

Influence of Women's Groups Felt in the Church

By Religious News Service

Did the freedom and equality of the American woman become a fact with ratification of the 19th Constitutional Amendment in 1920? "Not so," a chorus of modern voices are saying, and vibrations of a 1969-style women's liberation movement are being felt in the Churches.

Some church-related women's issues are long-established: voting rights in confessions, such as the Anglican, which have not yet extended women's suffrage to all levels; naming more women to top positions of leadership and not defining the female nature in a way suggesting inferiority to men.

Yet something more fundamental than professional or philosophical progress for women is involved. Having roots in the civil rights movement and in the struggles of relatively powerless groups to gain power, the new women's drive is a challenge to male dominance.

It also asks for a redefinition of the male and female roles, including cessation of seeing women only in terms of marriage and motherhood. The latter is particularly true among "progressive" Roman Catholic women.

"The new struggle for woman-power makes the forthright women of the past, even such free-thinkers as Eve, Joan of Arc and Susan B. Anthony, look like so much fluffy ruffie," New York magazine said.

More militant groups—such as WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) and the Female Liberation Movement (FLM)—are the most spectacular. While these are loosely related to revolutionary organizations, they still protest what is seen as control of left-wing associations. Most members are young, and sometimes tend toward female separatism. A number of new women's groups have been compared with a kind of super-female "nunsism," emphasizing discipline and rigor.

In the wide spectrum of the movement, the usury of women symbolized by the Playboy magazine outlook is a prime target of opposition, but so are bans against women addressing assemblies of Catholic bishops. Dr. Elizabeth Farians of the National Organization of Women has claimed that Roman Catholic discrimination against women is "probably worse than in most other institutions of our society."

The separate sisterhoods and women's groups in Churches might seem suitable recruiting grounds for militant liberation-

ists. Some women in Protestant seminaries and in campus religious organizations have joined up, yet most church women are not champions of separatism, not even for strategic reasons. They seem more inclined to question the legitimacy of all-women units in favor of more male-female theological, cultural and political interaction.

Coupled with the freedom of women is a rather widespread belief that women are more human than men and perhaps can better deal with the world's social problems. United Methodist Bishop James K. Matthews of Boston noted recently that

women have generally formed the conscience of that Church. Denial of this equality, according to Dr. Daly, "is a radical affirmation of (women's) inferior position among the people of God. By this exclusion the Church is in a very real and effective way teaching that women are not fully human and conditioning people to accept this as irremediable fact."

Officially, women have been equally recognized participants in most Protestant Churches—only a few major denominations still not allowing women clergy. Confrontations, therefore, do not appear as bold as in Catholicism, and new ef-

orts tend to stress the educating of women about rights and the need to exercise them. Education of women for a "new day" is growing in Catholicism. Rosemary Goldie, associate secretary of the Vatican's Council on the Laity and one of the few women attached to the Curia, told a congress of the National Laywomen's Retreat Movement that too often "women have taken the easier way of doing what they were told to do instead of taking the initiative."

Women have always worked in the Church, added Miss Goldie, but without positions of

responsibility. "Now that the opportunities have been created, it is up to women to take advantage of them," she said in reference to developments since the second Vatican Council.

Experimentation frequently centers around revamping inherited women's orders and organizations. Much attention in the 1960s has focused on updating duties and externals (such as dress) of sisterhoods. Changes are at least partly aimed at making the orders attractive for new members and, thus, correcting the distinctive contributions which nuns offer the Church and world.

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