

# Catholic Courier

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

VOL. 107 NO.54

THURSDAY, October 10, 1996 75¢

16 PAGES

## Dignity of all is at heart of women's task

In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II wrote, "In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place in thought and action, which is unique and decisive."

"It depends on them to promote a 'new feminism' which rejects the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination,' in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation."

Thus the pope brought to the fore the idea that a "new feminism" may be needed.

More than a year later, women are dealing with just what that term means.

To help delve into the matter, for example, some 250 participants attended a Women and the Culture of Life Conference co-sponsored in May by the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. Helen Alvare of the secretariat later said they discovered that a "new feminism" was already brewing in the Catholic Church.

"What was not a topic for any rancor whatsoever were the subjects of contraception or women priests," she said in an address at the Catholic Press Association convention in Philadelphia May 22. "These hot-button issues aren't all there is to who we are." Rather, for instance, the women expressed being "more radically pro-life than they ever thought" because of the current pro-abortion regime in the United States, coupled with the old feminism, she stated.

However timely the encyclical, its use of the term "feminism" comes at a time when most American women apparently do not want to be identified as feminists, and see feminism as irrelevant, if not negative.

At least that's what more women leaders and writers such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese are saying. In her 1996 book *Feminism Is Not the Story of My Life* Fox-Genovese, a professor at the University of Rochester from 1973 to 1980, and now at Emory University in Atlanta, documents how women today reject being labeled as feminists.

Despite its successes, feminism's most serious failure, she wrote, "lies in many feminists' preference to consider women as independent agents rather than as members of families." A family feminism, rather, would take into account women's rights as well as responsibilities and priorities.

Old feminism, new feminism, original feminism, backlash feminism, modern feminism: As Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, professor of theology at Fordham University, noted, "There are so many varieties of feminism to even begin with."

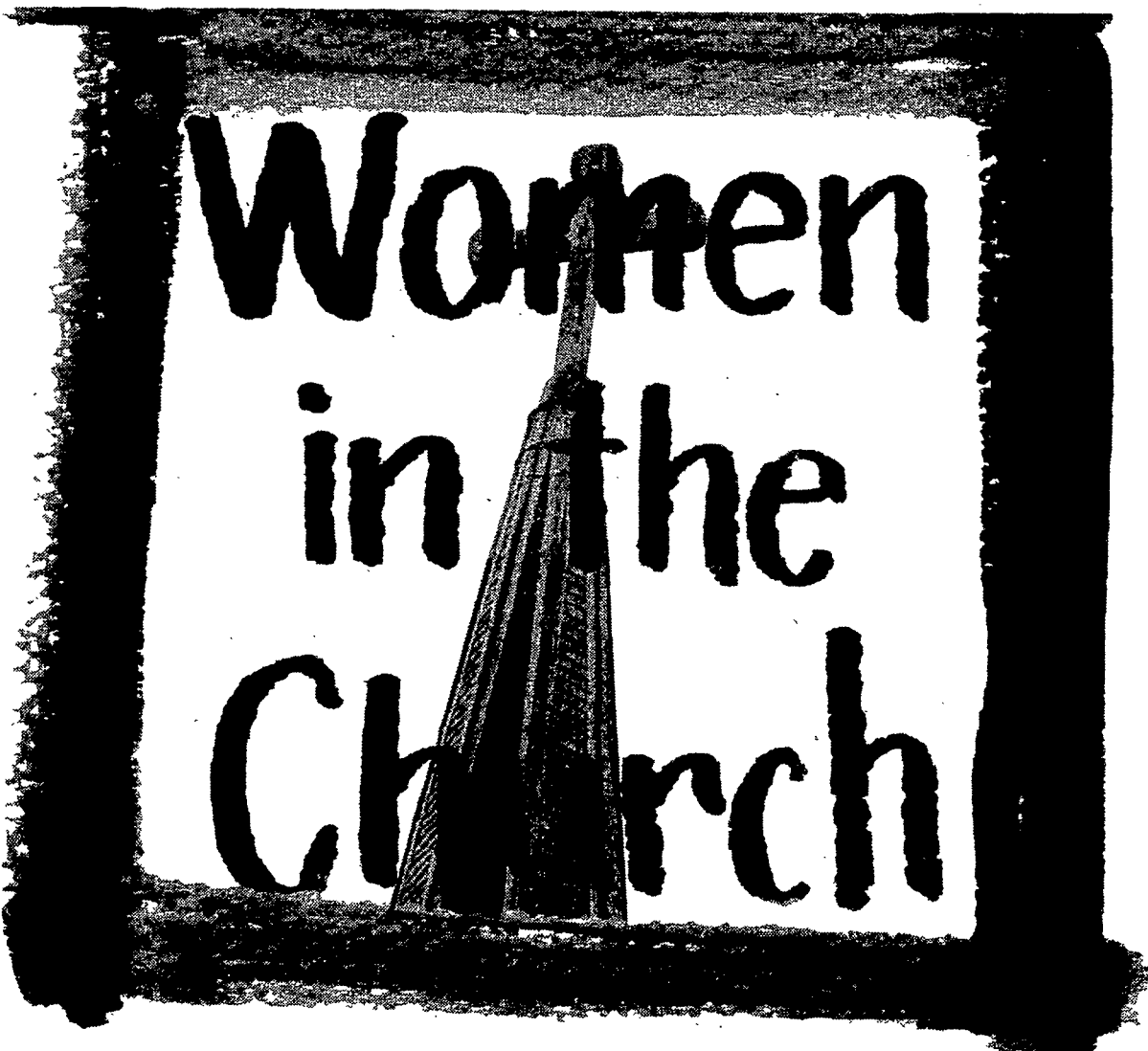
"It is a loaded word for a lot of people. I think it gets in the way of what some of us passionately believe in," agreed Gloria Ulterino.

Uterino, pastoral associate at St. Joseph Church in Livonia, has been named the first diocesan coordinator of the Office of Women in the Church and Society.

Anyone trying to grasp the essence of women's issues, she said, should first realize "there is a whole broad range of thought" and "there are multiple, multiple voices of women."

"The important thing for me is that all the voices be heard," she said. "What is at the depth of all this for me is the dignity of each and every person."

That concern, too, is at the heart of the reinstated Women's Commission, to which Ulterino will be liaison.



Its mission is to support Synod Goal 3, to recognize and value the dignity of women in church and society.

The commission, announced in May, has named four areas of concentration: inclusive language, spirituality, poverty and violence, and women in leadership in church and society.

"We've made a good start," said the commission's chairwoman, Dorothy Lindsay. "We have together committed to a broad vision of women's issues."

"People thought the Women's Commission would be an instant answer to everybody's hopes. The truth is, there is a lot more work that needs to be done," noted Lindsay, a member of St. Charles Borromeo Parish, Greece, and principal of Craig Hill Elementary School.

While some parishes are "champing at the bits" to work on women's issues, others aren't, she said. "All you have to do is read the Synod plans. Some people don't see any problem at all."

She and other commission members have dedicated themselves first to education about women's issues. At the Keuka Days parish support program Aug. 20, Beverly Evans, a teacher at SUNY Geneseo and member of St. Mary's Parish in Geneseo, talked about how language — and translations, whether correct or incorrect — shape our understanding. Christine Bochen, chair of Nazareth College's religious studies department, spoke of the rich and wide-ranging metaphors for God used throughout history. Pat Brewster, co-administrator of Holy Trinity Monastery in Hornell, addressed self-image and how language affects it.

Members will issue bulletin inserts next year in hopes of raising awareness of violence and poverty's effects on women; and the importance of language that is inclusive, meaning that it avoids excluding, demeaning or stereotyping anyone not only according to gender, but also to such qualities as race, social status, and disability. They're also developing guidelines for parishes on dealing with women's issues.

Such interests have been a part of feminist theology for years, according to Sister Johnson, the 1995 president of the Catholic Theological Society of America. On sabbatical from Fordham, she will give Colgate Rochester Divinity School's Rauschenbusch lectures and a colloquy Oct. 22-23.

Continued on page 14

Story

by

Kathleen

Schwar

Photograph

by

Matthew

Scott