

TOPIC: THE STATUS OF WOMEN WITHIN THE TRADITION OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

To begin...

This is a true story, which occurred about six or seven years ago in a parish in Sydney. The parish priest asked the parish secretary to get new altar garments for the altar servers. She sent a message to the school for them to come to her office to be measured. Within minutes an excited bunch of little boys tumbled into her office.

"Where are the girls"? asked this enlightened woman. There followed a few moments of stunned silence and then a chorus of protests "Girls can't be altar servers"! Grasping the teaching moment the secretary delivered a well-reasoned argument on the equality of all before God etc finishing with her piece de resistance, "Aren't the girls baptised the same as you boys"? Again there was a stunned silence then from the back this brave if desperate little voice; "No they use different water for them"!

Surely no one had taught that little boy such a "theology" yet he had already absorbed almost from the air he breathed the notion that the female was different and that difference precluded her from the exalted office of altar server.

(From Margaret Hinchey's written submission for the Report)

What view of girls was the boy echoing with his comments? How did his comment perpetuate the idea of 'exclusion' of girls/women?

How have women been included/excluded within the Catholic tradition?

What do you consider to be the essential changes needed if women are to be included more in the structural Church?

Women speak
to the Bishops?

The patriarchal system was identified as the greatest underlying barrier. A group of women from Moss Vale NSW wrote:

"We feel that the biggest barrier to women's participation in the Catholic Church is the 2000-year patriarchal tradition of the Church and its deep-rooted mistrust of women."
p.80

A group of women from Flaxton, QLD expanded this view:

The historical perspective to this issue is the most important one. The Bible and Church doctrine reflect the culture of Biblical times, which are not appropriate for our culture today. Thus the patriarchy and misogyny of Biblical times is still the barrier to equality in the Church now. This understanding is seen as central to the exclusion of women from participation in the Church. All other comments should be considered in the context of the socio-political structure of Biblical time, which created our religion doctrine, which is the basis of our interpretation of Scripture. p. 80

From young women studying theology:

Young women are discouraged by the fact that few roles exist to which they can aspire and few positions of direct influences are open to women: As young women with feminist ideals

we are being taught that we can aim for everything and anything but as Catholic women we face a conflict between this and what the Church's position on many issues affecting young women as well as those of great interest to young women. p. 312

Some views of women in the early Fathers and Doctors of the Church. These were great and good men but these views and beliefs about women affected the theology, spirituality, teaching and law-making taught in seminaries, down through the centuries even until the 2nd Vatican Council:

Tertullian 2nd-3rd Century:
Woman you are the devil's doorway.

St Augustine 4th-5th Century:
She is not in the image of God.

John Chrysostom 4th Century:
Among all savage beasts none is found so harmful as woman.

Gregory the Great 6th Century:
Woman is slow in understanding. Her use is two-fold; animal sex and motherhood.

St Thomas Aquinas 13th Century:
Woman is an occasional and incomplete being... a misbegotten male...woman is secondary in purpose (sex) and in material (body)

What is Patriarchy?

The fundamental and basic cause of the problem of women's status within the Church is the notion of **Patriarchy** – that social system based on the absolute power of the male head of household over wives, children, slaves, property etc. This grew up over many thousands of years and we have inherited the assumption that this arrangement of male dominance and female subordination was 'natural' i.e. ordained by divinity and therefore not subject to human revision.

Gradually over the centuries this absolute power was institutionalised in public systems and structures of societies so that men owned, controlled, shaped and administered all facets of life, culture, religion and society.

Taken from Margaret Hinchey's Written Submission for the Report. For further research, view the full text of her written submission, which at the Watac web site: www.users.bigpond.com/watac/



The third question asked of groups of people (women and men) in the Church for the Report was:

What are the barriers to women's participation in the Church?

How would you have answered this questions if asked for a written submission?