

*A Compilation of Reports from Diocesan Focus Groups
(Spring, 2003 – Spring, 2004)*

Background

In late 2002 and early 2003, at the invitation of the Bishops' Committee on Women in Society and in the Church, 17 arch/dioceses conducted focus groups on the topic of women's spirituality in the workplace. The Committee provided a template with questions on spirituality and work. Each arch/diocese submitted a report to the Women's Committee. The Committee compiled a summary report which is available at www.usccb.org/laity/women.shtml.

Because of the success of these initial focus groups, the Committee invited additional arch/dioceses to participate in the project. Between the spring of 2003 and spring of 2004, an additional 19 arch/dioceses sponsored focus groups (St. Paul and Minneapolis also participated in the first round). These arch/dioceses, and the number of focus group participants, are: **Austin (11), Brooklyn (61), Galveston-Houston (21), Grand Rapids (19), Honolulu (number not given), Joliet (20), Lexington (number not given), Metuchen (16), Milwaukee (39), New Orleans (7), New Ulm (7), Omaha (100+), Philadelphia (14), Rockford (61), Rockville Centre (40), St. Cloud (252 women responded to a questionnaire, an unspecified number participated in focus groups), St. Paul-Minneapolis (24), San Angelo (32), San Bernardino (8), and Superior (7)**. More than 500 women participated in these focus groups.

In all, the project involved more than 800 women in focus groups conducted by 36 arch/dioceses.

Summary of Responses

(Direct quotations from participants are in italics)

Participants' responses mirrored those of participants in the first round of focus groups. These are summarized below; the report on the previous focus groups explains them in more detail.

- **Most satisfying aspects of work:** Helping and serving people, compatible co-workers, and the opportunity to learn new information and skills were most frequently mentioned.
- **Frustrating aspects:** Many participants identified difficult co-workers, office politics, gossip, unethical practices, and lack of time as frustrations.
- **Making time for spiritual activities:** Balancing family and work is a challenge, but most find time for spiritual practices, which include the Eucharist, devotions, spiritual reading, and days of recollection.
- **Relationship between spirituality and work:** Most women see their spirituality as permeating all that they do. Their faith leads them to model Christian values in the

workplace. Faith helps them to deal with difficult, and sometimes unethical, situations at work.

- **Volunteering:** Despite heavy demands on their time, women continue to be involved in a range of parish activities. Some have had to cut back on volunteer activities, while others admit that they try to do too much.
- **Church support for women in the workplace:** Women want pastors and bishops to hear them and to recognize and use their gifts. Specific suggestions included resources to help women to deepen their spirituality (print materials, conferences, workshops). Support for single women and single mothers was a concern.

In this second round of focus groups, two themes in particular emerged.

First, many women speak of their work as a vocation, a call from God. Sometimes the call is unexpected. *I never thought I'd be a mortgage broker. I hate math. I guess that's what I was meant to do.* This woman is now in a position to help immigrants to buy their own home.

Sometimes the call comes at an early age. A cardiac nurse reflected: *When I was 17 I went into nursing school...I believe I've had a calling and I believe the Holy Spirit has worked through me.*

A patient advocate said: *Every time I've posted out for a new job the door is closed, so it tells me that my mission in life is this job.*

Some women came to appreciate their work more when it was taken away. *Work is a gift. Not being able to work [I had cancer and couldn't work] and wanting to work, you recognize how much of a gift that is.* Another woman observed: *I have a different attitude because I was out of work a couple of times and you don't forget that ever.*

Second, women witness to their faith in the workplace. Many spoke of the challenge of living out their Christian values in the workplace. In a few instances, the workplace is conducive to spiritual sharing. One woman, for example, participates in a weekly Bible study at work, while another shares e-mail with her co-workers about religious topics.

One woman sees a greater openness in the workplace to discussions of faith. She has a sense of shared spirituality that cuts across religious differences. *There is something happening in our society that allows people to express and share faith more openly.*

Opportunities to express and explain one's faith often arise. *People know I am Catholic and during the day, they'll stop by and ask me to pray for people they know who need prayer.*

One woman is a Eucharistic minister at a church near her place of employment. Sometimes she is scheduled for ministry and cannot have lunch with her co-workers. This opens up conversations, both pleasant and unpleasant, but overall it has created new friendships.

Another woman said that many people at work are Catholic but do not discuss religion. *Ash Wednesday brought about many questions from non-Catholics and got people talking, which was good.*

The attempt to witness to the faith can bring certain pressures. *I feel that sometimes people at work expect too much of me because they know I am a Christian. That makes me afraid of disappointing them.*

Nevertheless, women often go to great lengths to reflect their beliefs in their behavior. A bank employee said that she does not make a loan if it is not in the client's best interests. *I'm honest with customers. [It] doesn't matter if it will help the bank financially or for my own reward.*

Another woman spoke about the temptation to leave a job over a disagreement. She pointed out, however, that the organization needed someone who has a moral commitment and can look at things without judging. She helps to empower people by giving them information and working ethically.