

Maria de Lourdes Pratasigo

THE EMERGING LAY WOMAN?

Rosemary Goldie (1966?)

Vatican II and the "Other Half of Mankind"

If you have ever been inside St. Peter's in Rome, you may have noticed, high up all round the basilica, the niches containing more than life-size statues of saintly founders - and even foundresses - of the great religious orders of the Roman Catholic Church. Early in the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council a Bishop is reported to have pointed to these marble figures, with their founding protégés or earnest pupils clustered at their knees, as proof that women were not excluded from the great deliberations of the Church.

Two years passed. Much printer's ink flowed. Embarrassing questions were put to Council Fathers at press conferences. And the doors of the Council had already opened to a small band of lay men - the first "auditors" - when, in September 1964, the Mother General of the Sisters of Charity smiled up at her holy Foundress as she made her way to a tribune near the Council Presidency. The tribune was shared with other religious and lay women, with the lay men and with a group of eminent theologians.

The presence of these few women was a "symbolic" one. Pope Paul had said as much when he announced his intention of appointing the women "auditors". But, it was not meant as an empty gesture. The women (unlike the men "auditors") were never invited to the microphones of the Council hall; but they had many other opportunities of giving their opinion in informal conversation and formal Commission meetings. More important, however, than their personal contribution was the fact that, as the weeks wore on during the third session, and as the Council reconvened in 1965, their presence came increasingly to be regarded as normal. It came to be seen as one of many expressions of a new awareness the Church was gaining through the Council, under the action of the Holy Spirit - an awareness of something she had, of course, known all along: that "the Church" was not to be identified with the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the clergy in various relationships to all other members of the faithful; that the Church was the "People of God", one people with one mission; although, within the mission, a variety of ministries.

Pope Pius XII had already said it twenty years earlier: "The laity, too, are the Church". Libraries of books on the laity had been pointing to the role played by lay people - by women, too - in the early Church. But, many centuries had passed since the early Church. And recent centuries especially had created habits of thought and language which were not easily changed.

No one at the Council might have subscribed - consciously, at least - to the dictum of a 19th century prelate, that the laity's role was "pray, pay and obey". And "clericalism" was a nasty accusation which no one was prepared to accept. It is doubtful, however, if the Cardinal who described the layman, in

the starting point should be the laity

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

1951, at the First World Congress of the Catholic laity, as an "instrumental second cause" of the apostolate exercised by the hierarchy, thought he was being unduly "clerical". It is doubtful, too, whether all the Bishops who gave a kindly welcome to the women "auditors" on their appearance in St. Peter's, attached real importance to their coming. The Belgian Cardinal Suenens had pleaded for their presence with an argument no one could refute: that women make up "the other half of mankind". But this irrefutable argument might still be irrelevant for a fairly prevalent habit of mind which saw "the Church" less as part of "mankind" than as a clerical (masculine) world ministering to mankind.

It is significant that the question of women's place and women's contribution did not come up for discussion when the Council was debating the text (the "Dogmatic Constitution") on the Church; not even when the discussions had led to radical change in the order of the text, giving first place to the whole "People of God" rather than to the role of the hierarchy within that People; nor even during debate on the chapter dealing specifically with the laity. This debate produced a "positive" description of the layman. It was no longer felt adequate to describe him as a "non-priest" or "non-religious". The laity "emerged" from the Council as the faithful who "are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted the People of God; (who) are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ; (who) carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world". What "specifically characterizes" them is their "secular nature". "They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life". They "may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven". All of this is, of course, applicable to women as well as to men. And the Constitution even quotes at this point St. Paul's "there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3,28).

The Council Decree on the Lay Apostolate follows the same lines. And this is excellent. It means that, as Council implementation develops, as the basic unity in diversity of the "People of God" comes to be spelled out in greater mutual co-operation between all members, according to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and each one's vocation; as "family dialogue" within the Church develops through the new channels of communication which are envisaged at all levels, from parish to Roman curia, "laity" will normally mean "lay men" and "lay women". Hopefully also, as more opportunities are opened up to the laity for theological study, lay women as well as women Religious will find them accessible and take advantage of them, so that women's contribution to the thinking of the Church may become more evident. Above all, the orientation given by the Council should mean that women will be encouraged and equipped to bear a full Christian witness in all fields of life. In the Decree on Lay Apostolate, it was felt necessary to state this explicitly: "Since in our times women have an ever more active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that they participate more widely also in the various fields of the Church's apostolate".

This changing role of women had already been noted by Pope John as one of the "signs of the times" in his Encyclical "Pacem in Terris". It was inevitable that the Council should encounter it, when it entered into dialogue with the modern world in the preparation of the "Pastoral Constitution" on "The Church in the World Today". Quite naturally, this text stresses the equality of women's rights in family and society and women's needed contribution to cultural life. Less predictably, it was at this stage, in dialogue with the modern world, that the question came to be raised: What are the implications of "woman's promotion" for the Church's own community?

Canadian Bishop Codrro affirmed, on theological grounds, the Church's need for the contributions of both men and women. German Bishop Frots reminded the Fathers that "the time is past when we can be satisfied to have women just as pew-sitters", and demanded that their potential for the Church's mission be taken seriously. American Archbishop Hallinan, in a written statement, called for far-reaching changes to open certain liturgical and diaconal functions to women and asked that "the secondary place accorded to women in the Church of the 20th century" should not be perpetuated.

"Emerging" from where?

What has been said might leave the impression that the lay woman had to "emerge" from very deep water indeed. Such an impression would hardly seem borne out by the actual situation of the Catholic laity, and of Catholic lay women, at the beginning of the Council. The Conciliar debates on the participation of lay people in the mission of the Church had, after all, drawn largely on material amassed over some 40 years through the active witness of lay groups - in particular, the material from two World Congresses for the Apostolate of the Laity, held in Rome in 1951 and 1957. Moreover the forty-two lay "auditors" at the Council came, for the most part, from organisations grouping various categories of lay people at international levels: adults and youth, employers or workers, university graduates or farmers... The largest of these was undoubtedly the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations, whose Spanish President, Miss Pilar Bellosillo, spoke (or, in St. Peter's, listened!) on behalf of more than 36 million women and over a hundred organisations, of all continents. Some of the affiliates of the Union, like the National Council of Catholic Women of the United States, are highly developed bodies playing an important part in Catholic life, and even in national life; others may be small groups, growing up in developing countries to prepare women for new roles in family and society.

It is an observable fact that in the Roman Catholic Church - as, no doubt, in other communions - women's organisations tend to be more dynamic than their

masculine counterparts, where such exist. We should add to this fact the existence alongside the lay women's groups (rather too much "alongside", and not sufficiently in contact), of a peaceful army of over a million women Religious serving the Church and the Community wherever there is spiritual and human need. Why then have lay women, and women generally, still to "emerge"? There have even been complaints - for instance, from the eminent German theologian, Karl Rahner, S.J. - that Church life, at least in some parts of Europe, has been almost taken over by women; that it has been "devirilized" to such an extent as to make it untenable for any but the most resistant of potential male church-goers. I cannot go here into this interesting controversy. The fact remains that, whatever their strength in numbers and organisation, whatever their influence over "devotional" life, women have not, as a general rule, been accepted as, nor trained to become, fully responsible Christians in the life of the Church.

The same could be said, however, of the laity as whole. The "People of God" is not made up only of church organisations; but even among the thousands or millions of men and women grouped in these organisations for training and apostolate, how many have really grasped the personal commitment to Christ and his work to which they are called? How many of the clergy have grasped it for them? For one priest who has taken "lay apostolate" seriously, who has listened carefully to what recent Popes have had to say on the subject - to what St. Paul had to say about it -, how many have accepted unquestioningly that the "worthy laity" should "help Father" with priestly charge while the world of home, and work and leisure-time, of social and civic commitment, went "unleavened", and the Gospel message was not passed on in places where only lay people perhaps could be its bearers?

This was one of the major concerns expressed by the Englishman, Mr. Patrick Keegan, speaking on behalf of the laity during the Council. The Schema (the draft Decree) on the Lay Apostolate, he said, "marks for us a point of fulfilment in the historical development of the lay apostolate. We sincerely hope that it marks also the beginning of a whole new stage of development... The very existence of the document under discussion is proof that the apostolate of the laity is no luxury nor passing fashion. It means that this apostolate is incorporated into the new dynamism of the Church, seeking new ways to implement the message of the Gospel, seeking new means better adapted to the different social, economic and cultural situations of modern man".

The first great problem in this new "stage of development", as Mr. Keegan underlined, is how to make the vast majority of Christians aware of the responsibility that is theirs. There is a task here for all who have any role in Christian formation - whether in the family, the school, the parish, the lay groups... There is a task, too, which is a common ground for reflection, and even for joint effort, on the part of all Christian communions.

The full and responsible "emergence" of the laity in the life of the Church is, however, of special urgency as regards the "other half" of the laity. For - at least within the Roman Catholic Church - women have always been considered "irrevocably" lay (even women Religious are considered "lay people" as opposed to "clerics"). This is not the place to enter into the theological debate relative to women's exclusion from the ordained ministry. It is enough to state the fact. For, even supposing that at some future time there should be a change in traditional thinking and practice on this point, the fact would still remain that for at least two thousand years the ministerial priesthood has been exclusively masculine, and much in the Church's way of being and doing has been shaped by this fact. The problem, then, for us, is not to make women priests at all costs, but to find new ways of making their full, responsible contribution a reality in a Church where the priesthood is for men; it is how to take full advantage, for this purpose, of the new situation created by women's greater access to education and to all fields of secular life; to take advantage also of the new awareness which is growing of what the laity's day to day existence really means for the life and witness of the whole Church.

Ecumenical reflection

Such patient, *Fundação para o Cuidado do Futuro* such experience to be gained. There must be dialogue between clergy and laity, between men and women. There is a rich field here, too, for ecumenical sharing of experience and insights, and even for joint effort on the part of women from the different Christian churches.

Such dialogue is already under way in many parts of the world. It had a significant expression at a meeting held at Bracciano, near Rome, last October. The meeting was jointly sponsored by the Department on Cooperation between Men and Women in Church, Family and Society of the World Council of Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Second Vatican Council. It brought together about 30 women from 14 countries - Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic: Sisters, deaconesses, leaders of lay organizations, "auditors" at the Council...

The purpose, proceedings and suggested follow-up of the meeting have been excellently dealt with in a recent article for the New York "Catholic World" by Mrs. Theodora Wedel, of the National Council of Churches, who was one of the Protestant participants from America (with Mrs. Porter Brown of the Methodist Church, and Miss Frances Maeda, of the New York office of the World Council of Churches). Here I should like only to quote, from the report submitted to the sponsoring bodies, some concrete "issues" which it was felt could profitably be

studied together by women of all the churches, in order to further women's "maximum contribution to the life and work of Church and society":

- a) a re-assessment of the role of the single woman and a deeper understanding of celibacy;
- b) the changing role of the family and the growing interdependence of the family and the social environment;
- c) the changing role of the married woman in full-time and part-time work and in voluntary service, in the light of her home and family commitments and responsibilities;
- d) opportunities for a woman once her children have grown up and she is free to work outside the home, especially now that longevity makes this the longest period of her active life;
- e) woman's potentiality for service within the Church in policy-making and administration at every level from the parish upwards - and the extent to which this potentiality is actually used;
- f) woman's contribution to the development of theology".

+ + +

Fundação Cuidar o Futuro

At a time when woman is searching for her "identity" - often in strange ways and uncharted areas -, Christian reflection on God's plan for man and for woman, and on woman's place in God's Church, is a duty and a challenge. We do not know where the Holy Spirit may be leading us. But we do know that, like the women of the Gospels, if we strive to follow Christ in serving love, whatever our particular vocation, we shall meet one another under his Cross, and again in the joy of Easter, when a woman took to the disciples and to the world the glad news of his resurrection.