

Real women,
real lives

True Feminism

by
Kathleen O'Connell-Sundaram

“The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect, and a power never hitherto achieved.”

— Second Vatican Council, 1965

For women of every age group today, these words appear to have been prophetic. But their meaning is far from crystal clear: what, after all, *is* feminism? And, more specifically, is the feminism defined by our society in its political, legal, and broad public policy arenas actually true feminism? Last February, the California Catholic Women's Forum convened a one-day conference entitled “True Feminism for Real Women, The Church's Perspective.” More than 90 women attended the gathering in Silicon

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Valley. The invitation asked women to “come to a conference on our dignity and vocation as women in today’s world,” based on the principles outlined by Pope John Paul II in his 1988 Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (“On the Dignity and Vocation of Women”). The participants represented a wide spectrum of political ideas, education, ethnicity, age, and occupation.

Many attendees, I should note, were repulsed by the very term “feminism.” For them and others, the word is charged with passion and freighted with memories of lives lived under its influence, women with profound, personal experience of its effects. However, the disdain for the word is mixed with a desire to face and deal with its consequences.

The conference was not about getting women in touch with their feelings of anger and resentment and so did not deteriorate into a complaint session. It was about asking “who is woman?” Is she defined in some collective way by the world around her? Or is she an individual possessing a unique genius and value apart from her “role”? Must she define herself in comparison and contrast with men? Or does she share an equal dignity rooted in complementarity? Must she value herself exclusively by her ability to produce economic value? Or may she value her contribution to culture and civilization? Can women benefit society by bringing to problems in the business world, volunteer world, and the home a perspective that considers the dignity of the whole person and expresses solutions from the heart?

Rebecca Tetti, whose discussion of John Paul’s letter was warmly received by the conference, is program director of the Center for Integral Formation and a contributor to *Faith and Family* magazine. She highlighted John Paul’s emphasis on the anthropology of women, considering the ideas of complementarity with men and of woman as a reflection of the image and likeness of God. She argued that the “battle between the sexes” is a myth and that woman is equal in dignity and necessary in her complementary role with man. Mrs. Tetti said woman is uniquely equipped to emphasize each person’s dignity and value to humanity.

Marjorie Campbell, a mother and, formerly, a professor at McGeorge Law School and the University of Cincinnati School of Law as well as a bankruptcy and criminal litigator, examined the history of the women’s movement and described her own

personal history as a one-time, self-described “hard-core feminist” who titled her application essay to Yale Law School: “Abolishing the Nuclear Family.” She said the movement included much that was good: winning the right to vote; ending workplace inequality in hiring, pay, and treatment; ending child labor; and also much that does harm: abortion, divorce, and one-parent-headed families.

“Feminism crept far, far from its purpose of giving women their dignity,” she said. “It turned in on itself and it began consuming women.” She said the “women’s movement became openly hostile to religion, leaving no spiritual base and instead embraced a new system that replaced mysteries with injustices to address the fundamental question: what is the meaning of my life?” Women, she said, require healing from feminism’s harmful effects and urged kindness and understanding toward women wounded by the movement.

The conference was advertised in many venues (including articles in the *San Jose Mercury News* and the *National Catholic Register*, as well as in church bulletins and by word of mouth through women’s groups). This resulted in a philosophically and ideologically-mixed cross-section of attendees. And that, in turn, led to lively discussions during breakout sessions. One unhappy participant said the conference was about “setting women back.” A look at evaluation sheets turned in at the day’s conclusion, however, shows participants’ reactions were overwhelmingly positive. Some said they had feared a message consisting only of: “just stay married, barefoot, and pregnant”; but were pleasantly surprised and impressed with the frank exchanges and open discussions the conference afforded.

Judging by this gathering, women are becoming less susceptible to, and less tolerant of, the trite phrases used in the past to rally them into a collective force. They are ready for greater introspection about the “feminism” that has profoundly impacted their lives both positively and negatively. They want feminism to serve women, not serve as a vehicle for mobilizing women in service to various political agendas. And they are ready to look deeply into what John Paul II emphasized as woman’s created nature: a nature acknowledged in the fullness of each woman’s specific vocation and permitted and encouraged to be a positive influence in society. They want to pass this positive influence on, especially to their daughters. CPR