

# DISCRIMINATION IN THE CHURCH

By MARGARET HARVEY

THE WAY sends potential contributors a daunting summary of its aims, pointing out that in each issue topics will be discussed by people expert in their fields. How, I asked myself when I received this, does one qualify as an expert on discrimination against women? Discussing it with a (methodist) friend, she frivolously suggested that I begin with an impassioned plea to be allowed to marry the pope. 'But,' I said, 'I don't in the least wish to marry the pope'. 'Of course not', she replied, 'but it's the principle. And after all, you know what it's like being forbidden either to marry a pope or to be one'.

In fact one's chief qualification for writing on this matter seems to be that one is undoubtedly a woman. Most of my other qualifications, such as being single or specializing in teaching medieval history in a university, rather disqualify than qualify me as an expert, since they set me apart in experience from the vast majority of other english catholic women. Even the fact that I had most of my education before Vatican II will alter my viewpoint. Things feel very different now.

Yet on a question like this most of us have to depend largely on our own experience. It is important to remember that catholic women in Italy or Nigeria will experience the Church differently from me; but equally, the wife of a catholic working man in Jarrow would probably have written this article otherwise.

I will begin by making clear my assumptions. I assume that all catholics agree that human beings are equally human in the sight of God. I take it that we would also all agree that christianity obliges us to free ourselves from false selves which God did not intend us to be. There is now no room for playing a spurious part. For a christian, the basic question must always be 'What does God want of me?' The Church as an organized society is there to provide the environment in which one can be helped to become what God intended. Without Christ's example and help, we would have no true ideal of what being truly human means and would find it

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impossible to live up to the limited ideal we could have.

All this is easy to say, but it is another matter nowadays to decide what is meant by a 'spurious part' for a woman. Women's Lib. now tells us that most of the so-called 'feminine' roles and characteristics are not inherent in being biologically female, but are themselves conditioned. They are imposed on women by a male-dominated society. If the ideals of Women's Lib. were taken as a yardstick, the Church is extremely discriminatory in its attitudes to women. Even by the standards of modern secular society in the west, it is extremely restrictive. Women have no effective role in church government, cannot be priests, rarely study theology, and are limited in what they can do when they have. Those who control church government are men, and, what is more, men who cannot marry and who are seldom intimate with women.

If Women's Lib. is right, there ought of course to be equality of roles in the Church (women priests must be allowed); but also there ought to be no assumption that some characteristics or jobs are 'feminine' (and therefore not appropriate to a man) or 'masculine' (and therefore not appropriate to a woman). Our charity and tolerance ought to extend to an understanding that 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are mixed in differing amounts right across the human race, and that there is no rigid dividing line drawn by biology, and therefore not by God. Hence to insist that the 'female' role of the wife automatically means that she stays at home to look after the children, may run counter to the undoubted fact that some women, for instance those who do not feel maternal, think that they can only find fulfilment by combining marriage with a career.

In such an argument, St Paul's many sayings on the subordinate role of women in the Church or on the symbolic relation of Christ to his bride will be dismissed as being conditioned by his culture and environment. It will be pointed out that if there is now neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female,<sup>1</sup> St Paul did not fully understand the implications of that truth. Times have altered now and so must the Church. If the role of women is to be fixed as in the early Church, so too, the successor of St Peter ought to be a Jew.

The opponents of the Women's Lib. viewpoint, however, maintain that biology does make a fundamental difference to characteristics and, therefore, to appropriate roles. Father Fuddy Duddy will argue that woman's place, when not in a convent, is usually

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<sup>1</sup> Gal 3, 28.

in the home (and certainly if she is married). He will nail his argument with references to St Paul and to tradition. He will use 'the plan of God', where Women's Lib. uses 'conditioned by a male-dominated society', to describe most differences thought or known to exist between the sexes, where it is impossible at present to prove whether they are inherent or conditioned. One may argue that for some women fulfilment seems to require a combination of marriage with a career, or that anthropologists describe many societies where the roles are quite different from ours.<sup>2</sup> Father Fuddy Duddy will reply that the Church has the duty to present us with the ideal and with the will of God. If we refuse to live up to the ideal we are wrong. From this point of view it is not crucial for the theologian, considering the status of women, to ask modern christian women what they feel or what role they think God intends for them. This smacks of situation ethics and is tantamount to spiritual anarchy. Since all natural inclinations are prone to evil, naturally many deeply-felt aspirations will be wrong.

I have, of course, caricatured both sides of the argument somewhat. It would, however, be fair to say that 'discrimination' is a loaded word, and to take as a premise that there is discrimination in the Church begs most of the fundamental questions. Women's Lib. will consider that it is discrimination which keeps women out of the priesthood and (largely) in the home or, rather guiltily, in a career. Father Fuddy Duddy describes what is (or what was until recently) the situation of most women. Women's Lib. simply reiterates that these roles and characteristics are not essentially 'feminine'. To anyone attempting not to be too partisan, the problem is 'how is one to decide?'

Women's Lib. has performed a most useful service in pointing out that the area of the 'feminine' is one where all sorts of glib assumptions have been made without most people feeling any need to prove their statements. This is a major problem in the Church. What is depressing is not exclusion from the priesthood (which may be God's will) so much as the way that this exclusion is often defended with a frightening biblical fundamentalism. We were duly shocked when we saw photographs of Americans picketing their first black bishop with posters saying 'Christ did not have black apostles'. Somehow it is not so obvious what is wrong when people clinch their arguments with 'Christ did not have women apostles'.

<sup>2</sup> For example: Mair, Lucy: *Marriage* (London, 1971).

The same is true of many statements about sexuality. In *Humanae Vitae* we were invited to consider the grave consequences of the use of contraceptives. 'Responsible men can become more deeply convinced of the truth of the doctrine laid down by the Church' by reflecting on these consequences. One of them was:

That a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection.<sup>3</sup>

Reflection on this statement leads me to suppose that it means that in the past many men have been restrained from selfish behaviour only by the fear of too many children. Furthermore, the woman is envisaged as a passive recipient rather than as an active participant who might also expect to enjoy the relationship. There is no point in reopening old quarrels: it will suffice to say that many thousands whom these arguments were intended to convince must simply have found that the words bore no relation to their experience. The rights and wrongs of the teaching are not of course at issue here, but rather the terms in which authoritative statements about sexuality are made. Theoretically, one ought to receive any solemn papal statement with reverence and a readiness to obey simply because of its origin. In practise it is difficult to welcome any teaching receptively if it comes supported by arguments which seem to be invalid. It is easy to consider the teaching itself irrelevant in that case. From there it is but a short step to considering the authority making the statement irrelevant also. I think there is a real danger of this happening in the case of women and the priesthood. Authority at present seems to tend to defend the *status quo* by reiterating, as a clinching argument, facts about the role of women in the New Testament. One would feel easier about this sort of argument if one felt that authority understood the role of women in the Church today. There is much in public statements to make one feel that it does not.

Those who wish to alter the *status quo*, therefore, need, above all, to try to re-educate the clergy. There can be no doubt, in any case, that relationships between women and priests are unsatisfactory.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Regulation of Birth* (CTS, London, 1968) p 18.

A single woman in my position experiences frequently two social approaches from the clergy. One is a determined frivolity, often coupled with 'My goodness, how clever (meaning how terrifying) of you to have a doctorate'. The other (often found among the younger 'modern' clergy) is a determination to behave exactly like any other unmarried man in the name of brotherly love. The situation is probably not made easier for priests by the attitudes of women. It is very difficult for women of my age not to think of three sexes: men, women and priests. One's early training tells. I can still remember the salutary shock I got as a shy convent-bred first year undergraduate, when the university chaplain, that most courteous of english gentlemen Monsignor Van Elwes, opened a door to allow me to go first. Young women today are, I think, far less inhibited; but they often seem frighteningly ignorant about human psychological and emotional reactions to sex. But then the clergy, and particularly those of middle-age and over, are frighteningly ignorant too. One discovers in conversation that many men, trained perhaps twenty years ago, were never invited in their training to reflect on the life of the feelings, or on the positive value of celibacy. For too many clergy, celibacy has been in a sense involuntary, so that they are now merely unmarried rather than celibate. Nothing in their training led them to discover openness to others of either sex; and in gatherings of parish clergy I have been moved to find that sheer loneliness is one of the greatest burdens. Not surprisingly, many have been finding recently that the burden is too heavy to bear. All too often, however, the reasons for rushing straight into matrimony would come more suitably from an adolescent than from a supposedly mature man. Here again, the most depressing feature is that those who have the most authority in the Church seem the most likely to be at fault.

There seems little doubt that we are all in the throes of revolutionary changes in sexual attitudes, some of which no doubt are to be deplored. What is needed from authority in this chaos is a re-statement of the positive value of chastity and of celibacy. What we get, all too often, is a denunciation of backsliding weakness, or the opinion that people were more moral when the consequences of sexual license were more tangible. This is a very worrying situation. Young catholic women in my generation did not often sleep with their boy friends. Often they refrained out of fear. I would very much doubt if this made us any more 'moral' as a generation than the young women today who often do. Inhibition and fear are quite

different from chastity. In pulpit, press and public statements however the two often seem to be confused; and it is therefore not surprising if both many clergy and many people outside the Church do not find the ideal of celibacy any more inspiring than the 'immoral' young find the ideal of chastity.

We have, therefore, a situation in the western Church where those with the most power and authority to make changes, or to defend the *status quo* in a way likely to be accepted, are the least fitted by training to understand the modern ethos. In secular society, for better or for worse, revolutionary changes have been taking place for a long time in the economic and social status of women. In the Church, tradition still asks women to accept a situation which is being increasingly attacked and eroded in the western world. In that world, many of the barriers between the sexes have already fallen. Equal pay, the pill and pressure from many quarters will probably cause more to fall soon. This may or may not be a good development, but it is a development with which women have to live, and where the young, including the young clergy, have to be presented with ideals which they feel can answer their needs.

What, then, should the Church be doing? The basic question, I suppose, concerns authority. We need serious and open-minded reconsideration of the New Testament view of women. How fundamental is it that Christ was a man and in what sense does it matter that the president of the eucharist or the minister of other sacraments, who represents Christ, is a man? How important is the symbolism here? I do not pretend to know the answer to these questions, but it is perhaps significant that I had not even thought of them at all until they were pointed out very recently by a priest. As a woman, Christ simply represents to me the perfect human being. He had to be one sex or the other. I have thought, I suppose, that he could not have been female if he was to do the job he was born for in the culture to which he belonged. That many priests regard this symbolism as the most clinching argument against women priests came as a shock, and the fact that I had not yet come across the argument suggests a failure of communication somewhere. Maybe the laity never listen. The symbolism, of course, could be more important than one realizes, and it is perhaps that which is really being expressed when many people (women as well as men) show great uneasiness about, for instance, confession to a woman. On the other hand, symbolism has to express also what is happening in all the rest of life, and relations between the sexes, as well as the

status of women in society, are changing fast. We need to reconsider why in some areas culture and environment are allowed more influence in theology (attitudes to slavery are a case in point), whereas in others, like the status of women, the New Testament tends to be taken as the final word. In St Paul's day, to say that there was now neither slave nor free meant that the condition of being enslaved did not affect one's status as a christian. It did not mean that one's fellow christians felt it a duty to work for one's freedom or for the abolition of slavery as an institution. Nowadays, it does mean that. It has been very common for the Church not to realize for a long time the full implications of the message she is preaching. An example<sup>4</sup> is the way the marriage law developed. In the tenth century, it would not have been universally clear to christians, even to those in authority, that consent was essential to christian marriage, or that mere intercourse did not make people married. By the thirteenth century consent had become clearly essential. None the less, as a hangover from an earlier age and largely to prevent concubinage, it was common in the thirteenth century for couples found in fornication to be required by the church courts to contract a conditional marriage. The condition was that if they slept together again, they would be married by that act. This was objectionable, of course, because it used a sacrament as a penal sanction and ran counter to all the rest of the theory of marriage, with its emphasis on consent. Not surprisingly, the practice died out, no doubt because canon lawyers gradually recognized their inconsistency. Nowadays, Women's Lib. is saying that there is a similar inconsistency in upholding our equality as human beings, while denying to female human beings the roles which the males have. Those who are trying to defend the status quo must, therefore, restate the argument in a way which will win support from women living in the modern secular world.

If the authoritative basis were clearer, other matters could be considered. Women's Lib. may have misunderstood equality in any case. Certainly, equality does not preclude being different, although few human beings have enough courage and generosity consistently to accept this. We need to know much more about the differences made by biology and produced by environment, and catholics need to reflect deeply upon those differences. What is at issue, after all,

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<sup>4</sup> On what follows see particularly Helmholz R. H.: *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1974) pp 172 ff.

is the nature of the equality which God intends and the roles which we ought to be attempting.

I find it difficult to believe that the clergy with power will be able to perform this task, because of the defects of their earlier education. It is urgently necessary that those in charge of clerical training reconsider – and be urged by the laity to do so – the relations of the clergy with women and the way in which celibacy is presented as an ideal. No doubt this is more often done now in any case, but one does not yet notice the effect because the newer generation of priests have not yet obtained power. I am not one of those who think that a married clergy, or at least optional celibacy, would solve all problems, though investigation of the experience of other churches would help to reveal advantages and disadvantages of practices which we do not have. In theory, however, celibacy ought to free a priest to be open to others in a way which mere singleness does not. Dr Jack Dominionian has pointed out possible ways forward in this area in his *The Church and the Sexual Revolution*.<sup>5</sup> This is a powerful plea for the abandonment of the attempt to keep people ‘virtuous’ by negative sanctions and fear, and to educate them into an acceptance of sexuality as good and a commitment to positive love, whether married, single or celibate. If the clergy of the Roman Church really understood celibacy as they ought, they would present a convincing refutation to those who now say very loudly that man cannot be human without regular sexual intercourse (never mind with whom). This is one of the most dehumanizing modern tendencies, and in such a climate a celibate clergy could be a collective ‘witness’ for human values which society, with its emphasis on the physical and its fear of commitment, is not really prepared to recognize. If books like Dr Dominionian’s had effect on clerical education, however, clerical attitudes to women would certainly alter, and with them, no doubt, so many defences of tradition which simply do not convince because they are not related to most women’s experience of life.

No doubt women, too, need to reconsider their attitudes. For too long our Lady was held up to girls as the model submissive housewife or a model submissive nun, without any consideration of the courage it took to agree to become pregnant without a husband. Women’s Lib., however, has an appearance of strident aggressiveness to match the male chauvinism it denounces. Neither submis-

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<sup>5</sup> Dominionian, J.: *The Church and the Sexual Revolution* (London, 1971).



siveness nor aggressiveness are likely to bring constructive results in the Church. Such are our structures at present that if, for instance, women priests were now ordained, it would be more than likely that they would be forced on unwilling, unprepared parishes, rather in the way the new liturgy has been. Everything is forbidden until it becomes compulsory. I do not think that the question of equality, much less ordination of women, is a burning issue among us. There is probably not an enormous queue of potential applicants. None the less, the equality in the secular world, with its many possible variations, is a question about which christian women must reflect – to have several children or not, to be a working mother or not, to battle for recognition or not: on most of these matters women are well-equipped to inform the clergy of their viewpoint, and in order to do this they must make sure that they know their clergy. They must also labour to make sure that the clergy know something of what it means to be a woman and to be a christian.