



## CHAPTER VI

### FRUITING TIME:

### VOCATIONS TO CONFRONTATION

#### (A Case Study of Counterelltlet Sisters)

#### VOCATIONS TO CONFRONTATION

In Old Testament times God seemed to raise up prophets to admonish or critique the kings, the courts, or religious leaders. In the Christian era this needed role has been frequently performed by various religious communities, —if not through direct confrontation with religious or secular leaders, at least through their focus of commitment and their counterwitness presence. As part of that long tradition, the Sisters For Christian Community recognize that their own vocational charism is to the ministry of confrontation. They have been challenged to assume this sixth-stage-type service to the Church by these forceful words of Vatican II.

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. *Gaudium Et Spes*, II:29

For these sisters, then, the traditional sister-image of sweet docility and gracious submissiveness to the dictates of the all-male administrative personnel of the Church, must be, by reason of their vocation, swept away into the discarded culture heaps of history as relics of the passing patriarchal era. Although expressing Christ-like respect for all lawful authority, the life-style and mode of commitment of the Sisters For Christian Community is not circumscribed by male-made canonical legislation that deliberately left the sisters of the world, and all Christian women, unrepresented and voiceless. Rather, these sisters are responding to the Holy Spirit's challenge, extended to all Christians, to participate forcefully in Christ's own incarnational goal of freeing humankind from all forms of person-limiting, person-negating, person-destroying **DOMINATION**, —the master moral evil that denies persons their God-given, inherent, and immutable rights.

Jesus' own consuming goal to free persons and groups from all forms of dehumanizing oppression, is the determined vocational charism of the Sisters For Christian Community. With Jesus, these women disavow the multiple forms of domination in world society, but especially its presence in world religions. Each Sister For Christian Community may address any facet of this human problem for which she has interest and competence. Only in one specific area are these sisters committed by their commonly-ascribed-to **PROFILE** to respond collectively. Their unique vocational goal, the one that distinguishes them from any other religious community that has ever existed within the Church, is to address their energies specifically to the formidable challenge of helping to remove from the Church, itself, centuries-old accretions of **DOMINATIVE STRUCTURES, POLICIES, and PRACTICES** which ravage its beauty, deface its image, and leave it today a less than authentic witness to the freeing teachings of Jesus, and the meaning of Christian Community.

This newly emerging unity of women strive to live on the cutting edge of Catholic Church renewal and reform. They are women who strive to identify with

all women, —all oppressed and dominated persons regardless of gender, because they, themselves, have already walked alone through the valley of the shadow of death and felt the chains of subordination and degradation. These are women who have emerged from the experience of oppression sufficiently to identify with the courage of Jesus Christ when He protested the ossified laws of Judaism, when He charged the scribes and pharisees with being whitened sepulchers, when His just and terrible anger overturned the money-tables in the temple and scattered the sacrificial offerings.

In a very real sense, the word **OVERTURN**, for these sisters, is a cause for pause, a word to muse on, chew on, and pray over, for they are convinced that unless the Church as **THE PEOPLE OF GOD** can overturn the cemented-for-centuries **SEXISM, RACISM, ELITISM, CLASSISM, CASTISM, CLERICALISM, SECRETIVENESS, CENSORSHIP**, and other forms of authoritarianism in the administrative structures of the Church, the Church will continue to be an alienating force for millions rather than a Community of simplicity and love, —the **CHURCH RADIANT**.

Only the most daringly dedicated Christians would consecrate their lives to such overturn. The world press and religious publications focus at times on articles and books by thoughtful scholars risking their reputations in questioning or critiquing the Church relative to patterns of domination within it. The bishops of the world at Vatican II addressed facets of the issue, and the insightful documents which followed attest to their deep concern for freedom, the dignity of persons, the need for the People of God to be collegial community, and for the Church to be a radiant presence in the world. Nevertheless, the great hopefulness generated by the Great Council burns low. The issues raised by the Council simmer languidly on back burners. Regression and fixation are once more visible and operative. The impetus for reform seems frozen. The voices of the Hans Kungs seem muted within the Church. Critics outside of it can be ignored easily, —their accusations be sloughed off as rhetorical over-kill. Believers within can be easily intimidated by the mere label of extremism, —a discrediting technique needing no skill nor confrontation dialogue. Christianity, like Judaism, has multiple means for killing its prophets or denying their credentials. The ostrich syndrome is no stranger here. So what possible impact can the emerging Sisters For Christian Community, —whose title, itself, means: **SISTERS FOR THE CHURCH**—, possibly anticipate? Should not protest over the dominative patterns within the Church be addressed by the stronger, well-known, well-respected, canonically approved male groups such as the Jesuits, Benedictines, Dominicans, Franciscans, Passionists, etc.? Such groups, it would seem, could be effective forces. But one is left wondering why these scholar-filled congregations and orders are relatively silent over the:

- SEXISM**
- RACISM**
- ELITISM**
- CLASSISM**
- CLERICALISM**
- SECRETIVENESS**
- CENSORSHIP**

and other authoritarian patterns of domination and oppression within the Church. Have the male congregations and orders read so carefully between the lines of Church history that they consider it more prudent or political to withhold questioning or critiquing the most powerful religious bureaucracy in the world? Or, are the male groups part of the problem? Does **SEXISM**, an idolatry of maleness accompanied by the denegration of women, lock male congregations and orders into complacency and inaction? **SEXISM**, heading the above listing, is designedly in priority position, not because it affects one-half of the human race, but because its proponents call it **BIBLE-BASED** and justified by both the Old and the New Testaments, —a justification for the domination of women by men everywhere. All the other forms of domination seem green-lighted by that assumption.

The Church's dominative patterns throughout most of its history make it today a very ineffectual instrument for peace, or for protest of more blatantly aggressive forms of domination: totalitarianism, militarism, colonialism, and slavery. Unfortunately, history also associates the Roman Catholic Church with

these evils as well, and this association may account, in part, for the feeble impact, or feeble protest of the Church during centuries of oppression and war in purportedly Christian nations. The seeming silence of the Church during the subjugation and extermination of Jews by Nazi Germany, a nation of Christians, is a case at point. Only when the Church has straightforwardly admitted and removed her own dominative patterns, can it effectively examine and protest the mote in another organizational eye.

Currently, the most spotlighted and obstructive mote in the eye of Church administrators is **SEXISM**, defined quite commonly as above, —as an idolatry of maleness accompanied by the denegation and oppression of women. The most frightening aspect of this form of domination is the fact that the Bible is used as the basis for this distortion of truth, thus making God an accomplice in the misdeeds of men. The very instigators, propagators, and perpetrators of this moral evil are officials of Judaism, Islamism, and Christianity. Throughout the Western world, Christian feminist scholars researching and writing for the Women's Movement are uncovering and exposing the shoddy exegesis and the errors in linguistic interpretation that have made possible the most massive heist of women's rights in the history of humankind.

To right the evil, God must be vigorously de-sexed, or re-mythologized as androgynous or bisexual. The Church must portray God as God is: **PURE BEING, PURE ACT**. Or, if Church officials would allow God to be continuously anthropomorphized (portrayed as a human), as a condescension to what some claim is a human need for relating intimately with a personal, parental Creator, then the anthropomorphic image must represent the whole of the human reality, and not just the male part. An anthropomorphized God must image our femaleness as our **MOTHER GODDESS**, and not just our maleness as **FATHER GOD**. Or the two images might be combined, as some are doing who address our **MOTHER-FATHER GOD**.

To be imaged authentically, however, God must be scoured of all taint of **SEXISM** affixed by those who have truncated the human reality by presenting God exclusively as a male divinity who created man to His own image and likeness, but who created woman as an afterthought from man's rib. This exclusionary attribution of maleness to God by Jewish scribes and Christian clerics must be recognized for what it is:

- An act of discriminatory mythologizing, an anthropomorphizing of God's masculine attributes, as perceived by the scribes and clerics, while arbitrarily excluding God's feminine qualities from comparable mythologizing . . .
- A wishful and/or fictitious identification of the Godhead with malehood that is a deliberate or culturally conditioned denegation of women by reason of omission . . .
- A distortion of the Genesis revelation stating that God created both male and female to God's image, and regarded them as equally good . . .
- A defacement of the immutable nature of God as Uncreated Being by affixing to God's image the mutable appendages of maleness before scholarship allowed persons to recognize this as a mythologizing of God . . .
- A misemphasis on the incarnated Christ as **MALE** rather than as **HUMAN PERSON**, —human personhood being the quality assumed and shared equally by both women and men . . .

The very persons who claim to be the most committed to God's service, have rendered God the most massive disservice by distorting the creation story, by projecting their own maleness onto **PURE BEING**, and then claiming superiority and the right to dominate women on the basis of this gross distortion. The scribes and clerics responsible in both primitive times and the present, have beclouded for humankind the very realities they are purportedly commissioned and committed to illumine.

The science of linguistics affirms that a people participates in the forming of its own language. But then, the language, in turn, shapes the people who then become locked into frozen categories of thought limited by the limits of the language. Words do determine cultural mindsets. So it is of no small consequence that for over two thousand years scribes and clerics have used male-oriented liturgies, scriptures, song lyrics, text books, official documents and other forms of religious literature. Such usage of sexist language creates mindsets which overflow into discriminatory social structures, policies, and practices

oppressive of women. If we dared to be publicly frank on this issue, we would be forced to shout from the housetops that through the means of sexist language, religious officials have been advertantly or inadvertantly teaching concepts of both God and woman which are theologically and anthropologically false. This is no compliment to the teaching magisterium. If this moral evil has been inadvertant, the Church will acknowledge the culturally conditioned language patterns, and replace them. Some small efforts in this direction are being made in response to the urging of Christian feminists. It would be irresponsible evasion, however, if religious officials of whatever rank minimized the moral implications in what they have done by countering:

“Oh well, of course we know that God is sexless: —is **PURE BEING**. It is just a matter of expression that we call Him a **HIM**. We are not thereby spreading a false understanding of God or of woman. We are simply lacking suitable androgynous pronouns and have been too busy these past twenty centuries to initiate proper ones. Anyway, everyone knows that **GOD** is not a male. On the other hand, women can never be priests because they are **NOT** male and therefore cannot mirror God the Son as He was incarnated in Christ.”

In any other setting such double-talk would be recognized as sophistry and the trivializing of **SEXISM**, a moral evil destructive of half of the human family. **SEXISM** denies woman full personhood and thus exposes her to oppressive manipulation and exploitation that is purportedly Bible-blessed. Such evasiveness, where it still persists in the Church, increases the ambivalence toward religion already germinating in many educated believers, and serves as further justification for those who have already become alienated from Judaism and Christianity because of just such theological perjury. It is no surprise then that many Jewish rabbis and Catholic priests or Christian ministers are a source of scandal within their respective communions today, for allowing the spiritual crises of ambivalence, disbelief, and alienation to continue unabated, unattended, unrepented. The ostrich posture on the issue of **SEXISM** inevitably forces some of the best-informed and most sincerely committed Christians and Jews to ask themselves if continued participation in sexist liturgies, and continued financial support of sexist institutions, is morally permissible. To persons with 6th stage moral development, such support is seen as tantamount to an affirmation of **SEXISM**, and hence the affirmation of a moral evil.

Because **SEXISM**, whether as a distortion of God, woman, or man is a distortion of truth, a social injustice, and a perniciously evil act, increasing numbers of Christians and Jews, —especially women—, are being impelled by informed and developed consciences to disavow being party to continued sexist discrimination and Bible distortion. They are forced by their convictions and integrity to accept one of the following alternatives:

1. To face the terrible pain of **DISSOCIATION** from temple, church, or synagogue
2. To face the equal pain of **CONTINUED ASSOCIATION** which in conscience demands **RESPECTFUL CONFRONTATION** with:
  - sexist persons
  - sexist structures
  - sexist policies and
  - sexist practices

Religious officials within sexist organizations cannot fail to notice the serious erosion of membership; but the myopia of sexist mindsets blinds many religious leaders to one paramount cause: their own **SEXISM**. They erect diversionary smokescreens that blame exodus from the churches on the faithlessness, sinfulness, or extremism of others. In the face of deep-grooved sexist mind-binds, confrontation tactics alone have proven inadequate. The study of the psychological disturbances and personality maladjustment correlated with tenaciously held prejudices against women or any category of persons, is beyond the intended scope of this chapter. It needs to be mentioned in passing, however, that confrontation with sexism or with any dominative tendency can be effective only when dealing with otherwise balanced persons who have rather inadvertantly gone along with cultural patterns without questioning them or one's own ascription to them. With such persons of good will confrontation constitutes an effective means of consciousness-raising, and ultimately, of change.

However, if one is sincerely convinced that the celibate clerical caste of the Catholic Church is bound by an irrational psychologically-rooted sexist prejudice correlated with an authoritarian personality type, then a reasonable response would be to leave such a sexist stronghold. If, on the contrary, one is convinced that the sexism in the personnel, the policies, and practices of the Church are culturally conditioned and amenable to change, one is challenged to remain within the Church, to roll up one's sleeves and help bring about a metamorphosis through respectful, responsible, and continuous confrontation. This latter contributes to the urgency for bonding together of the Sisters For Christian Community.

## MEANS OF CONFRONTATION IN THE CHURCH

The multiplicity of confrontation patterns used by the Sisters For Christian Community are as diversified as the life experiences and competencies of the members. Pluriformity of background, vision, and charisms in these women preclude the possibility of any claim of unanimity or consensus on the just-completed statement on **SEXISM**, or other position statements found throughout this analysis. The SFCC consensus is firm only on their **PROFILE**-stated values and goals, and most specifically on their overarching goal of helping to forward the **CHURCH RADIANT**, —a community of simplicity and love. Today, and for almost all of its history, the Church has been institutionalized as a monarchial bureaucracy, a structure antithetical to community. The dominative administrative patterns of the institutional Church cast a menacing shadow over the People of God as a loving unity in pilgrimage. Dominative patterns eclipse the radiance of a more authentic expression of Christianity, and call the charismatic Church to prophetic protest.

The title of these sisters is, itself, a **CONFRONTATION MEANS**. They are **FOR** Christian Community where now stands Christian Bureaucracy. The Sisters For Christian Community make no pretentious claims for having any special insights that all other Christians do not share to some degree. They are confronting the Church in multiple unheralded ways, —sometimes just by their **PRESENCE**—, and certainly not as headline seekers. They are critiquing the male clergy lovingly as sisters would their brothers, as friends critique friends, —not to wound, but to help toward wholeness, even as they, in turn, seek help toward wholeness.

These 21st Century sisters are a rag-a-tag lot, —like all Christian pilgrims. Like Dorothy, Scarecrow, Tinman, and Cowardly Lion, they are searching for a special kind of **EMERALD CITY**. Like those well-loved Oz characters, the Sisters For Christian Community are in quest of more creative understanding, more unconditional loving, and more courage in confronting whatever injustices they meet on the yellow-brick-roads of life. If they are committed most earnestly to social justice **WITHIN** the Church, it is because the Church is **THEMSELVES**, —the People of God in pilgrimage.

"Well-and-good," some might respond, "we can accept such a group of sisters even if a little off-beat from what we are used to, —even if some have the aura of feminist revolutionaries about them. But what does the official Church have to say about them? How do the Pope, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, and world bishops view these confrontation-oriented, risk-ready **SISTERS FOR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY** in quest of a **CHURCH RADIANT**?"

Part of the following answer is historical record, but part must be conjecture or simple deduction.

### 1. THE RESPONSE OF BISHOPS TO SFCC

The first Sister For Christian Community, so-named, explained the nature of the proposed new group to Pope Paul VI by letter in 1969. She also visited Rome after having asked for a papal appointment. The request was never answered. If prelates in Rome actually read mail from American women, then one may surmise that SFCC became known by one pope and the Sacred Congregation for Religious by 1970.

In 1976 an Apostolic Delegate in Australia phoned Rome to ascertain the status of the Sisters For Christian Community. He was told that the SFCC was well-known there and was being watched with interest. The context indicated benevolent interest. The Australian bishop initiating the feed-back, encouraged two Australian sisters in search of this style of sisterhood to attend the fifth International Assembly of the Sisters For Christian Community

to see if their reality matched the statements of their **PROFILE**. In consequence, they joined the SFCC expression of the consecrated life before returning to their island continent to be catalysts for Christian Community down under.

Meanwhile, some Canadian and United States bishops who know members of the Sisters For Christian Community, have been wonderfully open, welcoming, brotherly, and in some cases have attended SFCC International Assemblies, referred women for membership, and presided over their vow or commitment liturgies. The bishops have expressed no concern over the non-canonical status of SFCC, —probably for these reasons:

- They know that, since the Council, a new canon law has been on the drawing board, not available, therefore, to an emerging post-Council sisterhood
- They know that practice must precede law, that a Vatican II-oriented sisterhood must be allowed to freely explore and develop its charisms from the Holy Spirit without interference
- They know well the contents of the documents of Vatican II that encourage just such an expression as the SFCC:

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. Allotting His gifts to everyone according to His will (1 Cor. 12:11) He distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank. By these gifts He makes them fit and ready to undertake the various tasks or offices advantageous for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church, according to the words of the Apostle: "The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone with profit." (1 Cor. 17:7) These charismatic gifts, whether they be the most outstanding or the most 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.

*Lumen Gentium* II, 12

## 2. RESPONSE OF THE SACRED CONGREGATION TO SFCC'S CONFRONTATION OF SEXISM

In at least one instance the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes has recently encouraged women to proceed in the exact direction of confrontation as is taken by the Sisters For Christian Community:

Religious women are encouraged to persevere in their undertakings for the advancement of women, thus leading to the acceptance of women in those areas of public life, in addition to Church life, which best correspond to their nature and talents.

Eduardo Cardinal Pironio, Prefect and Augustine Mayer, OSB, Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, August 12, 1980 (See *The Pope Speaks*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1981)

## 3. THE RESPONSE OF "SACRED PASTORS" AS MANDATED BY THE COUNCIL

Let sacred pastors recognize and promote the dignity as well as the responsibility of the lay persons in the Church. (There are only two categories of persons within the Church: clergy and laity, so sisters qualify as the latter.) Let them willingly make use of his (her) prudent advice. Further, let them encourage lay persons so that they may undertake tasks on their own initiative . . . Furthermore, let pastors respectfully acknowledge the just freedom that belongs to everyone . . . In this way the whole Church, strengthened by each of its members, can more effectively fulfill its mission.

*Lumen Gentium* IV, 37

## 4. POPE JOHN PAUL II'S RESPONSE TO SFCC (by inference)

In Chapter II this analysis incorporated a tremendously insightful excerpt from the social anthropology of Karl Wojtyla's monograph, *The Acting Person*, showing the destructive force of alienating structures which cause "radical or partial breakdown of social ties of both dimensions of human community: 'you and I as well as 'we'." Because all dominative patterns are the negative forces Pope John Paul II is speaking of in that monograph, the inference seems wholly justified that he would whole-heartedly encourage a sisterhood committed to removing such alienating structures from the Church.



In December, 1981, the Catholic News Service carried an ever-so-abbreviated and ambiguous statement to the effect that Pope John Paul II was "critical of the erroneous idea of exemption which leads some nuns, brothers, and religious order priests to consider themselves separate from Church structures." It is obvious from the description of the Sisters For Christian Community in this book, that these sisters are not separated from the structures they critique, but on the contrary, maintain strong, loving, associative postures within the Church. They determinedly disavow **SEXISM** and all other dissociative patterns of domination within the Church, but **NOT** the Church itself, —the Church as Christian Community, the People of God in pilgrimage, the becoming **CHURCH RADIANT**.

But what may one logically surmise is the attitude of the Pope toward the audacity of women openly disavowing male-accepted patterns of domination in Vatican City, itself? What do we know from the history of these times that throws such a powerful light on this question what we must deduct, without fear of overstatement, that the Pope would be in loving solidarity with the values and goals of the Sisters For Christian Community?

Pope John Paul II knows that there are three categories of persons **WITHIN** the Church who are not in full agreement with all aspects of Church structure, policies, and practices:

- *The Indifferent* who have given up caring about structures, policies and practices, —if they ever did—, who shrug their shoulders in almost total unconcern over any tempest-issues in the Catholic tea kettle . . .
- *The Antagonistic* who periodically or perpetually raise a voice, a fist, or a pen to castigate Church officials, lay persons, or religious groups for holding positions to the right or left of their own . . .
- *The Conscientious Objector*, the loyal opposition, who are deeply concerned but not at war, who cope with perceived moral evil or imperfections within Church structures, policies, practices, or personnel through the means of sisterly or brotherly **RESPECTFUL CONFRONTATION**. Such persons remain in loving association with Christian Community. Such are the most responsible Christians who serve the Church creatively and courageously.

Not only within the Church, but in his beloved Poland, Pope John Paul II finds the above categories of persons. He sees in Poland the **INDIFFERENT**, —persons unconcerned about the social injustices that the **SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT** members risk their lives to redress. He sees the **ANTAGONISTIC** government and individual persons with doubled fists who threaten Poland with civil war or Russian troop invasion. He sees the **CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS** in the **SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT** and loves them. He sees them in **RESPECTFUL CONFRONTATION** with lawful authorities who seem insensitive to the oppression of workers in mines and factories. He sees martial law temporarily denying his people their basic human rights of assembly and free speech, of worship and travel.

We must surmise that Pope John Paul II is a man of integrity devoid of double standards, who would see the Sisters For Christian Community for what they are: a **SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT** on another injustice front. Because these women are conscientious objectors to oppression or insensitivity from Church leaders, because they risk discreditation by their courageous confrontation with Church authorities over oppressive structures, policies, practices or service personnel, one can be confident that the Pope who raises a hand in blessing over Poland, and especially over the authority-confronting members of **SOLIDARITY**, likewise raises a hand in blessing over all Christians and non-Christians confronting injustices, and especially over the **SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT** of the Sisters For Christian Community, —Church women who risk standing in the front lines of Church confrontation needs.

## CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Hope is not a wishful sigh. Christian hope is a creative and determined action toward a goal. God is neither an indulgent mother nor sugar-daddy who tosses plums into waiting laps, but the **SUPREME POWER** who empowers persons to pick their own. Those persons empowered with hope that the evil of **SEXISM** and other dominative forces in Church or society be obliterated, are achieving some

obliteration of them. Every involvement of every Christian woman or man directed at countering **SEXISM** has already helped to make a difference. Even at this moment there is a visible melting at the tip of the iceberg. A powerful movement is in process within Christianity, urged forward by thousands of sixth stage Christian feminists and counterelementalist Christians who are on the move, —journeying . . .



—**FROM** androcentric theology

- FROM** seeing God as:
- Father of Mankind
  - King of Kings
  - Lord of Lords
  - Mighty Warrior
  - Unyielding Judge
  - Smiter of Enemies

—**FROM** seeing women as:

- misbegotten male (Thomas Aquinas)

- body and carnality
- daughter of Eve
- temptress and demon
- harlot
- nagger
- incapable of imaging Christ

—**FROM** Neo-Thomistic Theology

—**TOWARD** androgynous theology

- TOWARD** seeing God as:
- PURE BEING**
  - Mother-Father-God
  - Nurturing Parent
  - Loving Friend
  - Consoling Companion
  - Wise Counselor

—**TOWARD** seeing woman as:

- a human person
- a co-partner of woman or man
- daughter of Mother-Father God
- imager of the Son by reason of Baptism when they "put on Christ Jesus" and share in all that Christ is and has done

—**TOWARD** Confrontation Theology