

# Listening to women's experience

## A challenge for Jesuits

*Paula Terroni*

IF THE ECUMENICAL DECADE in solidarity with women failed to gain much visibility in the Catholic Church at either national or local level, the same could not be said of one of the documents of the 34th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus, entitled 'Jesuits and the situation of women in church and civil society'.<sup>1</sup> It generated considerable attention in and beyond the Church, and was the one document of the Congregation which was taken up and discussed at any length in the broadsheets. Why did it stir up such interest? Probably because no one really expected the Jesuits to address an issue like this in the course of a Congregation called mainly to consider questions internal to the law of the Society of Jesus.

This is the first time that a group of men so influential in the Church have joined their voices to those who have carried women's concerns in their minds and bodies throughout the ages. The fact that the document comes from an officially approved religious order, from a powerful international group with pastoral experience which spans the world, gives it a credibility which is impressive. Moreover, the General Congregation situates the issue in the context of the promotion of faith and justice to which the Society of Jesus has been actively committed for the last twenty-five years and more. It is not seen as a peripheral question, therefore, but something which is integral to a mission based on the values of the gospel. It is significant that, by this statement, the Jesuits are making a serious commitment to work for social change, not just in relation to the situation of women in Church and civil society but within the internal structures of the Society of Jesus itself.

### *Welcoming the voice of truth: the cost of listening*

As the leader of a women's congregation formed in the Ignatian tradition I welcome this document with enthusiasm. I welcome it first of all because it speaks with the voice of truth. The reality it names goes to the heart of women's experience as human beings.

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Throughout the world women of all cultures, of all ages and social classes, embody a unique experience that has, for too long, been denied. The movement towards liberation, not just from terrible oppression and violence, but from a stifling of their particular strengths and gifts, is something that is now irrepressible. It is a tide that will not be stemmed, because what so many women now know about who they are and what they can be, can never again be ignored. And because it is known it must be expressed. The wholeness to which many women and men now aspire demands it.

But the document has more than a symbolic value. It is more than a mark of progress, an indication that at least some male religious are taking note of what women have been saying for years. I also welcome it because it seeks to address men who are committed to working in and for the Church. It is, therefore, addressed through them to the Church as a whole. And if the Jesuits respond positively to this message, and really do see it as an integral element of a mission committed to faith and justice, then it will have considerable influence on others in the Church. It is, however, not easy to change the habits and perceptions of the past. Declarations of intent, even those which have the stamp of authenticity, have to be matched by action. Here I confess to feeling a certain hesitation. In welcoming the document, I want to raise a few questions by way of response.

The document is basically a call to listen. But what does it really cost to listen to women's experience? For the Jesuits? For the Church? In this article I will first briefly introduce the text and make a few comments on its strengths and weaknesses. Then, by concentrating on the experience of one particular congregation of women in the Church, I want to make a point about what it costs to listen. Listening is not a matter of picking up more information, or more data, but of bringing about a whole shift of perception, a whole shift of our religious and ecclesial culture. And that should make us all feel either profoundly uncomfortable or very encouraged, depending on where we stand.

### *Origins of the document: a challenge to justice*

Where did the Jesuit document spring from? It is clear from the way it is presented that it arises from reflection on experience and from discernment of the prompting of the Spirit. It is interrelated with other movements, other initiatives, part of a growing consciousness of the way women and men see things now. The Jesuits have received insights and awareness from what Margaret Wheatley calls

an invisible 'field' that links together people inspired by a common vision.<sup>2</sup> It is often hard to pinpoint exactly where this vision resides, or even how it is communicated, but it is a powerful force nonetheless, and one which gathers momentum as awareness grows. It has a certain coherence about it, and various factors converge to give it reality. The efforts of many women, in different parts of the world, have created this 'field'. The Jesuit document does little more than acknowledge what women have known in their struggles for decades. But this is not to underestimate the importance of a statement by the Society of Jesus which sets out to challenge its own members on an issue of justice.

To say that the document came 'out of the blue' would not be entirely true. The 33rd General Congregation had made a brief mention of the 'unjust treatment and exploitation of women' amongst a whole list of new pastoral needs which Jesuits were called to address. But the point was not developed. When the 34th Congregation convened it was expected that central to its deliberations would be an expansion of the Jesuit mission of faith and justice, to include issues connected with culture and with interreligious dialogue. What was not expected was that Jesuits would draw attention to the situation of women in Church and civil society as a 'central concern of any contemporary mission which seeks to integrate faith and justice'. This was the only one of some twenty additional proposals, over and above those already being considered by the various official commissions, to be accepted by the Congregation. Indeed it was warmly welcomed, and a small sub-committee immediately set to work.

Since the document is the first serious statement by a major religious order on the situation of women in Church and civil society, it is worth presenting a brief summary. Although addressed primarily to Jesuits, the introduction notes that this matter 'involves men and women everywhere' and must therefore be a matter of 'personal concern to those who work with us in our mission, especially lay and religious women'. The first major section addresses the problem of the 'domination of men in their relationship with women' by drawing attention to various examples of discrimination, from unequal wages to dowry deaths and the murder of unwanted infant girls. Despite some improvement, largely because of the efforts of women themselves, much discrimination is still 'embedded within the economic, social, political, religious, and even linguistic structures of our societies'. Prejudice against women assumes different

forms in different cultures, but is a universal reality. In fact, in many parts of the world there is an all too distinctive 'feminine face of oppression'.

This section of the document shows great sensitivity to the enormous suffering endured by many women and to the fact that, while the poor and the underprivileged suffer everywhere, there is a particular dimension to the suffering women experience simply because they are women. The Jesuits took something of a risk in writing of women in this way; many women recognize this and give them credit for doing so.

The document sees this situation as a major issue of justice which demands a prophetic response. Its reflections begin with the text from Genesis 1:27 which speaks of God's 'original plan' for 'a loving relationship of respect, mutuality, and equality between men and women'. Reference is made here to the 'Church's social teaching' in support of this ideal, but this section is not altogether convincing. One or two encouraging words of exhortation about making the 'essential equality of women a lived reality' sit uneasily with the actual situation of powerlessness which most women experience at the heart of the Church's everyday life and liturgy. Why is this section not stronger? I can only imagine that, out of a genuine desire to be true to their tradition of 'thinking with the Church', the Jesuits deemed it inappropriate to say too much. The document is content with a few generalities and much is left unspoken. It seems a missed opportunity.

### *A call to conversion and solidarity with women*

In the following paragraphs some honest appraisal is offered of the Church's responsibility for the alienation of women. The Jesuits then face their own responsibility in redressing the balance in favour of a more just treatment of women. This is followed by what is, in many ways, the heart of the document: its call to conversion. The Jesuits acknowledge that they 'have been part of a civil and ecclesial tradition that has offended against women'. They now wish 'to react personally and collectively' to do whatever is possible 'to change this regrettable situation'. There is then a warm acknowledgement of the contribution made by many women – especially religious congregations which are part of the 'extended Ignatian family' – to retreat direction, the ministry of the Spiritual Exercises, and the reshaping of 'our theological tradition in a way that has liberated both men and women'.

No single way forward is proposed. Instead attention is drawn to differences in culture and the need for 'real delicacy'. The major point being made is that 'there is no substitute for listening'. A number of 'practical ways' for Jesuits to align themselves in solidarity with women are suggested. These include explicit teaching about the essential equality of men and women in colleges and universities, support for liberation movements, involvement with women in decision-making and 'specific attention to the phenomenon of violence against women'. But it is also noted that other questions about the role of women in civil and ecclesial society will arise in time and that constant research is needed to clarify 'the underlying issue of justice'. The conclusion thanks all women, especially women religious, who have contributed to the life of the Society and commits Jesuits explicitly to 'regard this solidarity with women as integral to our mission'. It ends by returning to the scriptural theme and Paul's vision of a future in which there is 'neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3:28).

Wisely the Jesuits do not claim to speak for women, but rather, to allow what they say about women to be informed by their own experience, and by what they have learned about themselves through their conversations with women. The situation of women in Church and civil society has become a basic question of justice, and it can only be appropriately addressed when men and women engage in honest dialogue, and are prepared to believe in the validity of each other's lived experience. It is this matter which calls each one of us to conversion.

### *Opening up a dialogue: the charism of listening*

In what follows I want to open up this dialogue by sharing something of the experience of the women in the congregation to which I belong, the Faithful Companions of Jesus.

We are an international community founded in France in 1820, which now has members in sixteen countries of the world. Our foundress, Marie Madeleine Bonnault d'Houet, a young widow with a son, was very much influenced by the Jesuits. After many struggles, she managed to obtain authorization to adopt the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus and apply them to the new congregation she founded. Marie Madeleine saw the need for women religious to be involved in the ministries of education, retreat work and missionary activity, and these three strands continue to be the focus of our apostolic activity today. Perhaps the invitation to 'listen to women'

offered by the Jesuit document struck a chord in me because 'listening' is at the heart of our particular charism of companionship. What I want to share here is our experience as women in the Church who seek to develop a ministry which recognizes and values the particular gifts that, as women, we are able to put at the service of the gospel.

When the Jesuits challenge their members, and by implication, other men in the Church, to listen 'carefully and courageously', it is not just a matter of making amends to women who feel they have been ignored and hurt. By listening to one another we open up a whole depth or dimension of the human condition which otherwise would be completely missing. When people have the opportunity to articulate their experience, their desires and aspirations, when they have a sense that they have been heard, then something new is generated, something that did not exist before. The very act of listening enables them to focus on what they really want and gives them the courage to believe that their desires are important. Let me illustrate this point by some examples of the sort of work I have experienced our sisters doing, especially in their ministry as a listening presence to other women.

### *Working with women's groups in different parts of the world*

We have experience of working with women in different parts of the world. I think, for example, of women's groups in southern Bolivia, in the province of Tarija. Some of our work here is in pueblos, with collections of families scattered across a breathtakingly beautiful but harsh mountain environment. What we have found is that the greatest agents of change in these communities are the women. They have the responsibility for the survival and well-being of the family on a daily basis. The men are often away, sometimes as herdsmen or travelling for work to distant towns. These women are terribly poor in terms of material resources, but they would be the envy of many for their courage and resilience in situations of adversity. As part of their ministry the sisters encourage the women to come together, to share their stories, to listen to each other. In so doing, they identify how best to move forward to create a better life for themselves and for their children.

One favourite way of sharing their life experience with one another is through socio-drama, little plays that depict the realities they are living. It is enormous fun, as well as providing a moving and often painful insight that goes to the heart of the women's

experience. The solidarity that is built up in these women's groups provides a modest but real impetus for working for a more just social reality. Simply by listening to one another they are able not only to articulate what they want, but also to identify possible solutions. Not solutions offered by outsiders who think they know what the women need, but solutions that arise from the listening, from the respect for the validity of what is heard, and from the courage and confidence generated in the interchange.

Our experience in ministry, with regard to inter-cultural dialogue, takes many forms – from the Inuit people of the Canadian Arctic to inner-city schools in various parts of the world. Here, too, the emphasis needs to be placed very much on listening. The Inuit people, with their rich culture so connected to the land and to the rhythms of nature, now mostly live in settlements, and they are exposed to many influences that are alien to their traditional way of life. The sisters find that the demands made by inter-cultural dialogue raise some very delicate issues. Our work, mainly counselling, is very much a collaborative ministry, which seeks to strengthen the bonds which hold this society together. There is a great need to accompany the women as they struggle with the complexities of balancing traditional values with appropriate development, and as they share their stories which encourage one another to create a new reality for themselves and their families.

Perhaps, when we collaborate with people of a culture that is so different from our own, we come to see how important it is to value the experience of the other. We do not understand fully what shapes the thinking of people whose language and life experience is unique, but we come to a greater richness of understanding of what it is like to be human simply by listening with openness to another's story.

Of course, it is not necessary to go as far as the Arctic to have this experience. A girls' comprehensive school in inner London with pupils from forty-six countries speaking twenty-eight different languages provides sufficient opportunity for inter-cultural dialogue. Here again, the fostering of a climate of listening among a group of young women so diverse is both challenging and enlivening. Whether it be through helping families to come to terms with the integration of their own national culture with that of the host country, or brokering exchange between pupils whose countries of origin are in conflict, there is no substitute for listening and allowing others to be heard. The energy that grows from people coming

together in honest, if sometimes painful, conversation is worth all the effort which is necessary.

A very different culture is to be found in Indonesia where Christians form a tiny minority. In theory the state recognizes and affirms religious pluralism. In reality, nothing is so simple, especially when economic unrest disturbs the uneasy status quo. Yet I sense among the young Indonesian women of our congregation an immense desire to be in dialogue with the Muslim majority. It is not that they have clear ideas about how to develop such relationships adequately, but they know it has got to be part of their future. They want to know more about Islam and to learn from Muslims. Our neighbours in Yogyakarta are all Muslims, and we share much with them in simple ways. We participate in women's groups, and take part in celebrations and festivals, as well as the daily events of the *kampung* or local neighbourhood. Ordinary human activities are the occasion of meeting across the divide of religion, whether they be in the hospital, at baby-weighting sessions, or in the market. They are privileged moments for meeting not a Muslim, but a woman, a friend, a neighbour who happens to be a Muslim.

These encounters and opportunities for meeting are only fragile strands, but when woven together they create a web that is capable of holding our diversity and which enables us to move, in good time, to a deeper level of communication. What I referred to earlier as the amorphous 'field' connecting women across cultures and religions grows the more it is shared.

### *Listening for its own sake: an openness to God*

What is it that is shared? What is it that men should be listening for? A woman's insight arises out of the immediate reality of what is experienced. She needs to be in dialogue. But don't we all? Women *and* men? Undoubtedly, but the experience of the women we have talked about gives listening a value in its own right.

When women come together they can experience a great liberation from the simple act of bonding and being enabled to support each other. This is what our sisters try to do, to accompany women as they come to believe in the value of quite small things, to consider the future of their communities in very ordinary practical ways. A great deal of patience with the situation and respect for each other is needed to allow something creative to emerge from what appears to be quite a messy reality. To impose a solution from the outside may bring about change, but unless the group can own it

and it speaks to their experience, it will remain foreign and extraneous and at odds with the wisdom which resides within the group.

What we all – women and men – need is a very particular skill: the ability to capture what is going on in such situations, and to see how God is at work there. We have to learn to articulate that for ourselves. Only then will we be able to articulate it to others. In the listening and the sharing a new level of awareness comes about, an openness to God which means that we are prepared to put our insights into the melting pot with those of others in a desire for true discernment. In so doing we enable something new to emerge. This requires a high level of trust, however, because we cannot know the outcome in advance, nor can we control it.

This brings me back finally to the Jesuit document. Many women working within the Church today are aware of a climate of control. There are issues which may not be discussed in an open and honest way. If the Jesuits are speaking not just for themselves but for the Church when they insist that women have something to say which needs to be heard, and if they really understand what this means, then there is a long and demanding but potentially enriching road ahead. Some men will want to know what the message is that women are giving them. 'We want to listen. Now tell us what you want us to hear.' But, of course, in a subtle way, that still leaves them in control, trying to assimilate something more to the sum total of the truth which they seek to master. In so many ways for women the act of listening is a value in itself. I welcome the Jesuit document because it encourages an honest conversation and recommends serious commitment. But there is more to conversation than getting the 'right answers'. It is, rather, a matter of an open invitation to walk together, for none of us can know where the dialogue is likely to lead.

As we approach the millennium the Jesuit document is an important reminder to us of the need for reconciliation, and for a new beginning to the relationship between women and men in the Church and in civil society. By this document the Society of Jesus has taken a decisive step towards 'listening to women' and, therefore, to being challenged by what women have to say. It is a prophetic gesture which, if lived to the full, offers enormous hope for the Church and for our world.

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## NOTES

1 Decree 14, 'Jesuits and the situation of women in church and civil society', from the *Documents of the Thirty-Fourth General Congregation of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1995), pp 171-178.

2 Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the new science* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992), pp 47-57.