

WOMAN AND MAN: ONE IN CHRIST JESUS: A RETROSPECTIVE

Introduction

The Research project, on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, was launched on 21 August 1996 by Cardinal Clancy. The Project was undertaken for the *Australian Catholic Bishops Conference* by the Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace, the Australian Catholic University and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes. The culmination of the research was the 1999 publication of the Report, *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*. In every way and at every stage the process was one of purposeful and effective collaboration.

A Retrospective calls us to look back and contemplate the past with appreciation, asking 'What did this high point in the life of the Church mean?' 'What new understandings and challenges have emerged?'

These words from Joan Chittister describe well a rationale for retrospection.

Reality is the only thing we have that can possibly nourish hope. Hope is not based on the ability to fabricate a better future; it is grounded in the ability to remember with new understanding an equally difficult past – either our own or someone else's. The fact is that our memories are the seedbed of our hope.

(Joan Chittister in *Scarred by Struggle: Transformed by Hope*. William Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003. P104)

Background to the Project

It would be true to say that the women's movement has been one of the most notable developments for the churches in recent times. It has been recognized explicitly as such by a number of Popes.

In 1963, Pope John XXIII, reflecting on the Signs of the Times, identified the emergence of women asserting their right to be treated with dignity and equality as one of the major thrusts of the times. (*Pacem in Terris*, n 41).

In 1993, Bishop Brennan, Chair of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, and Bishop Manning reported to the Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace concerning the role of women as a high priority social justice issue. There was, they advised, a recognized need to study the actual position of women in the Church in Australia and it was time for action.

Pope John Paul II in May 1994 gave definitive statements concerning the lack of authority to change the current teaching on the ordination of women. These statements were heeded and fully respected. However, it was agreed that ordination would not be the focus of the study. The participation of women cannot be limited to a single issue and participation cannot be subsumed under ordination. It could not be denied that the question would be raised during the research, and it was.

In June 1994 the first of fifteen meetings of the Research Working Party was held and the project was underway.

Purpose of the Project

The overall aim of the study was to gather data on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia in order to provide a solid basis for:

- Theological reflection
- Dialogue with women and women's groups
- Pastoral planning

The Project hoped to foster growth in mutual understanding by bringing substance, historical depth and accuracy to the conversation – within Church circles and beyond.

The Church Climate

There were mixed reactions to the news that a survey would be conducted on the participation of women in the church. Many were excited and encouraged that the Bishops had initiated the project with, to use Cardinal Clancy's words, *a desire to learn from it*.

Despite a prevailing climate of hope there were fears expressed, fears that surfaced as nervousness, cynicism and sometimes anger.

A heartfelt and persistent plea throughout the Project was that listening and dialogue would occur and that action would flow. Many people expressed deep frustration and weariness with consultations that promise the world and go nowhere.

The Process

Four Key Questions that focused on *participation* of women in the Church were developed. These questions were central to every method of investigation.

- What happens at present?
- What helps?
- What hinders?
- What else can we do?

The study used a whole range of ways of listening to the views of women and men, old and young, church goers and those who have given up. Many of the Bishops were personally involved in the Hearing sessions that were conducted throughout Australia. That process itself was successful and often gathered people who would not normally come together. They spoke with passion and for the most part were listened to with reverence.

Findings

The huge response received, the widespread interest shown and the deep appreciation expressed for the process itself, are themselves important findings constituting a strong message to the whole church community.

The dominant issue arising from the research was gender equality, recognizing the equal dignity of women and men created in the image and likeness of God. This understanding of equality did not imply the sameness of men and women, but rather their complementarity and mutuality. The Church was seen to be lagging behind the wider Australian society in recognizing the changing role of women as one of the 'signs of the times' and affirming the equality of women. The very limited participation of women in decision-making at present and the need to increase women's involvement in decision-making at all levels were constant and major themes. The Executive Summary of Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus #6.

The Christian mandate for inclusion, equality and mutuality is clearly articulated in this frequently quoted passage, ultimately the source of the title of the Report.

All baptised in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:28

Threads

There were many common threads weaving throughout all responses. That women are integral to the very nature and life of the church was highlighted in every aspect of the research. There was universal agreement that there should be no discrimination on the basis of gender; that women make a great contribution to the life of the Church and that young people and future Church are of major concern. No matter the level of criticism or angst expressed, love of and commitment to the Church permeated all responses.

As well as the commonalities there were distinct differences. Two broad approaches were identified:

- (a) Maintaining the current participation of women or even returning to the position of the pre-Vatican II Church
- (b) Seeking an expanded role for women

The Church and Change

Amid rapid and universal change it has been said, two things will never change: The will to change and the fear of change. The Project certainly heard from people who were frustrated with the Church – some because not enough change was happening and others because there had been too much change.

Different models of Church were presented either explicitly or implicitly. Some respondents in speaking of Church stressed the saving presence of Christ. For others the accent was on Church as institution. Obvious tensions surfaced in speaking of the role of the hierarchy and

the role of the laity; about teaching, leadership, authority and decision making in the Church. One approach focused strongly on emphasizing the divinely ordained role of the Magisterium. At the other end of the spectrum there was the plea to honour and explore the role of all the faithful - the *Sensus fidelium*. Timothy Radcliffe OP, describes the differing views of the groups that are dividing the Church, or the two approaches, as Kingdom Catholics and Communion Catholics. “*Some Catholics, he says, see our Church as primarily the People of God on pilgrimage towards the Kingdom. Others see us as primarily members of the institution of the Church, the communion of believers*”. (Radcliffe, T. *What is the Point of Being a Catholic?* London, Burns & Oates, 2005. p166.) Radcliffe argues strongly that as Catholics we need both sorts of identity.

However, these two approaches certainly challenge us to hold in tension a faithful remembering of the past and a trusting embrace of the future. They call us to dialogue, theological reflection and authentic pastoral planning. It is my belief that tensions adequately addressed need not be destructive or divisive but can indeed be fruitful and dynamic.

Key recommendations

The key recommendations to emerge from the Project were, that:

- 1 Women’s involvement in decision-making and leadership be increased;
- 2 the nature of ministry and associated pastoral issues be examined;
- 3 attitudes and practices concerning gender equality and equal opportunity be addressed; and
- 4 attitudes and practices concerning racial equality be addressed and that there be dialogue with Australian Indigenous people concerning the Report.

Response of the Bishops

On 18 August 1999 the entire Report on the outcomes of the survey, *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*, was launched at the National Press Club, in Canberra. The fact that the Bishops of Australia agreed to publish the Report in its entirety, with no censoring of the findings, makes the document highly significant and extremely important.

The Social Justice Sunday Statement of September 2000 published the Bishops’ response to the Report. The Statement included NINE decisions of national significance and THIRTY ONE proposals for possible implementation at diocesan level.

While the Bishops gave their own stamp to the outcomes, all of the Decisions and Proposals can be sourced back to the findings of *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*. Fidelity to the process was maintained throughout.

The Bishops reminded us that they cannot and would not wish to change the teaching of the Church on any matter. Likewise they reminded us that they cannot and will not reverse the changes ushered in by the Second Vatican Council.

In both cases they said they are willing to dialogue with women about these matters for the sake of mutual understanding and in a spirit of Christian love.

Woman and Man: Forgotten, Finished or a Work in Progress?

As we mark this tenth anniversary of the publication of *Woman and Man*, it is time to question:

Has the Project been forgotten? Perhaps.

Is the Project finished? Definitely not.

Is the Project a Work in Progress? I think so.

A Work in Progress

If I focus attention on the key action outcome from the Report - the Commission for Australian Catholic Women – I can see that there has been fidelity to the task. The findings have not been lost. There have been many initiatives taken to implement the Decisions and Proposals and I applaud all the people who have invested energy and creativity.

However, in the progress there have been significant changes that some would read as a diminution of importance of the matter of women in the Church and a failure in follow through from the *Woman and Man* Report.

In May 2006, the Bishops undertook a review of the structures of their conference. At that time, in line with the changes in ACBC structures, the Commission (CACW) became a Council for Australian Catholic Women (CACW) advisory to the Bishops Commission for Church Ministry and with a changed Mandate.

The signs of the times, and our own experience tell us that there is still a long way to go if the gospel is to be preached as good news and the Bishops' hope of "ensuring that the dignity of women is honoured and their gifts are given space to flourish for the sake of the Church's life and mission" (ACBC Social Justice Statement 2000), is to be realised. Challenges present themselves; none of them, in my view, insurmountable.

Accountability

The 2006 structural changes from Commission to Council for Australian Catholic Women raise concerns that the location of the engine room for change and the lines of communication and accountability are somewhat unclear. Once responsible for reporting directly to the ACBC, the Council's role is now to advise the Bishops Commission for Church Ministry. So, who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the participation of women remains on the agenda?

What accountability is there regarding the decisions and proposals contained in the Bishops Response to *Woman and Man*? What happens if a particular diocese does not see the participation of women as an issue? What can be done to ensure life and growth for the Church in these circumstances?

In the case of the appointment of a new Bishop, alongside pledging loyalty to the Pope in regard to the ordination of women question, is he also required to promise to engage the wisdom, gifts and talents of the women in his diocese?

Assessment, Evaluation and Refocus

Questions of assessment, evaluation and refocus received constant attention as the Project unfolded. The original Commission for Australian Catholic Women was charged, by the Bishops, with the responsibilities of:

- Monitoring the development of strategic planning
- Evaluation of the outcomes of the ACBC recommendations.

The Council does not have these same responsibilities. Of the nine decisions, Decisions 1, 6 and 7 were selected for priority attention.

Decision 1: About achieving a better balance of women, men, clergy, religious and laity at every level of Church life.

Decision 6: About fostering educational initiatives to assist in the implementation of the recommendations of the Report.

Decision 7: About entering into dialogue with Australian Indigenous people.

The selection of these decisions for focus makes good sense and no doubt makes the task 'doable'. It does raise the question, however, of what happens to the rest of the decisions?

Dialogue

The Woman and Man Research and Report placed the issue of the participation of women as a whole Church issue, clearly and unambiguously on the Church's Agenda. It modeled a process for dialogue, demonstrated that collaboration does work and pointed a way forward.

One of the tasks of the Council is to provide advice to the Bishops about ongoing dialogue and the integration of ideas. Without being unduly pessimistic, I am aware of the difficulties involved in getting a structure and process to work at the national level. Has the Council got the reach, the resources and the networks to enable that to happen?

As a church community we are seriously challenged to develop our capacities for honest exchange, for speaking the truth in love without being divisive. We need institutional creativity, a dynamic Catholic culture where questions about the participation of women and other issues as well, are acceptable and even welcomed.

The Bishops made a commitment to listen and learn and to dialogue with those people who are hurting because of Church teaching or pastoral practice. They said they are willing to dialogue with women about these matters for the sake of mutual understanding and in a spirit of Christian love. Let us continue to take them seriously.

The Woman and Man Project is a call to action for the whole church – not just for the Bishops. Recalling the church's teaching on the *Sensus Fidelium* confirms this whole Church community privilege and responsibility. The *Sensus Fidelium*, the sense of faith that the People of God share among themselves means that *The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One* (see 1 John 2:20, 27), *cannot err in matters of belief.* (Dogmatic Constitution on the church, n.12).

Those who exercise *episcopate* are not to be separated from the ‘symphony’ of the whole people of God in which they have their part to play; bishops have to remain alert to the *sensus fidelium* “.....if they are to be made aware when something is needed for the well-being and mission of the community, or when some element of the Tradition needs to be received in a fresh way.” ARCIC II: *The Gift of Authority*. *Origins* 29 (27 May 1999) pp 17-29.

A fresh understanding of the role of the Magisterium and the Sensus Fidelium might ask, What do these teachings really mean? What are the pastoral implications?

Conclusion

It is my hope that the work identified by the Woman and Man Project, will continue to be ‘in progress’. It is my hope that the Report would be used as a tool and a resource in identifying and addressing the issues that face our Church communities today.

While structures and processes, commissions and councils, decisions and proposals are indispensable, the real changes, we know, will occur in the hearts and minds of people who respond in faith to the call of the Gospel.

Let us savour the wisdom of Habakkuk’s prophetic message for all times.

The vision still has its time, presses on to fulfillment, and will not disappoint; if it delays, wait for it, it will surely come. (Hab 2: 2-4)

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