

The Role of Women in the Catholic Church

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As I write my 'answer' to this question I am inclined to think that there are as many answers as there are Catholic women. Indeed, even my own 'answer' is changing the more I think about and discuss the attitudes of, and towards, women today. Education and sociological changes have brought women actually for potentially in many cases and/or areas to social adulthood. Financial and intellectual independence or self-respect (and the consequent freedom from the fear of being poor maiden aunts) have given today's women an energy that often overstates its case in Women's Lib. demonstrations.

These changes are evident in the Catholic Church too. It could hardly be otherwise. In fact Catholic women have to face a triple challenge: firstly they have to grow up as women, secondly they have to become adult Christians - after the mind of Vatican II on Christian responsibility - and thirdly they have to live (not exist or endure!) as Christian women in a male-dominated Church.

In the throes and adventure of this triple challenge it seems to me that *newness* and *variety* are key words. Mankind, and therefore the Church, is entering a new era, an era in which women are partners, comrades, not minors. So, instead of trying to imagine deaconesses, priestesses and bishopesses based on, or cut from, the existing male patterns of

ugly and soiled, so that my contact with white Christians, within the community of Christ, where I am denied the right to assert my dignity, becomes an affliction. I believe that we are one in Christ, but I question the commitment of those Christians who do not practise the fact and the reality of our being equal in Christ. I may be termed racist, but that I am not for I am beginning to look at myself with honesty and to assert that black is beautiful for God has made it stupendously beautiful. Christ is redeeming my blackness.

In conclusion I wish to say how I long for a black church that will ultimately become the Church of Christ, a church that will embrace and be a community of the faithful human beings. In order to work for that Church, we must both re-discover our common humanity and our God-given dignity - both black and white. Christ must by his power to love and liberate, rule supreme over our lives. But we must re-discover ourselves in sinful, horrible background situations, and this cannot and will not take place in the so-called multi-racialism of South Africa.

Catholic deacons, priests and bishops, let us be open to the new idea of deacons, priests and bishops who are women. There is a difference, though it seems a mere rearrangement of words. Deacons, priests and bishops who are women would naturally be different from those who are men, just as teachers and doctors who are women differ from their male counterparts. But this difference does not destroy effectiveness. Rather, it enhances the general effectiveness of the teaching and medical professions. Could not the general effectiveness of the Church be likewise enhanced by the complementary service of men and women in the ministerial role and concern of the Church?

It would seem that such service could be given by many of the women who up to the present have been confined to the forms of service offered by the Orders and Congregations approved by the Church. Here again newness and variety are all-important. Social services, adult education, remedial work, university research, the roles of priest, deacon, bishop, parish secretary are fields for individual and/or team work by women, religious or lay. Those who shudder at such ideas do so, I suggest, not because of theology but because of a sneaking doubt that women are really people.

I include Catholic laywomen in the vista opened out by Vatican II, because one of its most significant 'break-throughs' was the removal of the invisible label which classified laywomen as second-rate Christians. The 'holy-virgins and widows' used to get special mention in the liturgy, while the married, and especially those who enjoyed being married or marriagable, were somehow lumped together with the other unclassified faithful. The Council is thus largely responsible for the heightened awareness of its being possible and desirable to lead a Christian lay life, which characterizes Catholic women today. That the number of Sisters has decreased, owing to this and other factors, may be a sign that laywomen are going to be vital parts of the mustard tree that Christ spoke of, by giving Christ-like support and shelter to all they meet in details of daily life.

Maybe the slogan: 'a pluralistic Church in a pluralistic society' could sum up these rambling thoughts on women in the Catholic Church. There has been too much of a tendency to divide people, ideas and forms of Christian life into categories, to be filed away neatly in an office in Rome or to be given a place in canon law. Why not let the Spirit blow where he wills and accept the new varied ways in which he may make himself felt in women?