



## **Association of US Catholic Priests' Declaration on the Status of Women in the Church**

**On May 28, 2019, the Leadership Team of the Association of US Catholic Priests (AUSCP) approved a Declaration on the Status of Women in the Church. We invite you to read the document and discuss it in your parish or community.**

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## AUSCP DECLARATION ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN

April 2019

### PREAMBLE

*“The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.” (Gaudium et Spes 1).*

Joy and hope spring from our faith in Jesus Christ who promises to be with us until the end of time (Matthew 28:20). As a working group called together by the Association of United States Catholic Priests (AUSCP), we trust that with the help of the Holy Spirit we, the People of God, can overcome the grief and anxiety caused by the crises in our Catholic Church today, but only if the institutional Church engages women as equals in dealing with those crises and overcoming them.

The signs of the times suggest that what were once considered to be the most effective ways of spreading the Gospel are no longer sufficient. We need new models of universal and parochial leadership to stimulate Church renewal. Such models must be developed in such a way that, “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

We have every reason to hope for the possibility of change. A thorough examination of the official status of women is necessary to regain trust and credibility in a world that so badly needs their witness. In union with the Synod on Youth 2018, we hold that “we cannot but reflect on the conditions of women within the Church and consequently within society. Young men and young women ask for it with great force. It is a duty of justice.”<sup>1</sup>

The Holy Spirit speaks to us through various disciplines and our own experiences. Historical, cosmological, anthropological, biological, scriptural, philosophical, theological, sacramental, liturgical and pastoral reflections all support our conviction that this is a moment when we can engage in a process that recognizes our common Baptism and the vital role of women in the present and future of Church ministry. We offer contemporary insights in the following sections for your consideration and discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 3-28, 2018), *Final Document on the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*, Para. 148.

May we engage in genuine dialogue as men and women of faith? We call upon the Holy Spirit to guide our dialogue and action so that our joy might be complete (John 16:24). We invite you to join us, in the words of the Synod, in a work of “courageous cultural conversion and change in daily pastoral practice.”<sup>2</sup>

## HISTORY

Discovering the status of women throughout history in society and the Church is a daunting task. Until the mid-twentieth century, history has been constructed and recorded mostly by men. The androcentric bias of historical texts reflects the priorities and worldview of men with power, distorting and even obscuring what we can know about the actual experience and authority of women of the past. The contemporary response to that bias by both female and male theologians has been to generate a new field of theological thought called feminist theology, which has provided a new lens for examining both Scripture and our Tradition.

Theologians such as Rosemary Radford Ruether have asserted that human experience is understood as the basis of all theology. Traditionally, such experience has been identified with and defined by men; feminist theology includes the experiences of women, and therefore exposes the male-centered bias of classical theology and articulates an understanding of faith that incorporates all of humanity. Whereas the traditional paradigm of theology supported domination and subordination in relationships between men and women, feminist thinking enables a mutuality that allows for variety, particularity, equality and mutual respect in and among women and men. The goal is not to diminish males but to affirm both sexes as whole, along with all races and social groups.<sup>3</sup>

Scripture and other early Christian writings provide primary literary sources for the understanding of women’s historical status in Judaism and early Christianity. Each is subject to androcentric limitations. Although they offer windows into beliefs, practices and proscriptions at various times and places, contemporary biblical scholars and historians should be careful to distinguish between the patriarchal bias and historical interpretation of those texts and what happened in the actual lives of women.

This distinction is key to understanding the way we interpret the texts themselves. Indeed, the meaning of Greek and Latin masculine plurals often function grammatically

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Para. 148.

<sup>3</sup> See Phyllis Trible, “The Creation of Feminist Theology,” *New York Times*, May 1, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/05/01/books/the-creation-of-a-feminist-theology.html>.

as gender neutral in describing groups of men and women. Historically, androcentric readings of the texts rendered the Greek for words such as “saints” and “elect” as inclusive of both women and men, but words such as “apostoloi”, “didaskaloi” and “episcopoi” applied exclusively to men.

The status of women in society, culture, and the Church has varied significantly through time. At no time have women lived completely free from this patriarchal context. Social, ideological, religious and other factors were defined largely by distinct and strongly enforced gender roles. Nonetheless, while the patriarchy ruled and restricted all women, including Jewish and Christian women, the extent of those restrictions was mitigated to some extent by a woman’s socioeconomic status, cultural context and geography rather than by her religious affiliation. Ironically, this could lead to those poorest in society enjoying greater freedom than the higher-born.

Women, such as Mary, the mother of Jesus, were born poor and lived a subsistence agrarian existence under Roman rule. Heavy taxation and the political machinery that kept that system in place rendered Mary’s contemporaries some of the poorest, most oppressed, and most brutalized in the world. But this agrarian existence, by necessity, created a social network where women exercised various degrees of equity in comparison to women of a higher social status.

Jesus’ behavior toward women, even when viewed through the androcentric bias of first- and second-century texts, is extraordinarily egalitarian. Women, both single and married, were part of his inner circle and traveled with him and his other disciples carving out a new movement as a community. The Gospels tell us of a Samaritan woman who was the first missionary in her town (see John 4); a Canaanite woman who begged that Jesus acknowledge her share in God’s plan for salvation (see Matthew 15:21-28); and Mary Magdalene, who was the first messenger of the Resurrection according to all four gospels.

Christianity, this first century reform movement within Judaism, was attractive to women in part because of the equity it embraced as central to the reign of God. As the movement grew to include Gentiles, Paul wrote to the Galatians that, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28)

Thus, women played a critical role in the expansion of Christianity. Paul's greetings to acquaintances in his authentic letters offer solid information about many Jewish and Gentile women who were prominent leaders within the movement.<sup>4</sup>

Although there is no evidence that women led synagogue worship in Palestine, Ross Kramer's seminal study<sup>5</sup> of the epigraphic, papyrological and archaeological sources found that in the second century, both women and men in the Jewish diaspora held synagogal offices.

While women have always exercised some form of leadership and authority within a patriarchal power structure, they were in conflict with the systematic degradation of women in these societies. These ancient cultural and social mores continue to influence contemporary culture, and, as a result of deep-seated sexism, Catholic and Orthodox Christianity constitutionally and legally exclude women from ordained authority in church leadership and ministry.

In various parts of the world today women have achieved status much closer to equality with men than has perhaps ever been experienced in history. Despite imposed limitations in the Catholic Church, women have made extraordinary contributions to both the Church and society.

We, along with many Catholics today, judge that the misogynistic attitude embedded in Catholic Church culture must be uprooted to make room for women. How can we open those doors that are currently closed to women for the good of the Church and the world?

## **COSMOLOGY AND SCIENCE**

God is unchanging. What *does* change is our perception of God. Science has an important role in the ongoing discovery of the immensity of God's creation, and our ability to recalibrate our worldview accordingly.

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<sup>4</sup> The seven letters considered genuine by most scholars are: First Thessalonians, Galatians, First Corinthians, Philippians, Philemon, second Corinthians, and Romans.

<sup>5</sup> Ross Shepard Kraemer, "Jewish Women and Women's Judaism(s) at the Beginning of Christianity," in *Women and Christian Origins* ed. Ross, Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D'Angelo (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71.

Early Christians used the Greek word *catholic* (*Kata*, meaning “through”, and *holou*, meaning “the whole”) to signify universality, wholeness and attunement to the cosmos. Scientist and theologian Ilia Delio, whose research focuses on the intersection of science and religion, contends that the term *catholic* signified “an open system” where Jesus was understood as a new creation making a fragmented and broken humanity whole in Christ.<sup>6</sup>

With the rise of Constantine in the fourth century, the open system that had characterized the early Church increasingly became identified with notions of law, order and orthodoxy, a fixation that continues today. According to Delio, fixation on law, order and orthodoxy impairs the institutional Church’s ability to interact and adapt to shifts in modern biology, evolution and quantum physics. As a result, the cosmological framework for mainstream Catholic theology retains its pre-Copernican, Platonic notion that the body is inferior to the spirit. Furthermore, the ancient assumption that women are inferior to men and the source of sin persists. Additionally, sex and sexuality are seen as lesser attributes of human personhood that need to be closely monitored, rather than embraced or honored.

This theological framework has produced ecclesial structures that maintain outmoded philosophical notions of nature, gender, and personhood. Rules, fixed order, dogmatic formulas, unyielding laws, patriarchy, authority, and obedience have rendered the Church resistant to the radical interconnectivity that marks all levels of nature. The Church is bound to die out unless the system undergoes radical transformation. Thus, the institutional Church needs to consider the evolving insights of science and the universe. Or, as Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ wrote, “the church therefore needs to look to the world to discover God’s designs for the present time.”<sup>7</sup>

Can we as the Church be a legitimate player on the world stage if we choose to be out of step with scientific findings and a world that is evolving toward gender equality? Is it possible for us as the Church to claim our role in service to the Gospel if we continue to embrace institutionalized sexism and gender discrimination supported by outdated theology?

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<sup>6</sup> Ilia Delio, OSF, *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2015). Book review by Jamie Manson, “Delio Breathes New Life into term ‘Catholic,’” *National Catholic Register*, November 18, 2015, <https://www.ncronline.org/books/2017/08/delio-breathes-new-life-term-catholic>.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, (New York, Continuum, 2003), 16.

## ANTHROPOLOGY

Although a person's biological sex is largely fixed at birth, there is an expanding amount of research that indicates that culture can transform presumptions about the "inevitable" consequences of one's sex. Early anthropological studies presented differences and division between men and women as "natural" and based on being born male or female. Later studies challenged those judgments. A great variety of feminine and masculine ideals were found across populations and cultures. Eventually scholars and students in the field articulated a distinction between sex and gender, the former defined by biology and the latter by culture. The once fixed expectations of men and women loosened and became more fluid. In most of western culture it is no longer legal to deny or limit opportunities on the basis of a person's sex.<sup>8</sup>

Today's global society is increasingly open to various roles being played by both men and women, depending on their qualifications and abilities. This is true for heads of nations, doctors and nurses, road crews, soldiers, NASCAR drivers and astronauts. The Final Document on the Synod of Bishops on Young People 2018 reaffirms that:

God loves every person and so does the church, renewing its commitment against every discrimination and sexually based violence. Equally reaffirmed is the determinative anthropological importance of the difference and reciprocity between man and woman and it is held to be reductive to define a person's identity only by their 'sexual orientation.'"<sup>9</sup>

Sexual differentiation and distinct biological functions certainly influence the way a person fulfills the requirements of the roles one undertakes in life, work, and society. For example, parenting. But to suggest differences permit discrimination is intolerable in modern and secular society. Catholic social teaching calls us to examine systems that produce inequality and to bring the Gospel to bear on the life and structures of the Church as well as in society. Without equality, the credibility of the Church is rightly

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<sup>8</sup> cf. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/12/081211121835.htm>, *Boy Or Girl? It's In The Father's Genes*, ScienceDaily, and <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/sexinfo/article/sex-determination-and-differentiation>; cf. also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist\\_anthropology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminist_anthropology); and finally work of Professor Judith Okely, (MA, D.Phil. Oxford), Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology, Hull University and Honorary Research Associate, School of Anthropology, Oxford.

<sup>9</sup> Joshua J. McElwee , "Synod Ends, Calling Women's Inclusion in Catholic Leadership a 'Duty of Justice,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/synod-ends-calling-womens-inclusion-catholic-leadership-duty-justice>.

questioned. “Young men and young women ask for it with great force. It is a duty of justice.”<sup>10</sup> And the Synod document concludes, “The absence of women’s voices and points of view impoverishes discussion and the path of the church, subtracting a precious contribution from discernment.”

Can we as Church continue to render more than half of our members second-class citizens unworthy of equality in governance and ministry?

## **BIOLOGY**

A view of earth from outer space has profoundly changed our sense of our universe and ourselves. Similarly, the disciplines of modern science, especially biology and chemistry, have revolutionized the biological understanding of human beings from the moment of conception.

When a child is conceived and begins development as a fetus, Catholic teaching regards the developing baby to be a fully human person deserving of respect and dignity. Theologically speaking, all persons are loved and created in God’s image and likeness, one in Christ where there is neither male nor female. In the words of St. Bonaventure, “All things are said to be transformed in the transfiguration of Christ ... since in his human nature he embraces something of every creature in himself when he is transfigured.”<sup>11</sup>

Outmoded understandings of the biological basis of sex itself, and what these mean for the differences between men and women, affect not only Church teachings but also the way in which the Church governs itself and behaves in the world.

Is it time for a comprehensive reckoning of all Church teachings on nature, gender and personhood, informed by scientific evidence and Catholic moral tradition, to ensure the full inclusion of women?

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<sup>10</sup> XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 3-28, 2018), *Final Document on the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*, Para. 148.

<sup>11</sup> Ilia Delio, *The Emergent Christ*, Orbis Books, Marknoll NY: 2011, p.76, Ch.5 endnote 13: Bonaventure, *Sermo IX*, as cited in Zachary Hayes, “Christ, Word of God and Exemplar of Humanity, “ *Cord* 46, no.1 (1996): 13.



## SCRIPTURE

Genesis 1:27 tells us that humans were created in God's own image, male and female, with no mention of hierarchy or gender roles until after the Fall. In the Hebrew Scriptures God called women as well as men to lead, and sometimes even to save, all people. We encounter this in the roles of women, such as Deborah (see Judges 4-5, Hebrews 11:32-34), Ruth (see Ruth 1-3), Esther (see Esther 1-50), Tamar (see Genesis 38) and Huldah, the prophetess (see 2 Kings 22:14, 2 Chronicles 34:22). We also hear Miriam shed insight into women's struggle as leaders when she raises her indignant question, "Does the Lord speak only through Moses?" (see Numbers 12:2).

In the New Testament we find Jesus, a faithful Jew, leading a renewal movement within Judaism in which he regards Jewish women as part of his inner circle, both as disciples and leaders. According to Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Jesus drew new followers from outside of Judaism, many of whom were women and slaves drawn by the "discipleship of equals" they experienced. After the resurrection Jesus sent Mary Magdalene as the first person to preach the resurrection to the other apostles.<sup>12</sup>

There are many other examples in the New Testament of holy women who have various leadership roles in ministry: Prisca and her husband, Aquila, founded house churches in Corinth, Ephesus and Rome (see Romans 16:3-5); Phoebe was named as a deacon in the Church (see Romans 16:1-2); Lydia of Philippi began the first house church in that city (see Acts 16:6-40); Priscilla instructed a Jewish man, Apollos. (see Acts 18:24-26, 1 Corinthians 1:11); and Chloe and Nympha were named as the heads of churches that met in their homes (see Colossians 4:15).

Unfortunately, many Catholics are unaware of these leadership roles of women because Lectionary readings rarely mention them, especially in the Sunday readings. Yet Galatians 3:28-29 makes it clear, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs to the promise." As adopted children of God, we are all one in Christ and heirs to the Kingdom. There should be no hint of subordination or hierarchy in the Church.

Theologian James Bacik writes that the Bible has long been used to justify patriarchy. Composed by males and largely about males, it speaks from a male perspective to the neglect and even denigration of women, their role, their experience and

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<sup>12</sup> cf. *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, (Continuum, NY, 1994).

their perspective. God is primarily described with male names and roles. That pattern grows stronger as the original language is translated into other languages, especially English, where God is always “he”. The bias is clear: Women are not equal to men.<sup>13</sup>

Among other benefits of contemporary scholarship is the development of ways of speaking of God that are not just from a male perspective. Feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson writes that:

God is spirit, yet the daily language of preaching, worship, catechesis, and instruction conveys a different message: God is male or at least more like a man than a woman, or at least more fittingly addressed as male than as female. This exclusive speech about God serves in manifold ways to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women. Wittingly or not, it undermines women’s human dignity as equally created in the image of God. Inherited Christian speech about God has evolved within a framework that does not prize the unique and equal humanity of women, and bears the marks of this partiality and dominance.<sup>14</sup>

Because the Bible is God’s gift to us “for the sake of salvation” (*Dei Verbum* 8), contemporary readers can, but also must, recognize patriarchal biases and take steps to offset and correct them. Biased and especially sexist texts should not be normative for believers. Texts that are favorable to women and ground claims for the equality of women with men deserve attention and affirmation. Large numbers of feminist Scripture scholars, both male and female, have been able to bring into the open and affirm truths regarding women long hidden behind or beneath patriarchal and masculine bias.

To what extent can new discoveries about women’s authority in early Christianity help us carve out greater roles for women today?

## PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Gospel of Christ calls for a just, responsive and inclusive society. The Church cannot excuse itself from this call. In the process of answering the call, we must explore a variety of perceptions, including those related to the status of women in the Church.

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<sup>13</sup> James Bacik, "Bridging the Gender Divide: Christian Perspectives" August 9, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, (Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), Location 830 in Kindle edition.

According to the *Catechism* (1268), “The baptized have become ‘living stones’ to be ‘built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, a holy nation, God’s people, that [they] may declare the wonderful deed of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light.’ (1 Peter 2:9). *Baptism gives a share in the common priesthood of all believers.*” Male or female, all baptized persons have the indelible spiritual character that cannot be temporary or repeated. If there is a Thomistic ontological change, both male and females experience it at Baptism.

Although Christian philosophy has never been static and has grown and developed over centuries (and continues to do so today), a wide range of Christian thinkers has always engaged in debates over the same questions as ancient philosophers. What does it mean to be human? What is the relationship between body and soul; the mind and matter?

Origen was the first Christian philosopher to explore the integration of philosophy and theology. Plato and the School of Alexandria heavily influenced him.<sup>15</sup> He posited that wisdom and knowledge are accessible by faith and, thus, through the Church. Augustine, a follower of Plato, formulated the concept of Original Sin, concluding that humans could be moral only through the grace of God, which is only available through the Church. Thus, he taught, there is no salvation outside the church. Thomas Aquinas, like Aristotle, held that truth is truth no matter where it sits.<sup>16</sup> His doctrines draw from Greek, Roman, Jewish and Islamic philosophers. Unlike Augustine, he believed that the world could be known as it is and saw the complex interaction of subjective thinking (senses, imagination) and objective reality as both bearing on the production of knowledge. He is responsible for the concept of ontological change. He is also responsible for male understanding regarding the role of women—not just in the Church, but also in the world. All three of these Christian philosophers postulated that the church leadership, which was then exclusively male, was the arbiter of truth.

While the Roman Catholic Church never made Thomism its official philosophy, it gave pride of place to Aquinas’s work. Thomism, an integration of philosophy and theology, became the dominant and representative form of Catholic philosophical thought in 1879 with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Aeterni Patris*. Here is what Thomas wrote about the nature of women:

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Moore, “Origen of Alexandria (185-254 C.E.),” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/origen-of-alexandria>.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “Question 16: Of Truth,” *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Allen TX: Christian Classics, 1948).

As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex; while the production of woman comes from defect in the active force or from some material indisposition (ST Ia q.92, a.1, Reply to Objection 1)

Theologians have certainly challenged this view, especially since Vatican II, but the Church has not yet completely purged itself of this view of women. A residue remains. For some church leaders, at some level of consciousness, this thinking prevails. But contemporary Christian philosophers are challenging it. Feminist Philosophers such as Pamela Sue Anderson, Elizabeth Johnson, Judith Butler, Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, and others work to rectify the male-centric approach to reason and authority. Christine Schenk reminds us: "Women do not have to wait to be ordained as deacons or priests to begin exercising our authority in the church. Because you see, Christ has no body now but ours."

The Catholic Church has a powerful message, and there are many ways to convey it. It has been shared primarily from a male and, since the late eighteenth century, Thomistic perspective. How might the Church move beyond the narrow and scientifically disputed notion of what it means to be a woman? How might we formulate the equality of men and women more fundamentally? Are there valid reasons why both males and females cannot both be equals in Church leadership? Is ordination necessary for Church leadership?

## THEOLOGY/ECCLESIOLOGY

Both power and authority are necessary for governing all human communities. We hold that all authority comes from God the Author of all that exists. God gave authority to Jesus, who always exercised his authority in the manner of a servant. By his humble service, Jesus sought a radical transformation of power and authority. He taught his disciples that they were not to lord authority over others, but that the first among them must be the slave of all (Mark 10:42-45, Matthew 20:20-28).

Up until the time of Constantine, the Church was the *ecclesia*,<sup>17</sup> the Christian community. The members were all baptized, inseparably linked with their bishop,

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<sup>17</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, "Reflections on the Primacy of Peter", *Origins*, January 28, 1999. "Popes should exercise their authority 'with particular attention to the mystery of the church as a *corpus ecclesiarum*' ... as a communion of particular churches. In

without subordination or superiority, in loving obedience to Christ. There was no distinction between “lay people” and clerics in the vocabulary of the New Testament. Leaders within the community included Apostles, disciples, men and women, some of whom were named deacons. In this way the word of God continued to spread.

In the third century, St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, wrote, “The ancient liturgy had no ‘I’ distinct from ‘we’ of the whole community. The presider, as the head of the community, speaks in the name of all, for he is one with all its members.”<sup>18</sup>

All Church members took part in the election of bishops and the choice of ministers. They supplied information for councils and shared in the institution of those customs by which various communities regulated their lives. Their intervention was willingly accepted since the early Church “wanted to be ready for any movement inspired by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>19</sup>

Later in the century, following the peace of Constantine in 312, the Roman Empire established the Church’s leaders with imperial privileges and invested bishops with secular authority. Over time, many in the clergy succumbed to the human tendency to see themselves as a class set apart and experienced the temptation to protect themselves and use authority in service to self rather than the Gospel.

From the 11<sup>th</sup> century onward, authority, and in particular the supreme authority of the pope, borrowed many of the features of the vocabulary, insignia, ceremonial style and ideology of the imperial court. Protests for “less pomp and more of the Gospel” circulated.

In the centuries leading up to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the increasing authority of prelates continued to be questioned, denied and attacked. Anti-ecclesial spiritual movements gained momentum and added to the outcries. It is of some significance that the interpretation of the identity of the “rock” in Matthew 16:18-19 raised questions that had been wrestled with as early as Augustine and Cyprian. For centuries it was accepted that Peter was the “rock” on which the Church was founded. But at this time of unrest, the old controversy re-emerged and Reformers claimed Christ as the “rock”. Critics of Church leadership refused the right

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other words the papacy should recognize the church’s communal and collegial structure.” This is a statement that advocates a view “that the Roman Curia has never endorsed.”

<sup>18</sup> Yves Congar, O.P., *Power and Poverty in the Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, (1964/2016), p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

of any human authority to intervene in one's relationship with God. Authority was simply that of God's word in Scripture. Ultimately, Martin Luther's challenge sparked the Protestant Reformation. Under such threat, Church leadership "circled the wagons" and re-asserted its absolute authority.

At and after the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Church authority became even more centralized. Unquestioned obedience to Rome was established to such a degree that, from the sixteenth century on, God's will was identified with institutional authority. Power was exercised from the top down. The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) virtually confirmed this full centralization of authority. Over the centuries, the structures necessary to carry out the mission of the Church had developed hierarchical offices that distanced the bishops from the people they were called to serve.

There was no major crisis in the Church to convene a council in the middle of the twentieth century. So, it came as a surprise to the world when Pope John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council in 1962. His *aggiornamento* (updating) called for a *ressourcement*, a return to the sources of our Catholic faith.

The renewal the Council called for was defined in sixteen documents. Signs of reform were immediately evident in the active participation of the laity in liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Consilium* 11). *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church opened the way for lay leadership: Rights and duties of the laity were articulated (see also Canon Law 212 #3) and new ministries were opened to lay men and women in the temporal affairs of the parish and beyond (including pastoral and financial councils). Restoration of the ancient process of initiation in the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults as well as the restoration of the permanent diaconate was declared.

A fresh way of describing the institutional Church turned the past definition on its head. Before naming the structure of the Church as an organized and hierarchical society, a perfect society, it is first described in *Lumen Gentium* as the People of God, clergy and laity together as one pilgrim people on a journey in service to the Gospel and the world. As was evidenced by Scripture in the early Church, authority is viewed in terms of service rather than domination. Apostolic tasks are defined as a participation in the saving mission of the Church itself. "Through their baptism and confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself." (*Lumen Gentium* 33).

Richard Gaillardetz writes, "One of the most important and frequently overlooked contributions of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council was its recovery of the

biblical insight that all the baptized were called to be priestly; all were called to make of their very lives an offering to God.”<sup>20</sup>

By virtue of Baptism, the People of God are empowered by the same authority as the clergy in all matters related to the life of the Church. This concept is not meant as a power struggle or a mentality of us against them, clergy versus laity that causes people to seek positions of authority for exerting power over others. Rather, it means that all are to be servants of Christ in promoting the reign of God.

*Gaudium et Spes*, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, written for the whole of humanity, states that the solitary goal of the Church is “to carry out the work of the Lord Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit.” (*Gaudium et Spes* 3). It further states that, “to carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel.” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4).

The current “signs of the times” point to a critical need for reform. Trust in the moral authority of Church leadership has eroded with revelations of abuse and subsequent cover up. To this day, all decisions of governance are exclusively in the hands of the Church leadership, celibate men in ordained priesthood. At the same time and in contrast, the world has witnessed the leadership of women in every area of secular life. The lack of women in leading roles weakens the Church’s claim of dignity and equality for all people.

If sacred pastors truly know how much the laity contribute to the welfare of the entire Church ... and also know that they themselves were not meant by Christ to shoulder alone the entire saving mission of the Church toward the world ... it is their noble duty so to shepherd the faithful and recognize their services and charismatic gifts. (*Lumen Gentium* 30)

Bishops today are challenged to reflect on the pastoral and spiritual needs of the faithful. It is time to incorporate lay people, and especially women, in every position possible in order to be, in word and deed, the People of God, called to renew the face of the earth.

What positions for women can be promoted to let grace abound in every aspect of the Church’s governance and ministry? How can women’s role be formalized and

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<sup>20</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, “Challenging Clericalism,” *Pray Tell* (blog), January 2, 2019, [www.praytellig.com/index.php/2019/0f1/02/challenging-clericalism/](http://www.praytellig.com/index.php/2019/0f1/02/challenging-clericalism/).

included with authority for the benefit of the good news of the Gospel? How can we, the Church, be the *ecclesia* that Jesus called us to be?

## SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

Although sacramental theology underwent an enormous transformation as a result of Vatican II, it has been and still is a largely male-dominated field, closely tied to the institutional Church where women have virtually no official voice or established authority. Indeed, except for Matrimony, women's presence is not a necessary component in any sacrament. Because sacramental theology has not properly addressed women's official exclusion and invisibility, many women have found the potential for the transformative nature of the sacraments constrained or, even, non-existent. Indeed, if the sacraments are to be both valid and transforming vehicles of grace for women and men, they must be open to new lines of inquiry and new models of theological analysis.

The challenge the feminist approach raises for sacramental theology lies not simply in its import for the argument for women's ordination to the priesthood or diaconate, or even women-inspired liturgies and sacramental actions. The challenge lies, more fundamentally, in how the critique exposes and transforms the ways in which we understand symbols, how God is revealed in the world, and how the sacraments relate to our lives in our service to the mission of the Gospel. Acknowledging the embodied/incarnational character of sacramental life, both how we interpret symbols and how we understand the experiential basis of the sacraments, has serious implications for the lives of not only women but all people.

Since the Council of Trent (1545-1563), Church teaching has used an Aristotelian physical and instrumental model for sacramental causality. In this model, God is the principal agent and source of grace. The ordained minister is an instrument, one moved by God and through whom the sacramental graces flow. This flowing of grace is independent of the moral state of the minister (i.e. whether or not the minister is in the state of grace). Because any instrument must be appropriate to its role, the male gender of the priest is seen to be essential so that he can "image" Jesus Christ. Such thinking leads to the Church's stance that only a male can be a priest.

However, the Franciscan masters did not embrace the Aristotelian, physicalist model of instrumental causality for sacramental life. Their approach privileges divine initiative and generosity over human physical resemblance. Franciscan sacramental causality is relational causality rather than instrumental. It is a covenant causality, based on the divine promise to "be with us always, even to the end of time." (Matthew 28:20). The minister plays a role that gives witness to the power of God in the life of the believer



and the believing community. The physical (male) resemblance to Jesus is not essential to the identification of those designated for ordination. The resemblance to Christ is proper to all the baptized.

Implications of the Franciscan approach affect our understanding of both sacraments and grace. In a pre-Vatican II definition, the sacraments were “outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace.” Grace was understood as being necessary to get to heaven and the communal dimension of sacramentality was subordinate to the spiritual life of the individual.

Current liberation and feminist theology point to that earlier sacramental tradition and vision of the Franciscan Order. Liberation and feminist theology defines sacraments in relationship to justice, understood as right relationships. What is celebrated in the sacraments is not an other-worldly reality but what the community strives for: a community where all eat and drink together at a common table, where justice is a lived reality, and where Christians find the grace to reflect and inspire God’s vision for everyone.

Such Franciscan models of sacramental causality provide us with an opening to reconsider the current Church discipline that restricts sacramental roles primarily to ordained celibate male ministers. Franciscan sacramental theology takes as a starting point the abundance of divine love and grace in all of creation. God’s abundant life and love are a continuous free and generous gift to all. Accordingly, institutional structures of the Church are meant to enhance, rather than limit, access to this abundant life.

Blessed John Duns Scotus also suggested an alternative account to instrumental causality when he considered the role of the minister in the conferral of sacramental grace. He argued that because of the divine covenant, when the minister says and does certain things, God *directly and inevitably* brings about a certain supernatural effect. The minister plays an active, yet *non-instrumental* role in the sacraments or the conferral of grace. The concurrent co-causal relationship, divine and human, is the result of the covenant.<sup>21</sup>

Duns Scotus does not hold that the character conveyed in ordination can be instrumental in bringing about a supernatural effect since there are no powers other than God’s. Priestly character is a relationship of the divine will performing certain actions

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<sup>21</sup> See John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, Book IV, dist. 13, question 1, n. 40. The position on sacramental causality is explained in Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 137.

whenever the priest says certain words and does certain actions. Together, divine action and human action give birth to the presence of grace in the believer and in the community. While he does not conclude to the ordination of women, in *Ordinatio IV*, d. 25, q. 2, Duns Scotus argues that were ordination extended to women, the accessibility of divine grace would be enhanced.<sup>22</sup>

There are several implications to be drawn from this model of relational causality:

1. Divine action is primary in the life of the Church and the lives of believers. Whatever can be done to maximize occasions for sacramental reception should be done.
2. The primacy of divine action in sacramental reception reduces the role of instrumental, physical causality for the ordained minister, thereby eliminating the need for resemblance or image in a physical sense.
3. The baptized have a right to enhanced sacramental opportunities. Limiting ordained ministry to males is an act of injustice to the baptized.
4. Likewise, depriving one half of the human race of the capacity to serve as ordained ministers is an act of injustice.
5. While one might argue that there is no place in Scripture where Jesus chose to ordain women, one can equally argue that there is no place in Scripture where Jesus chose to forbid it—or, indeed, where he ordained men.

The Magisterium has the authority to revise sacramental discipline. Do the current crisis of vocations to ordained ministry and the needs of our time call for a revision of this discipline?

## LITURGY

Liturgy is the public worship of the People of God and the Church made visible. Liturgy is something that the whole of Christ, Head and Body, celebrates: Christ, the one High Priest, together with his Body, the Church in heaven and on earth. In the Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist is the “source and summit” of Christian life.

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<sup>22</sup> John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio*, Book IV, dist. 25, question 2. “If, however, it were at present licit by divine law for women to have an ecclesiastical Order, it could well redound to their salvation and that of others through their ministry.” (Wadding/Vivès (1891), volume 19: 141). English translation by Allan Wolter, OFM and paraphrased in Thomas Shannon, “A Scotistic Aside to the Ordination of Women Debate”, *Theological Studies* 56 (1995), 353-354.

The International Theological Commission writes in “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church” that the connection between the *sensus fidelium* and the Magisterium is particularly to be found in the liturgy.<sup>23</sup> The faithful are baptized into a royal priesthood exercised principally in the Eucharist. The bishops are the “high priests” who preside at the Eucharist and regularly exercise their teaching office. The Eucharist is the source and summit of the life of the Church. It is there especially that the faithful and their pastors interact, as one body for one purpose: to give praise and glory to God. From early Christian times, the Eucharist underpinned the formulation of the Church’s doctrine because there most of all the mystery of faith was encountered and celebrated.<sup>24</sup>

Vatican II’s *Constitution on Sacred Liturgy (Sacramentum Concilium)* initiated a dramatic reform of the liturgy and the active participation of the faithful in the removal of the altar railing separating people from the sanctuary; the use of the vernacular; and the allowing of men and women to serve as Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, lectors, altar servers, prayer leaders and sacristans. Women and laymen stepped into these new roles with enthusiasm and gratitude.

Today’s circumstances demand further consideration and renewal. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* states, “The Council...desires that, where necessary, the rites be carefully and thoroughly revised in light of sound tradition, and that they be given new vigor to meet the circumstances and needs of modern times.” (*Sacramentum Concilium* 2).

The signs of the times demand a response to the status of women in and out of the Church. How can the faithful express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church when gender stereotypes continue to exclude important scriptural passages relevant to women in cycles of the Lectionary? When inclusive language is not used where appropriate in the Missal and various rites? When women’s voices are not allowed to preach from the pulpit? Liturgy has the capacity to “marvelously fortify the faithful in their capacity to preach Christ.” (*Sacramentum Concilium* 2) To outsiders, the liturgy thereby reveals the Church as a sign raised above the nations.

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<sup>23</sup> International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church”, (2014), para. 75. The *sensus fidei* is the instinct or sense that all the faithful have for the truth of the Gospel. It is not necessarily the popular or majority opinion. It is a much needed resource for collaboration between all Church members, especially clergy and laity.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, paras. 90-93.

The permanent diaconate enhances the gifts and benefits of the Church by engaging men in the ministry of Baptism, marriage, funerals and preaching. All of these are actions in which women by their very nature have always been engaged. In August, 2016, Pope Francis commissioned 12 members to review the theology and history of the office of deacon in Roman Catholicism and to question whether women might be allowed to become deacons. The findings have yet to be released, but indications point to the possibility that women can be ordained to the permanent diaconate.

Would ordaining women to the permanent diaconate further endorse and sanctify the rights and duties of half of the people in the pews? Could it be a visible sign of the whole Christ, all the People of God, for the benefit of the Gospel and the world it seeks to serve?

## **PASTORAL MINISTRY**

All that we believe and proclaim to be true is manifested in our actions. Pastoral ministry is the visible sign of the Gospel imperative to care for all God's people and creation. It means being with people as they journey, enabling them to feel a caring presence in the face of fears, hurts, violence and neglect, offering ourselves as sisters and brothers who seek to be vessels of God's love.

A latecomer to the field, feminist analysis of pastoral theology began in earnest in the 1990's<sup>25</sup>, several decades after it had already taken hold in biblical studies, moral theology and other disciplines. But, as a lens, it offers important insights into women's status in the Church.

The first insight of feminist analysis recognizes that the very model of pastoral care has been rooted in a patriarchal framework in which the twin syndromes of sexism and clericalism operate. Metaphors such as "shepherding the sheep," while certainly valuable, have too often fostered dependency and paternalistic attitudes whereas feminist pastoral theology recovers and proposes a more mutual understanding of pastoral care rooted in accompaniment and solidarity.

Feminist pastoral theology starts with women's experience and takes up topics that are too often left out of traditional pastoral theology. Life concerns such as motherhood; eating disorders; violence; rape and abuse, including clergy sex abuse; and many others had not been prioritized in the past. From 1983 through 1998, when women

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<sup>25</sup> Nancy Gorsuch, *Introducing Feminist Pastoral Care and Counseling* (Pilgrim Press, 2001).

began entering the field of pastoral theology in greater numbers, more resources were published on these topics than ever before. Insights from feminist pastoral theology help us to understand why many women have been physically and emotionally abused; those who abuse them can go a lifetime without hearing a pastor preach against violence against women from the pulpit and preachers rarely suggest ways to heal victims and survivors of violence within a parish community.

Further, feminist pastoral care seeks to go beyond parish boundaries and integrate the need for care with justice. Fostering a sense of urgency, nurturance, liberation and empowerment helps shift the focus of pastoral theology and care from being the sole responsibility of the pastor within the parish to the wider cultural, social and religious context in which the faithful function every day.

Sensitivity to the issue of gender should be a priority in all pastoral theology. Every area can benefit from the question, “How does a gender perspective affect this issue?”

For most of history pastoral theology was not a distinct branch of theology, and it was regarded as primarily the work of priests. Recently, Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego spoke about “Pastoral Theology for a Post-Modern World”:

We are privileged to witness this moment in the Church’s life, and to recognize that it is a moment of explicit theological renewal that will contribute enormously to the spread of the Gospel in this new millennium. For we are seeing an emerging pastoral theology at the very heart of the life of the church which both links us to the pastoral action and ethos of the Lord himself and yet is highly attuned to the challenges and cultures of the twenty-first century.<sup>26</sup>

Quoting Pope Francis, McElroy adds that:

The thing the Church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle ... [First] you have to heal wounds. This is the mission of the church, which includes the whole body of the faithful in relationship with God, based on the lived experience of the faithful in the concrete call of discipleship:

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<sup>26</sup> From the text of a speech delivered by San Diego bishop Robert McElroy at the 2018 Assembly of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests meeting in Albuquerque on June 25-28, 2018. Also available at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/bishop-mcelroy-says-lived-reality-heart-francis-pastoral-theology-profound-moment>.

to heal wounds of the heart, to open doors, to free people, to say that God is good ... as the pilgrim people of God journeying together.<sup>27</sup>

Pastoral theology should imitate the words and actions of Jesus. Jesus met people where they were and often in their greatest suffering: the woman at the well in broad daylight; the Pharisee Nicodemus at night; and the lame, the blind, and the grieving crying out along the roadsides. Jesus loved and honored them all. He embraced them, healed them and called each one to repentance. Bishop McElroy concluded that, “We will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this art of accompaniment which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other.”<sup>28</sup>

How might the institutional Church meet women where they are pastorally? How might the Church welcome their insights as prophets and preachers, as priests in the universal priesthood of believers taking part in rituals collaboratively with their male counterparts, as leaders with an authoritative place at the table where pastoral decisions are made?

### Summary Statement

The Declaration on the Status of Women began with “the joys and hopes of this age.”

With hope for our future, the members of our group, a collaboration of four priests, two women religious and two lay women, were attentive to the “signs of the times” and the movement of the Holy Spirit. Each one reflected on the status of women in the world and in the Church. From multiple perspectives and disciplines a common theme emerged: the role of women has evolved with a growing demand for the justice of equal dignity and equality with men.

Knowing they are created in the image and likeness of God and are baptized into Christ, women are demanding the rights that have been denied them based on their gender only. Separate but equal status no longer meets the needs of the world today. The gifts that women can bring to the Church are thwarted when none are given the authority to minister or govern beyond limited possibilities. Granted, women always have the power to serve and to witness the Gospel of Jesus. But new models of universal and parochial leadership are emerging.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

The challenge for the future of the church is to institute pathways to shared governance and ministry that have been open to male, celibate clergy alone. To do so begins with conversation and dialogue among all the People of God.

How this is to be accomplished is the work of all the Church—inclusive of all the baptized. This can be done according to Pope Francis' vision for a church that is synodal at every level, in dioceses as well as in the universal church. We offer questions and concerns to raise awareness and bring people together to listen and to learn from one another, and ultimately to discern the will of God.

With joy we anticipate a vibrant community of inclusiveness that not only celebrates the power of men and women collaborating in spreading the Gospel, but also endorses that reality with visible signs of reform.

