

Opening of first national gathering of *Ordination of Catholic Women*,  
September 24 1994

Marie Louise Uhr, Convenor.

## 1. welcome

It is a very great pleasure for me to welcome you all to this truly historic occasion - the first national gathering of OCW, the first national gathering assembled in Australia to work for the ordination of women in the catholic church. And with two international delegates from New Zealand, here with financial support from one of their bishops.

Almost four months ago the pope spoke 'definitively' on the subject: the church, he said, does not have the power to ordain women. That for me was a time to weep. On the next Sunday I was at Mass in the Daramalan Community chapel and found myself beside the stylized stations of the cross. And the words that came to me were: 'women of Jerusalem (Or people of the world) , weep not for me; weep for yourselves and for your children.' A time to weep. But this weekend is a time to rejoice.

It is impressive indeed that so many of you have been prepared to spend time and money to be here today, where you question loudly and clearly by your very presence this papal 'no forever'.

Your presence here states that the idea of the ordination of women in the Catholic church is still alive; a goal to be worked for, a hope and a dream to be accomplished for the good of ourselves, of our children, of the church, and, indeed of the world beyond the church.

## 2. why work for ordination

We assemble today in the face of the firm committment from the Vatican that women cannot and must not be ordained; the pope says it cannot happen; Cardinal Martini, whom some forecast to be the next pope, in explaining why he had said it would not happen this millenium (a remark many have taken as a sign of his being in favour of it) said that what he was trying to say was just that it was not an issue that was worth giving "too much space to" at this time; and Cardinal Biffi, of Bologna, says "Women priests? Impossible. It would be as if we wished to celebrate the Mass with Coca cola and crackers instead of bread and wine", and then explains this by saying "the comparison with Coca Cola and crackers is not crude or disrespectful; it is concrete, relevant and clear". (both Tablet June 11). So with the hierarchy apparently assembled against us, why do we bother? Why does it matter enough to bring us here today.

For me there are two issues, and they have become entwined. The first is the question of the ordination of women. The second is the attempts to silence the church on this issue, which raises the whole question of authority in the church. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza saw this several years ago when she said in 1991 'the ordination of women and the religious authority and self-determination of the people of God have become the focal point and litmus test in post Vatican II struggles for a democratic practice of being church'.

So in opening this gathering, I want to say something about the ordination of women and then about attempts to close discussion, to banish the whole idea of the ordination of women. I am not going to address the scriptural and theological arguments around the 1976 Declaration or the recent Papal

letter, leaving analysis of these texts and of the meaning of 'definitive' to the scholars. Instead I want to consider the sub-text.

I believe that opposition to the ordination of women is so strong because the ordination of women into the catholic church would be a powerful iconoclastic act: it would shatter not only the image of the male-only priesthood but also the image of the male God. And it would declare the full humanity of women. This, I believe, is what is at stake and why it arouses such passion and such fear.

It is significant, I believe, that the recent Papal statement which argued from the significance of The Twelve and their successors, followed this not by exegesis and development of arguments that had been criticised by scholars after the 1976 declaration but by a dissertation of the nature of women. In these explanations in the papal letter, in *Mulieris Dignitatem* and subsequent speeches, I hear a form of biological determinism that says that women's dignity and destiny is found in their motherhood and this limits other roles for them throughout their lives in a way that being fathers does not so limit men. Women, he says, are either biological mothers or spiritual mothers. (Perhaps my being neither is the root cause of my concern with Papal pronouncements.) But spiritual motherhood does not lead to ordination even though spiritual fatherhood appears to be a consequence of men's ordination. Women are special - or 'other'? - limited to an expression of so-called 'feminine' characteristics; warned not to become 'masculine' - what ever that means - in our search for equality. It sounds like a version of the nineteenth century 'angel in the home'; woman as the private person, not at home in the public world; the follower, not the leader. It is amazing how often the question of women's ordination brings accusations of women seeking power. Somehow for a man, ordination is clearly seen as a desire for service, but for women, it is a desire for power. I believe that this expresses a belief in men as natural leaders of society and women as natural followers, men at home in the public sphere, women at home in the private sphere. So the question of ordination raises questions to what extent women are accepted by the hierarchy as fully human, public and private persons, sharers with men in all the range of human characteristics, able to lead and to follow, able to consecrate, bless and absolve.

And, able to be, and to be seen to be images of Christ, images of God. One of the arguments which the 1976 Declaration used to clarify its conclusion that women cannot be ordained was that a priest, in the exercise of ministry, represents Christ who acts through them. In the celebration of eucharist the priest acts, the Declaration says 'in persona Christi, taking the role of Christ to the point of being his very image when he pronounces the words of consecration.' And women, they declared, cannot do this. Yet all Christians are to be 'in the image of Christ' according to Paul and traditional teaching. The idea of women as the image of Christ is acceptable, it seems, as a vague generality but becomes unacceptable when it might be given a physical presence. Priesthood is a powerful image, it has become a powerful symbol of the divine (we have forgotten it as image of the community). Liturgically all our images of God are male and powerful males, - King, Judge, and above all Father - metaphors of God which we have used so exclusively that we have lost our awareness of them as metaphors and have begun to accept them as descriptions of reality. The all-male priesthood supports and confirms the all-male god, and the godliness of men. To challenge this, as ordination of women does, challenges our images of God and with that our own self-images too.

I believe that these are the issues at stake - and that is why the costs are high (and they will be high for all of us) and why the opposition is so strong.

### 3. can't stop ideas

Yet the idea of women's ordination will not be banished from the earth because a pope in 1994 says that it is impossible; no one, not even a pope, can control an idea once it has been thought. . Ideas are too powerful for that. Bruce Dawe has expressed this in a poem he called 'Description of an idea'. He is writing of political ideas and political thuggery. But I won't change his words, or skip them - and you can translate as you wish:

'You can nail it to the cross  
and it will rise again after three days.  
You can put it in the arena with several wild beasts  
and it will survive its own dismemberment.  
You can tie it to a stake and light faggots under it  
and the crackling of the flames will speak volumes.  
You can exile it to Siberia  
and it will still cry out with the voice of Ivan Denisovich.  
You can beat it to a bloody pulp in a public square in Peking  
and it will still think of freedom.  
You can turn the Star Chamber and the SS  
and the KGB and the Savak  
and the State Security Bureau  
loose on it  
and someone somewhere will still think it  
and someone somewhere will still die for it  
and someone somewhere will give it new life.  
For an idea is an organism more mysterious in its action than the  
miracidium.  
...You can declare an idea anathema to 999,999,999 people  
and the billionth will reach for a dictionary.'

You here are the reachers for the dictionary. The ones who say 'why' and 'why not'. And what will it mean for ourselves and for our children? The ones who believe that what we are concerned about is the spiritual well-being and wholeness of the followers of Christ; we are concerned with pastoral issues that will not go away and must be spoken of.

### 4. speaking for the silent

But there are many who cannot so speak, either with their presence or with their voices. They are silenced by church authorities. And the questions must be raised as to the why and the how and who of dogmatic control. We are part of the struggle for a truly democratic church.

### 5. have a great weekend.

So I hope that you all have a great weekend together. I am looking forward to hearing what all our speakers have to say: I am sure that it will be informative, illuminating - and enjoyable. But above all, our primary task

(if I can call it that) and I am sure our speakers won't disagree on its primacy, is to pray together for the first time. I do hope that you will all feel free to join us this evening in prayer. Meet together, talk together, pray together - and rejoice together. Thank you. Let us begin.