

The Pastoral on Women: What Should the Bishops Say?

I: Sidney Callahan

Can any all-male group have anything to say to women? How dare men speak when they belong to a body that has systematically excluded women from membership and denied them full participation in decision making? When the American bishops address a democratic society on the subject of women, they carry the heavy burden of their own suspect practice. Who will listen if the trumpet sounds from a rotting platform shakily supported on termite-ridden pillars?

Triumphant trumpet calls are definitely unsuitable in this case. Better there should be an apologetic opening that voices sincere regret that, once again, women and women's issues are being addressed by a body of men who have excluded women. However, as we can all see, in order for change to come about and more equal structures to be instituted in the future, those presently in power must act. Leaders, designated or elected, male or female, have to lead or be held irresponsible. If the bishops recognize their problematic position and are open to ongoing dialogue and reform, they can make a real contribution with a strong pastoral letter.

So what should they say after they say they are sorry? When discussing women the bishops face an array of issues, some of which are fairly simple and some of which are monstrously difficult. The easy matters to address have to do with Christianity's basic justice agenda as it is focused upon the needs of women. Here almost everyone agrees with the ideals, but getting anything actually done is another kettle of conundrums. Unfortunately, women are still being discriminated against, especially as society's commitment to affirmative action withers. Women need equal opportunity, equal pay for equal work, protection from sexu-

al harassment on the job and from unfair insurance, health and Social Security provisions. Old women need care, and divorced, displaced homemakers need job training. Women of all ages need elementary protection from rape, wife-beating, sexual abuse and exploitation.

Beyond these familiar litanies of feminine needs is the desperate and growing injustice found in the feminization of poverty. Women are getting poorer, and more single women are raising children in increasingly stressful and deprived circumstances. The latest research on the negative effects of divorce upon children is ominous. When fewer adults socialize children, the children suffer from lowered I.Q. scores and lessened levels of moral development. Good preschool programs, however, have been shown to make a long-term difference in even the most deprived child's life. Recognizing this, the church could perhaps best help women and children at the same time, by concentrating on providing supportive networks and programs for single parents and preschool children. What the church did for the immigrants, it can do for our newly vulnerable women and preschool children.

In fact, all parental and family support programs will help relieve the stress working women experience. The pro-life stance of the church has to be buttressed with women-centered help, from sex education, to problem pregnancy alternatives, to health care and finally to child-care allowances. The economic pressure upon women with dependents is fierce, even when homelessness and food are not a problem. The point can be quickly made when it becomes clear that in the United States, women are more likely to be poor, more likely to be physically vulnerable, more likely to be solely responsible for dependents and thus more in need of help. The rising rates of female alcohol and drug abuse,

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anorexia and bulimia, abortion, crime and suicide, reflect the increasing strains and conflicts of women's lives.

What ever happened to women's liberation? With questions of women's sexual roles, sexual identity, sexual functioning and reproduction, the bishops enter the mine fields and confront the hard cases. The sexual arena is an unmapped new terrain, with no sure pathways marked out by past generations. Never has a society been so medically and technologically advanced, while holding a democratic, basically Christian commitment to the goodness of sexuality and women's social equality. The convergence of fertility control, the sexual revolution, the changing roles of women and the instability of marriage have produced a turbulent scene. In the midst of all this struggle there is no one feminine party line; women are disagreeing with women both within and outside the churches.

Women fought for and against the E.R.A. Women make up the ranks of activists working for the prochoice and prolife movements. Phyllis Schlafly and her troops prove that politically women can be hawks as well as peace activists. Even within the feminist movement, there are ideological conflicts between women; in the yet more specialized world of feminist theology, different feminist theologians clash with claims and counterclaims regarding Christianity or Judaism.

I think these controversies among women are a sign of our progress. At last we have conflicts of women, by women, for women. No longer can all women be lumped together in some undifferentiated mass that supposedly thinks and feels alike because of common sexual characteristics. To me, a "minority" most suffers from the group stereotype, mindlessly applied to all; with more social power, individual identities and differentiated agendas are recognized as the natural manifestations of unique selves. Thus quarrels among women reflect spirited independence and maturity.

Amid these controversies, I would of course like to have the Catholic bishops support the feminist synthesis that seems best to me. Those of us who keep writing do so in hopes of influencing the course of both the church and the women's movement. From where I stand I see all sorts of mistaken turnings both to the right and left of "the Catholic center," which has to hold when things fall apart.

One alarming mistake I find mostly among young women. I have been attacked by bright young women on avant-garde liberal college campuses who scorn the feminist movement and reject its ideals as passé. They never experienced the bad old days and so have little sense of the valiant struggles of the women who went before them. In low moments I sometimes think that we are in for another full-scale backlash, so that in 50 years women will be starting all over at square one. Maybe the bishops can help stave off that kind of disaster. Often the church reminds me of a

turtle that keeps inching along in the right direction and eventually ends up ahead of the hares who have come and gone already.

Two other misguided manifestations of the women's movement may have helped turn off the young. Occasionally, the media feature rapier-wielding, swashbuckling feminists who have made it in some competitive male world by outtoughing all and sundry on their upward climb. These women take on the worst values of the male world as they find it and play to win with innovative aggressive power plays. Like some of the conniving queens of history, they prove that a Machiavellian is a Machiavellian, whatever the sex. Power can corrupt women, just as their more usual condition of powerlessness may deform them.

'Anatomy is not destiny, and Love and Truth are one'

Another group of feminists is also on the wrong track, I am afraid. There exist some hyperfeminists who, like all true believers, seem to have lost their mother wit while distorting the mother tongue. These feminist groups maintain that women have special positive gifts and insights inherent in their sexual identity, just as males possess negative traits. Since women think and feel differently, developing the feminine will bring about world revolution, if not the millennium. Religion, ethics, science, history, medicine, family life—you name it—will be transformed when the power of womanspirit is liberated in the land. Blowing with this wind, many of these feminists have spun right out of traditional historical religions and created forms of goddess worship and nature cults. A few of these groups are also radical separatists who reject all males and view patriarchy as the incarnation of all evil. They defend the faith by asserting that women are naturally nurturing, loving and life-giving, while males are inherently destructive, oppressive and deadly.

Another disturbing element in the extremist feminist cults is the glorification of the unconscious at the expense of reason and conscious will. Women's intuitive nature is relied upon to make her moral judgments all but infallible, especially when it comes to abortion. Since men have oppressed women and "male" civilization has exalted reason, now women must trust their feelings and concentrate on their own needs. Free sexual expression either in heterosexual or lesbian forms is another necessity for feminine fulfillment and growth. Patriarchy's repressive control of feminine sexuality has to be overthrown.

In contrast to these true believers, I see women, and men, to be liberated by recognizing the relatively minor importance of sexual identity and sexual function. Men and

women are at their best androgynous and differ very little. Essentially, the human brain is the primary sexual organ, and our beliefs, reasoned meanings and cultural conditioning shape most human behavior. The most essential aspects of the self may be beyond sexual identity and be like Yahweh, "I am who am." Certainly, consciousness and reason are always more to be trusted than misty unproven unconscious forces, so subject to the latest psychological scheme, whether of the woolly Jungian variety, or whatever. I can see only that the problem with Western civilization has been that it has been too irrational and out of touch with reason. As for women, I know in every Bryn

Mawr bluestocking bone in my body that no one does better by women than those who teach women how to think well.

Bishops need to think well too, of course. Perhaps this time out they will not be able to endorse women's ordination, revise the contraception and sterilization rulings, revoke mandatory celibacy or strike for democratic rights within the church. But they can further justice and avoid fashionable errors by asserting that "in Christ there is neither male nor female." Sex is a most happy accident of nature, to be respected but not revered. Anatomy is not destiny, and Love and Truth are one. ■

WOMEN AND THE PASTORAL

II: Sally Cunneen

Twenty years ago I was busily asking Catholic women across the country what they felt about the church and their place in it. The questions arose from my own deep need to air a tension I felt between the human, moral and spiritual challenges I faced as an American woman, the mother of teen-agers in the volatile 1960's, and the irrelevant and often restricting messages I received from my church.

When the answers came pouring in, they confirmed my suspicions that married and single women, nuns, young and old shared my own doubts and questions; they even thanked me for asking. I no longer felt so isolated or peculiar. I found two key points of consensus: First, most of these women felt that they were not accepted as the full partners they wished to be in carrying out the mission of the church. Second, most believed in that mission and in the church's ability to renew itself humanly into a community of loving service to, as one widow put it, "the people of God, all two billion of them."

Paradoxically, the faith and vision of these women helped me to remain in the church and, by sharing them in print, to remain honest. Now 20 years later, the bishops are responding to their concerns. But the task today is much more difficult. Many of those women do not have the same hope for the church that they had in those exuberant days just after Vatican II. Though a good number of my contemporaries still go to Mass and find the sacraments meaningful, their children (and sometimes their spouses) often do not. And more and more, when I discover women doing

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original, dedicated work—in education, local politics, groups helping other women—I find that they are ex-Catholics, sad or angry that "the church" has been antagonistic to what in a more sensitive and creative pastoral atmosphere might have been seen as the growth of ministries to others that the bishops' own earlier pastorals have asked for.

In all honesty, the bishops are in an extremely difficult, even an absurd situation. Several hundred American males dressed in black and committed to celibacy will now sit down to write a pastoral letter about women. How much easier for them if the ice had been broken before. What a different reception this and their earlier pastorals might have had if Dorothy Day had already been a bishop, if women like Mary Luke Tobin, Teresa Kane or Patty Crowley were now sitting among them. But the long delay in facing the need for reforms in selecting clergy and bishops in keeping with the knowledge of Gospel values and early church tradition has put the bishops in such a tight, anachronistic box that almost anything they say can be dismissed as too little and too late by those who do not identify with their position.

B

ut for several reasons I do identify with it. First, as a writing teacher, I find their assignment the most difficult one I can imagine. Instead of one clear purpose and a definite audience, they have too many of both, some contradictory. Second, I can identify with them as an American who has been stirred by the courage of their two recent pastoral letters asking us to think about the responsibility we bear for the very existence of our threatened planet and the well-being of its suffering human family.

But most of all I can identify with the bishops now as I

could not 20 years ago because I have had opportunities to meet a number of them, have been able to share straight talk and prayer with them and have come to know some of them as persons. They are no longer a block, "them," the opposition in power. If the bishops can see women in the same way, I believe they can turn their difficult assignment into a healing, creative gesture. But it will not be easy.

Stale categories and definitions will be counterproductive. Consider, for example, the remark made a few years ago by a recently deceased cardinal. "If the church were human," he mused, "women could be priests. But since it is divine, unfortunately they cannot." There is almost a comic air of invincible ignorance in such a sure separation of nature and divinity, with its unconscious projection of male superiority onto a supposedly doctrinal position. It was no accident that in my research of 20 years ago, married men—those who presumably knew real women best—were by far the largest group who believed women should be priests.

Only in recent years has solid information on female development been published and widely understood. Previously, it was assumed to be the same as male development. Like so many of us parents, the church preached its moral ideals without understanding the complex processes necessary to achieve them. Working with a culturally conditioned model of female passivity, preachers solemnly instructed young women not to be selfish. Today we realize that their greatest psychological need is to develop a strong sense of self. The revolutionary potential of Genesis' simple affirmation "male and female He created them" and St. Paul's "in Christ there is neither male nor female" was sacrificed to an unintended conformity with societies that practiced violence against women—physical, economic, psychological and spiritual. To ring true, therefore, the bishops' pastoral will need to show special sensitivity to the potentially new meanings that women have been trying to express in old words.

I recall another cautionary example. About 10 years ago in a small group discussion I listened to a mature, attractive nun struggle to present her autobiographical development as a "person" who had chosen a particular life style and work as her form of committed service. The archbishop across the table looked at her blankly and announced—just before he left—that to him the word "person" meant simply a distinction of individuals within one nature. He was signaling his firm commitment to received intellectual categories, as well as a total unwillingness to enter her world where experience and information from contemporary psychology might give ancient categories new life.

Bishops do not need to agree with all of my assumptions about women or current church practice to see that we are living in a period of critical transition. The great theological prophet of our time, Karl Rahner, has outlined the

'What you do and how you do it matters as much as your words'

needed spirituality of the future church as that in which dogma does not present us with "a foreign element but with something that we, in a variety of ways, already affirm in our existence." The challenge this pastoral letter presents to the bishops is to apply this profound insight to what the women's movement, in all its ambiguity, offers to the church.

I think women have been telling the church two important things. First, that we cannot be a "people of God" unless we are first of all people who understand and relate to one another humanly. And second, that our mission to help others will be inadequate unless we recognize and respect the freedom of the human beings who make up our church to envision, undertake and be affirmed in new forms of what we now call ministry.

The testimony of women—those I heard from and those the bishops are hearing now—is that we have not as a church, in teaching or practice, been encouraged to realize that it is through our human growth, in our work and personal relations, our communal and economic life as well as in our prayer and suffering, that we serve. The witness of women points to the need for growth in genuine community within the church in keeping with its earliest practices.

All right, some patient bishop who may have read this far is saying: "You don't want any definitions. No abstract talk about women and no justifying present inequalities in church or society. You want us to interpret the witness of women. But what do we say?"

Is it not possible simply to say you have no final word on "the meaning of woman," and that, although you do not fully understand the part played by church structures and practices in the process, you wish to ask forgiveness for all of us for those cries of women in pain that you have begun to hear?

And then, couldn't you make this pastoral the beginning of a larger, ongoing process of sharing our experience in countless small groups throughout the church, so that all might become more sensitive to those things that prevent others from growing, humanly and spiritually? In courses I teach about family life we find that such "leveling," expressing one's own position as honestly as possible—especially its emotional content—is the essence of building better family relationships. Ignoring differences, assuming you know what others think, telling them what to think, is disastrous in a family. Only the slow, patient work of hearing what others are saying and trying to say helps one dis-

cover the reality of family interactions. Such honest communication is essential for people who want to live and work together. It turns troubled families into nurturing ones.

If you as bishops can initiate such a healing process with

WOMEN AND THE PASTORAL

III. Monika K. Hellwig

If the bishops had asked me, and they did not, I should have told them that a statement on women at this time from the North American bishops would be inopportune. I would have said this because of the difference I see between what they should say and what they could say. Clearly, they cannot contradict any statement that has recently come from Rome. On the other hand, they cannot contradict the New Testament either. So silence would have been the best course of action. The bishops' statement is necessarily directed not to the central church leadership in Rome but to the community of Catholic believers to whom these bishops minister. To speak to these believers about secular affairs without dealing with church problems is awkward and lessens credibility. Yet, in the present situation, that is all that can be done.

What the bishops ought to be able to say is that in Christ we are a new creation in which distinctions of dignity and freedom based on bullying power are swept away. They ought to be able to say that in the community of believers all prejudices, injustices and oppressive relationships are overcome and transformed into affirmation of God's good creation in its spiritual and intellectual, as well as in its physical aspects. They ought to be able to say that the Spirit of God breathes where it wills and bestows the charismata of the divine outpouring in ways beyond our limited expectations. They ought to be able to say that no institutional structure determines limits and conditions for the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit. They ought to be able to say that what we shall be in a redeemed world has not yet been glimpsed but demands attentive responsiveness in discerning what the Spirit is doing in our midst.

Of course, the bishops can certainly state all these things if they remain safely theoretical and abstract and if they remain close to the language of the New Testament and do not attempt to make any applications to contemporary questions of justice and freedom and dignity in social relationships and in the use of talents in private and public life. But the statement is apt to sound hollow and to be met with

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this pastoral, you will be helping us now to move toward Rahner's spirituality of the future. And even justifiably angry women might want to join your efforts when they hear that sound of maturity in your voice. For what you do and how you do it matters as much as your words. ■

indifference or, in some quarters, even with derision. Some will read it, thinking all the while of the appalling injustices and disrespect inflicted on certain American religious women who held public office—notably, but by no means exclusively, the three Sisters of Mercy whose situation was recorded in the secular press. Some will remember that not even the highest religious superiors of these women's congregations were permitted to give evidence that should have been considered before the drastic penalties were imposed. And all the while these readers will realize that it is because the sisters and their superiors were women that they were allowed no voice in the church even to defend themselves against such extraordinary interventions of bullying power.

The bishops can write a statement that affirms Gospel principles, but it could achieve much that they do not intend. By the light of those principles, some readers will reconsider the way teachings on family life are shaped in the church. They will remember statements and policies in which women as persons are defined not eschatologically in terms of their destined union with God, but reproductively in terms of biological function. By the light of those same Gospel principles also, certain readers will recall the Code of Canon Law—the new one as well as the old one—and they will become more astonished and distressed than edified. Indeed, it is dangerous business to write on behalf of the rights and dignity of women in the name of the Catholic Church in our own times. But after all this is said, is there any advice that a lay woman theologian can give regarding what the bishops ought to say and could say in present circumstances?

C

Certainly, anyone who writes about justice in the United States today must attend to the phenomenon of the "feminization of poverty" and its effects on the self-image and spirit of women as well as its devastating effects on the children of poor women. This, of course, has already been included in the statement on the economy and will certainly remain there no matter what the revisions for subsequent drafts may bring. Yet it will be worth saying again that a society in which many women are abandoned to raise children alone in dire poverty must, in justice as well as soci-

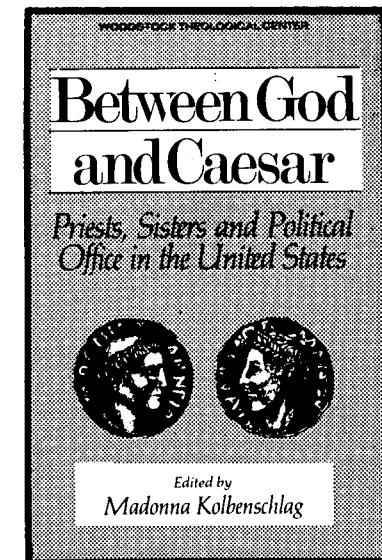
tal self-interest, take public measures to redress the balance. It can be done, and is done elsewhere, by "family allowances" automatically paid to mothers for each child from public funds, by public health and dental services, subsidized housing arrangements, and so forth. Moreover, it can be done without shaming and crushing the mothers concerned, without marking them as parasites on the public administration; it can be done as an acknowledgment of basic human solidarity and as an acknowledgment that raising children is a more significant public service than collecting taxes, making laws and deploying kill-power.

Likewise, anyone who writes about the dignity and rights of women in our times must take note of the problems connected with the unequal remuneration of work traditionally done by women—the salaries of nurses compared with those of physicians and surgeons, a discrepancy that goes far beyond the need to compensate long studies or repay student loans or offer incentives to take risks and burdens; the salaries of teachers compared with those of minor executives in all fields; the salaries of secretaries and telephone operators compared with garbage collectors and construction workers, and so forth. It might even be appropriate in a church document to acknowledge that the 19th-century papal social teaching on the need to pay adult men a family living wage is now outdated, because it is so frequently the mother alone who has to support the young family, for whom she must also care physically every minute of the day either in person or by paying substitutes. The church in our times must consider the problem of a family living wage for women's work, or a societal policy of income adjustment for the number of family members—an adjustment that goes far beyond the present tax structure.

But more important than anything along these lines, perhaps, would be an exhortation to listen to the voices of women on the nuclear question. There is an overwhelming tendency to regard as experts on national defense and the nuclear issues those who make bombs or release them, those who plan strategy and conduct maneuvers. Why not regard as experts those who have the most stake in the future, those who have borne and raised and cherished the people who will kill and be killed, will burn and be horribly, unbelievably burned, will see hope die and terror grow beyond bounds in the name of some national interest that has become quite irrelevant in the general holocaust? Why not regard as experts those who have most interest in human relations, in community, in nonviolent conflict resolution—those who most develop the artistic imagination?

There are innumerable voices of women in different parts of the world today all raised in unison to protest their governments' nuclear policies, because they care about their own children and those of other women in other power blocs. But their voices are drowned out by a few policy makers in power, who are free to hold those posi-

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tions because they are not burdened by day-to-day care for the people of the future who are the children of today. And the voices of women are so easily drowned out because they are characterized as unpractical, not acquainted with the realities of the situation. Someone must keep asking what we mean by realities, what limitations we are placing on our expectations of human relationships. And this the bishops might well do in the name of Jesus and His church.

If the bishops would do this, they might even be able to back into the question of women in the church quite gently and unobtrusively by pointing out that, in the theology of

the redemption, human nature and human society are not in the last analysis static but in the process of transformation. The redeeming grace of Christ summons forth undreamed-of possibilities, correcting our prejudices, opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf to see and hear a whole new order of things. The bishops might even be able to say that it is not for men to define women and put them in their place, but for the powerful Spirit of God to call women forth to take their divinely intended role in growing beyond all humanly made definitions and limitations, to take their share in shaping a new world. ■

WOMEN AND THE PASTORAL

IV: Margaret Brennan

The right to search for truth implies also a duty. One must not conceal any part of what one has recognized to be true" is engraved on the marble wall that circles behind the statue of Albert Einstein in Washington, D.C. On a sunny March afternoon a few weeks ago I observed visitors of different ages and cultures contemplating the furrowed features, studying the constellations of the universe spread out at his feet and watching the little children sitting comfortably in his lap.

The quotation came to life in a new way when some days later I reflected on the Syrophenician woman of the Gospels. "Give her what she wants," the disciples say to Jesus, "because she is shouting after us" (Mt. 15:24). Here is a woman of bold and daring faith who ultimately was heard because she spoke up and spoke out. Her initiative and persistence, according to many exegetes, led Jesus to recognize a new truth with regard to His ministry. In the realm of creative imagination one wonders in what other way He would have come to the realization that the Kingdom embraced more than one people and enfolded all those who believe in the tender mercies of a compassionate God.

My own immediate response to the proposed pastoral on women is to seek out the motivation behind such a theological reflection. Are the bishops prompted by "the women shouting after them," to paraphrase Matthew's Gospel? If the pastoral is to seek to give an answer to the serious questions and legitimate desires of women to participate fully and equally in the life and mission of the church, then, like Jesus, they may find their previous understandings and traditional convictions challenged to the point of a fundamental reinterpretation of church law and teaching. But if their intention is to encourage and affirm women without any

serious consideration of fundamental change, then the pastoral will serve only to deepen the existing alienation and drive a further wedge into the widening gap that places men over against women and prevents the church from becoming a community of equality and mutuality.

The meetings with women's groups that the bishops' committee have already had indicate a wide spectrum of views among women themselves. Some are looking for needed changes within the existing structure of church order, and others are challenging it as patriarchal and indicative of social sin that calls for conversion and a fundamental reordering. In the light of divergent views and the seriousness of the questions that have already surfaced, the bishops will not only need to hear the experience of women from various walks of life, but will also need to seek out the insights of feminist scholars who have researched the questions within the framework of a number of related disciplines. The growing volume of scholarly works and research in nonreligious fields must also be attended to if the role of women in the church is to be understood within the cultural framework from which it proceeds.

Of particular importance in this regard are the questions raised by women developmental psychologists in respect to inherent differences between men and women. While all these theorists attest to the fact that the cultural experience of women and men has contributed to the development of different qualities and characteristics, they are strong in repudiating the belief that these same qualities are essentially related to gender. When the opposing view is held, then men and women "according to their nature" are thought to be better prepared and gifted for different roles and functions in society. Such differentiation has fostered and bolstered the notion of "complementarity" rather than "mutuality" and is deeply endemic in the church's view and un-

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derstanding of what ministerial roles are best suited for women.

Because women's experience has been so little understood, a serious source of criticism arising from a number of women's groups and individuals is whether or not it is within the competency of the bishops to write a pastoral on women. From one point of view this is entirely accurate. The long and pervasive power of patriarchy remains structurally operative in the church despite all the protestations about commitment to the equality of the sexes. That this patriarchy has been supported by theological argumentation and biblical exegesis has only served to place the question in the outer reaches of what we have called the unchanging will of God, making it a question of faith that is ultimately beyond our ability to change.

Revisionist and reconstructionist theories that challenge such positions are not taken seriously, and the feminist scholars who have developed them find that, for the most part, their audiences and their readers are women. If the bishops, aside from the widespread consultation process, were to make a serious study of the prevailing and growing body of knowledge about the women's movement, their competency might be enhanced enough to allow them to speak to the moral issues. It was in this way that the bishops were able to answer those who criticized their competency with regard to the peace pastoral and the forthcoming pastoral on the American economy.

An important difference, however, is the fact that the church itself is a prime source of the injustice that is inflicted on women, who have no position of power from which to challenge or to change the legislation or the ideology that keeps them in a subordinate position. If the bishops are to deal with this existential reality and to probe its cause, they will be led inevitably to confront the pervasiveness of patriarchy of which they themselves are the official carriers. If and when this happens, we may well see a pastoral that

deals with the call to a conversion from sexist and androcentric ideologies that find expression in moral, ministerial and theological prescriptions.

P

ersonally, I find myself in agreement with those who have already gone on record as asking the bishops not to write a pastoral on women at this time. I say this for two reasons. First, I believe that we are in need of a better process for the study and practical implementation of the teaching in pastorals themselves. A number of bishops have already expressed their disappointment and regret that the peace pastoral has not had greater impact in the church. Perhaps part of the problem is the general lack of sustained effort to maximize its educational content and to internalize its strong message. While enthusiasm and interest are engendered as the various drafts are circulated and discussed, the momentum fades away with the final document only to be taken up again on another issue when a new pastoral is introduced.

Second, I believe that more time is needed to search out the issues that such a pastoral on women should treat. We have already experienced the value of hearings and consultations on other major social issues and felt their power as tools of consciousness-raising. Because the issues dealing with the role of women in church and society are so vast and so much a part of the fabric of cultural expression and change, the kind of consultation called for will have to be broad and deep.

It is my hope that the bishops will continue to listen to the lived experience and desires of women to be equal partners in the Kingdom of God. As authentic teachers in the church, they have not only the right but the duty to search for truth. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, in their search they must not conceal any part of what they will recognize to be true. ■

WOMEN AND THE PASTORAL

V. Doris Smith

To preside over a college or any similar institution these days is to expose oneself to an army of evaluators. There are times when I feel as though I am surrounded by grinchy cheerleaders shouting, "Give an A . . . Give a C . . . Give a C . . . until the word "accountability" comes bouncing back at me from the palisades across the Hudson. Self-study processes—required, encouraged or otherwise imposed by various accrediting agencies or by

state or Federal regulations—occasionally overlap but literally never stop.

The church is an institution, too, and the kind of formal self-study or evaluation that other institutions regularly face has not become a way of life for the bishops, who are the church's official teachers, or for the church itself. Nevertheless, the bishops have, I believe, provided excellent demonstrations of how to gather expert testimony in preparation for the pastorals on peace and on the U.S. economy. They are attempting to do this again as they begin drafting the proposed pastoral on women.

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'Religious women are not seeking pats on the back, far less pats on the head'

Before the bishops proceed too far, they might like to borrow my somewhat dogeared but still useful *Handbook for Institutional Self-Study*. This little guide, and many others like it, exhorts those responsible for the institution to review its mission, goals and objectives; to scrutinize, without blinking, its current operation; to examine its effectiveness and the degree of satisfaction with the way things are now done; to look at new needs, many of which have originated from changes outside the institution itself; to appraise resources available and resources required to accomplish whatever new goals and objectives now need to be incorporated; and only then to proceed to recommendations and courses of action.

As anyone familiar with this kind of procedure can readily and graphically testify, it is likely to induce a most frantic form of frustration. Those involved insist on telling one another with an air of great discovery things that the hearers have long known. People can be unnecessarily gleeful when they point out flaws in the current operation. They are less than realistic when they make recommendations for future action. They ignore attempts at forward movement that have either failed or been delayed through no fault of anyone in the institution.

And yet a self-study is a marvelous invention. Grueling as it can be, it has the great advantage of bringing about a common understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of an institution. More important, I believe, is the fact that it gives to all participants a stake in finding and implementing solutions to whatever problems are given precedence. The most beneficial kind of self-study will yield a realistic blueprint for future action that will address current needs and evoke the support of constituents.

Is it impossible for the bishops to apply this kind of approach to the proposed pastoral on women? I do not think so, although, like good self-study designers, they should leave some room for modifications along the way. And they should, of course, keep reminding themselves that an institutional self-study is for the benefit of everyone who constitutes the institution—bishops and priests, religious women and men, lay women and men, and, most of all, children, who are the church of the future.

The mission of the church and the goals and objectives supporting that mission have been described in innumerable documents from a variety of pens (or word processors) since Christ walked among us. It would seem imperative that words used to describe the church's mission for

this document should draw heavily on biblical and theological emphases on justice and human dignity. The message should be clear and unequivocal: The church seeks justice and the dignity befitting all those created in God's image—not just for women, not just for men, but for all people.

Scrutiny of the current reality regarding women and the church is, if not the most important, certainly the most basic part of this self-study. Even if the facts are thought to be well known, an orderly and dispassionate review can be helpful.

Consider, for example, the contributions of American sisters to the church's ministry. Religious women are not seeking pats on the back, far less pats on the head. The fact is, however, that members of religious congregations have for centuries administered elementary and secondary schools, colleges, hospitals, child-care agencies with remarkable success. There is ample documentation of the effectiveness of these efforts. In the field of higher education, the Neylan Commission of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities has amassed impressive statistics revealing the power for change that has existed and continues to exist in colleges sponsored by congregations of religious women. Donald Regan's opinion notwithstanding, hospitals administered by sisters are among the most efficient and forward-looking in the nation, leading the way in the hospice movement and in health care for the poor. And sisters have been quick to involve themselves in the stark realities of our times: drug addiction, homelessness, single-parent families, the hunger for material and spiritual food.

Religious women responded with enthusiasm and alacrity to Vatican II's suggestion in *Gaudium et Spes* that they update their constitutions and their manner of realizing the visions of those who had founded their congregations. Accustomed to confronting such challenges, they met this one readily but not rashly. They spent years following the very process that I am suggesting to the bishops: They assessed their present situations; they established new goals; they studied and painstakingly revised their constitutions; they tested the changes by living with them for some time; they dialogued with one another endlessly; and they emerged with a renewed eagerness and ability to serve God and the people of God.

The role of lay women in the church is even more difficult to encapsulate. Working sometimes alongside members of religious congregations, but more frequently without the kind of support that such associations may provide, these women have had to assimilate changes in the church too, and to try to mesh them with rapid changes in society. They are frequently the mainstay of the Catholic school system, usually without adequate compensation. In parishes, lay women are sometimes only grudgingly permitted to assume active and responsible roles. They are disproportionately represented among the poor, the underemployed,

the illiterate. They are occasionally confronted with the insensitivity of male marriage tribunals, who seem not to understand that justice requires equal treatment for both parties. About 75 percent of married women work outside the home, yet the burden of sustaining a close family life often falls most heavily on them.

This reality has strengths and weaknesses. Without succumbing to a "post hoc ergo propter hoc" fallacy, the bishops must acknowledge that the current scene results in part from the church's own attitudes toward women, toward men and toward women and men working together. Unquestionably, unsurprisingly and unavoidably, hardly anyone is wholly satisfied with things as they are. This is a predictable outcome of nearly any self-study. The obvious question: Where do we go from here?

The task of adequately assessing and assigning priority to present needs of the church in the United States could be overwhelming. Yet some of these needs are already identified, and others cannot be ignored. They include finding ways to make God real in the lives of the poor and the rich, the young and the old, the godly and the godless. They call for kinds of service that will enhance the dignity and comfort of all human beings, enabling them to provide for themselves and, in turn, for others. They require a renewal

of the compassion and love that were Jesus' gifts to us and by which we are to be known as His followers.

What resources does the church have for meeting these needs? Are these resources now being used as effectively as they could be? If not, why not? And what steps should now be taken to increase their effectiveness?

Now comes the moment of truth familiar to all self-study veterans. If all is not perfect, some change is called for. And so it seems that the bishops must ponder how they can help women and men to preach and live the Gospel, to minister to the people of God, to make decisions and take steps that will proclaim the church's mission and further its objectives. Rather early in the study process, perhaps even now, the bishops must know whether any substantive changes in the present structures are possible. If they are not, let them say so, so that false expectations will not be encouraged.

If, however, the purpose of this self-study/pastoral is to build a church with an enhanced capacity to be Christ present in the world, we need to infuse all its people with a consciousness of their own dignity and to include them, all of them, in the decisions that will shape their lives. Like many women who do not feel so infused or so included, I long for the attainment of that goal. ■

Winter Morning in Florida

*White mists rise from the warmer waters
Into the icy air; the wind sliced waves,
Huddling closer into woolly wraps,
Pull blankets
Tight over them, turn over, hunch into morning.*

*Sun plucks the coverlet to thin white fluff,
Sun draws the blanket from the glass-edged water;
The seal-black surfers, in and out of morning,
Strike out past foggy morning into day,
Swim to the windcloud, raincloud black horizon.*

*I, coated, huddle, no sun to pluck coat from me,
From biting wind and waves, and watch the morning
Unravel edges, spool the skeined horizon
In cloudy towers from the furrowed sea.*

ANNE KILMER

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