

## Redesigning women

### Is the church's "new feminism" a good fit?

By *Renée M. LaReau*



Last spring at the University of Notre Dame a heated debate about campus performances of the controversial play *The Vagina Monologues* made national news, provoking widespread debate not only about academic freedom at Catholic universities but also about the compatibility of Catholicism and feminism. While the debate surrounding *Monologues* took center stage, inciting lively debates in the op-ed pages of *The New York Times* and

*The Wall Street Journal*, another forum on campus quietly attracted more than 300 people. A weekend conference organized by three Notre Dame undergraduates, "The Edith Stein Project: Redefining Feminism," attempted to respond to the late Pope John Paul II's call for a "new feminism" in his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae* ("The Gospel of Life"), tackling such issues as abortion, pornography, contraception, eating disorders, and rape.

Gatherings like these on college campuses point to a small but growing number of Catholic women attempting to define a "new feminism," largely shaped by negating what they perceive as the failings and shortcomings of "old" feminism. While new feminism's proponents claim it celebrates women's "true genius," affirms motherhood, and liberates women from imitating models of "male domination," its critics say defining women's "unique gifts" unnecessarily limits and even harms women, curbing their career ambitions and their contributions to church and society.



#### What's new?

New feminists say the body of thought promulgated by John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae* and the apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* ("On the Dignity and Vocation of Women") allows women to look at themselves in a more holistic way.

"For a long time, feminism has been about doing: Can I build a skyscraper the way a man can? Can a man do half the housework? Can a woman break through the glass ceiling?" says Pia de Solenni, a Washington, D.C.-based moral theologian. "It hasn't been about who I am."

Laura Garcia, who teaches philosophy at Boston College, describes new feminism as "feminism the way it always should have been."

"It's a new way for women to understand ourselves, to value ourselves, a new way to invite others to value us as women, not to be apologetic, not to see it as a handicap or drawback," she says. Garcia, who has four children, says that many new feminists want to reclaim the term feminism in such a way that is not hostile to marriage and childbearing.

"Many of them perceived old-style or secular feminism or radical feminism as anti-children, anti-marriage, and [new feminists] value their marriages," Garcia says. "They felt they were pressured in secular feminism to be working full time and have a more and more prestigious job, doing whatever it took to find somebody else to take care of your kids—they didn't identify with those values."

Some younger women, like Madeleine Ryland, a senior at Notre Dame and one of the co-organizers of the Edith Stein Project, say their generation faces injustices that differ from previous generations of women. Ryland embraces the term feminist only with reservations.

"For my generation the word feminism has more of a negative connotation now," says Ryland, 22. "Feminism was important then, but do we really still need to be talking about this stuff? Women have equal voting rights—isn't that all we needed from that? It's kind of a dead horse people are still beating."

She and her peers care about feminism to the extent that they don't want to go into job interviews and be discriminated against. While older generations of women were more optimistic in thinking they could "have it all" in terms of a balance between career and family, younger women face a different reality.

"People are probably not as naive as in past generations," Ryland says. "My generation realizes it works in some cases, and in other cases it's really tough on the family and on the mom. We're in a generation where this has already been tried."

Ryland is not a lone skeptical voice on the work/family balance issue. A high-profile September 2005 New York Times article, for example, reported that many women studying at the country's most elite colleges and universities said they had already decided to shelve their careers in favor of raising children.

Ryland, who first read about new feminism in high school, says the late pope's writings have contributed to her self-understanding of her role as a young Catholic woman.

"It encouraged me to feel like there are crucial differences between men and women, and those have to be celebrated and acknowledged instead of pushed down."

### The other new feminists

The "new feminists" aren't the only young Catholic women trying to combine their feminism and their faith. The Young Feminist Network (YFN), a program of the Women's Ordination Conference, has attracted hundreds of young women, including many women of color, who support the goals of traditional feminism while trying to make it relevant to their lives as young Catholic women. Now with several local groups and a national e-mail listserv of 200 young women and growing, YFN offers faith sharing as well as an outlet for activism against injustice against women in the church and in society.

YFN coordinator Nidza Vazquez admits most members are more interested in faith sharing than activism. "Sometimes the [feminist] message sounds a little bit angry," she says, adding that younger women are bored by the battle-of-the-sexes mentality. But that doesn't mean they want to go back to traditional gender roles.

"The whole thing about feminism is, now women have choices," says 25-year-old Aisha S. Taylor, WOC's executive director. "If you

## Men from Mars, Women from Venus?

That there are essential differences between men and women, often described as “complementary” differences, is one of new feminism’s central tenets. New feminists join the late John Paul II in believing that acknowledging these differences frees women from being evaluated according to a male standard and enables them to contribute to society in their own unique way.

Though of course there’s no “master list” of characteristics for each gender, one example of a gender difference that new feminists see as “feminine” is that women are more relational.

“Women tend to have more relational manners of thinking than do men, which is to say that we tend to view ourselves within a complex or tissue of relations and not as isolated monads, a view that is more likely to be had by male thinkers,” says Michele Schumacher, a mother of four and editor of the book *Women in Christ* (Wm. B. Eerdmans), a scholarly compendium on new feminism.

Complementarity, seen by previous generations of women as holding them back, is now viewed by new feminists as eliminating the adversarial “battle of the sexes” mentality they believe is fostered by secular feminism. “It’s seeing both equality and difference, and seeing that difference as positive,” says Laura Garcia.

New feminism also pays close attention to the female body, especially to its ability to bear children. According to 46-year-old Genevieve Kineke, a mother of four living in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, a woman’s capacity for childbearing affects how she sees the world and processes information, whether or not she ends up having children of her own.

“Since a woman is the first to receive a human person and she is so wired into the human person and his needs, she processes the world through that lens of motherhood,” she says.

Young mothers like Danielle Bean, 34, identify with new feminism’s affirmation of gender differences and say that secular feminism’s attempts to mask differences between the sexes has been harmful to women.

“My generation grew up in a culture that was saturated with feminism all the way down to Sesame Street, accepting the ideals of no difference between the sexes,” says Bean, a mother of eight living in Center Harbor, New Hampshire. “A lot of women in my generation have experienced discontent with what feminism is. They go out and seek a career, and lo and behold, what they really want to be is a mother.”

Though new feminists are quick to criticize the women’s movement, it’s worth

want to be a stay-at-home mom, for example, great. But ‘new feminism’ falls down when it says women are meant to be mothers and are more nurturing because they are women. Then instead of doing something because of your gifts or because you feel called by God to do it, it’s because of traditional gender roles.”

This new generation also believes feminism is not only women’s work. “Too often most of the responsibility falls on the woman for making change when children come into the marriage,” says YFN member Laura Singer of Chicago, a 34-year-old stay-at-home mother of two. “But it’s not just about women having more choices and opportunities. Many of us women have pushed the work world for flexible schedules and family-friendly work environments, but our husbands are still working for places that do not allow men the same flexibility.”

As to whether she’ll raise her daughter to be a feminist, Singer says, “Definitely. And my son, too!”—*Heidi Schlumpf*

noting that secular feminists have been the driving force behind female-friendly workplace policies including flex time, job-sharing, on-site child care, paid maternity leave, and recourse against sexual harassment.

While none of these policies provides a panacea, they have certainly contributed toward more women flourishing in the workplace and enabling working mothers to spend more time with their children.

### New feminism or old sexism?

Like the “Theology of the Body” movement, with which it shares many beliefs, new feminism comes from Pope John Paul II’s attempts to uphold and honor the traditional female roles of wife and mother. Needless to say, more traditional feminists see this return to gender-based roles as problematic.

“It does matter whether you’re embodied as male or female—we’re not just neutered brains,” says Cathleen Kaveny, a Notre Dame law professor who also teaches theology. “Furthermore, the pope is saying not only does it matter, it’s a good thing we’ve got this diversity of men and women.”

But the notions of “different but equal” and “complementary” male and female traits may form a slippery slope that tilts toward outmoded sexist ideas and gender roles.

“It’s one thing to say men and women are complementary, that you need the gifts of both to build the world, but where some people get nervous, including me, is that some people have started parceling out traits to men and women and dividing who can be what,” says Kaveny. “Sometimes it doesn’t grow out of a reality of what men and women are, but what is imposed by social expectation, and that can do injustice.”

Defining traits related to childbearing and raising a family as “feminine” doesn’t reflect all women’s experience, even all mothers’ experience.

“The idea of women as being receiving, nurturing, gentle, kind—all of that can be true because that’s partly what you need to take care of a baby,” Kaveny says. “But anybody who has had to take care of a teenager knows you need an entirely different skill set. You need to be tough, you need to be firm to help set boundaries. Sometimes the notion of nurturing implies a certain type of fragility that may not reflect the experience of a mother who has had to struggle to have her child survive.”

And men’s and women’s traits can vary considerably throughout their life cycles, points out Sidney Callahan, an author, psychologist, and mother of seven.

“During adolescence and during the periods in forming mates there is the greatest difference between males and females, but when people are children or when they’re old, they’re not as different,” she says. “Women often get stronger as they get older, and men become more mellow—men and women become more alike as they age.”

Other critics say that relying too heavily on differences dictated by biology may discourage women from ambitiously pursuing careers, relegating them only to domestic roles.

“To say that men are the aggressive, rational ones and that women are the altruistic, maternal ones, and that you need both to make a whole—of course, what that also does is assign men the public space and women the private space,” says Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether.

But those who embrace new feminism insist that it doesn't mean women have to eschew careers for full-time motherhood.

"I abhor the idea that 'biology is destiny,'" says Michele Schumacher, who agrees that even for new feminists the work-family balance comes down to an individual decision for each woman and her spouse. "It is impossible to determine from the outset the proper balance between work and family, just as it is impossible to determine the balance between work and prayer, for example. The equation will be as different for every woman as her mission is different from that of any other."

Danielle Bean, an editor who works 20 hours a week from home, says that her own mother had stayed at home with her as she grew up, an experience that made her want to do the same.

"I don't think I ever considered doing otherwise," Bean says. "Just because we have more options than our grandmothers, all these options sometimes make us feel that we need to be doing more, having more than we have, looking beyond what we're meant to be doing now."

Genevieve Kineke, who writes part time from home now that her children are in school, says she chose to devote her time to her children first, expecting that she'd be able to focus on her career later.

"Women can have it all, but perhaps not all at once," Kineke said. "It's easy for a woman to step back into her career after throwing herself into motherhood for the time it requires."

Madeleine Ryland says though she can't know for sure how the career and family balance will play out in her own life, she hopes she can figure out a way to have both.

"I feel like I would like to have a family, and I feel like there will probably be a way I can work as well," she says. "Most women in my generation still want to try it, mostly because they don't see any other way. We're a little more realistic, a little more wary, and still hopeful, at least right now."

### The 'f' word

New feminists are not the first group of women to attempt a marriage between Catholicism and feminism. Since the 1960s, many prominent Catholic women theologians have gone to great lengths to bring feminist perspectives to bear on scripture, ethics, systematic theology, and liturgy, while working within the framework of the church.

At the same time, what separates new feminists from other prominent Catholic feminist theologians is that they will not challenge or criticize patriarchal teachings of the church, such as ordination not being available to women or a lack of inclusive language in church documents or liturgies.

When Madeleine Ryland and her co-organizers planned the Edith Stein conference last year, they did not include speakers who would challenge existing church teaching on women's roles.

"I think there are two groups of people," Ryland says. "Some people who feel like the church doesn't understand women or hasn't done enough for women, so we need to change the church. Others say, 'Maybe the church needs to improve and to acknowledge some of these things with greater depth and nuance,' but we want to stay within the framework of what the church has given us."

Some women theologians are wary of a “new feminism” initiated by a male Catholic hierarchy. Part of the problem, says Sister of Mercy Mary Aquin O’Neill, is that the church hierarchy is defined by having a teaching role, rather than a listening role, which may inhibit their ability to learn from the experiences of women.

“It will always mean that men are defining women and telling women what it is like to be a woman,” says O’Neill, director of the Mount Agnes Theological Center for Women in Baltimore. “It’s not particular to the pope, it’s particular to the system.” O’Neill also says that, as long as women are excluded from higher-level leadership church positions, sexism within the church itself can go unchecked.

“There is never a woman present to bring to bear our perspective, our experience, our knowledge,” she says. “I think this really weakens the documents that are written about women.”

Though the late pope did use the word feminism in his writings that many new feminists are attempting to redefine on their own terms, some women hesitate to identify with feminism at all. Genevieve Kineke says she does not call herself a feminist because the term has too many negative connotations.

“There’s a stridency to the word, a negativity,” Kineke says. “There’s a secular and stereotypical understanding of feminism that is just too confused to unpack, and it carries a lot of baggage.”

Danielle Bean says she does not embrace the term feminist for herself, though she would like to reclaim the label under different circumstances.

“I’d like to be able to consider myself a feminist—the kind that recognizes and values women for their true nature,” Bean said. “But the modern world doesn’t see it in quite the same way.”

### Let's talk

Despite the fact that nonfeminists, new feminists, and other Catholic feminists may have their disagreements, women agree that continued conversations about their own varied experiences of faith, work, and family may be fruitful.

“Something that plagues us right now in the church is that those who identify themselves as faithful and loyal to the papacy are not in conversation with those of us who see ourselves not as not faithful but as more willing to be critical and raise questions,” says O’Neill. “Ultimately we all have to wrestle if there is a disconnect between what we are told to believe and what we are experiencing.”

Pia de Solenni agrees that further dialogue would be helpful in articulating what is still a very new and nascent conversation about faith and feminism.

“There need to be more voices,” she says. “We can’t just have certain theologians talking about it—part of it is going to have to be lived experiences. It’s up to women to take this forward on lots of different levels, both academic and grassroots. Women need to get serious talking about their experiences.”

Will the feminism of the future be kinder and gentler? Will younger women take for granted the civil rights their grandmothers fought for? Will women ever really be able to have it all?

These questions remain, but amid the discussions, one thing is certain: For years to come these issues will continue to be thorny enough to stymie even the most astute “feminine genius.”

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