

Summary Document No. 5

Women and Ministry

Introduction

Women are discriminated against in the Catholic Church, excluded from the more important roles in governance and ministry, and denied a seat at the table where doctrine is determined. The Church justifies this discrimination through selective references to scripture and tradition.

What do Scripture, Secular Society and the Church say about women?

Women and Scripture

“There is no longer...male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (*Galatians 3:26-28*).

From the beginning, both men and women were created equal in the image of God. A woman was the mother of Jesus. Women were among his most ardent disciples and supporters, included in his inner circle, and sharers in his ministry. Unlike the Twelve, excepting John, they faithfully accompanied Jesus to Calvary and stood witness to his death. Archbishop Comensoli recently pointed out: “Mary of Magdala was the first to see him (after the resurrection); the first to recognise him; the first to be named by him; and the first to be sent by him. Mary rightly is the first apostle, the one called and sent to proclaim Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.”

In the early church, women ministered with the gifts of the Spirit as evangelists, pastors, teachers, prophets (Ephesians 4:11), preachers, healers, helpers, and leaders (1 Corinthians 12: 4-11; 27-30). Coloe persuasively contends that women were also priests and bishops. In 1976, the Pontifical Biblical Commission found that it is not Sacred Scripture that precludes women from ordination to the priesthood.

Women in Secular Society

In a movement that runs parallel to the Christian Scriptures, the quest for women’s equality is a critical ‘sign of the times’ in the secular world. The United Nations and International Courts, among the most gender balanced of the world’s institutions, recognize the full humanity of women, their rights and duties. Advanced secular societies also acknowledge that it is just and right for women to hold leadership positions in politics, business, academia, government and the military. Some discrimination remains, but while it is not protected, let alone required, by law, progress is well advanced.

Women in the Church

Women, like men, are mandated through baptism, to serve, teach and witness the Risen Christ. The Catechism states: “Baptism gives a common share in the common priesthood of all believers” and “it is an anointing, for it is priestly and royal, as are those who are anointed. Every baptised person is commissioned to “Go out and make disciples and teach all nations, baptising them ... and teaching them ...” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Women are not a special interest group in the Catholic Church. They comprise half the Church’s members and a majority of those present at church liturgies. Fundamental justice requires that women be treated equally in all ministries, and at all levels of church governance. In some other Christian churches women receive greater recognition and are ordained as priests and bishops. Within the Abrahamic tradition, which Christians share with Judaism and Islam, there are women rabbis and imams. Only in the Catholic Church

are women excluded by Church law from ordained ministry and the highest governance positions (canon 129).

Women and the Plenary Council

As the Plenary Council approaches, the role of women in the Catholic Church in Australia was recently diminished. This year, the Australian bishops abolished the Council for Australian Catholic Women and downgraded the Office for the Participation of Women, entities established in 2000 in response to the report, *Woman and Man: One in Christ*.

Last year Australian Catholics were invited to respond to the question - *What do you think God is asking of us in Australia today?* Some 200,000 responded, providing the best and most comprehensive contemporary insight into the *sensus fidei* (sense of faith) of Australian Catholics.

The latest independent research on those responses identifying the most widely discussed issues raised in the responses, found that three of the top six issues discussed concern the need for women to have a greater role in ministry and governance (*see [HERE](#)*).

This is a finding which accords with Catholics for Renewal's recommendations in its own published response - *Getting Back on Mission* – where it calls on the Plenary Council and Holy See to: commit to gender balance in church leadership at all levels (Recs. 3.14, 16-17), and take note of the *sensus fidei* of Australian Catholics with regard to women's ordination (Rec. 3.18).

The Catholic Church should end the entrenched practice of treating women as inferior and second-class citizens. By baptism, all members are equal, and must be recognized in ministry and governance. The Plenary Council needs to recognise in its legislation that women have the right to be included in all aspects of church leadership, decision-making, governance and ministry, including ordained ministry.