

Features

Lack of analysis flaws pastoral, evaluators say

By Lee Strong

When members of a black congregation are listening to a preacher, they yell, "Amen," when the preacher's remarks are particularly on target, and call out, "Fix it up" when the preacher goes off the mark.

Toinette Eugene urged approximately 60 men and women gathered at Rochester's St. Mary's Church Wednesday night, Aug. 24, to be similarly frank in assessing the first draft of the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on the concerns of women, *Partners in the Mystery of Redemption*.

"The important thing tonight is to talk back," declared Eugene, provost of Colgate Rochester Divinity School.

Eugene, who served as a consultant to the six bishops preparing the first draft of the letter — including Bishop Matthew H. Clark — was the featured speaker at the gathering organized by local members of the Women's Ordination Conference. The forum — one of many in the diocese and across the country — responded to the bishops' call for feedback when they released the first draft of the letter in April. The bishops will use evaluation summaries from the various groups when the panel prepares the document's final version — scheduled for completion in the fall of 1989.

The group that met at St. Mary's was larger and more diverse than anticipated, noted Sister Nancy DeRycke, SSJ, one of the evening's organizers. Although the nearly 60 participants came from various walks of life, their discus-

sions Wednesday night brought them to a general sense "that it's going to be a long time before sexism in the Church ends, a sense of frustration, but a sense that we're moving in the right direction," Sister DeRycke said.

In her opening remarks, Eugene cautioned that because the letter is a first draft, those assessing it should concern themselves not so much with the word choices in the document as with raising "the deeper issues."

"We can understand the document in some ways as providing larger windows through which we can observe the reality about us and let some of it in," Eugene said.

Eugene began her presentation by praising the pastoral and the process by which it is being written for incorporating seven positive elements: the many listening sessions that were conducted before the writing began; the bishops' effort to reflect the plurality of women's experience in the Church; the step of naming the sin of sexism; its discussion of such difficult issues in Church and society as women preaching, the ordination of women, and women teaching and studying in seminaries; its usefulness as a resource for discussion; the recommendations it offers; and its recognition of men's roles and responsibilities in the sin of sexism.

Eugene then elaborated on the major areas for which the document has been criticized, focusing on a number of its structural problems. She also pointed out several topics that received inadequate treatment in the draft.

'(The document) is a light. If you strike a match in a dark room, it's a light. The room is not undated with light yet, but you have to remember great things take time.'

*Miriam Snyder
head of the Harley School*



In terms of structure, the document is flawed by the way the data from the listening sessions are collated, she said, noting that the document lacks intellectual vigor because it contains no interpretation and analysis of this data.

In addition, Eugene said, the data are sometimes contradictory. For example, in Section 55, the bishops say, "Many women praised *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI's encyclical on birth control. But in Section 73, the bishops acknowledge a gap between what the Church teaches about birth control "and the actual practice of many Catholic women."

"How many (use artificial birth control)?" Eugene asked. "How many praised *Humanae Vitae*? What weight are we to give these statements?"

Another major area that needs to be developed in the document, she said, is its whole approach to sexism. The document identifies sexism with attitudes, actions, value systems or social patterns, but it does not adequately address the structures that keep sexism in place, she said, citing the all-male priesthood as the primary Church structure that results in women being denied access to positions of authority and decision making in the Church.

Eugene also identified several topical issues she said were not adequately addressed in the document, the first of which was the question of "personhood." She pointed out that the problems with this topic — which occupies the opening chapter of the letter — in many ways forms the keystone for problems in the pastoral's discussion of other topics.

Rather than dealing with women in terms of contemporary understandings of what it means to be a human being, the document relies instead on traditional understandings of what it means to be a woman, she said, observing that the document is filled with references to traditional Church language of the "proper role" or "proper nature" of women. The implication of this approach is that what it means to be human and what it means to be a woman are somehow different, Eugene suggested.

Among the other topics she claimed were inadequately addressed are sexuality, family (because the document uses a primarily Caucasian, nuclear family model), the work of

women ("universally identified in terms of motherhood" in the draft), religious life and language.

The pastoral's central topic is the issue of ordination, Eugene stated, noting that, "the question of ordination remains the Achilles heel of the document." Inadequate treatment of this issue calls into question all of the bishops' efforts to repudiate the sin and structures of sexism, she said, adding that in later drafts the bishops will have to discuss the ordination issue more clearly and honestly.

Eugene ended her presentation by commending the bishops for undertaking "the impossibility of the task," praising them for encouraging sessions such as the one at St. Mary's, and their willingness to use the feedback from these sessions in shaping the final document.

Following the Colgate provost's talk, the participants at St. Mary's split into four discussion groups, each focusing on one of the document's chapters: "Partners in Personhood," "Partners in Relationships," "Partners in Society" and "Partners in the Church." Each group was facilitated by a member of the Women's Ordination Conference.

The group discussions touched on topics ranging from violence against women to the question of references to women being deleted from Sunday Scripture readings, but overall the groups echoed many of the praises and criticisms voiced by Eugene. At the heart of the discussions lay repeated references to a sense that the document does not adequately deal with sexism contained in structures, particularly the structure of the Church itself.

For example, Jeff Young, who was in the "Partners in Personhood" group, noted that "(the document) lacks the looking at the system and how the system is being discriminatory. It is suppressing what the system has done and what our history has done." He suggested that the bishops had not completely confronted this issue because, "if you talk about that, then you need to talk about the changes needed in that system."

"One of the major critiques of the document is that it focuses on personal attitudes and almost seems to say all you need to do is change

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*Toinette Eugene
consultant to the bishops
writing the pastoral letter*

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At St. Mary's, approximately 60 men and women broke into small groups to assess the first draft of the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on the concerns of women.

Bonnie Traflet/Courier-Journal