell found herself drawn to Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *The Gospel of Life*, as well as his apostolic letters, which claim that every woman is called to be a mother but that there exists more than one way to answer that call; bearing children is not necessarily a requirement for motherhood. Campbell then discovered the wisdom of a saint that Pope John Paul II had recently canonized, Edith Stein. Edith Stein realized one of the most dangerous aspects of feminism - its effort to disregard some of the major features that define womanhood, including the ability to become mothers. When women succumb to this feminist tendency in order to equate themselves with men, they forget about the God-given characteristics that define them as women. In the lessons that Edith Stein offered, Campbell realized not only the power of her womanhood but also her innate motherhood, despite her infertility. Looking back, Campbell also discovered that neither Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Therese of Lisieux, nor Edith Stein bore biological children; they were not "mothers in the conventional sense" but they were mothers to countless spiritual children (*My Sisters the Saints* 127). Because of the women saints and her faith, Campbell was eventually able to come to terms with her infertility.

After four years of incessant praying to God through the intercession of women saints and learning how to cope with her infertility, Campbell's life was suddenly changed again. She received news that she was pregnant with twins and Campbell felt that God had finally answered her prayers. However, her pregnancy was not without frightening complications. Campbell developed a subchorionic hemorrhage, an internal tear that had produced bleeding between the membranes of one of the placentas and the uterus (*My Sisters the Saints* 179). For a period of

time, Campbell was unsure if her two babies would survive; the bleed tended to get worse as her pregnancy continued. Campbell felt as if she was receiving bad news with every subsequent doctor's appointment. However, months later, Campbell was told that the bleed had not only stopped spreading, but had vanished completely. Both Campbell and John interpreted this as yet another miracle, sent to them from Jesus.

Throughout her pregnancy, Campbell found comfort in Mary, the Mother of God. As she began to read more about Mary, Campbell discovered that Mary's example remains relevant for young females today. She also learned valuable lessons regarding motherhood. Campbell writes:

In a world always tempted to prize women more for their fecundity and sexual allure than for their souls – a temptation typified by the ancient “goddess” cults in which prostitution, forced abortions, and female infanticide were common - Mary's perpetual virginity challenges the status quo. Her complete consecration to God confirms the value and importance of women for their own sakes, even apart from their ability to provide sexual pleasure or large numbers of heirs to men (*My Sisters the Saints* 190).

Feminists today challenge this notion and assert that women are more than just their sexual appeal and ability to reproduce. As Campbell conveys, Mary is a testament to the value of women “for their own sakes,” regardless of their sexual allure, fertility, or decision to have children. Furthermore, Mary taught Campbell that sometimes, a woman's greatest strength is her silent communion with God, as opposed to the typical outspokenness associated with today's feminist movement.

After becoming a mother, Campbell continued to struggle to find a balance between her feminist desire for a full-time career and her God-given call to motherhood. Ultimately, Campbell decided to follow a flexible career path in order

to raise her children. In an article Campbell wrote on stay-at-home motherhood, she writes that both stay-at-home mothers and full-time working mothers deserve attention. However, also deserving of attention, according to Campbell, is “the growing contingent of mothers who are finding ways to do what American women increasingly say they want: savor the private and unhurried joys of motherhood without severing their connection to the professions and public life” (“A Skewed View of Stay-At-Home Motherhood”). While Campbell decided to trade in some aspects of her professional life for motherhood, she continues to write professionally and remains connected to her career while simultaneously raising her children – the perfect combination of feminism and faith.

As for raising her two daughters, Campbell made a distinct effort to avoid the “princess culture” of Barbie dolls and Disney characters. She worried about how her daughters would be affected by the hypersexual and superficial messages associated with today’s “princess culture.” She says, “I want my daughters to cherish their femininity. But I want them to understand that feminine beauty is more about their hearts than their bodies, more about the warmth and openness with which they approach the world and other people...” (“The Princess Culture May Not Be Harmless”). In accordance with feminist principles, Campbell objects to the early sexualization of young girls as a result of today’s consumerist market. Rather, Campbell tries to teach her daughters to embrace their inner femininity, as did so many of the women saints that Campbell now looks up to as role models.

Colleen Carroll Campbell’s life, from her years as a typical college student to her years as a wife and mother, was filled with a variety of obstacles. Almost all of

her inner conflicts were rooted in her struggle between modern feminism and traditional Catholicism and at times, a resolution between the two seemed near to impossible. However, with the guidance of women saints, Campbell was able to overcome the obstacles she faced while maintaining her feminist beliefs and upholding the teachings of her Catholic faith. At the end of her memoir, Campbell writes:

I had seen so much, changed so much, hurt so much, and learned so much. I knew I still had much to learn – my journey as a wife was in its early stages, and my journey as a mother had just begun – but I marveled that God had transformed my life and priorities so radically since that day. And he had done it in a way that the spiritually starved college student I once was never would have imagined: by introducing me to six women saints who taught me the true meaning of liberation (*My Sisters the Saints* 211).

With Campbell's rediscovered faith and the lessons from the saints on womanhood and femininity, Campbell found liberation and a life that was indicative of everything she stood and continues to stand for.

I would not call myself a feminist. In fact, I am often put off by feminist views because they contradict so many of the religious beliefs that I was taught as a child. Being a part of a college campus, I have found it difficult to remain true to my Catholic beliefs and not conform to the pervasiveness of feminism that surrounds me. So when I first encountered Colleen Carroll Campbell's writings, especially her memoir *My Sisters the Saints*, I knew that she would have great advice to offer me and would have a major influence on my life. As a modern day, young, female Catholic, I have begun to encounter some of the same questions and difficulties that Campbell faced in her early adulthood. As I grapple with issues affecting young women, like the extensive hook-up culture, dating, controversial issues like abortion

and contraception, and my future career, I am thankful to have a modern day role model like Colleen Carroll Campbell. Her ability to convey the relevance of the women saints to modern times and her determination to find strength in her femininity that coincides with her Catholic faith is an enormous feat in today's age.

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