

Response of WOMEN FOR FAITH & FAMILY to "One in Christ Jesus"

June 1, 1990

To the Bishops of the Church in the United States:

We wish to express our concern about the revised draft of the proposed pastoral letter, "One in Christ Jesus," scheduled for consideration by the bishops at their November meeting. Although we are preparing a more thorough critique of the draft at the invitation of the bishops' committee on the pastoral, we include here some of the reasons why we believe it is critically important that the draft be given most careful scrutiny.

1. The pastoral does not actually respond comprehensively to "women's concerns," nor did the "listening sessions" on which the pastoral was based accurately reflect the experience of most Catholic women. The "consciousness raising" format of the meetings tended to attract discontented women, and the kinds of questions posed tended to elicit predictable critical responses. The data from these sessions was given too much weight in formulating the pastoral's response and recommendations.

This draft contains an ominous blueprint for increasing Church bureaucracy and setting in motion machinery (through establishing "women's commissions") effectively to exclude both the testimony and the work for the Church of orthodox women, who already have difficulty enough making effective witness of their faith.

2. There is a fundamental conflict between feminist/liberationist ideology and the teachings and tradition of the Church. This essential conflict, which is at the root of much of the confusion and dissent in the Church today, is recognized both by orthodox Catholics and those who reject essential Church teachings; however, it is substantially ignored by the pastoral draft.

It fails to address this conflict in a way consistent with the fundamental nature of the Church. Therefore, it also fails to offer useful and consistent suggestions

for the inevitable encounter of individuals with ideologies alien to Christianity and to the resolution of problems, conflict and confusion within the Church and in society.

Many of the pastoral's twenty-five recommendations at the end do not follow consistently from Church teachings. In some instances, the recommendations contradict the text itself.

3. Many central concerns of Catholic women are omitted or inadequately addressed by the pastoral. There are many real plagues afflicting women and their families in our modern world: divorce, artificial contraception, fornication, sterilization, abortion, abortifacient pills & IUDs, infanticide, pornography, homosexual perversions, AIDS and other venereal diseases, sex education propaganda, euthanasia, artificial reproduction, child and spouse abuse, to name a few; and for Catholic mothers responsible for the religious and moral formation of future generations, defective or even destructive religious education.
4. Many Catholic women religious encounter problems living their faith within their religious communities. The section on religious life ignores the serious conflicts within religious orders over essential matters of faith, and provides no useful support for orthodox women religious who too frequently are intimidated into silence by dissenting leadership.
5. There is a deep desire among women for spiritual development — a desire which, when vital and authentic Catholic doctrine is missing, can lead to distorted quasi-pagan forms of religious expression (very briefly alluded to in the pastoral). This is a growing problem, especially within some religious communities of women; yet the pastoral offers no program for replacing these increasingly esoteric, alien and spiritually destructive forms of worship with genuine devotions which enrich and enliven true faith.

6. While the new draft contains expanded sections on two critical issues which have been the subject of considerable controversy due to feminist critiques (ordination and contraception), the draft is inconsistent in its treatment of these questions. Although official Church documents and papal statements are cited, the draft's use of these materials is inadequate; furthermore, too many works critical of Church teachings are presented as if they are to be regarded as equally valid or important with Church teaching in elucidating these issues.
7. Implementation of several of the pastoral's recommendations not only cannot help, but may actually hurt the Church's mission. For example, would implementation of the recommendations insisting on a "sexist test" for seminarians, mandating "inclusive" language in the liturgy, establishing "women's commissions" in every diocese, or authorizing support for federal programs such as day-care, "equal pay" and similar "family" legislation actually promote authentic unity within the Church? In fact, no consensus in support of these issues and policies exists, either within the Church or in society, and certainly not among Catholic women.
8. We understand the purpose of a pastoral letter to be essentially catechetical in nature; and that the intention of the bishops in writing such letters is for instruction and formation of the faithful. Therefore, it would seem essential that to achieve this, any pastoral letter should present definitively the teachings of the Church in such a way as to be truly formative, positive and unifying. This pastoral effort may have been fundamentally flawed from the beginning, in that it is not actually the bishops' exercising their teaching function, but their "response" to a limited set of "women's concerns." Furthermore, its entire spirit and disposition, its agenda, process and content were determined and governed to a large extent by the feminist critical perspective. To the extent that the draft failed to accede fully to feminist demands, feminists within the Church are angered by the result. To the extent that the draft erodes Church doctrine and authority by its concessions to these demands and by its conciliatory tone towards those who do not accept Church teachings (nor her authority to teach), it compromises its character as a pastoral letter.

We are convinced that, if approved by the bishops, the pastoral will not help to resolve conflicts and restore harmony in the Church, among Catholic women

and men, in women's religious orders; nor will it increase authentic vocations to the religious life or priesthood. Neither can it help to settle disputes about legitimate roles for laity and women in the work of the Church. This letter will not help to dispel confusion about the Church, her teachings or her mission. It will not help Catholics to understand and accept the teachings of the Church. It will not help women to deepen their spiritual lives nor to increase personal holiness.

In fact, it seems inevitable that if its recommendations were adopted it would actually be divisive, not unifying; would increase polarization among Catholics; would encourage dissent and increase the temptation of some confused Catholics to ignore the authentic message of the Church when it conflicts with their own notions; and would, in the perception of many Catholics, diminish, rather than enhance, the magisterial authority of the bishops themselves.

9. We earnestly hope that the bishops will find an acceptable alternative to either approving the pastoral draft or prolonging the "dialogue process."
10. We also hope that the bishops will find means to disseminate throughout the United States the teachings contained in such papal documents as *Familiaris Consortio*, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, and *Christifidelis Laici*, the "Charter of the Rights of the Family" and other such teachings which do respond directly to the principal concerns and needs of most women and their families. It seems clear to us that these documents, two of which were issued soon after the first draft of this pastoral letter appeared, were intended especially to address central issues affecting the role of women raised by feminism which have gained currency in the West, as well as providing the groundwork for vigorous and authentic evangelical action by the laity consistent with the salvific mission of the Church.

Surely the Holy Father's intent was that these teachings be used by the entire Church. We would like to see study guides, workshops, symposia, audio and video tapes produced and promoted by the Church which would make the extremely important teaching these documents contain available to everyone.

Finally, we pledge to the bishops our prayers, our support and assistance in any way available to us which might be useful to them in their often difficult task of nurturing the true faith which subsists in the Church and of carrying Christ's liberating message of redemption to the entire world.