

# PREFACE

When I was eight years old, I heard the voice of God—at least that's how I can best describe it. I can remember distinctly the day it happened, what I was doing, and even where I was standing when I encountered that voice. It spoke a short but simple sentence into my heart—not my head or ears—through a pathway I had never known existed and with an authority that was unmistakable. The words were clear and to the point: “I have a special mission for you.” Even as a little girl, I was not alarmed by the voice, though I had never experienced anything like it before. I was intrigued and sought to engage with it, to no avail. More than four decades later, I can still remember that voice as if it were yesterday. I can recall my feeling of awe and excitement and the sense of knowing that this was an important moment in my life.

This childhood incident would set me on a journey of discovery that continues to this day. Once I had learned that there was a mission out there for me, I was determined to find it. My journey would take me in surprising directions, including embracing a faith apart from my family upbringing. It would lead me from the big city to the suburbs, from a corner office to a minivan, and from private worship to publically proclaiming the faith. Along the way, I learned to be comfortable in my own skin as an authentic woman (once I found out what that was), despite that being an authentic woman goes against modern culture. I would also discover, amid the twists and turns, that I was accompanied on this journey. God had in store for me amazing heavenly helpmates who would

be there to challenge my faith, give me hope, and teach me to love, which is ultimately what this book is all about.

The truth is that each of us is on a journey and each of us has mission. We have been sent on this journey by our God who knows us, loves us, and wants nothing more than to be intimately involved every step of the way. We may not know he's there or even want him there at times. Though we may be tempted to forget or forsake him, God—in his infinite love—will never abandon his children to walk this journey alone.

Our loving Father delights in all of his children, of course, but I'd like to believe that God delights in women in a special way. We are precious in his eyes, for as the Genesis story alludes, we are the crown of his creation. Did you ever wonder why God created Eve last? It was not because he forgot about her or because she wasn't special enough; it was because Eve was God's finishing touch on creation. God has created women with beautiful hearts, minds, souls—and yes, even bodies (though few of us are at ease with that concept). We are daughters of the king, and it is his great pleasure to whisper plans and promises into the hearts of his daughters—if our hearts are open to them. Daily he sprinkles our paths with clues and kisses of his undying love for us. His love gifts may be spectacular, such as an exploding sunset in the desert, or gentle and fleeting, such as the dance of a hummingbird. He prompts us through the challenges of life with fatherly compassion, with inspirations from scripture, in the testimonies of others also on the journey, in songs that lift our spirits or inspire a tear, and in the examples of spiritual heroes who have gone before us. In a real and poignant way, our Lord reveals his very being in the intimate encounter of his sacraments, particular the Eucharist, the heavenly food for our journey.

Because he designed us, God knows that women in particular are relational in being. We thrive on interacting with others. That's why he carefully selected the perfect journey partners—our friends, spouses, children, co-workers—to encourage us, teach us, and stretch us for the journey and our ultimate destination of heaven. These journey partners and the situations of our lives that weave us together serve a special purpose. They offer the opportunity for us to develop virtue—holy habits of thought and behavior that help us become more Christ-like to ourselves and others. Virtue makes us more loving, more lovable, and better able to carry out God's special plans and purposes (our mission) for each of our lives.

Our earthly companions, however, aren't the only helpers whom God offers us for our journeys. In a special way, he presents spiritual journey partners who are eager to share the walk with us. These saintly journey partners offer us heroic examples of virtuous living and personal intercession as we navigate our way through this often-messy adventure we call life. Just as we may seek the assistance of personal trainers for our bodies, mentors for our professional careers, and life coaches for times of transitions, spiritual journey partners are there to help us in our faith walk, sharing valuable lessons and insights along the way.

God has blessed my own walk of faith by introducing me to several companions for the journey, but three women saints have entered my life in powerful ways at important moments and have left indelible impressions on my soul. They are Thérèse of Lisieux (the Little Flower), Faustina of the Divine Mercy, and Bernadette of Lourdes. These devout women of faith overcame tremendous spiritual and sometimes physical hurdles to leave us with profound discernments about the life of faith. They are models of holy living who have challenged how I think, how I behave, and who I

am. Most of all, they have helped me to develop into a more virtuous woman (though there is much work yet to be done in this area). Through their example, I am learning to use my God-given gifts and natural feminine qualities to have a more positive effect on those around me.

My three spiritual companions did not earn their designation as saints just because they saw visions or wrote literary masterpieces. They were singled out by the Church for their heroic virtue—their ability to hold fast to their faith, hope, and love through all kinds of tests and trials. They lived tragically short lives, and they lived one right after another. Bernadette (1844–1879) and Thérèse (1873–1897) lived in France while Faustina (1905–1938) lived in Poland, and their lives on earth were cut short by the same deadly disease: tuberculosis. At death, Bernadette was thirty-five, Thérèse was twenty-four, and Faustina was thirty-three.

Each of these saints lived during times of great strife and turbulence. The first two saw the effects of the French Revolution usurping the strong role of the Church in France, while Faustina witnessed secularism mature into godless socialism and the subsequent spread of communism and Nazism. Despite the tumult around them, these holy daughters remained steadfast in their faith, hope, and love, and now give us important encouragement as we contend with the escalating tensions of our own day.

Thérèse, Faustina, and Bernadette shared other qualities as well. Each had a passion for saving sinners and rescuing souls, a fear of losing God's friendship, a dedication to a Gospel-based path to holiness, and a total abandonment to the will of God. Internally they struggled—as we all do—with self-will and self-love. They suffered spiritual dark nights of the soul, in which God's consolations were removed for a time. Each went through a physical passion of sorts during a slow and agonizing death. Yet all three of these spiritual

giants learned to offer their sufferings for the good of others, which strengthened their virtue and led them to experience authentic joy, deep peace, and the crowning of glory.

It occurred to me in recent years that while these three special saints embodied many virtues, each demonstrated one particular virtue that I believe truly defines her character. For Bernadette, this virtue is faith. She was grounded in faith from the beginning of her life despite illness and poverty. She maintained her faith in the face of persecution and ridicule when chosen by God to deliver heavenly messages of Our Lady to a world gone astray. Finally, She upheld it for the remainder of her life as she lived the messages of prayer, penance, and conversion as a powerful witness to the world.

Faustina is defined by hope. She courageously accepted the spiritual assignment from Jesus himself to be his “secretary of mercy” in the hope that his messages, which she had carefully recorded and conveyed, would reach the world and heal it. Regardless of the disbelief of many of her superiors concerning her heavenly mission, the growing despair throughout Europe as Hitler’s troops were invading, and her prophetic awareness that the messages and devotion of Divine Mercy would initially be rejected, Faustina placed all her hope and trust in Jesus, confident that his mercy was the antidote to conquer the presence of evil.

For Thérèse, the virtue is love. She was nurtured in love from birth and was passionate in her love in return, whether it was for her family, for nature, or most especially for God. She learned to overcome her own self-love to love God in a new way—a little way—that became an accessible path for millions. At a time when many French Catholics ascribed to a misguided theology that emphasized sin and a final judgment from which few would escape, Thérèse discovered a good and loving God who yearned for the love of his children, not their fear. Thérèse’s heroic love for God and her

mission to help others love him as she did continues to have a major impact on people today.

Just as they were needed in the lifetimes of these brave and innovative saints, the virtues of faith, hope, and love are desperately needed in our world today. Consider for a moment where we would be without them. Without faith, people are left to turn inward on themselves where they ultimately find unhappiness and lack of fulfillment. Without hope, people eventually usher emptiness and despair into their lives. Without love, human hearts grow cold as mistrust, lack of empathy, and a general disconnect from others become the norm. What is the answer to this downward spiral? The solution lies within us. We are the ones who can bring healing to a hurting world by developing these powerful virtues within ourselves and watching their life-giving impact on the people and situations around us.

God knew I needed a lot of help to become more virtuous, so first he sent me Thérèse, who softened my heart and showed me how to love God and others better. Then he sent me Faustina, who showed me how to be a person of hope—despite life’s many challenges, and to trust God in everything—above all in his mercy. Finally he sent me Bernadette, who helped me to put my hope into action with a bolstered faith to weather the storms of life and come through them a stronger person. I will be forever indebted to these spiritual companions for the ways they have shaped and guided me, and I am greatly comforted knowing that they will be there for me in times to come.

Because of this, when I was first approached about writing a book to introduce these three heroines of faith to an audience of women in order to inspire them in their own pursuit of virtue, I could think of nothing more appealing. However, when they asked me to make the book personal, I felt a bit apprehensive. How could my small and ordinary

story as a struggling sinner and convert merit in any way to be told alongside of the accounts of these momentous saints? I trusted God had some sort of plan, but it definitely placed me outside of my comfort zone. Unlike other books I've written, this book began without a preconceived outline or blueprint. I had just a sense of knowing that if I could do it right, there was a story here worth telling.

Writing this book was, at times, like putting together a five hundred-piece jigsaw puzzle upside down, where I couldn't see the final picture. I was forced to go piece by piece, day by day, trying to discover what piece fit with what. As I reflect now on the image of an upside-down jigsaw puzzle, I notice that the image seems analogous to life itself, for only God sees the final picture of our journeys. Meanwhile, we need to content ourselves with working on our lives one piece at a time, living in the present moment, paying attention to subtle intricacies, and trusting that our labors will gain us the final vision God has marvelously designed for us.

Following the intuitions of my publisher, I have woven into the book parts of my own spiritual journey, which naturally is a process that continues to evolve. I hope that in sharing some of my brokenness, the ways God has softened and healed my hardened heart, and the insights and blessings he has imparted to me through my spiritual journey partners, you may find encouragement and support in your own spiritual journey. I pray that something in the following pages may help you discover and embrace who you are as an authentically feminine woman so that you, too, can bloom where you are planted, whether that be in a skyscraper in the city or in an SUV littered with French-fries and crayons. In the spirit of the New Evangelization to which our three most recent popes have called us, this book is an attempt to witness person-to-person the transformative effect God can have in our lives and the great freedom and happiness that

comes with our “yes” to him, even when that “yes” is whispered in weakness. To be sure, this is not a yay-me book; it is a yay-God book, because in his great goodness, he has never given up on me, despite the many reasons I have given him to do so.

It is now my great joy in the following chapters to introduce you to my three spiritual companions, offering the story of the way they came into my life and the invaluable lessons they have taught me to grow spiritually and in virtue. Perhaps after reading this book, you may choose Thérèse, Faustina, and Bernadette as your spiritual journey partners, or perhaps they will point you to others from the vast treasury of saints the Church has to offer. Either way, I thank you for allowing their stories and mine to become a part of your spiritual adventure, until with God’s grace we all meet face-to-face in our final destination of heaven.

November 1, 2012  
The Solemnity of All Saints



# UNSAINTLY BEHAVIOR



I emerged from Grand Central Terminal on a warm summer morning in 1982 like an ant scurrying out of a dark tunnel to the bright sunshine above. The familiar honks of taxicabs, shouts of construction workers, and the whine of a police siren welcomed me to the busy street. Freshly graduated from college, I was a proud resident of New York City, with the tiny room and absurd rent to prove it. More importantly, I was at last a full-time part of the city's bustling workforce. A throng of passing commuters on the sidewalk of 42nd Street swept me into its living river of humanity, and at once I was part of the moving mayhem. At the corner of the block, I turned north on Madison Avenue with my styrofoam cup of Zaro's coffee in one hand and my leather briefcase swinging confidently from the other.

The advertising agency that hired me was only a short walk from the terminal, and the Nike running shoes I wore with my pinstriped business suit carried me swiftly to my destination. With a feeling of liberation and empowerment, I pushed my way through the massive revolving glass doors at the entrance of my office building. I was a young businesswoman on the way up the corporate ladder with a bright and bold future ahead of me. I had jockeyed myself into a good position at the start of my career by completing four work/study internships—all in Manhattan—by the time I graduated summa cum laude from the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut. This helped me bypass the expected secretarial route to attain the coveted role of assistant account executive at the young age of twenty-two.

My first full-time assignment in the Big Apple was working for an account group that handled liquor and cigarette clients. It wasn't the most creative work, but I was immensely grateful for the opportunity. Madison Avenue, in those days, was regarded as the Mecca of the advertising world, and I was delighted to be in the nucleus where great headlines happened. It didn't particularly bother me at the time to work on campaigns for alcohol and tobacco. I had nothing against a good drink once in a while, and I had smoked socially in college. My cigarette of choice as a co-ed was Virginia Slims, the brand that reminded me with each theatrical puff that I had come "a long way, baby."

### *A Man's World*

The one thing I didn't consider when I signed on to work for liquor and cigarette accounts was that I would find myself working smack dab in the middle of a man's world. All three of the account executives I assisted were men, as were both the account manager and the group manager. As far as I can remember, most of the people above them were men, too,

even though it was the age when women were supposedly beginning to shatter those glass ceilings.

Women were, in fact, getting new opportunities. However, to compete in the male-dominated business world in the early 1980s, a woman could easily find herself being forced to be “one of the guys.” It was the cultural climate of the day to play down one’s femininity at all costs. Consequently, my business suits were conservative in cut and in a bland array of subdued colors, much like the conservative sling-back pumps I would slip into once I reached my cubicle. You would never find me sporting ruffles, bows, or—heaven forbid—slit skirts or plunging necklines. I made painstaking efforts not to let being a woman among all those male colleagues get in the way of being a business professional. In my mind, other than a few body parts, I couldn’t see anything my male colleagues had that I lacked. I had graduated college with honors, I had pre-graduation work experience, and I had the right New York City attitude—work hard to get ahead, because there were plenty of people eager to take my job.

Fear of being easily replaced was in fact a major motivator for men and women—but for a lot of women, it came at a cost. It made me (and I suspect many others) take things in stride that today make me cringe. The year 1982 was long before policies were put in place to protect people from harassment in the office, and the boys’ club could sometimes get pretty ugly. There were times, for instance, when some of the men in my department made inappropriate jokes and remarks in my presence. It often seemed as though they were doing it to test me—to see if the new college kid was up to being “one of the boys.” I decided to face the challenge and pretend not to notice, even chiming in at times with my own laughter. Magazines containing our current cigarette and liquor advertisements routinely came through the office mail, including copies of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. It was not

uncommon for young male account executives to be thumbing through these periodicals in the adjacent cubicles, their whistles and comments drifting over the thin fabric walls. When someone anonymously began pinning up the latest centerfolds on the walls of the conference room as “inspiration” for brainstorming sessions, I felt a line had been crossed. I didn’t have enough courage then to lodge a formal complaint out of fear of losing my job, but my grumbling at the water cooler somehow got passed along the chain of command, and the pictures were taken down as mysteriously as they had gone up. It was a minor victory from my vantage point, but not one that earned me any great favor with the male bosses.

My interaction with our clients—again, mostly men—didn’t help matters. While the account team was generally on better behavior during client visits, the clients didn’t always reciprocate. Going out to business dinners after work often meant having to deal with tipsy men who wanted to kiss me goodbye instead of accepting my firm handshake. With each passing month, it was becoming painfully obvious that as much as I had come “a long way, baby,” I had not exactly arrived, if arriving meant being respected for my talents. In my corner of the advertising world in the early 1980s, the good-old-boy network was in full swing, and I was not a part of it. I would never be a part of it, and before too long I began to wonder if I really wanted to be a part of it at all.

I conformed to the norms of the times in terms of attire, and I took my job performance seriously. I liked to work and did my job well. But interiorly, deep within the confines of my soul, a bitter discontentment was beginning to simmer. It would not go away, no matter how many accounts I helped win or advertising awards our team clinched. The long hours and heavy workload of my first full-time advertising job in Manhattan convinced me (within a relatively short time)

that the entire big-city experience was not for me. I lost ten pounds that I couldn't afford to lose and was barely sleeping at night. There was nothing I dreaded more than the sound of the alarm clock on an early Monday morning to signal the start of a new workweek. The hectic city life seemed fitting for all the other women catching subways in their tweed suits and running shoes, but I began to yearn for a smaller work environment in the suburbs, where the workdays might be slower and shorter. Perhaps there, I thought, I would find contentment. So, for reasons of health and sanity, I packed my scant belongings and returned to Long Island, the place of my birth, to begin a new chapter in my career.

### *Inner Conflict*

The decision to alter my career path did have some immediate benefits. For starters, the move from the city to the suburbs allowed me to make the transition from winning accounts to actually creating them. This would have been an impossible switch to make otherwise, at least within the same agency ("Once a 'suit' always a 'suit,'" the creatives would say about the account-management team.) I found the role of advertising copywriter to be better suited to my writing abilities than assistant account executive—a position in which I had spent most of my time drafting brand reports and marketing strategies. Copywriting was more fun and less demanding, and I was grateful for the change.

There still were some things about the work environment that had not really changed all that much. Yes, there were significantly more women working in the various suburban agencies I would serve, but it seemed that the men still held the highest positions. The behavior in the office was tamer and more "politically correct," but every now and again there was a hint of the good-old-boy network. The norms for attire were a little more relaxed as well, but

I still couldn't help feeling that I was wearing a uniform of sorts, one more determined by my attitude and behavior than fashioned with the material covering my body. I found myself locked into a self-imposed prison of perpetually trying to be recognized as a person no different from my male counterparts and superiors. "Equality, equality, equality"—that had been a mantra drilled into my head since I was in high school. I was taught that women were equal to men, plain and simple. Why then, I puzzled, was I experiencing such a disconcerting sense of inequality?

Eventually it dawned on me that the discord I was feeling had less to do with the men in the office than it had to do with me. I'm not saying that inappropriate behavior should ever be tolerated in the office. It absolutely should not. But what I began to realize is that my greater conflict was an interior one, a battle between a false self I had created in order to succeed in the workplace and my true self. That true self was a woman, not a man. I had suppressed the woman within for so long that I had no idea how to find her or if I would even be able to recognize her once I did.

### *In Stark Contrast*

Writing about the early years of my advertising career still causes me to feel a bit sweaty and nauseous. When I revisit the fear and anxiety I experienced in those days and my lack of joy and fulfillment in the role I played, I am tempted to wish those times had not happened. I think though, that in some way, it was a necessary experience that would allow me to appreciate more fully what God next wished to reveal to me on my journey.

Today, my work environment is vastly different from what it was in my early advertising days, and I can only shake my head when I think about it. I might as well have jumped into a spaceship and headed for a distant galaxy. For

starters, I no longer battle commuter traffic via train, subway, or car. I simply pad across the carpet in our master bedroom to a turret-shaped projection overlooking our backyard, which has a small stream and just enough trees to make it feel like a forest. From this serene outpost with birdsong as a backdrop, I work. I no longer write catchy headlines and persuasive copy to sell gizmos and gadgets. I now craft books to evangelize Catholics of all ages; scripts for PowerPoint presentations that I give at Catholic conferences, parishes, and schools; and research questions for the priests, deacons, and religious sisters and brothers I interview for an Ohio-based Catholic radio program. In stark contrast to my former conference-room walls with the pinups, my office today is decorated with pictures of popes, statues of the Virgin Mary, and holy cards with relics from my favorite saints. Three in particular hold a place of honor—Thérèse of Lisieux, Faustina of the Divine Mercy, and Bernadette of Lourdes. Their portraits are taped to my computer, where they smile at me and offer me encouragement each time I sit down to do tackle the week's demands. This is my team now, my coworkers, and we all report to the same supervisor—our Heavenly Father—to produce works far more important than any I had ever done on Madison Avenue.

If you were to tell me back in those early years fresh out of college that I would one day come not only to embrace the Catholic faith, but be called upon to defend it and teach it to others through writing, speaking, and the broadcast media, I would have thought you were out of your mind. If you had told me that some of my greatest mentors would turn out to be three young women from a century ago who had never worked in an office, earned a paycheck, or won an award from their peers, I would have been convinced you were off your rocker. I guess that's just the kind of surprising way God

can work in our lives once we begin to surrender our journey to him and chance to voyage into the deep.

In the following chapter, I'll pick up the story of my exodus from the big city and show you how God, through his holy book and his vicar of Christ, taught me something that I could never have learned from my business contemporaries or their slickest ad campaigns—what it means to be a truly authentic woman.



# AUTHENTIC FEMININITY



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Coinciding with my move from city to suburbs and my transition from the business side of advertising to the creative was another drastic change: my decision to abandon my nominal Protestantism and come into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. As I will reveal in greater detail in chapter four, I think I was being primed in subtle ways from my childhood for this transition, but my prime impetus for actually making the change was my desire to marry my Catholic boyfriend whom I had met in college. Becoming Catholic turned my world upside down in ways I had not anticipated and forced me to reevaluate and reprioritize my life's direction. It is within this ancient faith—one that the modern world often labels as male dominated, archaic, and insensitive to the plight of women—that I encountered

what I believe God had in mind when creating the female with her inherent dignity and her authentic femininity. Ultimately and quite ironically, it was the Church, not the tabloids, the talk shows, or the so-called sex-and-relationship experts that helped me resolve my inner conflict as a woman in a man's world.

### *Women of Scripture*

Before my conversion, I had always been an avid reader, and that didn't change when I became Catholic. What changed was what I read. I traded paperback novels for papal encyclicals. I gave up bestsellers for books on the saints. I immersed myself in Catholic apologetics (the explanation and defense of the faith), supernatural phenomena, and devotions. Early on, I got the inspiration to read the Bible—the whole Bible, cover to cover. I wanted to experience God's book from beginning to end, to try to grasp the bigger picture of my new faith. A reader-friendly version of the scriptures called the *New Jerusalem Bible* had just been published, and I snatched up a copy. I kept it in a canvas bag and read it discreetly on my lunch hour, hoping no one at the office would notice, lest I be labeled a Bible thumper—or worse—a Jesus freak.

As I waded slowly through the books of the Old Testament, I recognized a fair number of verses I had heard proclaimed in either my Protestant or Catholic worship experiences. However, there were many stories in the Bible that were completely foreign to me. There were stories that were surprising, sometimes shocking, at times even gruesome and bewildering. And there were women—lots of women—in the Bible. Some of them were the good kind of women you would expect from the pages of scripture. Others were downright scandalous. Some of their names were familiar to me,