

*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,' the report states.*

## Women

Continued from facing page

(at least from the evidence presented by the Rochester forum). Demographic information supplied in an addendum to the report, however, indicates that this majority was overwhelmingly white, middle-income, and well-educated. Of the 139 women and 23 men recorded to have attended two of the three reflection forums, two were Afro-American, two were Hispanic and 158 were white. Six of those in attendance had a grade-school education; 18 had a high school education; 55 had a college education; and 83 had graduate degrees.

The women from "marginated groups" from whom the commission solicited opinions included the Hispanics, lesbians, prostitutes, rural women, poor black women, women in prison, and elderly women. Of the 11 who actually responded, four were Hispanic and seven were white. If any effort was made to reach out to traditional homemakers who for some reason didn't or couldn't attend the forums, this information was not included in the report. The Courier-Journal did attempt to locate representatives of this group who might respond with their comments on the report, since those who did submit letters seemed to be primarily quite similar to many who attended the forums.

"The purpose of the report) was to report the views and feelings of the women who attended the forums, the women in the diocese who wanted to participate," said Judith O'Brien in a recent conversation. "In our view, we could see certain patterns — we didn't see any deep conflict or deep division among the women who came. Always with this type of report, there is some degree of bias. Yet the responses very much reflect the views of those who came."

"Our report from the Diocese of Rochester does represent many points of view, but not from all women in our local church," O'Brien added later in her own written reflection. "Listening in the room 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. They are, in many cases, women whose ministries have brought them direct experiences of discrimination, hurt and oppression. Many of the women, as well, are leaders in our parishes and are committed to the Church and are spending time, money and talents toward that commitment."

What are the views of the women who took the time to respond in writing to a request that they reflect on the commission's report itself? Most addressed the issues raised, rather than the content or presentation of the report, although several specifically address that pricklier topic. Respondents included a lawyer, a parish minister, a college student, a professional writer and teacher, a city councilwoman, a social worker and a day care center administrator. Two others interviewed by phone were an educator and a full-time mother and homemaker.

Denise W. Mack, a parish minister who is studying for a master's degree in theology at St. Bernard's Institute, expressed her views on ministry. "The Church is calling women parish administrators in Germany, Brazil, this country and elsewhere," Mack wrote. "The commission's report cites canon 517 #2, which allows women parish administrators. Women have been serving in that pastoral capacity for years even though they have not always been referred to as administrators. What loses out in this gap, it seems to me, sadly, are the sacraments. On the other hand, I'm touched by the many priests who are genuinely embarrassed by

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structures that stifle such needed ministry, but also presents the earnestness and tenacity among women at the forums who, despite frustrations, continue to live the faith," Mack added. "The cry for women to participate in Church decision-making was well-reported by the commission."

Kathie Dobe, a Nazareth College psychology major with a concentration in religious studies, expressed a heartening combination of hope, faith and frustration as a Catholic woman. "But even though I have those questions," she wrote, "I know God works through me in some very special ways. In some ways 'clerical structures have restricted our creative possibilities for ministry, but in other ways they challenge us to be even more creative.'"

As a social worker with an outreach program of Corpus Christi Catholic Church, I daily encounter women who struggle in the search for both their identity and their basic survival, women who desire to be listened to by each other and by society as a whole," wrote Teresa Snell, a social worker at Corpus Christi Center, who plans to begin studies for a master's degree in social work this coming fall. "What seems to be at the root of the 'feminization of poverty' that we see in our society today is, of course, inadequate resources available to women, but it is also a sense of helplessness and powerlessness that women seem to carry around with them — a result of experiences of not being heard, of not being recognized fully for their (value), of attempting but of not being able to fully achieve: a product of our society's and our Church's view of women in traditional, limiting ways. In perpetuating discrimination, we also perpetuate poverty."

An M. Schnepf, an attorney with Nixon, Hargrave, Devans & Doyle, wrote: "I have reviewed the report and am impressed not only with its content but with the very existence of such a study. I note that my personal experience seems to be different from that of many of those attending the forums or responding in writing to the questions. I have not experienced any significant prejudice in any context based on the fact that I am a woman. My good fortune is due, I believe, to a supportive family, the fact that I attended progressive learning institutions and selected a profession, a field within that profession and a law firm that does not distinguish among colleagues on the basis of gender."

Although she herself has never sought to play an active role in religious ministry, Schnepf allowed that both frustration and discrimination do exist, and asserted that change "is obviously necessary. Women now represent at least 50 percent of the American population. The Catholic Church can learn much from the experience of our business and educational institutions. Women are too valuable a resource to waste ... But I recognize, and the commission obviously recognizes, that the Catholic Church is a large institution burdened with a long history. Such a dramatic change cannot occur overnight."

Peggy Rosenthal, who converted to Catholicism three years ago, reflected on her experience as a Catholic woman. "I realize that one effect of the Church's limiting ordination to men is that the sacraments seem a bit less important to me than I want them to (and than they are)," Rosenthal observed. "This is a very slight, subjective response, and I don't want to overemphasize it. But I can't help noticing the gap between the immense contribution of women to diocesan and parish life and the absence of these same women from serving key sacramental functions. What loses out in this gap, it seems to me, sadly, are the sacraments. On the other hand, I'm touched by the many priests who are genuinely embarrassed by

this situation and do whatever they can to include women in the language and the activity of the liturgy." Rosenthal contrasts this negative experience with the positive one of having made the acquaintance of a number of women religious whose examples have inspired her.

City Councilwoman-at-Large Joan M. Hensler expressed her view that the Church needs an affirmative action program. "While there are Church barriers to ordain women, at this time, there are positions of leadership that are open," wrote Hensler. "Such areas could include pastoral counseling, parish financial management, parish administration. Women in responsible Church leadership roles that are receiving an adequate salary could offer a model that would help break down the negative view that society has of women and that women have of themselves. Affirmative action doesn't happen without pain, determination and breaking old stereotypes. It moves new faces and new people into old 'family photos.' It walks with the 'non-members' into the exclusive club room. It does not allow one member of a partnership to experience pain and rejection because they cannot apply."

"The report of the Commission on Women in the Church represents an honest reflection of the rewards, fears and frustrations of Catholic women in the contemporary church," wrote Nancy Evangelista of St. Mary's Parish in Auburn. "The commission made a sincere effort to gather responses from a diversity of women and men in the diocese. The report conveys perceptions of women as servants rather than leaders within the ministry of the Church, and ends with recommendations for greater leadership roles."

"... The value of women in leadership roles is many-faceted: as recognition of women's expertise, representation of a feminine viewpoint and provision of models for other women within the Church and society. But Catholic women also have a great need to reconcile the conflicting forces of Church teaching and secular trends regarding sexuality and family planning, divorce, working motherhood, peacemaking and career aspirations," Evangelista concludes. "Ministering to these needs of our 'workaday Catholic woman' must not be forgotten."

The women who wrote to comment on the report offered little in the way of criticism. Even with regard to women who did not attend the forums, some of the responses were more than charitable. "... (T)he commission's success at listening to a broad spectrum of women is key to the val-

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Judith O'Brien

ue of the report," wrote Denise Mack. "In parish work, I often hear women who would not go to a forum and/or speak in public, say what was reported at those forums. We know of pain and anguish, yet we see profound examples of gospel-based service and spiritual leadership among women. Women provide the substructure for male leadership, but that is not a biblical model of Church."

Not all of those who did not attend the forums would agree with her assessment or ascribe to any specific 'feminization' of poverty, as postulated by Teresa Snell. One local educator and activist in the social justice arena declined to be identified, yet expressed her views of the overall issue during a recent telephone interview. Basically, she reported, she was not highly interested in the activities of the commission. "I had been active within the diocesan church structure and even at the parish level for many years," she stated. "I became frustrated at what seemed to be a lack of sensitivity to human issues, to interpersonal relations. After awhile, I walked away from it." This woman saw the issue of women in the Church as primarily an American issue, and one that seems to concern women from affluent backgrounds. Involvement in such pursuits, she said, might seem to many of the women she's taught and worked with to be a luxury, al-

though she herself acknowledged its validity for those for whom it is a legitimate concern.

"I think the crucial issues for women are decent jobs with equal pay for equal work, day care and food stamps," she added. "Frankly, I don't think that people need to be a member of the hierarchy to follow the gospel." In fact, she concluded, such aspiration to power might prove a hindrance to those for whom poverty is a far more critical concern.

Another local woman who once taught school but is now a full-time mother and homemaker expressed her view that the Church seems to have turned its back on families, particularly nuclear family units, foster families, women with handicapped children and families who practice gospel values by taking in refugees and helping the poor in a very concrete way. Catholic education suffers, she believes, because textbooks are deficient, youth programs are sporadic or nonexistent, and school boards are staffed by 'non-parents.'

The Church has left mothers behind," she said during a phone interview. "You take your voice and scream alone, and it may as well be in the desert. There certainly is no support, other than lip service." The Church, she feels, is currently putting more emphasis on "fringe groups," on ministry to homosexuals, the divorced and separated. "The family as a unit doesn't get the support. Many of the people who have had the ear of the hierarchy are better-educated, have impressive titles, and political clout."

This woman, who asked that her name not be used, believes that there is indeed a large "silent majority" of women and Catholics who have given up on involvement in Church matters. "Time is involved, and money," she observed. "No one says, 'We'll provide child care while you go to meetings or forums. The ordinary people are not involved. Ordinary women don't want to get involved because the same group controls everything ... Many full-time mothers don't have time, or have given up in discouragement because a mental door is closed to us.'"

If you're not teaching the faith to the children, there's going to be a problem in the next generation," she concluded. Another woman of her acquaintance agreed that the "silent majority" is indeed a majority, with very definite views. "People who do not represent the mainstream purport to represent views which are not in accord with those of the average Catholic woman," she added.

Commission chairwoman Judith O'Brien, during an earlier telephone interview, expressed some degree of uncertainty as to how many silent dissenters are actually present in a diocese she believes is not as conservative as many others. The report, as she points out, goes into some detail over the history of the Rochester area as the birthplace of various rights movements, as well as a diocese populated by very active orders of women religious. "This report is skewed," she allows, "in that it represents the views of women who are active in the Church, in ministry and administration and teaching." She also laments the notable silence of those who disagree. "That's a limitation," she observes. "They should be heard; they should enter into this new conversation that's going on to represent."

Ultimately, O'Brien hopes, the forum process will raise awareness as well as the level of the discussion, thereby making it possible for everyone to be heard. "The publication of this report is not the end," she affirms. "It's really a beginning. I believe myself that it's been a wonderful exercise in opening up an ongoing dialogue. It's not a closed book at all."

"This report is just one of many," O'Brien adds. "We selected about 25 reports to read from all over the country. Whether it's Butte, Montana, Alaska, Hawaii, Vermont or Chicago — across the country, you're getting pretty much the same story being told — that women don't see why they can't be equal in the eyes of God and the Church. Even in rural areas, there's a kind of groundswell, a ferment, a raising of consciousness, a willingness to rethink things and take a stand."

"I'm very hopeful that good things will come out of it, but I expect that some degree of conflict will, too," O'Brien concludes. "Once you start rocking the boat, conflict arises."

If the Lord is willing and the creeks don't rise so high the boat capsizes, may the dialogue prosper.