

## THE ROLE OF WOMAN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

In November, 1972 a communication was issued by the International Research and Information Center *Pro Mundi Vita* in Belgium. This statement referred to the emancipation of woman as "perhaps the most significant of contemporary trends, necessitating new forms of ministry to meet new needs." The International Colloquium on Future Forms of Ministry, to be held in Brussels in September, 1973 will, hopefully, provide an opportunity to address this "most significant of contemporary trends," in search for the possible future role of woman in Church and society.

It is important to maintain both the ecclesial and the societal dimensions in this search for woman's role. The role of woman in the Church conditions and is conditioned by the changing role of woman in society. The emancipation of woman—sociologically, politically and economically—as one of the "signs of the times" calls for ecclesial consciousness and challenges theological reflection. In other words, gospel-concern for the promotion of woman must be specific as well as universal. It must be human as well as religious. Only in this way, it would seem, can the effort witnessed repeatedly in recent years to explore femininity as a valid theological category result in an effective Christian contribution to a changing society in which new needs necessitate new forms of ministry.

Because of the scope and intensity of the Women's Liberation Movement on the North American continent, there is a particular urgency that ecclesial concern for the role of woman be explicitly manifested to our society. The Ad Hoc Committee on Women in Society and the Church, formed by the National Council of Catholic Bishops in the United States, has indicated one positive modality of this concern. The questions treated by the bishops in their discussions are a further indication that the members of this committee, with their consultants, intend to ask the important questions and face the difficult issues.

The first question addressed by the committee at the February, 1973 meeting, chaired by Archbishop Leo C. Byrne of St. Paul and

Minneapolis, was that of the ordination of women. The basis of the discussion was a short document entitled, "Theological Reflections on the Ordination of Women," prepared by the Committee on Pastoral Research and Practices and approved for publication by the Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. This document seems to point clearly to the continued need for further reflection on three fundamental questions under discussion in theology today: (1) What is the Church? (2) What is the role of the priest in the Christian community? (3) Is there, in fact, an ecclesial ministry for women in the Catholic Church?

At the present time, the question of the ordination of women concerns, realistically speaking, the possible admission of women to the diaconate as a permanent life-style. The discussion of this question is sufficiently advanced in theological circles. It is gradually reaching maturation in the awareness of the Christian community.

Some words of caution, however, must be attached to this question. In a society as marked as ours has been by the Women's Liberation Movement—for better and for worse—the ordination of women can easily become a question that tends to be more specific than universal, more exclusively religious than human.

The advantages of admission to ordination, if possible, would be available, actually, only to a restricted minority of women who would be considered as eligible, qualified candidates. Many of these women are already advantaged, to one degree or another, because of their qualifications, competence and experience. Furthermore, the weight of opinion expressed in favor of the ordination of women, in general, seems to presuppose the priority of women religious as potential ministerial candidates. If this attitude became a principle, it could encourage an unfortunate development in the Church, as much for religious life as for the lay woman, who so often feels there is no particular role for her as an ecclesial woman.

One way in which to offset this second difficulty, as well as to advance the question of the role of woman in the Church, is that suggested as an area of action by the NCCB Committee. This is the area of collaboration between lay women and women religious in the Church. The distance and lack of understanding which frequently prevails between these two groups can be understood in the light of

past ecclesiastical and cultural practices. Collaboration between lay women and women religious could provide a source of mutual support and encouragement in the quest for ministry. It could provoke a sense of enlightened awareness that might release womanly gifts and feminine energies still to be tapped. It could open a new treasure-house of enrichment for the entire Church.

It is not enough, however, to seek to promote and strengthen the role of woman in the Church. Given the climate and the pressures of a technological age in which both cold and hot wars are a constant reality, the Christian woman is called, in a particular manner, to a ministerial role in society. This is a role which must allow women to seek the means of reaffirming the essential values of an authentically human life, of promoting the humanization of peoples. Major studies on the nature of woman<sup>1</sup> tend to agree that she is gifted with the potential for sustaining courage in the face of the mystery of those events in human experience which stand beyond the reach of means which are humanly efficacious to relieve suffering and misery. The efficacious human means are to be invoked, however. The Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee for Women was formed in order to help alleviate injustices against women and to encourage them to take their rightful place in the modern world. This explains the fact that they rightly face a number of critical issues dealing with women in society. These issues are: (1) the proposed twenty-seventh amendment on equal rights for women;<sup>2</sup> (2) the problems and aspirations of women in minority groups. In keeping with this second issue, the committee articulated a recommendation calling for the development of leadership qualities in women and girls in minority groups and adult education programs to awaken the consciousness of

<sup>1</sup>At least two major works, already regarded as classics in this field, are *The Second Sex*, by Simone de Beauvoir, and *Woman*, by J. J. Buytendijk.

<sup>2</sup>Much criticism has been directed to the committee on the grounds of its alleged opposition to the ERA. A news release from the USCC, dated 25 September 1972, states: "The report by Archbishop Byrne's Committee is not intended to promote opposition to the amendment but, rather, anticipating the likelihood of its ratification, to alert the bishops to the subsequent implications for legislation and litigation regarding women's rights, family life, and related issues." The committee's review of the status of the ERA in February, 1973 did not reverse this position.

women regarding their role.

Concern for women in minority groups is one clear sign of the universal and human character of the committee's intentions to promote the role of woman in society. The alleged opposition to the proposed twenty-seventh amendment on equal rights for women, expressed by some committee members and consultants, has called attention to the need for resistance to an unquestioning, "blanket" approval of the proposed amendment. Little attention has been given in the news media to the hidden implications in the amendment that could result, in some instances, in as much discrimination as now prevails against women. Women themselves must become aware of the fact that passage of the ERA will initiate the need for programs that must be further refined or amended if women's true role in society is not to be prejudiced.

Apparent hesitation on the part of some committee members and consultants is, rather, an evidence of recognition of the fundamental ambiguity attached to a monolithic notion of woman's role. As one author has written:

When inquiring into the role of woman in society one must ask, "Which woman?" and "Which society?" Which woman?—for her role will differ according to whether she is young or old, educated or uneducated, rich or poor, single or married, with no children or ten children, with husband present or absent, participating in a domestic or commercial career, etc. Which society?—primitive or modern, rural or urban, agricultural or industrial, underpopulated or overpopulated, at peace or at war, in an era of penury or affluence, of social chaos or order, with a family system that is patriarchal or egalitarian, in which women are of low or high status? Each of these variables—and many others—affect woman's role in society.<sup>3</sup>

The members of the Bishops' committee, along with their consultants, agree that "there is no field of human activity which must remain closed to woman." These words of Pius XII echo the thought of Clement of Alexandria who, in the third century, would have the Christian a stranger to no realm of human experience.<sup>4</sup> A new articulation of

<sup>3</sup>L. F. Cervantes, "Woman," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 14, 991-97.

<sup>4</sup>The theme was echoed by Erasmus, "prince of humanists." Cf. Francis

this position can be found in the documents of the Second Council of the Vatican.<sup>5</sup> A new understanding of church necessarily leads to a new perception of the responsible activity of the Christian in both church and world. A deeper ecclesial self-awareness gives rise to new insights regarding the nature and role of the Church in terms of dialogical relationship with the world. Thus, the role of every member of the Church, the People of God, assumes urgency. The role of woman in both Church and society becomes a necessary complement to the activity of man in the world.

The role of woman, as the concern of those who would promote this role, must develop, then, without preference for any given class or culture, without prejudice to any truly human project. Woman must be capable of coping with the reality of existing problems; of discerning the authenticity of the angry questions that she herself at times asks; of moving to implement the ambiguous decisions that will call for greater responsibility on her part. She must be capable of such action, and she must be free to take such action. Woman must seek to fulfill her role, even against hard opposition, as a person who is sensitive to hope for the future of mankind; who remains spontaneous in her compassion for human misery; who is faithful in love, in spite of human infidelities. The role of woman calls for a conviction born of faith that responds, even as it evokes response, to the challenge to live with integrity and wholeness, in society and church.

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Hermans, *Histoire doctrinale de l'humanisme chrétien* (4 vols.; Paris: Casterman, 1948), vol. 1.

<sup>5</sup>There are several texts, e.g., *Gaudium et Spes*, 9 and 29.