

MOMNIPOTENT

The Not-So-Perfect Woman's Guide to Catholic Motherhood

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Introduction



“This is my little piece of happiness,” my friend told me as she sat in her living room and nursed her infant son. “Right here, holding this baby and taking care of him.”

Her beaming face told me she was speaking the truth, and I marveled at the peaceful scene.

What made her so content with something seemingly so small? Was she still basking in a postpartum hormonal glow? Had she managed to sleep three consecutive hours the previous night and was now riding high until the next crashing wave of fatigue?

Maybe.

But maybe her contentment was real. Maybe she was experiencing the kind of natural joy and contentment God intends every woman to find in motherhood.

And yet so few of us do—at least on any type of consistent basis.

Standing there, watching my friend exude pure joy as she fed her son in a small corner of her cluttered living room, I felt a sudden urge to capture some of her “mom-bliss” and bottle it. It certainly would be a handy remedy to prescribe in hefty doses for the young moms, old moms, poor moms, harried moms, and moms from all



walks of life from whom I hear every day. I would love to prescribe a “happy-mother” pill to all the hurting women who reach out to me with heartrending tales of their interior struggles with finding joy in motherhood.

So many of us struggle.

I have a special place in my heart for moms who struggle. I have been the blissful mom, floating away on heart-shaped clouds and fluffy, sweet-scented diapers, but I have also been the disillusioned mom, tired and angry, because all she sees or smells is the mess.

A little more than ten years ago, my husband was working extra hours at a second job. I had a cranky, teething baby with an aversion to naps and an impending eye infection. I had a potty-training two-year-old who was solely responsible for a befouled area rug, a damp sofa cushion, and a full load of laundry washed, dried, folded, put away ... and soiled again.

As if all of this were not enough, next came a crash from the kitchen, where my four-year-old was attempting to pour herself a glass of Kool-Aid.

A mother simply does not ignore crashes of this kind, and so I did what a mother must do. I stepped over piles of unfolded laundry and made my way with haste to the scene where I found my wide-eyed, pigtailed daughter standing on a chair by the counter, blinking back tears and biting her lower lip. The kitchen tiles were spattered with orange Kool-Aid and shards of broken glass.

I sighed, grabbed a nearby dish towel, clenched my jaw, and stooped to mop up the sticky mess. Warily, my daughter stepped down from her chair and stood beside me in silence. I knew she

wanted me to tell her it was OK, but I could not bring myself to do it.

It was not OK. I was exhausted, and this accident felt like one mess too many.

I avoided her eyes and wiped the floor harder still. I did not realize that I had cut my hand until I saw the blood. It trickled from my fingers and dribbled onto the floor, mixing with orange Kool-Aid. Quickly, I wrapped my fist in the towel. As I sat bleeding on the floor, tears of frustration stung at my eyes.

“I can’t do this,” I heard myself mutter. The words came out of my mouth before I even knew what I was saying, and the fact that I truly felt incapable startled me. *Was* I capable of being a good mom? Though I loved my children, I had to admit that, at the end of many days, I felt disillusioned, depleted, and perplexed by my own weakness and unhappiness.

The words on my lips were, “I can’t do this,” but deep inside were other words I dared not give voice to:

I am not happy. I hate this life. I want to give up.

I know I am not the only woman who has ever held such unhappy thoughts deep inside where they fester and burn, where they deplete her self-worth and wound her soul. And so often we feel we cannot speak our feelings aloud; what good would it do? Our husbands, good men that most of them are, often underestimate the nonstop, ever-present reality of work and sacrifice that make up the life of the seriously engaged mother. Sure, at times when our complaints reach a fevered pitch, they enter into our struggle—briefly—to lift our spirits in the moment. But much of the time, ours is a solitary struggle.

So this book is for unhappy, struggling moms. It is also for those of us who, in moments of restlessness, boredom, or the frustration of seeing other women who appear to “have it all,” wonder if what we are doing now can legitimately be considered a life’s work.

I want to bring good news to those who silently suffer—a life-giving message of joyful confidence and self-worth. And yet, this book is not my message. It is God’s message, written on every woman’s heart and made clear to us through the teachings of the Church and, in a special way, through the inspired words of St. John Paul II.

As we contemplate this Mother, whose heart “a sword has pierced” (cf. Luke 2:35), our thoughts go to *all the suffering women in the world*, suffering either physically or morally. In this suffering a women’s sensitivity plays a role, even though she often succeeds in resisting suffering better than a man. ... We may recall her maternal care for her children, especially when they fall sick or fall into bad ways; the death of those most dear to her; the loneliness of mothers forgotten by their grown-up children; the loneliness of widows; the sufferings of women who struggle alone to make a living; and women who have been wronged or exploited. ... These sufferings too we must place ourselves at the foot of the Cross.¹

Of course, motherhood is not all about—or even primarily about—suffering. If you are in a particularly joyful season of life, this book is for you, too. In an often contrary world, we all need a reminder of the irreplaceable gift that we are to our families and, consequently, to society at large. We all need reassurance that our hidden work, done in the hearts of our homes, is life-changing, world-changing stuff that only we can do. We all need a reminder that the work we do as mothers does, in fact, matter. In fact, it matters more than many of

¹ *Mulieris Dignitatem* 19.

us will ever know. We all need to be reminded of that special power we hold as women—our “momnipotence,” if you will.

Momnipotence is a special charism that all moms have. Momnipotence is the special array of gifts given by God—lived out in particular through the vocation of motherhood—that bless our families and the world. Gifts of love, gentleness, insight, compassion, and more enable us to live out to the fullest our role as spouse and mother. These gifts are both our call to greatness and the means by which we can help others, specifically our children, find their call to greatness.

Unlike the only being who is truly omnipotent—God—we moms certainly are not all-powerful. The proof of this is that we still overcook every fourth meal or bark at our kids at the end of a particularly tiring day. But, in the wisdom of that same God, we do possess a power that is unparalleled in society and, in particular, our families—the ability to love in unique and necessary ways. Every woman is “momnipotent,” whether she knows it or not.

What Happy Mothers Know

The babies are the same. The diapers are the same. The laundry is the same. What makes one mom see the bliss and another mom see the mess? What makes one mom feel overwhelmed and another mom feel “momnipotent”? What makes one mom disgruntled—whether over the piles of laundry she returns to at night, or the piles that build up around her all day—and another hum to herself as she spins and folds? Why does the Church contend that “*the man* be fully aware that in their shared parenthood he owes *a special debt to the woman*”?²

Let’s find out.

² *Mulieris Dignitatem* 18.

Do What You Are Doing

Years ago, my online friend Alicia Van Hecke introduced me to what wound up being a life-changing concept. She shared a simple phrase in Latin (because she is cultured like that) that really made me pause: *age quod agis*.

What does it mean? It means *do what you are doing*. That's all. It is that simple. Simple, I say, but not easy. As every mother knows, sometimes it can be very hard to slow down and simply "do what you are doing," one thing at a time.

I sometimes manage to sneak away for a little while and attend Mass or Adoration by myself. There, in silence with no distractions, I can become frustrated because my brain simply spins. So unaccustomed to silence and inactivity, my "busy" self rushes in to fill the void.

What should I make for dinner? I find myself thinking. I wonder if there will be time to stop at the store on the way home. Was I supposed to call my mother back? I need to remember to buy wrapping paper before the birthday party this weekend. My nails sure could use a coat of polish. Is it cold in here? ... What am I doing here, anyway? Oh yes, JESUS! There you are! Here I am, paying attention!

It is embarrassing the number of times this cycle will repeat itself over the course of an hour. There I am, not doing what I am doing.

We do not do this just at church, though. Distracted thinking can happen anywhere and at any time. Take a moment now and ask yourself this question: "Do I look my children in the eye when they speak to me? Or do I grunt at them while I am focused on other things?"

I am not asking this question in order to inspire guilt trips. We are all busy and distracted some of the time. I am asking because I think we should all consider the positive effect that giving ourselves permission to do just one thing at a time can have on our mental health and our relationships.

Letting Go

I say “give ourselves permission to do one thing at a time” deliberately, because that is precisely what we need to do. No matter what worthy thing we are doing, there is some voice inside of us that nags, reminds, and calls us to concentrate on some other worthy thing. Then, because they are all worthy things, we feel guilty if we ignore the nagging.

If you have trouble just “doing what you are doing,” ask yourself, in moments where you are tempted to distraction, “Does my vocation require that I be [fill in the blank here: chopping vegetables, tying a toddler’s sneaker, shopping for groceries, feeding a baby, driving a carpool, talking to my teenager] right now?”

No matter how small the task, if the answer to that question is yes, then it is enough. There, in that moment, you are giving 100 percent of yourself to the work God calls you to, and you do not need to be thinking about or doing anything else.

Repeat after me: “This is enough. I am busy enough. I am doing enough.”

Feeling Accomplished

As I discovered when I first found myself challenged by the idea of *age quod agis*, it takes a great leap of faith to trust that we are being

faithful to our calling, even when we are not completing the 237 things on our to-do list this week. It is just so very nice to have the tangible sense of accomplishment and security that comes from crossing off the items on that list, even if it is only a mental list.

Some seasons of our lives are just not conducive to those kinds of tangible accomplishments, though. Ask any parent of a toddler. By the end of the day, merely having the house look sort of like it did in the morning—all the books in the bookcase, all the pots and pans in the cabinets, and all the toilet paper on the roll—is a very big accomplishment. But it is often hard to see that kind of accomplishment from the outside.

We are meant to keep a much bigger picture in mind than our to-do lists. We need to determine the value of our days in terms of whether or not they brought us and our families closer to heaven. We must change the questions we ask ourselves.

Ask yourself: Does my vocation require that I be scraping cemented oatmeal from the high-chair tray right now? Or, Does my vocation require that I get up before the sun to pack lunches and make breakfast before forty minutes of driving because today is my turn for the school carpool?

Answer to both questions: Yes, it does. And it is enough.

Ask yourself: Did I move myself and my family closer to heaven today?

Answer: Yes, I did. And that means it was a good day.