

New Feminism

Mary Ann Glendon:

In the mid-1950s, a friend wrote to the American novelist Flannery O'Connor to complain about the sexist statements of a now long-forgotten priest. The letter-writer must have demanded an explanation of how one could belong to a church that exhibited such attitudes, for O'Connor's reply was swift and sharp: "Don't say the Church drags around this dead weight, just the Rev. So&So drags it around, or many Rev. So&Sos. The Church would just as soon canonize a woman as a man and I suppose has done more than any other force in history to free women."

O'Connor was thinking, no doubt, of the many ways in which the advance of Christianity had strengthened the position of women in the past. A remarkable accomplishment of the early Church was to gain wide acceptance for the ideal of permanent monogamy in cultures where polygamy was common and men were permitted by custom to put aside their wives.

Later, despite pressures from princes and merchants, the Council of Trent stood firm against marriages arranged without the consent of the spouses. Later still, continental European policies protecting mothers and children were influenced heavily by Catholic social thought.

Perhaps the novelist also had in mind Jesus' attitude toward women. When we read the apostolic writings today, we easily can overlook how radically our Lord departed from the culture of his time in his friendships with women, including public sinners. It is striking how many important conversations Jesus had with women, and how many of his most important teachings were first confided to his women friends.

Still, one might imagine the young letter-writer of the '50s impatiently replying, "All right, but what has the Church done for us lately?" Not even Flannery O'Connor guessed, in those preconciliar days, that the Catholic Church was about to become one of the world's most energetic champions of the freedom and dignity of women.

It was Vatican II that signaled a new awakening to women's concerns with a few cryptic statements, rich in implications. The Council spoke warmly of the idea that political and economic orders should extend the benefits of culture to everyone, aiding both women and men to develop their gifts in accordance with their innate dignity (*Gaudium et Spes*, §1). In their "Closing Message," the Council fathers proclaimed: "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved."

Contribution to Women

That the Church would be no mere passive observer of women's progress in the secular world became clear in the 1970s when she emerged as a vigorous proponent in international settings of social and economic justice for women, especially poor women. From the beginning, hers has been a distinctive voice in those discussions. She has been a

tireless advocate for those whose voices are seldom heard in the corridors of power - refugee women, migrant women, and mothers everywhere. Often she has stood practically alone in insisting that there can be no authentic progress for women without respect for women's roles in the family. That concern for women's family roles is in no way inconsistent with her full support of women's aspirations for participation in economic, social, and political life.

In the 1990s, the Holy Father embraced the cause of women's rights in specific terms. *His Apostolic Letter to Women* prior to the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference stated: "there is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancements, equality of spouses with regard to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic State."

His support was not limited to encouraging words. The pope was the first world leader to make a concrete commitment toward the goals - equality, development, and peace - of the 1995 UN women's conference. A few days before the Beijing meeting, he committed all three hundred thousand Catholic educational, health-care, and relief organizations to a priority strategy for girls and young women, especially the poorest, with a special emphasis on education. He pointedly included a strategy on the education of boys "to a sense of women's dignity and worth." He made a special appeal to women of the Church "to assume new forms of leadership in service . . . and to all institutions of the Church to welcome this contribution of women."

An Evident Love

By the mid-1990s, it was clear that one of the great achievements of the papacy of John Paul II has been to give greatly increased life and vigor to the Second Vatican Council's fertile statements on women. In a remarkable series of writings, he has meditated more deeply than any of his predecessors on the roles of women and men in the light of the word of God. The vocabulary of these writings came as a surprise to many. Not only did the pope align himself with women's quest for freedom, he adopted much of the language of the women's movement, even calling for a "new feminism" in *Evangelium Vitae*. In his 1995 "World Day of Peace Message," he observed that, "When one looks at the great process of women's liberation," one sees that the journey has been a difficult one, with its "share of mistakes," but headed toward a better future for women. In *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), which contains the main theological basis for his messages to women, he labeled discrimination against women as sinful, and repeatedly emphasized that there is no place in the Christian vision for oppression of women.

The tone of all these writings is dialogical. Their author invites women to reflect and meditate with him about the quest for equality, freedom, and dignity in the light of the faith and in the context of a changing society where the Church and the faithful are faced with new and complex challenges. No one who reads these messages can fail to be impressed by the evident love, empathy, and respect John Paul II holds for womankind, nowhere more manifest than in his compassionate words to unwed mothers and women

who have had abortions. The image that comes through is of a man who is comfortable with women, and who listens attentively to their deepest concerns. After meeting with the pope prior to the Beijing conference, Secretary-General Gertrude Mongella told reporters, "If everyone thought as he does, perhaps we wouldn't need a women's conference."

New Roles for Women

Where women's changing roles are concerned, the pope's writings contain no trace of the dogmatism that often characterizes the rhetoric of organized feminism and cultural conservatives alike. He affirms the importance of biological sexual identity, but gives no comfort to those who believe men's and women's roles are forever fixed in a static pattern. On the contrary, he has applauded the assumption of new roles by women, and stressed the degree to which cultural conditioning has been an obstacle to women's advancement.

Despite the pope's statements, and the Church's unquestioned but often unappreciated role as a defender of women's interests in society, many women have felt that the Church has been slow to examine her own structures and the behavior of her own representatives in the light of the Holy Father's meditations. A glance at recent developments, however, shows that striking changes have occurred under his leadership. More importantly for the long run, he has provided a powerful set of guidelines for further and deeper transformations. Neither has the pope failed to confront past injustices and all the Rev. So&Ss throughout history: "And if objective blame [for obstacles to women's progress], especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision."

Modeling this rededication to the Gospel vision in his own sphere, John Paul II has taken historic steps to raise the level of participation of religious and laywomen at all levels of the Church. In 1995 he appealed in strong terms to "all men in the Church to undergo, where necessary, a change of heart and to implement, as a demand of their faith, a positive vision of women. I ask them to become more and more aware of the disadvantages to which women, and especially girls, have been exposed and to see where the attitude of men, their lack of sensitivity or lack of responsibility may be at the root." He himself has made an unprecedented number of appointments of lay and religious women to pontifical councils and academies, providing an example for cardinals, bishops, and other priests throughout the world.

Obviously, one cannot expect the entire Church to be brought into conformity with the Gospel vision one year after the Beijing conference, or even thirty years after Vatican II. Cultural attitudes, custom, and sin are more stubborn than that. Progress will no doubt take place at different rates in different parts of the Church and her far-flung institutions. The journey will have its ups and downs, its false starts and blind alleys. Institutional change, after all, requires changes of mind and heart within individuals. As Pope Paul VI once said of the Roman curia, "It does no good to change faces if we don't change hearts." But it is already plain that a historic transformation is under way.

Those who take a legalistic, formal approach to the study of institutions easily can underestimate the profundity of this process of change. An organization's formal rules often give a misleading picture of the actual status of women within the group. (One need only think of the United Nations as an example of an organization whose practice has fallen far short of its official commitment to sexual equality!) In the Catholic Church, a certain formal diversity in roles has in practice been accompanied by an extraordinary increase in female participation in the life of the Church since Vatican II. All over the world, lay and religious women currently are serving in many roles that were once confined mainly or exclusively to priests, men, and boys. Women are performing a variety of pastoral duties in parishes. They are swelling the ranks of missionaries. Perhaps not since the first century a.d. have women been so actively and visibly involved in the life of the people called together by Jesus Christ.

As for leadership roles, the Church's health-care system, the second largest in the world, is managed almost entirely by Catholic women executives. Catholic women, religious and lay, are superintendents, principals and trustees in the world's largest provider of private elementary and secondary education. (The Catholic Church long ago pioneered women's education, opening up opportunities for young women in countries where others paid little or no attention to girls' intellectual development.) The Catholic Church has no comparative need to apologize in this regard.

Church agencies also compare favorably, where progress for women is concerned, to large secular institutions such as corporations, governmental bureaucracies, universities, and the United Nations. These remain slow in welcoming the contributions of women, especially at higher levels. Unlike many secular institutions, moreover, the Church does not expect laywomen to sacrifice their family lives. When Dr. Jane Matlary, a member of the Holy See's Beijing delegation, announced she had to return to Norway before the end of the conference in order to deal with a family crisis, she left with blessings and good wishes. Many a woman's progress in the business world has been permanently impaired by resolving such a conflict in favor of her family. But the Church takes a different view. John Paul II subsequently appointed Dr. Matlary to the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace.

Given that the Church is in a period of such great vitality for women (and the laity), it is puzzling that some who purport to desire the advancement of women within the Church have focused particularly on the male priesthood. In most cases the explanation involves a confusion about the nature of the Church and the priesthood - leading to inapposite analogies from the secular realm. The Church is neither a business corporation nor a government. Its province is neither profit nor power, but the care of souls. Obviously, the Church cannot be run on the same principles as General Motors or city hall.

Equal Call to Holiness

As for the priesthood, it is not a job, but a calling from God. It is not about power, but service. To be sure, this kind of calling is reserved to men, but the call to holiness is universal. Who would claim that Mother Teresa's call to holiness is inferior to, because it

is different from, that of the archbishop of Calcutta? Understanding of the ordination question has been further clouded, moreover, by a widespread failure to distinguish between the sacramental roles that are reserved to priests and the vastly broader range of pastoral and ministerial roles that can be performed by nonordained persons. Pastoral and ministerial roles today are more open than ever to women. Indeed, the Church in many places desperately needs and seeks the contributions of lay men and women in these areas.

Given that "the Church would just as soon canonize a woman as a man," and that so many crucial roles in the Church are not only open to women but going begging, why do some people continue to feel aggrieved by the male priesthood? As just mentioned, good-faith misunderstandings are regrettably common. In some cases, sad to report, the preoccupation with ordination has a darker side. The discussion at the 1995 conference of an American group founded in the 1970s to promote the cause of women's ordination is illustrative. It was painful to read in the *New York Times* that some women at that meeting argued that the goal of ordination should be abandoned, not because the Church had closed the question, but because, in the words of one divinity school professor, "ordination means sub-ordination to an elite, male-dominated, sacred, hierarchical order of domination." Others spoke in favor of persevering in the group's original aim, but the tone of their remarks was more anti-Church than pro-woman: "We need persons with chisels inside," said one religious sister, "chiseling away at that institution, or it's never going to come down." A professor of religious studies chimed in: "To ordain women is to give this rotten totalitarian system that the Roman Catholic Church has become the push into the grave." Needless to say, such sentiments are not shared by the great majority of American Catholic women, but they are given wide publicity by the media.

Has the Church done enough to conform its own structures to the principle that men and women are equal partners in the mystery of redemption? Of course not. Once again, Flannery O'Connor had it right. Forty years ago, when her proto-feminist friend railed against the Church's shortcomings, O'Connor replied, "what you actually seem to demand is that the Church put the kingdom of heaven on earth right here now." She continued:

Christ was crucified on earth and the Church is crucified by all of us, by her members most particularly, because she is a church of sinners. Christ never said that the Church would be operated in a sinless or intelligent way, but that it would not teach error. This does not mean that each and every priest won't teach error, but that the whole Church speaking through the Pope will not teach error in matters of faith. The Church is founded on Peter who denied Christ three times and couldn't walk on the water by himself. You are expecting his successors to walk on the water.

Four decades after those wise words were written, a Catholic woman impatient with the pace of change might consider asking herself: Where in contemporary society do I feel most respected as a woman, whatever my chosen path in life? What body of thought takes most seriously my deepest concerns? What organization speaks most clearly on behalf of all women, including those in poverty? Catholic mothers might consider asking

as well: Where do I feel most supported and encouraged in the difficult task of raising children under today's conditions? For my own part, I cannot think of any institution that surpasses the Catholic Church in these respects.

Neither can I think of any more fruitful principles to guide and promote further progress for women than those contained in Scripture and the Church's social teachings. In particular, the implications of combining John Paul II's writings on women with his writings on the family, the laity, human work, and social justice are truly revolutionary - and for the most part yet to be explored. These great writings stand open to the future.

To a great extent it will be up to the faithful, men and women as pilgrims together on this earthly journey, to move beyond Beijing. As "partners in the mystery of redemption," women and men must join in applying the teachings "ever old and ever new" to the task of building the "civilization of life and love." We must draw out the implications for modern feminism of a vision of the human person that encompasses the unique individuality of each of us, our solidarity with our fellow human beings, and our unity in the mystical body of Christ.

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