
Comments on the Third Draft of the Pastoral on Women's Concerns

Janet E. Smith

LET ME BEGIN by saying that my purpose here is not to provide a thorough analysis of "Called to Be One in Christ Jesus", nor to point out all its strengths and weaknesses. Although there are some improvements in this draft over the first two it is not the purpose of this critique to acknowledge these systematically. While the committee is to be commended for having overcome some deficiencies of former drafts, what seems most important is to point out the weaknesses that remain. In my view, the document is seriously flawed to the extent that it ought not to be issued as a final statement by the bishops.

Although the committee that issued this statement is entitled the Ad Hoc Committee for a Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns, "Called to Be One" is addressed primarily to the concerns of feminists; this was a common observation about the earlier drafts as well. The concentration on sexism indicates that feminists are the primary inspiration of, and perhaps the expected primary audience of the document. While many women certainly are concerned about sexism and many of these women are in the Church, not all women are feminists; not all women place sexism high on their list of concerns. Indeed, what remains troubling about this pastoral in all its drafts is that the concerns of a key group of women are left largely unaddressed. Women who are not troubled by various teachings of the Church but find them intellectually and spiritually satisfying and find their lives enriched by lives of faithful adherence

to them, do not have sexism as their foremost concern. Rather they are largely concerned about how to raise children to be faithful Catholics in a society that is largely anti-Christian and in a Church full of confusion about what the Church teaches. They desire guidance on how to bring the practices of their Church and their society into line with true Christian values, to live in accord with these values and to fight all injustices, not simply those rooted in sexism. Whatever injustices they suffer at the hands of a sexist society are not their foremost concern. For those who are married, the foremost concern is how to be good wives and mothers; for those single and in the religious life, the foremost concern is how best to serve the Church in a hostile world. Justice and civil rights are surely concerns for those working to build the Kingdom of God, but this document suggests that a concern with one particular violation of justice and civil rights, sexism, is nearly exclusively the subject of women's concerns. I think sexism is the foremost concern of most feminists, but not of most Catholic women and certainly not of many (if not most) Catholic women who live the Church's teachings most faithfully.

In spite of some disclaimers to the contrary, "Called to Be One" gives the impression that women are disgruntled with much in their Church. No attempt is made to gauge how many women are dissatisfied; do they represent the majority, a significant minority, or a small minority? Without some attempt to measure their numbers, the im-

pression might well be left that most women or a very large portion of women in the Church are unhappy with the teachings and practices of the Church. But even more important and disturbing is that no attempt is made to discern if those women who are dissatisfied with the Church for various reasons, are making their evaluation on the basis of gospel values or on the basis of the values of modern secular society. Nor is any attempt made to discern the justice of their charges against men and the Church; their concerns are reported in an uncritical fashion.

Throughout, the voices of those who complain about practices of the Church and who reject some teachings of the Church seem to have made a greater impression on those who wrote the document than did the voices of those who accept the practices and teachings of the Church. No indication is given that there are Catholic women who oppose female acolytes, who oppose inclusive language, who accept an all male priesthood without objection. To leave their views unmentioned, to concentrate on the dissatisfaction that some women express about the Church on certain matters and not to acknowledge that there are also many women vocally and zealously in support of the Church on the same matters is, again, to give a false picture.

"Called to Be One" is largely focused on injustices done to women; these are many and it is right to draw attention to them. But a balance needs to be presented. Are women only the victims of injustice, or are they not also the perpetrators of injustice? Are they not concerned with their own moral responsibility as well as that of others? Are they not concerned to be just to others as well as to ensure that others are just to them? Do they not need — and want — to be called to a more faithful living out of the gospel? Do they fail to live the gospel faithfully primarily because of the obstacles put in their path because of the sexism in our society? Or are not women sometimes the

sources of injustice and wrongdoing?

"Called to be One" endorses many of the concerns of the feminist movement and surely some of their concerns are in accord with Christian values. Yet, it is clear to any Christian that the feminist movement is not an unqualified good. It is a tremendous force pushing for sexual liberation, contraception, abortion, sterilization, sinful modes of reproductive technology, active homosexual lifestyles, marxism, witchcraft, etc. (The programs of any feminist convention will bear out these charges.) Do not women who are seeking full civil rights for themselves and others need to be warned about joining activist groups such as

NOW, groups that are working to perpetuate many of the evils that Catholics are working hard to eliminate? In this document we are told that women are the victims of those who are overly attached to power, possessions, and pleasure. Women need to be warned

Concentration on sexism indicates that feminists are the pastoral's primary inspiration... and primary audience...

not to succumb to those attachments themselves. To have a document on women's concerns, one that focuses very sympathetically on several of the chief concerns of feminists, and to have nary a word critical of the pernicious elements of the feminist movement, is, I think, irresponsible.

Reading the "signs of the times" requires more discernment than "Called to be One" evidences. Sexism is a great evil and the source of many of the troubles of women, but it is not the sole or perhaps even the primary source of such troubles. Papal documents frequently speak of erroneous notions of freedom that govern the modern age and influence our personal lives and social policies. A true diagnosis of the condition in which we find ourselves requires an analysis of such notions of freedom. Faulty views of the human person and of the purpose of human sexuality are as much behind the troubles that all women face as is the sin of sexism. To concentrate exclusively on one evil, is to present an unbal-

anced picture and thus may serve to misdirect what efforts need to be made to truly help women better their condition and to help women be better Christians.

Furthermore, most Catholic women today are torn between a culture that mandates that they seek self-fulfillment and that they distinguish themselves in the workplace and a Catholicism that requires that the needs of the family must come first. Catholic women need help in thinking through what vocations or careers are most fully in accord with gospel values. This document does little to assist them in discerning what place career and what place family should have in their priorities. Although the concerns of mothers are occasionally mentioned, again, I sense that their concerns are of secondary importance to those who drafted this document. For instance, many Catholic women

are extremely concerned about the school systems, Catholic as well as public. They are concerned about the faithfulness of Catholic doctrine presented to their children in Catholic schools and universities; they are concerned that the sex education programs of the public schools follow the agenda of Planned Parenthood and that the sex education programs in the Catholic schools are not much better. They are concerned about the decrease in vocations but are hesitant to encourage their children to enter orders that are marked by dissent, to encourage their sons to go to seminaries that are known for permissive sexual behavior. They are concerned that their children have the experience of beautiful and reverent liturgies. These are real concerns of Catholic women and ones the bishops have the means of directly confronting and correcting. While women should be paid a just wage in the marketplace and the bishops are right to call for such, there are certain practices taking place within their sphere of direct influence that need to be addressed. For instance, women who attempt to

Women who choose to be wives and mothers are not denying their authentic human personhood, but indeed are fulfilling it.

get the school systems (both public and Catholic) to provide sex education that promotes chastity and abstinence meet with much resistance from the schools. The bishops should express their admiration and compassion for such women; they are often very unsung heroines.

Mention of the need for greater tax deductions for families, of the value of a voucher system for schools would also show that the bishops have the concerns of mothers in mind as well as the concerns of feminists. Certainly some interest is shown in the concerns of mothers; mention of the need for flex time and job sharing indicates an

awareness of the needs of working mothers. But little indicates an awareness of the needs and concerns of mothers who stay at home. Women who have large families and who stay at home to raise their children are often mocked as not doing work worthy of adult human persons. This document, in spite of some clear

efforts to the contrary, unwittingly, it seems, and largely by omission, fails to promote the values of motherhood and to make it clear that women who choose to live their lives as devoted wives and mothers are not denying their authentic human personhood, but indeed are fulfilling it.

There are patterns of speech in this document that produce confusion. It regularly makes distinctions between "many" women, "some" women, "most" women and "women". What sense are we to get from such distinctions? When "Called to Be One" speaks of "women" without a qualifier are we to understand it to be speaking of all women or only some (or most or many) women? For instance, section 92 states, "Women carry the mission of the church forward in ways worthy of the highest praise and gratitude," and section 93 states, "Women are signs and effective instruments of God's transforming love in the world." These generalizations are certainly not true of all women. What exactly is being claimed in these generalizations?

On occasion the terminology of psychology enters into the document where terminology of the Church would be more precise. In section 6, for instance, we learn that Christ's teaching confronted "inappropriate" behavior. Psychologists speak of "inappropriate" behavior; Christians speak of "sinful" behavior. Section 71 tells us that preachers and counselors should help abusive spouses come to understand why such behavior is "unacceptable". They should also be helped to see that such behavior is sinful. Sexism is unacceptable and a sin; abuse is unacceptable and a sin; abortion and contraception are sins; words carry a certain force and speech should be as precise as possible. More than sexism should be labeled a sin in this document.

Comments on the content of specific sections should serve to illustrate the types of problems pervasive throughout the document.

Section 69 does not begin to do justice to the complexity of the proper relationship between husband and wife. It states that, "In traditional understanding women were seen as subordinate to the headship of their husbands; in contemporary teachings, as in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, a couple is called to be subordinate to one another. In an ideal marriage, individual gifts are valued and spouses respect each other as equals before God." Mutual subordination does not necessarily rule out the headship of the male in some respects; the complex question of proper roles for males and females is left altogether untouched.

This section displays another peculiarity and deficiency of "Called to be One". It seems (unintentionally, to be sure) to characterize the relationships between husband and wives as ones that should be governed largely by a respect for one another as equals. It is in the context of seeing sexism as a violation of human rights that husbands are implored not to be 'sexist' towards their wives. Calling to the attention of men that they are

treating their wives unjustly may certainly be helpful in guiding them to correct their attitudes and behavior, but an appeal should also be made to the love that spouses should show for one another; husbands should treat their wives in accord with the demands of full human dignity not simply because they should not violate the rights of their wives, but because they should not violate their vows of love. This document seems to see all human relationships as governed by the demands of rights; the language of Christian and familial and spousal love should appear much more often than it does in "Called to Be One".

This document seems to see all human relationships as governed by the demands of 'rights.'

Section 70 makes reference to male insensitivity. This is another instance of unbalance. To speak of male insensitivity without also acknowledging that many males are devoted, helpful, and sensitive husbands and fathers seems unjust. The document verges on con-

veying an anti-male sentiment in some passages; more statements laudatory of males would give the proper balance.

The sections on birth regulation (77-83) are somewhat improved from the former draft but are still inadequate. Section 77 tells us that "some feel obliged to leave the Church if they cannot follow this aspect of the church's official teaching" (what does the adjective "official" attached to teaching imply? why not simply "the Church's teaching"? if adjectives are needed, I recommend the Church's "unbroken and constant" teaching). It tells us that "others choose to remain in the church but not to comply". Later, "Called to be One" asks for better formation of consciences and better instruction. Isn't this document the appropriate place for such instruction? It would be helpful to tell us what should be the relationship to the Church of women who contracept. To raise the question and not to answer it adds to the confusion. If there is some general guidance that could be given, about the need for regular mention

of the sin of contraception in the confessional, this should be mentioned.

Section 79 rightly tells us, in reference to contraception, that couples have "a right and duty

Those who wish to learn why the Church teaches what it does and how to defend the Church will receive little guidance from the sources cited.

to know what the church teaches and an obligation to respect the authority of that teaching." Why not clarify the authority of that teaching for couples? There is a vagueness here that contributes to the very confusion that the document says the Church should work to dispel. Here would be the proper place to begin dispelling the confusion of Catholic women and couples about this issue.

Footnote 46, attached to this section, is misleading and contributes to confusion in the Church. To say that "disagreements among theologians as to the obligatory force of these norms has produced much confusion" is certainly true. But does this mean that the norms are not obligatory? Could not the bishops take this as a proper occasion to clarify matters and reduce the confusion?

Indeed, it is not right for the document (in footnote 46) to direct readers to the opinions of Andrew Greeley and Mary Durkin and to leave Pope John Paul II's strong statements on the need for Catholics to abide by this teaching unmentioned. Neither *Humanae Vitae* nor *Donum Vitae* are mentioned at all in the document or the notes, though their content is clearly relevant to the discussion. Why Greeley and Durkin and not these documents and not the writings of the Pope? If Catholic women were to go to the footnotes of

this document to try to learn Catholic teaching on these and other matters more fully, they would not be directed to many of the key documents and would instead be reading much that is misleading. Dissenters are cited with no indication that those who consult these authors are likely to find much in opposition to Church teaching. Note 57 is a case in point: the work of these feminist scholars has been uniformly to demand changing essential Church teachings. Those who wish to learn why the Church teaches what it does and how to defend the Church will receive little guidance from the sources cited in the footnotes.

In section 81 we are told that some couples are not convinced of the effectiveness of NFP. Would this not be the proper place to provide the data that should convince them? Is their failure to be convinced rational or irrational? Footnote 48 to this section could be more informative. Bishop James McHugh's office has commissioned a report on the satisfaction experienced by users of NFP with the method; it should be referenced.

To talk about abortion and not to talk about excommunication and confession seems irresponsible (section 84). Many Catholic women have had abortions and one of their concerns is their

Womens commissions will represent primarily the concerns of feminists... increase polarization among women...

relationship to the Church. Priests are rightly directed to be compassionate in the confessional; but women who have had abortions or who have assisted and counseled abortions should be directed to go to confession.

In section 87, as elsewhere, certain socio-

logical facts are mentioned without any guidance as to how these facts are to be interpreted in light of the Church. We are told that some divorced and separated women have been asked to resign from certain parish ministries and committees. The implication is that these women have been treated unfairly but no explanation is given. Is divorce never a disqualifying act, or does it depend upon the circumstances of the divorce?

Again, in section 96, some sociological facts are mentioned without any guidance as to how they are to be interpreted. We learn what some women claim about the Church's treatment of women but are not given any indication whether their interpretations accord with the facts or not. Finally, in section 110 we learn that the authors of this letter takes *Inter Insigniores* as their "point of reference." What precisely does this mean? We

are told that the tradition is normative. But this very good guidance should be placed in closer proximity to section 96 where we are given the impression that the issue is open-ended.

Section 131 issues a call for the establishment of commissions on women in church and society in each diocese. When bishops are complaining about too much bureaucracy in the Church it seems unwise to add another commission. But the greatest fear is that these commissions will, as does this document, represent primarily the concerns of feminists and further marginalize and alienate women for whom feminist concerns are not a high priority or who, in fact, oppose feminist ideology. Women's commissions may well increase the polarization among women rather than uniting women in the effort to form the world in light of gospel values.

*Dr. Smith is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Dallas and a longtime associate of Women for Faith and Family. Professor Smith has addressed many audiences on the subject of the Church's teaching on human life, and is the author of many scholarly articles. Her most recent work is *Humanæ Vitæ—A Generation Later*, a definitive study of the controversial document, which was published by Catholic University of America Press late last year.*