

# Feminist

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"Jesus clearly included and, in fact, went out of his way in seeing (women) as carriers of the good news," said Sister Nancy DeRycke, pastoral minister at Gates' St. Helen Church, a member of the Rochester Women's Ordination Conference and a member of the diocesan Commission on Women.

Although wealthy widows often financed and led early Christian communities, Sister DeRycke said that by the late Middle Ages sexism had caused women to lose their leadership status within the church. "The church has obviously been influenced in its tradition by the culture around it," she said.

Today, however, that culture is among the forces pressuring the church to open its leadership to women. The secular feminist

movement of the 1960s, along with Third World liberation and civil rights movements, led many women to re-examine their historically subordinate roles in the church. Just as advocates of liberation theology examined God's role in history through the eyes of the oppressed poor, feminists began examining God's role in their own lives.

Ruether noted that Vatican II also played its part in the feminist theological movement by calling congregations of women religious to renew themselves. "The religious women began to apply feminism in the 1960s and 1970s in incorporating it in the renewal of their orders," she said.

Sister DeRycke also said women religious spearheaded feminism in the church because many of them felt frustrated by not being able to answer what they saw as God's call to ordination.

"I think what we're seeing now is married women and single women feeling that call," Sister DeRycke said, noting that

scores of women — religious, single and married — are signing up for theology courses in Catholic seminaries across the country. Many such women are already in such parish-level leadership roles as catechists, lay ministers and administrators — positions that have become available as the priest shortage has worsened, several observers commented.

Proponents of feminist theology believe the church as a whole benefits from their efforts to eliminate sexist language from services because inclusive language emphasizes God's equal love for all people, and creates a new awareness of the so-called "feminine aspects" of God.

Scripture studies now explore the Lord's tender and nurturing qualities as well as the attributes of power and might, which are traditionally identified as "masculine." Several observers noted that scriptural references to God's "femaleness" are exemplified by the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament, which uses female imagery for the divine.

Ultimately, feminist theology may be a sign of the Holy Spirit's wish to enrich the church, said Judith O'Brien, co-chair of the communications committee of the diocesan Commission on Women and the commission's former chairperson.

"Christian feminism is really going to be one of the engines for transforming the church," she said. "We think we are feeling God's Spirit."

Although feminists are sometimes stereotyped as working against men to advance their own interests, some feminists emphasized that true Christian feminism is an attempt to change the church so that the gifts of all its members can be realized.

"The traditional element of the church sometimes gets threatened by people who get labeled as feminist," Sister DeRycke said, noting, however, that feminism can take various forms. "It doesn't have to be an either/or situation — either I'm humble or bold."

Her words were echoed by Sister Egan, who concluded her talk by saying: "Today, we would call Jesus a feminist, that is, a person who believes in the full personhood and equality of women, and who acts to bring that belief to realization in society and church."

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