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THE LIFE AND WORK OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

The following two reports have grown out of the discussions which took place at the recent meeting of the World Council's Commission on the Life and Work of Women in the Church held in Oxford (England) in September.

A. MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIPS AND THE RENEWAL OF THE CHURCH

There is a deep conviction everywhere that if the message of the Church is to find a hearing in the world of today, the Church must bear witness in its own life to the transforming power of Christ. This will mean a radical renewal of many aspects of Church life. One of the most significant factors in this renewal is the quality of men-women relationships.

Christ's teaching about the human personality and his attitude to woman have been as leaven deeply affecting the prevailing conceptions of the position of women and the relation of the sexes in family life and outside, though he never violently broke down the social customs. This liberating effect with regard to women has been repeated whenever the Gospel of Christ was brought to new lands ; striking evidences of this are to be seen in the history of modern missions. Everywhere we find, however, that when the preaching of the Gospel loses its freshness and tends to be overshadowed by emphasis on the Law and when organizational church-patterns are inclined to become static, this liberating power can no longer exercise its dynamic force and old and new restraints regarding women emerge. In our day this leads to great tensions, emphasized by the anomalous position of the Church compared to that in the secular world.

The problem must be faced in its fundamental aspect : the full recognition of the equal value and joint responsibility of the twofold human being : man-woman as members of the Church of Christ. The urgency of facing this fundamental problem cannot be over-stated, because only then can the questions arising around it, such as the place of women's organizations, women's participation in church government and at other policy-making levels, or even the complex questions of ordination of women, be solved.

Following this understanding of man-woman relationships, some issues that are of the greatest significance for the renewal of the Church can be tackled, such as the strengthening of the sense of fellowship in church life. If anywhere it is here that the Church must bear witness to Christ, the hope of the world, for the millions that are in danger of breaking down with the strain of solitude, and are in despair because of the lack of a sense of meaning in

life and of true human companionship. Modern man and woman can only find this in a community where there are no discriminations on grounds of sex, but the value of their fellowship is recognized. This is not only of significance for those for whom the message of the Church is new, but also for the large group of those who are becoming more and more alienated from the Church to which they still nominally belong.

Another important issue is the full sharing of women in responsibility for the life of the Church. The power of women through all ages has been considerable, but it has nearly always been restricted to influence exercised indirectly, while not sharing in direct responsibility. Unfortunately this situation is preferred by many women, who need to learn to accept full responsibility and to take criticism. The bearing of responsibility being of the very essence of true human existence the Church should not withhold this from women in any realm, but open up opportunities for women to grow in responsible living and encourage them to enter into their heritage as full-grown partners with men in being children of God, equal in His sight and jointly called in His service in the Church and in the world.

A third issue concerns the family. A new conception as to the man-woman relationship, this very foundation of all human relations, cannot but radically affect the family, the living cell of society and the Church.

If Christ is the Hope of life, a new experience of his transforming power can never merely mean the defence of old values, but must contain the eager expectation of new richness. As a true partnership of man and woman, spiritually and intellectually, as well as physically and emotionally in dedicated freedom of both personalities is achieved, a renewal of family life on a higher level will undoubtedly ensue.

This will be of great significance for the Church in as far as the family is saved from considering itself as an end in itself, but is made more and more conscious of being the unit by the means of which its members are called to bring their joint contribution to the life and fellowship of the Church, witnessing to unity and wholeness, which are essential characteristics of the Church. It may be that this unity will be one of the means through which the Church of Christ will be led to a deeper knowledge of spiritual truth, which it cannot understand while abiding in its divisions (I Cor. 3 : 1-4.).

B. THE SPECIFIC VOCATION OF WOMEN

Introduction

The call of God to the Christian is that he should live the whole of his life under God's commandment and by His grace. If men and women are called of God to obey Him in the whole of life, then they have to examine what it means to be obedient in their own particular daily work.

Our purpose in this memorandum is to examine this general statement as it particularly affects women. We would however point out (a) that many considerations apply equally to men and to women, (b) that no considerations apply to women in isolation from men. Men and women work in a single social whole, and even if women's immediate work is with other women, that work is related, even if impersonally, to that of men.

There seems to us a certain confusion in Christian teaching about the calling of women. In much church teaching there is an implicit assumption that the proper calling of a woman is to marriage. Furthermore, by this is meant *both* the married state *and* the functions or occupations which are thought of as going with it — the service of a husband, the care of a home and the upbringing and education of children. Thus the *state* of marriage and the *occupations* dependent on it are to a certain extent confused.

The married state and the single state

Marriage is a state to which God may call many women and the churches rightly stress the supreme importance of marriage to family, Church and society. But it seems to us that often the very urgency of the Church's teaching carries with it by implication the suggestion that the single state is a second-best or incomplete condition, to be made the best of in default of marriage. Such a view, even if it is only implied, is not only unjust: it is unscriptural and contrary to many of the traditions of the Church. In the New Testament marriage and the single state are equally commended by St. Paul as pleasing to the Lord.

The Church brought into the world an entirely new attitude to marriage. It is not a biological and social necessity hallowed by religion, but a *choice*. It is a choice because there is an alternative choice in the single life which God approves and blesses equally with marriage. The presence in the Church of this alternative choice enters profoundly into the Christian conception of marriage. The recovery of a constructive emphasis on the Christian idea of the vocation of the single life — for men as well as for women — is necessary in Christian teaching today, the more so because popularisations of certain biological and psychological insights tend to create the impression that men are not complete human persons without sexual experience, nor women without childbearing.

Occupations deriving from marriage

Marriage, at least in the West, is commonly followed by the making of a home by the married couple, and the woman then embarks upon her major occupations which will fill most of her time for most of her life — caring for a husband, keeping house, and nurturing children.

The discussion of these occupation is made difficult by the fact that it is only partly possible to say how far what a woman does in the home is an occupation measurable in terms of hours of work or output and how far it is the expression, in acts, of a personal relation with husband and children, incapable of measurement. It is of course both. An attempt to turn it into a form of employment comparable to others shifts the ground from the personal relationship and raises the question "Who is employing whom?" On the other hand, the idea that all woman's work in the home is a labour of love, can be a cloak for serious exploitation by unceasing thoughtless demands (proper in childhood, but not in adult life).

The separate household following on each marriage with one woman as wife, mother and housekeeper, is a bourgeois phenomenon, very largely the result of social and economic conditions. In the West it is often supposed that a new home following on every marriage is natural, right and necessary. In the East and Africa where patriarchal or extended family systems prevail a new marriage does not necessarily create a new home, nor does a wife immediately become a housewife, nor are children brought up solely by their parents. The small family unit of the West has been in a particular culture and epoch the means whereby certain Christian insights on marriage and family have been given a living form. Here man and wife can develop a mutuality of loving service, each fulfilling the other : here also Christ's teaching when he set the child in the midst can be fulfilled. But it is not the only possible form of family living or of wifely occupation.

It is well known in the West that among women one of the main incentives to marriage is "a home of my own." This has become an *ideal* for women in modern society, an ideal compounded of many elements such as the desire for a place which is free of the restraints of older relatives, the desire for personal possessions, not always just for the sake of possessing them, but because they are the material through which personal preferences and tastes are expressed, and the desire to enter upon the role of housewife, which is largely a personal, even an individualist role.

We would make two comments on this :

(i) The occupation of homemaking and housekeeping is not only a derivative from marriage. Homes are made in modern society by single women living alone (less rarely by single men) — by friends or sisters, by mothers and daughters. The personal satisfactions which home making offers should be recognised by the Church and society as legitimate hopes for the unmarried woman. She often makes of her home a centre of friendship. Society often refuses to grant her any claims on behalf of her home — her chances of getting a home in a municipal housing state or block of flats are very slender, though her presence there might be of great benefit.

(ii) The fact that "a home of one's own" is the ideal makes the married woman without a home conscious that she belongs to the dispossessed. In Christian propaganda "Marriage and the home" are spoken of in one breath as though they belonged together. Though they may do ideally, the facts do not warrant the association in a vast and growing number of cases. A young married woman often goes to work since there is not room for two housewives in her mother's or her mother-in-law's home. Modern society, when this ideal of a home of one's own is frustrated, offers no alternative resource. It is useless to preach to a young woman the advantages of the extended family system if she has not been brought up in it : a sense of grievance at having to share a home, soon affecting her marriage, often sets in. This points to two conclusions for the Church (i) the realisation that there is a *new* acute housing problem not in slums but hidden behind the respectable exteriors of countless houses. It is largely the result of war and it deeply threatens family life ; (ii) conscious effort by Christians to work out larger family units in which some women will either share or forego the role of housewife.

Of all the occupations deriving from marriage the most important is that of the mother, responsible as she is (though not solely so, for fathers have both duties and rights) for the physical, mental and spiritual nurture of her children. We omit the consideration of it here, not because it is unimportant but because in every country and Church there is a large literature on the subject, Christian and secular.

The occupation of the housewife

We now turn to the occupation of the woman in the home as "Housewife". This is a genuine occupation comparable with other occupations : a man who is a widower or bachelor may hire a woman to perform these functions at a rate of pay now often fixed by labour bureaux. These duties include buying, cooking and serving food, keeping the house clean, seeing that clothes and furnishings are washed and kept in repair, keeping the house supplied with the necessities of living. The wife usually performs such tasks, with or without help. What opportunities for Christian witness does such an occupation offer, and what temptations ?

(a) Opportunities : (i) The work is largely under the woman's own control, she can create a routine and make out of her work an orderly context for her own and others' lives. (ii) In the course of her work she enters into numbers of personal relationships with neighbours, tradespeople, etc : no-one could call the work of the housewife "depersonalised". (iii) Housewives are the buyers in the community : their spending power, and therefore their potential influence in industry and commerce are enormous, but seldom realised. (iv) Housewives are the great supporters of and workers for, our churches. Unless poverty is great — and even then — or the claims of a

large family quite overpowering, the housewife can nearly always manage to give time whether in service or by turning her time into produce — something she has baked, or eggs from her hens, or needlework. It would not be too sweeping to say that thousands of local churches keep afloat financially and exist as communities and maintain their worshipping life because the occupation of housewife provides (in a quite unique way among modern occupations) the possibility of turning time and materials to creative use.

(b) Among temptations we note: (i) To individualism, shutting out other claims. A woman becomes sole mistress of everything in the house, things are done her way, or to please her husband. The arrival of an older relative becomes an imposition for her unless she remains outward-looking. (ii) To love of possessions and to competitiveness with neighbours over possessions and appearances. (iii) To social and political irresponsibility, due to living in a very small world; lack of wider perspective makes women vulnerable to propaganda by advertising or other agents: they are the main target of most high power advertising, because they are the chief spenders in society.

We would strongly emphasise the need for a specific act of witness on the part of Christian housewives. Competition in standards of living is rife, and time, money and energy are consumed in competitive acquiring of possessions and in entertaining. The witness to a simpler mode of life, with more emphasis on worship, on service to the community, personal friendship, the cultivation of the mind through reading and of the imagination through the arts, is urgently needed in modern society.

The work of women in society

It is only possible in a memorandum of this kind to touch the fringes of a vast subject — one in urgent need of objective study based on facts, with Christian insights brought to bear on them.

Over an area containing at least five-sixths of the world's population, that is to say in the whole of the East, in Russia and in Africa, women are engaged in primary production in fields, gardens and markets, and their work is not terminated by marriage. Such an aphorism as "woman's place is in the home" would be meaningless to the countless women whose place has always been the home, the field and the market. Ecumenical conversations ought to help Westerners to see the question of women's work in a vaster perspective than that of their own society. While they cherish the possibility of deep personal relationships between husband and wife, parents and children, which the separate family home provides, they should perhaps realise that the Western pattern is not the only good life and that other patterns may be also made a vehicle of Christian living.

The work of women has been one of the main agencies to transform certain areas of society in recent years. Education and medicine could hardly have

developed as they have without the work of women teachers and nurses. The social services which almost every country is now seeking to develop, draw largely on the service of women. Teaching, medicine and social work are all concerned with the human person and depend on good personal relations as well as on technical skill for their success. They supplement the home; and to the weak, unfortunate or feckless family they may mean restoration, or at least the rescue of the children. All this is, or can be, a profoundly Christian labour.

But women have also been swept into industry and commerce. In industry they are most frequently engaged in those industries or public services which now perform, much more cheaply and efficiently, tasks once performed in the home — laundering, food preparation, textiles, garment making, etc. This labour has unquestionably raised the standard of living of the poorest, bringing within their purchasing power goods and services long considered as necessities by the middle classes.

It is necessary however to look not only at the social but at the personal aspects of women's work. Some women find deep personal satisfaction in work: many like it not for the work itself, but for the companionship that goes with it. The vast majority of women who work do so from economic necessity. While pages could be written, we can only stress the following points: (i) Most women are employed in occupations offering little scope for advancement, either in financial reward or in responsibility. Where figures are available, the average wage of all women, including the most highly skilled, does not reach the average of unskilled male labour. Several women's occupations exist which are purely auxiliary and which in fact make possible the existence of certain male occupations. Thus, for example, there could scarcely be business directors and managers of all kinds if there were not stenographers, filing clerks and telephone operators, the overwhelming majority of whom are women. They can never rise out of the class of those who perform tasks set them by others. (ii) Young women, with rare exceptions, look on work as a stop-gap, to be done for a few years till marriage comes. This makes them on the whole indifferent alike to conditions and to prospects, unready to take extra training, uninterested for the most part in Trade Union activity or collective action. The woman who does not marry or who returns to work as a widow reaps a bitter harvest from this indifference. (iii) Women's work is often characterised by amateurishness: few women seem to take a large view, to plan and think ahead about their work or the use of their gifts, (although there are conspicuous exceptions to these generalisations). There seems also to be a large element of strain in a woman's attitude to her work, partly induced by the fact that in some professions she has to be far better than a man to be thought as good at the job as he is. She is often surrounded by

a certain amount of suspicion and jealousy. But part of the difficulty at least lies in the lack of a full acceptance of work as a God-given task.

There are several points which we would like to see emphasised in this matter of women's work. Since it is in doubt during her early years whether a woman will work all her life, or marry, she ought as far as possible to be educated to accept and fulfil either vocation. Christian parents should consider the possibility that perhaps in the modern world girls' education needs even more thought than boys', if daughters are to avoid being inept housewives and difficult wives if they marry, or unskilled workers if they do not.

We would also like to see emphasised in church teaching the fact that both man *and* woman are called by God to the task not only of replenishing the earth, but of subduing it and making it plentiful (Gen. 1 : 28). Woman's task in society is not merely indirect through man, it is also direct. A society which is man-made, whose institutions reflect only the male way of looking at things, is unbalanced and lacks wholeness. This task falls especially, but not wholly, to the single woman, whose main vocation is in society, not in the home.

We would like to see emphasised also the fact that God intended men and women to live in relationship with each other, not only in the marriage of one man to one woman, but in the social task of humanity. This can never be achieved by segregating the sexes, or by ordaining that certain tasks are *by nature* "men's work" and others "women's work". Social conditions may demand such a distinction and division of labour, but to identify such expedients, however necessary, with an immutable law of God, is to close one's mind to certain possibilities of good. It was good, for example, that the functions of midwives, theirs by right of centuries of custom, should have been taken over by doctors and transformed from ignorant practice to skilled care : but these tasks passed to them for a time as doctors, not as men.

We would emphasise the extent to which good work depends on good relationships. Relations between the sexes at work bring both difficulties and enrichment. While for the married woman life is mainly centred on one relationship, with, it may be, many friendships of a different order, the single woman works with many men in a comradeship of work. Too many men are oblivious to any demand of God in relationships at work with women, and blind to the richness that can come to their work from women's particular insights. Christians, both men and women, have a calling to witness to the reality of comradeship in work and genuine friendship, especially in a society in which relationships which may destroy a marriage are so lightly entered upon.

Lastly, we are concerned that all discussions of work should include a strong emphasis on the importance of *rest*. Work has become a fever in the modern world and few people know how to rest. Rest, meaning by that not mere recuperation for further work, but the quiet, receptive mind and spirit is a religious conception : it is fundamentally a gift of grace given by God to those whose lives are open to Him.