

Final Observations and Recommendations on "One in Christ Jesus"

Summary of Critiques

Critiques of the second draft of the pastoral letter on "women's concerns" issuing from a broad spectrum of sources [*inter alia*, Women for Faith & Family statement June 1, LCWR statement August 9, "Center of Concern" statement June 11, Archbishop Rembert Weakland's comments and his subsequent "listening sessions," Rosemary Ruether's "Open Letter"] have in common at least two major conclusions:

- 1) Internal inconsistencies make the draft essentially incoherent (e.g., on the one hand it claims that the "patriarchal" structure of the Church is defective, allowing for the "sin of sexism" which excludes women from exercising "full ministry," while on the other hand it restates constant Church teaching restricting the ordained ministry to men);
- 2) Because the pastoral draft is so deeply and inherently flawed by fundamental internal contradictions, the bishops should reject the draft and the entire project should be abandoned.

Agreement among the disparate critiques ends here, however. Those who support Church teaching and the Church's authority to teach register concern that the document will increase confusion on critical doctrinal matters. They are apprehensive that some of the pastoral's recommendations would cause further harm to Church unity, erode rather than enhance the authority of the bishops, and foster further dissent, rather than promote understanding and acceptance of essential Church teachings.

Those who oppose central Church teachings and reject her teaching authority are angered by the draft when it fails to conform to their concept of "church" [*sic*] and does not accede to their demands for change.

By now it is surely clear to everyone that these two distinct views are intrinsically incompatible; and that no amount of "dialogue," no number of revisions, however well intended and honestly undertaken, can produce a sound document which would also be acceptable to all.

Fundamental problems still unsolved

The pastoral "process" itself has succeeded in revealing that fact, if nothing else. It has also shown the areas which continue to present problems. What it has not succeeded in doing is what apparently it set out to do: to produce coherent teaching from the bishops of the United States on critical matters of Catholic doctrine which, at base, are at the heart of what ails the Church in our time—what it means to be human beings, male or female, in relationship to each other and in relation to God; and what every person's existence means or should mean for society and for the Church.

These problems are not unique to the United States, nor to "the West." These are cosmic questions, which have in one way or another plagued the consciousness of mankind for at least 150 years, but which have reached crisis proportions in our troubled century. They cannot be settled by any "pastoral statement" by any committee, however well motivated. Questions of such fundamental import for each of us, which bring an entire civilization to a crisis of faith, simply will not submit to the methods we have become accustomed to apply to "problem solving."

The past seven years' labor of the pastoral committee and others concerned with it demonstrates the impossibility of issuing a truly useful pastoral statement which would satisfy those women (or men) who do not understand or do not accept Church teaching, without both compromising Church doctrine and dogma and ignoring mainstream Catholics.

The bishops' dilemma

Bishops who must deliberate and decide the fate of the draft pastoral and its recommendations realize both the importance of their decision and the tension and fragility of the situation which surrounds this draft document. Bishops will, doubtless, be concerned not only about the fate of the pastoral, but about the perception of their actions by at least three groups:

- 1) the communications media, secular and religious;
- 2) the Pope, Vatican officials, and mainstream clergy, religious and laity;
- 3) dissenters.

(For the record, it should be noted that all three groups include both women and men.)

Because both the first and third groups (which, in fact, overlap considerably) now have enormous influence over public opinion, many bishops have become extremely reluctant to take a stand or make clear and forthright decisions on any issue which might unleash the hostility of the media and dissenters. Some may fear that negative publicity could harm the faith of the unsophisticated — the “rank and file” believers, the young — who are most vulnerable to persuasion by the errors they read or are taught. Bishops may genuinely worry that many Catholics may leave the Church which is portrayed as “rigid,” “narrow,” and “outdated.”

However, bishops may well be concerned also about the great harm of appearing to capitulate to what amounts to terrorism, and may perceive themselves to be, in effect, hostages of those whose agendas are either overtly or covertly hostile to the Church, her teachings, her authority and her tradition.

Bishops considering this pastoral letter may feel themselves to be in a “no-win” situation for these and other reasons:

- 1) If they proclaim clearly and forthrightly what they know to be the Truth embodied in the Church and her teachings, they risk being discredited, disobeyed and publicly ridiculed, as well as the possibility of losing some percentage of Catholics who will not accept the Church's teachings;
- 2) If they are perceived to accede to demands from those who hope to effect revolutionary “reformation” of the Church, they will:
 - a) discourage and demoralize the faithful,
 - b) encourage dissent,

- c) neutralize the evangelical mission of the Church.
- 3) They may also worry that Divine Law is “unenforceable,” and conclude, therefore, that they should not risk open conflict by proclaiming it candidly.

Many bishops now realize that while disunity is deeply damaging to the Church's ability to bring salvation to the world (as Cardinal Bernardin's address to the bishops in Santa Clara in June stressed), no less harmful are “cover-ups” and denial (as several recent scandals involving clergy have so dramatically revealed.)

The bishops' problem as defenders of the faith and as pastors of Christ's flock, at this historic time of conflict and confusion, is how to deal effectively with the climate of dissent which continues to lead many people (including clergy) into error and sin and separation from the true life-giving nurture of the Church.

The greatest challenge the bishops face today is not how to handle public relations, not how to address misperceptions about disunity, but, in fact, how to restore unity which has been shattered; how to reestablish the integrity of the Church through all her clergy, religious and laity; and how to strengthen and invigorate the faith of all the members of the Body of Christ.

Women's Commissions — Half a loaf?

Some have suggested that the bishops approve the draft pastoral's final recommendations rather than approving it in its entirety. “Center for Concern” and LCWR, for example, advocate this alternative. An apparent “compromise” may appeal to some bishops as a face-saving solution. However, this choice could cause very grave problems for the bishops and for the entire Church.

The pastoral's recommendation to create “women's commissions” is arguably the most important — and potentially the most dangerous — single item it contains. “Women's commissions” would provide a useful strategic vehicle for feminist ideologues' placing maximum pressure on bishops for radical changes in the Church. They could be easily co-opted by feminist activists and their effect on the Church and on women could be devastating. At a minimum they would interpose yet another bureaucratic layer between the bishop and his people. Among the most serious problems could be these:

1. They could become “single-sex lobby groups,” promoting the feminist political, social and religious

agendas.

2. They would use the financial support of the entire Church to promote activities they, not the Universal Church, would determine.
3. They could provide means for dissemination of so-called "feminine" spirituality programs alien to Catholic belief, thus endangering the faith and the souls of thousands of Catholic women.
4. They could set up programs for feminist "consciousness raising" designed to "radicalize" Catholic women, as has been done in Canada since the early 1980's with the radical feminist inspired "Green Kit" study programs.
5. They could co-operate with, provide a forum for and sponsor existing groups such as "WomenChurch," the "Women's Ordination Conference," "Catholics for a Free Choice," the "National Coalition of American Nuns," and many other groups and individuals of similar ideology who falsely claim to speak for Catholic women in America. Even if "women's commissions" might also offer a forum to orthodox groups or individuals, and also distribute authentically Catholic materials, nothing could nullify the perception of official endorsement by the Church in the United States of groups, programs and ideas which directly conflict with essential Church teachings.
6. Bishops and diocesan officials, as well as the NCCB, would be under continual scrutiny by these commissions. The influence of the "women's commissions" within the dioceses would be a constant factor with which each bishop would be forced to contend in establishing policy, in religious and seminary education, in developing spirituality programs, and in nearly every aspect of the bishop's work. This could seriously hamper his pastoral mission to the people of his diocese.
7. "Women's commissions" could be used to further marginalize and alienate orthodox Catholic women and their families who already have difficulty enough making their voices heard and their needs known to the bishops — women whose talents, abilities, insights and expertise are already underutilized by the present bureaucratic structure.
8. It is a truism of elementary political science that once an agency is established within an official organizational structure it becomes virtually impossible to dismantle. If ever "women's commissions" should not prove to be beneficial to the Church (or, in fact,

harmful), bishops would be essentially powerless either to control or dissolve them.

Finally, there are already "councils of Catholic women" in many dioceses (DCCW) and at the national level (NCCW) which can readily be transformed into agencies for the implementation of destructive, as well as salutary, objectives. If bishops relinquish their supervision and guidance of these councils in an attempt to mollify or placate demands of feminist activists for "full decision-making power," the result could be devastating for the thousands of faithful Catholic women who belong to these councils and for the entire Church. In addition to causing these women grief and spiritual harm, such an eventuality would rob the Church of the many thousands of hours of prayer and service these women have willingly offered, confident that they were helping the Church to accomplish her true mission.

The problem at hand — a beginning

So what can bishops do about the pastoral letter on "women's concerns" now facing them? How can they help to provide a means for those who reject Church teachings or who are confused to return to unity with the Universal Church, while also encouraging believers to fulfill their evangelical apostolate to the world? Some suggestions are:

1. Reject the draft pastoral in its entirety. Reject all its recommendations. End fruitless "dialogue."
2. Simultaneously, issue a statement indicating all bishops' commitment to promote authentic Church teaching and practice throughout all the dioceses of the United States, and to eliminate influences which are inconsistent with orthodox teaching; for it is this liberating Truth of Christ which inheres in the Church that each person ultimately seeks — and desperately needs — whether or not this fact is acknowledged.
3. Immediately initiate programs to disseminate papal teachings, clearly, honestly and unashamedly, in parishes and in schools — particularly those teachings directly focused on the critical ontological problems of our time, e.g. *Humanae Vitae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *Christifidelis Laici*, *Laborem Exercens*, and the trilogy of Pope John Paul II developing the "theology of the body," *The Original Unity of Man and Woman*, etc.

4. Encourage initiatives which genuinely support families, the “domestic Church, following the Holy See’s Charter of the Rights of the Family.
5. Insist that everyone who works to develop such educational programs and foster such initiatives truly understand and believe in what the bishops are asking them to do, and can approach their tasks with genuine evangelical zeal.
6. Insist that the language and liturgy of the Church, both in theory and in practice, conform to the norms of the Universal Church, directly intervening, when necessary, to inhibit and suppress liturgical practices and forms of spirituality which are alien to the Church’s authentic tradition and which may confuse and damage the faith of the people.
7. Create no additional structures (such as “women’s commissions”) which actually separate pastors from the faithful, and which often filter out information and constructive ideas to which the bishops should have access. Work, instead, to reduce and refine existing national and diocesan bureaucracies.
8. Following the missionary example of Pope John Paul II, each bishop personally could conduct assemblies of the faithful throughout each diocese — most particularly of youth — guiding them in prayer and instructing and forming them through addresses and homilies which help them to understand and accept the teachings of the Church; for only the Truth can give them true liberty. Give them the encouragement and strength of their bishop’s example of obedient fidelity to Christ and His Church, that their faith may be deepened and enriched, and that they, too, may help to bring Christ’s message of salvation to the world which hungers and thirsts for it.

Bishops need prayerful support

Today’s bishops, as was true of many brave and saintly bishops of the past, face problems of cosmic proportions and are confronted by impediments to their apostolic work which would be unsurmountable were it not for the assurance of Divine Assistance. They may often feel isolated, alone, discouraged. They may be beset by fear, afflicted by severe temptations, fall prey to doubt, confusion, pride, disease and all manner of sin, just as might any other Christian.

It is surely true, however, that by their very role as leaders of the Church, bishops may be called to experience these afflictions more intensely than others. In our time the martyrdom which bishops and clergy must be willing to embrace for Christ’s sake, following His example of self-giving love, may take the insidious form of ridicule, detraction, and other subtle psychological warfare.

For this reason it is urgent that bishops whose office requires that they valiantly and even heroically embrace and proclaim Christ’s truth inherent in the Church, receive the constant assistance of the prayers and the work of all Catholic believers. Bishops whose faith is strong must help brother bishops who are weaker. Clergy, religious and laity must support the bishops and must support one another through constant prayer and willing service.

All Catholics who accept Christ’s commission to bring the Gospel “to every creature” and who recall God’s promise to provide whatever we lack to accomplish His work must realize that the future of the Church and the eternal lives of all humanity rely heavily on what we do now. The people of the world are crying out for the Bread of Life. We must not give them stones.

WOMEN FOR FAITH & FAMILY
September 1, 1990