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WOMEN *and*
ROMAN CATHOLIC
CHRISTIANITY

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CATHOLICS FOR A FREE CHOICE

WOMEN 2000: GENDER, EQUALITY, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

THE HOLY SEE AND THE FOURTH WORLD CONFERENCE ON WOMEN REVISITED

CATHOLICS FOR A FREE CHOICE

Catholics for a Free Choice has prepared three documents for Women 2000: Gender, Equality, Development and Peace for the Twenty-First Century, the five-year review of the Fourth World Conference on Women.

The Holy See and Women's Rights: A Shadow Report on the Beijing Platform for Action provides a review of the Holy See's activities regarding the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Catholics for a Free Choice collected representative samples of Vatican activity since the 1995 Beijing conference and uses these examples, as well as the Holy See's own objectives and reservations regarding the Platform for Action, to critique the Holy See's progress regarding women's rights.

Catholic Voices on Beijing: A Call for Social Justice for Women is a review by Catholic Voices of the Platform for Action, Catholic social teaching and feminist critique. To repudiate the Holy See's contention that the Platform for Action is not representative of Catholic thinking and teaching regarding women, it discusses common ground between the platform and key areas of Catholic social teaching, including women and poverty, women and education, women and health, women and violence, women and decision making, human rights of women and the girl-child, and women and the environment. Catholic Voices is an international forum on the issues of population and development convened by Catholics for a Free Choice. It pro-

vides an opportunity for progressive Catholic leaders to influence and participate in international discourse on women's human rights, sexuality and reproductive health.

Women and Roman Catholic Christianity traces the development of the Catholic church's attitudes toward women since the time of Christ. It examines the complicated roles of gender and celibacy within the church, the ongoing conflict over women's place in Christianity, the church's gradual acceptance of some new roles for women and the historical and theological precedents for its continued resistance to full equality for women. The paper was authored by Rosemary Radford Ruether, one of the world's leading Catholic feminist theologians. She teaches at the Garrett Theological Seminary and is the author or editor of more than twenty-five books, including *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*.

Catholics for a Free Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the moral capacity of women and men to make sound decisions about their lives. Through discourse, education, and advocacy, CFFC works in the United States and internationally to infuse these values into public policy, community life, feminist analysis and Catholic social thinking and teaching.

1. Religions
2. Mujer
3. Cristianismo catolico Romano

romano *catholico* *centenarius*

WOMEN AND ROMAN CATHOLIC CHRISTIANITY

ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER

Christianity was shaped in two Mediterranean patriarchal cultures, Jewish and Greco-Roman. These traditions saw women as inferior and subordinate to men, and excluded women from public, cultural and political leadership. But the early church was also shaped in Jewish prophetic and apocalyptic visions of hope for the liberation of oppressed people, as seen in the Biblical narrative of Exodus and the writings of the prophets. Usually this liberation was understood as national emancipation and applied mostly to men, as leaders of the nation. However, in the first century a few Jewish thinkers applied this idea of liberation of the oppressed to those subjugated within the family, slaves and women.

The New Testament

The conflict between these two ideals in early Christianity, patriarchy and liberation, is reflected in the New Testament. On the liberationist side, one finds in the early strata of the New Testament a number of stories and teachings that suggest that redemption will transform traditional gender relations. The gospel stories often set arrogant representatives of the leadership class—Pharisees and rulers—against women of despised groups, prostitutes, Samaritan and Canaanite women, poor widows and a woman with a flow of blood (making her unclean in Jewish law). These women are praised as having the true insight into Jesus' teachings, while the male religious leaders are rebuked as false teachers.

The coming of the messianic age heralded by Jesus turns the social system upside down. Mary, Jesus' mother, sings the praises of her coming child as the one who will "put the mighty down from their thrones and lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things and send the rich empty away" (Luke 1:52-3). In his inaugural sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus announces that he has come to "bring good news to the poor, the liberation of the captives, the setting at liberty of those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18-19). In the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost slave women and men prophesy (Acts 2:18), Jesus declares that prostitutes and tax collectors will enter the Kingdom of God ahead of the Chief Priests and Elders of the people (Matthew 21:31). The idea that redemption transforms gender, as well as class and race divisions, is expressed in an early baptismal creed cited by Paul: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). However, by Paul's time (some twenty years after the death of Jesus) the idea that women are made equal in Christ

has taken on a particular meaning. It has become linked to celibacy. Women are seen as becoming spiritual equals with men by giving up their female functions as wives, renouncing sex and procreation and becoming "spiritually male."

However, even this limited idea of gender equality became too threatening to Paul and his successors, particularly as women in their congregations claimed a new freedom to preach and travel as evangelists, while renouncing marriage and family. Later writers in the New Testament insist that equality in Christ is only spiritual. It does not change the actual power of masters, husbands and fathers over slaves, wives and children. Rather they are commanded to obey. "Wives obey your husbands, slaves obey your masters, children obey your parents" is an insistent theme in the later strata of the New Testament writings, such as Colossians 3, Ephesians 5-6 and 1 Peter 2-3. This demand for obedience itself testifies to the extent to which these power relations were seen as threatened by the liberationist tradition.

The epistle to Timothy, written in the generation after Paul, seeks to give a definitive basis for women's continued subordination in the church and to refute any thought that this subordination has been changed by redemption in Christ. Woman was created second and was the originator of the Fall of humanity into sin. This heritage locates women as both secondary in God's original plan for creation, and also subordinated as punishment for her primacy in sin. "I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent...she will be saved by rearing children." (1 Timothy 2: 11-15).

This text in 1 Timothy shaped the dominant church teachings about women in Christianity until recent decades. It is still taken as authoritative by fundamentalist Christians. Yet the text also reveals that 1 Timothy was written in a context in which some women and men in the early church did not accept this teaching as the true meaning of Christianity. The author writes to try to silence Christian women in his own congregation who assume that they are liberated by Christ to depart from marriage, travel and preach the gospel.

The Patristic Era: Second to Sixth Centuries

This conflict between patriarchal and liberationist understandings of Christian faith continues in the second century after Christ. Writings of the time reveal that there were numerous currents in early Christianity that continued to assume some

kind of transformation of gender relations. We read in these writings the story of Thecla, a young woman converted by Paul, who, against the wishes of her mother and her husband-to-be, renounces her coming marriage, cuts her hair and leaves home to preach and baptize. Paul himself is portrayed as showing up at the end of the story to validate her ministry. We hear of church leaders, such as Priscilla and Maximilla, who abandon their husbands to engage in teaching as inspired prophets. Some groups of early Christians particularly revered the figure of Mary Magdalene, seen as the apostle to the apostles, whose special relation to Christ has given her an inside understanding of his teachings.

The second to the fourth centuries saw a gradual suppression of these more radical understandings of Christianity in regard to women's roles. Christians with these views were declared heretical and expelled from churches increasingly dominated by male clergy who modeled themselves after the patriarchal rule of families and the governors of Roman cities and provinces. The bishop of Rome would come to see himself as spiritual heir of the Roman emperor and as supreme ruler of the church.

Women continued to be given some minor ministries in the church into the sixth century. In some parts of the church deaconesses and orders of virgins and widows were regarded as ordained to these roles. But the major ordained roles of priest and bishop were reserved for men. Fourth century church documents insist that women in these minor ministries only pray and serve silently and not preach in the church, itself an indication that some women appointed to these ministries continued to assume that they were given a more active leadership.

The popularity of monastic life for both men and women also allowed many women to renounce marriage and child-bearing to live in communities of women where they engaged in study, traveled to visit holy places in Egypt and Palestine, and founded their own institutions for service. Many of these women monastics became powerful leaders governing large communities of women and complexes of buildings. Bishops were often beholden to such women who came from the highest aristocratic families and owned great wealth.

Yet bishops also tried to control such women by insisting that they confine their leadership to a private world within the nunnery and not take public leadership roles. Abbesses should obey bishops in all things. But this struggle of male church

leaders to control nuns and confine them within the walls of cloisters would not be completely successful. Nuns would continue to see their women's communities as a base of independence from male control. This conflict has arisen again today in the Catholic church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

For the Roman Catholic tradition, the most influential bishop and theologian to try to resolve the conflict over women's place in Christianity was St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) Augustine was aware of the conflict between the teaching in Genesis 1:28, that women and men were created equally in the image of God, and that of St. Paul, that only men are made in the image of God. According to Paul, women have only a secondary reflection of this image of God under the male (1 Corinthians 11:2-10). There was also a contradiction between 1 Timothy's view that women in the church are still to be defined as inferior because they have been made second in creation and were first in sin, while Paul in Galatians declared that women and men are now equal in Christ.

Augustine sought to resolve these contradictions in the tradition. His solution was to distinguish between a spiritual capacity in women's souls and their psychological and physical natures as female. The spiritual capacity of women's souls was made in the image of God and capable of being redeemed equally with males. But in their specific female bodily nature and reproductive roles they are inherently subordinate to the male, having been made so by God in the beginning. Moreover by taking the lead in disobedience to God, Eve violated this subordination and became the cause of the Fall. She is then to be doubly subjugated, both as an expression of her original subordination and as punishment for her primacy in sin.

Augustine insisted that the choice of celibacy, while a higher life than marriage, does not liberate women from subordination to men. A celibate woman must submit her will to her bishop, rather than to a husband. The true Christian woman voluntarily accepts her place as one of silence and submission, and thereby shows that she is truly in the path of redemption. At the end of the world, when the present worldly order is transformed into a heavenly one, women will be spiritually equal to men according to the spiritual merits of their lives. Sex and procreation will be no more, and so women will no longer be defined by these female roles. But here and now women's "natural" subordination has not been changed, but rather reinforced in the church.

Augustine is also important for the understanding of sex and procreation in Latin Christianity. Augustine believed that in the original creation, as intended by God, there would have been reproduction without sexual pleasure. One of the effects of the fall into sin is that sexual intercourse becomes accompanied by orgasmic pleasure. Augustine believed that this was inherently sinful, debasing to the “manly mind.” The highest Christian life is to renounce sex and marriage for celibacy. For those who choose the lower path of marriage, sex is allowed, but only for procreation. Even then sex is sinful, but it is “permitted” and so only venially sinful. Those who engage in sex, even in marriage, but deliberately avoid procreation, commit a mortal sin that severs their souls from God.

The Medieval Church

Augustine’s teaching on women, sex and procreation would continue to shape Roman Catholic Christianity to modern times. These teachings encapsulate the view of women as simultaneously equal in soul, capable of spiritual life and redemption in heaven, while being inherently inferior as female on earth. They are the foundation for the negative Catholic teaching on sexuality and birth control. One of the most important theologians to develop Augustine’s views on women was the 13th century Dominican Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas’ teachings would become the basis for Roman Catholic orthodox theology in modern times, although in his own day he was regarded as radical.

Aquinas incorporated a false Aristotelian understanding of biological reproduction into his understanding of gender. Aristotle taught that women were inherently inferior in mind, body and moral will. He defined women as “defective” whose very gestation was such as to produce a type of human that lacks the full and equal human capacities of males. For Aristotle the relation of male and female is similar to the relation of mind and body, spirit and matter. The male alone possesses procreative power, while women contribute only the material substance that is formed by the male seed. In procreation the potency of the male seed shapes the female matter in the woman’s womb, something like a sculptor shaping a piece of stone or wood.

According to Aristotle, if the seminal power of the male seed shapes the female matter fully, the result will be a male. If some defect occurs in the process, so that the matter is not fully formed, then a female will be produced. Females are characterized by a lack of full capacity for rationality, moral self-control and physical strength. Since women are inherently defective, they cannot govern themselves or govern others, but must be dependent and under the control of a male.

Aquinas incorporated this Aristotelian understanding of biological reproduction into his theology.

Aquinas reasoned that, since women are inherently defective, they cannot represent the human species. Women are not normative exemplars of humanness. Therefore Christ had to be a male in order to be the representative of humanity in its full potential. Moreover the priest who represents Christ must be a male as well. Because women are inherently dependent, they cannot hold any public offices or exercise leadership in the church or society. This dictate contradicted the actual existence of ruling queens and abbesses in Aquinas’ own day and contributed to the illegitimizing of such leadership by women. Roman Catholicism continues to insist even today that women cannot be ordained because Christ was and had to be a male, and therefore only a male can represent Christ. This view is rooted in Aquinas’ teachings.

Medieval Catholic spirituality is characterized by extreme polarity in its view of the female. As wife and sexual being women were seen as sources of the greatest temptation and sin, especially to a celibate clergy vowed to abstain from sex. As daughters of Eve women inherit her double subordination due to her insubordination to God’s commands. In the later Middle Ages and the Reformation era a widespread belief arose that Christian society was threatened by witchcraft. Hundreds of thousands of women and some men were burned at the stake or drowned as witches because it was believed that their willing submission to Satan opened the gates of Hell upon the Church and society.

Aquinas’ teachings that women are inherently defective shaped the views of Dominican inquisitors that witchcraft is an evil to which women were particularly prone. The fifteenth century witchhunter’s manual, *Malleus Maleficarum (The Hammer of Witches)*, states “It should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from the bent rib, the rib of the breast which is bent in the contrary direction to a man... And since through the first defect in their intelligence, they are always more prone to abjure the faith, so through their second defect of inordinate passions, they search for, brood over and inflict various vengeance, either by witchcraft or some other means. Wherefore it is no wonder that so great a number of witches exists in this sex.” The inquisitors offer thanks to God for the incarnation of God into the male sex, which has preserved males from so great an evil as witchcraft.

While the church excoriated the female as Eve, prone to witchcraft, they also exalted the feminine in the worship of

the Virgin Mary. The theology of Mary and veneration due to her expanded in medieval Christianity. She was ever virgin. She was not only a virgin in the conception of Jesus, but she preserved her virginity (her hymen) in his birth and remained a virgin after his birth to the end of her life. This last teaching denied that Mary had any later children by Joseph after the birth of Jesus, even though brothers and sisters of Jesus are reported in several places in the New Testament. Her body did not decay at death, but she was physically assumed into heaven, there to be crowned Queen of Heaven, seated by the side of Christ. Catholic Mariology taught that prayer to Mary will preserve even the worse sinner from ultimate perdition.

Some theologians in the later medieval church even speculated that Mary had been preserved from original sin in her own conception, although the Immaculate Conception would not be declared a doctrine of the Church until 1954. This exaltation of Mary, however, had an ambivalent effect on actual women who were still identified as daughters of Eve and prone to witchcraft. Male celibate devotion to Mary allowed them to cultivate love for an ideal virginal woman, while despising actual females.

Nuns as virgins were more like Mary than married women. Some nuns cultivated a Marian piety that saw Mary as allowing them to share in nursing the baby Jesus, compensating for their own childlessness. In the earlier Middle Ages some abbesses held vast properties and exercised power as feudal lords. Many women mystics claimed their power to preach and teach as prophets inspired by God. However the general trend of medieval Christianity was to curb the independence of nuns and to confine them behind cloister walls. In the later Middle Ages the educational level of nunneries declined as universities replaced monastic schools. Women, vowed or lay, were forbidden entrance to university education.

The Reformation did little to change this marginalization of women in Western Christianity. The major reformers, Luther and Calvin, continued the traditional teaching that woman is second in creation and first in sin, and reiterated the ban on women's preaching or public teaching. A few maverick humanists and Quakers explored novel ideas that women's subordination is not based on the will of God or female inferiority, but simply due to male tyranny. But such persons were either ignored or persecuted as heretics.

The papacy responded to the Reformation with the Council of Trent, seeking to reconquer Protestant areas and consolidate its hold on Catholic territories of Europe. The Trentine view

of women is that they should be silent and obedient, either as chaste wives submissive to their husbands or nuns locked behind convent walls and submissive to churchmen. The founding of new women's orders that would allow women active apostolates in the world was generally discouraged. The persecution of women as witches was revived and extended, as both Catholics and Protestants competed for souls and territories.

Catholicism and Women from Trent to Vatican II

The primary challenge to the traditional view of women's natures and roles in church and society has sprung from the feminist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An important impetus to the rise of feminism was liberalism, which developed the view that all "men are created equal." Liberalism challenged the traditional Christian view that class, race and gender hierarchies are the divinely founded "order of creation." It saw such hierarchies as false constructions by the ruling classes to secure their own power. The true and original "order of nature" is equality. Societies are to be reformed, overthrowing old aristocracy and writing new constitutions that guarantee equal rights of all citizens before the law. Catholicism in the nineteenth century set itself as the foe of liberalism and the champion of the old feudal order, which it identified with Catholic society. In 1864, Pope Pius IX issued the *Syllabus of Errors* condemning liberalism and socialism, decrying the ideas of democracy, freedom of thought, education, press and religion as modern errors. Pius IX consolidated both doctrinal and jurisdictional control over the church in the hands of the papacy by convoking the First Vatican Council (1870), where the pope was declared to be infallible.

However, male liberals were mostly not open to women's rights, but reinforced male domination in political and economic affairs. The industrial revolution was shaping a new middle class family based on the split between home and work. Paid work and politics was the sphere of men, while women were to be confined to non-paid housework and child-raising. Religion was being privatized. Spirituality became the sphere of women and the home; secular rationality the sphere of men in public life. Women's nature was redefined as intuitive, altruistic and maternal, but also non-sexual. Ideally women had no sexual feelings and endured sex for the sake of motherhood. This is a kind of secular mariology.

This new ideology of family and sentimental, non-sexual womanhood was congenial to Catholicism. The old medieval view of woman as Eve as inferior, disobedient sexual

temptresses was muted in favor of a view of woman's "nature" as passive, ethereal, loving and maternal. The sexual temptress still lurked in the shadows of this definition, but she now became the "bad" (black or working class) or "fallen" woman, who had lost her true nature. Woman's seclusion in the home was necessary to "protect" her from the danger of becoming a fallen woman. Mary was the model of true feminine womanhood. Gender relations were redefined. Instead of men as superior, the norm of full humanness, and women as defective and inferior, the new model was that of complementarity. Femininity and masculinity are two "halves" of human nature, harmonized in the marital union of a man and a woman, but only by each sex keeping to their own separate "natures" and spheres. Women must not become "masculine," nor men "feminine."

From 1850-1930 the limitations of the old liberalism that confined the rights of "man and the citizen" to white propertied males was being challenged. Slavery was gradually abolished. Women began to claim rights to property, higher education, professional employment and the vote. Catholic bishops and the Vatican were generally hostile to feminism, insisting that women's place was in the home. In 1930, in the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, Pope Pius XI condemned women's emancipation as undermining the divinely founded obedience of the wife to her husband; a false deflection of woman from her sole and true role as homemaker and mother. In the United States, some prominent bishops were active in the anti-suffrage movement.

However, once women had won the vote, the U. S. Catholic bishops moved quickly to organize Catholic women to oppose liberalism, socialism, and feminism. Officially recognized Catholic women's groups, such as the National Council of Catholic Women (set up in 1920), campaigned against birth control, divorce, child labor laws and the Equal Rights Amendment. These groups championed the view of women as having a totally different nature from men. Although "naturally" more spiritual, moral and loving than men, women keep their superior nature only by maintaining their traditional roles in the home.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65), called by Pope John XXIII, represented a détente in the two-century battle of Catholicism and liberalism. The Declaration on Religious Freedom accepted the principle of freedom of religion and separation of church and state, departing from earlier Catholic insistence on Catholic states in which the Catholic church alone was the officially recognized religion.

In April 1993, the pope issued the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth). The encyclical endorsed a whole gamut of civil liberties in language that echoed the American Bill of Rights. Every human person is said to be endowed with intelligence and free will. The full and equal rights of all persons in society flow from this basic human nature. Since these rights are rooted in human nature itself, they are universal and inviolable.

These rights include the right to seek truth, to freely express and communicate one's opinions, and to be truthfully informed about public events. Freedom of religion, of the press, of democratic assembly and participation in political life, freedom to choose one's state of life, and equal protection under the law are all affirmed. Economic rights are also included; such as the right to a living wage, to sufficient food, to adequate housing, to medical care, to social security in sickness and old age, and to unemployment insurance.

The encyclical also endorses women's equal inclusion in these rights of the human person in society, and her entrance into public life, work and politics. These rights of women are due to women simply as human persons, but their recent acceptance is the fruit of women's new consciousness: "Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person in both domestic and in public life."

Catholicism and Modern Women

But the battle of the Vatican with feminism was far from over, particularly as the new feminist movement that arose in the late 1960s added reproductive rights to its concerns for equal rights to education, employment and political participation. As we have seen, Catholicism traditionally opposed birth control on the grounds that the only purpose of sex was procreation. Sex was immoral, even in marriage, if it "artificially" prevented procreation. This anti-contraceptive tradition was shared by Protestantism.

In the 1880s, conservative Protestant men in the United States passed laws banning public information on and sale of contraceptives. They were particularly alarmed by the declining birth rate among white middle class Protestant women. These women were seeking higher education, professions and the vote. Some women were remaining single, and childlessness or small families were common among the married of the middle class. Conservative Protestants feared the loss of white Protestant power, as their numbers declined relative to

blacks, Jews and Catholic immigrants. Birth control, however, was not a public issue for the feminist movement of the nineteenth century. It was seen as too "indelicate" for women to discuss publicly.

Birth control was taken up in the 1920s by socialist feminists. Margaret Sanger, then a socialist, became its champion. She was jailed on several occasions for openly violating the statutes banning public information on contraception. However, Sanger soon abandoned her association with the left. Planned Parenthood, the organization that flowed from her work, found better sponsorship in established sectors of American society that feared a rising population, particularly among blacks, immigrants and the poor.

However, by the 1930s-1950s, mainstream Protestantism was accommodating itself to modern scientific thinking. This included a rethinking of the Christian tradition about sexuality. Protestant church bodies began accepting contraception within marriage and officially sanctioning its use among the faithful. In 1930, the Anglican churches meeting at Lambeth tentatively allowed contraception in some cases (they did not fully accept the use of contraception as morally good for marriage itself, rather than simply as a concession to crisis, until 1958). The same year the Vatican responded with a defense of the traditional Augustinian view of the purposes of marital sexuality in *Casti Connubi*, which condemned any artificial barrier to the procreative potential of the sexual act as gravely immoral.

Catholicism in the 1930s-1950s made anti-contraception the centerpiece of its teaching on marriage. It accommodated somewhat to family planning by allowing the "rhythm method" that utilized the sterile period of the woman's menstrual cycle to limit conception without total sexual abstinence. In the 1960s, the invention of the birth control pill, which repressed ovulation, opened the question of whether this was allowed for Catholics under the same rubric as the rhythm method. Moral theologians began to doubt the rationale for the anti-contraceptive position, and married laity openly questioned it, not simply in private but in published articles and books.

As the result of this incipient revolt, Pope Paul VI (who wanted to exclude discussion of the issue from the Second Vatican Council) called the Birth Control Commission in 1964. The commission brought together not just bishops, priests and moral theologians, but demographers, doctors and lay representatives of the U.S. Catholic Family Movement. For the first

time celibate clerical churchmen had to listen to married Catholics discuss their experiences of sexuality and reproduction. Pat and Patty Crowley, representatives of the Catholic Family Movement, brought the testimony of their members on why the rhythm method was not conducive to marital love and harmony.

The effects of the consultations of the commission between 1964 and 1967 was an over-whelming vote in favor of allowing any method of birth control that was medically safe, within faithful marriage committed to having (some) children. A few dissenting moral theologians and bishops were horrified by this result and issued their own minority report against it. They persuaded the pope to reject the report of his own commission on the grounds that a change would threaten the laity's belief in the inerrancy of official Catholic teaching.

Pope Paul VI reiterated the traditional anti-contraceptive teaching by issuing the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in July 1968. However the tacit consensus in favor of this teaching had already been broken. Moral theologians openly dissented from it and Catholic laity mostly ignored it. For the first time in modern Catholic history, an official teaching of the pope was explicitly "not received" by the majority of Catholics.

Yet the Vatican has refused to mute its anti-contraceptive position. Pope John Paul II (elected in 1978) continues to insist on the unchangeable nature of this teaching. Pope John Paul II has launched a crusade to uphold the traditional Catholic teaching on sexuality, family and reproduction. Some moral theologians, such as Charles Curran, were dismissed from their teaching positions in Catholic universities for views that allowed for the morality of contraception. Representatives of the Vatican have regularly appeared at United Nations conferences on social issues, such as the Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, Egypt, in 1994, and the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in 1995, to oppose policies that would promote contraceptive services and the legalization of abortion.

Catholic bishops, sensing that the birth control issue was lost and Catholic couples could not be controlled in what they did in bed, have focused on the church's prohibition of abortion, seeking to prevent the legalization of abortion or its re-criminalization where it had been legalized. This anti-abortion view argues for the full personhood of the fetus from the moment of conception. Catholic teaching today claims abortion, even in the early stages of gestation, is murder. This idea is contrary to earlier Catholic anthropology in which the fetus was not a human person until several months after conception.

Lurking behind the anti-abortion crusade still is the view that women's primary role is motherhood, and that the defining purpose of sex (allowed only in marriage) is procreation, not sexual pleasure. There is a deep fear of allowing women to decide for themselves whether they will or will not become pregnant, as though women could not be trusted to reproduce at all unless it is forced upon them and they are taught to submit to motherhood as their destiny. The assumption is that men, and not women, must control women's bodies.

In the 1970s, feminism was no longer simply a secular movement seeking women's vote, equal access to employment and reproductive rights. It had moved into the churches. Feminist theology was challenging the whole tradition of women's subordination as an expression of God's "order of creation." Male language for God and maleness as normative humanness were being questioned. Catholic women were among the leading feminist theologians in the United States and Europe. Even Catholic churches in Latin America, Asia and Africa were producing feminist theologians. Religious women as well as laity were articulating feminist views.

In 1972, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, representing then ninety percent of U.S. Catholic women's communities, endorsed feminism as a critical perspective both for the justice work of women religious in society and also for reexamination of their own status in the church. Catholic nuns, particularly in the United States, came to be seen by the Vatican as in dangerous revolt against their traditional roles in the church. The Vatican has made vigorous efforts to reassert control over religious women. One example of this is its insistence that religious congregations of women submit their constitutions to the Holy See for censorship.

The Vatican seeks to restore traditional hierarchical relations to the Magisterium and between religious superiors and members within the order. It opposes democratic processes in the policies of religious congregations. It has sought to exclude religious women who publicly dissent on birth control or abortion from membership in their congregations. The result has been a running battle between the Vatican and many women's religious orders, with the Vatican trying to impose obedience to its demands, and many religious congregations seeking to evade these demands and shelter members who fall under attack.

A central point of conflict between Catholic feminists, lay and religious, and the Vatican is the question of women's ordination. As we have seen, women were gradually eliminated from ordination even to minor ministries in the church between

the second and sixth centuries. Historically, mainline Protestantism accepted the same ban on women's ordination. However, in the mid-nineteenth century the issue began to open up for Protestants. The more liberal and democratic churches (Congregational, Unitarian and Universalist) were the first to accept women's ordination from the 1850s through the 1870s. In 1956, mainline Methodists and Northern Presbyterians in the U.S. accepted women's ordination. Lutheran and Reformed churches in Europe were also ordaining women by the 1950s and 1960s.

However, the Roman Catholic church did not respond directly to the issue until 1975, when the American Episcopal church voted to ordain women. The Vatican considers the Episcopal church to belong to the inner circle of "separated" churches with possible claims to apostolic succession (even though the Vatican continues to reject the validity of Anglican orders). Hence actions by the Episcopal church tend to evoke a response from the Vatican, while other Protestant changes are ignored. The Vatican's response to the Episcopal vote, as well as to the growing women's ordination movement among Catholic women, was the 1976 "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," which asserts that women are unordainable by their very nature as females.

According to this document, the Catholic church's refusal to ordain women is not a matter of social discrimination against women. The declaration claims that the Catholic church fully accepts women's civil rights in society. But it said it cannot ordain women because the very nature of priesthood is incompatible with women's nature. It further stated that this ban is divinely founded and unchangeable. The declaration gives three main reasons for this position: 1) Jesus intentionally did not include women in ordained ministry; 2) the church's continuous (and hence infallible) tradition has excluded women from ordination; and, 3) the priest represents Christ, a male. According to the declaration, the maleness of Christ is not simply a social accident, but intrinsic to the representation of Christ (who represents God). To ordain women would be to violate the sacramental affinity between Christ, God and maleness.

The declaration did not cite as a reason to exclude women from ordination the Thomistic view that women are naturally defective and lack the capacity to exercise any social leadership. This argument is no longer tenable now that the church has conceded, for the most part, civil rights for women in secular society. Rather, the declaration focuses on the sacramental relation of maleness and Christ, claiming that "there

would not be this natural resemblance which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ was not taken by a man...For Christ himself was and remains a man (5:27)."

This assertion evoked a storm of criticism among Catholic theologians and Biblical scholars. Some, such as the eminent Karl Rahner, even suggested that this literalism about Christ's maleness and its necessity for his sacramental representation was heretical. Polls showed that U.S. Catholics who supported women's ordination expanded after the declaration, reaching more than 60 percent today. The U.S. Catholic Women's Ordination Movement, founded in 1975, continues to organize for this cause and women's ordination groups have developed in other countries. Thus, the Vatican ban on women's ordination has become another area where official teachings are notably "not received" by the majority of Catholics.

The more radical wing of Catholic feminism has come to question whether ordination itself is a desirable goal. They call for a dismantling of clerical hierarchy and organize "women-church" worship communities. They believe that women can be ordained, but it would be unhealthy for a woman to put herself in this position in the present hierarchical system. The pontificate of John Paul II, however, has made the ban on women's ordination, along with anti-contraceptive and anti-abortion teaching, a touchstone of orthodoxy. The pope claims the Catholic church cannot change its teaching on this matter, and hence open discussion of it is forbidden. Clergy who dissent in this issue are not to be advanced to the episcopacy. The Vatican has sought to reassert control over Catholic colleges by demanding that Catholic theologians receive a mandatum from the local bishop. This will likely include acceptance of the ban on women's ordination.

These conflicts over the roles of women in the family, society and the church, sex, reproduction and women's ordination have opened up the question of gender and human nature. How is maleness and femaleness related to a common "human nature?" Are men and women primarily alike, with small nuances of differences, sharing all the same human capacities? Or are they so unlike, so specialized in different capacities as male and female, that they must play completely different roles in the family, in public life and in the church? The insistence that women as women are unordainable because maleness is necessary to the sacramental representation of Christ rests on a notion of an essential difference between women as "feminine" and men as "masculine."

The idea that males and females are totally different in psychological and mental capacities due to their biological makeup is rejected today by most feminists and indeed by much of contemporary philosophical and social thought. Most social thinkers today see such traditional separations of men as having particular masculine capacities and women as having other different feminine capacities as a social construction that is inculcated by culture and education, and not biological necessity.

At the same time, the restriction of the priesthood to celibate males has put the church in crisis. Fewer men are making themselves available for priesthood under these conditions. Some celibate priests are discrediting themselves by their sexual and other misconduct. As the numbers of Catholics continues to expand, the church faces a crisis in its ability to provide priests for the sacramental ministry of parishes. At the same time, increasing numbers of Catholic women are earning degrees in theological education and seeking ministries. Bishops are turning from necessity to these theologically educated nuns and lay women for parish ministry and chaplaincies in prisons, hospitals and schools. Bishops are pressed to allow women to administer parishes, preach, hear confessions and preside over Eucharistic celebrations.

This crisis of ministry disposed the U.S. Catholic bishops to allow an official dialogue between the Women's Ordination Conference and the Catholic Bishops' Commission on Women from 1980 to 1982. This dialogue resulted in a recommendation for a full study on the question of women in the church. U.S. Catholic bishops set up gatherings to listen to Catholic women's feelings about their roles in the church, using the data to write a pastoral letter on women. The first draft of this letter, *One in Christ: A Pastoral Response to the Concerns of Women for Church and Society* (1988), boldly asserted that "sexism is sin."

The pastoral sought to ground male-female relations in family, society and church in a model of "partnership." Men and women are created equally in the image of God and are to be partners in the family, partners in the work world and partners in the ministry of the church. This approach revised the traditional anthropology of complementarity, the separation of masculine and feminine "natures" and spheres of home and work. The bishops accepted that women are now a part of the work world (although their "vocation" was still seen as that of mother; men were never said to have a "vocation" to be fathers). There was also a recommendation to expand as much as possible the lay ministries available to women in the church. Ordained ministry was still off limits for discussion.

Pope John Paul II saw this pastoral as unacceptable. The Vatican intervened in its drafting to insist on more explicit condemnations of birth control, abortion and women's ordination. Moreover, the language of partnership was to be replaced by the pope's preferred anthropology of complementarity. Women must be defined as having a "different" feminine nature that fits them for the domestic world. Women are not forbidden work and public life, but this is seen as something forced upon them by inadequate social protection, not something due them as human beings. The U.S. bishops' pastoral went through several drafts in an effort to satisfy these papal demands, and was finally tabled by the bishops in recognition of its unacceptability to U.S. Catholic women.

The pope himself has issued a series of letters and declarations on women in an effort to assert his own understanding of gender difference. In his 1988 letter, "The Dignity and Vocation of Women," the pope expounds a mariological idealization of the "feminine" as essential to the openness of the soul to God's redemptive work. Women's highest vocation is to represent and cultivate this feminine capacity of openness to divine grace and service to God. But this very nature of woman as feminine forbids her from taking those roles that represent divine power itself, most notably the priesthood as representative of Christ. For the pope, this exclusion of women from priesthood is in no way an inferiorization of woman, but rather is based on valuing and protecting woman's true dignity and vocation.

This essentialist view of gender difference is increasingly unacceptable and even incomprehensible to many Catholic women and men. Catholic church teaching on women and the bans on birth control, abortion and women's ordination represent a widening gap between Church leaders and most Catholics. The refusal to open any dialogue on these issues has become an impasse that threatens the credibility of church authority and its ability to maintain its own pastoral ministry, which can no longer do without the services of women.

The intransigence of the pope and Vatican leaders and the silencing and persecution of dissenters has made it unlikely that there will be any movement on these questions within the lifetime of John Paul II. Moreover his efforts to make sure that these questions will not be reopened after his death will create a difficult legacy for his successor. Yet historical experience has shown that what the Catholic church has to do for its own survival it is likely to do eventually. Like John XXIII's turn-about on liberalism, a future pope is likely to seek ways

to ease the impasse between Catholic women, who assume self-determination in sexual and social life, and the church's need for women to continue as the mainstay of church membership and increasingly of pastoral ministry.

This paper has shown that although there has been a long history in Catholic church teaching that has justified women's subordination in church and society, this teaching is not monolithic. There have been alternative views from the very beginning of Christianity, renewed again and again through centuries of church history, that have affirmed women's full humanness and equality. Jesus himself did not teach social hierarchy and women's subordination. On the contrary, his vision was a radical one that announced "good news to the poor" and the "liberation of those who are oppressed." The gospels are filled with stories in which Jesus affirmed despised women as those who were his true followers and denounced the narrow-minded clerics of his time as "blind guides and hypocrites."

This liberationist vision of the gospel has been rediscovered in modern times. Catholic theologians have applied this vision of liberation to the poor and down-trodden of society. There has been an increasing recognition that the oppression of women is not God's will, but is unjust and sinful. Although the present pope is conducting a reactionary backlash against feminism, most Catholics have come to accept women's equality in society and in the church and see little reason why women cannot be ordained. There is also widespread dissent against traditional teachings on sexuality and reproduction.

Although the Vatican may try to hold the line on acceptance of these modern views, it is unlikely that they will convince the majority of Catholics. It may be only a matter of time before church teaching adapts itself to modern times and also to the deeper liberation vision of Christianity, but this remains to be seen.

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