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Incarnating the Feminine Genius in the Contemporary Catholic Church

by Leonie Westenber

In examining the “feminine genius” in the contemporary Church one can similarly examine the effects of the Second Vatican Council and shifts concerning the role of lay men and women in our post-Conciliar Church. The Second Vatican Council was called both a “light for the Church and a light for the world.” Indeed, Pope John XXIII voiced a need for *aggiornamento*, a renewal and bringing up to date of the Church to serve a world that had undergone much political and social change. What then, have been the fruits of the Council, some fifty years on? Pope Benedict XVI, in calling for a Year of Faith (2011), identified the encouragement of the lay vocation and lay ministry as a positive fruit of the Council.¹ On the other hand, however, the Pope also noted that the years following the Council have been marked by a crisis of faith among peoples, with a corresponding indifference and apathy to faith, religion, and, in many cases, to Christianity.² However, this apathy in the Western World has been, for many women, a symbol not of their own apathy but of their disenfranchisement and exclusion.³ Oftentimes, women in difficult circumstances have found it hard to see their place in the Church or have found little compassion for their circumstances. Yet, as *Lumen Gentium* notes, in Mary the Church has reached perfection and should exhibit a motherly love in its missionary activities.⁴ While this motherly love should be extended to men and women alike, in and outside the Church, the distinct needs of many women in our community, for example, those women who feel ignored and suffer because of family circumstances, poverty, and marginalization related to gender, demand that such motherly love be administered to women and their children as “the least of these.” Certainly, too, it is most frequently other women in the Church who can be of assistance in representing the “motherly love” noted in *Lumen Gentium* and who can often best recognize the particular gifts of women in the Church.

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- 1 Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, (2011), http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20111011_porta-fidei.html.
- 2 Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, no. 2.
- 3 Sidney Callahan discusses this in respect to “biology as destiny.” Sidney Callahan, “Mary and the Feminist Movement,” *America*, no. 20 (December 18, 1993), <http://americamagazine.org/issue/100/mary-and-feminist-movement>.
- 4 Second Vatican Council, “*Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*” (hereafter LG) in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott (New York: Guild Press, 1966), nos. 15, 46, 50, 52-69.

Motherly love in this usage introduces the notion of the “feminine genius” and of spiritual motherhood. The medieval mystics held that the qualities often associated with the “feminine genius” can be modelled by the Church in its pastoral concern.⁵ Additionally, in speaking of the feminine genius, some women theologians have written of “traditioning” as a form of “spiritual midwifery,” so that women’s ministries in the Church can be recognized, utilized, and valued in both new and traditional ways.⁶ Examples of such ministries include grassroots movements in Ireland, Europe, Central America, and the United States, to be discussed further in this essay.

What, however, is meant by the term “feminine genius”? The term emerged in wider use as a result of the work of Edith Stein, philosopher, teacher, and, later, Carmelite nun (St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross). Stein described the feminine genius as marking the ability of women to “naturally seek to embrace that which is living, personal, and whole.”⁷ Stein further qualified this statement in noting that though she wrote of generalities (“No woman is only woman; like man each has her individual speciality and talent”), she continued to envisage women’s inclination to “cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth” as part of a feminine formation that can enrich all professions.⁸

St. John Paul II further introduced the concept of the feminine genius in his 1988 Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*. He wrote of the feminine genius as encompassing “the moral and spiritual strength of a woman” in connection to her “awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way.”⁹ Like Stein, John Paul II clarified his description of the feminine genius by stating that “God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being.” He maintained, however, that the feminine genius should not be discounted as a result of this calling to all of humanity but should be considered separately in the life of the Church since the “entrusting” described above “concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of their femininity—and this in a particular way determines their vocation.”¹⁰

The term feminine genius thus denotes the idea of women’s care thinking, as suggested by the feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan. Gilligan’s research highlights that women, more often than men, view self as a component of a network of relationships and therefore represent “care thinking” (empathy in Stein’s description of the feminine genius) in sustaining these relationships as a moral imperative.¹¹ Central to this “care thinking” are important notions of both care of and responsibility for others. Definition of the feminine genius, therefore, involves a respect for the dignity of all human life amidst a woman’s own respect for the dignity of womanhood. This respect is personified in the work of many women in the community and in the Church in effecting change in the world that will ensure a personal dimension in societal concerns, including health care, social issues, and economics.¹²

5 St. Bridget in her *Revelations*, St. Hildegard of Bingen’s *Book of Divine Work*, and St. Julien of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love*.

6 Judith Lynch, “Traditioning: Women Passing on the Story,” *Newsletter*, May 28, 2015, National Office for the Participation of Women, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, http://www.opw.catholic.org.au/resources/traditioning-women-passing-on-the-story.html#.V5pQc6Ly_fb.

7 Edith Stein, *The Collected Words of Edith Stein, Volume Two: Essays on Woman* (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), 43.

8 Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 43-47.

9 John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women, Mulieris Dignitatem*, Apostolic Letter, August 15, 1988, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

10 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

11 Carol Gilligan, “Moral Orientation and Moral Development,” in *Ethics: The Big Questions*, ed. James Sterber, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 443.

12 In similar vein, Stein notes that “there is no profession which cannot be practiced by a woman” in discussion of women’s “potentialities” in influencing public and domestic spheres. Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 105.

Women in the Church Fifty Years on from Vatican II

Such discussion of the feminine genius provides a corresponding hint at its possible significance for the Church and community. Furthermore, description of the feminine genius at work in the Church raises the question: What is the experience of women in the contemporary Church post-Vatican II?

In one sense, it can be argued that women's involvement within the Church has increased since the Second Vatican Council. While noting that lay ministry in general and participation within dioceses has been a "fruit" of Vatican II, Susan Ross states that the work of women, religious and non-religious, has formed the spine of the Catholic dioceses in the U.S., with extended growth so that some "80% of lay ecclesial ministers are women."¹³ Additionally, the type of work undertaken by women in the Church has also varied, to include more lay women theologians and biblical scholars, and pivotal roles in parishes once undertaken by priests—positions such as chancellors, liturgical specialists, catechists, and those running faith and sacramental formation. This has been, in the words of sociologist and advisor to the U.S. Council of Bishops Msgr. Phillip Murnion, a "virtual revolution in parish ministry."¹⁴

Furthermore, there has been recognition in the Church of women's voices, that nebulous term that nevertheless accentuates the stories of women and the importance of presenting women's experiences in decision making. Gilligan describes the different experiences, the different voice of women, especially in noting relational truths that have often been ignored or suffocated.¹⁵ Fifty years on from the Second Vatican Council we see a gradual inclusion of women's voices in the Church and in ecclesial decision making. Pope Francis, for example, in 2014 appointed five women to be part of the International Theological Commission assisting the Holy See, and as part of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. Listening to, and incorporating, the experiences and voice of women in the Church has also been furthered by a distinct feminine and feminist theology. Indeed, Pope John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* discussed the "distinctiveness" of women, acknowledging that women's voices must be recognized as "*sequela Christi*," followers and imitators of Christ, so that their experience through history and in the world today can be considered as valued contributions to our theological understanding.¹⁶

On the other hand, however, it can be argued that while these changes in the roles and understanding of women's contributions since Vatican II are positive, there remains discussion on the fullness of such change. Is the change superficial, so that women are seen to be "stop-gaps" in ministries until more male clergy emerge? Are the changes "accidents" and not "substance," as Ross maintains, changing the appearance of women's roles but not breaching the substance of the same?¹⁷ It can be noted that change is gradual and fifty years is a drop in the bucket of ecclesiastical history. However, much social change has occurred in the last fifty years and it seems that the positive changes for women in the Church have also been accompanied by areas still requiring change.

In particular, I refer here to women in families undergoing change and disruption, and women as victims of abuse. In both Western and developing countries, many women are single parents or parents with absent partners, and live in abject poverty.¹⁸ Many times, their voices are not heard in Church decision making, not even by the often

13 Susan A. Ross, "Joys and Hopes, Grievs and Anxieties: Catholic Women Since Vatican II," *New Theology Review* 25, no. 2 (March 2013): 30-38.

14 Phillip J. Murnion, cited in John L. Allen Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church*, (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 192.

15 Carol Gilligan describes this as "ethics of care" so that women's voices include ideals of caring and relationships, in Jill Taylor, Carol Gilligan, and Amy A. Sullivan, *Between Voice and Silence: Women and Girls, Race and Relationship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 123.

16 John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

17 Susan A. Ross, "Joys and Hopes, Grievs and Anxieties: Catholic Women since Vatican II."

18 This has been called the "feminization of poverty," wherein the burden of poverty is borne by women and children, in both developed and developing countries. See Martha Chen, Joann Vanek, Francie Lund, James Heintz, Renana Jhabvala, and Christine Bonner, *Progress of the World's Women 2005: Women, Work and Poverty* (New York: United Nations Development Fund for Women, 2005), 36. http://www.sarpn.org/documents/d0001563/Women_work_UNIFEM.pdf.

middle-class feminist theologians. This point is addressed by Jacqueline Grant, who portrays the lifestyle of numerous women of different ethnic backgrounds as being lived on the margins of society and the Church, concerned less with issues of women's ordination or positions in the Church than they are with the practicalities of life, and spiritual, physical, and emotional support and recognition from local churches.¹⁹ It seems that though Church hierarchy and theologians have emphasized the dignity of women and the importance of female contributions to the Church (as in *Mulieris Dignitatem*), in reality many local parishes have failed to live this in practical terms.²⁰ This failure is evident beyond the parish level too; an example of note is in the 2014 Synod of the Family wherein much air time was given to Eucharistic Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics, for example, while little discussion was made obvious concerning the effects on families, women, and children of domestic violence, abuse, rape, economic uncertainty, and the simple fact of feeling unwelcome as a divorced mother in many parishes.²¹

The discussion on women in the Church, fifty years from Vatican II, has pieced together a collage of both positives and negatives. On the one hand, we see that in recognizing the concept of the feminine genius and honoring Mary's maternal qualities and role in connection with the work of Christ, women's work as lay ministers and in ecclesial and theological concerns has broadened, with emerging avenues for women's voices to be included in Church discussions and decision-making. In contrast, however, there is room for deep deliberation concerning the role of women in these areas, with a danger voiced that these "accidents" are merely that—appearances of involvement, even tokens of involvement, without substantial debate on what it means to be a woman in the Church today.

It appears, too, that there has been a focus by some female theologians on the role of women in ordained ministry. Arguably, this attacks the substance versus accidents debate head-on, looking for change in the substance of women's contributions to the institutional Church. In fact, one Catholic feminist has stated that the emphasis on obedience to Church teachings in this matter has overshadowed honest debate.²² Yet, I cannot help but wonder if this debate itself misses some of the reality of the lives of women in the Church, and in the community. Edith Stein noted that a discussion of women should involve the reality of women, "seeing what is."²³ Perhaps in focusing so intently on the vocation of the priesthood and the ordination of women, the debate neglects both the reality of women in society today, and an understanding of the value of other vocations in the Church and in the world. Perhaps these other callings may inadvertently be denigrated in calls for women's ordination, so that we fail to understand how these other callings may utilize the feminine genius of women and minister to women in the actuality of their lives. Discussion of such qualities and ministries would, as *Lumen Gentium* states, emulate Mary's "obedience, faith, hope and burning charity" and thus emphasize Christ's priesthood "shared in various ways both by the ministers and by the faithful."²⁴

Pia de Solenni argues that we should strive to avoid defining women within the confines of the (traditional) masculine, to avoid representing the traditional masculine roles as superior to those that have been tradition-

19 Jacqueline Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: American Academy of Religion, 1989).

20 Contrast, for example, John Paul II's call for recognizing women's contributions to the Church and the world in *Mulieris Dignitatem* with the "feminization of the Church" discussed by John L. Allen, "Lay Ecclesial Ministry and the Feminization of the Church," *National Catholic Reporter*, June 29, 2007. <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/lay-ecclesial-ministry-and-feminization-church>.

21 Private discussion with a group of divorced and separated practicing Catholic women, November 2014.

22 Patricia Wittberg, "A Lost Generation?" *America* 206, no. 5 (February 20, 2012), <http://americamagazine.org/issue/5129/article/lost-generation>.

23 Edith Stein, cited in Katharina Westerhorstmann, "On the Nature and Vocation of Women," published first in German: *Westerhorstmann, Katharina: Wesen und Berufung der Frau bei Edith Stein vor dem Hintergrund einer radikal dekonstruktivistischen Position des Postfeminismus*, *Brixner Theologisches Forum* 117 (3/2006): 41-62, <http://www.laici.va/content/dam/laici/documenti/donna/filosofia/english/on-the-nature-and-vocation-of-women-edith-steins.pdf>.

24 *LG*, nos. 62, 63.

ally considered feminine.²⁵ Undoubtedly, if we in the Church wish to join the discussion regarding change and the substance of women's experience of faith and religion, we could look at the discussion of Stein's idea of the "feminine genius," qualities such as sensitivity and empathy, and apply these in our parishes, in our communities, and in our workplaces. In practical terms, this means widening our understanding of the work we do in our lives, in and outside the Church, so that all work is termed our vocation. Such an idea of ministry and work has been termed a "suffering-with," using the narratives of our lives to share in the narratives of others.²⁶ The understanding of empathy in service as suffering-with aims to "fix" the harsh realities of the lives of many women by approaching the women themselves first, not simply as recipients of ministry but as colleagues, being with the other, sharing the suffering of the cross. Empathy as ministry here implies listening to the voices of women, being empathic, and harnessing the concepts of spiritual motherhood, vocation, and the feminine genius into further developing an inclusive and welcoming Church on a local level, with a concept of mutual caregiving in understanding and sharing the joys and sorrows of the Cross. That this is possible will be demonstrated with a discussion of practical measures undertaken in a similar process.

Significantly, too, *Lumen Gentium* writes of the People of God as sharing in spiritual riches.²⁷ This is of importance to the notion of mutual ministry within local parishes and can be heralded under the umbrella of the feminine genius as empathy, receptivity, and care-giving, shared in grassroots practical undertakings in our parishes and communities. Examples of this are discussed by Joti Sekhon and Jill Bystidienski, and with women's grassroots organizations across the world, and spanning differing cultures, following a participatory democratic model, involving women acting autonomously to help other women.²⁸ A "new feminism," approaching the daily lives of women in Western society, has thus arisen in an organic manner, as women share stories and welcome other women in local churches.²⁹ Examples of such sharing in practice, on local parish levels, will be examined below.

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A deeper look at empathy and ministry thus adds to our understanding of vocation. In fact, Patricia Fox defines ministry as a vocation, "leading others" to both holiness and discipleship in "God's mission in the world."³⁰ This definition of ministry encompasses the role of clergy and laity alike in utilizing diverse and separate gifts in the Church, for others and for love of God. It also lays stress on discipleship in the world so that our discipleship, while vital for the life of the Church, is not confined to the Church but spreads to the community, to the workforce, to the environments in which people live. Importantly, *Lumen Gentium* makes note of the secular life of the laity who, in their vocations in the wider community, seek to share the kingdom of God.³¹

It should be noted here, however, that broadening the concept of ministry, with the inclusion of men and women in diverse roles in the Church or in living a life of faith in a variety of milieus, does not denigrate the role and importance of the ordained priesthood. Vatican II highlighted the importance of both the priesthood of all believers and the ordained priesthood while asserting that the differences between the two are essential and "not only in

25 Pia Francesca de Solenni, *A Hermeneutic of Aquinas's Men Through a Sexually Differentiated Epistemology: Towards an Understanding of Woman as Imago Dei* (Roma: Apollinare studi, 2000). Translated privately with the help of A. Westenberg.

26 "On Coffee Shops and Crucifixes," *Women in Theology Blog*, February 7, 2015, <http://womenintheology.org/2015/02/07/on-coffee-shops-and-crucifixions/#more-10064>.

27 *LG*, no. 13.

28 Jill M. Bystydzienski and Joti Sekhon, *Democratization and Women's Grassroots Movements* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999).

29 Michelle Schumacher, *Women in Christ: Towards a New Feminism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004).

30 Patricia Fox, "A Renewed Theology of Vocation in Response to the Pastoral Challenges Facing the Australian Church," *Australian Catholic Record* 89, no. 1 (2012): 33.

31 *LG*, Chapter IV.

degree.”³² This is a fundamental, theological, and ontological difference. How, then, do we widen our understanding of vocation, as Fox describes, while utilizing the feminine genius of women within non-clerical discipleship?

I have already hinted of some practical examples of this understanding in grassroots organizations described by Schumacher, and by Sekhon and Bystidienski. These grassroots organizations are run by women for women, in local parish communities or otherwise under the auspices of Catholic teaching. Each heralds a way in which the feminine genius can be utilized in pastoral activities within the idea of “spiritual midwifery,” as described earlier. One such model is the Family Resource Centre in Moyross, a housing estate in Ireland’s county of Limerick.³³ Under a Catholic activist banner, and citing Catholic social teaching especially in the wake of Vatican II, women have formed together to provide resources for other women and to lobby against poor living conditions and family violence. Mothers living on the estate, with the collaboration of Sister Imelda O’Sullivan, L.S.A., have forced the center to grow from an initial drop-in house to a place that offers health care, playgroups, child care, and counseling and education programs. The management committee is portrayed as active ministry, and arose from the need for the women on the estate to have an avenue where their voices could be heard. The Family Resource Centre began as a ministry of the Church firstly through the Little Sisters of the Assumption and then to women helping other women in the spirit of mutual service. This group embodies both the hope and maternal love exemplified by Stein’s and Pope John Paul II’s definition of the feminine genius, and demonstrates how qualities such as empathy and compassion can be valued in grassroots ministry. Here we see a practical outpouring of spiritual motherhood so that the faithful may be “regenerated.”³⁴

A further practical example of ministry that involves the particular gifts of women in the Church and community is that depicted by Marguerite Lena, in Schumacher’s book *Women in Christ: Towards a New Feminism*.³⁵ Lena expounds literary studies as a means of educating both men and women of the value and significance of the feminine genius. It is through education, she argues, that we effect change and offer Christ’s salvific work to others, appealing to intellect, experience, and soul. The practical outpouring of such an education has been the Endow programs in many parishes in the United States.³⁶ These programs are run by women, initially for other women and with the hope of extending the studies to men and to families. Endow involves education and discussion, a shared experience of theological and literary reading in informal collegial groups followed by integrated questions in relation to women’s personal experiences. The ministry here is that of suffering-with, embodying Mary’s role in the salvific work of Christ, with hope, solace, and education. This is likened in *Lumen Gentium* to a pilgrimage, so that the faithful are journeying with Christ, suffering with Him, and receiving His graces.³⁷ It is an ongoing pilgrimage and, in the Endow and similar programs, an ongoing education that effects change as more women are empowered in ministering to others in their local parishes and communities.

In Poland, since the “transitioning” of political power, several women’s groups have emerged within the Church, giving voice, education, and identity to women of the working class. Judy Roote Aullette describes her interview with Elizabeth Oledzka concerning the work of women in the strongly Catholic Solidarity movement of the 1980s.³⁸ Initially, women joined the group as an expression of their political solidarity but, as Oledzka notes, “It was

32 LG, no. 10.

33 Described in depth by Christopher Gale in “Women’s Participation in Grassroots Initiative in Ireland,” in Bystydzienski and Sekhon, *Democratization and Women’s Grassroots Movements*.

34 LG, nos 63-64.

35 M. Lena writes of literary studies as adding to the “rich polyphony of culture” that is needed on a local and global scale, signifying the importance of the education of men in this area of “intimacy,” in her chapter “A Creative Difference: Educating Women,” in Schumacher, *Women in Christ: Towards a New Feminism*, 312-323.

36 See the Endow website <http://endowgroups.org/>

37 LG, nos 6-7.

38 Judy Roote Aullette, “New Roads to Resistance,” in Bystydzienski and Sekhon, *Democratization and Women’s Grassroots Movements*.

interesting to see working-class women change from meeting to meeting” as they shared their concerns over poor working and living conditions and lack of suitable healthcare for families.³⁹ Women began educating themselves in this area through the sharing of stories and collection of data concerning health issues and poor conditions in factories for women workers. The coming together in prayer and discussion of the narratives of the women’s lives encouraged the formation of a number of spin-off women’s groups, each independent of larger organizations but each run by local women, effecting change in local communities through an initial exchange of stories that told of the particular needs of the women at work and in the home. While there is a number of such groups, some concerned more with violence against women, some more faith-based and others focussed on education especially for secondary-age girls, they each demonstrate a consensus-based democratic form of organization with a sharing of women’s lives. In this way, the groups represent both Stein’s idea of the feminine genius as embracing that which is living and whole and Pope John Paul II’s comment on the “moral and spiritual strength” of women in ways that address de Solenni’s notion that the new feminism seeks change in organisation and structure, rather than defining womanhood only in traditional ways or by that which is traditionally considered masculine.

Participatory democracy is modelled in the women’s faith-based group Christian Commission for Democracy (CCD) in the Honduras. Forty percent of the organization’s time is devoted to prayer, reflection, and discussion.⁴⁰ This structure describes a model of open discussion that allows women to air differing viewpoints and experiences and, in this practice, a continued self-development. Charles McKehey reports that staff of the CCD express spiritual and intellectual growth in their own self-development as facilitators of programs within the CCD.⁴¹ Such a practice of mutual growth and education embodies notions of the feminine genius as cherishing, guarding, and advancing growth in a non-competitive fashion. Instead, the women’s real needs are met in mutual care and respect, for example, in faith-based educational programs that identify social struggles as community struggles. This embraces women’s care thinking; in order for women to flourish, the women themselves demand that the community should flourish.

These examples give a practical illustration of the utilization of women’s gifts in the Church and the community. Each mirrors the idea of the feminine genius as described by both Stein and Pope John Paul II, and each is separate from, but can collaborate with, the sacred, empathetic, and sacramental work of the ordained clergy. These programs provide models of ways in which the feminine genius may be enacted in practical measures in local parishes. Programs such as these can begin at the local, grassroots level, inviting women to share their needs and talents through initial meetings. The connections thus established between women at the parish level can be fostered to extend in a myriad of individual ways, addressing specific issues and strengths of the parish and of the women of the parish in response to prayer, membership, and participation.

Conclusion

I have attempted to begin an exploration of the experience of women in the Church, some fifty years on from Vatican II, in light of the notion of the feminine genius as described principally by Edith Stein and Pope John Paul II. Changes in society in the last fifty years have caused some to question the relevance of Christianity. Women’s lives have changed, both professionally and in families, in the Western world in particular. We also have a growing awareness of the differences in the lives of women on a global scale, across cultures. While calls for change for women in the Church sometimes center on the issue of women’s ordination, this article has instead provided ex-

39 Aullete, “New Roads to Resistance,” 220-221.

40 Charles McKehey, “Feminist Organisations and Grassroots Democracy in Honduras,” in Bystydzienski and Sekhon, *Democratization and Women’s Grassroots Movements*.

41 McKehey, “Feminist Organisations and Grassroots Democracy in Honduras,” 206-209.

amples of grassroots change on local and global levels to demonstrate how practical encouragement of the particular gifts and strengths of women can effect change that meets the realities of women and their families. This adds depth to the concept of the feminine genius in the life of the Church. That the incarnation of the feminine genius in the contemporary Church is possible has been highlighted with the practical examples of such ministries in the reality of the lives of women, so that Mary's *fiat* is echoed in the vocation of women and, indeed, in the compassion of the People of God in contemporary society.