

The Diocesan Forums on Women in the Church

Making the Invisible Seen

By Emily Morrison

She is known, in some incarnations, as "our Mother, the Church."

In his celebrated pastoral letter, "The Fire in the Thornbush," Bishop Matthew H. Clark depicts the Catholic Church as rooted in the image of Mary, described by the Fathers of Vatican Council II as "a model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ."

The metaphor is appropriate not only to "The Fire in the Thornbush," a watershed in the development of enlightened scrutiny of the role of women in the modern Church. In the wake of the ongoing dialogue that has ensued since the publication of this and similar pastoral letters on the formidable topic, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has begun to work toward drafting a national pastoral on what many agree is the most important single issue facing the Church today.

A considerable degree of ferment on the local level has followed Bishop Clark's pioneering pastoral, as well. After the diocesan Task Force on the Pastoral Letter on Women in the Church issued its final report in December, 1983, Bishop Clark responded affirmatively to one of the recommendations set forth by this regional reflection on his pastoral statement. In January, 1985, the bishop formed the Diocesan Commission on Women in the Church to assist him in his work on the national pastoral and to provide a consistent local voice that would serve to call attention to women's participation in Church matters.

"The Church has always had a female face, maybe today more than ever," says Judith O'Brien, chairperson of the commission and an eloquent advocate of Catholic women's causes. "Many are not fully aware of the extent to which Catholics depend on women to run the activities, programs and ministries of parishes. From traditional nurture and mercy roles to new governance and liturgical roles, American parishes welcome and rely heavily on their women members."

"The strange thing," she adds, "is that often women in the Church are invisible to themselves and to others."

In a concerted effort to open the eyes of area Catholics to the singular gifts and contributions of the diocese's female members, as well as to the prejudices and problems women have traditionally encountered in their bid to participate more fully in Church structures, O'Brien and fellow commission members have initiated a series of three "reflection forums" being held this month at various locations in the diocese, with the bishop in attendance.

Those who attend the forums will be given the opportunity, both in small groups and in a larger session, to relate their experiences by answering a short set of questions provided by a committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. These responses will be recorded and later collated by commission volunteers, who will forward them to the U.S. bishops' committee.

The first forum was held Sunday, Sept. 8 at St. Stephen's in Geneva. The remaining two forums are scheduled for Sunday, Sept. 15, 3-5:30 p.m., at Holy Cross Parish Hall, 4492 Lake Ave. in Rochester, and Sunday, Sept. 22, 2-4:30 p.m., St. Mary's Parish, 38 Elizabeth St. in Dansville. Representative questions being asked reflect the concerns of the American bishops over the approach they should take to the upcoming pastoral, expected to be published in 1988. Respondents will be asked what they feel are the salient features of their experiences as

Catholic women (or, if they are men, of Catholic women), in what ways they feel women are appreciated or discriminated against by the Church, and what they feel contributes to both the alienation and the reconciliation of women in the Church.

"In a special effort to reach as many women as possible," reads a recent statement, "the commission is making an outreach effort to collect stories from women who could not or would not attend the forums: the sick, elderly, rural isolated, new community members (refugees), the divorced and the separated from parish life." Copies of a questionnaire being circulated for this purpose are available from the Pastoral Center, 1150 Buffalo Road.

"In this missionary work, the commission hopes to give the U.S. bishops a 'chorus' of women's voices not usually heard," wrote Judith O'Brien in the commission's recent statement. A lay woman active for many years in diocesan affairs in central Pennsylvania before her husband, Dennis O'Brien, assumed the presidency of the University of Rochester, Judith O'Brien believes that, although "the women who will participate in these forums are a drop in the bucket," many local women are vitally concerned with the consensus an ongoing dialogue should develop.

"I think the majority view is that women see that they have been left outside the door and not allowed to do certain things — and they're asking why," comments O'Brien. "The women who come to the forums will come to make things better for their daughters and granddaughters." As for those who don't respond, O'Brien believes the issue perhaps hasn't gripped them. "They haven't been educated. Part of it is just the human condition."

The condition of women, and particularly lay women, is an active concern of the 18-member commission, half of whom are lay women. "I find now that the Church is quite different in its attitude toward lay women than it was five to 10 years ago," O'Brien affirms. "More and more women are taking leadership roles in diocesan affairs, as heads of diocesan offices or pastoral assistants. What I've found is that there's more opportunity, and that the official Church is more open to it. I view it as very hopeful work."

This climate of change, O'Brien expounds, is rooted in the pronouncements on participation by the laity promulgated during the early 1960s by Vatican Council II. The American Church, she feels, has responded to the spirit of Vatican II in a much more progressive way than its European counterpart, perhaps because of American democratic traditions of human rights and individual dignity.

On the local level, positive reaction to the bishop's initiative on the consideration of women's roles in the Church was perhaps equally encouraging. Following the publication in April, 1982, of "The Fire in the Thornbush," many of the Diocese of Rochester's 161 parishes responded to Bishop Clark's call to diocesan dialogue by initiating discussion sessions, talks and homilies on the subject. Sixty parishes submitted written reports to the Task Force on the Pastoral Letter, which reported that the general spirit of such reports was one of "openness, thoughtfulness and commitment."

The task force subsequently collated some 20 pages of insights into the needs, feelings, and problems of local Catholic women, as expressed in the parish reports. Not all respondents were highly optimistic about the



official Church's progress to date, but their observations reflected an incisive honesty and a wide diversity that eloquently reflect O'Brien's contentions about our democratic heritage.

In the task force report's introduction, for example, the following comments appear:

- There is value in self-examination of attitudes on sexism.

- The Church supports the sexism of the culture.

- Laity and women are discriminated against when they try to participate actively in the inner workings of the Church. Therefore, many enthusiastic parishioners experience discouragement and frustration.

- The Church has come a long way in recognizing contributions and leadership of women.

- It is a frustration to be more accepted at one's job and held back in one's spiritual growth.

- Women are more active in the Church because of Vatican II.

- The plight of women in this diocese is far less severe than in other dioceses known to members of our discussion group.

The task force report lists parish responses to the 12 major areas discussed by the bishop in his landmark pastoral. Other issues respondents commented on included the model of Mary as proposed by Bishop Clark, the history of women in the Church, their current experiences, the need for reconciliation, individual dignity, the spirituality of women, the mission of the modern Church, teaching and proclaiming the Gospel, priestly roles, involvement of the laity, and future directions for the continuing dialogue.

Such potentially volatile issues as the ordination of women, the admission of women into the permanent diaconate, poverty, and the oppression of women in society at large are not lightly dismissed in either the bishop's pastoral or the task force's response. The official stance of the Vatican still precludes the admission of women into the priesthood or diaconate, but, as Bishop Clark stated in his 1982 pastoral, "I encourage more inclusion of women in liturgical functions, in those roles now open to them or in new roles that may be legitimately created."

Since the announcement of the national pastoral, says Judith O'Brien, certain women's religious groups and theologians have presented papers to the American

bishops advising them as to how they might interpret such new directions. "There's been a real rethinking of this, and good, sound scholarship that will give them a basis for reexamining the idea of women as priestly ministers," says O'Brien. "There is ferment. People are taking the initiative to look at the issue."

The serious implications of this particular question stem not so much from the exclusion of women from the priesthood, according to O'Brien, as from her contention that "women cannot really be equal to men in the Church, because the priestly roles are positions of power that come from the Church's hierarchical structure. As long as we simply hold lay positions, we are outsiders. As long as women cannot serve in these roles, then they will not be able to share in the Church's power structure, and will remain second-class citizens."

Still, as O'Brien is quick to point out, there are a number of other considerations the commission is equally concerned about, including the needs of poor women (or, as she describes them, "women in marginated groups") and the status of women in the diocesan Church of Rochester. "For example, how many women are pastoral assistants? How many of them are lay women? How many are in leadership roles in diocesan offices? How many are Eucharistic ministers? We're planning to assess the level of participation of women in diocesan parishes and agencies, and encourage such agencies to open up new doors," says O'Brien. "We're also going to work for women in the pews, to determine their level of participation in liturgies and other functions."

Commission member Dr. Mary Sullivan, a Sister of Mercy and dean of Arts and Sciences at Rochester Institute of Technology, would apparently concur. "The essence and the completeness of Christian faith for me does not hinge solely on the ordination of women — which is not to say I don't think women should be ordained, because I do," says Dr. Sullivan. It would be a mistake, however, she adds, to insist that ordination is the crux of the entire issue of women's roles in the Church.

"If you go to any diocesan liturgy, you see greater inclusion of women in liturgical celebrations," she points out. "It's clear to me that recommendations two, three, and four (of section 93 of "The Fire in the



Judith O'Brien

Jeff Goulding / Courier-Journal

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