

## STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

by Elizabeth Farians Spring 1973

In the Roman Catholic Church the struggle for women's liberation is being waged on many fronts and at many levels. There have been demands for the ordination of women to the priesthood, and in fact women are studying in Catholic seminaries hoping one day to be ordained.<sup>1</sup> There have been calls for the elimination of sex discrimination in Canon Law public protests and demonstrations over archaic liturgical rites which degrade, insult or exclude women.<sup>3</sup> Women have organized to work on problems such as restoring the diaconate to women<sup>4</sup> or withholding funds from an institution, a sexist church, which then uses those funds to discriminate.<sup>5</sup> Nuns have become uppity, \* first in their own internal affairs, refusing to submit any longer to male domination in their communal life<sup>6</sup> and now, with raised consciousness, moving into the secular sphere and supporting the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>7</sup> Along with this is what is perhaps the most important factor of all: the devastating attack by Catholic radical feminist theologians on the over-masculinized theology of Judeo-Christian tradition, an attack which may well be the final critique of Christianity.

It is not possible to pinpoint the beginnings of the movement for liberation. No matter what moment one chooses one can always find a prior event, for women have always protested oppression in and by the male power-structured church. Whether one speaks of a saint whose desire to be priested was so great that she wanted to die,<sup>8</sup> the story of Pope Joan,<sup>9</sup> the Women's Bible,<sup>10</sup> the authorship of the scriptures,<sup>11</sup> denied and hidden previous ordinations of women,<sup>12</sup> or the new emphases on the supposedly much wider role of women in the church in the past, both in the early church and in the Middle Ages<sup>13</sup> --much of the struggle still needs to be investigated and recorded, with unprejudiced eyes. In any case, it is clear that the aggiornamento of the Second Vatican Council gave women the impetus needed to work for organized improvement in their status in the Church of Rome. As the necessary background for the task, the founding of St. Mary's (Notre Dame) Graduate School of Sacred Theology for women in 1944 by the outstanding and farsighted woman, Sister Madeleva Wolff, provided, for the first time, the education women needed to change their situation in the church.

St. Joan's Alliance, an international and independent (ie., not tied to church structures) feminist organization, has been active since 1911 for the cause of women. In the early 1960's, it made the first move in taking up the gauntlet for Catholic women by asking for women auditors to the Vatican Council.<sup>14</sup> After several years' persistence and at the eleventh hour, Rome finally capitulated by allowing several women to attend the last Council session. Even then the women were not given the same status as their "lay" male counterparts.<sup>15</sup>

In 1963 St. Joan's made an historic breakthrough by resolving that "should the church in her wisdom and in her good time decide to extend to women the dignity of the priesthood, women would be willing and eager to respond."<sup>16</sup> Ms. Frances Lee McGillicuddy organized an American section of St. Joan's in 1965.<sup>17</sup> It publishes a quarterly bulletin and recently formed an anti-defamation committee to make its work more effective.<sup>18</sup> News reports of these events in the early 1960's brought a rash of articles and controversy about the role of women in the church. Much of it was reported

in the pages of the then newly founded National Catholic Reporter, and the so-called second wave of feminism in the church began.

In 1966 the author founded the Ecumenical Task Force on Women and Religion to provide an ecumenical base for the problem of women's rights in the church. At the same time NOW (National Organization for Women) was being organized and the Ecumenical Task Force joined with it.<sup>19</sup> In contrast to the more cautious St. Joan's Alliance, the NOW Task Force immediately put out a list of demands calling for full participation on an equal basis with men in all areas and levels of church life and practice. The statement also enunciated an important principle for women's rights in the church: "We hold that discrimination based on sex is destructive of religious values."<sup>20</sup>

The NOW Task Force worked with Albertus Magnus College in planning what was probably the first public conference on women and the church in the United States. The conference was held in February, 1967, at the college in New Haven, Connecticut. It was so well-attended that closed circuit TV had to be set up to accommodate the overflow crowd. The author put forth the theological challenge:

"Embedded in the exclusion of women from the Catholic priesthood is the insidious notion that Christ is the Redeemer in his maleness. Therefore only a male can represent him... It is the total humanity of Christ that enables him to be the Saviour, not his maleness."<sup>21</sup>

The militant NOW group, looking for a way to call attention to the plight of women in the church, began to organize demonstrations. In 1968 NOW called for a "National Unveiling," urging women to refuse to cover their heads as a sign of inferiority in the church. In April of the following year this policy was dramatically carried out in the "Easter Bonnet Rebellion" which was probably the first church demonstration for women's rights. Many persons were deeply upset by the incident. The story is partially told in the Revolt of the Second Sex.<sup>22</sup>

In 1970, outraged by the continued insensitivity of the Catholic hierarchy toward women, the NOW Ecumenical Task Force on Women and Religion burned a copy of the newly issued, and supposedly reformed, Roman Missal. The new missal contained a regulation, Canon No. 66, restricting the role of women as lecturers. After burning the degrading Canon the women sent the charred ashes tied in a pink ribbon to John Cardinal Dearden, who was in San Francisco presiding over the semi-annual meeting of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. The package was signed "Woman" and the following poem was attached:

Pink and Ash  
The color of our caste is pink  
But the color of our mood is ash.  
We have burnt your sacred books  
Your latest oppressive words.  
We are sick with your pomp and male prerogative  
We are weary of your callous stance toward women in the church.  
You have raped us of our rights  
And preached that it was in the name of God.  
These are the ashes of your Canons or your instructions sixty six.  
The color of our caste is pink  
But the color of our mood is ash<sup>23</sup>

Another protest which should be mentioned is one now called the "Exodus." In 1971, Dr. Mary Daly, the first woman to preach at the staid Memorial Chapel at Harvard University, marched the congregation out of the church in a new "exodus" from the slavery of the patriarchal church.<sup>24</sup>

The first group of women religious to organize and publicly recognize women's oppression by the male church was the National Coalition of American Nuns. The Coalition was founded in 1969 by Sister Margaret Traxler and has since made several important contributions to the cause of women's rights. In 1972 the National Coalition formulated a five-year plan in which full and equal status for women should be achieved, including ordination to the ministry and elected proportional representation in church voting bodies. They are also demanding reformation of the economic and power systems, full equality for women, and a greater austerity and simplicity of life styles.<sup>25</sup>

In May 1970, the author brought together several of the already existing women's groups into the Joint Committee of Organizations Concerned About the Status of Women in the Church. The purpose of the Joint Committee was to intensify efforts to get the American bishops to deal with the discrimination against women by the Roman Catholic Church and to show strong Catholic support for the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>26</sup> In August 1970, the Joint Committee succeeded in getting a meeting with the newly formed Liaison Committee of the National Council of Catholic Bishops (N.C.C.S.). This was an historic meeting, believed to be the first time United States Catholic bishops have met in committee with women about rights in the church--or anything else. The meeting culminated more than five years of organized effort on the part of women to get a hearing by the bishops. The Joint Committee presented the bishops with a proposal calling for the moral condemnation of sexism, an end to sex discrimination by the church, an affirmative action program for women and an office of women's affairs to oversee and promote the status of women in the church.<sup>27</sup>

As a result of the efforts of the Joint Committee, the N.C.C.B. set up an ad hoc committee of bishops to consider the problem the church has with women, and in 1972, the bishops added women to the committee.<sup>28</sup> It should be pointed out that the bishops never did respond to the proposal of the Joint Committee nor has any of its members been appointed to the bishops' committee on women.<sup>29</sup> Ms. Bernice McNeela and Ms. Patricia Brunner now co-chair the Joint Committee. Recently, the Vatican set up a committee to study the role of women in the church. The only American appointed was a college sophomore and the Pope will not permit the committee to include on its agenda for study the ordination of women to the priesthood.<sup>30</sup>

When one looks back over the past years one can see progress in the role of women in the Catholic Church. Before the Vatican Council, women had no participation and no one dared mention their exclusion. Now they act as lectors, aspire to the priesthood, give out Communion, and sit on parish and diocesan councils while their status is under official study by the church.

But the progress has been uneven and the work difficult. Advancement has been made only after much pressure and protest and then there is double-talk, evasion, and insulting restrictions. For example, when a right is restored to women it is usually permitted first to women religious and then to "lay" women. Also the decree is usually couched in special language granting the dispensation to "women known to be morally righteous" (no such

adjectives describe male counterparts) and the dispensation usually depends on many restrictions: the unavailability of men, denial to stand in certain sacred places, or the nonconferment of the proper title of the office.<sup>31</sup>

Besides all this, the opportunity for co-optation is ever present, thus Catholic women must always be on guard. For example, when bishops attempt to speak for the cause of women, as a few now have, they speak guardedly (and sometimes with "forked tongues" ), often arguing for special ministries, such as the diaconate, or some type of "mini-ministry" or "different" ministry, or of needing women to make up for the shortage of men.<sup>32</sup>

The bishops do not acknowledge that justice is the heart of the matter.<sup>33</sup> Nor do they recognize women theologians: no bishop has appointed a woman periti. The bishops do not even consult female theologians on problems which especially concern women. And when a woman finally does obtain some official position, she may not be taken seriously.<sup>34</sup>

Also, the hierarchy is at best not consistent. Despite statements condemning sex discrimination by the Vatican Council,<sup>35</sup> the American bishops do not support the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>36</sup> Neither does the National Council of Catholic Women, the official church organization for women.<sup>37</sup>

Although the legislative history says the Amendment will not touch the private sphere, they claim the Amendment may disrupt the family.

When considering the activities for women in the church the work of feminist theologians is especially important because it provides the bases for change. Catholic theologians, Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether, and the author, have been in the vanguard of this development<sup>38</sup> Also, the Swidlers, Arlene and Leonard, have written extensively on the role of women in the church. These Catholic theologians were also the first to work on feminist studies.<sup>39</sup>

If the literature on the subject of women's rights in the church is any gauge of the extent, seriousness or depth of the movement, one has only to note that over the past several years the number of articles has quadrupled and that the titles and content of the articles have become increasingly more forceful and radical.<sup>40</sup>

The theological theory in feminist religious studies is intensely interesting. There are two main schools of thought. One group would attempt to rescue Christianity from its misogyny by returning to what is considered the pristine purity of a non-sexism inherent in the love preached by Christ and the Christianity true to his teaching. Much scholarly work is done by this group to rid Christianity of its cultural sexist accretions. The other group is more radical and holds that Christianity is patriarchal in its essence and therefore can no longer contain women and men seeking the true individual uniqueness to be themselves.<sup>41</sup> Both groups are causing an exciting reevaluation of women in the church.

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• *The word "uppity" is used in the women's movement as meaning "not passive." not in the dictionary sense of "haughty, snobbish" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language). Editor's note.*

A listing of some important writings follows (arranged chronologically):

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Notes:

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4. "' Want To Be A Deaconess" (Letters to the Editor) by Jeanne Barnes, *National Catholic Reporter.* Feb. 18, 1970.
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