

# **THE FIRE IN THE THORNBUSH**

**A PASTORAL LETTER ON WOMEN IN THE CHURCH**

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## INTRODUCTION

1. In the years following Vatican Council II much attention has been given the theme "Women in the Church" This discussion within our faith community reflects the serious reception given the documents of the Council. It finds its roots also in the women's movement occurring in society at large.

One portion of that dialogue has been several pastoral letters by American bishops<sup>1</sup>. Their voices have been an eloquent and encouraging response to the persistent questions and faithful witness of American Catholic women in our day, as well as a recognition of the many and varied gifts of women in our Church.

These bishops acknowledge the injustices suffered by women in society and in the Church. They recognize " that women's growth and dignity are often hampered by discrimination, sometimes by deliberate exclusion, sometimes through inattention."<sup>2</sup> In response to this recognition they raise their voices in a call to justice and compassion.

In this pastoral letter I wish to join my voice to theirs because I am convinced that these bishops are calling us in a direction which, for the greater life and growth of the Church, we must travel together.

I judge this to be true not only because of what my brother bishops have written but because of my own experience with you who make up the Church in the Diocese of Rochester.

2. Society today reflects a deep interest in questions concerning women. Columns on women's issues are common features in daily newspapers. We read of efforts to promote equal pay for men and women doing the same job; and we know that the struggle for equal job opportunity for women is a fact of daily life.

Equally compelling is the reality that women of every state of life and nation, every financial stratum, every culture and religious tradition are asking for what is rightfully theirs as full human persons. Centuries of what they now understand as domination, taboo and repression have led to this time when many women will not and cannot remain silent any longer. It is not desirable-or possible-for us to try to turn back the clock to a time when today's questions did not exist. Women in most advancing nations have entered the arenas of business, the formerly male dominated professions, and the field of politics. Their contributions and influence will continue to grow.

3. In another vein we are aware of our society as it demeans women because of a distorted view of human sexuality. Pornography, which so dehumanizes producer, subject and consumer, is rampant. Rape and other violence against women are on the rise or at least more commonly reported. Hospices for battered women are sadly a necessity in many of our communities.

4. These are graphic elements in the public consciousness, but there are other challenges before us. Among these are the impact of societal changes on family life, the long-range consequences for family life when both parents are employed, and the effects of cultural changes on the traditional relationship between husband and wife.

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<sup>1</sup> For example Bishop Carroll T. Dozier, "Women Intrepid and Loving" (Memphis, 1975), Archbishop William D. Borders, "Reflections on Women in the Mission and Ministry of the Church" (Baltimore, 1977); The Roman Catholic Bishops of Minnesota, "Woman, Pastoral Reflections" (St. Paul, 1979); Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen, "Pastoral Statement on Women" (Seattle, 1980); Bishop Victor H. Balke and Bishop Raymond A. Lucker, "Male and Female - God Created Them" (Crookston, Minnesota and New Ulm, Minnesota, 1981); Bishop John S. Cummins, "Statement on Women in Ministry" (Oakland, California, 1981); Archbishop Peter L. Gerety "Women in the Church" (Newark, NJ, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> The Roman Catholic Bishops of Minnesota (Archbishop John R. Roach, St. Paul and Minneapolis; Bishop Paul E. Anderson, Duluth, Bishop Victor H. Balke, Crookston, Bishop Raymond A. Lucker, New Ulm, Bishop George H. Speltz, St. Cloud; Bishop Loras J. Watters, Winona; and Auxiliary Bishop John F. Kinney, St. Paul and Minneapolis), "Women, Pastoral Reflections" (St. Paul, 1979), p. 6.

A world speeding toward the 21st century poses questions about the stability of marriage, the relationship between spouses, and responsibility to and for children. Women and their spouses and families deal with new questions. Is the choice to work at home at the loving service of husband and children a demeaning, unenlightened one? Is the choice to pursue a career selfish or somehow suspect and dangerous? Or in the words of a contemporary writer, "If we mother well, can we work? If we work well, can we love? Shall we compete out there or not? Can we stay at home and not feel guilty, useless and strangely hurt?"<sup>3</sup>

5. These questions are important because they affect our common life as Church. We are a faith community incarnate in a particular place at a specific time. To this we bring that heritage of faith in light of which we desire to conduct our lives. But it has ever been the task of the Church to let the questions of the day challenge and deepen her understanding of that heritage. It is this kind of dialogue between believers and their culture, given encouragement in Vatican Council II, which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit keeps us growing toward the full stature of Christ. The Church must teach faithfully in every age; and we must be ready to learn in every age.

6. It is not possible, of course, for me to offer solutions to these questions and issues; and I do realize that the issues and questions are hardly the same for all men and women.

What I do hope is that this pastoral letter will offer us, as the local Church of Rochester, an opportunity to reflect, pray and act upon many questions in light of the faith which makes us one. In this way, through God's grace, I pray that we may be able to build up the love and unity of our local Church, promote deeper faith in individuals and in the community, and preach the Gospel with fresh vigor.

If we do this we shall engage in "maturing and correcting conversation."<sup>4</sup> We shall give hope to the faithful women within our Church. And, that is my purpose.

## **I. MARY OUR MOTHER AND MODEL**

7. The pre-eminent model for men and women from the beginning of Christianity, most especially in the Catholic Church, is Mary, the Mother of Jesus. It is no coincidence that the Fathers of Vatican Council II included a chapter on Mary in the Constitution on the Church, for she is both the traditional symbol of the Church and the best model of true discipleship.

Devotion to the Mother of God as a special model for Christian women has undergone many changes through the centuries, and seems even more vital now that women's role in the Church has come under new and enlightened scrutiny.

8. In the Gospels of Luke and John, Mary is seen primarily as an example of the perfect disciple of Jesus, the one who "hears the word of God and keeps it" (Luke 8:21). Her role at the beginning and end of Jesus' life is one of acceptance and obedience to the Will of God in perplexing and painful circumstances.

9. In the Constantinian period Mary became the model of women who withdrew from the world to a solitary life of prayer and fasting. The middle ages found her a model of purity and fidelity in love. During the Renaissance Mary was revered especially as a tender mother, caring for her spiritual children. In our own century we have emphasized Mary as the heart of the Holy Family, the symbol of family unity.

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<sup>3</sup> Anne T. Fleming, "Can I Stay at Home Without Losing My Identity?" *Vogue* (1978); quoted in Colette Dowling's "The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence" (New York Summit Books, 1981), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), p. 85.

10. Most recently, the fathers of Vatican Council II described Mary as "a model of the Church in the matter of faith, charity and perfect union with Christ" and as the Church's "excellent exemplar in faith and charity."<sup>5</sup>

11. Each of these is a true facet of Mary, as a model for women, but each in itself is incomplete. It may be that the gospel image of perfect discipleship brings us closest to a view of Mary that can serve as a model for women today.

The Mary we see in the Scriptures is a woman of deep faith and courage, of clear-eyed acceptance of God's will. She is the strong and mature believer who achieves a balance between the tensions of humble obedience<sup>6</sup> and forthright questioning,<sup>7</sup> of contemplation and action. She is, in fact, the preeminent role model of a mother or father in that her example made real for her son the meaning of openness to the will of his Father.

Mary had a prominent place in the public life of Jesus from Cana to the cross and was, according to tradition, the guiding force of the new Church from the Pentecost event until her assumption.

Her life was full of contradictions. She obeyed the orders of a repressive Roman government in her journey to Bethlehem, but defied custom by standing at the foot of the cross. Mary accepted in faith that her blessedness lay, not simply in having borne the Son of God, but in hearing God's word and keeping it. She accepted her son's seeming indifference to her frantic search when she found him in the temple, but urged that he use his power at Cana, even though his hour had not yet come; she accepted the mystery of the Incarnation in complete faith and was willing to let him go with the same faith, accepting the mystery of her new vocation to become the Mother of the Church.

12. Mary is not a woman protected from the demands of faith in daily living. There is nothing vapid or sentimental about her. She is a woman with her feet planted firmly on the earth, Mary of Nazareth, the new Eve, the new Mother of all the living, the woman whose risk in faith first made Christ present among us.

13. It is precisely in this way that Mary is the first model for the contemporary woman- not as a mysterious icon or an object of obscure veneration and unattainable blessedness, but as an altogether human woman who was painfully misunderstood by the man she loved; who was confused by her child's behavior, who was not afraid to speak her mind or voice her questions; who stood by courageously while her son was executed; who was present at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the new Church and who, indeed, had a role of leadership in that Church.

God's presence in her life was the source of her strength in the face of frightening change and danger. Her fidelity to the Spirit working in her makes her the perfect disciple and the best example of human response to God's action among us.

When Mary's place in the life and continued ministry of the Church is recognized and understood, the place of all women in the Church is assured-not as onlookers or maid servants, but as integral co-workers, as necessary for the incarnation of Christ in our world as Mary was to the first Incarnation.

## **II. WOMEN: THEIR HISTORY IN THE CHURCH**

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<sup>5</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 63 and 53.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:38

<sup>7</sup> Luke 2:48; John 2:4-6

14. The coming of Jesus meant a new day and Good News for all men and women. The people who walked in darkness now saw a great light. Though Jesus was a man of his time in many respects, his justice and love revealed a new covenant with women, as well as men:

"According to the Gospels, Christ showed an enlightened attitude towards women: in His conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, in His friendship with Martha and Mary, especially in His defense of Mary's preference to listen to His words, rather than to wait upon Him; in His behavior towards the Syrophenician woman with the sick daughter, and His appearance as Risen Lord to Mary Magdalene, whom He sends to announce the Good News to His Apostles. These incidents, interpreted in their cultural context, give a basis for a genuine emancipation and liberation of womanhood."<sup>8</sup>

15. This biblical perspective can be a source of freedom and clarity for us. We have all been created by a loving God; we spring from the love of God and are destined to become one in the fullness of his love. For this we need the life-giving power of Jesus Christ in whom "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for all are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

16. The women represented in the Gospels approached Jesus with faith. This is in stark contrast to some of their male counterparts and to the generally submissive role of women in Jesus' day. Jesus always rewarded their faith and offered them to us as examples of discipleship.

17. Jesus treated women as human beings in an age which forbade the religious education of women, prohibited their reciting of certain prayers and severely restricted their public and private behavior. Jesus transcended these limits by teaching women openly, including them among his traveling companions and encouraging them to study the Scripture. None of this was allowed in the Palestine of his day.

It was to Martha that Jesus declared, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," thus revealing to this woman and homemaker the central message of the Gospel.

In the story of the woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears, he treats the woman not as a sinner or sexual object, but as a loving repentant person. He shows the same compassion to the woman taken in adultery. The woman who was "unclean", according to Leviticus (15:19 ff.), was healed by the touch of Jesus (Luke 8:43-48). Again, he broke the ritual constraints against touching one who was unclean. In all these instances Jesus called attention to the dignity of women.

In John's Gospel it is evident that some of the Jews questioned Jesus' practice of speaking with women. Yet it is in his encounter with the Samaritan woman that Jesus reveals himself as the Messiah for the first time. She then witnessed this revelation to the townspeople, and many believed in him on account of her testimony.

Finally, there is the great example of the appearance and commission given to Mary Magdalene. On the morning of Jesus' Resurrection, he appears to her in the garden, consoles her and asks her to announce his Resurrection to the rest of the disciples: "Go and find the brothers and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God". So Mary went and told them that "she had seen the Lord and that he had said these things to her" (John 20: 17-18).

18. The history of the Church since that wonderful Easter morning has been long, varied and, by God's presence, holy. Men and women have led, inspired, nurtured and reformed the Church throughout its human journey. We must realize also that men and women have suffered during all these ages because of the Church's frailty and her slow maturing toward the fullness of Christ's Resurrection. Yet, in all of this history, the power of God reaches its perfection in weakness. That is the shocking truth of Paul's faith in a community of men and women gathered by Christ. As Catholic men and women we take pride in the

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<sup>8</sup> National Conference of Catholic Bishops "Behold Your Mother: Woman of Faith, A Pastoral Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary" (Washington, DC, 1973), No. 141

history of the Church always and only because of the goodness and holiness of God. As a Church, we are poor pilgrims who can boast only of the saving virtue of God which is revealed in our weakness.

19. As a Church, we are the handmaid who recognizes that she depends finally not on the resources of men and women but on the gift of God of which we endlessly stand in need. The issue of women's roles in the Church is no exception to this weakness, this need of the whole body of Christ.

20. In this, as in so many matters, the Church is "the tired, dusty pilgrimess through the desert,"<sup>9</sup> but she is also the thornbush that bursts into flame with heavenly fire. "For so speaks Our Lord: In this Church I appear to you as once I appeared in a thornbush. You are the thornbush I am the fire. I am the fire in the thornbush in your flesh. I am the fire to illuminate you, to burn away the thorn of your sinfulness, to give you the favor of my grace" (St. Ambrose, Epistle 63).

### **III. THE CURRENT EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH**

21. It is a moving and powerful experience to hear women speak of their life in the Church. For many women that life is sustaining and rewarding. For others, however, it is at once affirming, challenging, and painful confusing: Changes in the Church and society, while opening new doors, also threaten cherished traditions. And finally, the painful experience of still other women has led them to perceive the Church as generating and reinforcing circumstances oppressive to them. In their view men have all power in the Church; women are excluded by them from any significant action; they are considered to be inferior and incapable of a contribution of any consequence. In spite of the pain of these women, however, there is evident among them a love for the Church and a desire to serve God and his people in her name.

We address these realities best when, as a community, we pray and reflect together. In this way we respond appropriately to the challenges of our time, and plant the seeds of future vitality.

22. We all need to evaluate our ideas and attitudes toward women in the Church. Further, we should be willing to share our thoughts with others.

If we can become more aware of the variety of attitudes, appreciate them, understand them to the extent that it is possible for us to do so, we will go a long way toward healing some of the real and potential wounds in the unity of Christ's body. Through prayer, reflection and genuine action inspired by new insights, our goal is to realize as Church that profound reconciliation of men and women for which Christ hungers and of which he is the means.

23. Good and faith-filled women in the Church acknowledge that they are confused by the occasionally mixed messages of the Church and of some of her leaders. They describe a real crisis of faith, a sense of alienation and isolation, even anger and resentment at the restrictions placed on them because of their gender.

24. Not all women in the Church experience this kind of distress, but far more do than many of us realize and many more do than care to admit it to their husbands, friends or pastors.

25. Women in significant numbers speak of growing disappointment with the Church's inability or apparent unwillingness to accept their full identity as Christian women. They speak of a quietly persistent disappointment with the Church's frequent failure to seek their contributions and participation in ways that respect their full personhood in the Church.

Finally, many of these women develop a fear of the Church and a dread of competition, especially with the clergy of the Church and so they withdraw, visibly or invisibly, in order to preserve some fundamental self-respect and peace in their lives.

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<sup>9</sup> Hugo Rahner, S.J., "The Church, God's Strength in Human Weakness in The Church": Readings in Theology, Foreword by Gustave Weigel, S.J. (New York P.J. Kenedy and Sons, 1963) p. 7

26. If such feelings and attitudes can sap the strength of many of our women, there is a corresponding attitude in men which can be equally alienating and divisive.

This attitude is characterized by a fear of rivalry with women in the Church and by apprehension about the increasing presence of women at the heart of the Church's daily life. Some men, inexperienced in working with women as equals, are uncomfortable when called to do so and discover in themselves subtle, even unconscious efforts to prevent the fuller inclusion of women in Church affairs.

Some men resent the pressure placed on them by women who in their view too strongly advocate the fuller participation of women in the life of the Church. In my judgment, where this exists, it is not so much a sign of rancor as the result of an uprooting which followed upon the demands of Vatican Council II. In this rich but demanding time in the Church, many persons, men and women, married and single, priests and religious-will acknowledge that in some way they have been forced to rediscover their identity as persons in the Church.

For the majority of lay people, these tensions surface not only in the institutional life of the Church, for example, in the parish, but in a most personal way in the everyday life of the domestic Church, the family. The ongoing re-examination of the traditional roles of men and women in family life has affected virtually every household.

To pretend that these fears, feelings and attitudes do not exist or to judge that they are irrational will not help us as a Church to become "fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself" (Ephesians 4:13).

27. But, there are other attitudes and feelings in men and women which can edify, reconcile and create a new and healthier Church; these we must all nourish and develop.

Many women in the Church, even those who have been deeply alienated, desire to understand and forgive; they desire to share generously with all in the Church. They wish to participate actively in the daily work of the Church and to bear their share of responsibility for where we are as a Church-not yet fully home but in pilgrimage at this human, historical moment.

They wish to be acknowledged as full members of the Church, but they wish this joy also for every member of the Church, male or female, lay person, priest, deacon or religious. They desire to learn and to teach in the Church -to be, in fact, with all the rest of us a still imperfect, learning Church, which is what it means to be a pilgrim Church.

Men in the Church also wish to learn and to understand. There is, I believe, a genuine desire to recognize sexism where it exists, and to eradicate it when it is recognized. This is part of a wider movement among men in the Church who wish to collaborate with women, to be at ease with them, and with them to be recognized and respected as human beings anxious to live loving and faithful lives.

#### **IV. THE NEED FOR RECONCILIATION**

28. The heart and the strength of any Christian community is its unity in Christ. It is our union with and in him which endows us with the vision and strength we need to respond to the Gospel in any given age. Without that spirit and a constant effort toward unity disputed questions become issues which divide rather than invitations to deeper life.

When the former happens, people take sides, perspective and proportion are lost, and it becomes important to win.

When, on the other hand, such questions are approached in a spirit of communion and prayer, they can be a great source of strength. Persons are eager to understand one another and basic human disagreements are seen in the wider context of values shared.

29. In my judgment, we need constantly to reform attitudes and practices among us which fall short of recognizing the full dignity and stature of every person.

But, if this is ever to happen with the depth and sincerity which all desire, it can happen only if we all, men and women, laity and clergy, enter more deeply into the fullness of the reconciliation to which Jesus calls us and which he has wonderfully achieved for us in his death and resurrection when he made "peace by his death on the cross." (Colossians 1:20).

St. Augustine said of Christ, "You have touched me and I have been translated into your peace."<sup>10</sup> The true peace of the Church and the peace of her members is the peace which Christ makes between us and among us.

The author of Ephesians explained so patiently to the Jews and pagans of the time and to us that, "now in Christ Jesus, you that used to be so far apart..have been brought very close by the blood of Christ. For he is the peace between us, and he has made the two into one and broken down the barrier which used to keep them apart, actually destroying in his own person the hostility caused by the rules and decrees of the law." (Ephesians 2:13-14).

30. The estrangement and even hostility which we find in our own hearts and the hearts of other men and women of the Church come, as Paul says, from the long accumulation of our evil and as yet unredeemed ways: "Not long ago, you were foreigners and enemies, in the way that you used to think and the evil things that you did; but now he has reconciled you by his death and in that mortal body" (Colossians 1:21-22).

31. We are called to carry on the work of Christ, the work of lifting to full dignity in his body all men and women in the Church, by beginning where Christ began-by reconciling all persons in himself and restoring peace to one another.

This is the hidden plan God so kindly made in Christ from the beginning. In Christ we have all been "claimed as God's own," and the daily remembrance of this fundamental grace of our faith will give strength and truthfulness to our endeavors as we reach out more generously in love and respect to all women and men in the Church.

32. As I reflect on the tensions which exist in various ways among men and women in the Church, I can only conclude that this lack of Christ's peace is due to fear and the imperfection of our love. We have all read St. John's claim, "Perfect love casts out fear." Yet we fail to realize the great and thoroughly demanding challenge in these words. Individually and as a Church, we must devote our lives to growing in love and peace with one another.

33. We know that God desires our peace; that his words effect our peace; that Christ, himself, is the source of peace-peace with him and with one another. Together we need to hunger and thirst for this gift of God and humbly acknowledge that when and where it is absent among us as men and women in the Church, then our love is closed, imperfect and fearful.

Peace among Christians is a fruit of spiritual mindedness and it is a gift from Jesus Christ. It is an achievement which is not possible for the world relying on its own resources. Jesus is our communion with God and with one another-not just at Eucharistic liturgies, but at Parish Council and diocesan committee meetings, at our family tables, in schools and shops and in all of the ordinary affairs of human life.

34. This is why in the matter of "Women in the Church" and in all other matters with which we struggle as a faith community, we pray that we may have that attitude to which we are called by the author of the Letter to the Philippians "In your mind you must be the same as Christ Jesus. His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became

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<sup>10</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo, The Confessions, Book 10, Chapter 27.

as we are; and being as all of us are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8) .

35. We know that the strength of God reveals itself in human weakness and we beg to be emptied of all that makes us unavailable to God's grace: our fears, our clinging to status, our sexism, our racism, our failure to work for the freedom of the oppressed. In positive terms we pray for the help we need to become selfless servants to one another, even to our death.

## **V. THE DIGNITY OF EACH PERSON**

36. We are blessed in our faith tradition with a wealth of values concerning the human person. The Word of God is the story of the communication of life and the restoration of hope. The dignity of the human person in the eyes of God shines through the Scriptures even in those events and personages which are difficult for the modern person to understand.

37. Jesus is the perfect expression of this. By his birth and life, his passion, death and resurrection, we are redeemed and made holy. He gave his life for all and communicated his life to his people.

38. It is the faith of the Church that through baptism we are joined to his dying and rising. We become one with him and so become an offering acceptable to the Father. Through the sacraments of initiation we become full persons in the Church.

39. The basic message which our loving God speaks to humankind is the unique goodness and loveliness of each person. "With everlasting love I have taken pity on you....my love for you will never leave you" (Isaiah 54). The motivation which draws each individual forward on the journey to respond to God's love, to search out one's own uniqueness and respond to the call to the Kingdom, is the gift of faith.

40. The Church is the holy body of believers who acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus, who celebrate his presence in Word and Sacrament and who, in response to the Word, live the hospitality and compassion of Jesus in daily life. The individual Christian, incorporated by baptism into this community of believers, is called to live in precisely the same manner.

41. The Church supports: individuals in their journey of faith. As a community of the faithful, she must model the attitude of God toward her members - an attitude of reverence and care. Her embrace must include all young, old, rich, poor. And her concern must always be to remind all of their goodness, their loveliness and magnificent eternal destiny. Insofar as we do this, we are worthy of our name. Insofar as we diminish, belittle or erode self-confidence, or deny one another's gifts, we diminish God's Kingdom and undermine his Word.

The words of Vatican Council II remind us that we do this when we are guilty of sexism or any other kind of sinful prejudice.

"With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent."<sup>11</sup>

This strong moral imperative is most fruitfully appreciated when it is understood as flowing from this statement of faith found elsewhere in the documents of the council:

"There is in Christ and in the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex, because there is neither Jew nor Greek;

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<sup>11</sup> Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 29.

there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female. For you are all "one" in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28)."<sup>12</sup>

42. The dignity and human rights of all men and women are promised in their creation by a universally loving God and in their baptism into the generosity of Christ Jesus. Nonetheless, the dignity and rights of poor women and men are of particular concern to the Church as she attempts to be faithful to God's special regard for the anawim, the poor of Israel, and to Jesus' preferential love for the poor of his day.

From the earliest days of the Church, the needs of the poor have been a special responsibility of the Church. As Vatican Council II so clearly affirmed, the Church "recognizes in the poor and suffering the likeness of her poor and suffering Founder. She does all she can to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ."<sup>13</sup>

43. The needs of poor women, who make up the greater majority of poor people, are doubly oppressive to them. As the Office of Domestic Social Improvement of the U.S. Catholic Conference points out in its study, "On the Concerns of Poor Women in the United States":

"Within the context of the Church's traditional concern for the poor, the needs of poor women present a special challenge to dioceses, parishes and Catholic organizations...whether they are black white, Chicana or American Indian and whether they come from rural or urban communities, poor women share many common concerns. Lack of economic and educational opportunities, unavailability of health care, non-existent or inadequate housing, lack of self-worth and the need to provide for their children are problems which poor women confront daily. Although the same types of problems can be faced by women who are not poor, for poor women these concerns are a matter of basic survival."<sup>14</sup>

44. Because of the variety of cultures and socio-economic groups represented in the Church of Rochester, there is a danger that the poor women of this diocese will be invisible to the vast majority of our people and ministers. For poor women are often hidden-on the other side of town, in apartments or poor housing, on winding rural roads, and in countless forms of isolation. They are often inaudible-in the privacy of their distress, behind closed doors, in their quiet fear about the future.

These poor women are widows, single parent, elderly women, mothers who cannot make ends meet, poor working women with minimum wages, single women who live alone, and minority women struggling with the additional questions of racism and bigotry. They may be black, Hispanic, Indochinese, white; they may be homeless, friendless, unemployed, hungry, sick, battered, afraid to share their need. "The equal dignity of persons demands that a more humane and just condition of life be brought about" for all such poor women. "For excessive economic and social differences between the members of the one human family or population groups cause scandal, and militate against social justice, equity, the dignity of the human person, as well as social and international peace."<sup>15</sup>

45. It is my special obligation as bishop "to attend upon the poor" and it is the special obligation of all of us in the Church to hear and if need be search out the cry of the poor. For "it is as if Christ himself were crying out in these poor to beg the charity of the disciples."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 32.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>14</sup> "On the Concerns of Poor Women in the United States," U.S. Catholic Conference Office of Domestic Social Improvement, (Washington, DC, 1979), p 1.

<sup>15</sup> Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

## **VI. THE SPIRITUALITY OF WOMEN**

46. I wish I could convey adequately in this letter all the hidden and unsung goodness, strength and wisdom women have contributed to the Church through all the years. By this, I do not mean to suggest that the role of women in the Church should be hidden or unsung, but to acknowledge that when all is said and done, the holiness of God's people is not a matter of organization, title, publicity or function. Rather, holiness is ardently and generously belonging to God through every fiber of our heart and soul and strength.

To be holy is to be thoroughly possessed by God, to hand over ourselves in full and free response to his love. This depth of belonging and handing over in individual Christians is not usually commented on in the press or in our annual reports, but it is the essential life of the Church, that without which we are not Christ's Church.

Wherever holiness truly exists a woman or in a man-the central meaning and mission of the Church is fulfilled.

47. It is possible for us to forget this and to think that unless one has an explicit function in the Church's visible organization or unless one has a role with particular duties in the workaday life of the Church's operation, somehow he or she is not contributing to the Church or recognized by the Church.

48. Certain ministries and functions are necessary elements in the life of the Church and are constituted for the service of God's people. For those services to be carried on, all of us, men and women, need to step forward to fulfill them according to the norms of the Church at present and in the future. But ministerial roles and functions do not in themselves signify holiness or confer it. It is important to remember the true nature of holiness and its source.

49. It is especially important that Christian women be aware of the centrality of their everyday lives in building up the holiness of the Body of Christ. This holiness is expressed and sought by women who choose to serve the mission of the Church by total dedication to family life. This holiness is also expressed and sought by religious women and by women pursuing careers in the many fields of human endeavor and in positions of responsibility in the Church.

50. The work of the Church is the same at home and in public places. The holiness of each of us is found finally and only in the depth of our faith, hope and love: "In short, there are three things which last: faith, hope and love; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Corinthians 13:13). Who, but God alone, can assess this immeasurable variety and disposition of his holy love among his people? If it is not given to us to measure it, how can we compile reports about it? And yet we need to help one another experience it, be ever grateful for it and bear one another up in its strength.

51. Women in their homes, as well as women in the marketplace, need to be confident of their spirituality. They need to be aware, as often they are not, that work, prayer, service, hospitality, sacrifice, suffering and all the countless efforts of so-called humble activity which make up the lives of most of us constitute the spiritual lives to which Christ calls us, and in which he takes great delight. It is our greatest gift to one another and the source of renewed life in the Church.

52. Women have been remarkable donors of such life throughout the history of the Church. Contemporary women can be proud of this spiritual heritage in the lives of such saints as Monica, Elizabeth of Hungary, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, Bridget of Sweden, Frances Cabrini, Elizabeth Ann Seton and many others.

These women were shining examples of the holy life, not only because they lived in God through prayer and humble service, but because they spoke the truth to the Church and called her to reform. Their voices spoke the truth in love and, because they did, the Church has been enriched.

We are ever in need of this kind of contribution from the women of the Church and as a community must search for ways to invite and encourage it. We are less strong than the Lord wants us to be when we do not have it.

53. Women today are called to articulate to the Church and the world the meaning and dynamics of their own spirituality. Such a spirituality may place more emphasis on relatedness, intimacy, growth and community than other forms prevalent today. This influence is needed by the whole Church, male and female, clergy and laity, for balance and wholeness.

54. Part of that call to women today is, I believe, to share this spirituality concretely within the Church by forming groups devoted to prayer, healing, meditation on the Scriptures and the study of the great mystical writers of the Church. This will contribute much to our ongoing renewal because it will strengthen the capacity of our communities - all of our people - to heal, encourage, reach out, sacrifice, bear one another's burdens, endure, console and share.

This effort will deepen our awareness that the spirituality of the Church is rooted in the gentleness of Christ, who cared for his people like a hen gathering her chicks under her wings. Such spirituality reflects the life of God, who is like the mother who cannot and will not forget the child of her womb, like the woman who searches for the lost coin and rejoices in finding it.

55. I ask all women to reflect on the holiness which is in them, to be aware of its power for the good of the Church, and to realize that it can be and is being shared by all of us in a multitude of ways.

## **VII. WOMEN AND THE MISSION OF TODAY'S CHURCH**

56. There are many ways to describe the nature and mission of the Church. In fact, the Church discovers and re-discovers herself and her mission in every age under the patient, persistent guidance of the Holy Spirit, who continually speaks fresh words to us through the Sacred Scripture newly understood, through the re-examination of our traditions, and through the conditions and signs of the times.

All of us are called to put on Christ, to assume his mission to this world and to be consecrated to Christ's holy tasks to teach what he understood and proclaimed; to unify with his justice, eagerness and compassion; to sanctify and be sanctified by the presence of his holiness, which is the love of God poured out upon us, first and everlastingly.

57. When we think of women and of all the laity in relation to this work of Christ, we realize that there is much which needs to be made more explicit, more open and more inclusive.

Vatican Council II affirmed that pastors have the "duty so to shepherd the faithful and recognize their services and charismatic gifts that all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart." For from Christ "the whole body (being closed joined and knit together through every joint of the system according to the functioning in due measure of each single part) derives its increase to the building of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:15-16).<sup>17</sup> The Fathers of Vatican Council II said of the laity:

"They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ. They carry out their own part in the mission of the whole Christian people with respect to the Church and the world"<sup>18</sup>

58. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church was promulgated in November 1964. As we look back on that document after 18 years, we find ourselves remembering the many ways in which the Church has

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<sup>17</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 30.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 31

translated into its daily practice the meaning of such phrases as "their proper roles," and "the functioning in due measure" and "in their own way." At the same time we struggle to understand how the reality of the present day constantly calls the whole Church to a renewed understanding of her mission which is our "common undertaking."

59. It is part of our work in this local Church to deepen our understanding of how each of us can become more fully "sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ."

For the present there is much which can and should be done to affirm the rights and responsibilities of lay men and women to participate in the teaching, shepherding and sanctifying work of the Church.

## **VII A. THE CHURCH AS PROPHET, TEACHER, PROCLAIMER OF THE GOSPEL**

60. Jesus came among us to proclaim day in and day out the Good News of his Father's unfailing love for us. He taught and preached to those who would listen; he touched and healed as he moved among the people. He proclaimed the truth of God in his words and work, giving himself fully to his Father and his people in his moment of glorification.

It is for us to teach in the same way, with the same wholeheartedness, the same alertness to the present moment, the same singleness of purpose.

61. Women have for centuries demonstrated a natural teaching ability in their homes and far beyond. Now more than ever they need to be encouraged to teach the Gospel in every way-at home and away from home, in places of business and commerce, to adults and children, in schools and prayer centers, in public media and in personal spiritual direction.

Opportunities for their continued education in the faith should be encouraged so that their own growth might be fostered and their contributions to the life of the Church might be made even richer.

62. Many women have also demonstrated that they have the gift of inspired preaching, that they can explain the Word of God in a way so moving that it reaches the minds and hearts of their hearers and thereby strengthens their faith.

We have such women in this diocese. In our liturgical and other prayer assemblies, and in all events wherein we witness to our faith, we need to be creative in designing ways and providing opportunities for women with such gifts to share this richness with the community.

63. Our common vocation to proclaim the Good News should be of prime importance and it should ever be our desire to develop and improve the ways in which we carry it out. So much depends on the way in which God's Word is proclaimed. Paul says, "Men and women will not ask God's help unless they believe in him, and they will not believe in him unless they have heard of him, and they will not hear of him unless one is sent...So faith comes from what is preached, and what is preached comes from the word of Christ" (Romans 10:14-17).

64. Even now, within the norms of the Church, there is room for lay persons who preach well to do more public preaching than they do or than we encourage. Qualified lay persons may explain the Word of God at Eucharistic liturgies for children, and at paraliturgical worship services. In addition, all those who serve as Readers are asked to explain the Word of God to catechumens and others who hunger for its nourishment. Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist who bring Holy Communion to those not able to leave home appropriately comment on and explain the Scripture proclaimed on that occasion.

65. The Eucharistic liturgy, itself, offers occasions for lay persons to participate in acts of proclamation and sharing which can enrich the prayer of the assembly: the call to worship, the offering of a communion meditation, or a brief reflection prior to the final blessing.

66. I recognize that for some the question of preaching by lay persons, and particularly by women, has been a sensitive one in our diocese. Two years ago, in obedience to the reaffirmed liturgical norms of the Church governing the matter, I directed that only ordained persons should preach the homily at the Eucharistic liturgy.

This I did with the realization that some of our laity, the great majority of whom were women, had been preaching regularly at Eucharistic liturgies and that their efforts had been appreciated by those who heard them.

My intention was then and is now to be in concert with the whole college of bishops as we are called to be "governors, promoters and guardians of the entire liturgical life of the Church" entrusted to us.<sup>19</sup>

My action was in no way meant to signal any derogation of the skills or love for the Church of the persons involved. I do realize, however, that I caused some hurt through insensitivity in communicating the directive and for that I do sincerely apologize.

67. We know that the holy People of God share also in Christ's prophetic office, when as a whole people "it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals," sustained and aroused to this faith by the Spirit of Truth. But, as Vatican Council II pointed out, "It is not only through the sacraments and Church ministries that the same Holy Spirit sanctifies and leads the People of God and enriches it with virtues." The Spirit of God also "distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank."<sup>20</sup>

The gift of prophecy is present in persons of all stations and vocations in the Church. Its purpose is to inspire the People of God. In the words of a contemporary writer, a prophet is "a person who has a personal spiritual mission, that is, to be a witness to the strength of God, to the love of God for his people."<sup>21</sup> The way of life of a prophet is ordered and directed by an extraordinary gift of God.

Vatican Council II carefully affirmed that God may give such gifts "to everyone according as he will" (1 Corinthians 12:11) for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church:

"These charismatic gifts, whether they be the most outstanding or the more simple and widely diffused, are to be received with thanksgiving and consolation, for they are exceedingly suitable and useful for the needs of the Church. Still, extraordinary gifts are not to be rashly sought after nor are the fruits of apostolic labor to be presumptuously expected from them. In any case judgment as to their genuineness and proper use belongs to those who preside over the Church, and to whose special competence it belongs, not indeed to extinguish the Spirit, but to test all things and hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 12:19-21).<sup>22</sup>

68. It is entirely possible that the Spirit of God is even now granting to the Church at large and to our local church true prophets, men and women through whom the Spirit of God will inspire and renew us. No one of us can claim on personal authority that he or she does not possess this gift of prophecy nor can any one of us claim from God's hand this extraordinary power. But all of us- bishop and housewife, priest and lay person, monk and religious woman - can and must be open to in advent among us. It remains to those who preside over the Church to decide the presence of true prophecy and even they must be extremely careful not to make premature, unprayerful judgments and so to "extinguish the Spirit."

69. Therefore, it is possible that the voices of many women and men now heard in the Church will in time be discovered to be voices of true prophecy through whom the Spirit has spoken to and reformed the

<sup>19</sup> Decree on the Bishop Pastoral Office in the Church, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Ladislav M. Orsy, S.J., *Open to the Spirit*, (Washington, DC: Corpus Books, 1968), p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 12.

Church. This has happened in the past. It is altogether likely that the future will hold similar gifts for us. We need to be alert to this possibility as we face the difficult task of reading the signs of the times.

70. As part of their participation in the prophetic mission of Christ, women, as well as men, also have the obligation to proclaim the word of God from the pages of Sacred Scripture, in public worship and in private gatherings. Men and women in all of our parish communities should be encouraged to proclaim God's Word from the lectionary.

71. Finally, all men and women have the obligation to proclaim the Word of God by the powerful example of their lives. Many men and women who live in the ordinary dwellings of the world and engage in work beyond the obvious structures of the Church have a special opportunity, and therefore, a special responsibility to make God's Word known to others, "especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity."<sup>23</sup> Generations of women in this diocese have proclaimed the Gospel in this most effective way and proclaim that word splendidly today by the penetrating example of their lives, work, sufferings and prayer.

## **VII B. THE CHURCH AS PRIESTLY, WORSHIPING AND SANCTIFYING COMMUNITY**

72. The entire liturgical life of our faith community revolves around the sacraments and expresses the priestly office of Jesus Christ in our behalf. Through the Sacred Liturgies of Baptism, Holy Eucharist, Confirmation, Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony and the Anointing of the Sick, Jesus worships his Father, with us and in us he renews the perfect praise of his passion, resurrection and ascension.

73. Whenever and wherever we gather to celebrate the sacramental liturgies of the Church, Jesus Christ is present as Priest with his people. As Vatican Council II reminds us, "Christ indeed always associates the Church with himself in the truly great work of giving perfect praise to God and making men and women holy."<sup>24</sup>

74. The sacraments are the most holy and mysterious events in the life of the Church. Each sacrament is "an action of Christ the priest and of his Body the Church" and is "a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can match its claim to efficacy, nor equal the degree of it."<sup>25</sup>

The liturgy of the sacraments is "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows."<sup>26</sup> It is our unceasing and common vocation to comprehend and honor this most sacred action of Christ in our behalf, trying to enter as deeply as we humanly can into these sacred mysteries of Christ's incomparable love for us.

75. In this we need the selfless ministry of one another, for as the Fathers of Vatican Council II knew so well, a faith community must prepare itself for the celebration of the sacraments.

"In order that the sacred liturgy may produce its full effect, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their thoughts match their words, and that they cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain. Pastors of souls must, therefore, realize that when the liturgy is celebrated, more is required than mere observance of the laws governing valid and licit celebrations. It is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part knowingly, actively and fruitfully."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>24</sup> Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy 7

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 11.

Awareness and active participation are essential elements in the celebration of the Church's liturgy. Lay men and women need to be given every opportunity to be active, knowing participants in the celebration. They are not present as spectators at an event being celebrated by someone else. Rather, together with the leadership of the faith community, they offer to the Father the sacred action of Jesus Christ. For this reason, it is most important that the laity actively participate. Lay women and men need to be incorporated into our sacramental rituals in ways expressive of their role in the faith community.

76. Some parishes and worshiping communities in our diocese have done remarkable work in developing this fullness of participation in ways that are most fruitful. They have kept in mind the liturgical and sacramental dignity and needs of all the worshiping community, including the women of the community, and have devised a variety of ways to signify more actively the responsibility of lay men and women in the celebration of the sacraments.

77. Here I wish to say a word about the ordination of women. Much has been written on this topic.

Some argue that to deny women ordination to the priesthood is to make them second-class members of the Church and is a denial of the dignity which is theirs by virtue of their incorporation into the Body of Christ through the sacraments of initiation.

There are some who judge the practice of the Church to be sexist in its origins and designed to keep women in a position of subservience.

78. Let me state as briefly as possible the current position of the Church on the ordination question. It holds that the ordination of women is excluded because Jesus, in choosing the Twelve, did not choose women (Matthew 4:19f), and the Church in choosing their descendants must remain faithful to that original pattern.

This position is held to be strongly supported in the writing of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, and is witnessed to in the constant tradition of the eastern and western Church. Moreover, it has been pointed out that the priest, as another Christ (Cyprian, Epistle 63:14), a symbol on earth of the heavenly Lord, must naturally resemble the earthly word made flesh in order to make that symbol understandable; a woman cannot properly symbolize Christ as is fitting of a Christian priest (Thomas Aquinas In IV Sent. 25, 21, 1a).

79. There are others, whose fidelity to the Church cannot be questioned, who hold that the ministry of the Twelve as witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of the Lord was an unrepeatable ministry (Acts 1:21-22). They argue that the Twelve probably were neither overseers nor elders of a local Church in any real sense (Acts 15:22) and, therefore, not truly ancestors of the Christian priest in any historical way. Rather, it was the Christian community, through the action of the Holy Spirit who dwelt their midst, that chose leaders and set them apart for ordination. Celebrating the Eucharist flowed from the task of leading the community.

For those who hold this view, the question is not whether Jesus chose any woman to be a priest (since, strictly speaking, he chose none to be priests), but rather whether the historical fact that women were not chosen to preside at the Eucharist is a matter of divine tradition based on revelation or a human tradition rooted in cultural and sociological factors extraneous to the Gospel. The question for today, they would say, is how the Church responding to the call of the Spirit in choosing leaders for the communities of today. In ages past a woman could scarcely be chosen as a leader of a community and was excluded by that fact from celebrating the Eucharist. But, today, in some cultures, women have begun to take positions of leadership in the secular realm, and so it is possible for a community to respect, accept and desire the leadership of competent Christian women.

80. I spend time on this because I judge it to be of great importance that all members of our faith communion appreciate the fact that the decision of the teaching authority of the Church to ordain only men is made, not because the teaching authority is unmindful of the position of those who think the decision

could be otherwise, but because it is striving to be faithful to what it understands as a divine tradition that comes to us from the earliest days of the Church.

81. I pray that as this theological discussion continues all of us may be alert to the Spirit, who instructs us so patiently.

This dialogue will be enriched by our wholehearted and prayerful attempt to live out as fully as possible the rich and diverse ways in which the risen Lord, who is always among us drawing us to a deeper understanding and a fuller commitment to his Father's will, makes himself known through our humble service in the Church and our constant vigilance to be faithful to the revelation of God's will. "For," as the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation states, "as the centuries succeed one another, the Church constantly moves forward toward the fullness of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her."<sup>28</sup>

82. Ordination to ministry is but one aspect, one form, of a larger common work to which we are all called. It is difficult for us to comprehend that in this work of sanctifying his people, Jesus Christ depends directly on each of us. We are his eyes, his voice, his healing hands in the earthly pilgrimage of his people.

Although we are aware of our constant failings and sinfulness, Christ insistently calls us to the kind of sanctifying love of one another that will bring fuller holiness to his people. Indeed, he counts such love of our neighbor as love of him: "As long as we love one another, God will live in us and his love will be complete in us" (1 Jn. 4:12).

83. Our life is well served when all of us reflect on this work which is common to all, but which is extended by lay persons to every aspect and corner of human life. As Vatican Council II pointed out, "the faithful must learn the deepest meaning and value of all creation, and how to relate it to the praise of God. They must assist one another to live holier lives even in their daily occupations. In this way the world is permeated by the Spirit of Christ, and more effectively achieves its purpose in justice, charity and peace." The Council noted clearly that "the laity have the principal role in the universal fulfillment of this purpose."<sup>29</sup> Women and men share equally and fully in this solemn responsibility for the renewal of the face of the earth.

#### **VII C. THE CHURCH AS SHEPHERD OF CHRIST'S PEOPLE: INVOLVEMENT OF THE LAITY**

84. Within our faith community, as in any human community, there is need for guidance and direction, for the ministry of administration in fidelity to Christ's purposes. Those who are ordained to the pastoral ministry of governing the Church, namely the bishops, are by definition the servants of their brothers and sisters in the Church. For this service they need the help of their assistants, priests and deacons, and of all the laity on whose faith, wisdom and expertise they rely. Vatican Council II instructed each bishop that "In exercising this pastoral care, he should preserve for his faithful the share proper to them in Church affairs; he should also recognize their duty and right to collaborate actively in the building up of the Mystical Body of Christ."<sup>30</sup>

85. The call to this kind of collaboration is an exciting one and one which will demand much from us. It is exciting because in this postconciliar age the American Church has responded with vigor and creativity to the call to live out as fully as possible the vocation which we share through the sacraments of initiation. By this response we have tried to embody in our community life the profound insight that we are constituted full persons in the Church through these sacrament.

86. We have come to see and to live out in a new way the faith foundations for active participation and service in the life of the Church. What we have shared not only carries out the directions given us by the Council, but ratifies them and encourages us to move into the future.

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<sup>28</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 8.

<sup>29</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 36.

<sup>30</sup> Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church 16.

For we have come to realize through this experience that the involvement of the laity in the life of the Church is not something commissioned to them by the hierarchy, but is something founded in the baptismal vocation.

87. This does not mean that the past involvement of men and women in the Church lacked these foundations, nor does it mean that in our age we have discovered something completely new. Rather, it means that through this experience we have progressed to a new degree of consciousness and appreciation of what it means to be the Church.

There are many examples of this - the beginnings of Parish Councils and Diocesan Pastoral Councils, as we know them in our day and age, the many new ministries and modes of service carried on by lay persons in liturgical assemblies, and most commonly the renewed understanding of the life of the domestic Church. The expertise brought to the affairs of the Church by members of the community manifests in rich ways the contribution that God's people make in the life of the community. We have shared in a positive and life-giving period in the history of the Church. For all its difficulties and challenges, I am convinced that the beginning of this postconciliar age holds for us all the promise of ever greater maturing in the Spirit of the Lord.

88. In this continuing pastoral work of shepherding and governing the Church, I think we need to make strong efforts to include the contributions of women in decision-making processes and roles. We need to examine the composition of diocesan and parish committees, councils and staffs, and develop a more affirmative approach to incorporating the experience and expertise of women members. We cannot ignore their absence from advisory or decision making bodies or positions; nor can we justify it on the grounds of their inexperience in certain kinds of Church affairs or their lack of certain skills. Such attempts at justification will create a circle of self-fulfilling prophecies which will continue to keep many qualified women at the periphery of Church affairs.

If we acknowledge the baptismal call of women to contribute responsibly to the governance of Church affairs, then we must provide regular occasions and structures for such contributions.

For example, in the matters of administration, finances, building, organization, and long-range planning, all of us learn by doing. It is in the best interest of the Church that the talent of all her members be developed and placed at the service of the Church's needs.

## **VIII. OUR COMMON JOURNEY INTO THE FUTURE**

89. We are in the midst of a postconciliar renewal in the Church. For 20 years we have been striving as an ecclesial community to be faithful to the Holy Spirit calling us to new life. This renewal has been the source of much joy and excitement; and it has also seen us facing many problems new to our generation. These have not always been easy years, or ones totally free from suffering.

90. Perhaps that will always be the case. Neither new life nor lasting values are easily achieved on this earth. The call to sacrifice and change is an inseparable part of our union in the mystery of our Lord's paschal sacrifice.

This call to suffering is present in some members of our community because they judge themselves to be held back without good reason from certain forms of service. For others the sacrifice is precisely their call to move with the Church into ways of living and worship not of their preference.

Often enough the pain comes from the tension we experience in belonging to a Church which, because of its long history and universality, tends to change slowly, especially when those changes touch the heart of her traditions. For others, the pain comes from the perception that the traditions are changing too rapidly.

91. It is precisely because of the rich variety of life in the Church, the diversity among her members and our common obligation to be faithful to the Spirit of God, that I think the Lord in his wisdom has given the Church the service of authority. It is the role of the bishop of the local Church to be a sign of charity and unity among his people and to be the voice which calls his brother and sister pilgrims to that communion of life so important to the well being of all.

92. In this spirit I ask all in the Diocese of Rochester to consider prayerfully and thoughtfully the following observations:

1. It is imperative for our present well-being and future growth that we pray about, reflect upon and discuss the participation of women in the life of the Church.
2. We stand in need of that kind of conversion of heart which will call us away from any attitudes or ways of thinking contrary to the Gospel. As this kind of communal attitudinal change occurs, we will enter creatively into the future and enrich and be enriched by the ministry of women in the Church.
3. For this reason, I believe that the most important contribution our local Church can make at the present time to the dialogue being carried on in the larger Church is as full and faithful an entry as possible into the experience of the ministries now open to all of us. Further, we need to share what these ministries mean to us, both in terms of our own sense of service and in terms of the goodness of the ministry of others.
4. In the meantime we must be ready to sustain, encourage and give hope to one another. Some, because of their experience, educational background, personal makeup and commitments, find this journey a very difficult one. It must be a mark of our community that we keep our minds and hearts open to those who express viewpoints different from our own, or for whom the current norms of the Church regulating our life together are a source of suffering.
5. I encourage those who suffer to remain closely bound to the life of the community so that the pain they experience may possibly be not only a source of purification, strength and growth for them, but also an occasion for inviting others to join them in prayer and reflection about vexing questions. If we continue to face such questions, in an open and communal manner, we will avoid the dangers of being locked in ourselves and forgetting the primary mission of the Church, which is to proclaim the Good News of God's Kingdom to those who hunger for such spiritual nourishment.
6. At every step of our common journey we need to let the light of the Gospel shine on our attitudes and conduct. Our life together should be characterized by the fruits of the Holy Spirit's presence, such as charity, joy, peace, patience and long suffering. The primary statement which should always be made about us is that we love one another. This love, with the grace of God, will be evident among us even when there is a lack of agreement or harmony about certain aspects of our life in the Church.
7. I believe it is incumbent upon all of us in the diocese to make some effort - in ways that are natural and open to us - to express sorrow for those practices of the past that were injurious to the development of the full potential of women in the Church. I ask all priests and pastoral ministers to reach out to all women who have experienced hurt in this way. In particular I ask all pastors to take every opportunity to hear women reflect on their experience of the Church and their aspirations to share more deeply in her life.
8. I recognize that for many women and men the tensions which exist about the role of women in the Church are intimately intertwined with the role of women in the family. We need to create opportunities in which husbands and wives can search their own

attitudes with regard to sexism and dialogue constructively with one another and with other members of the community.

93. Finally, I present the following courses of action and ask appropriate parties in the Diocese of Rochester to respond to them as fully as possible:

1. It will be a priority of the Diocese of Rochester, all of its agencies, divisions and departments, to encourage and to invite women to participate in full measure in volunteer and paid positions within the diocese and its organizations.
2. There are many parishes in the diocese and many other groupings of the faithful, such as in hospitals and on college campuses, where there has been notable and steady increase in the proper participation of the laity in the life of these communities. This is to be encouraged and promoted - our ideal being that all the ministries and services in our communities which are baptismal ministries and services are to be fulfilled by lay persons.
3. In addition to this, in those parishes or communities of faithful where this has not been the case, every effort should be made by those in positions of leadership to invite, encourage and provide the proper training that will help lay persons, men and women, to assume their rightful positions in the life of their respective Church communities.
4. It is my wish that all our educational programs and institutions continue to improve their curricula on the roles and experience of women, the enormous contributions of women to the history of our Church, and the present rich gifts now being offered by women to our common life.
5. In our communications at every level we need to make efforts to use inclusive language and to avoid using expressions which are offensive to women.
6. Those of us who have such opportunity should make an effort to include the contributions of qualified women on all study commissions and policy-advisory bodies at the local, state, and national levels.
7. Those in the diocese responsible for the formation and education of candidates for the priesthood and permanent diaconate and for the continuing development of priests should make every effort to include study of the rightful roles and dignity of women in the Church.
8. All members of the diocese should seek to be knowledgeable about the continuing work of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Women in Church and Society, as well as other responsible groups at the local, national or international levels that concern themselves with the role of women in society and in the Church.
9. I encourage more inclusion of women in liturgical functions, in those roles now open to them or in new roles that may be legitimately created.
10. I encourage all theologians in the diocese to participate according to their expertise in continued theological and pastoral reflection on the questions related to the roles of women in the Church. Such reflection needs to be characterized by honesty and reasonableness in the argumentation, theological, and scriptural maturity, and respect for historical and sociological developments as contributors to tradition. Such reflection will involve thorough examination of Church history and the force of various Church statements and should include creative examination of the complementary relationship between ordained ministry and that which flows from the Sacrament of Initiation.

11. I urge the Liturgy Department and Liturgical Commission, as well as parish liturgy committees, to examine creatively the work of preaching: its kinds, the qualifications required for it, its various liturgical and extra-liturgical forms and moments. I ask especially that we engage in an effort to improve the quality of our preaching. How can we encourage and assist those entrusted with this ministry to carry it out in an even more fruitful way?
12. I ask the committee that plans conferences for our priests to plan programs dealing with such topics as Women in the Church, Ministry, Team Ministry, Sexism and Clericalism, and to involve, as appropriate, qualified women in the planning and presentation of such conferences.
13. The ministry of pastoral assistants should be recognized and developed as an important one in our diocese. For a decade they have extended God's love to his People through competent and loving service.
14. I ask individual donors, Catholic organizations, and individual parishes that are able to do so to sponsor scholarships at St. Bernard's Institute or other institutions for the graduate theological, ministerial or religious education of qualified women who seek to prepare themselves to serve the diocese or their parish.
15. I ask the priests of the diocese to unite with me in a prayerful examination of our attitudes toward women and the ways in which we communicate with them. Through such a sharing I believe that we will strengthen our bonds of faith and affection and, at the same time, lessen the possibility of any unhealthy clericalism among us.
16. Homilies on Sundays and the feasts of Mary and women saints should from time to time, as the scriptural readings permit, deal with such topics as the priesthood of the laity and the place and contribution of women in the Church.

## **EPILOGUE**

Let me close by reflecting, with respect and admiration, on the anonymous but dauntless women of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. From them we can learn, after all these centuries, what Jesus so cherished in them: their persistent faith, courage and presence to him.

These nameless but active women were in the crowds, in the synagogues, and in the homes he visited. They reached out fearlessly to touch the fringe of his cloak, in need they shouted after him, they entered his hosts' houses uninvited, they poured most expensive ointment over his feet to the consternation of some, they met him at wells, they resolutely waited on him and waited for him, they accompanied him from Galilee, they stood beneath his dying body, they ground spices for his burial, they calculated how to roll back the stone from his tomb. They attended firmly to the business of his living and dying, knowing his significance and deciding to stand and do on his behalf and on behalf of his Father's business.

For some reason, the evangelists did not record their names or much of what they said, but everyone knows that they "followed him." They knew where he was and they were there. They heard his words and they acted on them. They knew what he needed and they supplied it. They knew what he could do and they asked him to do it. They knew what he asked them to do and they did it. They knew the promise made to them, they went out to meet him on the road, they welcomed him, they knew from Jesus' own treatment of them the strength of their own testimony to him, and they were unafraid to show him great love.

Their lives were alabaster jars of nard poured out in active service, in decisive works, and in watchful presence at the end. Their action on Jesus' behalf was all very positive, courageous, and straightforward.

Their active faith in him and their decisive following of him are, finally, the unchanging quintessence of the Church's vocation.