

FREEDOM OF RELIGION, BELIEF AND GENDER

A Catholic Perspective

Any discussion of freedom of religion, belief and gender today will need to take place in the context of the contemporary globalized world and its complexities. Many Catholic women are asking the question: Can the development and full participation of women in society be welcomed and embraced by Catholic Christianity? Can Catholic tradition acknowledge and welcome women into a relationship of partnership with men? Can those who occupy positions of official leadership in the Catholic Church listen to women's perspectives on these questions?

Despite the strong community support (eighty-seven percent) for protection of human rights in Australian law,¹ the proposal to create a national Charter of Human Rights has received mixed reactions from religious groups. Well publicized negative responses have come from some church spokesmen, but other church groups have been supportive or have reserved their opinion. The Australian Catholic Bishops' Conference, while affirming that "human rights are at the core of humanity and of fundamental importance to our society," declined to take a position on whether there should be a Charter of Rights.²

Before we can reflect on the position of women in church and society from a Catholic perspective it will be necessary to consider more generally the global social, economic and political position of women at the beginning of the 21st century, in other words, put "a human face on the global economy."³

The position of women at the beginning of the 21st century

By the late 20th century it was acknowledged that global inequality had reached a new magnitude. The World Bank reported that about half the world's population

(2.8 billion people) survived on less than two dollars per day, and 1.3 billion on less than one dollar per day. According to the United Nations Development Program (1996), “Between 1960 and 1991 the share of the richest 20 percent rose from 70 percent of global income to 85 percent – while that of the poorest declined from 2.3 percent to 1.4 percent.” By 1991, “more than 85 percent of the world’s population received only 15 percent of its income.”⁴ In the early 21st century, UN studies show that females still score poorly in every development sector.

Although women’s political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy, the proportion of women parliamentarians at the national level has increased by only 8 percent in the decade from 1998 to 2008, to the current global average of around 18 percent.⁵ In 2009, Australia has 27 percent female representation in Parliament, putting us on a par with Trinidad and Tobago, and Namibia, but lagging far behind nations such as Rwanda (56 percent), Sweden (47 percent) and Cuba (43 percent).⁶ In the top 200 companies listed on the Australian Stock Exchange women hold only 8.3 percent of board directorships, a drop of 0.4 percent in the last two years.⁷ In the Federal Court of Australia, women make up only 13 percent of the bench.⁸

Women perform 66 percent of the world’s work and produce 50 percent of the food. Yet they earn only 10 percent of global income and own less than one percent of the world’s property. Women generally get paid proportionately less than men for the same work.⁹ In the era of globalized economics where a “race to the bottom” is critical for superprofits, in assembly plants, export processing zones and garment sweatshops, it is women’s labour that allows and guarantees maximum profitability for the corporate elite, a tiny minority of the world’s inhabitants. Australian women continue to earn substantially less than men, with female wage and salary earners working full time receiving, on average, only 84 percent of what their male counterparts receive.¹⁰

Women bear a disproportionate burden of the world’s poverty, representing 70 percent of the world’s poor. They are most at risk of hunger because of the

systematic discrimination they face in education, health care, employment and control of assets. Poverty implications are widespread for women, leaving many without even basic rights such as access to clean drinking water, sanitation, medical care and decent employment. Being poor can also mean they have little protection from violence and have no role in decision making. Women face persistent discrimination when they apply for credit for business or self-employment and are often concentrated in insecure, unsafe and low-wage work. Two thirds of the world's illiterate are women.¹¹

The *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (CEDAW), the key international agreement on women's human rights across the globe, has been ratified by 185 UN Member states since its inception in 1979. Yet many women continue to confront manifold violations of their human rights when they cannot participate in the decisions that affect their lives or claim fair political representation when they face discrimination in employment, when they are denied education or entitlement to land and property, or when they suffer violence¹² within their own home.

This world-wide pattern of women's disadvantage is also reflected in the social order of Catholicism. Although the number of women working in the Vatican has virtually doubled from 11 percent in 1978 to 21 percent in 2007, most women are in support staff positions and have little decision-making input – a pattern replicated in archdioceses and dioceses around the world. The two top positions in every Vatican agency must be held by the ordained who currently must be male.¹³

There is much evidence to show that it is labour and class relations, bolstered by particular constructions of women's identity, which lie at the heart of global processes which disadvantage women.¹⁴ There is also evidence that, when women generally are empowered as part of modern development, societies show themselves capable of moving towards a holistic appropriation of economic and cultural change. While it has been claimed that, of all the groups with the potential to bring about

such a transformation, the most promising is the women's movement, patriarchal elites have also come to sense this transformative dynamic as a "threat". This helps to explain some of the high levels of violence against women in modern times. However, when women are included in the development process it is possible that a society and culture may develop holistically, with both women and men being given the possibility of reaching their full human potential.

A proper understanding of women's societal standing must include a multi-layered exploration of the relations between state and society, democracy, economic growth and development, ethnic and religious identity and conflict, environmental concerns and especially human and women's rights. Such an approach is found in the "capabilities" approach to human development pioneered by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.¹⁵ This approach focuses on human capabilities, that is, what people are actually able to do and to be, and emphasizes functional capabilities ("substantive freedoms", such as the ability to live to old age, engage in economic transactions, or participate in political activities). It argues that the capabilities in question should be pursued for each and every person, treating each as an end and none as a mere tool of the ends of others. Martha Nussbaum observes, "Women have all too often been treated as the supporters of the ends of others, rather than as ends in their own right."¹⁶

World religions, since they are among the most powerful ideological, sociopolitical and spiritual forces, play a crucial role in the organization and reinforcement of particular gender relationships. In the context of religion and women's human rights a question which must be asked is "What renewal and transformation of theological teachings and practices are needed to ensure a better understanding of the position and role of women and to enhance the full development of both women and men in today's world?"

The questioning of religious attitudes and practices in Catholicism which contribute to women's inferior status will need to be an integral part of this process. A platform

for Catholic thinking has been well provided by Pope John XIII in his groundbreaking encyclical “Peace on Earth” (1963), which has been described as “the most powerful and thorough statement of the Roman Catholic understanding of human rights in modern times”¹⁷ and the Second Vatican Council which stated:

There must be made available to all people everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing, and shelter; the right to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to respect, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and rightful freedom even in matters religious.¹⁸

THE VOICES OF CATHOLIC FEMINISM

To speak of Christian/Catholic “feminism”, it must be recognized, is to enter in into another arena of widespread contention with many complexities. I use feminism here to mean a perspective or a movement committed to securing and defending human rights and opportunities for women that are equal to those of men. Feminist women and men are opposed to any form of discrimination on the basis of gender. They oppose sexism in all its forms whether institutional, attitudinal or embodied in ideologies, beliefs, theories or practices that establish and reinforce gender discrimination.¹⁹

Religion is only one determinant of women’s status and role in society. Political and socio-cultural conditions are equally, if not more, important. Nevertheless the influence of religion can be a powerful factor in mediating women’s status. The role of women in religious systems is often an oblique reflection of women’s status in society, with religion in turn playing a mediating role in interpreting and maintaining that status. Through a process of “symbolic interaction,” then, religion is often used to restrict women – but it also has the potential to lend support to more gender egalitarianism. In the process religion too may undergo a manner of change and transformation. Religious authorities have often made women’s bodies the turf on which their own power struggles are played out. But this raises the question of how,

if the spirit and the body have been linked in women's oppression, they must then also be linked in the strategy towards women's liberation. Women will need to walk a freedom road that is both material and spiritual.

Here I draw on scholarly insights from the historical development of Western feminist thought²⁰ as is appropriate in the Catholic context to argue that laws which discriminate against women need to be changed (first wave, "liberal" feminism), that power relations in society need to be critiqued (second wave), that different feminine subjectivities need to be heard (third wave) and that patriarchal attitudes, practices and structures (radical feminism) and structures of economic "maldevelopment" need to be challenged (socialist or Marxist feminism). I also heed the call of Georgina Waylen, who calls for a feminist analysis that respects the "multiplicity of difference" among women rather than one that sees women as a unitary group or as "other".²¹

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

A number of different feminist approaches can be discerned among women within the Catholic faith tradition, each in their own way making a contribution to the global feminist movement. They may be broadly categorized as (1) rejectionist, (2) traditionalist/fundamentalist, (3) reformist/moderate, and (4) reconstructionist. It is possible to identify Christian/Catholic feminists, both male and female, within each of these groupings.²²

The rejectionist position is held by feminists who have rejected or sidestepped religious tradition in its entirety, viewing religion as a key factor in the subordination and oppression of women. An example in the Catholic tradition is Mary Daly,²³ one of the earliest Catholic feminists in the United States, who finished up in some despair, believing the patriarchal underpinnings of Christian tradition to be largely unreformable. However, this approach is critiqued by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza,

who believes that, although it must be taken seriously, such a feminist strategy is in danger of too easily relinquishing women's feminist Christian heritage.²⁴

Both traditionalists/ fundamentalists and reformers/moderates (unlike rejectionists)²⁵ work through a methodology of reinterpretation, recognizing that “symbolic representation of the sacred is at the heart of all religions.” However, while fundamentalists/traditionalists reinterpret the term “feminism” in a way that leaves the patriarchal framework of religion intact, the more dynamic approach taken by the reformers/moderates has been, rather, to reinterpret patriarchal elements of the religious tradition. Making Catholic social justice teaching their theoretical base, reformist feminists promote human rights, advocate the participation of women in the political process, advocate economic justice for women and emphasize the principles of freedom and equality. They seek to bring about change on behalf of women both within church structures and in the political sphere. They tend not to defend religious dogma as such but rather to integrate the experience of women within the teachings of the religion in order to advance the empowerment of women.²⁶

The traditionalist/fundamentalist approach within Catholicism, the ideology underpinning the traditional stance of the Vatican, is well exemplified by Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor selected by John Paul II to chair the Vatican delegation to the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Glendon, who describes her Christian feminism as “holistic” or “new” feminism, does not critique any forms of hierarchy or patriarchy, or any structures of church authority, but rather asks “all men to look into their hearts to see whether they are treating women as subjects and objects rather than as equals made in the image and likeness of God.”²⁷ Using traditional theological sources and vocabulary within a patriarchal framework, a fundamentalist feminism promotes the concept of woman as wife and mother, based on an immutable, static and unchanging view of the nature of human beings. It interprets equality to mean that men and women are created to complement each other, advancing a concept of “equality with dignity” that

promotes women's exercise of all their talents and rights without undermining their (patriarchally-defined) roles. Catholic traditionalist feminism lacks reference to social context and grounding in the Catholic Church's tradition of social teaching. However, Catholic feminist scholar Susan Maloney may be right in seeing significance in the appropriation of the term "Christian feminism" by conservative Catholic women as indicative of the "dynamism and power of feminist thought."²⁸

Interestingly, Catholic traditionalist feminists such as Mary Ann Glendon, while defending Catholic teachings which in practice subordinate women, have called on the Catholic Church to demonstrate its belief in women's equality. Speaking at a Rome conference on "Feminism and the Catholic Church," Glendon stated that the Church "will continue to have difficulty explaining the exclusion of women from the priesthood" unless it demonstrates the seriousness of its belief that women and men are equal, but not identical, by providing examples of lay women and men and priests working together in real partnerships. Her colleague, Professor Lucetta Scaraffa from Rome's La Sapienza University, speaking at the same conference, also called for change. "The problem with the church today is the lack of women in positions of responsibility at the Vatican," she asserted, while carefully remaining within the boundaries of Vatican doctrine by claiming that her argument had "nothing to do with the question of women priests." However, neither speaker addressed the question of how women can work in equal partnership with men when, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "according to canon law the power to take legally binding decisions is limited to sacred orders," that is, all responsibility for governance in the Catholic Church is vested in its ordained members who currently must be male.²⁹

Benedict XVI has said that although there are "limitations" on women, he expects that women themselves "will know how to make their own space" and "achieve their fully effective place in the Church best suited to them".³⁰ This is a position that contains many contradictions.

It has been suggested that at least some of the appeal of traditionalist feminism in religious communities lies in the “apparent orthodoxy of its discourse” and its pragmatism. That is, within the framework of promising women greater security, rights and respect in society, traditionalist feminist discourse can provide a safe place from which to integrate values associated with modernity. In this way it can provide the ideological framework that allows for slow adaptation to change – a process that gradually will give way to the construction of new religious identities.³¹ Therefore, in the Catholic Church where “conservative” and “liberal” Catholics have to co-exist side by side with each other, unlike some other religious traditions which can form separate congregations, Catholic women are in a unique position to confront the polarities.³² It would seem important therefore that Catholic traditionalist feminists should not be ignored in intercultural dialogue.

However, attempts by fundamentalist thinkers to set up false dichotomies or attack caricatures of feminist thinking, need to be critiqued. This was the case when the “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World,” issued by Pope John Paul II in May 2004, tried to discredit feminist thinking by linking it with anachronistic Marxist “radicalism.”³³

Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) responded:

(This document) takes extreme positions that may have historically been held by five people and casts them as if they were held by every woman. The feminism I know is all for partnerships and is all for empowering both men and women. The feminism I know does not ignore the fact that there are sexual differences.³⁴

Frances Kissling is representative of the fourth group of feminists indicated above, that of reconstructionist feminists, who draws on Catholic social teaching and Catholic teaching on primacy of conscience to present a strong critique of the Vatican’s view of women and to promote the idea of a woman’s ability to make decisions for herself, especially in the area of sexual ethics.³⁵ Unlike reformist and

traditional feminists who respectively ignore and condone the sexual teachings of the church, reconstructionists make it a priority to challenge the church's paternalistic teaching on sexuality. Their feminism can be understood as a more revolutionary or radical path which seeks to "deconstruct, subvert and reconstruct" the past and the present of the given tradition.

The majority of Christian feminists, both men and women, belong to the reformist trajectory of thinking. Reformist feminist scholars note that before Catholicism became associated with state power in the first four centuries of Christianity women did hold positions of leadership. By recovering aspects of the tradition that are liberating for women, while critiquing others which diminish women, they unmask and delegitimize the sexism, embedded in Catholic discourse and praxis, which has accumulated over the centuries. Examples of Catholic reformist feminists include Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Joanna Manning, Hans Küng and Australian Camille Paul.

Religious reformists have a major role to play in the transformation of religion that is indeed necessary if religious tradition is to contribute in a meaningful way to an economically just, and politically inclusive, global community which is at peace with itself. While it seems unlikely that rejectionist feminists (because of their abandonment of the religious tradition) and reconstructionist feminists (if their "reconstructed" frameworks lie outside the traditionally accepted ones) will contribute greatly to this much-needed transformation, traditionalist feminists may have a role to play if they can provide a link to an ideological framework in which a slower and more gradual transition may occur. For this reason it is important for the wider reformist/moderate feminist and progressive discursive community to find ways to include traditionalists/fundamentalists, and not exclude them, from interfaith and intercultural dialogues.

WHAT CATHOLIC FEMINISTS ARE SAYING

The central issue for Catholic reformists today is that the patriarchal leadership of the Catholic Church is engaged in an ideological struggle to maintain control of social and cultural reproduction – both the reproduction of the species (especially through its teachings on contraception and abortion) and the social reproduction of the church (opposition to the ordination of women). Church tensions and struggles have become clustered around issues of (a) human sexuality – e.g. abortion, contraception and to a lesser extent homosexuality (the reproduction of the species), and (b) the struggle over the ordination of women (the social reproduction of the church).³⁶ This has meant that the critical issues around which a battle is being waged are centred on women, their identity and their participation in church and society, even though these issues may seem to have little to do with the fundamental teachings and essential doctrines of Christianity.

Many of the doctrinal teachings and attitudinal positions which are being protected today by patriarchal interests should have been superseded long ago but, because of their systematic and interlocking nature, to change one concept or practice is to introduce change to the whole edifice. As Camille Paul argues: “Change one part and the remainder is thrown off-centre.Change one concept and all is changed.”³⁷ Therefore, these issues have taken on ideological significance in the Church’s rejection of “secular” modernity. In order to justify women’s subordination and exclude women’s leadership, such teachings and practices draw heavily on a Catholic anthropology based on erroneous Aristotelian biological theories. They draw on scriptural interpretations, images of God, language which excludes women, and ethical teachings, especially as they touch on women’s bodies and lives, to reinforce legal restrictions on women’s participation in the church community and liturgy. However, as many contemporary scholars point out, in doing so they also risk denying some of the most fundamental and traditional teachings of Christianity.

Catholic anthropology

A basic area of critique has been an examination of the anthropology embedded in interpretations of the Biblical creation stories in Genesis which have often been used in Christian tradition to misrepresent women's sexuality and to justify women's subordination. Lisa Sowle Cahill, a respected American Catholic ethicist, points to the affirmation found in Genesis 1: 26-28 and 2: 4-25 that both male and female are created in God's image, and that both are created through a personal and individual divine creative act.³⁸ She asserts that the creation of woman from the rib of Adam signifies their commonality of nature rather than the secondary nature of the woman. When this idyllic picture changes in the third chapter of Genesis, and the male-female partnership is transformed into one of strife and pain, with gender roles and hierarchies introduced for the first time, Cahill, in line with mainstream modern biblical scholarship, sees this as a symbolic representation of the effects, if not the origins, of sin in the world, at the personal, social and even the cosmic levels. The biblical exegesis she draws upon provides a critique of the Catholic endorsement of hierarchically-ordered sexual relationships and their social mediation via gender roles. These deformed patterns are seen to be the result of sin and evil in the world and require transformation.

Natural law and Catholic ethical teaching

Another area of Catholic thought which is receiving a thorough feminist critique is that of Catholic ethics,³⁹ specifically its appeal to the morality of human "nature" or "natural law", the paradigm for which was provided in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas. While the strength of the natural law approach to ethics lies in its ability to appeal to common human values, known experientially, its inherent limitation is that these experiences will always be interpreted, and values generalized, from particular historical and cultural standpoints. With the enormous economic and social changes taking place in the modern era, there is a large

question-mark around assertions that parental and domestic roles have an asymmetrical importance for women as opposed to men.

Current teachings still have attached to them conclusions once derived from the old biologicistic, procreative and hierarchical model of sexuality, especially women's sexuality defined primarily in terms of motherhood, domesticity, and submission to the husband/father instead of a partnership of equals. There is a need to restate the Catholic approach to sexuality towards a more integral, embodied, and social perception of the meaning of sex, which applies essentially the same interpretative framework for men and women.

This is especially so due to the serious threat to the safety and well-being of women which can result from church teachings that support women's disempowerment and subordination. Joanna Manning finds that the imbalance of power between men and women at every level, supported by traditional church teaching defining separate natures and roles for men and women, has led to multilayered structures of dominance by men over women, and many forms of associated violence.⁴⁰ While it may be laudable for the pope to denounce male violence, as he does in the encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), Manning finds it disturbing that it is precisely within this kind of thinking on the nature of women that the roots of violence against women are found.

Other scholars note the moral responsibility which proponents of natural law have to enter into serious engagement with those whose lives are marginalized by its claims to truth. They draw attention to the ways in which unjust power relations between men and women can shape the lens through which we view the moral order.⁴¹ When religious leaders introduce definitions of women as "equal but different", it is necessary to look at who is doing the defining and who is benefiting from the very unequal division of power. It is similar to the "separate but equal" argument which once sanctioned racial segregation and which was equally dangerous and discriminatory.

The person of Jesus and the early church

Also ambiguous for Christian women is Church understanding of the identity and life-meaning of the church's founder, Jesus Christ. Many feminist scholars acknowledge the liberating praxis of Jesus of Nazareth, whom they see as modelling the coming of God's kingdom through his radical inclusiveness and table-fellowship with the poor and marginalized, including women. Catholic feminist thinkers take no issue with Jesus's maleness, which they see as belonging to his historical identity, along with his Jewishness and first century Galilean cultural identity, but they are critical when the maleness of Jesus is set apart and used as an ideological tool to exclude women from ordained ministry.⁴² Elizabeth Johnson is but one example of a Catholic feminist scholar who believes that sexuality must be integrated into a holistic vision of human persons. She sees advantages for women in the affirmation of one human nature celebrated in an interdependence of multiple differences, a multi-polar set of combinations of essential human characteristics, of which sexuality is but one element.⁴³

Mary

Like many other symbols in the Christian tradition, Mary the mother of Jesus is also an ambiguous figure for women today. Mary holds an important place in the redemptive pattern and is important in Christian tradition, but she has also been the subject of an idealizing Mariology that sought to venerate her at the expense of real women. As many Catholic women scholars have pointed out, too often a male and celibate church hierarchy has projected onto her the passive values of submission, humility and docility that women in a misogynist and patriarchal Christian culture were expected to imitate. They see this as an "impossible ideal" that no longer has any moral significance.⁴⁴ Such depictions can serve to deter women from becoming fully independent and whole human persons. In the past, the myth of Mary as "mother of God" has functioned to reduce women's possibilities to their biological capacity for motherhood.⁴⁵ A more soundly based biblical theological view holds

that Jesus is the model for all human persons and that the whole of humanity is changed in principle because of the incarnation and redemption.

Liturgy and images of God

Battles for liturgical church language that is inclusive of women's identity and experience have in recent times become known in Catholic circles as the "liturgy wars."⁴⁶ The length that Vatican authorities are prepared to go to negate any link between the feminine and God by preserving exclusively male language, not only for God (vertically), but also horizontally (i.e. with reference to humans), in its official documents, is described by Joanna Manning in the case of the translation of the 1992 English language edition of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Because there was "too much inclusive language" in a draft copy, the Vatican dismissed the American Father Douglas Clark as chair of the working committee and replaced him with Australian Archbishop D'Arcy of Hobart who, like his predecessor, believed that inclusive language had theological implications, but in a diametrically opposed direction. When the English translation finally appeared in 1994, D'Arcy had not only rendered all uses of the word *homme* as "man" (not even "mankind") but extra male pronouns had been worked into the text. Around the same time the Vatican issued secret norms for the translation of biblical texts and liturgical prayers which instructed that feminine and neuter pronouns used to depict the Holy Spirit in the original Hebrew and Greek texts were to be replaced by male pronouns in the English translation. Joanna Manning is concerned about the educational and psychological implications for girls and women in Catholic institutions as this translation is used in all Catholic schools and offices in the English-speaking world today.⁴⁷

When she accompanies girl students to the local church for mass, Manning is struck by how the images and ritual reinforce the idea that God is male:

What is the gender of the God addressed in the prayers? Male. Who is God's minister at the altar? A man. Who preaches the sermon to the school community? A man. Whose experiences does he draw on for his preaching? Men's. What language is used to describe human beings in the readings and the hymns? Almost exclusively male. How are women portrayed in the statues and paintings inside the church? Like the Virgin Mary, beautiful, passive and obedient.⁴⁸

She is concerned that when religious symbols are focused around exclusively male images of divinity, boys grow up believing that they really do – or should – represent God on earth in roles of authority, knowledge, dignity, and power. Girls, however, internalize images of themselves as inferior, wrong, incomplete, guilty, unsure, and incapable. The inculcation of such ideas is of no help at all to women in their quest for adult autonomy, interdependence, freedom, responsibility, bodily and sexual integrity, and self-respect – characteristics necessary for an adult and fully Christian life.⁴⁹

If there is any glimmer of hope for women's equality in the Catholic Church it may be found in the unlikely place of an address by Archbishop Celestino Migliore, permanent observer to the Holy See to the United Nations in New York, to the sixty-first session of the UN General Assembly on International Women's Day, 8 March 2007.⁵⁰ In this speech he called for the empowerment of women to include “addressing discriminatory practices that exclude women from decision-making processes, often caused or aggravated by discrimination based on a women's race, ethnicity, religion or social status.” Some measures he recommended to overcome women's inferior position were microfinance projects and education which he saw as improving women's status, “from earning greater respect from men to being acknowledged as important contributors to society.” In acknowledging the link between the lack of economic and educational opportunity and women's poor social status, this was an important step.

Pope Benedict XVI has also described the participation of women in the life of the church and of society as an issue of importance: “Man and woman, equal in dignity,

are called to enrich themselves mutually in communion and collaboration, not only in matrimony and in the family, but also in society and all of its dimensions.”⁵¹ But as yet the Catholic Church still has to take the gigantic leap of applying this new-found wisdom to its own structures.⁵²

CONCLUSION

A main concern for Catholic women regarding human rights is the need for mutual accountability within much more effective institutions. While public secular institutions – governments and international structures – need to show themselves capable of achieving more democracy, and economic development with enhanced human and women’s rights at their centre,⁵³ religious institutions and leadership need to undergo parallel development. Religions need to examine how their teachings, practices and structures add strength to world systems that exploit women and contribute to women’s marginalization and disempowerment. They need to take responsibility for the ways they leave women vulnerable to exploitation and violence by denying women voice, visibility and autonomy. They must take stock of the ways their marginalisation of women has compounded women’s suffering. A strong civil society, including the robust presence of women in the public as well as in the private spheres, provides a necessary critique and support.

The United Nations sponsored study *Beyond Conflict Prevention: How Women Prevent Violence and Build Sustainable Peace*, states: “Once in leadership positions, women are known positively to impact governance processes...ranging from fighting corruption to making constitutional processes more inclusive, to bridging ethnic and political divides.” The recommendations of the UN study include (a) that steps should be taken to guarantee women’s representation in all international committees, commissions, and peace-building structures and initiatives, (b) that men’s and women’s equality should be recognized and support given to women’s creative solutions to merge traditions, beliefs and customs with legal guarantees of women’s constitutional rights, and (e) that resources should be channelled to civil

society organisations, particularly women's groups, to engage in non-violent conflict resolution.⁵⁴

There is no reason why recommendations such as these should not be applied to religious institutions as well. They may help to counter what is a common experience of disempowerment of Catholic women within their traditional religious framework. The process will not be an easy one, for in the words of one Catholic woman:

The controllers of religious interpretation are men. Decisions about the rules and rituals of religion are made by men. Those who claim to speak for the voice of God are all men. So naturally, this male God never impinges on men's rights, as these are sanctioned in the dominant religion or culture. (It is) men who benefit from the religious or cultural norms, norms according to which their God has allotted women a separate and inferior nature and role.....who are the most resistant to any threat to their privileges.⁵⁵

Today, many Catholic women, faithful to their religious tradition, are challenging fundamentalist religious teachings which diminish them. They view such teachings as a distortion of the original Christian vision embodied in the person of Jesus Christ as attested to in the Bible and the earliest Church tradition. In this they are supported by United Nations resolutions, such as UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Millennium Development Goals, which recognize women as important actors in peace-building initiatives and calls for women's inclusion as key co-ordinators, decision-makers, program designers and implementers at all levels of societal action.⁵⁶ This recognition also needs to include the full participation of women in every aspect of the life of their religious traditions.

As a Catholic woman I support the recommendation of *Progress of the World's Women 2008/2009* that accountability systems both public and private contain two essential elements: (a) that women are participants in all oversight processes and (b) that the advancement of gender equality and women's rights is one of the standards against which the performance of officials is assessed.

Gender equality in both church and society is ‘mission-critical’ to poverty reduction and international peace and security, and power holders must answer for their performance in advancing women’s rights. The mandates, operating practices, and deep cultures of international institutions must be revised where necessary to ensure that gender equality is a top priority in the hierarchy of issues for which they are accountable. Women’s empowerment is not a stand-alone goal. As well as being integral to the original Christian vision, it is the driver of efforts to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, reduce child and maternal mortality, and fight against major diseases like HIV/AIDS and malaria. Women’s empowerment is also a driver of sound environmental management and is, finally, essential for ensuring the full development of the world’s peoples.

¹ George Williams, “The people have spoken – and they want protection”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 October 2009.

² *Submission on Behalf of The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference to The National Human Rights Consultation*, June 2009. See also Tom Calma and Conrad Gershevitch, *Freedom of Religion and Belief in a Multicultural Democracy: an inherent contradiction or an achievable human right?* (3 August 2009), p 7. Online:

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/papers/freedom_religion20090803.html accessed 19 February 2010, and Frank Brennan, “Churches confused on Human Rights Act”, *Eureka Street*, 28 January 2010. Online: <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=19037> accessed 19 February 2010.

³ A phrase used by President Bill Clinton in his State of the Union address 1999, quoted in Delia D. Aguilar, “Introduction”, in Delia D. Aguilar and Anne E. Lacsamana (eds), *Women and Globalization* (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), p 12 .

⁴ See Delia D. Aguilar, “Introduction”, in Delia D. Aguilar and Anne E. Lacsamana (eds), *Women and Globalization* (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), pp 11ff) and Jeff Haynes, *Third World Politics* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1996), pp 17, 150-151.

⁵ See UN Press Conference on “Annual Statistics of Women in Politics”, 5 March 2009. Online: http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2009/090305_IPU.doc.htm accessed 27 February 2010. See also UNIFEM: *Progress of the World’s Women 2008/2009: Who Answers to Women?* Online: <http://www.unifem.org/progress/2008/> accessed 19 February 2010. Yearly gains are so slow it is estimated that it will take 20 years to reach the minimum target of 30 percent set by the United Nations.

⁶ Statistics compiled by the [Inter-Parliamentary Union](http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm) 2009. Online: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm> accessed 19 February 2010.

⁷ Moira Rayner, “Australian superwomen left holding the poison”, *Eureka Street*, 3 November 2008.

⁸ See Australian Human Rights Commission – fact sheet – Women in Leadership. Online: http://www.hreoc.gov.au/listeningtour/launch/fact_sheets/factsheet_1.html accessed 19 February 2010

⁹ UNIFEM: Women, Poverty and Economics. Online:

http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/ accessed 19 February 2010.

¹⁰ Australian Women Online, “Equal Pay Day – Gender Pay Gap Widens in 2009”. Online: <http://www.australianwomenonline.com/equal-pay-day-gender-pay-gap-widens-in-2009/> and <http://www.eowa.gov.au/> accessed 19 February 2010. See also Jonathan Dart, “Women fall victim to growing wage gap”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 October 2009.

¹¹ UNIFEM: Women, Poverty and Economics. Online:

http://www.unifem.org/gender_issues/women_poverty_economics/ accessed 19 February 2010.

¹² Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that in 30 years there has been a miniscule 1.5 percent decrease in violence against women in Australia. See Nina Funnell who says, “With these statistics at hand, the claim that women have achieved equality and that feminism is now redundant seems implausible.” (“All jokes aside, it’s a disgrace”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 2008).

¹³ Robert Mickens, “Revealed: the true role of women in the Vatican”, *The Tablet*, 26 August 2006.

¹⁴ Aguilar, “Introduction”, in Aguilar and Laesamana (2004), p 17.

¹⁵ See Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: OUP, 1999) and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Poverty is understood as capability-deprivation. A person may be deprived of such capabilities in many ways e.g. by ignorance, government oppression, lack of financial resources, or false consciousness.

¹⁶ Nussbaum, pp 5-6.

¹⁷ John XXIII, “Peace on Earth”, April 1963, especially paras 11-12. See David Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p 41.

¹⁸ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, December 1965, para 26.

¹⁹ See for example Encarta® World English Dictionary, North American edition. Online: <http://encarta.msn.com/encnet/features/dictionary/DictionaryResults.aspx?refid=1861610952>. Sighted 8 August 2007. Also Margaret Farley, “Feminist Ethics” in Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley and Richard A. McCormick (eds), *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition* (New York/Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), p 5.

²⁰ Forming a background to this discussion is the historical development in Western societies of what became known as (a) first-wave feminism, dating from nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which perceived gender discrimination to be an issue of socialization and focused on officially-mandated structures of inequality such as lack of women’s suffrage; (b) second wave feminism, from early 1960s to late 1980s, which looked beyond official structures to the power-relations of society which formed a basis for the personal discrimination and oppression of women, and (c) third wave feminism, from mid-1980s onwards, which critiqued “essentialist” feminist understandings which assumed a universal feminine identity and over-emphasized the experiences of upper middle class white women. The latter raised consciousness about the fundamental ambiguities inherent in all discussion of gender and power, and called for new subjectivities in feminist voice. The 1970s also saw the rise of “radical feminism” (sometimes pejoratively termed “militant feminism”), which located the root cause of women’s oppression in patriarchal gender relations as opposed to legal systems (liberal feminism), or class conflict (socialist and Marxist feminism)

²¹ Georgina Waylen, *Gender in Third World Politics* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1996), p 10.

²² See Nayereh Tohidi and Jane H. Bayes, “Women Redefining Modernity and Religion”, in Jane H. Bayes and Nayereh Tohidi (eds), *Globalization, Gender and Religion: The Politics of Women’s Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp 47ff; Susan Marie Maloney, “United States Catholic Women” in Bayes and Tohidi (2001), pp 64ff.

²³ An account of Mary Daly, her sermon given in Harvard Memorial Church in 1971 and her “exodus” movement out of the church is found in Elizabeth A. Clark and Herbert Richardson (eds), *Women and Religion*. Expanded edition. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp 309-318.

²⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Discipleship and Patriarchy” in Curran, Farley and McCormick (1996), p 51.

²⁵ In writings about Catholic fundamentalism (e.g. William D. Dinges and James Hitchcock, "Roman Catholic Traditionalism and Activist Conservatism in the United States," in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds), *The Fundamentalism Project: sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (vol 1) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp 66-141), fundamentalists are often labeled 'traditionalist' which, in effect, means the same as "fundamentalist."

Traditionalists/fundamentalists tend to be ideologically motivated, avoiding any challenge to hierarchical or patriarchal structures in which they are likely to have a vested interest. In this they differ from reformists/moderates (terms which can also be used interchangeably), who work to reform hierarchical and patriarchal structures from within and to reclaim a "usable past." The terms "traditionalist" and "fundamentalist" are to be distinguished from the term "traditional", since it is understood here that a person who is "traditional" is, by definition, open to change and development in the tradition.

²⁶ Maloney, in Bayes and Tohidi (2001), pp 69-70.

²⁷ Mary Ann Glendon, "CEDAW and women's 'unfinished journey'", *L'Osservatore Romano*, 5 January 2005, p 4. See also John Allen Jnr, "The Word From Rome", *National Catholic Reporter*, 1 April 2005.

²⁸ Maloney, in Bayes and Tohidi (2001), p 66.

²⁹ 'Interview with Benedict XVI (part 2)', *Zenit*, 17 August 2006; Cindy Wooden, "Catholic Church must show it believes women are equal, speakers say", *Catholic News Service*, 18 December 2006.

³⁰ John Thavis, "Women chip Vatican's glass ceiling with increased numbers, influence", *Catholic News Service*, 2 March 2007.

³¹ See, for example, Roxanne D. Marcotte, "Identity, Power and the Islamist Discourse on Women: an exploration of Islamism and gender issues in Egypt", in Nelly Lahoud and Anthony H. Johns (eds), *Islam in World Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp 67-68, 86-88.

³² Christel J. Manning found that Catholic women conservatives who denounced feminism as "anti-Catholic" and opposed the ordination of women, at the same time insisted they were not against women's equality. ("Women in a Divided Church", *Sociology of Religion*, vol 58, no 4, Winter 1997, pp 2, 7). Online: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_n4_v58/ai_20573924/pg_15. accessed 13 May 2007).

³³ Archbishop Angelo Amato, secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had said on Vatican radio that the aim of the letter was to critique two current stands in feminism: one that emphasizes "a radical rivalry between the sexes" and the other that seeks to "cancel the differences between the sexes." (Daniel Williams and Alan Cooperman, "Vatican Letter Denounces 'Lethal Effects' of Feminism", *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 1 August, 2004). John Allen Jnr comments: "Any other organization would be embarrassed to issue a response to a cultural phenomenon that is now more than 40 years old. Yet this is the Vatican where one thinks in centuries." (John Allen Jnr, "Vatican document rejects combative feminism, seeks 'active collaboration' for men and women", *National Catholic Reporter*, 31 July 2004; and "The Word from Rome", *National Catholic Reporter*, 6 August 2004).

³⁴ Frances Kissling, quoted in Williams and Cooperman (1 August, 2004).

³⁵ Maloney, in Bayes and Tohidi (2001), pp 74-77.

³⁶ See Robert Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997), p 23. Rosemary Ruether records: "The Vatican has made contraception and abortion and women's ordination indiscussible topics and has required new bishops to take (secret) oaths not to be open to change on these issues.....hierarchical Catholicism views feminist theology with deepest suspicion" in *Women and Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p 190.

³⁷ Camille Paul, *Equal or Different?: Women, the Papacy and Social Justice* (Mulgrave: John Garratt Publishing, 1999), p 100.

³⁸ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Women and Sexuality* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), pp 26ff.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 6-7.

⁴⁰ Joanna Manning, *Is the Pope Catholic? A Woman Confronts Her Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1999), pp 76-79. Manning also notes that the Catholic bishops of Quebec came to much the same conclusion in their 1989 pastoral letter *A Heritage of Violence: A Pastoral Reflection on Conjugal*

Violence, for which all four members of the working team and fifteen of the sixteen resource persons consulted by the bishops were women.

⁴¹ Carter Heyward quoted in Clark and Richardson (1996), p 299. See also Gerard Mannion, “Cast in stone?”, *The Tablet*, 20 October 2007, pp 12-13 for a critique of the “immutability” of natural law.

⁴² Elizabeth A. Johnson, “The Maleness of Christ” in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (ed), *The Power of Naming* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1996), pp 307ff.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p 310.

⁴⁴ For example, see Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace, Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1998), pp 52, 189-191. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza draws attention to the power of myth which has a stabilizing, retarding function insofar as it sanctions the existing social order and justifies its power structures. She argues that it is precisely because such myths are important that they must be analyzed and demythologized in order to “liberate” them in *Discipleship of Equals* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), pp 72-73.

⁴⁵ Fiorenza (1993), pp 74-76.

⁴⁶ See Editorial, “Jarring history of the liturgy wars”, *National Catholic Reporter*, 30 June 2006.

⁴⁷ Manning (1999), pp 137ff. Pope Benedict XVI has continued to discourage the use of feminine symbols for God by declaring that since “mother” is not a title for God in the Bible, therefore the Church is disqualified from using it. (John Allen Jr, “Pope’s new book addresses key concerns for this pontificate”, *National Catholic Reporter*, 27 April 2007).

⁴⁸ Manning (1999), pp 126-127.

⁴⁹ Carr (1988), pp 139-140.

⁵⁰ Archbishop Celestino Migliore, quoted in “Equality and Complementarity between Men and Women”, *Vatican News Service*, 9 March 2007.

⁵¹ Benedict XVI, Papal Address to Laity Council, 15 November 2008, reported by *Zenit*, 23 November 2008. Online: <http://www.zenit.org/article-24343?l=english> accessed 27 February 2010.

⁵² An overwhelming number of submissions to the Australian Catholic bishops’ study (1994-1999) on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia called for greater participation by women in the Church, in particular through the involvement of women in decision making at all levels of Church life. (see *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*, Sydney: HarperCollins, 1999, p 386). Yet after 10 years of implementation there was little progress to report (see Sonia Wagner, *A Retrospective* – August 2009. Online: <http://www.opw.catholic.org.au/latest-news/23.html> accessed 19 February 2010.

⁵³ Haynes (1996), p 197.

⁵⁴ Camille Pampell Conaway and Anjalina Sen, *Beyond Conflict Prevention: How Women Prevent Violence and Build Sustainable Peace*. UN: Global Action to Prevent War and Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, 2005), pp 65-66. See also UN News Centre, “Women must play full part in peace-building, Security Council declares”, 5 October 2009. Online: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=32424&Cr=Gender&Cr1> accessed 27 February 2010.

⁵⁵ Manning (1999), p 162.

⁵⁶ See Conaway and Sen (2005), chapter 4.