

A CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY: THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

The story behind the organization of the first Women's Rights Convention, held over 125 years ago in Seneca Falls, New York, provides me with a starting point. This convention grew out of a revolution in consciousness that was experienced by two Americans who are numbered among the founders of the women's movement, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.¹

Lucretia Mott was well known to her contemporaries for her active involvement in the causes of temperance, peace, the rights of the working-class poor, and the abolition of slavery. Mrs. Mott felt called to "preach deliverance to the captives" and "set at liberty them that are bruised." This she did as a preacher in the Society of Friends. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, daughter of a prominent judge and graduate of Troy Female Seminary, was also an energetic opponent of slavery.

The story is that Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton met in London, England at the World's Anti-Slavery Convention of 1840. They were elected members of the United States delegation. To their great astonishment and outrage, these ardent advocates of human rights were denied entrance to the Anti-Slavery Convention because they were women! Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison sat with them in the gallery and refused to deliver his speech as an expression of his indignation. Mrs. Mott, in a masterpiece of understatement, later remarked, "This brought the woman question more into view; and an increase of interest in the subject has been the result."²

Some years later, when they met again, Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention. Out of deference to custom, Mr. Mott was obliged to preside, but the movement for the legal and civil rights of women in this country had begun in earnest.

¹This story is recorded in Georgia Harkness's *Women in Church and Society: A Historical and Theological Inquiry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), pp. 94-6. Chapters four and five in this book provide a summary of the women's movement in this country.

²Phebe A. Hanaford, *Daughters of America* (Augusta, Maine: True and Co., 1882), p. 524. Cited by Harkness, *Women in Church and Society*, p. 95.

Something of the same kind of revolution in consciousness has taken place today, especially since the revival of the women's movement in the 1960's.³ It is becoming clearer and clearer that this cause—ignored at first as seemingly frivolous among the great social struggles of our time—is intimately linked to other patterns of injustice. In some respects, the social order which permits men to dominate women (as if this hierarchy were established by divine design) is the prototype of all other social relationships of domination/subjugation. The domination of rich over poor, of developed nation over Third World nation, of white over black all have common roots in the myth that some people are by nature superior to others. This same myth was used by generations past to justify the rights of lord over serf, of master over slave, of Aryan over Jew.⁴

As this myth of superiority/inferiority is exposed for what it is, and oppressed classes, races, and nations are claiming their basic human rights, the inherent evil of such assumed hierarchies is being acknowledged. Voices are raised to deplore it. We have discovered the sinfulness that may be embodied in social structures. We are learning how to dissociate ourselves from patterns of oppression and how to work for radical changes in the social order.

Looking back, we can see that the evil of slavery was not immediately apparent to our American and Christian forebearers; and the evil of racism is a relatively new discovery. Only in the past few years has there been some kind of critical evaluation of patterns of exploitation and oppression involved in our own national and international economic dealings. Sexual discrimination is perhaps the most hidden of all,

³See Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963) and Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1970).

⁴This insight regarding feminism as a challenge to hierarchical and oppressive patterns in society is increasingly prominent in the writings of women theologians. See Elizabeth Gössmann, "Women as Priests?" in *Apostolic Succession*, ed. by Hans Küng (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), pp. 115-8; Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Male Clericalism and the Dread of Women," *The Ecumenist* 11, 5 (July-August, 1973), 65-9; Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973); Letty M. Russell, *Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective—A Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974); and June O'Connor, "Liberation Theologies and the Women's Movement: Points of Comparison and Contrast," *Horizons* 2, 1 (Spring, 1975), 103-13.

precisely because it is so all-pervasive. The objects of this form of discrimination are found in every nation, every class, every race. In fact, they are found in every home! They are our mothers, sisters, and daughters—it's all in the family!

Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton discovered this. Well-born, well-educated, well-married women, they presumed they were the equals of the male delegates to the Anti-Slavery Convention. Their connections of blood and marriage with "important" men supplied them with status, but only in so far as they carried out the appropriate roles of wife and mother. This restriction of personhood is at the heart of sexual discrimination against women.

Why should women count themselves among the oppressed? Part of the condition of being oppressed is being defined by some "outside" group. Oppressed people tend, out of ignorance or for reasons of survival, to internalize the definition given them by those in power, for the key to acceptance in any hierarchically organized society is to play one's assigned role graciously. The process of liberation involves a revolution in consciousness whereby the oppressed throw off the definition given them by the "other" and reclaim the right to define themselves independent of their relationship to those who exercise authority over them.⁵

The oppression of women in our society consists of the fact that, either by law or by the profound power of convention and attitudes, women are still defined by men and in relation to men. For the most part, they take the social status of their husbands (although this can be extended to include fathers, brothers, and sons). In large part, they are recognized as having value chiefly in the relationships of wife and mother, that is, relationships specified in terms of sexual function.⁶

⁵See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 31-3.

⁶As Letty Russell (*Human Liberation*, p. 148) puts it: "It is the position of feminists that this objectification of woman's sex role so that it is considered to be her exclusive self-definition is destructive to the full humanity of both men and women." Arlene Swidler, *Woman in a Man's Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972), p. 100, calls attention to this identification of women by citing the Gallup poll and the Good Housekeeping poll as they report on "Most Admired Women." Half the women named appear because of their relationship to a famous man.

Women's liberation quite naturally manifests itself, then, in efforts to attain personal identity apart from the relation of being a sexual partner to a man. Liberated women wish to announce the basic equality and full personhood of all women. Part of the process is that of sorting out "person" from "role," and so the redefinition includes claiming the right to assume any role not limited to the male by physiological constitution. The entire weight of civilization supports the definition of women as potential or actual wives and mothers. It is not remarkable that resistance to this sometimes becomes strident. Nor is the intermediate stage of imitating the oppressor to be seen as anything outside the ordinary path to equal rights.⁷ Women in the movement today are, by and large, well into the stage of self-definition as equal *and* different.

A woman is a person in her own right. She has equal dignity with a man as a human being. The male of the species does not represent the norm for humanity. Women are not imperfect or defective men; they are not inferior by nature; they are not destined by divine plan to be obedient and submissive to men. Sexual difference allows women to complement men as sexual partners, just as it allows men to complement women. It is not of the essence of woman to exist as the sexual partner of man, anymore than it is of the essence of man to exist as the sexual partner of woman. Society rarely defines men in these terms. Women seek this same right to personal autonomy.

Sexism has been defined as "any attitude, action, or institutional structure which systematically subordinates a person or group because of sex."⁸ A key word in this definition is "subordinates." Differences must be acknowledged and appropriately provided for in the social order. But no person or group should be automatically and systematically treated as subordinate, that is to say, inferior. The assumption that some people (men) are superior to others (women) is wrong. When acted upon, it is sinful, for it unfairly militates against the full development of women as persons. The fact that this assumption is widespread and is acted upon with impunity—and even accepted as normal and good by the majority of women—is no argument for it, anymore than it was an argument for slavery to point out the almost universal accept-

⁷ See Russell, *Human Liberation*, pp. 118-21.

⁸ Valerie Russell, "Racism and Sexism: A Collective Struggle," in *The Woman Packet* (New York: Church Women United, 1972).

ance of that practice. It is only in living memory that racism has been confidently denounced as a sin. Today, many do not hesitate to denounce sexism as sinful. Sexism perpetuates the myth of superiority/inferiority in the realm of basic human relationships. It results in functional relationships of domination and subjugation which strike at the core of the dignity of women.

CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY

What is the challenge posed to theology by the situation of women today? First, Catholic theologians have the task of announcing clearly the Church's contemporary teaching on the basic equality and full personhood of women. Since the 1940's, popes, council, and synod have committed the Catholic Church to a position which supports the emancipation of women and condemns sexual discrimination.⁹ One thinks of the strong statement in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not yet being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men.¹⁰

⁹To be sure, this support is chiefly at the level of theory and is not readily harmonized with admonitions to married women. For a record of official ambivalence, see Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), pp. 65-81. For official determination, see Haye van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973), pp. 103-4. See also *Pacem in terris*, arts. 15, 41, 43; *Gaudium et spes*, art. 60; *Populorum progressio*, art. 15; *Call to Action*, arts. 13, 16; *Justice in the World*, III, para. 4; Pope Paul's address to the Fourth Synod, "Human Rights and Reconciliation" (November 7, 1974), to the Convention of the Union of Italian Catholic Jurists, "The Role of Women in Contemporary Society" (December 8, 1974), and to the Committee for the International Women's Year (April 18, 1975).

¹⁰*Gaudium et spes*, art. 29 (Abbott translation, pp. 227-8).

One could not find grounds in the contemporary magisterium for a case against the emancipation of women in the social order. Rather, this cause is given full support, especially if one reads every declaration of the rights of man as intended to apply equally to women. The Church has entirely overcome any earlier hesitation about women's suffrage and the full participation of women in public life.¹¹

A second task of Catholic theology in response to the women's movement is to resolve the seeming contradiction between this full endorsement of the equality of women and those parts of Sacred Scripture and Catholic tradition which suggest another view. The Church's contemporary assumptions about women are surely irreversible. We can imagine the furor that would ensue if women were suddenly told to "stay in their place" as that "place" was conceived even one hundred years ago—to say nothing of nineteen hundred years ago! An irreversible movement in social awareness, a revolution in consciousness has taken place. It is part and parcel of Catholic social teaching.

Yet this attitude toward women has not been fully assimilated. At several points, Catholic tradition and Catholic theology uphold views that support sexual discrimination against women. Certain unexamined presuppositions are still "in possession," and it will take a concerted effort on the part of theologians to displace them and to re-interpret doctrine accordingly. Let me suggest what directions such a re-examination might take.

Two theological presuppositions which have had profound influence on the shape of Christian theology are: (1) that the order of creation established by God places man over woman; and (2) that man is made in the image of God (with the corollary that God is most appropriately conceived in male imagery). Given the fact that the cultural tradition of patriarchy was the context not only of the Bible but also of nineteen hundred years of Christianity, it is important to determine how these traditional teachings are to be evaluated in an age which is overthrowing patriarchal structures.

The Order of Creation

The teaching that there is a divinely given order of creation which sets man over woman in a hierarchy of being went unquestioned in

¹¹van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* p. 103.

Israel. By and large it was retained in the apostolic Church and it has held sway right up through modern times. The source of this belief is the story of creation as told in the first three chapters of Genesis. Until the advent of higher criticism, the story thus told was faithfully accepted as literally true. It was taken to be the divinely revealed story of the origins. The Priestly and the Yahwist traditions were assumed to be compatible, and the Yahwist depiction of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib was thought to be simply a more detailed explanation of the Priestly account: "male and female he created them" (Gn 1:27). At face value, and relying on the Yahwist account for details, the most learned and devout reader could only conclude that man was created first and given dominion over the earth, whereas woman was created from him and for him, as his helpmate or partner.

The relationship of subordination, already implied in the order in which man and woman were created, becomes oppressive to the woman as a consequence of the fall. Her punishment for tempting Adam to eat the forbidden fruit is that she shall experience pain in childbirth and that her husband shall lord it over her (Gn 3:16). Thus sin introduces a pattern of domination/subjugation that affects the situation of every woman.

The patriarchal religion of Israel accepted this as an explanation of "the way things are." On the other hand, patriarchal religion is responsible for this account! It is certainly more likely that this story is the *result* of a pattern of male superiority than that it is the *source* of it.¹² We no longer argue for the literal truth of a seven day creation; in fact, we see in this pattern an appeal for divine justification of the Sabbath rest. Could it be that the Yahwist story of creation and fall represents not only an explanation but a justification of a hierarchically ordered society?

What is the theological truth of Genesis 2-3 in so far as it tells of the origins and relationships of the sexes? When one considers the profound reinterpretation given to the first eleven chapters of Genesis as the result of modern scholarship, one can hardly presume that belief in this "order of creation" may go unquestioned. If, in fact, the theological truth does not reinforce male domination, then these chapters must be thoroughly demythologized, and every subsequent reference in

¹²Harkness, *Women in Church and Society*, p. 155.

Scripture and tradition which presumes this mistaken message must be judged in light of this re-evaluation.¹³

What we know of the status of women in ancient Israel suggests that the Yahwist story of human origins and the fall uncritically presumes, rather than teaches, the subordination of women. In Israel, this situation of subordination encompassed every aspect of a woman's life. She is defined as daughter, wife, and mother—having (with a few notable exceptions) no life of her own. Unable to participate in the covenant sign of circumcision, she depended on men even for her relationship to the Lord. That the status of woman was tied to her sexual function is clearly seen in the opprobrium suffered by unmarried and barren women. The Jewish male daily blessed God that he was not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman.¹⁴

The presupposition that male dominance is of divine design colors most of the New Testament. Still, it is clear that Jesus took women seriously, even to the extent of ignoring social and religious taboos which might have hindered his relationships with them.¹⁵ Women gained religious status in the apostolic Church, for the rite of admission was no longer circumcision but immersion in water—the Jewish ritual for the initiation of women.¹⁶ Women were admitted to the religious

¹³See *ibid.*, pp. 138-56. Walter Brueggemann, "Of the Same Flesh and Bone," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970), 532-42, takes a step in this direction. A survey of major commentaries on Genesis indicates that this question has not yet been seriously dealt with. The implications of reinterpretation are vast, for these texts provide the foundation for the Church's endorsement of a patriarchal order. If they have been misread, all doctrines and practices which appeal to them for a rationale must be read with the same sophistication one brings to an appeal to the story of the fall which presumes Adam and Eve to be properly historical personages. For an even more pertinent example, one might consider how a literal reading of the story of Ham (Gn 10:18-27) was used for centuries as biblical justification for the enslavement of black Africans. This text has been thoroughly demythologized for all but the most fundamentalist segregationists.

¹⁴J. Massyngberde Ford, "Biblical Material Relevant to the Ordination of Women," *The Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 10, 4 (Fall, 1973), 688; see also van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* p. 42.

¹⁵Leonard Swidler, "Jesus Was a Feminist," *The Catholic World* 212 (January, 1971), 177-83.

¹⁶J. Massyngberde Ford, "Woman in the Image of God," *Sisters Today* 39 (November, 1967), 93, n. 35.

assembly and were partners in mission. They were the subjects of Baptism and participants in the Eucharist. They shared in the various charismatic gifts and ministries of the community. Even Paul's admonitions regarding the proper conduct of women in the liturgical assembly presume their active role and seek simply to establish good order and decorum.¹⁷

I will not attempt a full exposition of New Testament teaching on women, but I would like to note the pertinence of three texts to my main point, namely, the presumption of an order of creation in which woman is by nature subject to man.

The first is a text from 1 Corinthians prescribing the appropriate role for the woman who exercises a ministry of prayer and prophecy with her husband. Appeal is made to the order of creation. The woman ought to wear a veil (as some would have it, a badge of authority),¹⁸ whereas the man should not cover his head because

Man was not made from woman but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman but woman for man. For this reason a woman ought to have a sign of submission on her head, because of the angels (1 Cor 11:8-10).

The second text is a passage from 1 Timothy which also occurs in the context of instructions regarding the liturgical assembly. It reads:

A woman must listen in silence and be completely submissive. I do not permit a woman to act as teacher, or in any way to have authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was created first, Eve afterward; moreover, it was not Adam who was deceived but the woman. It was she who was led astray and fell into sin. She will be saved through childbearing, provided she continues in faith and love and holiness—her chastity being taken for granted (1 Tm 2:11-15).

What is of interest here, for my purpose, is that these two texts appeal to a hierarchy established in the beginning: man first, woman second, with a back-up argument in 1 Timothy which recalls that the woman was led astray and fell into sin, an event which reinforced man's

¹⁷Ford, "Biblical Material," pp. 678-81. See Harkness, *Women in Church and Society*, pp. 57-72, for a review of the position of women in the apostolic Church.

¹⁸Ford, "Biblical Material," p. 679.

dominance over her. These texts are typical of the rabbinical tradition which, quite naturally, took the stories of Genesis 2-3 literally. What is the weight of these arguments when the stories are not taken literally? What if the hierarchy is not of divine design but simply the presumed pattern of a patriarchal society?

The third text is from Galatians. Writing to a Christian congregation that was tempted to require observance of the Mosaic Law for full membership,¹⁹ the apostle Paul issued a manifesto of freedom:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no 'male and female'; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27-28).²⁰

Whereas several other Pauline passages hint at the radical freedom possible to believers (Rom 10:12; 1 Cor 12:13; cf. Col 3:11), and at the equality men and women experience "in the Lord" (1 Cor 11:11-12), this statement puts it plainly. Speaking against an abuse that would restrict salvation, Paul is prompted to enunciate its full availability. Not only the Law of Moses, but the "order of creation" preserved by the Law has been transcended in Christ.²¹ In this theological statement, the apostle declares an end to traditional divisions. Some have seen in this passage a reversal of the blessings in the Shemoneh Ezreh, for in Christ it is no longer a disgrace to be Gentile, slave, or woman.²² Positions of domination and subordination are cancelled out.

¹⁹Krister Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 37, correctly calls attention to the special context of this utterance: "When Paul fought those who defended the old—as in Galatia—his bold vision of the new expressed itself most strongly, as in Galatians 3:28. When he discerned the overstatement of the new he spoke up for the old, as in Corinthians."

²⁰The translation is Stendahl's (*The Bible and the Role of Women*, p. 32), and he comments: "the terminology points directly back to Genesis 1:27 and in the direction of man as the image of God, beyond the division into male and female."

²¹This treatment of Gal 3:28 is indebted to Stendahl's study, especially pp. 32-7.

²²Ford, "Biblical Material," p. 688; Leonard Swidler, "Jesus Was a Feminist," p. 178.

Therefore, regardless of whether Genesis 2 and 3 validate the patriarchal structure of Israel, redemption in Christ Jesus ushers in a new order, making obsolete this "order of creation." Developments in the apostolic Church bear out the significance of this Pauline insight.

For instance, despite Jesus' clear conviction that he was sent only to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 15:24); despite his directive to the Twelve, "Do not visit pagan territory" (Mt 10:5) and his choice of apostles and disciples from among his own people; despite all this, the leaders of the apostolic Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, preached Christ among the Gentiles, embarked on extensive missions in pagan territory, and confirmed Gentile men and women in various ministries. The eradication of the barrier between Jew and Greek caused a major upheaval in the early Church. It had profound social implications. It was a clear departure from the example of Jesus' ministry.

It took considerably longer for the full implications of the eradication of barriers between slave and free to find expression in society and in the Church. Slaves in Paul's time were, we know, admitted to Baptism, but the overturning of the social system which allowed one person to own another came only in the last century. The epistles direct masters to be kind and fair to their slaves, and to love them in the Lord (Col 4:1; Eph 6:9; Phlm 16), but not to set them free.²³ Nevertheless, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, conscientious Christians ultimately saw through to the evil of slavery and insisted that the system itself be abolished.

The third clause in Paul's affirmation of a new order is the last to be recognized as a moral imperative. Women, of course, were baptized and admitted to certain leadership roles in the Christian community.²⁴ Though assured that they were equal before the Lord, they were ex-

²³It is worth noting that the admonitions to slaves and masters in the New Testament are most often found in those paranetic sections called *haustafeln*. Directives for good order are given to husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and masters. See Col 3:18-4:1; Eph 5:21-26; cp. Ti 2:2-10 and 1 Pt 2:18-3:7. We no longer accept the legitimacy of the master/slave relationship, so the admonitions directed to both are simply ignored as obsolete. It is time that we examine the admonitions to husband and wife. If they spring from a patriarchal system supported by Gn 2-3, they, too, must be read critically. This will challenge the concept of the patriarchal family which in some respects has been given the status of a tenet of Christian faith.

²⁴Ford, "Biblical Material," pp. 670-84.

pected to maintain the subordinate position in home and in Church. Freedom in Christ remains to be fully implemented in the social order and in the Church where women are concerned. The most widespread and primordial expression of domination/subjugation has not yet been uprooted. The myth of a divinely ordained hierarchy of being has not yet been broken. Theologians must examine and finally put to rest all arguments from the "order of creation" taught in Genesis 2 and 3.

The Image of God

The second presupposition that continues to plague us and prevent clear thinking about the equality of women is that man is made in the image of God. The received teaching, both in Scripture and tradition, most frequently assumes that it is the male human being who was created in God's image and likeness. In Christian history, when the question arose as to whether woman too was made in God's image and likeness, the answer was often "No." Where it was allowed that woman was made in the divine image, this assertion was qualified to include only her "spiritual nature." Her bodily condition was thought to render her naturally inferior. The man, however, was considered as image not only in respect to his soul, but also in so far as he is "the origin and goal" of the woman, just as God is the "origin and goal of the entire universe." Woman, as derivative from man, was thought to share only indirectly in God's image.²⁵

This traditional teaching was based on the first three chapters of Genesis. Curiously, like the teaching on the "order of creation," this too depends upon reading the two creation stories as if they were one. The Yahwist story, which depicts the immediate creation of Adam and the building of Eve from his rib, makes no comment whatever on resemblance to the Creator. The "image and likeness" doctrine comes

²⁵ van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* pp. 55-68 and 107. Rosemary Ruether (*Liberation Theology* [New York: Paulist Press, 1972], pp. 100-11) examines the penchant of the Church Fathers for assimilating soul-body and male-female dualism. This reinforced the idea of woman as a relative being and both reflected and sanctioned the idea of hierarchy. The proper relationship of man to woman was believed to be one of domination and subjugation. It is curious that the woman who chose a life of consecrated virginity was thereby understood to be equal to a man. This insight was never implemented in the Church! In any case, it is entirely unacceptable for it makes denial of sexual identity a condition of equality.

exclusively from the Priestly tradition, generally thought to be a later and more theologically sophisticated account. In the Priestly account it is worth noting first that both male and female are mentioned in a single phrase and secondly, that the Hebrew term for man (*adham*) means man in the generic sense.

God created man in his image;
in the divine image he created him;
male and female he created them (Gn 1:27).

A parallel passage from Genesis 5 reinforces this:

When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God; he created them male and female. When they were created, he blessed them and named them "man" (5:1b-2).

This Priestly creation story does not suggest a hierarchy of being. The fact that the word "man" is used in the generic sense strongly supports the position that both sexes together constitute the image of God. This tradition, then, provides a doctrine of the fundamental equality of the sexes. Again, this remains to be established exegetically, but it may be the case that the Priestly insight—which, in fact, goes undisputed in contemporary Catholic teaching—carries the authentic message of the Hebrew Scriptures with regard to the relationships of the sexes.²⁶

It is not the male who images forth God, but man and woman. The trans-sexual nature of the Godhead requires this. The "image of God" doctrine does not eradicate sexual difference but requires it! Man alone cannot do the "imaging" job. It is the complementarity and mutuality of the sexes that enrich the witness.²⁷

²⁶See Harkness, *Women in Church and Society*, pp. 143-56. The Yahwist tradition appears to have as its overriding concern an explanation of the human condition as "fallen"; this may account for its view of sexual inequality, particularly if the subordination of woman to man is seen to be the consequence of the fall—a disorder resulting from sin. Several authors have pointed out: (1) that Adam, too, is responsible for the "order of the fall" (Rom 5:12), and (2) that this order is redeemed, i.e., reversed by the New Adam (Rom 5:12-19; 1 Cor 15:21-22).

²⁷Recent speculation on this includes the idea that God is best imaged by a community of persons whose mutuality mirrors the triune life; also, that since God is Love, the one who loves best represents divinity.

When it comes to matters of social justice, contemporary Catholic teaching takes the "image of God" doctrine as axiomatic.²⁸ Just recently, in a speech to the Fourth Synod of Bishops, Pope Paul said:

Human dignity is rooted in the image and reflection of God in each of us. It is this which makes all persons essentially equal. The integral development of persons makes more clear the divine image in them. In our time the Church has grown more deeply aware of this truth; hence she believes firmly that the promotion of human rights is required by the Gospel and is central to her ministry.²⁹

Theologians from oppressed groups have given the "image of God" doctrine a slightly different twist in order to bring home its message. In recent years we have heard "God is Black," "God is a Latin American with Marxist leanings," "God is female." The images jar our sensibilities, perhaps, but the message gets through. God is beyond race, beyond nationality, beyond sexuality. Emerging minorities portray God in images of their own to underscore their right to compete, as it were, with the prevailing Christian image. If God truly transcends race, nation, and sex, then the mental image of an elderly male parent in heaven is also an inadequate and partial representation, despite its biblical warrant.

There is nothing surprising about the use of male imagery in a patriarchal society. Studies which call attention to female imagery used occasionally of God in both testaments only attest to the exception.³⁰ But the breaking of the myth (to borrow Tillich's category)³¹ that God is, in fact, male, is far from realized. The belief that God can only be imaged forth by a male human being is very deeply rooted. This belief

²⁸*Gaudium et spes*, art. 29. Appeal to the "image of God" doctrine has been the deciding factor in matters of racial discrimination for Christians in general. H. Shelton Smith's book, *In His Image, But . . . : Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1972) tells the story of the Christian awakening to the evil of slavery as a coming to terms with this doctrine.

²⁹"Human Rights and Reconciliation" (Washington: USCC, 1975).

³⁰See J. Edgar Bruns, *God as Woman, Woman as God* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), pp. 33-40; Letty Russell, *Human Liberation*, pp. 97-103; for woman as the image of the Holy Spirit, see Ford, "Woman in the Image," pp. 86-7.

³¹For Tillich, the language of faith is myth. When moderns become conscious of the mythical character of religious language, they have "broken the myth." The broken myth is a symbol.

has the effect of reinforcing male domination over women, especially in the religious sphere. Certainly it is an urgent challenge to theology to take "affirmative action" on behalf of women by endorsing and employing female imagery, on occasion, when speaking of God.

God is beyond sexuality, but Jesus is not. Part of the scandal of the Incarnation is that the Lord Jesus was born in the first century, that he was a Jew, and that he was a man.³² And Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). This irrevocable historical fact has been invoked as part of a pattern of anti-feminism. Nevertheless, women find in their examination of the New Testament that all Christians—not just males—are called upon to imitate Christ, to put on Christ, to let him dwell in their hearts through faith, to live in him and he in them. The risen Lord is the first fruits of a new *humanity*. In Jesus, God embraced the *human* condition—necessarily specified by sex—but nothing in the ministry of Jesus is in principle something only a male could do.³³ What was not assumed was not redeemed, according to the patristic axiom. Human nature was assumed, and women claim the promise of redemption. Along with men, they hope to live out their election in imitation of Christ.

CONCLUSION

What, then, should be the response of Catholic theologians to the women's movement? First, they are called upon to take note of, and attempt to close the credibility gap that exists between the bold assertions regarding women in recent Catholic social teaching, on the one hand, and the lingering anti-feminism in doctrine and practice, on the other. Specifically, they must give careful reconsideration to the two presuppositions I have just criticized, namely: (1) that man is superior to woman by the divine order of creation; and (2) that man (i.e., the male) is made in the image of God, and conversely, God is best symbolized in male images.

These two presuppositions may prove as hard to demythologize as the conviction that Adam and Eve were historical personages. No less

³²Letty Russell, *Human Liberation*, pp. 137-40.

³³It might be worth considering whether Jesus' choice not to fulfill his human sexuality through marriage and fatherhood, in a culture which demanded this of adult males, has some message for us. See van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* p. 135.

than a revolution in consciousness is required. Patriarchal patterns are not part and parcel of Christianity, but this is a relatively new insight. If these patriarchal patterns die hard in the social order, they will die even "harder" in the Church. Nevertheless, the struggle for the full equality of women is part of the Church's agenda; it is a mandate of the gospel.³⁴

Throughout this paper, I have taken pains to address the question of women in general terms. There is a massive task before us all in the struggle to insure women full rights in society. It can truly be said that the best index of oppression in any given group is the oppression experienced by women, and this has by no means been overcome. Worldwide, millions of women lack basic human rights. We cannot remain deaf to the cries of oppressed women, here and abroad, nor to the anguish of women caught in the transition from one role expectation to another, fearful of change or regretful of what now appears to be a wasted past.

Women must come together and lay claim to equality. To the extent that they are successful, men too will experience liberation—for example, from the role expectations that call upon them to be consistently superior to women. The vision of a new humanity beckons, a society in which women and men live together in attitudes of partnership and mutuality. The women's movement has the long-range potential of vanquishing hierarchical patterns in human relationships and replacing them with patterns of friendship and collaboration.³⁵

It is urgent that theologians challenge the Church as a whole with the full implications of this message of justice in its own life. In my mind, the reasons for the emancipation of women in the social order are obvious and, as I have pointed out, they are clearly upheld by the magisterium. The residual doctrinal arguments which might be brought to bear against it are not insurmountable. In fact, these arguments are

³⁴The bishops of the Third Synod urged "that women should have their own share of responsibility and participation in the community life of society and likewise of the Church" ("Justice in the World," III, para. 4).

³⁵In *Pacem in terris*, Pope John XXIII expressed the hope that "there will soon no longer exist a world divided into people who rule others and people who are subject to others" (art. 42). The challenge to Roman Catholic ecclesiology implicit in the denunciation of hierarchical relationships demands serious consideration.

not being brought to bear against the emancipation of women in the social order at all, but against the full participation of women in the Church! The sign of contradiction in the Catholic Church today is its prohibition against women in the priesthood.

Vatican Council II announced that "there is in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex,"³⁶ and cited Gal 3:28 in support of this claim. Yet it is clear to women that what obtains by divine right in the social order is still withheld in the Church.

Most of the arguments against the admission of women to the priesthood are based on a literal reading of Genesis 1-3 and consequent patriarchal conceptions of the order of creation and the nature of God (and the divine image). I have questioned the cogency of these arguments as they apply to the emancipation of women in the social order. Let me point out that the arguments against the ordination of women stand or fall along with these. There is no special case against women in the ministry in the New Testament.³⁷ It is because women were not emancipated in apostolic times—nor, indeed, until well into the twentieth century—that they were not candidates for ordination. Failure to choose women for the principal leadership roles reflects the social situation of the times and not a special decision of the Church.

The real revolution in consciousness and breakthrough into legal and social equality is still very much in process where women are concerned. The question of admitting women to ordination is "new," in the sense that socially oppressed women in past generations were hardly in a position to ask it. The burden of proof, however, lies with those who would deny qualified women admission to holy orders, for there is no traditional claim that women should occupy a different status in the Church than they do in the world.³⁸

It is most urgent that men and women theologians call upon Church leaders to witness to the order of redemption and end official sexism by removing the sexual barrier to the priesthood. The only clear

³⁶*Lumen gentium*, art. 32.

³⁷Stendahl has developed this thesis at length. He concludes, "If emancipation is right, then there is no valid 'biblical' reason not to ordain women" (*The Bible and the Role of Women*, p. 41).

³⁸See van der Meer, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church?* p. 104.

and final way to stand in judgment on the evil of sexual discrimination in society is to repudiate its last vestiges in the Church.³⁹

SARA BUTLER, M.S.B.T.
Office of Religious Education
Mobile, Alabama

³⁹ED. NOTE: This topic was also the subject of an informal pre-convention seminar led by Mary B. Lynch and Sister Margaret Farley. Ms. Lynch explained the background of the movement for the ordination of women and the plans for the ordination conference to be held in Detroit during the Thanksgiving weekend of 1975. More information is available from the Association of Women Aspiring to the Presbyterian Ministry, 60400 Campground Road, Washington, Michigan 48094.