

To begin...

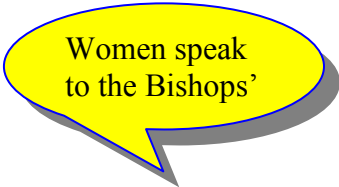
TOPIC: SOCIAL JUSTICE

We, the people of the United Nations, determine to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women, and of nations large and small. (Preamble, Charter of the UN)

The Sex Discrimination Act in Australia gave effect to the UN Convention in 1984. But some of the specific exemptions in the Act relate to religious institutions. Section 37 says 'the Act does not have any effect on the ordination or appointment of priest, ministers of religions or member of any religious order'.

In many countries cultural and religious traditions are used to justify the oppression of women. Give examples.

There are strong arguments for and against churches having this exemption from the Sex Discrimination Act in Australia? What do you consider to be some of them?



Women speak
to the Bishops?

It was noted that women participate, in greater numbers than men, in all aspects of the life of the Church, except in the ordained ministry:

Wherever the Church is there too you will find women – working in health and social services, fighting for social justice, prominent in education from nursery to university, a strong force in all professions. In the parish and diocese women, faithful followers of Jesus, are their backbone, far outnumbering men as they fill key positions with the exceptions of the priesthood - and priests and bishops are beginning to seek their advice. p. 66

Young women, together with all of us, note that the stance of the Church takes on issues of social justice is seriously undermined by the gulf that exist between what the Church says and what the Church actually does in its exclusion of women from many aspects of Church life and ministry. p. 198

At theological level, women no less than men, are created in the image of God. Women, no less than men, are called 'to share in the divinity of Christ', who humbled himself to share in our humanity'. Women, no less than men, participate in the benefits of Christ's salvation and are recipients of the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

To exclude women from some areas of the Church's ministry and governance, therefore, seems to me to be an injustice to them and an offence against God. It is also, however, a grave injustice to the members of the Catholic Community at large, who are thus deprived of the qualities of ministry and leadership that might be contributed by women. p.84

Two women from a parish in Brisbane presented a view of contemporary woman in disadvantaged circumstances:

This is the picture of the single, unmarried mother, the divorcee, perhaps even the lesbian mother, living in outlying suburbs, often working in less well-paid jobs or unemployed, and constantly disadvantaged in housing, transport, in social amenities, even at times not properly recognised in Church communities or in support by the Church...

A presentation by Aboriginal women in Tamworth highlighted the barrier of racism: *The biggest issue facing Aboriginal women in society and in the Church is racism. This applies to men also... they do not pass you the collection plate because we are Aborigines. They think that we do not have any money. People still continue to change lines when coming to Communion so that they do not receive from us... There are less and less Aboriginal children in the Catholic school.*

Need for Listening and Compassionate Church. There were strong requests for the Church being able to see both sides of an issue and for genuine compassion for the poor. The importance of listening, of being able to see both sides, was stressed. The vision of the Church with 'a compassionate heart' is expressed below in the words of a group leader of women from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Queensland:

As they spoke, these women did not really distinguish between, men, women or children in the matter of participation in the Church. If I could sum up what they were looking for from the Church, it would be a welcome, understanding, and a change to speak and be heard. They are very clear that the Church should have a compassionate heart. p.288

What is Catholic Social Justice Teaching?

Catholic Social Teaching sums up the teachings of the Church on social justice issues. It promotes a vision of a just society that is grounded in the Bible and in the wisdom gathered from experience by the Christian community as it has responded to social justice issues through history. Some key themes in Catholic Social teaching:

Human Dignity and the unity of the human family: Each person is created in the image and likeness of God and so has an inalienable, transcendent God-given dignity. It follows that each member of the human family is equal in dignity and has equal rights because we are all children of the one God.

Solidarity: We are all really responsible for each other.

The common good: Each social group must take account of the rights and aspirations of other groups and of the well-being of the whole human family.

Participation: Because of their intelligence and free will, people have both a right and a duty to participate in those decisions that most directly affect them.

Subsidiarity: The people or groups most directly affected by a decision or policy should have a key decision-making role. (Extracts from Sandy Cornish)



Discuss

What are some of the areas of injustice in Australian society where people within the Church are currently working? Globally?

What areas of injustice within the Church have been faced in the last few years?

In the course of preparation for the research the Bishops' Conference discussed whether this project was to be considered a third justice consultation (after Wealth and Youth)

In the light of the above comments by women and the outline of Catholic Social Teaching in what ways is the issue of women and the church a social justice issue?