

Woman and Man – One in Christ Jesus

Report of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Research Project on the participation of women in the Catholic Church of Australia

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This record of the findings of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference Research Project holds within its cover the ambivalence of the title—is the phrase 'woman and man—one in Christ Jesus' a question or a statement? The report of the research reflects the tension between the place of history and tradition within the church, and the need for contemporary revelation and contextual faith. It records the stories of those who seek a return to a pre-Vatican II church and those who believe that Vatican II is only the beginning of radical change within the Catholic Church. Whilst the research group regularly refer to the commitment that 'both male and female are created in the image of God', it is clear from the research that the living out of this is experienced in varied ways within the life of the church.

The report records tension between the range of the ideas presented to the research group and the ability of the Australian Catholic Church to respond to the findings of the report. For example, a majority of respondents, both those seeking the ordination of women, and those who seek a more traditional role for women, saw the need for the conversation about women's ordination to take place. It is clear from the 1997 papal declaration, however, that this is not a matter open for discussion. Where then is the integrity of undertaking research which may have no outcome? This was a key question for many respondents. There were those who believed that the sharing of their stories was therapeutic and constructive—others made it clear to the research group that if the Catholic Bishops Conference did not act on the findings, the integrity of the research would be lost. The report contains a dynamic collection of stories with a variety of suggested outcomes, yet it is very measured. It is written in a tone which reflects a balance of responses and reasonableness of the outcomes. This is not the overwhelming content of the submissions and research. The responses seem to indicate a clear need for change, even from the most satisfied respondent. The sense of urgency of many of the responses seems to have been lost in the final recommendations of the report.

A record of findings and research methodology The model of data collection was varied and open, and reflected an engagement with regular church attendees, those who are now on the fringe of the church, Catholic institutions, support and advocacy groups, and those outside the church. This commitment to hearing a range of views is the strength of the report, which endeavours to reflect the divergence within the church and society on the roles and participation of women. A number of strategies for this were adopted. The first was the distribution of a survey addressing the main survey questions:

1. What are various ways in which women participate in the Catholic Church in Australia?
2. What assistance and support are currently offered to women to participate in the

Church?

3. What are the barriers to women's participation in the Church?
4. What are some of the ways in which women's participation can be increased?

2555 responses were received, 30% of which were from groups. The message communicated by these respondents was of pain, alienation, a desire for greater participation, support and a need for the barriers created by patriarchy and hierarchy to be broken down. In reading the summary of responses to the survey it was hard to believe that women are part of the church at all, yet despite this the majority of respondents seek a place to express their faith within the Catholic tradition. The impact of patriarchy within the institutional church is raised a number of times by respondents; however, this does not appear to be addressed in the recommendations at all.

The second source of data is that of the information collected through the Catholic Church Life Survey (CCLS). 4500 church attendees completed the survey. These responses ran counter to the research material received from other sources. Most of those completing this survey attended mass at least once a week. Not surprisingly, then, this group felt a strong sense of belonging, experienced no barrier to women's participation and believed that increased participation could occur through involvement in prayer and decision-making. There was a confronting plea from this group for the maintenance of the status quo. It is clear, though, that if your needs are being met, you are unlikely to be seeking change. Regular and consistent church attendees are unlikely to challenge a system that meets their needs, and where their teaching comes from those within that system. The findings did not seem to adequately reflect that to complete this form, you needed to have a level of regular participation in the church. It is important to affirm this participation but the sample needs to be interpreted recognising that the respondents operate within the current teachings of the church.

The third method of research was a series of public hearings held in 23 centres over 32 days and with 500 people making presentations either as individual or on behalf of groups. This produced the most divergent group of responses, though while some held 'comfort with the traditional stance, for some pain and anguish were generally expressed' (pp173). It was clear in these hearings that while women's participation is diverse and varied it is limited by the structure and teaching of the church. Again the role of motherhood was raised, while others noted experiences of feeling excluded from decision-making, leadership and participation in worship.

After the collation of the above three research results the research group agreed to seek information from targeted groups whose voices appeared to be missing from the research to date. These groups included Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women; clergy; women with disabilities; laymen; women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; women from non-English speaking backgrounds; migrant women; refugee women; solo parents; Ukrainian women; and young women. What was clear from the variety of responses received was that culture and being a minority group often excluded women from the church before they were able to consider the impact on their gender. The focus on tradition within the church often limited the exploration of the more diverse

experiences of spirituality, cultural and personal encounters which enhanced women's lives individually and as a community but were unable to be expressed within a formal sense within the church. What was clear in the comments from this group, however, was that even when traditional viewpoints were promoted little support was offered. For example, young and single mums reflected that there was little support with children during worship, yet motherhood was seen as a core traditional role for women. This highlights a range of inconsistencies within church life that the research reveals but did not flesh out. Many points such as this were alluded to but not explored. Some of these matters, such as children in worship, would appear to be practical steps that the church could respond to immediately.

The final research material came from a survey of Catholic organisations and theological institutions. Only 79 responses were received in this category; however, some useful data was collected. For example, a large number of women are enrolled in theological education at their own expense. The results also indicated a high level of participation by women in all functions within predominantly Catholic institutions.

The outcomes

On reaching page 400 of the report there is a sense of the inevitable question heard so painfully throughout much of the reporting—is there potential for any change? The overwhelming response of the church to this piece of research highlights the volatility of the subject matter—the response of the Catholic Church to participation of women will be both 'crucial and controversial' (p373). While Australia has well-developed equal opportunity legislation, the response of the church to the place of women in society will still be prophetic and inform many attitudes within this society. While this research is for the purpose of the Catholic Church, the diverse nature of Catholic women and their other roles in society makes the outcomes of this research much more far-reaching. One of the unasked questions within the report, at least for respondents, appears to be: what is the place of the Catholic Church within contemporary Australian Society? The variety and intensity of the responses reflects the importance of this issue for many people both in their faith community and public life.

I was struck by the response of an Aboriginal respondent who clearly stated 'We are the Church' (p237). As with much of the universal church, women make up the majority of membership, but this strength of commitment and perseverance is not reflected in all forms of possible participation.

The report is affirming of the role and current participation of women in the church. But is this enough? The report calls for greater participation for women in the Catholic Church in Australia, firstly through prayer, then in involvement in decision-making and thirdly through the re-examination of the nature of ministry. The report then goes on to recommend the reforming of practices that do not promote the equality of women and men; promoting gender equality and opportunities; promoting participation in leadership; fostering participation in leadership/management of organisations; and allowing talents to be fully utilised.

The report provides a great resource to the Catholic Church and insight into the experience of many women who seek to be part of the church. It is clear that unless action is taken by the Catholic Bishops to develop a strategy for the implementation of the recommendations of the report then many of these women and their giftedness will be lost to the church. The final summary of action is disappointing. While prayer was an issue raised for participation by the CCLS in their responses, at no other point in the report was it given such prevalence. Participation in the prayer life of the church does not seem to address at all the complexity of participation issues raised by the research. There is an element of this recommendation which seems to maintain the exclusive patriarchy it claims to counter. Similarly, the focus on decision-making, leadership and gender equity are offered as priorities with very little strategy. The strength of the work and findings of the research group do not seem to be reflected in the final recommendations of the report.

It is important to affirm that the report contains ample strategies and insights for the increased participation of women in the Catholic Church and for the re-examination of ministry and women's participation within it. The evidence of the research has the potential to allow for the strengths of the Catholic tradition to be maintained while accepting the challenge to be a contemporary expression of the church in a prophetic time. The research project appears to have been useful within its own right. However, the weight and intensity of its findings will only be realised once its recommendations are enacted, and the church and individuals are challenged to fulfil the statement 'Woman and Man—One in Christ Jesus'.