

Reflections on Women in the Mission and Ministry of the Church

A Pastoral Letter from Archbishop Borders

Catholic
Review
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My dear Friends in Christ,

The first week in August, I left the Archdiocese to make a retreat at the Spiritual Center in Wernersville, Pennsylvania. The purpose of the retreat was twofold. I needed some time for reflection and prayer about my own personal relationship to Christ and about my response to the duties of my vocation. I also wanted to pray for the needs of the people of the Archdiocese, and to express my joy at being a part of the local Church of the Archdiocese of Baltimore. Normally, a retreat is a time of reading, reflecting, prayer, and — in rare moments — contemplation.

This retreat is a bit different for me because I'm writing all of you a letter. It is a long letter, but I hope you will find the time to read this letter as carefully as you would read a letter from a personal friend. As I write, we are looking forward to the beautiful Feast of the Assumption. Even though this letter will not reach you until after the Feast of Our Lady, the days surrounding her feast give us a happy opportunity to reflect on ourselves as a Church and to recognize and honor the role of women in the Church.

Gratitude is due women

Before getting involved in the much-needed discussion of the changing role of women in the Church and how to offer better opportunities and correct injustices, I would just like to thank God for the women in my life, most of whom have been actively involved in the work of the Church. My mother who died during the year was a good example; she was a simple direct happy person who loved her family and shared her love beyond the family circle. When we talk about decision-making and responsibilities and rights and forming communities, let us remember that all of this starts in the home. Few of us can have the strength and courage to respond to greater needs of the Church or society if we had not experienced love at home, and in our earliest years understood and accepted personal integrity. In our society, often people give symbolic service to family life on Mother's Day, but a true Christian lives in such a manner that the home is not just a symbol but will always be the center of strength, stability and love.

Now having said that, I would like to get something else off my chest: I think we men have been taking women for granted and have been only on the receiving end of women's concerns too long. This is true in the Church as well as in society in general. I wish I could continue in this manner of speaking throughout the letter, but if I did it would become a book, and we do not have that much time or space. Therefore I had better start to condense some of my ideas, though they might appear to be a bit technical and read like a textbook. (Textbooks are not all that bad.) Let's begin—

Jesus took on our humanness

The People of God in every generation are called to respond to the Holy Spirit in a manner that will most effectively make Christ present in our lives. In responding to the prompting of the Holy Spirit all of us recognize that we are moving from one imperfect condition to another. We get better, but we are still imperfect. This movement upward is not only possible but the fulfillment of promise.

The great source of strength for every follower of Jesus—the strength that makes it possible to respond to the Holy Spirit — is

Every faith community in each period of history must understand the mission of Christ and His message in relationship to its culture and age. Yet the Church must grow and therefore change. As an instrument of the Holy Spirit the Church proclaims, protects and penetrates the truth of the Father's revelation; but never in any formulation will the Church express the totality of revealed truth. The Church must speak within a cultural pattern so that eternal truths are expressed within the confinement of space and time. The Church penetrates and modifies an existing culture but does not substitute another for it. The Church accepts what is good in all cultures. It tries to change those things which wound the lives of people, becoming, as Jesus challenged us to be, a leaven for society.

Nevertheless, men and women of every age are not only conditioned by a culture; to a certain extent, they are prisoners of a culture. We cannot judge people in different periods of history by standards of our own time. Such an appraisal would fail to appreciate the on-going development of human knowledge, customs and resources. Imagine expecting a sophisticated response from our great-grandparents to space technology or genetic engineering.

Vatican II and Pope Paul

The Second Vatican Council under the guidance of the Holy Spirit recognized the needs of our times and the potential in ministry for both men and women. The Fathers of the Council affirmed that the mission of the Church was to grow as a people of God and accept the responsibility of giving witness and service to the world in the name of Christ. They reaffirmed that this mission belongs to all the people of God because each person is more than united with Christ: he or she is incorporated into Christ by Baptism. The traditional, though incomplete, description of Christ's mission is that of prophet, priest, and king. The Council asserts that since each person is incorporated into Christ by Baptism, every Christian shares in each aspect of Christ's mission. You and I then are called to be what Jesus is. This is very different from the traditional understanding of the lay person's responsibility for continuing the mission of Christ in the Church and to the world.

Related to this changed understanding of responsibility for the Church's mission, there has developed within the Church a different and broader insight into ministry. Each person committed to further the mission of the Church should be recognized by the faith community as so designated. As the bishop of our diocese I accept the responsibility to recognize these new ministries and provide an opportunity for their effective development. In taking this action I am following the leadership of Pope Paul VI, who, in a statement issued on the feast day of the Assumption 1972, called for a re-examination of the Church's practices in ministries stating that these practices should be adapted to the needs of the day. He established lay ministries directly concerned with the worship of the Church. Up to that time, official ministries related to divine worship had been restricted to candidates for the priesthood. These lay ministries are those of lector and acolyte. They were instituted and made part of the discipline of the Church.

Lay ministries for women

mise.

The great source of strength for every follower of Jesus—the strength that makes it possible to respond to the Holy Spirit — is that Jesus took on our humanness.

Our humanness is a gift of life, of existence, that comes from God the Father through the Son. Our capacity to rise above the limitations of human life and share in divine life comes from Christ through the Incarnation and Redemption. Our response is to accept this gift of life, and through the power of redemptive love mold ourselves to the image of Christ.

People of every age since apostolic times have responded to this divine gift and invitation with varying successes and failures. The most outstanding response in recent history has been the experience of the Second Vatican Council. Obviously this great effort did not start from a fresh beginning, but drew from the efforts of saints and scholars and people like ourselves of other generations. Our Christian progenitors labored for a greater understanding of the Scriptures, a better appreciation of the liturgical life of the Church, and a desire to improve social conditions.

The Second Vatican Council produced a dramatic shift in thinking about the Church by recalling that the Church is, first of all, a mystery of God's calling a people to Himself and choosing them, through His Spirit, to make known and continue the work and mission of His Son. We humbly recognize that we need to grow in knowledge of this mystery of the Church so that we can understand the purpose for which Jesus came, and also to realize that our future as a Church is in the hands of God's Providence.

Focusing on mission, ministry

In this letter and with this understanding of Church, I would like to focus on mission and ministry with a particular emphasis on women in ministry. In this area all of us have seen significant changes in recent times and expect further developments in years ahead. In offering my own reflections on this issue in the Church today, I will indicate directions I hope this Archdiocese might take in the immediate future.

It is probably inevitable that, to many people, the question of the role of women in the Church's mission and ministry will be seen in the light of social and political efforts to secure a more equitable position for women in society. It would be dishonest to assert that these movements do not have an influence on discussions in the Church. It is my belief, however, that the issue must be seen always in the context of ourselves as a people, in faith, seeking to understand ourselves in the light of the Lord's will and trying to be faithful to the mission that comes from Him. If we speak of women apart from the mission and ministry of the whole Church, we fail both women and the people of God

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At the present time, these are the only two such ministries, though there has been a petition for two others — leaders of song, and catechists. It is also a fact that installation in the ministries of lector and acolyte is reserved to men, though women may exercise the functions of reader and minister of the Eucharist. I plan to advocate strongly that women, as well as men, be installed in those ministries.

Development of lay ministries is significant, I believe, for several reasons. The Church is responding to the needs of our day and is developing a deeper understanding of its mission. Down through the centuries, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Church has adapted and will continue to adapt practices needed to fulfill the mission it received from the Lord.

The broader acceptance of ministries as outlined above hopefully will help to give us a better understanding of the mission of the Church in today's world. The new understanding of ministries at the heart of a faith community helps our understanding of the key role women have played in the life of the Church in families, social services, hospitals, schools, and centers of prayer. The witness value of the Church as a community of faith, love, and service, has emerged through the leadership and dedication of women in the Church.

Even though in the past women have made their contributions in a man-centered world, their contributions in forming faith communities, while more subtle, in many areas have been more effective than the efforts of men. The strong family life, with love forming the basis of unity, comes primarily from women. Outstanding examples can be recognized in every period of history, as St. Helena, St. Monica, and St. Elizabeth of Hungary.

In the realm of theology and Church reform, we revere St. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa of Avila, who influenced and supported popes, bishops, and heads of Religious orders. Despite these shining examples of a clear and visible role in the Church's life within the cultural patterns of the past, it is probably accurate to say that women have been rather silent members of the Church. However, history recognizes that through their insight into Christ's presence and their dedication to His mission, they have made staggering contributions. Without their efforts in all areas of work, the Church would not have grown and flourished as well as it has through the centuries.

Recent changes in society

In the past two decades, the pattern of work and responsibility for women has undergone a radical change in public life and in the

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SERVED AS A LECTOR AT THE SAME MASS.

business world. Studies in the fields of psychology, sociology, and anthropology have demonstrated the competence of women and their great potential in the professions and in leadership positions currently dominated by men. Inasmuch as many women have taken advantage of educational opportunities and have received some welcome in the world of business and the professions, their contributions and influence presently are felt more deeply. The Church, recognizing these changes, is seeking more opportunities for women to use their talents effectively in leadership roles and ministries heretofore closed to them because of custom or

There is always a danger in change of denigrating the good and positive vocations of both past and present. The role as wife, as mother, as Religious, and as single woman remains equally as important today as in the past, though women may live these vocations in different ways. However, more opportunities of leadership service and influence are available. In today's society, if the Church is to continue as a force in the world, women must enter into decision and policy-making, and accept leadership roles within the Church. Such activity should find expression in all areas of the Church — parish, diocesan, and national councils; international synods; liturgical commissions; boards of education; and similar policy-making bodies.

New directions for archdiocese

In the Archdiocese of Baltimore, we have made some progress in attempting to deal with the issues of women in ministry. I feel that the Archdiocese of Baltimore should offer leadership in recognizing the need for women in ministry and attempt to heal some of the pain caused by injustices to women in the past. The tradition of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton and Archbishop John Carroll forbids us from doing less. With this imperative, I am putting forward four considerations which represent my own thinking at the present time and which I am proposing as directions for the Archdiocese:

First, I believe that all of us need to be sensitive and, as the case might be, to become more sensitive to the fact that some women have experienced inequities in the Church. In many subtle ways the men among us, clergy and lay, can suggest, perhaps most of the time unaware to themselves, that women are less capable of bearing witness and serving in the name of the Lord than are men. I would suggest that we clergy ask women what impression we give in our speaking about them or dealing with them. I know that my own attitudes have changed in the past few years, and I believe that I have become more aware of this as I deal with women, both lay and Religious. I do not say that I am as sensitive as I should be.

May I ask my brother priests and all laymen to give serious thought to this matter. If we believe that every human person is a gift born of the love of God, then we must affirm that belief in the respect we show to everyone, regardless of their sex, their race, their background

For my part, as I indicated above, I shall support and shall ask my brother bishops to support the designation of official ministries in the Church, not only of lector and acolyte but also those of leaders of music and catechists; and that official recognition be given to both women and men in these roles. This is a matter of discipline that cannot be determined by this Archdiocese alone, and my working for these developments will be an expression of my responsibilities to serve the Church that is more universal than that of this Archdiocese.

Fourth, I am aware that some people, both men and women, are put off by the at times one-sided use, and sometimes almost consistent use, of masculine nouns and pronouns in the Liturgy and educational programs of the Archdiocese. To be honest, this came home to me as a problem only recently, after reading in several articles that women are rarely mentioned in the Liturgy. The masculine form of some words has a generic meaning in Latin, but these same terms convey a different meaning when translated into English. I am asking that all of us be sensitive to this concern as expressed by some of the priests and faithful of the Archdiocese.

Ordination of women

There is a further matter which inevitably enters any discussion on the role of women in the Church: that of ordaining women to the priesthood. I have already given my thoughts on this issue on the occasion of the publication of the Vatican document in January of this year. I would repeat only my hope that other ways of promoting the role of women in the Church's life and mission will be given the attention they deserve, even as all of us draw inspiration from the witness to Christ and the service in His name given by so many women in the Church's past and present.

At the recent meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, I asked my brother bishops to promote further study in Sacred Scripture and theology in relation to the role of women in the Church. I further note that the recent document issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith left open the possibility of admitting women to the diaconate. Through the Providence of God, the diaconate was instituted to advance the mission of Christ in the service of the People of God. The Providence of God is still with us.

I pray and believe that the Holy Spirit will be with all of us, clergy and laity, in this Archdiocese. I firmly believe that future decisions about women in the mission and ministry of the Church will be made through the prompting of the Holy Spirit and will further the Mission of Jesus. It is not necessary for us to know the future, but if each of us gives generously of our lives and our energies to the building-up of the Body of Christ to the advancement of the Kingdom of God, the future will be better.

How can we respond otherwise, when as a faith community we listen in wonder and reflect in humility the prayer of Christ at the Last Supper:

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thought to this matter. If we believe that every human person is a gift born of the love of God, then we must affirm that belief in the respect we show to everyone, regardless of their sex, their race, their background.

Second, it is my intent that leadership positions in the Archdiocese will, where the Sacrament of Ordination is not required, be given to those who are qualified, and that the Archdiocese will try to recruit women applicants for these positions. If an internship period would provide a woman with experience needed for a position for which she is otherwise qualified, we shall seek to provide that training.

Role of women in the liturgy

Third, it is my wish that the parishes and institutions of this Archdiocese take full advantage of existing Church discipline whereby women may assist in the liturgical life of the Church. I am asking that clergy and laity co-operate in welcoming the participation of laywomen as well as laymen in the liturgical functions to which the Church is calling the laity. I am thinking primarily of the roles of lector and extraordinary minister of the Eucharist. The fulfillment of these roles should be a reminder that all, though in different ways, share in the royal priesthood of Christ by Baptism, and all are called to proclaim Him in their lives and in their ministry to His Body, the Church, especially to the poor, the aged, the youth, the imprisoned, the lonely, the disturbed, and the sick.

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I pray not only for these,
but for those also
who through their words will believe in me.
May they all be one.
Father, may they be one in us
as you are in me and I am in you,
so that the world may believe it was you who sent me.
I have given them the glory you gave to me
that they may be one as we are one.
With me in them and you in me,
may they be so completely one
that the world will realize that it was you who sent me
and that I have loved them as much as you loved me.

(John 17:20-23)

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

William D. Borders

Archbishop of Baltimore