

17. Jesus treated women as human beings in an age which forbade the religious education of women, prohibited their reciting of certain prayers, and severely restricted their public and private behavior. Jesus transcended these limits by teaching women openly, including them among his traveling companions and encouraging them to study the Scripture. None of this was allowed in the Palestine of his day.

It was to Martha that Jesus declared, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," thus revealing to this woman and homemaker the central message of the Gospel.

In the story of the woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears, he treats the woman not as a sinner or sexual object, but as a loving repentant person. He shows the same compassion to the woman taken in adultery. The woman who was "unclean," according to Leviticus 15:19 ff., was healed by the touch of Jesus (Luke 8:43-48). Again, he broke the ritual constraints against touching one who was unclean. In all these instances Jesus called attention to the dignity of women.

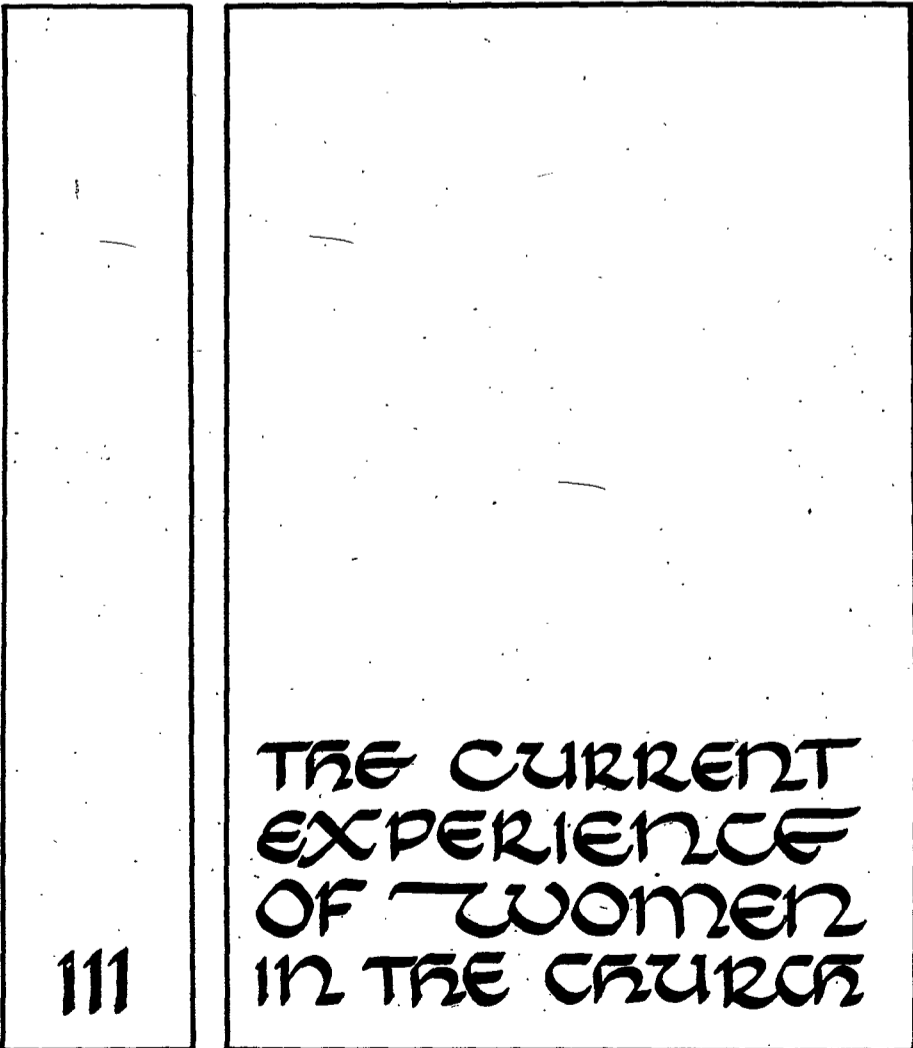
In John's Gospel it is evident that some of the Jews questioned Jesus' practice of speaking with women. Yet it is in his encounter with the Samaritan woman that Jesus reveals himself as Messiah for the first time. She then witnessed to this revelation to the townspeople, and many believed in him on account of her testimony.

Finally, there is the great example of the appearance and commission given to Mary Magdalene. On the morning of Jesus' Resurrection, he appears to her in the garden, consoles her and asks her to announce his Resurrection to the rest of the disciples: "Go and find the brothers and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." So Mary went and told them that "she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her" (John 20:17-18).

18. The history of the Church since that wonderful Easter morning has been long, varied and, by God's presence, holy. Men and women have led, inspired, nurtured and reformed the Church throughout its human journey. We must realize also that men and women have suffered during all these ages because of the Church's frailty and her slow maturing toward the fullness of Christ's Resurrection. Yet, in all of this history, the power of God reaches its perfection in weakness. That is the shocking truth of Paul's faith in a community of men and women gathered by Christ. As Catholic men and women we take pride in the history of the Church always and only because of the goodness and holiness of God. As a Church, we are poor pilgrims who can boast only of the saving virtue of God which is revealed in our weakness.

19. As a Church, we are the handmaid who recognizes that she depends finally not on the resources of men and women but on the gift of God of which we endlessly stand in need. The issue of women's roles in the Church is no exception to this weakness, this need of the whole Body of Christ.

20. In this, as in so many matters, the Church is "the tired, dusty pilgrimess through the desert," but she is also the thornbush that bursts into flame with heavenly fire. "For so speaks Our Lord: 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 burn away the thorn of your sinfulness, to give you the favor of my grace" (St. Ambrose, Epistle 63).



21. It is a moving and powerful experience to hear women speak of their life in the Church.

For many women that life is sustaining and rewarding. For others, however, it is at once affirming, challenging, and painfully confusing: changes in the Church and society, while opening new doors, also threaten cherished traditions. And finally, the painful experience of still other women has led them to perceive the Church as generating and reinforcing circumstances oppressive to them. In their view men have all power in the Church; women are excluded by them from any significant action; they are considered to be inferior and incapable of a contribution of any consequence. In spite of the pain of these women, however, there is evident among them a love for the Church and a desire to serve God and his people in her name.

We address these realities best when, as a community, we pray and reflect together. In this way we respond appropriately to the challenges of our time, and plant the seeds of future vitality.

22. We all need to evaluate our ideas and attitudes toward women in the Church. Further, we should be willing to share our thoughts with others.

If we can become more aware of the variety of attitudes, appreciate them, understand them to the extent that it is possible for us to do so, we will go a long way toward healing some of the real and potential wounds in the unity of Christ's body. Through prayer, reflection and genuine action inspired by new insights, our goal is to realize as Church that profound reconciliation of men and women for which Christ hungers and of which he is the means.

23. Good and faith-filled women in the Church acknowledge that they are confused by the occasionally mixed messages of the Church and of some of her leaders. They describe a real crisis of faith, a sense of alienation and isolation, even anger and resentment at the restrictions placed on them because of their gender.

24. Not all women in the Church experience this kind of distress; but far more do than many of us realize and many more do than care to admit it to their husbands, friends or pastors.

25. Women in significant numbers speak of a growing disappointment with the Church's inability or apparent unwillingness to accept their full identity as Christian women. They speak of a quietly persistent disappointment with the Church's frequent failure to seek their contributions and participation in ways that respect their full personhood in the Church.

Finally, many of these women develop a fear of the Church and a dread of competition, especially with the clergy of the Church, and so they withdraw, visibly or invisibly, in order to preserve some fundamental self-respect and peace in their lives.

26. If such feelings and attitudes can sap the strength of many of our women, there is a corresponding attitude in men which can be equally alienating and divisive.

This attitude is characterized by a fear of rivalry with women in the Church and by apprehension about the increasing presence of women at the heart of the Church's daily life. Some men, inexperienced in working with women as equals, are uncomfortable when called to do so, and discover in themselves subtle, even unconscious efforts to prevent the fuller inclusion of women in Church affairs.

Some men resent the pressure placed on them by women who in their view too strongly advocate the fuller participation of women in the life of the Church. In my judgment, where this exists, it is not so much a sign of rancor as the result of an uprooting which followed upon the demands of Vatican Council II. In this rich but demanding time in the Church, many persons — men and women, married and single, priests and religious — will acknowledge that in some way they have been forced to re-discover their identity as persons in the Church.

For the majority of lay people, these tensions surface not only in the institutional life of the Church, for example, in the parish, but in a most personal way in the everyday life of the domestic Church, the family. The ongoing re-examination of the traditional roles of men and women in family life has affected virtually every household.

To pretend that these fears, feelings and attitudes do not exist or to judge that they are irrational will not help us as a Church to become "fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself" (Ephesians 4:13).

27. But, there are other attitudes and feelings in men and women which can edify, reconcile and create a new and healthier Church; these we must all nourish and develop.

Many women in the Church, even those who have been deeply alienated, desire to understand and forgive; they desire to share generously with all in the Church. They wish to participate actively in the daily work of the Church and to bear their share of responsibility for where we are as a Church — not yet fully home but in pilgrimage at this human, historical moment.

They wish to be acknowledged as full members of the Church, but they wish this joy also for every member of the Church, male or female, lay person, priest, deacon or religious. They desire to learn and to teach in the Church — to be, in fact, with all the rest of us a still imperfect, learning Church, which is what it means to be a pilgrim Church.

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