

Introduction

You Had Me at *Bodacious!*

So what are we to make of these words describing women as *blessed*, *beautiful*, and *bodacious*?

It's the name of an all-woman singing group I would have formed if I were to sing this book to you. That or Triple-B, but that name might be confused with my other rock band where I play rhythm guitar: Babes, Bibles, and Benedict.

Kidding! Really. Just kidding.

I don't know where your mind just went, but mine went to cute, irresistible Gerber babies; the Bible apps on my iPhone; and at the time of this writing, the coolest octogenarian on the planet, Pope Benedict XVI. All of this might identify me as a middle-aged woman who misses holding babies every day and looks forward to grandchildren, a believer with geeky new media habits, and well, a Catholic who thinks you should just get better and, sweeter with age.

Back to the book title: *Blessed, Beautiful, and Bodacious*.

Blessed evokes something of the sacred and the higher things. A woman needs to know she is blessed, that she is a treasure, and the reasons why. This blessing is derived from the sources of a woman's dignity.

Beautiful . . . I've yet to meet a woman not seeking to be beautiful in some sense of the word. When it comes to the gifts of femininity, every woman has them. No woman was left out when God handed out these beauties. Let's hear what makes them sing.

Bodacious is a bit bolder than the first two words, depending on your point of view. For me, *bodacious* is a compliment meaning "remarkable" or "most excellent." It sounds one

part attractive and one part audacious, both descriptors of many women, too. I offer *bodacious* in a spirit of good will and respect for the extraordinary mission women are called to live.

Blessed, Beautiful, and Bodacious seeks to celebrate womanhood by exploring a woman's dignity, gifts, and mission. The three parts of this book contain introductory conversations on these themes, not the final word on them. I'm a gal you might find next to you in the pew just as easily as you'd find me pouring coffee for a friend. I relish those moments when someone leans in, saying, "I really love this, and I'd love to share it." That's what church and coffee and friends are for. And that's why I write.

My research for this book has been tested in the school of life even though my training and work classifies me a certifiable theology book nerd. If you like what you read here, there are many authors who can you take you much deeper. I suggest further readings and resources for each of these topics at the end of the book.

I've long volunteered in and been employed by Catholic parishes. Conversations with women over the years tell me we need to hear more about women's topics in church. My favorite conversations are with women yearning to go deeper with God and in their mission in life, whether in their families or in their work.

Yet when I speak to women in faith settings, it is not uncommon for me to find a woman who cannot articulate what makes her special in the eyes of God, the Church, or the world. Meanwhile the Catholic Church has been proclaiming a rich, empowering message to women for years. Sadly, not every woman has heard it. I know, I was one of them.

So, I started taking notes on what I found meaningful for me as a woman. Then I began sharing my findings with

women in churches and on websites through my columns and my podcast, *Among Women*. And here we are.

Blessed, Beautiful, and Bodacious is what I've learned about womanhood from God, the Bible, the teachings of the Church, and from people who've loved me along the way. Much more than giving me a few new adjectives to express my joy in being a woman, as this book's title suggests, coming to know the gift of my womanhood has brought me into a deeper relationship with God, my husband, family, and countless others, including—much to my surprise—Mary. That's Mary, as in the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus, whom you'll find I've spent a lot of time avoiding. If Mary had played guitar on stage in the seventies I might have thought she was cooler sooner. Back then, if you wanted to get my attention, you had better be carrying a six-string.

When I was a young girl, I dreamed about playing the guitar.

I trace my love for music to childhood memories of spinning 45rpm records on my parents' portable phonograph. In pre-adolescence I spent hours listening to the stereo, an RCA Magnavox. Back then stereo consoles were pieces of furniture housing an automatic stackable turntable, an AM/FM radio, and a cabinet to store a record collection. I dusted the thing for years during my Saturday chores. Most of all, I loved playing deejay and cueing up the records.

My parents owned an album by Chet Atkins, a big-time Grammy winner who was nicknamed "Mister Guitar." His sound is synonymous with Gretsch electric guitars.

It was love at first chord. The joy and the life that came from that guitar captivated me. Thanks to Chet, I set my mind on playing guitar someday. I was nine. I didn't know any of the music basics. Yet.

So I prayed desperate prayers to God, like little Catholic schoolgirls are wont to do, for a seemingly impossible dream

. . . a guitar. There was the usual dropping of big hints to my parents in hope of such a miracle. Meanwhile I became a radio junkie, listening to all the pop stations beaming out of New York City on my Emerson radio. Slowly my musical tastes veered beyond the family album collection to mainstream pop such as the Beatles, the Beach Boys, and the iconic folk-rockers of the seventies.

One Christmas, I received the blessing I had longed for. My parents bought me a beginner's acoustic guitar. I had no idea how much that gift would eventually bless me, but I just knew it was the greatest gift I had ever received. Weeks later, I began lessons with a hip mustachioed musician in a colorful sports jacket. Imagine my swoon at that first lesson when I saw that my instructor played a gleaming electric guitar like *Chet's!*

The most meaningful gifts are the ones that come from someone who loves you, the ones that offer a promise of something more than the gift itself, the ones that say "I believe in you." And so, with the promise of lessons being an investment in my future, the good things to come were an even greater blessing.

That guitar and those lessons played a powerful role in my becoming the woman I am today. Learning to play music opened me up to a whole new way of relating to the world. It made me unique in my family; no one else played an instrument. Once I mastered the basics, I jumped at chances to play with others. Soon that guitar was part of my identity.

Music introduced me to new friends. In my class, I bonded over music with girls who were guitarists too. Musical camaraderie staved off some of the awkwardness of puberty, when many girls start getting clique-ish.

I was in a Girl Scout troop at the local public school. Being from a Catholic school made me a bit of an outsider, but music at scout camp and troop events helped me make

friends. Music has a way of building community where none exists. Through scouts I began singing, and my confidence grew. Soon, my deep baritone was noticed at school when we sang at Mass. The nun in charge of liturgical music often asked me to lead the boys singing parts, so she could lead the girls. I learned to harmonize out of necessity.

Music helped my faith grow, and it strengthened my bond to the Church. In some ways, I think I loved music before I really loved God. Singing and playing at church became very special to me. It gave me a sense of belonging and freedom to express myself. Through singing I learned what it means to pray with the heart, not just by rote.

Music made me beautiful. When you are fourteen, you need things that remind you of that.

On the inside, music created a connection with God in the sanctuary of my heart. It also helped me connect on an emotional level with people. Music became a bridge toward getting to know people and being approachable; it was one of the first ways I began to share my faith with others. Between the prayer and the community it brought, music was a gift that kept on giving. I always liked creative writing in school, so it wasn't long before I wrote songs for church and friends.

Music softened me on the outside, too. I had always been a bit of a tomboy, somewhat loud, competitive, and sort of rough and gritty for a girl, much to the consternation of my very ladylike mother. My clothes were perpetually sporting grass stains. Still, music helped me discover my emerging feminine side—the part of me that noticed a boy might be more than someone to outrace on my bike and the part that listened to love songs and wondered what it would be like to fall for someone like that. I attended school dances with the boys I knew, but the music always captivated me more than the dancing.

I didn't realize it until much later, but popular music introduced me to the ideals of feminism, too. Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman" would play on the Emerson at night, as the beat of female empowerment permeated the Top 40.

My first taste of being a girl who broke into an all-boys club was my brief stint in a garage band playing rhythm guitar with three boys who adored the Stones and Led Zeppelin. I don't know who was impressed more—the girls who saw what I was doing or the boys who were amazed that I could play. I did not yet have the maturity to discern that my playing "Sympathy for the Devil" was no "Stairway to Heaven." I was just happy to be strumming along as we competed in a battle of the bands to play for future school dances.

Sooner or later, jamming with musicians from school, scouts, and church began to pay off. I was getting paid for musical accompaniment at weddings and elsewhere. Youth ministry was springing up in my parish, and yours truly was always providing music for the retreats and meetings.

God started to get my attention, too. On a retreat, I committed my heart to Jesus Christ and never looked back. That commitment led me slowly to reprioritize things in my life. Sometime after that conversion moment, I realized God was inviting me to use my guitar playing and writing gifts for his purposes.

You could say that my guitar playing led me to my vocation and avocations. This gift blessed me and shaped me in beautiful ways. It was like God was orchestrating it, and that was the most bodacious thing of all to discover: God really did have a plan and a purpose for my life.

Music introduced me to the love of my life, my future husband, Bob. No surprise! He was a talented guitar player I had met in high school. Guess what? He played all those fancy jazz chords and arpeggios—just like Chet! Bob played in a band, too. Eventually he joined me playing at church

weddings. Funny that years later, we had a wedding of our own!

My love of music and writing fostered my interest in radio, and I pursued a communications degree. I worked as an on-air deejay and as a copywriter in radio for several years. None of that would have been possible without my interest, knowledge, acceptance, and application of the basics—the musical basics.

Mastering the basics of music was a small price to pay for all the joy it brought me. Most of all, applying what I learned changed my life, opening a new world of relationships and experiences. A lot of life is like that. But first we've got to know what the basics are to unlock their potential for our growth.

The same holds in the Christian life. When the basics are in order—love of God followed by love of neighbor—we're well on our way to responding in love to all the relationships and experiences we have in life.

For a woman's life, discovering the basics might begin by asking questions like "Who am I?" and "What are my gifts?" and "What's my purpose in life?"

Why bother talking about these things at all?

Simple.

Women are blessed, beautiful, and bodacious. Too many women doubt that about themselves.

What's more, Christianity values and esteems womanhood much more than our present culture does. Some women are not sure what to make of that. I mean, that might sound kind of old school to a modern woman. Yet I've found that the Catholic Church has been singing the praises of women out loud and has a view of femininity that is blessed, beautiful, and yes, downright bodacious. Pope John Paul II lauded it as the "feminine genius" (*Mulieris Dignitatem* [Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women], 30, 31).

Still, a lot of women might doubt that the Church has a good opinion of them.

Over time, I've accepted being blessed and beautiful, though the meaning of those words has changed from my youthful definitions.

What has impressed me about my own faith experience is that I'm always coming across new things that bless me and help me to grow. The Catholic faith traces its roots back centuries, and still I find new things that pique my interest and have direct application to my life. It's attractive, enduring wisdom. I find that a great comfort, an anchor steadying me against twisting tides (Heb 6:19), a perennial song that runs through the soundtrack of my life.

Within this old and wise faith, there is also a new brand of feminism afoot, attracting women with its smart, empowering message and a new evangelization, or a retelling of the familiar Christian story with a new passion.

But none of this is worth discussing unless we get to the basics. What are the notes in the chords of this new melody?

What are the things that make women blessed, beautiful, and bodacious?

Our dignity, gifts, and mission.

Blessed? All persons are created with a sublime dignity they did not earn. By calling you into existence and creating you, God did something unique. He fashioned a one-of-a-kind woman. She has never existed before, yet she will exist into eternity. If you've ever admired a masterpiece of art or music, you understand an original work of genius.

The baptized Christian has an added blessing. God's care and power are invoked, and a woman enters God's family. God will never divorce, disown, or unfriend us. We belong. We are beloved. This is a God who is singing a love song over us. (See Zep 3:17.)

Our dignity arrives at the moment of our conception and in the moment of our Baptism. It's about *who* we are and *whose* we are.

A woman's dignity is a blessing. The sacred character of this blessing is derived from God's plan for a woman. Her core identities flow from her being created by God as a feminine human person and her Baptism that graces her as a beloved daughter of God and a member of the Body of Christ, the Church. The blessing is akin to light, an inner spark that flows from God to a woman's core. It lights her from within, allowing her to be a radiant light-bearer to others.

Beautiful? Okay. I've heard all the complaints women have—even from some of the most gorgeous women I know.

"Sure, God just might have something to say about my being blessed and all, but have you seen me? Beautiful? Are you kidding?"

"You know, there's a lot of competition among the ladies out there. The media images of beauty are too far out of reach."

Few women I know really understand the depth of their own beauty because they are too busy comparing themselves with others or have been unfairly compared—and rejected—by others. I get that. I've dealt with my own body issues and flaws. One priest advises, "Compare and despair!"

Most issues about beauty or body originate from unrealistic standards and pressures in today's culture. What's worse, fashion and vogue are always changing.

But what if I told you that there is a level playing field? What if you found out that every woman has gifts that make her beautiful—beauty derived from something innate and eternal and not fleeting or skin-deep? These gifts sing in sync with the beauty of a woman's inborn femininity, a standard for true beauty far beyond mere appearances.

Women are uniquely endowed with gifts of receptivity, generosity, sensitivity, and maternity. When we trust these things, we become beautiful from the inside out. We live the lives we are born to live, becoming the best women we can be. When we exercise our gifts, beauty always emerges.

Receptivity is tied to a woman's nature. It is openness to others characterized by a *yes* that actively responds to the people and the world. Receptivity draws people in and celebrates their presence.

Generosity gives freely. It relinquishes the what's-mine-versus-what's-yours mentality. Women who practice generosity are passionate lovers of their true spouses. They have learned how to make a sincere gift of self to their beloved.

Women who excel in sensitivity have x-ray vision of the hearts around them. Okay. Maybe that's an exaggeration. But a sensitive woman sees others with her heart. She is a visionary seeing into situations that require a delicate touch.

Finally, there is the gift of maternity, being a life-bearer to others through motherhood. We've all known maternal nurturers. Not all of them were biological mothers. A woman's selfless mothering love and service can be life-giving in physical and spiritual ways.

I describe these four qualities of femininity as gifts for two reasons: they are beautiful gifts to women from God, and they are beautiful gifts from women to others, enabling women to be bearers of love to the world.

Bodacious? A young woman I know told me she loved the title of this book, saying, "You had me at *bodacious!*" It's a word I love, too. But I don't suggest flipping to those chapters first since the *blessed* and the *beautiful* really do lay the two rails of track for the *bodacious* train to travel upon.

The most excellent women, the *bodacious* women, are women who authentically live their dignity and gifts. They don't keep beauty and blessing to themselves. They lovingly