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A NEW STATUS FOR THE SINGLE WOMAN

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The need for dialogue between Protestants and Catholics on the status of the single woman became clear to the author of this article as she prepared a talk on the subject for students of Regina Mundi College in Rome. A graduate of the Yale School of Divinity, Mrs. Lindbeck teaches religion at Southern.

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"The experience of all movements of liberation proves that the success of a revolution depends upon the degree of participation by women". Cardinal Suenens in his book, The Nun in the World, quotes with approval this passage from the writing of Lenin.

One of the most revolutionary movements in our times has been begun by the Second Vatican Council: breaking down the walls of separation between Christians; freeing Catholics and Protestants from past prejudices and present misunderstanding; freeing them for the mutual endeavor to learn afresh what it means "to walk as those redeeming the times".

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

If Lenin is right, the ecumenical movement will only achieve its purpose if Catholic and Protestant women become full participants. The changes in the status and vocation of women in the modern world allow Protestant and Catholic women to enter profitably into ecumenical dialogue, to learn from one another what is to be the witness of Christian womanhood to a society that although rejecting traditional patterns of assessing the role of women, nevertheless still gropes for new methods of relating men and women to the common tasks of marriage, family, work and the community.

Many Protestants have assumed that Catholics have something to learn from them about the positive nature, witness and blessings of the married state - the personalistic estimate of the sexual bond and the common life of mutual sanctification - but they are not apt to assume they have anything to learn from Catholics about the positive nature, witness and blessings of the life of dedicated virginity. Yet, in part, it has been the separation in Christian life and thought of a high evaluation of woman as wife and mother from a high evaluation of her as dedicated virgin (paralleling the separation of Protestant and Catholic at the time of the Reformation) that has lessened the ability of the churches to relate to, interpret and embody the enormous changes in the socio-

cultural role of women that have taken place in Western Christendom.

4
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Movements to liberate women from a minority status and androcentric prejudice have for the most part been secular movements: the higher education of women; the bestowal of the franchise; their full entrance into the political, social and economic realms; their entry into the "masculine" occupations; the democratization of the family and their claim to individual autonomy and equality.

In part, these movements have been felt as direct challenges to the traditional teaching of the churches about the nature and role of women. But it has been the Christian image of women that has made possible this new image of womanhood in Western Christendom. The churches, in response to the Gospel, have preached woman's equality with man in the sight of God, her equal creaturely dignity, her equal baptism, equal call to discipleship and endowment with the Holy Spirit, equal redemption and re-creation in the image of God in unity with Christ.

But the institutional churches have always been more conservative than their preachments. If the secular ~~cha~~ world today seeks to judge the churches for their failure to evaluate positively and embrace enthusiastically the new image of the modern woman, it is judging the churches by a yardstick they created themselves.

It is easy to show that the churches have sinned considerably in the past against this image of Christian womanhood, have failed to support it in word and deed, have failed to sustain the vision of its rectitude against cultural and historical distortions. The androcentrism of the ancient world was espoused uncritically by the Church Fathers. More recently, in a heritage that still haunts us, the Victorian ideology of frail, fainting femininity was equated with Christian doctrine.

There are two general sins against the image of the Christian woman that the churches are now repenting of. Within the Catholic world, the past exaltation of celibacy over marriage was tinged by the influence of Greek spirit/body dualism. The fear and rejection of the body became a fear and rejection of woman; as spirit came to represent the masculine principle and the body the feminine, woman was conceived as the sexual being par excellence, and as such a snare and temptation. Augustine, and Aquinas following him, could find no "earthly" use for woman save as a sexual agency for procreation.

However, woman as sanctified virgin, removed as a source of temptation, safe from bodily defilement desexed as it were, was another matter. In virginity she was exalted. Until but recently this paradoxical attitude persisted. As Siriamaki stated it: "She was either Lady or Witch Blessed Virgin or Sinful Eve, object of adoration or vessel of abominable lust". No matter which way the pendulum swung she was caught in abstractions - elevated too high or thrown too

low, never allowed to be the equally sinful and equally gracefull being she was in reality.

The major Protestant reformation churches sinned against the image of the Christian woman in the opposite direction. In elevating the marriage state to primacy, they were inspired by the same medieval attitude toward woman as naturally inferior and subordinated. In scorning celibacy they provided women with no other option or outlet but marriage and a life of Kuche, Kinder and Kirche in a restored, rigidly conceived, patriarchal pattern. Yet the elevation of marriage and the sanctification of the sexual relationship within it had given to the marital relationship in Protestant culture a new seriousness. It helped to break down the double standard that had persisted in sexual matters. It made possible an image of marriage as a personal covenant, a full sharing of life's joys and sorrows, a mutual aid in growth in grace, a partnership in mind, feeling and spirit whose end result was to be an evaluation of woman as "wife" and not merely as "mother".

This evaluation of woman as wife, however, made it just as hard for the Protestant churches to accept the movements in the 19th and 20th centuries for feminine emancipation. It was difficult for Protestants to envision woman in any other role except that of wife and mother. They had not even the heritage of women in religious orders to give them the possibility of another vision of the vocation of women. The heritage of the elevation of marriage and the family-centered nature of the churches has made the position of the single woman problematic in Protestant ideology.

After the industrial revolution - which more than anything else, perhaps, hastened the demise of the patriarchal, extended family system - the plight of the single woman in American Protestant culture became more desperate. No longer was there a place for her in the smaller family units as household help or doting aunt. As we became more and more a marriage-centered society, there was little place for her in our social arrangements. The religious ideology that found room for woman as wife and mother only found itself treating the single woman as one of the earth's unfortunates. It left her with little support against the pseudo-scientific, psychological theories that claim women find their only fulfillment, health and happiness in exercising their sexual roles.

No wonder our young girls rush into earlier and more marriages. The word "spinster" has only unhealthy connotations - the single woman is thought to be not only a social, but also a psychological, misfit, an object of pity in society. If she is still attractive and unmarried by what seems like her own choice, she is an object of suspicion by her married sisters and an object of prey for her male colleagues. Our society has little good yet to say for the career woman - by choice or necessity. The terms "office wife" and "office mother" have been coined to refer to women who are close co-workers; we have been unable to shake loose from considering women only as adjuncts to men, to

envision them as having an independent role to play, to see them as persons first and females second, even in areas and contexts in which the direct sexual referent is inappropriate and ill-advised.

Until recently, the Protestant churches seemed to be unaware that the family-centered nature of their life and thought worked hardship on single women. Most women's groups were and still are programmed for married women, reflecting their needs and concerns. Parish life often makes the Protestant churches seem less a family of God than an agency serving the needs of a network of self-related human families with their couple's clubs, family nights and concentration on Sunday schools. The woman professional worker seldom has a place in the communal life of the church.

Again, while the Protestant churches have more and more opened their seminaries and ministeries to women, seeking to train them for full-time work in the churches as directors of religious education, parish workers, teachers and even ordained pastors, there seems to have been little thought given, or effort extended, toward overcoming in the churches the cultural mores which continue to raise social and psychological barriers to the full acceptance of women in these roles. The single woman church worker often faces the same job and wage discrimination, the same difficulty of finding a satisfactory social life, the same restriction to traditional "woman's work", and the same limitations of promotion that women face in the wider society;

Paradoxically, although the churches for the most part are theoretically opposed to celibacy and prefer married men as pastors, the seminaries and parishes in most cases demand that women be celibate if they are to serve the church as pastors or even parish workers. At the same time, little help is given to the woman in the seminary in formulating a positive estimate of the life of dedicated virginity as a Christian vocation. Nor are most Protestant churches structured to provide her with the benefits of a community, such as an order or an institute, which would recognize the uniqueness and legitimacy of her calling and support her spiritually, intellectually and socially within it.

Because the churches fail to recognize the needs of single women, while at least implicitly demanding their singleness as the price to be paid if they wish to devote themselves vocationally to the church, single women face untold hardship loneliness and dissatisfaction. It is little cause for wonder that while the Protestant churches are calling more and more women to their service, women still respond in few numbers or, after an initial response, leave their training or their work for the more socially accepted and supported role of wife and mother.

The Protestant churches as well as Protestant culture continue to sin against singleness, that of vocation as well as that of necessity. Their heritage of the exaltation of marriage and their family-centeredness has caused them to

neglect the task of formulating in life and thought a positive role for single women.

It is the thesis of this article that conditions in contemporary American culture make the need for a new concept of the single woman even more urgent. The need is for the sake of the single woman within and outside the Christian churches, and for the sake of her sisters, married or to be married. What are some of the aspects of contemporary culture that make the witness of the single Christian woman seem so crucial?

First, as a recent article in Esprit has pointed out, "sexuality is the new religion of our time". Romantic love, Eros, is the crowned divinity, "Love makes the world go round" refers, not as in times past, to love of country, of truth, of beauty, goodness, humanity, love of God - but refers only to love between man and woman. Because they live in a cultural milieu that seems more and more impersonal and mechanistic, without a context for the development of other intimate ties and without transcendent mystery, both men and women are seeking in romantic love and sexual ecstasy the means for overcoming a sense of personal alienation from the world. They can experience a feeling of self-identity, community and meaningfulness through the loss of self in something higher, something still shrouded in mystery, something still apparently able to give a sense of transcendence to a life filled with routine, surface encounters and experiences. For many, love, marriage and family become a means of building a refuge away from the world with its lacks and its perils.

Secondly, the blatant sexualisation of our culture in which sex is made to sell everything from aspirin to zippers has forced many young women and men to measure themselves in terms of sexual attraction and competition. These are the fragile wares the young woman is to nurture and the older woman to enhance as a means of gaining and holding married status, the only status that our society fully approves and rewards. The "anatomy is destiny" school of psychoanalytic theory has stressed the irreducible male-femaleness of human beings as determinative for personality structure and social role .

These factors in part have produced a situation in American culture in which there is a not too subtle exhortation to women to content themselves with the role of sexual partner, wife and mother, and not to push for an education like that of men, or to enter vocations thought to be masculine. The result is the present social phenomenon of more and earlier marriages for women. Americans not only marry in greater numbers than in other societies, but we have a lower marriage age than in any other civilized country outside of India. These developments have insured a situation in which less women in proportion to men are being fully college educated and less numerically are entering professions than thirty years ago: the partnership and communication of women with men in the center of social, cultural and economic life becomes thus weakened.

With more and earlier marriages, social scientists are becoming concerned with what has been called the "privatization of values" in our society: the restriction of interest to the personal values realized or sought for in home and family to the neglect of the values and concerns of the wider community and the common good. Thus an economist can talk of the imperialism of the private sector of our economy and the resultant starvation of the public sector - the fact of private affluence and public squalor. It would seem that customary talk of strengthening marriage and the family as the fundamental social unit will not automatically insure the well-being of the society as a whole. If they are overwhelming preoccupations, marriage and family may become too successful for the good of other social institutions.

If sexual love and marriage have come to bear the full weight of the need for personal happiness and social well-being in the ways outlined above, it is little wonder that young women and men are unable to withstand the social pressures that tempt them into premature enjoyment of the first, and hasty entrance into the second. It is no wonder that lacking any kind of positive evaluation of the single life as a temporary or permanent state, marriage has become a "natural" necessity for many. But sex and marriage conceived merely as the means of escape from the perils of the public world in order to enjoy the private values of personal happiness and fulfilment - sex and marriage divorced from a consideration of their wider social and institutional dimensions - cannot be sexual love and marriage as conceived within the Christian community. Thus non-Catholic theologians (from Karl Barth in the Reformed tradition to V.A. Demant in the Anglican fold) are beginning to see that, as Demont writes:

The idea of holy virginity is indispensable to the idea of holy matrimony... Marriage can be accepted and embraced as a high vocation only in a world in which there exists some feasible and proper alternative... Without a place for vocational virginity, sexuality and marriage become necessary and cease to be vocational.

However, vocational virginity either as a temporary state, a period for personal growth, education or social service, prior to a consideration of marriage, or as a permanent commitment entered into as a means of freeing the individual for the fulfillment of the demands of an all-consuming life of service to others, can be claimed as a possible human option only in the context of a community which affirms that the personal dimension of human existence both embraces and transcends the sexual, that the sexual can be sublimated in the effort to achieve and express other ends of the self. The Christian community can relativize marriage as a human option only as it relativizes the determinateness of being as male and female. Man and woman in the family of God no longer confront one another simply as sexual beings with a natural destiny, but as persons who in freedom must choose the path by which they would direct, channel and express their sexuality in response to the call of God and neighbor, in response to their vocation considered in the whole framework of human value and

potentiality, of personal and social need for the structuring and ordering of life.

Secondly, vocational virginity becomes possible only in a community that affirms the power of other loves to give meaning and direction to life and to provide a sense of community. This may be the love of truth for the scholar, the love of beauty for the artist, the love of neighbor for the teacher and doctor, but these are all rooted ultimately in the love of God who is Truth, Beauty and Love. With this comes the recognition that a life so lived for the sake of devotion to these loves can be as humanly rich and rewarding as can be a life lived for the sake of the family. For the love between man and woman and the love of a parent for his child are very exclusive loves. Eros is not Agape (Christian love) although some theologians from the Protestant camp in attempting to revise the older scorn of sex and marriage seem at times to come perilously near to equating the two. Eros and parental love must be informed by Agape if they are to become more than an egoisme a deux (or trois or quatre). Sexual, marital and parental love can destroy as well as bring life. They are distorted, unable to mature, unable even to remain the good they are if they are burdened with the need to provide all meaning, value and communion in life; if they are not directed toward a more inclusive love and loyalty to God and to his kingdom.

Within the Christian community, the dedicated single woman can bear witness to the truth that Man is more than male and female. She can show the power of other loves to give meaning, provide a community of loyalty and companionship in work and service, and witness to the mystery at the very depth and foundation of all living - a reality which in taking us out of ourselves, drawing us into the ecstasy of adoration and thanksgiving, gives us back to ourselves as whole and liberated persons, free now ~~see~~ for all responsible loving, the mystery of the presence of God to and in his creatures and his world.

It is the single woman who can help other women to achieve another image of their selfhood and their destiny rather than that forced upon them by their culture, so that the choice of marriage or singleness becomes a matter of Christian vocation, a free personal decision involving an awareness of the particular responsibilities and blessings inherent in that life situation. Such a witness can help young women and men to realize that encounter and communication between them may be possible without an atmosphere of eroticism, that they might approach one another with mutual respect for the myriad human potentialities for commitment and meaning in life of which sexual and marital love is but one out of many.

Within the Roman Catholic community such a witness is more possible today. However, if the woman religious is to be an efficacious witness, it is incumbent upon her to know the world, its pressures and its possibilities, its problems and its values. She must be visible in and to the life of the human community as a whole, seen in formal and natural relations to men. She must

give evidence that personal encounter, mutual respect, companionship in work are possible for men and women. She must not be limited in her service to so-called "women's pursuits" - the education of girls or young children, the care of the sick. She must bear testimony to that liberty of Christian brethren which makes the gifts of the Spirit the criteria for service. Above all, she must not be led to psychologize her role in out-moded images of "femininity" - spiritual motherhood, feminine spirituality, etc. - forcing herself into an artificial mold, nurturing certain traits to the exclusion of others, especially at a time in which empirical studies and social awareness itself are demonstrating that men and women are more alike than different in personality structure, capacities and talents, hopes, fears and desires.

To be specific, the world does not need "spiritual mothers". Particularly in a "world come of age". What are needed are more adults who can meet one another as adults, provide the help of a brother or sister. Too long have we depended upon the education of children to upbuild the kingdom. Meanwhile the adults have gone their own way, often disenchanted with the Church because we have been handing out milk-sops when they needed meat, hovering and clucking over them when they needed the strong hand and mind and the open friendship and understanding of fellow Christian adults. Cardinal Suenens wrote that a religious must be a woman of her times, if she is to witness to women in her time - that is all I am pleading for here.

These are but suggestions for dialogue rendered by a Protestant observer upon the Catholic scene. Protestantism itself needs a more positive image of singleness and the life and witness of the single woman in the Church. Catholicism can help show us the way by extending and expressing its rich spiritual and apostolic heritage of dedicated virginity in ways that are relevant and redemptive for men and women in contemporary society. To do so would not only enrich the life of the Church, but also assist women who dedicate their lives to its service. It would give testimony of what being made in the image of God and participating in his New Creation in Christ Jesus can mean for the relation of men and women in a culture caught in confusion and conflict over the proper roles of man and woman in marriage, the family and society.