

A Critique of "One in Christ Jesus"

by Helen Hull Hitchcock

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After three more years, the second draft of the pastoral letter on "women's concerns" still "responds" almost exclusively to the same feminist "concerns" of sexism. Significantly, the new draft, now entitled "One in Christ Jesus," opens with a biblical quotation from Galatians 3:28 "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus") which is about the only verse of scripture feminist theologians and biblical scholars accept without qualification as inerrant, and which they frequently cite to support their demand for "equal access" to all ecclesial roles — including ordination to the priesthood.

This draft, although mercifully shorter than the first, is still essentially flawed. It still focuses on the "voices of alienation" in nearly all its references to the "listening sessions," still argues from the assumption that the Church is a patriarchal "structure" desperately in need of "conversion" and change to reflect feminist views.¹ It is still essentially negative in its view of the Church, "improved" only to the extent that it expands sections dealing with ordination and contraception, and makes some limited use of recent Papal teaching in *Mulieris Dignitatem* and *Christifidelis Laici*, which it could hardly ignore entirely.

The new draft still displays only selective sensitivity to the concerns of women, and for the most part stereotypes and excludes from consideration the majority of women who are not feminist activists. In its overwhelming preoccupation with "sexism," it unfairly demeans and stereotypes men (that is, male human beings) as oppressors of women. The existence of distorted or sinful attitudes of women towards men, or of women towards other women is omitted entirely from consideration.

The new draft apologizes repeatedly to feminists for

the "sin of sexism," stating as a given, for example, that "in the past, church [sic] and society have erred in considering women almost exclusively in relation to men and in regarding only men as fundamentally autonomous" (part I, 21), yet nowhere are women's defective attitudes discussed. Surely this is a remarkable omission in an effort such as this to call the Church to "conversion" to rectify errors in understanding the equal dignity of all human beings.

Women are always sexism's victims, never its perpetrators, according to the pastoral. The evil of sexism, as described in the pastoral, "fosters sins of rape, prostitution, adultery, emotional and physical abandonment, and pornography." However, abortion, which always involves a woman, the mother, is never directly called a sin. Neither are contraception and remarriage after divorce. Although these errors might be related in some way to "sexism," the pastoral urges compassion and understanding for those "persons of good will" who cannot accept church teaching on these moral issues. "Pastoral solicitude and concern" is expressed for lesbians whose "dignity as persons has been belittled and demeaned by sexism abetted by cultural prejudices." (Part II, para 87) To be a male guilty of "sexism," however, apparently entails full penalties.

Euthanasia, which arguably affects more women than men, both as care-givers and potential victims, is not mentioned. Neither is the possibility that women may have unjust and sinful attitudes towards men and towards other women, nor that women (not just men or "social structures") may have a defective view of what it means to be a Christian and a Catholic which need "conversion."

By the pastoral's own definition of sexism, we would submit that the implied exclusion of women from full responsibility for their own sins against God, against

human life and the integrity of persons is itself sexist. To subsume all sin under the heading of sexism, or to reduce the culpability of women because of men's shortcomings surely diminishes the "full personhood" of women.

The pastoral does not respond effectively to the most important concerns of women in the real world who are facing an uphill battle for the faith of their families in a society which is increasingly resistant to Christian moral teaching and overtly hostile to the practice of the Catholic faith. Instead, it lists twenty-five recommended initiatives "to foster equality as persons."

Some of these recommendations are unexceptionable and, indeed, unnecessary, especially in the light of recent papal teaching.² Many, however, are certain to cause further problems and divisions.

Item 1 on the list of initiatives is "oppose the destructive power of sexism by working to change structures, attitudes and misconceptions that perpetuate this evil." It is important to note that 'church' [sic] has elsewhere and repeatedly been identified as an afflicted "structure" in need of "redemption." For example, "The corrosive power of the sin of sexism has seeped into the fabric of our civilization, invading economic and governmental systems as well as social and *ecclesiastical structures*." (Part I, para 34; emphasis added.) Accepting this premise, it makes no sense whatever that women should not be given access to the "power" of the ordained priesthood. We are, in fact, told that "many women" find in the Church's teaching on ordination such serious evidence of sexism that they may leave the Church. Yet this draft of the pastoral recites Vatican and papal statements that confining the ordained priesthood to men "represents the mind of Christ." Therefore, we must surely conclude either that "the mind of Christ" unfairly excludes women; or that Christ's "mind" is not reflected by the "current teaching" of the Catholic Church.

It should be noted, too, that in the extensive section called "Problems of Exclusion," the pastoral asks for "study" of opening the diaconate to women and "encourage[s] participation by women in all liturgical ministries that do not require ordination," including service at the altar and preaching (Part III paras. 113-124.)

Equally troublesome is the recommendation (Item 12) to, "Require that the church's [sic] teachings on the equality of the human person become integral to seminary and lay formation." The text devotes an entire subsection to this topic, indicating that freedom from "sexism" is supremely important in the "formation of

candidates for the diaconate and priesthood." (Part III, paras. 122-124) What the pastoral does not say is who determines whether a candidate is "sexist," and how. Despite the "vocations crisis" widely deplored by those who advocate the ordination of women to provide more priests, the draft gives still another means of filtering out men who might become priests. If this pastoral is taken seriously, seminarians can be forced to take a "loyalty oath," not for the Church and Church teachings, but against "sexism."

Still other recommendations are objectionable because they proceed directly from feminist critiques of the Church. For example, Item 17, "*Adopt inclusive [sic] language when and where it is appropriate.*"³ To accept uncritically the argument of feminists who believe the very language is a product of the "patriarchy" and intrinsically "sexist," to propose a such a controversial and highly ideological change in *lex orandi*, moreover, to refrain from commenting on the radical way in which this is intended to alter *lex credendi*, is a very serious error. Important recent scholarship on the subject of proposed changes in liturgical language, as well as the experience of most women who use the language is ignored.

Item 18 requires establishment of diocesan women's commissions — the creation of yet another bureaucracy which will impose still another layer between bishops and ordinary folk.

Part III, and especially the sections entitled "New Solidarity of Women" and "Christian Feminism" may hold the key to what is really amiss with this, as well as the first draft. The following passages are illustrative:

127. Partly as a result of Vatican II and partly *through the influence of the women's movement*, women religious and laywomen are discovering a new solidarity. ... *The women's movement supports sisterly mutuality as distinct from relationships based on rank.*

128. ... Women are finding new expressions of sisterhood. ... In some cases the initiative comes from laywomen... whose *longing for deeper spirituality and a stronger theological formation continues to challenge the rest of the church.* [sic]

129. Within this move toward mutuality among women in the church [sic] an awareness is growing of the need to promote and celebrate women's religious experience *through emphasis on "feminine" or "feminist" spirituality...* [such as] *risking change rather than settling for the rigidity of worn-out institutional structures; offering prophetic witness in the face of social injustice [and] seeking ways to modify traditional modes of religious living...*

130. In reports from the hearings, several women identified themselves as "Christian feminists," faithful to church

[sic] teaching yet championing the rights of *women menaced by sinful stances and structures*. ...

131. This pastoral letter supports the efforts of feminists in general to liberate women from attitudes and actions that stand in the way of women using their gifts and talents for the good of society and the church [sic]. *We want to respond to the challenge that feminist thinkers, writers, teachers and speakers pose by persisting in our intent to eradicate the personal and structural forms of sexism documented in this pastoral.* [emphases added.]

These passages encapsulate what is fundamentally wrong with the pastoral, and why it should not be adopted by the bishops. They reveal the bias which fundamentally flaws the pastoral; and they contain dangerous blueprints for forcing all women into the ideological rigidities of the "women's movement" if they hope to have any voice whatsoever in the work of the Church.

Unsurprisingly, this pastoral contains no attempt to critique feminism itself — a movement which has had tremendously destructive effects on individuals who subscribe to its theories as well as on society (abortion, sexual "liberation," among others) — a divisive movement which has set woman against woman, women against men. In fact, the work is pervaded with feminist constructs, feminist views and feminist social and religious critiques.

Unlike the Holy Father's recent Apostolic Exhortations on the subjects covered by the draft pastoral which addressed issues the pastoral attempts to deal with, and which, in the minds of many, obviated the need for this pastoral, the new draft contains little to allay confusion about basic teachings of the Catholic faith. It is deeply flawed by internal contradictions. Rather than clarification, we get compounded confusion.⁴ In fact, the pastoral provides a means to step up pressure on priests and bishops to make changes in liturgy to conform to feminist demands (e.g. "altar girls," "inclusive" language, etc.), and to commit the Church to an essentially biased view of womanhood and "women's concerns" which does not reflect reality.

Acceptance and implementation of the pastoral will make it even more difficult for women who are not feminist activists to work within the Church, to hold offices in parishes and on diocesan committees, or to teach the Catholic faith in schools.

Already often marginalized, alienated, intimidated and ignored, unfairly stereotyped as ignorant and labeled "right wing" or "fundamentalist" by feminist women who happen to hold most positions of leadership in

religious communities and in Church offices, these faithful women's talents, abilities, insights and experience (and in many cases remarkable personal holiness) are a resource which the Church sorely needs.

These women of the Church need encouragement and support for their faithful service to the Church; they need assistance in their difficult task of teaching the Catholic faith in their homes and in schools; they need the help of men — priests and bishops and spiritual directors and husbands — to accept their full and equal responsibility as Christians to deepen their Catholic faith and to put this faith into authentic action for the benefit of both the Church and society. They do not need "conversion" to feminist views.

An unintentional question which the pastoral draft raises is why so many people who occupy positions of leadership and "decision making power" in the Church so consistently dissent from essential teachings of the Catholic faith. A second question is what can be done about it. Until this problem is forthrightly addressed at all levels we can expect the cleavage to widen between what the Church constantly teaches (which the Pope consistently explains and upholds) and those individuals within the Church who publicly reject essential elements of the Catholic faith, causing ever greater damage to the mission of the Church to bring salvation to the entire world.

Meanwhile, consideration surely must be given to those millions of Catholic women and men who try to remain faithful to the liberating truth of the Catholic faith, and, moreover, who try to pass this faith intact to their children, the real future of the Church and of society. Pastoral letters like this one do not help. Their concerns have evidently fallen on deaf ears. We trust that the American bishops who must decide the fate of this draft pastoral letter will hear them.

1 Of the 64 works cited in the footnotes which are not Vatican or USCC/NCCB documents, 20 are secular (including feminist works and 'neutral' statistical studies), at least 24 are writings of known feminists and/or dissenters (*inter alia*, Rosemary Ruether, Anne Carr, Raymond Brown). Only 8 works are cited specifically in support of Church doctrine and/or discipline; of these, three writers are Protestant, one Greek Orthodox.

2 For example, Item 3, "Reaffirm the values of commitment and fidelity in married life," and Item 11, "Help young women and men to develop healthy and respectful faith-inspired attitudes toward one another."

3 (cf Part III, paras 133-135 on "Inclusive Language.")

4 For example, citing *Familiaris Consortio*, the pastoral seems to advocate the concept of a family wage, making it possible for mothers to remain with their young children in the home (para. 60). Yet it

specifically advocates social policies regarded by most experts as in direct conflict with the concept of a "family wage." Many, in fact, view such programs as undermining the "traditional" family in important ways, even those who regard them as useful or even necessary under current economic conditions. No genuine consensus exists even in the secular community about the absolute merit of such programs, much less within the Church. These are, however, important goals of feminists.

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