

4. Friend, sister and spouse

A fourth aspect of the *feminine genius* is woman's unique contribution to interpersonal relationships with men. Pope John Paul II writes: "Humanity... can exist only as a 'unity of the two', and therefore in relation to another human person. It is a question here of a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man."²⁴

In Genesis 2:18, Eve is described "as a help-mate fitting for man." She was not created to be a nurse maid, servant or appendage to man, though this is a common misunderstanding of the text. She is a lively counter-weight and a helpful collaborator, a co-worker and partner in the "making and doing" which God calls forth in humanity.

The biblical notion of a "shared bone" means that man and woman are firstly of the same "kin" – they must respect each other's differences with the mutual and enriching love of brother and sister, not as alien competing forces or conquering powers.

Women as friends, sisters and colleagues of men give and receive what Pope John Paul II calls "co-education" in ways that are richer and also more challenging than occurs in same-sex friendships.

Dietrich von Hildebrand, a great Catholic philosopher of the person, speaks of the dynamic of male and female friendships. Because there is a deeply spiritual and personal difference between them, he says, "... a woman will never be as deeply understood by a woman as she could be understood by a man; a man will never be as deeply understood by a man as he could be by a woman."²⁵

There are numerous examples of this edifying and encouraging role of women. Pope John Paul writes: "The women whom Jesus met and who received so many graces from him, also accompanied him as he journeyed with the Apostles through the towns and villages, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God; and they 'provided for them out of their means'. The Gospel names Joanna, who was the wife of Herod's steward, Susanna and 'many others'" (cf. Lk 8:1-3).²⁶

Great reforms in the history of the Church have often come from the mutually invigorating vision and talents of holy men and women friends, among them Saints Clare and Francis, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Macrina and her brothers Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, Mary MacKillop and Fr Julian Tennison Woods, etc.

According to John Paul II, man and woman not only find themselves as companions but they also long "to go out of themselves" towards each other in the "spousal meaning of their bodies."²⁷

In marriage, women and men give themselves in a sexual love which is spousal and familial. In so doing, their "one flesh communion" becomes a unique icon of the "family" that is the Blessed Trinity: "They are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life."²⁸

In her awareness of the need for support, maturity, reliability and selfless love, a woman listens to her *feminine genius* and will not be prepared to give her whole self – including her powers of service, fertility or feminine creativity – until she finds a man who is prepared to engage in "co-education" for this great mission. Pope John Paul II writes: "It is the woman who 'pays' directly for this shared generation, which literally absorbs the energies of her body and soul. It is therefore necessary that the man be fully aware that in their shared parenthood he owes a special debt to the woman. No programme of 'equal rights' between women and men is valid unless it takes this fact fully into account."²⁹

Unfortunately, many women today are deaf to their maternal/spousal genius and do not demand sexual or maternal respect from men. They believe there is no inherent "meaning" to sexual relationships other than satisfaction, convenience and a fragile type of loving companionship in which pregnancy and fertility are problematic.

The new feminism is marked by a concern to re-value the place of the *feminine genius* for the home, marriage and the family, and the development of good fathers at every level of society.



Mary, model of the *feminine genius*

The fullness of the *feminine genius* is realised in the life of the Virgin Mary. Pope John Paul II writes: "In Mary, Eve discovers the nature of the true dignity of woman, of feminine humanity. This discovery must continually reach the heart of every woman and shape her vocation and her life."³⁰

Mary, in an outstanding and shining way, received her womanhood as a gift along with its transformation through God's redeeming grace in self-giving "spousal" and "maternal" intimacy with Christ.

Edith Stein encourages us to re-discover in the pages of Scripture and in the riches of our tradition the prophetic shape of Mary's *feminine genius*. Mary, our Mother in faith, is God's valiant woman – a "sign from heaven" for men and women, hospitable to salvation, radiant in her strength and

daring, unfailing in her discipleship, self-giving in her maternity, blessed in her faith and eloquent in her contemplative silence. She is our model and also our help. May she guide us and pray for us.

Anna Krohn is an Adjunct Lecturer and Tutor at the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family in Melbourne, the Convenor of the Anima Women's Network Inc., and the Co-ordinator of the Caroline Chisholm Library, Melbourne.

²⁴Mulieris Dignitatem, 7

²⁵"Friendship between men and women" in his *Man, Woman and the Meaning of Love*, p. 109

²⁶Pope John Paul II, *Ibid.*

²⁷Theology of the Body, 15:1-5

²⁸Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7

²⁹*Ibid.* 15

³⁰*Ibid.*

Questions for discussion

1. What struck you most about this article?
2. What do you think should be some characteristics of the "new feminism"?
3. Which of the four aspects of the *feminine genius* mentioned in the article do you think especially important? Can you think of any others that are not mentioned?
4. Which women, from the past or the present, do you think especially embody the *feminine genius*?

Further Reading

Genevieve Kineke, *The Authentic Catholic Woman*, Servant Books 2006

Edith Stein, *Edith Stein – Woman, Essays on Woman*, ICS 1996

Edith Stein, *Essential Writings*, Orbis 2002

Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein – A Biography*, Ignatius 1992

Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue*, Free Press 2000

Joan Carroll Cruz, *Saintly Women of Modern Times*, OSV 2004

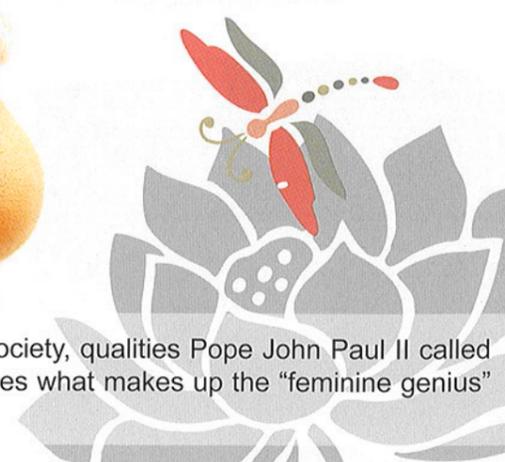
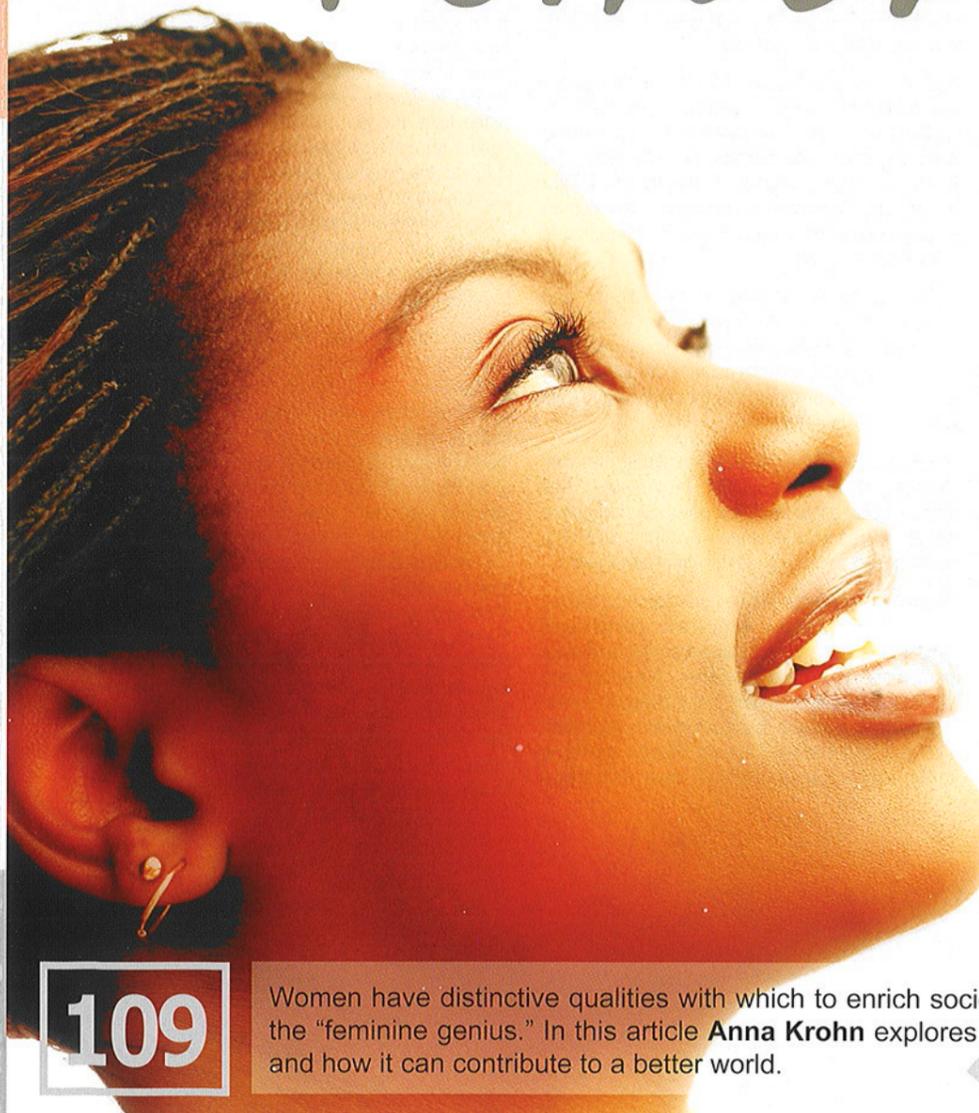
Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 29 June 1995

- Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15 August 1988

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The Feminine Genius



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Women have distinctive qualities with which to enrich society, qualities Pope John Paul II called the "feminine genius." In this article **Anna Krohn** explores what makes up the "feminine genius" and how it can contribute to a better world.

The call for a “new feminism”

Most of us are familiar with popular phrases such as “a woman’s touch” or “a feminine eye”. Can we really speak about a list of universal “womanly” characteristics or roles without diminishing the mystery of each actual and individual woman?

Pope John Paul II, a great champion of the cause of women, has warned: “Yet how many women have been and continue to be valued more for their physical appearance than for their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity; in a word, the very dignity of their being!”¹

He has also written: “Women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and this has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity.”²

Pope John Paul was broadly sympathetic³ with feminist concerns about the “exploitation, discrimination and violence”⁴ against women. He nonetheless questioned the assumptions and the effects of the secular feminist movements.⁵

In the struggle to promote women’s rights, opportunities, equality, and social standing, many contemporary feminisms become polarised at two opposite extremes.

At one pole, the liberal and socialist feminisms deny the inherent or essential differences between the sexes. They promote either a uni-sexed or a competitively “masculine” ideal for women. Most liberal feminists argue that in order to achieve an equal footing for women with men in education, employment, political expression and recognition, women must also have “fundamental” rights to abortion, contraception, pornography and reproductive technology.

At the other pole are radically “separatist” feminisms which argue that men are so substantially different and at odds with women’s interests that all “man-made” cultural, religious and intellectual traditions and structures must be rejected. These radical feminisms are also deeply suspicious of traditional male-female relationships such as exist within marriage, religious life and the family.

Apart from the fact that these feminist approaches are in obvious conflict with Catholic tradition and moral teaching, they have often overlooked what is distinctly feminine. Pia de Solenni writes: “In an effort to recognise the dignity of woman, we have tried to detach her from traditions which we thought were detrimental to her dignity. The effect has been that, more often than not, a woman has been kept within the confines of male perspective. What is particularly feminine remains unexplored.”⁶

This echoes Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), where he exhorted women of faith to acknowledge and affirm that which grounds and inspires “what is particularly feminine”, calling this “the true genius of women.”⁷

Pope John Paul expressed confidence that it would be Catholic women and their sisters who would uncover their *feminine genius* and develop an alternative “new feminism which will transform cultures so that they are truly life-affirming, fully humane and receptive to God’s guidance.”⁸

Many outstanding women of different ages, gifts and cultures are today associated with the unfolding international project of the “new feminism”, among them Mary Ann Glendon, Mary Shivanandan, Pia de Solenni, Sr Prudence Allen, Janet A. Smith, Michele Schumacher, Leonie Caldecott, Wanda Poltawska, Janne Haaland-Matlary and many others.

What is the *feminine genius*?

John Paul II became aware of the need for a “new feminism” and of the notion of the *feminine genius* by reflecting on three sources of his academic work and his pastoral experience: a) his extensive philosophy of human love, expressed particularly in his early book *Love and Responsibility*; b) his theological reflections on God’s original plan for man and woman, now known as *The Theology of the Body*; and c) the writings on the dignity and vocation of women by St Edith Stein, otherwise known as Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (1891-1942), a German philosopher, Carmelite nun, and martyr in Auschwitz.⁹

Both the Pope and Edith Stein wanted to explore the reality of women, avoiding a simplistic or “naturalistic” view, especially when describing qualities which are present in both men and women in varying degrees. In the words of Pope John Paul, “Womanhood expresses the human just as much as manhood does but in different and complementary ways.”¹⁰

In developing her idea of a “true dignity and capacity” of woman, Edith Stein believed that the shape of feminine inspiration is uniquely related to woman’s physical, spiritual and emotional *maternal capacity*, quite apart from whether the woman ever conceives or bears a child.

Pope John Paul II too affirmed the intimate maternal dynamic of woman’s interior experience: “This indescribable experience is a privilege of mothers, but all women have in some way an intuition of it, predisposed as they are to this miraculous gift.”¹¹

The *feminine genius* can be understood as the full and authentic spiritual, ethical and interpersonal response to the given of being a particular female person, a physical, emotional, historical and spiritual whole. It is present in the heart of woman like a seed. It needs to be respected, nourished and allowed to develop in each woman according to her talents, personality and, most importantly,

“Therefore the Church gives thanks for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community... for “perfect” women and for “weak” women – for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity.” Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*, 31.



according to her free response.

Her genius can be overlooked or suppressed when a woman is wounded by damaging conditions or human actions, or due to her own moral or personal failings. Women, just like men, are in need of Christ’s Redemption.

Pope John Paul II describes how women who have been involved in sin and then encounter Jesus, respond as truly feminine disciples: “Christ speaks to women about the things of God, and they understand them; there is a true resonance of mind and heart, a response of faith. Jesus expresses appreciation and admiration for this distinctly ‘feminine’ response, as in the case of the Canaanite woman (cf. Mt 15:28). Sometimes he presents this lively faith, filled with love, as an example... This is the case with the ‘sinful’ woman in the Pharisee’s house, whose way of acting is taken by Jesus as the starting-point for explaining the truth about the forgiveness of sins: ‘Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little’” (Lk 7:47).¹²

In its truest sense, *feminine genius* is revealed when God’s own work of creation and healing bears fruit in holiness. It radiates particularly brightly in diverse ways through the holy women of the faith: the girl martyrs Cecilia, Agatha and Agatha Kim, the ex-courtesans Pelagia and Mary of Egypt, the prophetic military leader Joan of Arc, the reforming Queens Margaret and Elizabeth of Hungary, the great Doctors of the Church Catherine of Siena and Teresa of Avila, the heroic mothers Gianna Beretta Molla and Margaret Clitherow and countless others.

In this regard Pope John Paul writes: “The Church gives thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine ‘genius’ which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity; she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness. The Church asks at the same time that these invaluable ‘manifestations of the Spirit’ (cf. 1 Cor 12:4 ff.), which with great generosity are poured forth upon the ‘daughters’ of the eternal Jerusalem, may be attentively recognised and appreciated so that they may return for the common good of the Church and of humanity, especially in our times. Meditating on the biblical mystery of the ‘woman’, the Church prays that in this mystery all women may discover themselves and their ‘supreme vocation’.”¹³

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Some aspects of the *feminine genius*

While, it is difficult to make a list of universal feminine qualities without diminishing the mystery of each individual woman, we can consider here four such characteristics of greater importance.

1. Strength and conviction of a woman’s own dignity

Edith Stein describes a first element of *feminine genius* – the conviction with which a woman acknowledges her own unique dignity and vocation, and is true to herself and her own “unrepeatable” humanity: “But especially needed are faith in one’s own being and courage regarding it, as well as faith in one’s individual calling to definite personal activities and a ready willingness to follow this call.”¹⁴

Pope John Paul agrees. Each woman, like Adam in the garden, must realise her “original solitude”, her “self-knowledge [which] goes hand in hand with knowledge of the world”... and with it an experience of her own distinctiveness and the meaning “of [her] own bodiliness”¹⁵ before God. While it is good for her to serve others, a woman’s *feminine genius* will recognise her individual gifts and talents in an integrated way, hence the importance of developing her intellectual powers, nourishing her moral character and her spiritual life.

Many women today have lost confidence in the deep mystery and preciousness of their lives before God. Despite the gains of feminism, some live in dependent and abusive relationships and have to put up with sexual exploitation both of themselves and of others. They have been encouraged to expose themselves both emotionally and physically in order to “please” the gaze of the market and workplace and the desires of predatory men.

In light of the *feminine genius*, moral truth and modesty are not priggish or life-denying, but rather virtues which ensure women’s empowerment and personal integrity.¹⁶

2. Particular awareness of the “other” person: empathy

Many secular feminist scholars acknowledge that women seem more aware of and connected to the emotional dynamics of human relationships than men. That the consciousness of women tends to be more global, their perceptions more multidimensional and their attention more flexible is also recognised by the human sciences. Well-known writers such as Carol Gilligan broadly define this as women’s “care thinking.”

Edith Stein studied “empathy” and identified it with women’s maternally-patterned insight: “Woman naturally seeks to embrace what is living, personal and whole. To cherish, guard, protect, nourish and advance growth is her natural and maternal yearning.”¹⁷

She believed that all professions and social roles could be open to women and said that women bring their concern for the “concrete person” and the “personal” to the workplace as “a blessed counter-balance, precisely here where everyone is in danger of becoming mechanised and losing his humanity.”¹⁸

She believed that women were drawn to person-centred professions because they could see in them the importance of growing, healing and educating.

Pope John Paul II thought that this “person-centred orientation” in women’s genius could prove prophetic in promoting a “culture of life” and a “culture of peace”: “In our own time, the successes of science and technology make it possible to attain material well-being to a degree hitherto unknown. While this favours some, it pushes others to the edges of society... Our time in particular awaits the manifestation of that ‘genius’ which belongs to women, and which can ensure sensitivity for human beings in every circumstance: because they are human! – and because ‘the greatest of these is love’” (cf. 1 Cor 13:13).¹⁹

If feminine empathy can promote a “culture of life”, the attack on life through abortion is completely at odds with this empathy. When in the name of personal freedom or under the pressure of de-personalised relationships “a woman views a developing human being as simply a piece of material, she reduces the fetus to a ‘what’ or ‘thing’, instead of a developing ‘someone’ worthy of love,”²⁰ and she loses not only a child but something vital in herself.

It is particularly tragic that many secular feminists who argue for a more empathetic and person-centred culture cannot see the damage that induced abortion leaves behind in the hearts and lives of women. It is a contradiction of which the “new feminism” is compassionately and imaginatively aware.

3. Creators of environs

Edith Stein saw that, in addition to having a gift for acute awareness of other people, women were also adept at creating receptive “spaces” in which people, especially vulnerable people, could flourish. She identified this as a type of high hospitality to “civilisation” – to spiritual, moral and aesthetic development. She wrote: “Part of the natural feminine concern for the right development of the beings surrounding her involves the creation of an ambience of order and beauty conducive to their development.”²¹

This aspect of the *feminine genius* inspired Australia’s Caroline Chisholm in the 19th century.

Recognising that the large number of men without women or families led to the brutalisation of the young colony, she worked to create a more humane environment.

This gift for creating “ambience” has also been used against women to relegate their presence and creativity to either the prettified and “decorative” on one hand or to seductively air-brushed glamour on the other. Pope John Paul II wrote: “I think particularly of those women who loved culture and art, and devoted their lives to them in spite of the fact that they were frequently at a disadvantage from the start, excluded from educational opportunities, underestimated, ignored and not given credit for their intellectual contributions.”²²

Unfortunately, in the interests of economic survival or social involvement and in a culture dominated by functional, disposable and rationalistic world views, women today often have little time or space in which to enjoy or share their creative or cultural gifts.

Edith Stein wrote about the importance of the “cultivation of beautiful religious custom initiated with love and care” and deep liturgical intelligence. She saw that women had gifts with which to enliven and deepen Christian culture – to enrich the altars, liturgical music, festivities and presentations of the “mysteries of the faith.”²³

Jesus’ attitude is clear: “Why do you trouble this woman? For she has done a beautiful thing to me... In pouring this ointment on my body she has done it to prepare me for burial. Truly, I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.” (Mt 26: 6-13)

¹Letter to Women, 3.2

²Ibid., 3

³Cf. *Ibid.*, 6. The Pope describes the conscious “liberation” of women as complicated and sometimes mistaken, but “substantially a positive” movement which is as yet unfinished.

⁴Pope John Paul II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 99

⁵It is now widely acknowledged that there is not one single feminist school or position but a diverse and complex world of feminisms.

⁶Pia Francesca De Solenni, *Towards an Understanding of Woman as Imago Dei* (Universita della Santa Croce: Rome 2003), p. 12

⁷Pope John Paul II, Enc. *Evangelium Vitae*, 99

⁸Ibid.

⁹St Teresa Benedicta had in common with Pope John Paul II a philosophical training in phenomenology, a study of the work of St Thomas Aquinas and a Carmelite spirituality.

¹⁰Letter to Women, 7

¹¹Pope John Paul II, Angelus reflection “The Vocation to Motherhood”, 1

¹²John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 15

¹³Ibid., 31

¹⁴Edith Stein, “Problems of Women’s Education” in *Essays on Woman*, p. 193

¹⁵*Man and Woman He Created Them: a Theology of the Body* (2006), pp. 151-52

¹⁶This is the premise of Wendy Shalit’s *Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (2000)

¹⁷“Ethos of Women’s Profession” in *Essays on Women*, p. 48.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30

²⁰Prudence Allen, “Can Feminism be Humanism?” in *Woman in Christ*, p. 281

²¹“Vocations of Men and Women” in *Essays on Woman*, p. 77

²²Letter to Women, 3.2

²³Cf. “Church, Women and Youth” in *Essays on Woman*, p. 237

