

TOPIC: GENDER ROLES WITHIN THE CHURCH

To begin...

Florence Nightingale in a letter Dean Stanley 1852:

'I would have given the Church my head, my hand, my heart. She would not have them. She did not know what to do with them. She told me to go back and do crochet in my mother's drawing-room; or if I were tired of that, to marry and look well at the head of my husband's table. You may go to the Sunday School if you like it, she said. But she gave me no training even for that. She gave me neither work to do for her, nor education for it.'

Women in Sydney for the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia Report 1997.

Many of us are restless and dissatisfied with the knowledge that no matter how much we are prepared to give to the Church – the Church is only prepared to take limited service from us. We know the Church needs all the help it can get ... but it seems that major potential providers of human resources available to the Church...- women - still aren't good enough to fully participate.

... Women get full support to work in a voluntary capacity in the roles men of the Church say we can have... There is almost nil support financially to educate ourselves for roles in ministry.

These are the voices of women 150 years apart calling for more meaningful roles in the Church. What have been some of the changes of women in society in this period? In the Church?

Why is the same question being asked for so long?

Women speak
to the Bishop'

Despite historical evidence that the early Christians gave leadership roles in the Church to women..., cultural norms quickly tempered the original freedom.... By the fourth century it was even being debated whether women could image God.... The non-differentiation between cultural norms and the Gospel message continues, as it has done throughout history, to keep women bound to subservient roles within the Church, in the mistaken belief that such cultural norms are part of revelation. p. 91

Patricia was a Pastoral Care Worker at a major hospital in Melbourne. She had been visiting Anna regularly over a few weeks. The day prior to Anna's departure from the hospital, Anna announces to Patricia that she wants to go to confession. Patricia says she will get a priest. Anna responds promptly, "You can forget about the priest. You're the one I know. I'm going to confession to you." Anna will not take "no" for an answer... p. 107

A submission from a parish in Melbourne urged:

Use the nurturing gifts of women more. Their potential to give birth is negated. In homes they are usually the peacemakers, the ones who build community. They have to budget, prepare meals, care for the sick, listen to the stories and visit the needy. Why can't they be involved in giving the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and Eucharist? (p. 109)

Read on:

Since the first wave of women's movements the Popes have been conscious of the restiveness of women. In his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (1963) Pope John XXIII assessed the women's movement as one of three significant signs of the time:

...it is obvious to everyone that women are now taking a part in public life... Since women are becoming every more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting human person both in domestic and in public life.

Pope John spoke of 'domestic' and 'public' life. However in Church life in 1962 when the second Vatican Council began in Rome all participants were male except for 23 women auditors with no voting rights. One Cardinal asked 'Where is the other half of humanity?' (Quoted in America Jan 17, 1976 p. 23)

More recently Pope John Paul II observed:

It is... urgently necessary to take concrete steps by providing room for women to participate in different fields and at all levels, including decision-making processes, above all in matters which concern women themselves. (Post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Vita Consecrata, 1996)

Graham English's cartoon

From Report came many recommendations to promote gender equality in the Church. The bishops' responded to the Report with a number of decisions they will adopt and also a list of proposals which bishops might wish to consider for action in their Diocese:

- The need to increase women's involvement in decision-making and leadership in the Church (Executive Summary 6)
- Re-examination of the nature of ministry with the exploration of the possibility of more inclusive role for men and women in ministry (Executive Summary 10)
- The possibility of providing rituals to be used in the absence of a priest in the prison and hospital apostolates. (Decision 4 of the Bishops' Conference)
- The inclusion of stories of women and their experience in the Scripture readings in the liturgy and the omission of those which place women in subordinate positions
- The promotion of the writing of women theologians
- A better balance of men and women on church organisations and in leadership roles at the national level. (Decision 1 of the Bishops' Conference)
- The Church keeping pace with the laws of the land in the area of discrimination
- The establishment of the Commission for Australian Catholic Women to implement the decisions of the bishops in response to the Report (Decision 9 of the Bishops' Conference)
It was established in 2001 with headquarters in Canberra.



If you had to choose three of the above to begin the process of achieving greater gender equality (or others you would have suggested to the bishops) what would they be and why?