STRENGTHENING THE BONDS OF PEACE: A PASTORAL REFLECTION ON WOMEN IN THE CHURCH AND IN SOCIETY

CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES


Earlier this year the Holy Father issued the apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, reaffirming the teaching and practice that priestly ordination is restricted to men. We bishops recognize this clear reaffirmation of Catholic teaching as a pastoral service to the whole Church, and we accept that it be definitively held by all the faithful.¹ This letter also reiterated the “necessary and irreplaceable” role of women in the Church.

Some people received the letter with joy and peace. Others found acceptance difficult. We encourage all our brothers and sisters, through prayer, study, and dialogue, to accept and seek to understand more fully the teaching that *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* reaffirms.

This brief reflection reaches out to all. It is an invitation to strengthen the bonds of peace and cultivate the unity that the Spirit gives (Eph 4:3). For certainly all can agree that peace is a blessing we long for—peace in our hearts, in our homes, in our Church, and in our world.

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Peace, we know, is more than the absence of conflict. Peace comes about when we, as members of Christ’s Church, respect the dignity of each person, when we welcome the gifts and competencies of all people, when we respect differences, and when we work together to build the reign of God. We will work to bring about this peaceful climate where we can assess and respond to challenges of all kinds.

We can begin by embracing three principles. First, in the words of Pope Paul VI: “If you want peace, work for justice.”² Second, peacemaking needs to focus on the present and future. We know that people have suffered greatly in the past—for example, from racism and sexism—but we know that these evils must not continue to hold people hostage. As Christians, we look toward the future. Third, in the world at large we have seen that honest, open, sustained dialogue is indispensable for bringing about genuine peace. We believe this same kind of dialogue is necessary in the Church. We offer this message, then, as one moment in a developing dialogue, with the hope that all women and men of the Church will receive it as such and continue as participants in what can be a sacred conversation for all of us.

As characteristics for that dialogue we draw on the wisdom of Pope Paul VI. In his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, he said that dialogue, which he spoke of as spiritual communication, is marked by: (1) clear, understandable language; (2) meekness, a virtue
that makes our dialogue peaceful and patient; (3) trust between speaker and the listener; and (4) sensitivity to the situation and needs of the hearer.

With Pope Paul VI’s words in mind, we consider these points: leadership in the Church, equality of women and men, and diversity of gifts. Confident that the Holy Spirit will guide us in the way of peace and justice, we invite all women and men in the Church to join in this dialogue.

Leadership

Strengthened by the teaching reaffirmed in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, we need to look at alternative ways in which women can exercise leadership in the Church. We welcome this leadership, which in some ways is already a reality, and we commit ourselves to enhancing the participation of women in every possible aspect of Church life. We are especially concerned that women from different ethnic groups be drawn more fully into this participation.

Today, throughout the world, women hold positions of exacting leadership, as heads of government, judges, research doctors, symphony conductors, and business executives. They serve as presidents at Catholic colleges and universities and as administrators and faculty members at Catholic colleges and seminaries. They are also chief executives of Catholic hospitals and executive directors of Catholic Charities. An increasing number of Catholic theologians are women. Some women serve the diocesan churches as school superintendents and chancellors, as archivists and members of marriage tribunals. More and more women have responsible national positions in the Catholic Church.

Locally, we can see in our parishes the scope of women’s leadership: in various liturgical ministries, including altar servers and proclaiming the Word before the assembly; in pastoral ministry and administration; in religious education and teaching in schools; in peace and justice activities; in outreach to the homebound and the hospitalized. One recent study shows that 85 percent of non-ordained ministerial positions in parishes are now held by women.

We know that women’s gifts have tremendously improved the quality of parish ministry. Looking to the future, we especially want to encourage women to pursue studies in Scripture, theology, and canon law, not only that the Church may benefit from their skills in these areas but that they, themselves, may benefit from their own scholarly efforts.

An important issue for women is how to have a voice in the governance of the Church to which they belong and which they serve with love and generosity. This can be achieved in at least two ways that are consistent with church teaching: through consultation and through cooperation in the exercise of authority.

As recently as July 1994, Pope John Paul II reiterated the need for the consultative expertise of women, saying: “Qualified women can make a great contribution of wisdom and moderation, courage and dedication, spirituality and fervor for the good of the
We need to seek ways to honor this call at every level of the Church, from the parish to the diocese to the national offices that are involved in drafting official church documents for our conference of bishops. As a specific example of this consultative role, we cite the participation of women in the development of pastoral and missionary statements, as called for in the apostolic exhortation on the laity, *Christifideles Laici* (no. 51).

Consultation is already occurring in a number of ways, of course. Parish and diocesan pastoral and finance councils are vehicles for engaging the gifts of lay women and men as important decisions are crafted. While final decision-making rests with the pastor, the Code of Canon Law urges consultation even in areas not strictly required. We encourage such consultation. We note, too, that Commissions on Women, now present in many dioceses, allow for women’s concerns to be expressed and their expertise to be utilized.

Second, the Code of Canon Law, while situating the foundation of jurisdiction in the sacrament of Holy Orders, nevertheless allows for the possibility of lay women and men cooperating in the exercise of this power in accord with the norm of law (canon 129). This may be a graced moment in the life of the Church that enables us to take a fresh and deeper look at the relationship between jurisdiction and ordained ministry, and thus gain a better understanding of legislative, executive, and judicial acts within the Church. We strongly urge that the studies which are underway on this issue be pursued; and we urge canonists to make widely known the provisions in the Code of Canon Law for the participation of women in the life and mission of the Church.

Change occurs through knowledge and understanding. While not all change is progress, a thoroughly informed laity can only benefit the Church as it seeks to promote dialogue inside and outside the Church. To enhance the dialogue, we invite ecclesiologists and other theologians to join with us to explore new and creative ways in which women can participate in church leadership.

Leadership involves servanthood; we learn this from the example of the head of the Church, Jesus Christ. What does it mean for leaders—ordained and lay—to model this truth? Obviously it will mean rejecting authoritarian conduct. But it will also mean giving time and energy to fostering community life where men and women are called forth and accepted as vital collaborators in the work of evangelization, social justice, teaching, administration, and governance. The collaboration of women and men as equal partners in this servant leadership is a “sign of that interpersonal communion of love which constitutes the mystical, intimate life of God, One in Three.”

We welcome, too, women’s leadership in more traditional areas, e.g., in advocacy for church and societal policies that support just remuneration for women; in establishing a “family wage” to increase the possibility that at least one parent can remain at home during the child’s early years; in pro-life efforts that seek justice for the unborn and compassion and assistance for pregnant women in difficult circumstances; in advocating quality child care for employed women; in action to stem the tide of domestic violence against women; in adherence to a family perspective in institutions, programs, and policies of Church and society. Furthermore, we encourage men to join women in these efforts which are needed for strengthening the family, the parish, and the civic community.
We pledge our partnership in all these endeavors. In no way should these commitments be construed as “ecclesial political correctness”; they are theologically correct. They are rooted in our baptism and in our understanding of the Holy Spirit who works in the Church to build it up through the gifts of its members.

Having looked at women’s leadership in the Church, we now turn to two realities that make this leadership possible: the equality of men and women, and the diversity of gifts among God’s people.

Equality

We reaffirm the fundamental equality of women and men who, created in the image of God, “are called to participate in the same divine beatitude [and]... therefore enjoy an equal dignity.”10 What we said of marriage and family life in our pastoral message Follow the Way of Love applies to other expressions of church life as well. In that message we pointed out that equality does not imply sameness in roles or expectations, nor does it mean that two spouses will have identical gifts or character. Rather, they will respect each other’s gifts and identity. In this “domestic Church” we see a spirit and practice of mutuality, a sharing of power and exercising of responsibility for a purpose larger than oneself, that is, for God’s purpose.

The domestic Church reminds us that all women and men must take seriously the need to listen to one another, to try to understand one another, including an appreciation of the different forms of authority. These lessons of the domestic Church, especially concerning relationships, should be reflected in the experience and behavior of the gathered Church. For example, the pastor of a parish has the authority of office, while the lay man or woman will often have a particular competence or knowledge, a specific authority that complements the pastor’s. The challenge is for all authority to be exercised for the well-being of the community and the effectiveness of the Church’s mission.

To meet such a challenge requires a mature spirituality that understands and practices the virtue of humility. We admit that humility is often misunderstood, and we are sensitive to women’s concerns that it not be misused to justify the suppression of women’s voices. We stress that all of us are called to “be subordinate to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:21). Humility must be practiced mutually by all the faithful, ordained and lay. This mutuality is rooted in an authentic respect for the dignity of each person and our call to belong to one another in the Body of Christ.

We can say with certainty that discrimination against women contradicts the will of Christ. We are painfully aware that sexism, defined as “unjust discrimination based on sex,”11 is still present in some members of the Church. We reject sexism and pledge renewed efforts to guard against it in church teaching and practice. We further reject extreme positions on women’s issues which impede dialogue and divide the Church. We commit ourselves to make sure that our words and actions express our belief in the equality of all women and
Diversity of Gifts

In St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians we read, “grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift . . . some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God . . . to the extent of the full stature of Christ” (Eph 4:7, 11.13).

The Church better fulfills its mission when the gifts of all its members are engaged as fully as possible. Women are essential in ministry both within the Church and to the world. The diversity of women’s gifts and talents should be celebrated. Different voices, different experiences and perspectives, and different methodologies help the Gospel to be proclaimed and received with freshness. The majority of women exercise their gifts in the home, in the workplace, and in civic leadership. In addition, many are now trained and skilled in spiritual direction, in the leadership of prayer groups, and in the study of Scripture. They are educated and formed for pastoral ministry in parishes. Some are psychologists who are also trained in theology. These gifts are essential in a world where the inner peace of so many has been shattered. Spouses in troubled marriages, families affected by abortion, adult children from dysfunctional families, lonely youth, people of all ages who feel isolated and alienated—all need healing.

Countless men and women long for help in the ways of prayer. They seek to be in touch with God in the depths of their souls. We see so many women engaged in meeting these spiritual needs, and we thank God for these gifts to the Church.

We are grateful, too, that many women possess leadership and organizational skills which, although often underutilized in the past, are now coming to the fore. We urge pastors to recognize and to continue to call forth the distinct contributions that women can make to the Church and to the world. Diversity of gifts in the service of Christ is not to be feared or suppressed but recognized as a sign of the Church’s vitality and ongoing renewal.

Concluding Words: The True Face of the Church

In *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* Pope John Paul II emphasizes that “[the role of women] is of capital importance . . . for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church.”12 We have seen that the true face of the Church appears only when and if we recognize the equal dignity of men and women and consistently act on that recognition. It is this face, shaped through the centuries, that is visible to the world. From the beginning, women have been essential to this visage: from Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the women of the early Church, through the martyrs, through the doctors of the Church—Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint Catherine of Siena—to the women closer to our own time, such as Saint Elizabeth Seton, Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha, Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, and Sister Thea Bowman, who have graced the Church in both traditional and new ways.
Still, the face of the Church reveals the pain that many women experience. At times this pain results from the flawed behavior of human beings—clergy and lay—when we attempt to dominate each other. Women also experience pain because of persistent sexism. At times this sexism is unconscious, the result of inadequate reflection. A Church that is deepening its consciousness of itself, that is trying to project the image of Christ to the world, will understand the need for ongoing, prayerful reflection in this area.

One example of the need for ongoing reflection concerns the use of language. While inclusive language is becoming a concern in many areas of the world, it has a particular importance in the English-speaking world, especially in North America. Our conference of bishops continues to be engaged in the study of scriptural, doctrinal, and liturgical translations, a highly technical and complex task. Moreover, since the Holy Father has indicated that catechetical and pastoral materials that evolve from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* could reflect the culture, language, and idiom of a given country, we urge that catechetical and religious materials and hymnals, as well as our daily language and prayer, honor the concerns that shape a more inclusive language, while taking care to ensure that they do not become a source of division, anger, and hurt. This can be accomplished if our conversation within the Church is “full of faith, of charity, of good works, [and is] intimate, and familiar.”

For many years a dialogue among women and between women and men took place in the Church in the United States, as we tried to write a pastoral letter that would capture the vast range of concerns expressed by women. The pastoral letter was not approved, but the concluding recommendations were sent to the Executive Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops for action by various Conference committees. We bishops pledge ourselves anew, through our committee structure, to continue the dialogue in a spirit of partnership and mutual trust and to implement the recommendations where possible.

To be committed to honest dialogue is no easy task. As Pope Paul VI noted, “In the dialogue one discovers how different are the ways which lead to the light of faith, and how it is possible to make them converge on the same goal. Even if these ways are divergent, they can become complementary by forcing our reasoning process out of the worn paths and by obliging it to deepen its research, to find fresh expressions.” As we search together for truth, it is critical that we draw upon the insights of contemporary scholarship in a wide variety of disciplines—Scripture, anthropology, history, women’s studies, and systematic theology.

We pray that others will join us as we listen to one another and learn. For our part we take as our own the words of Pope Paul VI: “The dialogue will make us wise; it will make us teachers.” Once again, we urge the Church at all levels to establish structures to hear and respond to the concerns of women.

Pope John Paul II has chosen “Women: Educators for Peace” as the theme for the 1995 World Day of Peace, pointing out what women have done, and continue to do, on behalf of peace. While we know that conflict and disagreement often mark the road to peace, we also know that women’s energy is a positive force for the good of Church and society. With our
Holy Father, we thank God for our sister peacemakers and pray that God will guide us all in the ways of patience, love, unity, justice, and peace.

Notes
5. Canon 129 states: (1) In accord with the prescriptions of law, those who have received sacred orders are capable of the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction; (2) Lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this power in accord with the norm of law.
7. See Canon 135, Code of Canon Law.
8. The Committee on Canonical Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, is currently sponsoring such a study.

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