

# CATHOLIC FEMINIST MINISTRIES IN A DISCIPLESHIP OF EQUALS

Call to Action

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Mary E. Hunt

My topic is “Catholic Feminist Ministries in a Discipleship of Equals,” a hot topic as we look ahead to next August’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebratory conference sponsored by the Women-Church Convergence. CELEBRATING CATHOLIC FEMINIST MINISTRIES: A WOMEN-CHURCH FORUM will be held August 17-19, 2007 at the Hyatt Regency, O’Hare/Chicago. All are welcome at what I am sure will be an innovative and inspiring, not to mention enjoyable and productive, weekend.

## WOMEN-CHURCH

Women-Church Convergence is “a coalition of autonomous Catholic-rooted organizations/groups raising a feminist voice and committed to an ekklesia of women which is participative, egalitarian and self governing.” Member groups include the Grail Women’s Task Force; Catholics for a Free Choice; National Coalition of American Nuns; Cincinnati Women-Church; A Critical Mass; the BVM Network for Women’s Issues; 8<sup>th</sup> Day Center for Justice; Loretto Women’s Women’s Network; Women’s Ordination Conference; the Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual (WATER); and several dozen others. I sometimes refer to us as “the best and the brightest of the bad girls.” We meet regularly to educate ourselves, to share resources, and to engage in common struggles for justice as we seek to be women-church. It is in the context of women-church that I want to address “Catholic Feminist Ministries in a Discipleship of Equals.”

My interest in Catholic feminist ministries comes from my own training as a theologian and as a minister, a doctorate in theology as well as a Masters in Divinity with the Jesuits in Berkeley complete with CPE, two years of mission work in Argentina, and now 20+ years at WATER, a non-profit educational center in Silver Spring, MD where we engage in various feminist ministries of education, counseling, liturgy/ritual, organizing/networking, and other justice-oriented tasks. So I come to this question not as a disinterested academic but as a practitioner.

The urgency I feel about deepening the practice of feminist ministry now in a discipleship of equals, the reason I continue to think about this issue when so many seemingly more pressing ones are on my screen, is because I understand that the various forms of oppression are connected. Let me be specific in the U.S. context. The immoral war in Iraq; the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the name of national security; globalization that results in increased poverty; the destruction of the environment as a sacrifice to unbridled capitalism; the death-dealing lack of sharing of health, education, and other common resources are all part of the same worldview that baptizes and confirms privilege for some and oppression for others. In this worldview, clergy, from pope to parish priest, are logically and divinely Other than the lower status laity.

This hierarchical dualism, this habit of thinking in twos such that one is always better than the other, is deeply ingrained in us. Feminist theorist Catherine MacKinnon described it as the inability to see difference without discrimination.<sup>1</sup> I respectfully suggest that what is at stake in our choice of models of Catholic feminist ministries is no less than how we wish to posture vis-à-vis these global issues, because at root the permission to think of another person, another animal, even the earth itself as Other and

of lesser value is intimately connected to one's religious view. Anything we do to encourage, however implicitly, that oppressive view is implicit encouragement for structures of domination.

So when we create new models of church, we need to pay strict attention to how our new structures are constructed. I need not rehearse the dangerous and damaging implications of our current ecclesial system. But I must say that the trajectory of what Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has aptly named “kyriarchal” power, kyriarchy being, the “interlocking structures of domination, elite male, relations of ruling (*Herr-schaft*).”<sup>ii</sup> The interlocking forms of oppression including sexism, racism, nationalism, unbridled capitalism, heterosexism, and more—is played out in Roman Catholicism to a fare-thee-well.

#### BISHOPS' PITIFUL PASTORAL

Examples abound but the most recently circulated document to be voted on by the American Catholic Bishops this month, “Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care,” is a microcosm of the problems of kyriarchal ministry. Let me simply name a few of the most glaring problems with the title page alone. I will suspend a fuller exegesis as the problems are so pernicious.

First, it is a document that comes from the top down with no consultation with lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer people except perhaps any closeted gay priests who participated in its development. Given the many able lgbtq Catholics who could have set the bishops straight, as it were, such lack of consultation is deeply lamentable. Feminist ministries are participatory from the outset with a preferential option for hearing from those who are most deeply affected.

Second, the document is predicated on a model of ministry TO, not a model of ministry WITH, a particular population. This violates post-Vatican II understandings of ministry. In contrast, feminist ministries do not confuse largess with justice. Imagine if we were to publish guidelines for “Ministry for Persons with a Heterosexual Inclination.”

Third, the mistaken focus is on “persons with a homosexual inclination” rather than on how the Catholic community can face and deal with its heterosexism. After all, Catholic theology and ministry is replete with heterosexist dimensions—marriage or ordination for heterosexuals only—and a critical reflection on those would be welcome indeed. Feminist theologians are writing extensively on this topic.

Fourth, the guidelines do not challenge much less change repressive Vatican teaching on homosexuality. They simply restate it as if it made perfect sense when in fact it has been roundly critiqued and shown to be found wanting in both charity and common sense, not to mention that it flies in the face of contemporary social scientific data. Feminists reject such teaching and urge Vatican officials and local bishops to beg forgiveness and/or guard silence until they have something useful to say.

Fifth, the document includes timid little niceties about baptizing the children of lgbtq parents. The writers act as if anyone could decide not to baptize a baby because of the parents’ sexual integrity. Baptism is a gift a God, not a decision of bishops. Moreover, such seeming largess is granted gratuitously while the bishops mount anti-same-sex marriage efforts in many states, in effect making it harder for same-sex families to develop and thrive. Feminist ministers put the well-being of children ahead of ideology.

Stop me before I exegete this text line for pitiful line! Let me simply urge you to instruct your bishop to reject it, and all of us get on with the task of being church when threats to human well-being through war and to environmental survival are far too important to be forgotten in the midst of such dismal distractions. At stake is the world, not simply the church.

## CATHOLIC FEMINIST MINISTRIES

I suggest that Catholic feminist ministries are a lynchpin in our theo-political situation. Modeling new ways of working cooperatively, of living out the radical vision of “a discipleship of equals” as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has described the democratic, egalitarian community that flows from the Jesus movement, is imperative not just for church but for society as well. I am concerned not in the first instance with the reform of the kyriarchal church, but with the survival and flourishing of the world of which of course church renewal is a part. Let me define clearly what I am talking about.

By CATHOLIC I mean not in the first instance the Roman Church which is a tertiary definition, but a more ancient and enduring meaning of the word—namely, “from the Latin ‘*catholicus*’ meaning universal; 1. of broad or liberal scope; comprehensive, 2. including or concerning all humankind; universal.”<sup>iii</sup> So I am suggesting that our ministries have no parochial limits, rather that we are responsible for the world starting with our local setting.

By FEMINIST I mean not simply a concern for women and dependent children as that word connoted in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and remains crucial today. I am promoting a 21<sup>st</sup> century commitment to eradicating the interstructured forms of oppression—beginning with racism, capitalism, and nationalism, including, of course,

sexism and heterosexism, ecocide and war so as to bring about equality and dignity, rights and flourishing. Feminism means bringing these concerns to bear in all forms of ministry, and ministering as if those contextual issues matter.

By MINISTRIES I mean the infinite range of ways we serve our communities. Again, I am not restricting this to a church-focused definition. Rather, I see ministries or forms of service as the common gift and responsibility of baptism when we are received into and become part of a community that has love and justice as its reason for being.

Finally, for “DISCIPLESHIP OF EQUALS” I take my meaning from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza who coined the phrase, claiming that from the time of the early Christian communities, the goal of our people has been to be communities in which the radical equality of creation is lived out. We are far from it, but at least the concept gives us a horizon over against which to find our way.

If we build even the hint of hierarchy into our communities and ministries we capitulate to forces that would love our blessing in the larger world over. Imagine instead that Catholic feminist ministries are efforts to bring about interreligious international social justice, beginning with the person next door. The majority of feminists, both women and men, that I know are actively involved in justice work, whether as lawyers, teachers, government officials, social workers, professors, pastoral ministers, musicians, eco-farmers, writers, or the like. Thirty years ago Roman Catholic women could not be ordained. Today we cannot **not** minister since the needs of the world require our talents and commitments.

The forms of these Catholic feminist ministries will vary. But it is my view that the focus ought to be on the ministries, not on whether one is ordained to them or not.

Ordination seems to me to be of lesser import than whether one is building up community, providing for the material needs of those who are poor, gathering the community for worship, putting the community's values into practice in the political area, teaching and counseling so that individuals can hear and respond to their own calls to ministry.

Feminist efforts to talk about ordination in a discipleship of equals face the serious problem of squaring the circle: whether one can be ordained, that is, ordered, and still claim to be part of an egalitarian community. While I understand and respect the moves toward various forms of ordination in which some Catholic women are engaged, I believe such efforts are fraught with problems that an emphasis on feminist ministries does not share. These include creating two-tiered communities and reinforcing a model of church that is pastorally and theo-politically inadequate to the needs of our day.

Rather than falling into the kyriarchal trap of orders, ministries based on the many gifts of the spirit invite those whose talents and training take them in the direction of what has traditionally been the work of ordained ministers can still exercise their gifts without fear of contradiction, cooptation, or scandal by developing new contexts in which to work. Seeing the many ministries and ministers as important without privileging some through ordination strikes me as an important approach. Whether in a base community, a parish, a school, or other place where values of love/justice hold sway, such Catholic feminist ministers, whether ordained or not, are needed for leadership and service. Rather than tinker with a structure that oppresses, we create new contexts, new institutions that transform the world.

Just as "women-church" gives new meaning to the word "church" by including

women and others who have been marginalized, so, too, does “feminist ministries” instead of women’s ordination change the default assumption that ordination is primary, that kyriarchy sets the agenda. <sup>iv</sup> It puts the emphasis instead on women’s and, yes, feminist men’s many forms of committed service. It leaves behind once and for all the hierarchical trappings we saw on display during the papal transition and creates new forms of church.

I suggest we look for ways to coordinate and amplify our ministries so as to be more efficient in doing justice against very efficient forces to the contrary and to build up our communities as places where love and hope dwell. The question is how, for which I offer several concrete suggestions.

When the balcony doors opened at St. Peter’s after the sham conclave “*Habemus papam*” was intoned, and out came His Nibs dressed to kill, down to the red Gammarelli shoes that had been out of papal vogue for years, I realized that the problem was not simply that Cardinal Ratzinger had been elected pope. I am not sure I would have been happy if Jesus had been elected for the simple reason that the process was so utterly flawed: bereft of any input from women, lay people, or children; undemocratic and elitist. The papacy is meant to be a symbol of unity, not a person with authority.

I realized that about the only thing that could have rescued the sorry Vatican scene from what I predict will be history’s harsh judgment would have been if the doors had opened and an African woman, HIV positive, with her baby in her arms had come out onto the balcony proclaiming the love of Wisdom-Sophia for all of creation, the imperative of Wisdom-Sophia that justice be done. What a symbol of unity she would have been! Our tears of joy at such a miracle would have cleansed the world as we went

about actualizing the ministry of a catholic church worthy of its name. Instead, we got Cardinal Ratzinger.

I mourned the failure of religious imagination and vowed then not to postpone what I envision. I urge us to live the vision of radical equality now, however imperfectly, rather than participate in, much less create or recreate, what oppresses. I urge us to listen with special attention to what young women are saying about the world and the church they want.

#### CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING FEMINIST MINISTRIES

I propose four criteria we can consider as we develop new models of feminist ministries in a discipleship of equals.

First, our ministry must be *feminist* in the deepest sense of that word. The full personhood of women, the very survival of millions of women and their dependent children is in the balance. We have feminist resources aplenty to guide not a liberal, corporate approach to ministry, but one which weaves the experiences and talents of willing workers with the pressing needs of the day. Feminism, far from outmoded, is a deep well of successful struggles against racism, sexism, colonialism, heterosexism, and the like that can help set priorities and implement strategies that work. A good example is the 2006 voter's guide, "An Open Letter to Catholic Voters" published by the National Coalition of American Nuns in October 2006. These feminists urge Catholics, including legislators, to vote their conscience especially on issues like abortion and homosexuality which the bishops would urge them to oppose.

Second, the implications of our choices must be *evaluated in global terms*, not simply in terms of local options. While all ministries like all politics are local, choices we

make, styles of ministry we embrace have implications beyond any given shores. Training programs, ministerial preparation, even ministries will vary, of course. But especially those of us who live in so-called developed countries must resist the tendency to imperialize our styles and criteria, and thus perpetuate colonial Christianity in feminist dress. This is a tricky balance given the unequal distribution of resources, but it is no excuse for setting up a parallel system that excludes and diminishes the contributions of the world's majority. Especially those of us who are U.S. citizens will benefit from a thorough distancing of ourselves from our government's and our churches' policies that oppress, and patriotically identify ourselves with those people around the world who stand against such oppression and stand for, even unto death, equality and mutuality.

Third, feminist ministry is *not denominationally specific, but interreligiously connected*. That is why excessive concern about *ROMAN* Catholic ministries is, in my view, misplaced. Such an important issue of principle feminist ministry must be included in the Roman Catholic context. But given the current dismal state of affairs in the kyriarchal church, and given that the Roman dimension is wildly overblown, too much focus there can serve as a distraction from the collaborative work we need to be about to do justice. Rather, I see us identifying our work as catholic or universal in the more profound sense that I defined earlier, and linking ourselves with people of good will from a variety of religious and non-religious backgrounds who are focused as we are on the common goal of sharing the common wealth for the common good.

Fourth, feminist ministry is *justice-seeking activity*. Grounded in the pain of exclusion, Catholic women and Catholic men urging a married priesthood began our movements for renewed ordination as a matter of justice. Along the way, as our feminist

ministries deepened, we have joined our forces with those who seek to eradicate poverty and racism, to provide health care, to eliminate HIV/AIDS, to stop war, to live in communities and families that do justice in an increasingly unjust world. I suggest that we go about this transformative work rather than tinker with the structures that oppress, specifically, that we emphasize our ministries and in so doing ignore the pastorally and socially inadequate structures that would co-opt our efforts into more of the same.

These criteria for ministry, that it be feminist, global, interreligiously connected, and justice-seeking, offer a common starting point for seeing much of our work in a common light. What kinds of feminist ministries are you involved in?

#### PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

Let me conclude with several problems I see with this approach:

Of course the “catholic” aspect of this is problematic because we are so used to thinking of things “catholic” in terms of kyriarchal church, hence our minds go to ordination when we think of ministry. I understand and support the need to make changes on that front. But I am proposing something far more radical than opening ordination to women, married men, and honest gay men. I am proposing that we take the term “catholic” in a 21<sup>st</sup> century, post modern context to mean as it did originally something for everyone, universal. Ironically, our global connectedness has made this imperative possible. Thus I am calling for catholic feminist ministries as service to the cosmos, as the regular vocation of all in a discipleship of equals. I am calling for a wholesale renewal of our sense of ourselves as human beings because I fear nothing less is adequate to the dire straits in which we find ourselves as a species. At a time when rich people and poor people live as almost different species, this move is crucial.

A second problem comes from the fact that “feminism”—the f-word—is badly understood and can be a source of division rather than unity. To this I say let us do the educational work it takes to understand why and how women’s well-being is tied with other forms of justice work so as to build coalitions where possible. Let us ask young women and especially women of color what they mean by feminism. If all else fails, let us put the word aside, though only for a moment, and engage in the practice, returning to think about it together with some new content to add to its rich history. Then I think it will be obvious that feminism is a transforming force.

A third problem lies with the word “ministry” which has been so often thought of in ecclesial terms that a broadening like this to see the many forms of service can be hard to imagine. To this I say again try it and see what happens. There is no reason to see underpaid, underappreciated, religiously-connected, “soft” forms of work as ministry while well paid, valued, so-called secular, “hard” forms of work are not unless of course such work is exploitative. Rather, we need to rethink many aspects of work and begin to see how service-oriented or ministerial work makes real sense in the transformation of our social economy.

## CONCLUSION

This approach to Catholic feminist ministries may sound utopian. I prefer to consider it visionary and possible, certainly preferable to the narrow approaches of kyriarchy. I have every confidence that Sophia in her Wisdom will bless our efforts to live out Catholic feminist ministries with integrity. Then, just as we break bread and share wine “in memory of her,” our children and their friends will take up their ministries in memory of us. Or so I pray.

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<sup>i</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination," in The Moral Foundation of Civil Rights, Ed. Robert K. Fullinwider and Claudia Mills, Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1986.

<sup>ii</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said, Boston, Beacon Press, 1992, p. 8.

<sup>iii</sup> The FREE DICTIONARY BY FARLEX, <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/Catholic> accessed 11/2/2006.

<sup>iv</sup> The women-church movement is based on the idea of the ekklesia of wo/men articulated by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. See her Wisdom's Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001 and Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Ekklesia-logy of Liberation, NY: Crossroad, 1993.