



Strong Women and Holy Mothers: Some Lessons from Scripture and the Saints

The Most Rev. José H. Gomez,
Archbishop of San Antonio

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Thank you for your warm welcome this evening. It is very good to be with you.

As I was getting ready for this talk, I found myself remembering my time in Denver, where I served as auxiliary bishop. There is a mountain west of the city that is very beautiful. There are lots of wildflowers, and from the top you can see snow-capped peaks all around and also the city of Denver.

What a lot of people don't know is that one of America's great women saints bought a piece of that mountain.

In the early 1900s, St. Frances Xavier Cabrini had established ministries to the immigrants working in the mines outside Denver. When Mother Cabrini saw this mountain she thought it would make a great place to build a convent for her sisters and a summer camp for the girls in their orphanage.

So she purchased a part of the mountain. And on her last visit to Denver—in 1912, five years before her death—Mother Cabrini did something very special there. She took some of her nuns and some of the orphan girls and they drove a horse and buggy up a cow path to the foot of the highest hill. Then they all climbed up to the top. Once they were there, they gathered hundreds of white stones of all different sizes. Then they worked to arrange them into the shape of a huge Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Mother Cabrini's heart of stones is still there on that mountaintop, just the way the saint intended it. The sisters have since covered it in glass to preserve it. And they have made the grounds surrounding it into a peaceful space for prayer.

I'm telling you this because it occurred to me that Mother Cabrini's heart of stones is a beautiful symbol for your calling and mission as women.

Each of you is called to be a saint. You've all heard this before, I know—but we need to keep hearing it. We need to always be trying harder to live it.

When St. Paul addressed his letters to those “called to be saints,” he wasn't writing only to men (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2). He wasn't writing to a special group in the Church—bishops or priests or consecrated people. He was writing to the whole Church. “This is the will of God: your sanctification,” he said (1 Thess. 4:3). This was Jesus' teaching, too. He said: “Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48).

You are here to be holy, my friends. To live as the image of God. To be saints. That is the first thing I want to tell you tonight. You are here to be saints. But what does that mean? Holiness is the perfection of love. To be holy, to be a saint, is to love like Jesus calls us to love—to love God with everything we have and to love our neighbors as ourselves. To be willing to lay down our lives for our love.

As Mother Cabrini and those orphans gathered stones and turned them into a heart of Jesus, you are called to do the same thing. From the materials and experiences of your daily lives, you are called to make something beautiful for Jesus, to turn your little corner of the world into a reflection of his Sacred Heart.

What I want to do this evening is to encourage you, my sisters! To love with the heart of Jesus! To bring others to the heart of Jesus! To surround the people you know with the love of Christ and to extend the good news of his love so that it embraces and surrounds everyone you come in contact with.

I did not come tonight with a formal lecture for you on your vocation as women. Instead I want to share some reflections, some lessons and insights from Scripture and the saints.

It's no coincidence that the first American citizen to be named a saint was a woman.

Mother Cabrini was a true hero of the faith. She established schools, orphanages, and hospitals in Denver, Chicago, New York, and elsewhere in the United States and throughout Latin America—Nicaragua, Panama, Argentina, Brazil.

Her motto was always “I can do all things in him.” This, of course, is something St. Paul used to say: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil. 4:13). And we should never forget this. No matter what we are doing, my friends. If we are doing it for Jesus, he will give us the strength we need, the courage we need to accomplish what he wants us to do.

When Mother Cabrini died, they found some notes she had made while on retreat. Including this prayer she wrote: “O Jesus, I love you very much. ... Give me a heart as big as the universe. ... Tell me what you wish that I do, and do with me as you will.”

That's a good prayer for all of us—but especially for you in your vocation as women. Ask our Lord for a heart as big as the universe, so that you can love him more and love

others as your brothers and sisters. Ask our Lord to tell you what he wants you to do for his Kingdom.

I said it was no coincidence that our first citizen to be named a saint was a woman. I meant that. Because in every time and in every place, women are always the hidden agents of sanctity; women are the leaven, the true catalysts of the Kingdom of God.

Every saint, man or woman, had a mother. And when you read the lives of the saints, you find that in most cases these mothers were the first spark of the saint's vocation. Just a few weeks ago we celebrated the feast of the most famous mother of a saint, St. Monica. She was the mother of St. Augustine.

Monica, however, is the exception to the rule. We remember her name. For the most part, the mothers of the saints are forgotten, anonymous. Yet their names are written in heaven (cf. Luke 10:20).

How many of you know the name Drana Bojaxhiu?

She was an amazing woman who was Albanian by birth. Her husband was murdered, leaving her penniless with three young children. So she started her own business—a rug-making business, and she worked hard to make it a success. She never stopped taking her kids to daily Mass and she made sure the family was always generous with what little they had. Every Sunday after Mass she and her children would take food and clothing to the poor. Drana also opened her home to give shelter and aid to women and their children who had been abused or had nowhere else to go.

Nobody remembers Drana's name. But we all know the name Mother Teresa, or as she is known today, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. Drana was her mother.

Mother Teresa said her mother used to tell her: "When you do good, do it quietly, as if you were tossing a pebble into the sea." That is a beautiful image of the hidden life. Of the life lived totally in the presence of God. It reminds me of what St. John the Baptist said: "[Christ] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

This is an important spiritual lesson for every Christian. But it seems especially important for those of you who are mothers.

In the course of your day, you will do many heroic things, you will make sacrifices that no one sees. Sometimes even the people you are sacrificing for don't appreciate your efforts.

But your faith, your love, can move mountains—even if in this lifetime you will never see them move. You are sowing what others will reap, as St. Paul used to say.

Did Drana know that her daughter would grow up to be a great saint who would change the world? Of course not, how could she? But that wasn't why she was doing what she was doing. Her motive was love. Not recognition. Not "results."

This lesson applies to all of you—those who are mothers and those who are not. We live in a results-driven culture; a workaholic culture. We like to get things done. We like to see results—and the sooner the better.

But the Kingdom of God doesn't work that way. Jesus told us the Kingdom grows quietly in our midst, almost unseen—except for those who have eyes to see, those who have the eyes of faith. The Kingdom grows by every little act of faith you make, by every little thing you do for the love for God.

Mother Teresa used to say: "We are not called to be successful, but to be faithful." My sisters, you really need to believe that. Without this perspective, you risk burn-out. You can become "anxious and troubled about many things," like Martha in the famous story from the Gospel (Luke 10:41).

I want to talk about Mary and Martha in a minute. My point here is that you need to practice letting go. You need to practice a certain detachment from "results." Be faithful to what God is calling you do. Do everything for love. And trust that God will do all the rest. Trust as St. Paul did—that "he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion" (Phil. 1:6).

Do you know the story of Henriette Delille? She is the first African-American born in the United States to be considered for canonization. She grew up as a free black woman in New Orleans, but she devoted her life to serving the spiritual and material needs of slaves, especially slave women, in the years before the Civil War. She served the sick and dying and she was renowned as a great catechist and evangelist.

Henriette had a prayer that she would say: "I believe in God. I hope in God. I love God. I want to live and die for God." This is a very simple confession of faith. But it is a very profound statement of your mission, my friends. This is what you are here to do. To love God and to live for him. To serve him with love. To "decrease" so that Christ might "increase" in us.

If we had more time, my friends, I would love to do talk about all the women of the Gospel and our Lord's dealings with them. There are so many of them—the several Marys; the mother-in-law of St. Peter; the Samaritan woman at the well; the Canaanite woman; the widow of Nain and the daughter of Jairus; the woman who touched Jesus' cloak; Joanna and Susanna; the prophetess Anna. And more.

My sisters, I hope you will do the Bible study we can't do tonight. Pray with and read the Gospel accounts in which women are at the center of the story. It will draw you closer to Christ, as Christ himself drew close to these women.

You will notice that the Gospel itself begins with the story of two women, two mothers—Mary and Elizabeth. The first announcement of Christ comes from Elizabeth, when she recognizes Mary as the Mother of her Lord (Luke 1:43).

“In the fullness of time, God sent forth his son, born of *woman*,” St. Paul said (Gal. 4:4). Salvation has come into the world by way of woman. And it is fitting that women were the first witnesses to the resurrection. Mary Magdalene was the first to speak to Christ after he rose from the dead. And she was the first to be called by name and commissioned to tell the good news to his disciples (cf. John 20:16–18).

These women from the Gospels provide the outline, the profile of your own vocation as women. Our Lord means for each one of you to play a crucial role in his plan of salvation.

Wherever you find yourself—if you’re at home taking care of your kids or your aging parents; if you’re working or running a business; if you’re engaged in politics or ministering in your community or parish—you are called to proclaim Christ by your words and deeds. You are to be witnesses to the power of his resurrection. The power of his love.

The encounter with Christ is never for us alone. It is a gift of love that we must share with others. Not only by our words, but by our example, by our service.

Remember the story of the Samaritan woman who meets Jesus at the well (John 4). The woman goes away, leaving her water jar, because she has discovered the true source of living water. But where does she go and what does she do? She returns to her home and invites all the people of her town to come and see Christ.

This is your calling, too, my sisters. To bear the good news of Christ. To bring others to him.

All the great women saints are women of prayer and women of action. They founded schools, hospitals, orphanages, and many institutions of mercy; they were active in politics and diplomacy.

Even a saint like Therese of Lisieux, who never left her convent, was a woman engaged in the world. She read the newspapers and prayer over them. She prayed fervently for the Church’s missions. There is also the great story of Therese praying—successfully—for the conversion of a murderer when he was on death-row.

There is so much power in your prayers, my friends! Pray for your children, for vocations to the priesthood, for an end to violence and injustice, especially the cruelty of legal abortion.

And work for all these things, too. Through your service of others, bring them to the encounter with Christ. Bring our society to the encounter with the truth of his teachings.

The great challenge you face, sisters, is always going to be how to balance prayer and service. The active and the contemplative life. This is a particular challenge for women—of whom so much is expected and upon whom so much depends.

This was the point of the great Gospel story of Mary and Martha. I would like to conclude our time together by reflecting on this Gospel.

We all know the scene from Luke, chapter 10. Jesus comes to the home of Mary and Martha. I imagine this like other scenes from the Gospel, where the house is filled with people who have come to see Jesus. This explains Martha's frustration with Mary. Mary has left Martha to serve the crowd alone, while she is seated at Jesus' feet, listening to his teaching. Martha complains to Jesus: Tell her to help me.

What makes Martha so distracted and troubled? It's what I warned you about earlier. Martha is all focused on getting "results," on serving the people and getting things done.

Now, Jesus doesn't tell her that that's not important. We should always do our best work for the Lord, no matter what we're doing. The problem is that Martha has lost perspective; she's forgotten *why* she is serving.

My sisters, when you are serving others—again, whether it's in your families, or in the workplace, or in your communities—you need to keep your eyes on the goal. Your work must always be to help people to know Jesus, to hear his words, to feel his love.

When you serve others, you are being Martha so that those people around you can be Mary—so that they can come to Christ, to listen to him, to adore him, to know that he is our Savior.

That's one lesson from this Gospel. The other is what our Lord tells Martha: "One thing is needful, and Mary has chosen the good portion."

Remember, our Lord never says that Martha's service is wrong. Discipleship means service. But we have to have our priorities straight. Before we can be Martha, we must first be Mary. Our service to Jesus must flow from our adoration of our Lord in the Eucharist, from our contemplation of his words, from our prayer.

Dear sisters, I am very grateful for the initiation to speak with you this evening.

Let me leave you with this thought: The age of saints is not past! In every age our Lord is calling out for saints. In our day, he is calling to you. When Mary Magdalene met Jesus at the empty tomb on that first Easter morning he asked, "Woman, whom do you seek?" (John 20:15)

Our Lord is asking each of you that question. Offer your lives to him in all generosity—as Mary Magdalene and the great women saints before you have.

Some of you may know the story of Maria de la Luz Camacho González. She was a very talented and beautiful laywoman who dedicated her life to serving the Gospel as a catechist.

In 1934, during the dark days of the persecution of the Church in Mexico, a mob of revolutionary thugs known as the Camisas Rojas, came to burn down Maria's church, San Juan Batista, in the Coyoacán section of Mexico City. They came during the Sunday morning children's Mass.

Maria organized a group of parishioners to block the entrance to the church. She told the mob: "We have no fear. We are ready to die for Christ and we would be happy to do that!"

They gunned Maria down on the steps, but her martyrdom saved the church and the children. She was 27 years old. Her last words were *!Viva Cristo Rey! !Viva Santa Maria de Guadalupe!*

I pray that Christ our King and Our Lady of Guadalupe give you the courage to be saints. The courage to love as Maria Camacho González loved and as Mother Cabrini loved. With a love that transforms hearts of stone into hearts of flesh! With a love that brings others to the heart of Jesus!