

SYNODAL OBSERVATIONS

Under the general title of The Ministry of Women in the Church, *Fr Jean Beyer* has examined briefly the current theological and canonical state of the question, and has added a postscript, in which he shows precisely how the recent papal documents, on the reform of certain ministries conferred on candidates for the priesthood and for the diaconate, have helped to clarify the present situation, and have opened the way for a more positive development towards fuller participation by women in ecclesial ministries as such. At the same time, *Sister Begoña Isusi*, an apostolic religious with wide experience of current conditions in Europe and South America, has offered her personal reflections on the difficulties and frustrations of women like herself, who have committed themselves to the consecrated life of mission in the Church.

It is encouraging to know that some of these problems were ventilated with seriousness at the last international synod of bishops, held in Rome during September/October 1971, in the context both of the priesthood in the Church and of the christian community's role in fostering justice and peace in the world.

We are glad to publish here two important interventions at the synod, one by the president of the conference of canadian bishops, the other by a representative of the conference of the United States hierarchy. They should serve to give fresh heart to the vast numbers of apostolic women religious, who must so often feel that they are the only body in the Church who are taking renewal and adaptation really seriously.

Intervention of his Eminence George B. Flahiff C.S.B.,
Cardinal Archbishop of Winnipeg, Canada, on the
ministry of women.

WE HAVE spoken of the ministry of the whole Church. Several speakers have dealt with the increasing diversification of the priestly ministry, and also with the new ministries that may be proper to the laity. But no-one has raised the question of the possibility of a ministry of women in the Church. And the question is: Are new or changing ministries to be limited to men?

It is not my intention to deal extensively with this aspect. The

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standard answer to that, twenty years ago, was the following: a) Christ was a man, not a woman; b) He chose twelve men as his first ministers; c) St Paul has clearly said that women must keep silent in the Church; therefore they cannot be ministers of the word;¹ d) St Paul equally said that woman, having sinned first in the garden of Eden, can have no authority over man;² e) The Church had feminine ministers, especially in the oriental church, up to the sixth century, but they were not really ordained ministers. And the conclusion was that ministry is a man's work. Let the women be contented with the part of the blessed Virgin and of the group of women around Jesus and the apostles: let them be faithful and obedient servants.

It is generally accepted that this historical argument cannot be considered as valid today. We know that the priesthood of the Old Testament was all-male, on account of a legitimate reaction against fertility cults in Canaan, whose priesthoods were mostly feminine. We know that Jesus would not change so radically the social perception of men and women, although St Paul is going to insist later that there are no more male and female before God.³ We also know that many of Paul's statements concerning church discipline are sociological, and not doctrinal, as when he insists on women wearing a veil on their heads in church.⁴ As far as I know, therefore, there is no dogmatic objection to reconsidering the whole question today.

Women after Vatican II

Certain affirmations from the decrees of the Council, especially in the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, and in the decree on the apostolate of the laity,⁵ made categorical statements against all discrimination against women in the Church. But we must recognize that many excellent catholic women in particular and other persons as well, find that no notable effort has been made to implement this teaching. They patiently await, as a gesture of authenticity, the revision of the code of canon law and the elimination of all passages in it which reflect some inferiority on the part of women.

The change in the position of women in contemporary society, a change partly brought by the influence of christian thought, makes it necessary to deal with this question honestly and seriously.

¹ 1 Cor 14, 34-5.

² 1 Tim 2, 12-13.

³ Gal 3, 28.

⁴ 1 Cor 11, 3-16.

⁵ Cf *Gaudium et Spes*, 9, 20, 60; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 9.

But I am not speaking specifically about it. Perhaps this question will be raised when we come to treat of 'justice in the world'. I raise the question only of a possible rôle for women in the ministry or, better, in the ministries of the Church.

Women and the ministries

In view of what has been said of a growing diversification of the ministries of the Church, I do not see how we can refrain from raising the question of the possible rôle of women in these ministries. We would be failing in our duty towards more than half of the Church if we did not at least *speak* of the subject.

I recognize that the position of women has not evolved at the same pace in all parts of the world; and it may be difficult to have a universal view or perception of this evolution. But it has changed enough in many countries to oblige us, as representatives of the whole Church, to pose two questions regarding the possible ministry of women in the Church.

Given this growing recognition both in law and in fact of the equality of women with men, and the recognition likewise of the injustice of all discrimination against women, should we raise or should we not raise the question whether women too are to have a place in the sacred ministries of the Church as they exist or as they are developing? Secondly, with the emergence of new forms of ministries, under the direction of the holy Spirit, to serve a society that is developing rapidly, can we foresee or at least allow for ministries for women that are even better adapted than the traditional ones to their nature, their gifts, their competence, both in the society and in the Church of the modern world, of which the *Church in the modern world* spoke so eloquently?⁶

To my mind the question is too serious at the moment for our Synod to pass it over in complete silence. On the other hand, a cursory or superficial treatment of it would be inadequate; indeed, it could be interpreted as one more expression of male superiority.

After informal consultation extended over several months, the bishops of Canada invited highly qualified representatives of Canadian Catholic women from all parts of our country to discuss the question. Their views and their aspirations were presented clearly, constructively and respectfully. In a general assembly that was held in September, 1971, the episcopal conference of Canada almost

⁶ *Loc. cit.*

unanimously adopted the recommendation which, in the name of this same conference, I hereby submit to this Synod:

That the representatives of the canadian catholic conference urge the forthcoming synod of bishops to recommend to the holy father the immediate establishment of a mixed commission (that is, composed of bishops, priests, laymen and laywomen, religious men and religious women) to study in depth the question of the ministries of women in the Church.

We do not wish to prejudge the question. We do not know if further action should follow. And we certainly have no recommendation regarding the time or the mode of such action. But, despite a centuries-old social tradition against a ministry of women in the Church, we are convinced that the signs of the times – and one of those signs is that already many women perform many pastoral services and with great success – strongly urge a study at least both of the present situation and of the possibilities for the future. Unless such a study is begun at once, we may find ourselves behind the course of events. This and this only is the intention of the recommendation that the canadian bishops make to this synod.

Intervention of his Excellency Leo C. Byrne, Archbishop of St Paul, Minnesota, U.S.A.,
on the rights of women, especially in the Church

I AM SPEAKING in my own name but with the agreement of my colleagues of the american delegation. I speak as the chairman of a newly-established committee of bishops of our national episcopal conference on the rights of women in society and especially their rights in the Church. Therefore I am speaking of the influence that women can wield in the Church and in the world: an influence for justice, peace and development in the world, and an influence for the Church's mission of salvation, of sanctification of life and of leavening of life, an influence that up to the present has been sorely under-estimated and all too slighted. I speak in favour of justice for this half of mankind both in the civil world and in the world of the Church.

Women's rights in the civil world

In *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII noted the growing self-awareness of women and their desire for self-determination as one

of the signs of the times. 'Women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role, or allowing themselves to be exploited, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons'.⁷

In some countries, much progress has been made in women's struggle to achieve the recognition of their basic human rights. More opportunities for education, for professional work in the field of law, medicine and other professions, are open to them than ever before. But in other societies, either by law or by custom, women still occupy a position of enforced inferiority. Making allowances for legitimate variations in social custom, one must still insist on the basic christian principle that women are essentially equal to men, and any law or custom to the contrary is unjust. Even in the so-called 'advanced' countries which pay lip-service to the principle of equality, women in fact often occupy an inferior position and are subject to exploitation. It is not uncommon, for example, for women in the working world to be paid far less than men for doing the same job. Also, sexual exploitation of women by men is widespread in many western countries, and has even taken on the aspects of an organized commercial industry. Apart from ethical considerations, one must protest about this, because it once again places woman in the role of an object to be used and exploited by man.

Quite correctly, modern woman does not define herself as 'inferior' to 'superior' man, but as 'different': as a unique human person in her own right. This is wholesome and eminently christian. It is 'liberation' in its best sense. We read in the bible that God created man to his own image and likeness: man and woman he created them. One and equal in their resemblance to God, man and woman are equally destined to be children of God in full participation of his life. All human differences are transcended in equality in Jesus Christ, an equality which offers to all the same means and possibilities of encountering the Lord, of living the fulness of his life, of answering his call to live as members of the Church.

Recent psychological research indicates the radical differences between the attitudes of the male and the female. However, it must be stressed again that this is a question of 'difference', not of 'inferiority' or 'superiority'. Women should assert the unique value

⁷ *Pacem in Terris*, 41.

of their womanhood; they would be making a serious mistake if they simply appropriated to themselves all aspects, including the worst aspects, of male culture and male norms (which are often highly dubious in themselves).

It is necessary to oppose and eradicate all forms of legal or customary injustice which impose an inferior place on women. Certainly, all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approved by the United Nations in 1949 should be recognized as belonging to women in all parts of the world.

The rights of women in the Church

As archbishop Alberto said in his *relatio*, 'Before talking justice to others, let us set our own house in order'. What can the Church do in the matter of women's rights? I should like to come directly to a few proposals for your consideration and approval.

Episcopal conferences should undertake serious studies of their own national cultures, and of church law and practice, in order to eliminate any form of infringement on the rights of women in civil or ecclesiastical life. This study should investigate the entire area of implications of women's rights in both civil and church society. It should be complemented but not replaced by a study of an international commission established by the holy Father, as suggested by Cardinal Flahiff. These studies should investigate the possibility of advancing qualified women to the service of the Church. (I shall submit to the synodal secretariate a separate memorandum on this point.) No argument should be used to exclude women from any service to the Church, if it stems from male prejudice, blind adherence to merely human traditions that may have been rooted in the social position of women in other times, or questionable interpretation of scripture.

The Church should take care that in its expression of attitudes toward sex, marriage, family planning, etc. it recognizes the dignity of women and her christian understanding of herself.

The Church, universal, national and local, should seek out ways to give women representation and greater and more meaningful participation in the liturgy and in the Church's activities and organizations.