

THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE CATHOLIC  
CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

TO: The Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference Committee  
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## The Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia

You have asked me to talk with you about women's participation in the church. Enough perhaps to say that the very fact that you are all men, that the hierarchy is - by the laws you've largely made - entirely male, says almost everything I could wish: statement enough, surely. And ironies enough - you'd agree? - in your asking for a "submission". None of this would matter - should not matter perhaps; even Paul, at least at one point saw a time when it wouldn't; except that for thousands of years my experience has been profoundly different from yours. You may be looking for a dispassionate and scholarly statement - nothing controversial, nothing divisive one of you said. But heaven knows, there has been scholarship enough: on the social construction of gender, on the significance of biological difference; on the dualistic thinking which gives to men the sacred sphere, women the profane, to women the private and to men the public worlds; on women in the early church. But even if you've not read much yourselves - no end after all to the making of books - then perhaps you've heard your friends discuss such things, your sisters or your cousins or your aunts.

Not that you show yourselves very eager for discussion. Remember how a few months ago at the conference of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations in Canberra the pronuncio swept down to forbid discussion on women's ordination, the resolution put forward that groups continue to debate the issue was, he said, "inadmissible". Much like the Red Queen really - "Off with their heads": and in its own way just as comic. Not a word from any of you that day,

nor any day after; and though you've not, as the New Zealand bishops have, suspended any Catholic paper, you've turned any of them I've seen into a kind of "happy hour". It's as though you'd forgotten that those freedoms to speak - to be spoken through - cannot be limited without being lost. Remember 1939? My father - yours too? - stood up against that kind of limitation; joined the AIF precisely to oppose the kinds of authority that come with totalitarian governments. Indeed in this context you could do worse than consider what happened in occupied countries where the occupying power demanded assent: consider I mean both the techniques of repression and the techniques of resistance. Any Pole, one would have thought, *should* be able to tell you something of that. Yet not a single public statement from a single one of you ever to indicate you've absorbed any of it; nothing to shake those unsupported certainties of yours that block our being seen, as seeing ourselves, as fully human.

It's true, I can now be an altar girl even if not an acolyte; a parish assistant, but not its sacramental minister. It looks as though - would you not agree? - my baptism were partial, tentative; as though the water - and the Spirit - flowed away from the XX chromosomes: one X good, two X bad, in the kind of church-speak that Orwell might have delighted in. And that has to mean that I'm not fully redeemed, not fully incorporated into the body of Christ. And indeed the liturgy, the very heart of our being Christian, reinforces precisely that: this is the only point I propose to make - everything about women's participation in the Church is - I would argue - implicit in the liturgy as we presently have it.

You'll agree of course that God is no more male than you, no more female than I; no more male than I, no more female than you: the images are of the imageless, only Christ as the

adequate expression of the triune God. Yet the entire liturgy as it stands authenticates male experience, invalidates mine. From the very beginning we pray to a God who is male: like you. "He" is a God "of power and might": imprisoned, our poor God, in the conventional male stereotypes, cramped in a cage of words. I often think of Mary at that point, of Joseph too: going down into Egypt, having to speak the language of the masters, in a place where their people had been held as slaves. And that child, Incarnate God, the God whom I celebrate as one of us, is really one of you; becoming "man" the liturgy insists "for us men and our salvation"; indeed if I heard last Sunday's reading from Corinthians aright, then the entire plan of salvation is a male affair: men lost in Adam, men restored in Christ. You might argue that "we know what it means"; that in that most objectionable of jokes "'man' embraces 'woman'". But that is to assume that words don't matter: something that the Logos is hardly likely to agree with. You could test that yourselves by using female pronouns of God, saying "She" for instance; trying at the same time to avoid the conventional feminine attributes; and noting where that strikes you, excluding you, making you the Other. Not easy to have many hopes for the new ICEL text either: was it not the Australian bishops who turned the inclusive language of the "Englished" new Catechism into exclusive language again.

But of course the words, the pronouns the nouns simply point to the entire orientation: if the readings are to be believed then those who prefigure Jesus are all male too. Never mention of a judge like Deborah, a prophet like Miriam; women are for having children, or - more truly - for having sons: enough to contrast the Abraham/Isaac story with that of the daughter of Jephthah. If Abraham is "our father in faith" it can be only for obeying orders, for accepting an unjust order, for the kind of blind obedience

that we examined at Nuremberg: and never a suggestion that this was the Abraham who sent Hagar and her child into the desert. And if these are chosen primarily as type and antitype as the ancient exegetical thinking demanded, then surely the women of the Old Covenant can also prefigure Christ the redeemer, the Christ who sets us free: Pharoah's daughter for instance, or Esther the queen, perhaps Hagar as the Suffering Servant. But the stereotypes seem far too hard for you to escape from; so hard that when a few Sundays ago we prayed for wives and mothers it was that they might "serve their families well"; for husbands and fathers that they might "lead their families in the ways of God". Women serve this says, the official Church says, the liturgy says, you say: men lead.

Still there? No doubt you will find a statement of this kind a nuisance to deal with, no way of reducing it to a proposition, much less a set of arguments. In the end a tick in the box marked *inclusive language* I suppose. And another in the box marked *for the ordination of women*; or you could if you were allowed to discuss that.

And what now am I to suggest you do, what changes should you make. Well, for a start perhaps, remember Cromwell; not always the most accommodating of men either. But even he: "I beseech you gentlemen in the bowels of Christ, consider it possible that you may be mistaken". And as top the Catholic hierarchy, more than mistaken: in error. And I would suggest you formally acknowledge that; and not by more talk either.

1) The pattern of salvation history as one finds it in the official liturgies has to acknowledge women no less than men as precursors of the redeemer, as apostles like Mary Magdalen, as Christ bearers in the new Covenant. After all,

there's good precedent: Jesus himself accepted Mary of Bethany as a serious disciple, sitting as tradition demanded at his feet; his own understanding of his mission was decisively shifted by conversation with the Syrophenician woman; on Easter Sunday he showed himself first to Mary Magdalen - odd how that has been so completely written out of the liturgy. It would not be possible given that, to speak of Incarnation as for "us men and our salvation", of Christ "becoming man"; indeed the Latin version of Nicea forbids that already - "homo factus est" (perhaps with the shadow of a pun); so does the Greek. And of course the praying church has also to use non-male language of God; has to.

2) And of course if women are fully human, then we are equally "ordainable": no scriptural reasons against ordaining women, as the Pontifical Biblical Commission recognised a generation ago, the American Biblical Association a few years later; the Catholic Biblical Association of Australia some time last year. Well... Theological reasons? Can you honestly see the Trinity saying, "Well, yes, let's have priests; but only those humans with XY chromosomes". So, take heart. At that first Pentecost the Holy Spirit turned that small frightened group into men and women able to go out, to speak of the new freedom, the freedom of the sons and daughters of God, to speak of the God who is with us, who is one of us. Courage then, to your hearts and voices.