

IN THIS CHURCH
 I APPEAR TO YOU
 AS ONCE I APPEARED IN A THORNBUSH
 YOU ARE THE THORNBUSH I AM THE FIRE
 I AM THE FIRE IN THE THORNBUSH
 IN YOUR FLESH
 I AM THE FIRE TO ILLUMINATE YOU...
 TO GIVE YOU THE FAVOR
 OF MY GRACE
 ST. AMBROSE EPISTLE 63

INTRODUCTION

1. In the years following Vatican Council II much attention has been given the theme, "Women in the Church." This discussion within our faith community reflects the serious reception given the documents of the Council. It finds its roots also in the women's movement occurring in society at large.

One portion of that dialogue has been several pastoral letters by American bishops.¹ Their voices have been an eloquent and encouraging response to the persistent questions and faithful witness of American Catholic women in our day, as well as a recognition of the many and varied gifts of women in our Church. These bishops acknowledge the injustices suffered by women in society and in the Church. They recognize "that women's growth and dignity are often hampered by discrimination, sometimes by deliberate exclusion, sometimes through inattention."² In response to this recognition they raise their voices in a call to justice and compassion.

In this pastoral letter I wish to join my voice to theirs because I am convinced that these bishops are calling us in a direction which, for the greater life and growth of the Church, we must travel together.

I judge this to be true not only because of what my brother bishops have written but because of my own experience with you who make up the Church in the Diocese of Rochester.

2. Society today reflects a deep interest in questions concerning women. Columns on women's issues are common features in daily newspapers. We read of efforts to promote equal pay for men and women doing the same job; and we know that the struggle for equal job opportunity for women is a fact of daily life.

Equally compelling is the reality that women of every state of life and nation, every financial stratum, every culture and religious tradition are asking for what is rightfully theirs as full human persons. Centuries of what they now understand as domination, taboo and repression have led to this time when many women will not and cannot remain silent any

longer. It is not desirable — or possible — for us to try to turn back the clock to a time when today's questions did not exist. Women in most advancing nations have entered the arenas of business, the formerly male-dominated professions, and the field of politics. Their contributions and influence will continue to grow.

3. In another vein we are aware of our society as it demeans women because of a distorted view of human sexuality. Pornography, which so dehumanizes producer, subject and consumer, is rampant. Rape and other violence against women are on the rise or are at least more commonly reported. Hospices for battered women are sadly a necessity in many of our communities.

4. These are graphic elements in the public consciousness but there are other challenges before us. Among these are the impact of societal changes on family life, the long-range consequences for family life when both parents are employed, and the effects of cultural changes on the traditional relationship between husband and wife.

A world speeding towards the twenty-first century poses questions about the stability of marriage, the relationship between spouses, and responsibility to and for children. Women and their spouses and families deal with new questions. Is the choice to work at home at the loving service of husband and children a demeaning, unenlightened one? Is the choice to pursue a career selfish or somehow suspect and dangerous? Or, in the words of a contemporary writer, "If we, mother well, can we work? If we work well, can we love? Shall we compete out there or not? Can we stay at home and not feel guilty, useless and strangely hurt?"³

5. These questions are important because they affect our common life as Church. We are a faith community incarnate in a particular place at a specific time. To this we bring that heritage of faith in light of which we desire to conduct our lives. But it has ever been the task of the Church to let the questions of the day challenge and deepen her understanding of that heritage. It is this kind of dialogue between believers and their culture, given encouragement in Vatican Council II, which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit keeps us growing toward the full stature of Christ. The Church must teach faithfully in every age; and we must be ready to learn in every age.

6. It is not possible, of course, for me to offer solutions to these questions and issues; and I do realize that the issues and questions are hardly the same for all men and women.

What I do hope is that this pastoral letter will offer us, as the local Church of Rochester, an opportunity to reflect, pray and act upon many questions in light of the faith which makes us one. In this way, through God's grace, I pray that we may be able to build up the love and unity of our local Church, promote deeper faith in individuals and in the community, and preach the Gospel with fresh vigor.

If we do this we shall engage in "maturing and correcting conversation."⁴ We shall give hope to faithful women within our Church. And, that is my purpose.