
The Involvement of Roman Catholic Women in Mission since 1965

Mary Motte, F.M.M.

Missionary involvement has changed significantly in the Roman Catholic Church in the years that have followed the end of Vatican Council II in 1965. The council opened new ways for both laity and clergy to become involved in the life and mission of the church. Much of this change found expression through groups organized for missionary activity, such as the religious and missionary institutes. At the same time, the expanded understanding about the missionary nature of the church led increasing numbers of women and men, married and single, to dedicate themselves to full-time missionary work for a certain number of years. This major development among the laity is already beginning to impact upon missionary activity. Some of the most recently organized groups are from the Philippines, Bolivia, and Peru, and have begun to move in mission to other countries. This growth of lay involvement will be one of the important factors determining the shape of missionary activity in the years ahead.

Among other influential forces bringing about changes in the way of being involved in mission has been the renewal required of religious congregations as a result of the council. This call to renewal coincided with the rebirth of the women's movement in the United States in the mid-1960s. It is especially in this coincidence that the involvement of Roman Catholic women becomes more universalized and ecumenical, i.e., moving beyond the parameters of religious congregations as well as of confessional groups, to include involvement and collaboration with all women. The examination of the scriptural and theological foundations of ministry are due in large part to the interrelation of these two renewals. The principal aspects focused upon are the essential relationship between ministry and mission in the church, the sharp differences about the ordination of women, the understanding of the role of the feminine in relation to Scripture and tradition, and the growing number of women who experience a calling to deeper engagement in ministry. Increasing numbers of women have acquired the competence in law and theology to examine these questions concerning their participation in ministry and mission from the perspective of feminine experience in a religious tradition that has defined itself in patriarchal terminology. Through their continued efforts, women have tried to raise consciousness about their role in the church and society to new levels, and have taken the initiative to become engaged in new areas of ministry.

Vatican II asked religious congregations to update and renew their constitutions, the law that governs each particular congregation. Women religious are still in the process of carrying out this task. The last twelve to fifteen years have led many of their congregations to life experiences in the realm of uniting the sacred and the secular, in the lived expression of communion, and in shared decision-making that are now ahead of the definitions given in the newly promulgated church law.

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Renewal in religious congregations has also contributed to some extent to the demise of the "eternal woman," that romanticization of woman as symbol. Many sisters (nuns) have literally removed their veils and now dress in a simple, ordinary manner in order to provide a more meaningful witness to the simplicity and poorness of the Beatitudes in today's world. At the same time, they have left aside outdated rituals that accumulated over the years, and have entered upon a journey toward more integrated

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spirituality. A profound transformation in ministry/mission is resulting from this more holistic understanding of their relationship with God.

Roman Catholic theology developed the eschatological dimension of religious life. This dimension, especially related to the three vows taken by religious—poverty, obedience, and chastity—has begun to be interpreted in more relevant ways in relation to working for justice and mission for the kingdom.

Inspired by the expanded understanding of mission among Christians, members of some of the traditional mission/overseas congregations of women have come to think of mission in terms of six continents, without lessening their commitment to overseas and transcultural mission. Women in other congregations, which had not been considered missionary in the more traditional understanding, reexamined their ministries from the perspective of the universal missionary obligation of the church and every baptized person. Many of them have taken on cross-cultural and overseas mission as part of their overall ministry in the church. In nearly all of the women's congregations there has been a move from large institutional works, where most of their members carried out apostolates (usually health care, education, or social service), toward small insertions among the people and more direct engagement in different forms of pastoral ministry, especially among the poor. There are places, including the United States, where sisters are associate pastors in parishes; in other places there are those who are engaged in youth or campus ministries, justice ministries, ministries to the sick, the dying, and the imprisoned.

The mission of the poor who have heard the gospel has had a special effect upon sisters' communities/congregations. They have seen that their vow of poverty did not mean being poor in the way that so many persons are poor; they have searched for a simpler lifestyle; they have sought to be among and with the poor. They have questioned their ministries, and have often transformed them radically and at great cost to bring them more into focus from the eyes of the poor. Conviction about the integral relationship between justice and evangelization has led numerous women to ministries among the oppressed, handicapped, and prisoners. This

Announcing

The next meeting of the International Association for Mission Studies will be held at the University of Zimbabwe, in Harare, January 8-14, 1985, on the theme "Christian Mission and Human Transformation." Further details about the program will be sent to members in the near future. Inquiries about membership and activities of the Association may be sent to the General Secretary of IAMS, Rapenburg 61, 2311 GJ Leiden, The Netherlands.

conviction is at the source of their search to uncover the root causes of oppression in society, and their consequent engagement in ministries that seek to influence government leaders and decision-makers in favor of the poor and oppressed. Most commitments with and on behalf of the poor have political implications, and on more than one occasion have resulted in conflict with some other members of the church, as well as with government officials.

Many of the women's congregations have become more international in their membership. While at times this increase has been due to an intentional search to shore up numbers of vocations lacking in Europe and North America, more of the increase is due to growing awareness of the meaning of universality in the church, and a genuine desire on the part of women from various places in the world to participate in that universality. With the increase in internationality, a gradual change is beginning to emerge in the

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orientation and structures of those congregations founded originally in Europe.

Sisters in situations where communities of other religious traditions are present have developed a style of missionary presence based upon respect for the other as person and respect for the mystery of God present in the lives and history of those persons. Experiences in India, Sri Lanka, and North Africa, among others, have demonstrated how dialogue first of all needs to be lived out in the daily sharing of life events; how this dialogue of life is indeed a form of evangelization in which the Word is spoken and the Name named through living testimony.

An essential aspect of women's missionary involvement in recent years has been inculturation, a genuine encounter between the Word of God and the cultural/historical reality in a given place. In international congregations some of this inculturation has perhaps been easier in places where there are women who are from the local culture. In all places, inculturation touches upon such specifics as language spoken in a group, style of furnishings and living quarters, location of living quarters, manner of dress, food, style of prayer. Naturally, there are many variations in the degree of inculturation, and even in the understanding of what is possible and best.

The foregoing description presents an overview of the major lines of development that have been emerging among Roman Catholic women engaged in mission. This development has had various stages, and it has not been uniform among all Roman Catholic women. The overview has been mainly in terms of what has happened in women's religious congregations, since these represent a concentrated effort at renewal and change during the period of time elapsed since Vatican II. At the same time, it is important to remember the new strength of the laity, both men and women, in mission.

Categories for interpreting new ministries, new ways of being in mission are often not adequate, and consequently many of the experiences of women in mission today are not understood by authorities in the church. At the same time, the role of religious congregations belongs to the charismatic life of the church, and members of these congregations, both women and men, are meant to be ground-breakers—a task never much appreciated, much less immediately understood by those whose task is to preserve.

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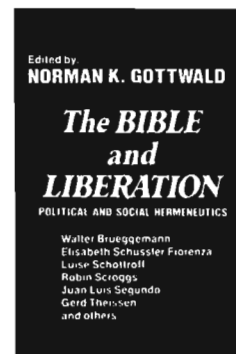
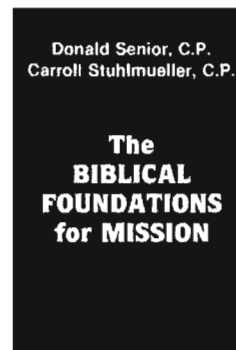
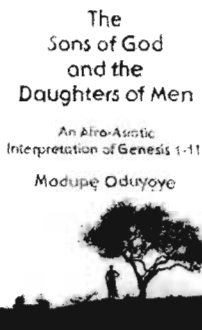
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The proclaimed mission of Roman Catholic Womenpriests North America is to: ...spiritually prepare, ordain, and support women and men from all states of life, who are theologically qualified, who are committed to an inclusive model of Church, and who are called by the Holy Spirit and their communities to minister within the Roman Catholic Church.[4]. The organization has sponsored numerous ordination ceremonies for women; in response, the Roman Catholic Church has excommunicated or threatened excommunication of all involved.[5]. In the liturgical traditions the Catholic Church the term ordination refers to the means by which a person is included in one of the orders of bishops, priests or deacons. The teaching of the Catholic Church on ordination, as expressed in the Code of Canon Law, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and the apostolic letter *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, is that only a Catholic male validly receives ordination, and "that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that Interviews with Roman Catholic women priests who have started their own independent churches after being excommunicated by the Vatican.ÂThis project is really about breaking down the stereotypes of women in the church and listening to what they have to say,Â she says. ÂLetÂs challenge what the church says is sacred, what the church says is pure.Â Snyder says that whispers about her involvement with the womenÂs priest movement provoked her parish priest to tell her that she was no longer welcome at his church. This pronouncement came just after the Vatican publicly categorized womenÂs ordination as a Âgrave crimeÂ worthy of equal punishments to those placed on clergy members who had committed sexual abuse.