

In Depth

Bishop emphasizes broad scope of proposed pastoral letter

Each of the letter's four sections — dealing with women as persons, in relationships, in society and in the Church — incorporates representative quotations from these reports and testimonies in which women identified areas of affirmation and alienation.

The incorporation of women's testimony into the document is indicative of the bishops' attempt to be inclusive and their admission that they don't have all the answers, observed Judith O'Brien, chairwoman of the diocesan Commission on Women.

"When the bishops first contacted women's groups about the letter, (the groups) said, 'If you're going to write this, you're going to have to listen to women all over,'" O'Brien said.

The letter's inclusive methodology strengthens the bishops' positions, O'Brien noted. "They could say all sorts of pious things, but without the women's testimony it would be hollow," she said.

The first chapter of the letter sets the tone for the pastoral, directly addressing the issue that lies at the center of the letter: the sin of sexism that depersonalizes women.

"What's extraordinary about this pastoral is that it's the first time in history of our Church that it talks about something that's been denied — sexism," O'Brien said. In the letter, the bishops acknowledge that because of sexism, "women have suffered and are suffering in Church and society from all sorts of injustices, and that we as a Church must address these injustices," she added.

The sections containing women's statements about their sense of alienation and affirmation in the Church and society — and which point to some of the injustices women have suffered — are followed by sections that attempt to place the discussion within the context of the Church's heritage. Bishop Clark cited the effort to address issues in terms of this heritage as one of the letter's strengths.

"(The letter) makes a sincere effort to root issues within our tradition and values," Bishop Clark noted, pointing to the letter's discussion of women's ordination as an example of this approach.

"During the hearings, it became clear that not many people are not well-versed in the (Church's) reasons for not ordaining women,"

Bishop Clark said. "The document calls for continuing discussion so that people can understand the reasons."

The letter points out the Church's reasons for not ordaining women to the priesthood, but at the same time acknowledges that some Catholics do not find the reasons convincing. "The document recognizes that it is not a finished question, that we should get about addressing the question as a community," Bishop Clark observed.

Examination of tradition also sheds light on such questions as women's ordination to the permanent diaconate, and on women performing such liturgical ministries not requiring ordination as altar servers, acolytes and lectors.

The draft concludes that the reasons for barring women from performing some of these liturgical ministries are not compelling, and recommends that these ministries be opened to women. This conclusion is contrary to the current teachings from Rome, Bishop Clark acknowledged, observing that if the American bishops endorse this section of the letter as written, they will "be committing themselves to bringing the proposed changes to Rome for approval."

One aspect of the Church's heritage that must not be overlooked, however, is the belief that "we're part of a living tradition," Bishop Clark noted. The document needs to reflect this aspect of the Church better, he said.

"One thing I'd like to see sharpened (in the letter) is the sense of vitality and dynamism in Roman Catholic tradition," he said. "(The draft) tends to treat it as perfect and over, whereas the history of the Church is that it seeks ways to deepen its understanding of the mysteries of faith, and attempts to encapsulate that understanding in practice."

O'Brien, on the other hand, faults the draft's discussion of Church traditions for not pointing to tradition as a cause of some of the sexism in the Church.

"Even though the bishops speak candidly about sexism in the Church and society, they don't put blame on tradition for some of this," O'Brien noted. "It's a glaring omission not to refer to how hierarchical tradition in the Church is at the root of some of this sexism."

She contended that some of the draft's discussions are too shallow, and that the docu-

ment doesn't contain enough specific recommendations.

"The discussion of ordination is too brief, too limited, too thin," O'Brien suggested. "This might cause a doubt of the good faith of the bishops."

And in the discussion of women and their economic position in society and the Church, for example, the document points to some of the injustices, "but doesn't go to the next step to say the Church will do everything in its power to change the situations," she said.

Despite these and other objections to the document as it is currently written, O'Brien said she sees many positive aspects in the pastoral.

"(The letter) is written in a tone that's conciliatory," she noted. "It's trying to encourage good will and reconciliation."

The document also gives a great deal of attention to social-justice issues, especially those resulting from sexism, O'Brien said. Not only does it focus on these justice issues, but it will give a certain legitimacy to women's complaints

because the bishops have recognized their validity.

Finally, she noted, the document will provide an opportunity for education. The diocesan Commission on Women will spearhead efforts to circulate and evaluate the letter in the Diocese of Rochester, producing feedback that will be collated and submitted — along with input from other dioceses — to the bishops' committee writing the final draft of the document. The process of evaluation will in itself "provide a means to educate, to raise consciousness, and to point out the pains and joys of women in the Church," O'Brien predicted.

Bishop Clark acknowledged that working on the bishops' letter already has had an impact on him. "Through the experience of going through the reports of 100-plus dioceses, the hearings of national groups, the reading needed for a work like this, what I see is the God's spirit moving us to a deeper awareness and understanding of these faith issues," he concluded.

Highlights of the first draft

• Sexism "depersonalizes women" and is a sin against human dignity.

• Discrimination against women, a result of sexist attitudes, cannot be justified.

• Although the Church acknowledges itself unable to ordain women as priests, it should study the possibility of women deacons and should open all lay ministries to women.

• Liturgical ministries that do not require ordination also should be open to women.

• The Church should adopt anti-discriminatory wages and benefits.

• The Church should actively promote to treat women as equals.

• The Church should promote women's equality and should support the ordination of women.

• The Church should support the Equal Rights Amendment.

Pastoral draft

It calls for expanded Church programs to train women to take up leadership roles open to them within the church.

The document terms sexism a pervasive sin that "depersonalizes women." It calls for the elimination of sexist attitudes and structures in the Church, society, family life and all personal relations.

According to the document, members of the Church are called "to a profound interior renewal" to reverse sexist and discriminatory attitudes that have denied women opportunities, ignored or trivialized their contributions and placed unequal burdens on them.

Concerning family and social relations, it says that while secular culture often reduces women to sex objects, the Church's teachings on marriage and sexuality are a "counter-cultural" defense of the dignity of women "in the face of sexual exploitation, desertion and violence."

At the same time, it says, many women see Church teaching on artificial contraception "not as liberating but as oppressive." The Church needs to do more pastorally not only for married couples but for women who are single, divorced or widowed and for the many women trying to raise families as single parents, it says.

Men, it adds, must "take seriously their responsibility in the realms of sexuality,

procreation and parenting."

The working draft was based on extensive consultations with national Catholic women's groups and with an estimated 75,000 Catholic women who participated in diocesan, campus and military-base discussions.

The drafting committee was urged repeatedly not to write a pastoral letter "on women" as if women were a problem. It dealt with that issue by calling the letter "a pastoral response to women's concerns." It titled the letter "Partners in the Mystery of Redemption."

The writers say that the U.S. bishops "must and do pledge to reject clearly and consistently human structures and patterns of activity that in any way treat women as of lesser worth than men.... We, therefore, regret and confess our individual and collective failures to respond to women as they deserve."

Regarding the Church's treatment of women as people, the draft calls for "a consistent policy within the church to acknowledge in word and practice the equality of women before God and to affirm their giftedness."

Among its recommendations is "an effective process of education in schools and seminaries that eliminates any and all forms of disrespect and diminishment."

In another footnote it says that although the bishops support women's equality and oppose discrimination, "as a body, the bishops have not been able to support the Equal Rights Amendment in its present form

without a guarantee that the ERA will not be interpreted as securing the right to abortion as public policy."

The draft says that when the Church speaks about justice to members of society, "we must first be just in their eyes... We must respond to women by providing just wages and by offering those qualified for church-related work the opportunities which

they seek."

If societal discrimination against women is to be ended, the draft says, in addition to economic and legal equality there is a need for "education of boys and men" that will "stress respect for the personal integrity of women and impress on males the sinfulness of violence and every form of sexual exploitation."

Proposed document challenges Church norms concerning women

By Jerry Filteau

Washington (NC) — The first draft of the U.S. bishops' proposed pastoral letter on women's concerns takes the unusual step of directly challenging Church laws that keep women from being installed as acolytes or readers.

It also calls for deeper study of the possibility of women deacons and of the reasons given by the Church for not ordaining women priests.

The draft document, released April 12, also asks for reversal of liturgical norms excluding women and girls from "certain aspects of service at the altar."

While previous pastoral letters by the U.S. bishops have challenged the Church to live up more fully in practice to the ideals it teaches, none has called directly for a reversal of general legislation governing the Church.

At the request of the U.S. bishops and others, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship has been studying the question of female altar servers for some time.

That issue and the Church's exclusion of women from installed ministry, as readers or acolytes were raised at the 1987 world Synod of Bishops. The final proposition the synod submitted to Pope John Paul II contained other suggestions for the advancement of women in the Church, but did not address the exclusion of women from those ministries.

The pastoral letter's proposed language on altar servers and installed ministries raises the interesting prospect of the U.S. bishops as a body debating whether to

make a public statement opposing current Church policy set by the Vatican.

The proposal for a thorough study of the possibility of women deacons is not new in itself. In 1983 the bishops' committee on women, doctrine, and the permanent diaconate took the first steps to study the status of deaconesses in the early Church. A preliminary survey of scholarly literature on the topic was made, but nothing further has been done.

The 1976 Vatican declaration stating that the Church does not consider itself able to ordain women to the priesthood made no mention of the diaconate. An explanatory note issued by the Vatican along with the declaration said that the declaration intentionally avoided addressing the question of women deacons.

The draft pastoral's treatment of the ordination of women to the priesthood clearly states the position of the 1976 declaration — that the Church considers its tradition of ordaining only men a normative tradition, and that women cannot be a sacramental sign acting in the very person of Christ because he was a man. But the draft does not engage in a defense of that position.

Instead, it notes that "some Catholics, including biblical, anthropological and liturgical scholars, do not find all the arguments put forth in 'Inter Insigniores' (the 1976 declaration) to be convincing or persuasive."

In discussing women's views on the issue, the draft letter states: "For some women, the whole issue of women's rights in the

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