

CATHOLIC BISHOPS AND WOMEN'S ISSUES IN THE U.S. AND CANADA

This workshop focused on recent responses to women's concerns by Roman Catholic bishops of the United States and Canada. Four panelists gave presentations, and a lively discussion followed.

Sister Mariella Frye is a staff member of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops who assisted the American bishops in the preparation of the first draft of their pastoral letter on women's concerns, "Partners in the Mystery of Redemption: A Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns for Church and Society." She had worked with the committee on women that the Conference established in 1972, and she emphasized that the recent pastoral letter's first draft could never have been written without the earlier efforts by the bishops to address women's concerns, including many "false starts." She traced the history of these efforts, including the start of a dialogue with the Women's Ordination Conference and a workshop for bishops about women's concerns. Work on the pastoral letter grew out of these earlier initiatives.

Bishop Matthew Clark is the bishop of Rochester, New York and a member of the committee that wrote the first draft of the American bishops' pastoral letter on women's concerns. He noted the importance of his work as a spiritual director in Rome for his own development, but he acknowledged that he came to Rochester as a bishop without much lived experience of women's concerns. These concerns were drawn to his attention in Rochester in both pleasant and painful ways, he continued, but both helped his personal conversion and his episcopal development. Work on women's concerns has highlighted three areas of importance for him as a bishop: (1) the adaptation of the Gospel appropriate in the local church; (2) the relationship of bishops among themselves; and (3) the way to theologize: "You can't teach unless you are willing first to learn," he commented.

Sister Donna Geernaert works on the staff pastoral team at the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops and holds the portfolios on ecumenism and women's issues. She traced the recent history of attention to women's concerns by the Canadian bishops. A brief with requests from women was given to the bishops in 1971, and since that time numerous studies at the national, regional, and local levels have been sponsored by bishops and interested women's groups. Growing out of these studies, twelve recommendations covering a broad spectrum of women's concerns were adopted by the bishops in 1984. One of these led to the development of a study and discussion kit on women that has been widely used and debated throughout Canada. The issues raised by the kit include concerns about exclusive language, images of God, women's identity, problems facing women in society, and ministries and leadership for women in the church.

Margaret O'Gara is associate professor of theology in the Faculty of Theology at the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto. She drew attention to common theological themes that emerge when comparing the pastoral letter of the U.S. bishops with the 1983 and 1987 Synod speeches on women's concerns and the study kit on women of the Canadian bishops. First, the bishops speak in a spirit of repentance; "they are ready to acknowledge serious errors and abuses in church theology and church practice about women, and to call these 'sin.' " Secondly, the bishops avoid a dualist anthropology. Thirdly, both sets of bishops raise for discussion the possibility of the ordination of women to the diaconal office. While noting some criticisms of the bishops's approaches—too gradualist an approach on ordination of women, too much emphasis on sexuality, too little consultation with women ethicists, too little attention to the experience of Christian churches that ordain women—O'Gara agreed that the bishops have taken a promising step in a dialogue that needs to go on for a long time.

During the question period, one participant argued that the theology of the eucharist implied that women should be ordained. Another urged the church to be open to the Holy Spirit and allow women to pastor untended sheep. Concern was also expressed that the women consultants on the U. S. drafting committee would be seen as complicit or agreeing with the bishops' decision not to discuss the ordination of women to the presbyteral ministry within the letter. In response, Clark noted that the bishops are trying to respond to these kinds of concerns. He expressed his conviction that the first draft of the pastoral letter will be improved by the widespread critical discussion that it is receiving. Geernaert noted that the issue raised the problem of living a Christian life within a local church that remains in communion with the universal church. It was suggested that the Catholic Theological Society of America set up a standing consultative group of theologians to assist the bishops in their discussions with Rome on women's concerns.

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