

# Women in the Church:

## Reflections on the diocesan commission's Valentine's Day report

*Editor's note: Last September, a series of three public reflection forums, sponsored by Bishop Clark's Diocesan Commission on Women in the Church, tabulated the responses of area Catholics to questions framed by the U.S. Bishops' Committee for a Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns. Matters of oppression, discrimination, and alienation of women within the Church and society at large, as well as those of appreciation and reconciliation, were addressed by approximately 237 respondents. Some 26 others attended meetings held on three area college campuses, and 11 women responded from "marginated groups" within the diocese's outreach ministries.*

*The commission's report to the national pastoral committee was issued February 14. Since that date, a number of local women have been sent copies of the report and asked by the commission's chairwoman, Judith O'Brien, to respond with brief critiques of the report's content and presentation. The following is a reflection on the report itself, as well as the various responses the Courier-Journal received.*

By Emily Morrison

The returns are in, the report has been forwarded to the U.S. Bishops' Committee and, to paraphrase a comment by Commission on Women in the Church chairwoman Judith O'Brien, the dialogue has been joined.

Although it remains unclear whether a consensus can ever be reached on a matter that provokes such a variety of responses, the commission has arrived at a concluding statement agreed on by those who drafted the report: "This report is for the U.S. Bishops' Committee for a Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns. As it is read by members of that committee, it is hoped that the voices of the women in the Rochester church can be joined together with the women of all the churches, in small towns and cities, in this country. It is hoped that their voices send a message of urgent news: 'Women are being barred from entering into the full life of the Church.' This message needs to be listened to, reflected upon, prayed about and acted upon. The bishops, in communion with the people, can be the catalyst for change. The great pope of our generation, Pope John XXIII, gives us the historical perspective and counsel we need:

"The past will never return. New situations require new dispositions."

**D**are we not heed John's words?" reads the report's final paragraph. "Dare we not heed the voices of the women and men whose words give life and authenticity to this report?"

The voices of those who attended the forums were raised in response to questions posed by commission members who acted as facilitators. Individual reflections were written on the topic of participants' experiences as Catholic women (or, if the respondent was a man, of Catholic women). Forum participants were then divided into small groups to discuss in what ways women felt appreciated or oppressed/discriminated against in the Church and society (or in what ways men saw women being appreciated/oppressed). In the large group reflections that concluded each forum, various speakers took the podium to comment on their own personal experiences with alienation, abuse, divisiveness and dehumanization of women in the Church, as well as reconciliation, harmony, affirmation, dignity and healing of women in the Church.

The report provides a number of representative responses to the various questions posed by forum facilitators, although no numerical or demographic breakdown of these responses is given in the report. As the section detailing the "Method of Investigation" explains, "The responses from these meetings are summarized in the middle section of the report. We have also included some verbatim comments to suggest the form and feeling of the women's words."

The summary of responses to the individual written reflection, for example, leaves the reader somewhat confused as to specifically *who made which* comments. "As you reflect on your experiences as a Catholic woman (or if you are a man, of Catholic women), what stands out for you?" reads the reflection question. "While some



It is hoped that their voices send a message of urgent news: "Women are being barred from entering into the full life of the Church." — Huriyet Necdet Aydogan

responses were either negative or positive, many contained ... a mixture of the two," states the summary that follows. "Expressions of disappointment, frustration, pain and resentment were numerous and frequently repeated."

Exactly how numerous is not determined, either here or in the next division — "much less numerous" — between listings of individual responses. Examples of such responses include "a sense of conflict between feminist goals and traditional Catholic priorities for women, especially those which restricted women's roles to the family" (in the "numerous" category) or "a desire for frank and unthreatening dialogue and a concern lest the attitudes of strident, 'liberated women' carry inappropriate weight in shaping Church policy" (in the "much less numerous" category).

**B**oth positive and negative responses from individual participants are listed in the report for each remaining forum category. Results of the small group reflections on oppression/discrimination in the Church were divided by drafters of the report into three subcategories: worship and ministry, decision-making, and spirituality. Answers to the large group reflection question on what contributes the most to the reconciliation (harmony, affirmation, dignity, healing) of women in the Church were prefaced by the following observation: "These answers fell roughly into two categories, the first addressing the healing of pain inflicted through sexist attitudes and practices in the Church, the second affirming traditional understandings of women in the Church and family as most urgently needed to balance negative, dangerous secular forces."

The body of the report appears to be balanced quite fairly between opposing views expressed by feminists and traditionalists — although it isn't readily apparent from reading the report itself how many from each camp were represented at the forums. Attendance at the forums, it should be emphasized, was strictly voluntary, so the chosen method of investigation didn't necessarily indicate any type of random sample.

*'Our report from the Diocese of Rochester does represent many points of view, but not from all women in our local church. Listening to the women who did come to the three forums, I can say that these are women who feel deeply about the Church, who see it as a significant force in their lives and who are concerned about its future direction.'*

Judith O'Brien

From the observations made by this writer upon attending the forum held in Rochester, the majority of those in attendance expressed feelings of frustration over exclusion of women from the Church hierarchy, although a vocal minority of those in attendance did express a more traditional view of the role of women.

The commission's reflection, as written up in the report, does include a statement on the difficulty of arriving at a single conclusion, based on the variety of individual responses. "Before we comment on the range and depth of these women's voices, an insight must be shared and argued for — that is, it might simplify things if the commission could draw a single conclusion from the above responses. We cannot do so because of the wide range of convictions expressed and the 'tensions' they reveal," reads the report. "That is, many respondents report resentment, frustration, pain and anger at the limited roles and positions of women in the Church. Others believe that, on the whole, the role of women is as it should be and that attempts at role change may undermine deep values which they hold to in both Church and society. Others carry the anguish of 'second-class citizenship' in the Church right along with a thoughtful acceptance of woman as the bearer of children and the nurturer of family and community. This complexity of thinking may well be — indeed should be — the outward sign of a totality of spiritual and practical concerns that no collection of opinions can recapture."

**T**his "reflection" section of the report maintains the feeling of balance between opposing views, although it still isn't clear precisely what data these observations are based on. In the final two sections, however ("Plain Talk" and "The Past Will Never Return"), the tone of the report takes a decided shift toward conclusive statements: "To be specific," the report asserts, "it is especially crucial that women be involved to a much greater degree in decision-making in the Church, especially in the making of those decisions that affect their own lives in the Church community ... Without women being involved at all levels of decision-making, it is difficult to see how any radical changes can be made in a patriarchal system that oppresses women and stifles the creative contribution that they could be making to the life of the Church."

The conclusion, "The Past Will Never Return," makes the very definite assertion that "Women are being barred from entering into the full life of the Church." As a news release from the diocese, mailed out from the Pastoral Center on March 18, reads, "That is the principle message the Rochester Commission, headed by Mrs. Judith O'Brien, wants the Bishops' Committee to hear."

**T**hose area women asked to critique the report in writing appeared to be primarily in agreement with its findings, which did seem to accurately reflect the views of the majority of those who attended the forums

Continued on facing page