

Women as agents of change

Leela Ramdeen, Chair, CCSJ

(delivered at Women of Grace session on Saturday 30 May 2015. Bernadette Patrick is the Caribbean Regional Coordinator of this programme which is the initiative of Johnnette Bnkovic, St Petersburg, USA).

Good afternoon, my sisters and brothers. It is a pleasure to be able to share with you a few words on the theme: *Women as agents of change*. Congratulations on completing the Women of Grace Foundational Study Series, *Full of Grace: Women and the Abundant Life!* Now you can use the knowledge gained to build the common good.

There is a saying: If you think you are too small to make a difference in the world, just lock yourself in a room with a mosquito! You and I may seem small in our huge universe, but we can and must make a difference if we are to be credible witnesses of Christ.

Pope Francis has been condemning global indifference to the pain and suffering of others. The Holy Father told us in his Lenten Message this year: “Usually, when we are healthy and comfortable, we forget about others (something God the Father never does): we are unconcerned with their problems, their sufferings and the injustices they endure... Our heart grows cold...how greatly I desire that all those places where the Church is present, especially our parishes and our communities, may become islands of mercy in the midst of the sea of indifference!”

He reminds us that “A merciful heart does not mean a weak heart. Anyone who wishes to be merciful must have a strong and steadfast heart, closed to the tempter but open to God. A heart which lets itself be pierced by the Spirit so as to bring love along the roads that lead to our brothers and sisters...”

I share with you a copy of CCSJ’s Newsletter which contains a summary of Pope Francis’ Papal Bull of Indiction – The face of Mercy. It proclaims the Jubilee Year of Mercy which will commence on Dec 8 2015 and conclude on Nov 20 2006. Pope Francis sees this as a way for the Church to “make more evident its mission to be a witness of mercy.”

In a world in which millions are suffering as a result of poverty, wars, social exclusion, human trafficking, slavery etc., too many people are showing no care or concern – they are apathetic. Our silence/inaction could make us complicit to the various forms of injustice that threaten to overwhelm us. We have a duty, as Catholics, to SEE, JUDGE, and ACT; to be living witnesses to our Faith. Let us move out of our comfort zone and promote a culture of life and solidarity. May the “voice of the prophets...cry out and trouble our conscience.”

In Isaiah 6:8 we read: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying: Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?” I answered, “Here I am, send me.

Are you ready to be sent into the world to bring Christ’s light to dispel the darkness that threatens to overwhelm us? Am I speaking to a Eucharistic people? Am I speaking to people of the Beatitudes? At the end of your study series, Women of Grace Foundational Study series by the author, Johnnette Benkovic, drawn from the teachings of our Church and from Sacred Scripture, I know that you are 'raring' to go out and continue to spread the Good News!

(The topics covered were

1. The Special Call and Gift of Women.
2. Prayer, Strength of the Abundant Life.
3. Praise and Petition, Thanksgiving and Contrition: Symphony of the Abundant Life.
4. Obedience, Power for the Abundant Life.
5. Wisdom, Vision for the Abundant Life.
6. Eucharist, Heart of the Abundant Life
7. Resurrection, Made New for the Abundant Life.
8. Carrying Out the Mission, Embracing the Abundant Life).

*** If we are truly a Eucharistic people, a people of the Beatitudes, “*the salt of the earth...and light of the world*” (Matthew 5:13-16); evangelisers of our time, we will listen to what God is telling us to do and act on it. Remember the words of Psalm 85:

“I am listening. What is Yahweh saying? What God is saying means peace for his people, for his friends, if only they renounce their folly...”

A long time ago I recognised that in today's world in which folly abounds, we women must play our part to help humanity live as God intended. God created order in the universe that He created, but we are so 'own way' that we have shattered this order in many ways. He is calling on us today, now, to use our feminine genius to reverse this destructive trend and to restore order. As women, God is calling us to participate in and help to shape/bring Gospel values to every aspect of life: social, political, economic, and cultural.

I have recently returned from Rome where I attended a 3-day International Conference organised by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, of which Cardinal Peter Turkson is President, in cooperation with the World Union of Women's Catholic Organisations and the World Women's Alliance for Life and Family. The theme of the Conference was: "Women and the post-2015 development agenda: the challenges of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)." This International Conference follows one held in 2009 on the theme: "Life, family and development: the role of women in the promotion of human rights". I had also attended that Conference.

Before the Conference, it was reported that Cardinal Turkson said that this 2nd International Conference on Women will be "an occasion to debate on many old and new forms of slavery and violence suffered by women, with different facets in the different parts of the world." He noted that while in the Western world domestic violence prevails and episodes of so-called 'femicides' grow, in some poorer areas of developing countries instead "infanticides of girls and selective abortions of female fetuses are numerous." Although important progress had been made in favour of women's causes in several countries, "there is still much to be done," said the Cardinal.

We received the following words of encouragement Pope Francis as the Conference opened on 22 May 2015. These words are of importance to each of us here today as they clearly outline some of the areas in which we should be involved as agents of change – locally and globally. He said:

"I was pleased to learn of this timely initiative, which highlights the concerns of Catholic women's organizations in the international discussions leading to the drafting of a new Post-2015 Development Agenda at the level of the United Nations. Many women and men wish to contribute to this Agenda, as they work to defend and promote life, and to combat the poverty, the forms of enslavement and the many injustices which women of all ages, and throughout the world, too often experience.

“Women face a variety of challenges and difficulties in various parts of the world. In the West, at times they still experience discrimination in the workplace; they are often forced to choose between work and family; they not infrequently suffer violence in their lives as fiancées, wives, mothers, sisters and grandmothers. In poor and developing countries, women bear the heaviest burdens: it is they who travel many miles in search of water, who too often die in childbirth, who are kidnapped for sexual exploitation or forced into marriages at a young age or against their will. At times they are even denied the right to life simply for being female. All of these problems are reflected in the proposals for the Post-2015 Development Agenda presently being discussed in the United Nations.

“Issues relating to life are intrinsically connected to social questions. When we defend the right to life, we do so in order that each life – from conception to its natural end – may be a *dignified life*, one free from the scourge of hunger and poverty, of violence and persecution. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, highlighted how the Church ‘forcefully maintains this link between life ethics and social ethics, fully aware that a society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized’ (No. 15).

“I encourage you, who are engaged in defending the dignity of women and promoting their rights, to allow yourselves to be constantly guided by the spirit of humanity and compassion in the service of your neighbour. May your work be marked first and foremost by professional competence, without self-interest or superficial activism, but with generous dedication. In this way you will manifest the countless God-given gifts which women have to offer, encouraging others to promote sensitivity, understanding and dialogue in settling conflicts big and small, in healing wounds, in nurturing all life at every level of society, and in embodying the mercy and tenderness which bring reconciliation and unity to our world. **All this is part of that ‘feminine genius’ of which our society stands in such great need.**”

In his 2013 apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The joy of the Gospel* - on the Church's primary mission of evangelization in the modern world), Pope Francis stated:

"The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess. I think, for example, of the special concern which women show to others, which finds a particular, even if not exclusive, expression in motherhood. I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because "the *feminine genius* is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace" and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures (103).

What does the Church mean by '**feminine genius**'? In March, the Holy Father, in addressing an international audience of men and women religious, reminded those gathered that it is important to ensure that women have a voice and are listened to, he said, because the Church needs their specific contributions.

"When we men are dealing with a problem, we arrive at a conclusion, but if we deal with the same problem along with women, the conclusion could be different. It could lead along the same path, but would be richer, stronger, more intuitive," he said. "Women in the Church must have this role," because the Church needs "the feminine genius".

There are 2 documents which you should read – both written by Pope St John Paul II's. The first is his landmark apostolic letter for women, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (*On the Dignity and Vocation of Women* (August 1988). As one writer says, in this letter he introduced the concept of 'feminine genius', which began "a quiet revolution of a new feminism characterized by an integration of gospel values." In 1995 he wrote a *Letter to Women* in which he said: "Thank you, *every woman*, for the simple fact of being *a woman!* Through the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world's understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic." He goes on to say:

and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration. He ended his letter by praying: "May Mary, Queen of Love, watch over women and their mission in service of humanity, of peace, of the spread of God's Kingdom!"

On Oct 12 2013, on the Commemoration of the 25th anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope Francis said: "Woman has a particular sensitivity to the 'things of God', above all in helping us understand the mercy, tenderness and love that God has for us. I also like to think of the church not as an 'it' but as a 'she'. The Church is woman, she is mother, and this is beautiful. You must consider and go deeper into this." And at a press conference on July 28, 2013, he said: "A Church without women is like the college of the Apostles without Mary. The role of women in the Church is not simply that of maternity, being mothers, but much greater; it is precisely to be the icon of the Virgin...what helps make the Church grow!"

At a Press Conference on July 28, 2013, he said: "...I believe that we have much more to do in making explicit this role and charisma of women in the church...We need to develop a profound theology of womanhood."

At the Conference in Rome I met over 100 women whose experiences as agents of change are truly inspirational. Indeed, their stories strengthened my resolve to work more diligently in the Lord's vineyard to build His Kingdom of justice, truth, love, freedom and forgiveness - the pillars of peace.

In his 1963 encyclical, Peace on Earth, Pope John XXIII stated that there are four pillars of peace: truth, justice, love and freedom. In his Message for World Day of Peace in January 2002, Pope St John Paul II added another 'pillar': 'forgiveness'. He said: 'My reasoned conviction, confirmed in turn by biblical revelation, is that the shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness. The pillars of true peace are justice and that form of love which is forgiveness.'

In his Peace Message for 2003, Pope John Paul II said that:

“Truth will build peace if every individual sincerely acknowledges not only his/her rights, but also his/her own duties toward others.

Justice will build peace if in practice everyone respects the rights of others and actually fulfills his/her duties toward them.

Love will build peace if people feel the needs of others as their own and share what they have with others, especially the values of mind and spirit that they possess.

Freedom will build peace and make it thrive if, in the choice of the means to that end, people act according to reason and assume responsibility for their own actions...peace lies in the defense and promotion of basic human rights, which every human being enjoys, not as a benefit given by a different social class or conceded by the state, but simply because of our humanity.”

I am sure you realise that being change agents is not an easy task. You will face many challenges. You need to cover yourself with the blood of Christ for this important work. The Eucharist, our scriptures, the social doctrine of our Church and prayer will nourish you on your journey. Immerse yourself in constant prayer. As St Magdalene of Canossa said: “Prayer is the exercise by which the soul draws close to the Lord. By thus learning to know him in some way, the soul becomes ever more disposed, and enkindled with the desire to love Him.”

Magdalene (1774-1835) was the foundress of the Canossian Family of Daughters and Sons of Charity.

Our social ministry must be anchored in prayer where we uncover the depths of God’s call to seek justice and pursue peace. Prayer helps believers to apply their faith to everyday situations. People of faith have a duty to be in communion with God by prayer. We must find space for God, and nourish our own spiritual life by giving time to God daily. We must pray for a conversion of hearts because true justice and peace can be a matter of policy only if it is first a matter of the heart. Let us open our hearts to conversion to truly love one another as God loves us.

We must not underestimate the power of prayer in our efforts to transform the world. But remember, social justice is more than just prayer. As the late Cardinal Hume said: “the deepening of the spiritual life must go hand in hand with practical concern for our neighbour, and thus with social action.” Today, the social mission and message of people of faith in our region are more important than ever, and we must share these with credibility and integrity.

And if we truly love Jesus, we will see Him in the faces of our neighbours and respond in love to their needs. In *Communities of Salt and Light*, 1993, the U.S. Bishops stated: “...our faith is profoundly social. We cannot be called truly ‘Catholic’ unless we hear and heed the Church's call to serve those in need and work for justice and peace.” And in their 1998 document, *Everyday Christianity*:

To Hunger and Thirst for Justice, they said: “Catholicism does not call us to abandon the world, but to help shape it. This does not mean leaving worldly tasks and responsibilities, but transforming them.”

In Proverbs 29:18 we read: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” The Catholic Church has a vision and a mission to assist us in meeting our social obligations. Too often we shout about our 'rights', forgetting that with rights come 'responsibilities.' We have a responsibility as Catholics to strive to transform our communities and our world to reflect Gospel values. This means that we must walk with 2 feet of Christian service: Works of mercy and Works of social action.

Pope Pius XI said in *Divini Redemptoris* (1937): "Charity will never be true charity unless it takes justice into account...Let no one attempt with small gifts of charity to exempt themselves from the great duties imposed by justice."

This is linked to the saying: Give a man/woman a fish, feed him for a day; teach him how to fish, feed him for life." Being agents of change means being prepared to work to develop a culture of volunteerism - we need mentors, role models, advocates - we must speak out for the voiceless and, where necessary, empower others so that they can realise their potential. Our country and our world need healing. We must strive to change systems, structures, institutions and public policies that are at the root causes of injustice - such as poverty and social injustice. On the last day we will be asked: "How well did you love?" Love of God and neighbour requires us to see through the lens of Christ. Are we feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and afflicted, and comforting/standing up for the victims of injustice? (Matthew 25:31-46).

In a world in which selfishness and individualism are rampant, we must keep to the forefront of our minds the words of our former Archbishop Edward Gilbert who reminded us over and over that we must move from a vertical relationship with God to a horizontal relationship with our neighbour. Inter alia, he said: “We must begin trying to reclaim the nation. The first step in the reclaiming process is to concentrate on values and recommit to virtuous living...The good people have to work hard together to build a society on values/virtuous living. They must give to the young an experience of living with values and virtues.”

Vatican II stressed the need for the Catholic Church to stand in solidarity with the whole human family: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ.”(Lumen Gentium).

We are one human family. Our responsibilities to each other cross national, racial, economic and ideological differences. Learning to practise the virtue of solidarity means learning that 'loving our neighbour' has global dimensions in an interdependent world.

Our Church tells us that solidarity means the willingness to see others as another 'self' and so to regard injustice committed against another as no less serious than an injustice against one's self. As agents of change, we must stand in solidarity with people everywhere. Ask yourself: What can I do to promote the dignity of those who live on the margins, those on low incomes; the unemployed, the differently abled, the sick or infirm, the homeless or poorly housed; those in prison or who are otherwise vulnerable; the voiceless and the powerless; the 4,000 or so youths who drop out of secondary school in TT each year; the parents who can't afford to pay for transport to enable their children to go to school to access free education; the lonely elderly persons who yearn for human contact; the young men who have lost their way and are killing each other with impunity?

We will achieve our mission as agents of change if we stand in solidarity with each other to:

- protect and promote the sanctity of life and the dignity of each human person;
- promote integral human development (the development of all dimensions of a person and of each person);
- act as advocates for the poor and vulnerable, including our children, the differently-abled, and senior citizens;
- strengthen family life, build community and the common good;
- promote human rights and meet our responsibilities;
- promote economic justice e.g. by ensuring that the economy works for the people;
- promote participation in the economic, political, social and cultural life of society;
- build a nation/world in which truth, justice, love, freedom and forgiveness – the pillars of peace, become a reality.

- be good stewards of God's creation by promoting environmental/ecological justice:

recognising that the gifts of the earth that God has given to us is for all to share – including future generations. (Look out for the forthcoming Encyclical by Pope Francis on the Environment and Human Ecology. In 1989 St Pope John Paul II highlighted the fact that: “The ecological crisis is a moral issue.” Pope Emeritus Benedict had warned in July 2007: “Our earth speaks to us, and we must listen if we want to survive.” He later urged us “to respect the ecology of nature, if we are not to cause serious harm to the world which future generations will receive from us.”

Read his World Day of Peace message on January 1, 2010 to understand more about the relationship between God, humanity and creation. It is entitled: “If you want to cultivate peace, protect creation.” Our own AEC Bishops produced a Pastoral Letter in 2005, *Caring for the earth – Our responsibility: An invitation to reflection*, in which they called for a “conversion towards a different lifestyle, a different way of thinking and behaving” to protect our planet.

I wish to share a few examples of women I have known who have been agents of change -

1. Give example of group of Catholic women who worked with me in Haringey to organise 'Adopt a Grandad or Grandma' - inter-generational contact - after old lady died and lay dead for more than 4 months in her flat before her body was discovered.

2. The late Maureen Arneaud, who, at one stage, worked as CCSJ's Parish Link Coordinator - outline some of her work e.g. at St Theresa's Woodbrook: parishioners going from house to house in the street in which they live - asking if their neighbours needed any assistance - see woman who needed 3 front steps. And also her work with Sr Annette in the Southern Vicariate - agricultural project and raising funds to build toilet for woman who needed an inside toilet. Also see her work on SJF - working with at-risk youths in rural areas.

3. Read about how Liberian women (Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace) showed resilience and determination in working to end Liberia's second Civil War

http://www.academia.edu/8630895/Women_in_Peace_Building_Study_case_Liberia

Go forth, my dear friends, as agents of change; as true witnesses to Christ. And don't be daunted by the extent of work to be done. Let us remember that no one can do everything, but everyone can do something. As Mother Teresa says: "What you can do, I can't do and what I can do, you can't do, but together, we can do something beautiful for God."

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to open our hearts and help us to discern how we can respond to the multiple cries for justice in our land and in our world.

What does the Catholic Church mean by 'feminine genius'?

Some notes from Leela Ramdeen, Chair, Catholic Commission for Social Justice

On 16 May 2015, the UK's Catholic Herald reported that Pope Francis said during an audience with an international group of men and women religious working in the Diocese of Rome that: "Women should be promoted." But assigning a certain number of women to leadership positions is "simply functionalism," he said. What is important is to ensure that women have a voice and are listened to, he said, because the Church needs their specific contributions. He continued saying:

"When we men are dealing with a problem, we arrive at a conclusion, but if we deal with the same problem along with women, the conclusion could be different. It could lead along the same path, but would be richer, stronger, more intuitive," he said. "Women in the Church must have this role," because the Church needs "**the feminine genius**".

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In his message to the women who attended the 2nd International Conference on Women and the Post-2015 Development Agenda: The Challenges of the Sustainable Development Goal – held in Rome from 22-24 May 2015, Pope Francis said:

“I encourage you, who are engaged in defending the dignity of women and promoting their rights, to allow yourselves to be constantly guided by the spirit of humanity and compassion in the service of your neighbour. May your work be marked first and foremost by professional competence, without self-interest or superficial activism, but with generous dedication. In this way you will manifest the countless God-given gifts which women have to offer, encouraging others to promote sensitivity, understanding and dialogue in settling conflicts big and small, in healing wounds, in nurturing all life at every level of society, and in embodying the mercy and tenderness which bring reconciliation and unity to our world. **All this is part of that ‘feminine genius’ of which our society stands in such great need.**”

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