

New draft of pastoral marked by major shift

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — The fourth draft of the U.S. Catholic bishops' proposed pastoral letter on women vigorously defends the church's position that it cannot ordain women priests.

Like earlier drafts it condemns sexism in the church and society, but the new version also criticizes other views and attitudes in U.S. society that it considers harmful to women.

The fourth draft was written this summer and sent in late August to the Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, a 50-bishop committee that will set the agenda for the bishops' next national meeting in November.

Rochester's Bishop Matthew H. Clark is a member both of the pastoral-writing committee and of the NCCB's Administrative Committee.

The new text, intended for debate and a final vote at the November meeting, was not immediately made public. Catholic News Service obtained a copy from a source outside Washington.

The new version retains large portions of the third draft, but also introduces several major changes in tone and content. The changes appear to be based on criticisms a number of bishops made of the third draft when they discussed the earlier version at the University of Notre Dame in June.

Significant changes in the 85-page fourth draft are:

- A major shift from the third draft's focus on sexism to a broader look at evils harming women.
- A move from a short, simple affirma-

tion of the teaching on women's ordination to an extended defense of that teaching and rebuttal of counterarguments.

• In its response to the concerns of women, a shift from the approach of dialogue and shared examination that marked earlier drafts to an approach that emphasizes the bishops' responsibility to teach "fundamental truths about the human person and ... applications of these truths."

• The addition of extensive teaching material on sexual morality.

• The dropping of nearly all criticisms of alleged clerical insensitivity to women.

Major areas of similarity or continuity between the third and fourth drafts are:

• Both condemn sexism, calling it "a moral and social evil."

• Both affirm the equality and equal dignity of women and men.

• Both call for rooting out structures and attitudes that demean and discriminate against women.

• Both call for an end to violence against women and the often underlying male attitude of viewing women as sex objects.

• Both reject a "unisex" view of humanity, arguing that "the equality of women and men as persons is best served not by disregarding sexual difference but by taking this gift and reality into account."

• Both affirm a wider role for women in the church, within the limits set by the exclusion of women from ordained priesthood.

• Both urge essentially the same 25-point program of action by dioceses and other church institutions to promote fuller participation by women and to advance the dignity and equality of

women in church and society.

The committee of bishops writing the pastoral, headed by Bishop Joseph L. Imsch of Joliet, Ill., began its work nearly nine years ago with nationwide consultations with Catholic women.

From the start, how it would handle the church's exclusion of women from priestly ordination has been widely perceived as the most critical issue that it had to address.

In the first draft, the committee took the approach of trying to explain and defend the teaching articulated in a 1976 document issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, with the approval of Pope Paul VI.

That document said that the church's unbroken tradition of ordaining only men was normative and that — in fidelity to the mind of Christ, who ordained only men — the church does not consider itself authorized to admit women to the ordained priesthood.

After the first draft came under heavy criticism for its approach, the committee adopted a far more limited stance in its second and third drafts, briefly affirming the church teaching but saying that the pastoral was not the appropriate place to carry out the debate.

In June, a number of bishops criticized that approach. One said the issue symbolized the church's inability to confront its own sexism, but most of them called for a clearer explanation and defense of the church teaching.

The new draft extensively explains the teaching that only men can be called to priesthood. It marshals arguments from Christian tradition, sacramental theology, biblical and sacramental symbolism, various aspects of the theology of the church, and "the natural symbolism of gender" to oppose the idea that the church is free to ordain women priests.

The new draft's shift from emphasizing sexism alone to treating sexism as one of several social evils harming women stemmed from complaints by several bishops in June that the third draft failed to consider the evil of "radical feminism" and other movements today that do not correspond to a Christian understanding of women.

In the third draft the writing committee explicitly chose to focus its analysis on "the disordered consequences of the sin of sexism," even "at the risk of seeming to oversimplify."

The fourth draft takes a completely different approach, stating as its new operative principle, "To identify sexism

as the principal evil at work in this distortion of relationships between men and women would be to analyze the underlying problem too superficially."

Gone is the third draft's view that "sexism is so deeply rooted in the fabric of society that it tends to permeate human relationships and lead to the other evils touched upon here."

In its place, sexism is situated as one of several evils harming women. The fourth draft adds to the list such considerations as individualism, certain forms of feminism, the sexual revolution and social policies and laws that treat men and women identically.

The other main section of the third draft's chapter on women in society focused on difficulties, opportunities and concerns women face — friendship, single life, marriage, regulation of birth, abortion, unplanned pregnancy, divorce and separation, homosexuality — and how the church can improve its pastoral response to them in those areas.

The fourth draft expands that section in several ways. It briefly states church teaching on such relevant issues of sexual morality as modesty, chastity and sexual activity in and out of marriage.

The new draft adds a new paragraph condemning the practice of "living together" without marriage, a new two-paragraph treatment of premarital chastity, and an expanded section praising the values of natural family planning for couples seeking to regulate birth.

Apparently in response to several bishops' complaints that the third draft seemed to engage in "priest-bashing," the fourth eliminates most previous comments about the failure of some priests to be sensitive to the concerns of women or to treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve.

In a similar vein, the fourth draft significantly reduces the number of instances in which past or present failures or inadequacies of the church as an institution are acknowledged.

Also eliminated in the new text is one of the statements in the third draft which was hailed by many who regard sexism among Catholic clergy as a major problem in the church.

The deleted statement said that "programs for the formation of candidates for the diaconate and priesthood should emphasize the importance of being able to work cooperatively with women. An incapacity to treat women as equals ought to be considered a negative indicator for fitness for ordination."

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