

# Catholicism, Gender and Human Rights

BY SANDIE CORNISH

## **From rejection to proclamation: a brief overview of the development of Catholic thinking on human rights**

The Catholic Church's teaching on human rights is part of what is known as Catholic Social Doctrine or Catholic Social Teaching. Catholic Social Teaching is grounded in Biblical revelation, the teachings of the leaders of the Early Church (often known as the Fathers of the Church, although there were also some significant 'Mothers'), and in the wisdom gathered from the experience of the Christian community as it has responded to social justice issues through time (also known as Tradition). Catholic Social Teaching develops through time as it responds to new situations and learns from advances in human knowledge. It uses perennial principles for reflection and also more dynamic middle axioms or criteria for judgement. Catholic Social Teaching also includes less authoritative, more changeable and more specific guidelines for action in the particularity of given cases or historical situations.

Few people today would doubt that the Catholic Church is a great champion of human rights, yet the Church has not always viewed the concept of human rights as a positive thing. The journey of the Catholic Church from an outright rejection of human rights to a very active and committed proclamation of human rights is instructive for us all as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Monsignor Franco Biffi, of the Lateran and Gregorian Universities, describes the Church's engagement with the idea of human rights as hav-

ing passed through four phases: rejection, discernment, dialogue, and proclamation.<sup>1</sup>

### **The phase of rejection (Pius VI-Pius IX)**

The Church's initial response to the French Revolution and the resultant Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was complete rejection. This was essentially a defensive reaction against the anti-Christian, anti-religious, anti-clerical, rationalist and indifferentist spirit of the movement which produced the Charter of 1789.

The Church saw the French revolution as proclaiming a 'liberty' that was total and without limits. Such a 'liberty' was seen as ultimately promoting a freedom from God, the laws of God, and the social requirements of the common good. The base of this movement for liberty was naturalistic and materialistic.

The Church's rejection of the human rights ideas being promoted reached a peak during the reign of Pope Gregory XVI. In *Mirari Vos* (1832) he saw freedom of opinion and the separation of Church and State as 'crazed absurdity'. He also rejected religious liberty, freedom of the press and indifferentism (the idea that it is possible to obtain salvation through the profession of any kind of religion, ie. being indifferent to different religions).

The logic of the Church at this time was as follows. The Roman Catholic faith is the true religion. It is good for people to believe what is true. The State is obliged to promote the common good. Therefore the State is bound to promote Catholic belief, and, wherever possible, to establish Catholicism as the religion of the State.<sup>2</sup>

The basic idea was that error has no rights. The Church now sees persons as being the subject of rights rather than abstract concepts.

### **The phase of discernment (Leo XIII-Pius XII)**

Pope Leo XIII began to discern and accept some positive elements in the human rights ideas of his times.<sup>3</sup> His great contribution to the Church's teaching on human rights was the incorporation of whatever he saw as true or healthy in the liberal institutions being established in society.

Leo XIII saw human dignity as the root of natural, universal and inviolable rights. He saw a need for the State to exercise authority according to the rule of law, to defend the powerless, and to promote the common good. In taking this position he stressed that the person is prior to and above the State and therefore the State has no right to 'swallow up' the individual or family. In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, Leo XIII understood that the Church must become an advocate of the social and economic rights of the person, and his landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) elaborates a whole series of socio-economic rights.

Pius XI developed further the thinking of the Church about the rights of the person in relation to the State. In *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* (1931) he spoke out against fascism and in favour of the liberty of conscience. In *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1937) he rejected Nazism and the idolatry of the State, emphasising the right to profess one's faith and live according to it and the primary right of parents to the education of their children. In *Divini Redemptoris* (1937) he rejected communism and its reversal of the order of relations between the person and the State. He also enunciated a whole range of the respective rights and duties of the person and the State. In the third of his 1937 encyclicals, which became known collectively as the Easter Trilogy, *Nos Es Muy Conocida*, Pius XI made it clear that Catholic citizens should not passively accept the infringement of their religious and civil liberties, and that defence of oneself and one's nation by legitimate and appropriate means (with certain conditions) is not prohibited.

Pius XII's thoughts during the second World War were already focussed on what would be needed to reconstruct just and peaceful nations. His Christmas radio messages were particularly important in setting out the philosophical and juridical framework of the Church's approach to human rights and the role of the State. Pius XII's contribution is often overlooked because he published few encyclicals and lacked the charisma of John XXIII, who was later to rely so heavily on his predecessor's work.

### **The phase of dialogue (John XXIII Vatican II)**

Pope John XXIII initiated a phase of dialogue between the Church and the international community on human rights.<sup>4</sup> In his teachings, and that of Vatican II, the affirmation, defence and promotion of human rights was included with increasing clarity as one of the fundamental and indispensable tasks of the Church's mission.

In *Mater et Magistra* (1961) Pope John picked up Pius XII's revival of the expression 'the signs of the times' and he set about reading the hopeful and concerning signs of his times. He identified as a positive sign of the times the increasing consciousness of their own dignity and rights of workers, women and newly independent nations.

*Pacem in Terris* (1963) is as close as the social magisterium of the Church in modern times comes to its own declaration of human rights. Pope John saw human rights as the basis of peace, without which real peace was not possible. He set out the rights and duties of individuals within the community, and the rights and duties of political communities. He went on to outline the need for a supranational authority capable of ensuring a more enduring peace between nations.

It was in the context of the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* addressed not only to Catholics, but to all people of goodwill, that Pope John explicitly praised the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which had been issued by the United Nations in 1948. This was highly significant given that his predecessor had passed the Declaration over in silence. Pope John built on the secular Declaration to produce a 'Christian Charter of human rights', which saw human rights as based on the dignity of the human person created in the image and likeness of God, and giving emphasis to the social nature of the person and the reciprocal nature of rights and duties. It had been the absence of these dimensions from the UN Declaration that had so disappointed Pius XII that he failed to explicitly welcome it. Pope John, as Cardinal Roncalli the Papal Nuncio in Paris, had worked on the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in *Pacem in Terris* he completed his own declaration.

The Second Vatican Council, initiated by Pope John and brought to completion by Pope Paul VI, focussed on the Church's role as a servant of humanity. All of the rights enunciated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be found in the texts of Vatican II, and especially in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965).

### **The phase of proclamation (Paul VI to the present)**

Following the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church embarked on a new phase of actively proclaiming human rights.<sup>5</sup> By 1971, the Synod of Bishops saw the promotion of human rights as not only part of the work of the Church, but central to the demands of the Gospel. This theme was taken up by Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) which sets out the

relationship between evangelisation and the work for social justice, human rights and development.

Pope Paul taught about rights, duties and peace through a range of 'gestures of peace' such as the institution of the World Day of Prayer for Peace, and the establishment of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace (now a Pontifical Council). Pope Paul engaged in many of the activities and conferences of the United Nations and frequently made positive reference to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He worked hard to assist those whose rights had been violated, although little of this 'diplomatic' action was known. He fostered ecumenical collaboration via SODEPAX (Committee on Research on Society, Development and Peace) which acted as a link between the World Council of Churches and the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace. And it was Pope Paul who initiated the great Papal travels of our times.

During the past twenty years, Pope John Paul II has contributed strongly to the development of Catholic Social Teaching, producing important social encyclicals and taking part in many significant international forums. His journeys to many countries have become an important tool for highlighting the particular forms of human rights abuses present in various parts of the world. The theological underpinnings of John Paul II's human rights work are explicitly Christological and incarnational. Followers of Christ, who embraced the human condition, must be lovers of humanity and are called to imitate him in defending the dignity and rights of every human person and of all peoples.

The Catholic Church's attitude to human rights has come a long way since the French Revolution. We now understand that far from offending God, the defence of human rights is the will of God.

### **Human dignity demands respect for human rights: connecting Church teaching and human rights today**

To summarise the current state of Catholic thinking on human rights, the source of human rights is the inalienable, transcendent, God given dignity of every human being. It is on the basis of this dignity that we make the claims that are called human rights. Every human being and all human groups share equally in the image of God and are therefore equal in dignity and rights. The promotion of human rights is a central part of the mission of the Catholic Church. It is both a requirement of evangelisation and a consequence of it.

## **The source of human rights is God**

Human dignity is the starting point and central concern of Catholic thinking about human rights and justice in society. Each person is created in the image and likeness of God and so has an inalienable, transcendent God given dignity. It is because we were made by God in God's own image, endowed with intelligence and free will, that we have human rights. This is the source or origin of our human rights, not the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Universal Declaration states some truths about the dignity and rights of human beings, and it has significant moral force in international humanitarian law, but it does not create or confer those rights.

To speak of human rights is to speak of the claims that we can make on the basis of our human dignity. They are the things that are due to us simply because we are human beings, made in the image and likeness of God. It follows that each member of the human family is equal in dignity and has equal rights because we are all created in God's likeness, all children of the one God. We are sisters and brothers to each other.

We understand God to be a trinity of persons and so we see the image of God reflected not only in individual people, but also in communities. Together in community we bear the image of our God whose very nature is communal. Our nature too is social. We were born out of relationship and into relationship. Human beings cannot survive, let alone reach their potential, in isolation from others. Just as all persons are equal in dignity and rights, so too every nation possesses equal dignity and rights.

Created in the image and likeness of the one God and equally endowed with rational souls, all men [sic] have the same nature and the same origin. Redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, all are called to participate in the same divine beatitude: all therefore enjoy an equal dignity.<sup>6</sup>

## **Human dignity demands respect for human rights**

The Church more often speaks of the dignity of the human person than of human rights; however, the teaching of the Church makes it clear that respect for human dignity requires respect for human rights.

Respect for the human person entails respect for the rights that flow from his [sic] dignity as a creature. These rights are prior to society and must be recognised by it. They are the basis of the moral legitimacy of every authority; by flouting them, or refusing to recognise them in its positive legislation, a society undermines its own moral legitimacy.<sup>7</sup>

Respect for human dignity and human rights is not simply something that the Church urges on individuals and secular authorities. The promotion of human dignity and human rights is a central part of the Church's own mission. The Church's work for social justice and the promotion of human rights has deep Christological and missiological roots.

### **The mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption and human rights**

To be Christians we must be followers of Jesus Christ. Through the mystery of the Incarnation Jesus took on the human condition and redeemed it. Christians, then, must also embrace the human in all its concrete historical particularity. God acts in and through human history and so the ordinary business of living in this world is part of our journey of faith, part of our path to salvation. This is what Pope John Paul II means when he talks about the human person as the path of the Church.

... we are not dealing here with man [sic] in the 'abstract', but with the real, 'concrete', 'historical' man [sic]. We are dealing with each individual, since each one is included in the mystery of the Redemption, and through this mystery Christ has united himself with each one forever. It follows that the Church cannot abandon man [sic], and that this man [sic] is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her [sic] mission ... the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption.<sup>8</sup>

### **The option for the poor and human rights**

Jesus had a special care for the poor, powerless and pushed aside. To follow him means walking in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and those who are powerless, to affirm their dignity and rights, and to lend them a voice. Our lives too must bring good news for the poor, sight for

the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. This is sometimes called the option for the poor.

This is an option, or a special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity, to which the whole tradition of the Church bears witness. It affects the life of each Christian inasmuch as he or she seeks to imitate the life of Christ, but it applies equally to our social responsibilities and hence to our manner of living, and to the logical decisions to be made concerning the ownership of goods.

Today, furthermore, given the worldwide dimension which the social question has assumed, this love of preference for the poor, and the decisions which it inspires in us, cannot but embrace the immense multitudes of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care and, above all, those without hope for a better future. It is impossible not to take account of the existence of these realities.<sup>9</sup>

## **Evangelisation and human rights**

Work for justice and respect for human rights is an essential part of the Catholic faith, and it is a necessary part of preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is both a requirement of evangelisation and a consequence of it. The first means of evangelisation is the witness of life; in order to preach the Gospel effectively we must witness to its values in the way that we live. And if we hear and accept the Gospel, we will answer its call to work for justice and respect for the dignity of each and every human person.

As the kernel and centre of his good news, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man [sic] but which is above all liberation from sin and the evil one.<sup>10</sup>

Work for social justice and respect for human rights involves promoting the elimination of poverty, and freedom from political oppression. These things are part of working to build up the Reign of God already mysteriously present in the world, but the Reign of God is not to be reduced to a purely temporal transformation of our societies. Work for social justice and the promotion of human rights is not the whole of the mission of the Church.



Catholicism, Gender and Human Rights

The teaching and spread of her [sic] social doctrine are part of the Church's evangelising mission. And since it is a doctrine aimed at guiding people's behaviour, it consequently gives rise to a 'commitment to justice', according to each individual's role, vocation and circumstances.

The condemnation of evils and injustices is also part of that ministry of evangelisation in the social field which is an aspect of the Church's prophetic role. But it should be made clear that proclamation is always more important than condemnation, and the latter cannot ignore the former, which gives it true solidity and the force of higher motivation.<sup>11</sup>

### **The rights of man or of all human persons? Catholic teaching on the rights of women**

Current Catholic teaching about the roles and rights of women appears to be contradictory. On the one hand, women and men are seen as equal and the participation of women in public life is heralded as a positive sign of the times. Yet on the other hand, the role of women is seen in terms of complementarity and being helper to men, and the appropriate vocational choices presented are either virginity or motherhood. Sex discrimination in the world at large is decried, but not all roles within the Catholic Church are open to women.

As we shall see there is much in the teachings to support those who promote a socially conservative view of the role of women, while at the same time there is ample encouragement to Christian feminists.

### **Women's rights are human rights**

During the early 1990s I undertook a study of the teachings of the Catholic Church in Australia on matters of justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I compared the Australian teachings to the international teachings of the Church – or, as we would say, to the universal social magisterium. The development of the Church's thinking about the rights of indigenous people was to be seen most clearly in the speeches given by the Pope when visiting various countries and addressing groups of indigenous people.

I found that the approach of the Church was not to identify special rights for indigenous peoples that other peoples can't have, but rather to emphasise that the rights of indigenous people and indigenous peoples

are simply human rights. Everybody, including indigenous peoples, has a right not to have their land and property taken from them arbitrarily. Everyone, including indigenous people, has a right to primacy in the education of their children, and a right to raise their children according to their own culture. And so the list of basic human rights of indigenous people that haven't been respected in practice goes on.

This study illustrates the general approach of the Catholic Church to the rights of particular groups. It is not a case of special rights for special groups. Human rights are seen as universal, as applying to all people and all peoples across all boundaries of time and place. But what might be required in order to give practical expression to these same rights may be different for different groups or in different concrete circumstances. For example, respect for religious liberty does not require that Catholics have access to particular pieces of land, but the freedom of many indigenous peoples to practice their religious beliefs does require that they have access to particular sites.

Following this approach, the Catholic Church today proclaims that women's rights are human rights, that all human rights pertain to women as well as to men. As in many other areas of teaching on human rights, it has taken the Catholic Church some time to reach this understanding. During the medieval period women were clearly seen by the Catholic Church as inferior beings and there were serious theological discussions on whether or not women possessed souls.

In *Gaudium et Spes*, which is a very authoritative Church document, being a teaching statement of the Pope in Council, we have a clear denunciation of discrimination on the basis of sex:

Undoubtedly not all men are alike as regards physical capacity and intellectual and moral power. But forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design. It is regrettable that these basic personal rights are not yet being respected everywhere, as is the case with women who are denied the choice freely to choose a husband, or a state of life, or to have access to the same educational and cultural benefits as available to men.<sup>12</sup>

## Complementarity, virginity and motherhood

While the Catholic Church sees women and men as being equal in dignity, it also sees them as different, and as having quite different roles and responsibilities. The proper vocation of women is seen as either virginity or motherhood. These sex roles are treated as biologically determined and Divinely ordained. They are seen as part of the natural order and, at times, it appears that women and men are seen as having different natures rather than a common human nature. Men's vocation, role and nature are not defined by the teachings biologically.

As John Paul II expressed it in his *Letter to Women*:

The creation of woman is thus marked from the outset by the principle of help: a help which is not one sided but mutual. Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: men and women are complementary. Womanhood expresses the 'human' as much as manhood does, but in a different and complementary way.

When the Book of Genesis speaks of 'help', it is not referring merely to acting, but also to being. Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' that the 'human' finds full realization.<sup>13</sup>

The concept of complementarity between the roles of women and men casts women in the role of helper and nurturer. These roles may be experienced as subsidiary, dependent, conferring little social status and providing few opportunities for self expression and growth. In these circumstances, such a division of roles may foster domination rather than mutuality and equality.

While affirming the full personhood of women, their autonomy, their capacity and right to freely determine their own life choices, the Catholic Church also indicates what it sees to be the proper role of women. This is well illustrated by the following passage from *Octagesima Adveniens* by Paul VI:

in many countries a charter for women which would put an end to actual discrimination and would establish relationships of equality in rights and respect for their dignity is the object of study and at times lively demands. We do not have

## Catholicism, Gender and Human Rights

in mind that false equality which would deny the distinctions laid down by the Creator himself and which would be in contradiction with women's proper role, which is of such capital importance, at the heart of the family as well as within society. Developments in legislation should on the contrary be directed to protecting her proper vocation and at the same time recognising her independence as a person, and her equal rights to participate in cultural, economic, social and political life.<sup>14</sup>

The controversy regarding the Catholic Church's judgement that it has no authority to ordain women to the ministerial priesthood is related to this view of complementarity. Many of the faithful struggle to see this gendered division of religious roles as reflecting different but equal roles rather than simply enforcing different and unequal ones. Interestingly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholics seem to find this division easily acceptable. All of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic women with whom I have discussed these issues saw this division as being in harmony with their cultures: cultures in which gender roles are highly specified but experienced as complementary and equal. This encourages me to believe that it is the social construction of complementarity that is problematic rather than the concept that women and men are different but equal.

This is how John Paul II has explained the Church's position on ordination:

the presence of a diversity of roles is in no way prejudicial to women, provided that this diversity is not the result of arbitrary imposition, but is rather an expression of what is specific to being male and female ...

If Christ by his free and sovereign choice, clearly attested to by the Gospel and by the Church's constant tradition entrusted only to men the task of being an 'icon' of his countenance as 'shepherd' and 'bridegroom' of the Church through the exercise of the ministerial priesthood, this in no way detracts from the role of women, or for that matter from the role of the other members of the Church who are not ordained to the sacred ministry, since all share equally in the dignity proper to the 'common priesthood' based on baptism.<sup>15</sup>

Those who wish to examine a fuller explanation of this position should read John Paul II's Apostolic Letters *Mullieris dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women) and *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (On Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men Alone) - only the titles are in Latin.

## Participation in the public sphere

The participation of women in the public sphere was at first treated by the Popes as an unfortunate reality, often the result of economic necessity, typically the loss of a male provider, or the advent of war. Such participation was gradually accepted, on the proviso that it should not be allowed to interfere with women's 'real' role as mothers.

And so we see the following qualifications in *Gaudium et Spes*' affirmation of women's participation in social and cultural life:

Women are employed in almost every area of life. It is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full proper roles in accordance with their own nature. Everyone should acknowledge and favour the proper and necessary participation of women in cultural life.<sup>16</sup>

And, spelling out more specifically what this nature implies:

the children, especially the younger among them, need the care of their mother at home. This domestic role of hers must be safely preserved, though the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account.<sup>17</sup>

'Good' Pope John had earlier welcomed, in his characteristically optimistic tone, the increasing consciousness of women and their participation in public life as a sign of the times:

it is obvious to everyone that women are now taking a part in public life. This is happening more rapidly perhaps in nations of Christian civilisation, and, more slowly but broadly, among peoples who have inherited other traditions or cultures [this claim is perhaps debatable]. Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as inanimate objects or mere instruments, but claim, both in domestic and in public life, the rights and duties that befit a human person.<sup>18</sup>

While the contributions of women to public life are now more clearly celebrated, there remains an implicit preference for domestic roles or roles with a quasi domestic quality. In welcoming women's participation in

public life and urging them to become involved in the work of reconciliation, Pope Paul VI sees their specific contribution as an extension of their nurturing family roles:

We rejoice, especially on the eve of International Women's Year, proclaimed by the United Nations, at the ever wider participation of women in the life of society, to which they bring a specific contribution of great value, thanks to the qualities that God has given them. These qualities of intuition, creativity, sensibility, a sense of piety and compassion, a profound capacity for understanding and love, enable women to be in a very particular way the creators of reconciliation in families and in society.<sup>19</sup>

While the heavy emphasis of Catholic teaching on the family roles of women may seem burdensome and restrictive to many, the experience of many women of different cultures and classes, but especially the poorest, has been that the price of involvement outside the domestic sphere is that they are now expected to work the double shift of paid employment, caring for dependants and performing housework. It is true, as the International Declaration of Human Rights sets out in Article 25.2 that motherhood and childhood are worthy of special care and protection. Catholic teaching is right to insist that this role be esteemed and protected. This is really a pro woman stance. What is problematic is the apparent reduction and restriction of women to this role. There are signs, however, that the Catholic Church's thinking on how this care and protection can best be ensured in is a state of change. In recent Church pronouncements and in 'semi-official' writings there has begun to enter an appreciation of the necessity of men taking their fathering roles more seriously and sharing in the work of family life. There has also been a move to suggest that the organisation of the production process itself should be better adapted to the family responsibilities of workers.

There has also been a significant concession that sex role stereotypes may not be Divinely ordained but rather the result of social conditioning. John Paul II's acknowledgment of the role of social conditioning and apology for the Church's part in the oppression of women is worth quoting at length:

Unfortunately we are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their

## Catholicism, Gender and Human Rights

prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. Certainly it is no easy task to assign the blame for this, considering the many kinds of cultural conditioning which down the centuries have shaped ways of thinking and acting. And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision. When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself. Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love. As we look to Christ at the end of this Second Millennium, it is natural to ask ourselves: how much of his message has been heard and acted upon?

Yes, it is time to examine the past with courage, to assign responsibility where it is due in a review of the long history of humanity.<sup>20</sup>

How can the Catholic Church respond to this call?

**Fidelity to the Gospel vision: some directions for the development of Catholic teaching on gender and human rights**

Catholic social teaching draws on the Scriptures; on human knowledge, especially in the areas of the social sciences; and on Tradition or the experience of the faith community through time. It is a constantly developing body of teaching as the Church grows in understanding of the human person and the world and responds to changing circumstances and new issues. Its standard methodology is inductive, moving from observation and description of the social reality to assessing this reality according to the Church's principles for reflection and applying the criteria for judgement in order to develop guidelines for action.

Recalling the sources and methodology of Catholic Social Teaching provides several starting points for the development of Catholic thinking on gender and human rights.

## **Return to the Book, look again at Tradition**

What does the Bible tell us about the lives of women as they respond to the message of the Gospel? What does it tell us about the kinds of relationships that Jesus had with women and the kinds of relationships that the Gospel message inspired in the early followers of Jesus?

In the last couple of decades there has been an explosion of Scriptural studies undertaken by women and feminist men. As people of the book, the Bible is a critically important source for us in trying to be ever more faithful to the Gospel. Good Biblical scholarship, attentive to the perspectives and experiences of women as well as men, will be indispensable to the task of renewing our commitment to the Gospel vision of the equal dignity of women and men.

I mentioned earlier the influence of the 'Fathers of the Church'. We need also to look for the Mothers of the Church and to recover the stories of the women of the Early Church. This enterprise also needs to extend beyond the so-called Patristic period to encompass the experience of the people of God through time-up to and including the present. In particular we will benefit from the excavation of the wisdom gained through the experiences of the female part of the people of God as we have struggled to respond to social justice issues through history.

There are many role models that could be offered to modern women. There are many virgins and martyrs but strangely very few mothers among our saints. Women engaged in working actively in the world should also feature among those held up as examples of faith.

## **Embrace knowledge about the human person**

The Church can always learn from human sciences, especially the social sciences. As human knowledge advances, it is conceivable that the anthropology underlying Papal teaching on the roles of women and men may need to be reassessed. Perhaps the part played in the determination of gender roles by social conditioning is even larger than currently thought. If nurture were found to be a stronger influence on roles than nature, then it may well be that rigidly defined sex roles are not part of a Divinely ordained order but rather are a consequence of original sin.



The passage from John Paul II quoted above moves in this direction but it needs to be more thoroughly 'unpacked' to understand its implications.

### **Start with the reality of women's lives**

There has been a growing tendency in teaching about women to work deductively, applying abstract ideas to the 'question' of women, or to base teaching in Mariology, rather than working inductively, starting from the concrete reality of contemporary women's lives. To date the experiences of women have not been adequately taken into account in the Catholic Church's social teachings. For example, it is only in recent times that women's experiences as workers have begun to be addressed as something more than an unfortunate passing phenomenon.

Applying the standard methods of the Catholic Social Teachings, we would start by looking at the concrete, historical, lived experience of real women around the world today. We would then ask what was happening to the dignity of women as human persons. We would formulate a call to action to promote the dignity and rights of women as full human beings. A global analysis would grow out of the dialogue between a variety of more localised or specific analyses.

As well as being the object of Catholic reflection, women should also be more frequently involved in that analysis, reflection and subsequent formulation of Church teaching. The laity as a whole have the particular mission of transforming the everyday world according to the will of God. Women in particular must claim this legitimate role in action for social justice.

Returning to the methodology of Catholic Social Teaching would provide a strong antidote to the romanticisation and sentimentalism that marks so much Catholic teaching on women and on motherhood in particular. As a woman and a social scientist, I think I am reasonably well placed to observe that women are not morally superior to men; we are capable of all of the evil that is perpetrated by men - sometimes we just lack the opportunity. The exalted status that is given to women by Church teaching has not in fact resulted in care and protection of women by men, but more often in a dualistic love - hate relationship marked by exploitation.

## Conclusion

Catholic teaching on the dignity and role of women appears at this time to be riddled with contradictions. Is this chaos and confusion? Is it hypocrisy? In my opinion it is the sign of a period of growth and development in the Church's teachings. Catholic thinking is struggling towards a new understanding of gender and human rights. It has already taken some time, and it may take some years yet, to reach that new understanding. It is my hope that it will be an understanding that continues to esteem motherhood but balances this esteem with a greater emphasis on the parenting responsibilities of fathers and the personal growth and opportunities for self-giving that this offers men. I hope that it will be an understanding that retains a commitment to the complementarity and mutuality of women and men but denounces as sinful the social construction of complementarity as subordination. I hope that in the not too distant future, the teaching authority of the Church will encourage a greater participation by women in the public realm and a greater participation by men in the private realm, but above all, deliver a challenge to everyone to develop their God--given potential and to place it at the service of the human community.

## Notes

- 1 The historical material that follows is indebted to the work of Monsignor Biffi in course notes and in his article "Human Rights in the Magisterium of the Popes of the Twentieth Century", in *Human Rights: a Christian Approach*, International Federation of Catholic Universities Research Coordination Centre, Manilla, 1988.
- 2 Key Papal texts from this period include Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos*, 1832; and Pius IX, *Quanta Cura* and the *Syllabus of Errors*, 1864.
- 3 Key Papal texts from this period include: Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 1891; Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, *Non Abbiamo Bisogno*, 1931, *Mit Brennender Sorge*, 1937, *Divini Redemptoris*, 1937, *Nos Es Muy Conocida*, 1937; Pius XII, *Summi Pontificatus*, 1939, and his Christmas Radio Messages during the Second World War, especially 1941, 1942, and 1944.
- 4 Key texts from John XXIII were *Mater et Magistra*, 1961; and *Pacem in Terris*, 1963. One of the most significant texts from Vatican II was *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965.
- 5 Some important texts from this period include the 1971 Synod of Bishops' statement, *Justice in the World*; Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 1967, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975; John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 1979, *Laborem Exercens*, 1981, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991.
- 6 Catechism of the Catholic Church, n 1934.
- 7 Catechism of the Catholic Church, n 1930.
- 8 John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n 52.

Catholicism, Gender and Human Rights

- 9 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n 42.
- 10 Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n 9.
- 11 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n 41.
- 12 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, n 29.
- 13 John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 1995, n 7.
- 14 Paul VI, *Octagesima Adveniens*, 1971, n 13.
- 15 John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 1995, n 11.
- 16 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, n 60.
- 17 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, n 52.
- 18 John XXII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, n 41.
- 19 Paul VI, *World Day of Peace Message*, 1975, n 13.
- 20 John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 1995, n 3.