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# Women and Power in the Church: A New Testament Reflection

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Black Catholics today are certain that the Church will not be firmly rooted in the black community until that community has ministers of salvation who are drawn from its own members.<sup>14</sup> In the black community, new ministries are emerging under the power and authority of the Spirit, and the community stands ready for those who hold the powers of orders and jurisdiction to acknowledge and confirm these ministries as it has the emerging ministries of the past.

One might wonder why this statement does not clearly single out women in ministry as being a particular problem within the present context of the Church. While the black community acknowledges the problem of sexism in the Church and society, in most conversations within the community and in most data collected regarding the problems of ministry facing black Catholic ministers, it is agreed that the problem of racism is far more insidious and pervasive. We are grateful to our white sisters for their insights regarding the harshness of sexism within the Church and as black women we share the pain of being its victims. With our black brothers we share the intense pain of racism. One must note that although there are sexist patterns in the relations of black men and women, in the emerging forms of ministry and in the developing conference which addresses questions of implanting the Church more firmly in our community, a conscious effort is being made by our most perceptive and mature leadership (both male and female) to build the community and Church together as a sign of Christ's presence and active offering of salvation to the entire black community.

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### WOMEN AND POWER IN THE CHURCH: A NEW TESTAMENT REFLECTION

Because of time and space limitations I have sacrificed both elegance of expression and much of the nuance demanded by a volatile subject to brevity and clarity of position for the purpose of provoking thought and generating discussion. Let me begin by stating some presuppositions.

First, all mollifying rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, I regard it as a fact that *the male hierarchy and women in the Church are involved in a power struggle*, perhaps more serious in nature and far-reaching in consequences than any in the history of the Church. These men are struggling to maintain power over women in order to maintain exclusive power in the institution. Although some of the hierarchy may still think that their domination of women gives glory to God there is sufficient evidence to the contrary available, if they choose to consult it objectively, to make the claim to invincible ignorance increasingly open to a charge of bad faith. Women are struggling to break

<sup>14</sup>Austin Flannery (ed.), "Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity," *Vatican Council II* (New York: Costello Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 824-25, 831.

<sup>15</sup>Eugene Hillman, *The Church as Mission* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965). See particularly his ethnic-cultural understanding of "The Nations," pp. 100-20.

the male power-grip in order to assume power in their own lives as Christians and to exercise an appropriate power, with men, in the institution.

Secondly, *the fundamental issue in this power struggle is the equality of women with men as Christians*. Equality, for the purposes of this discussion, can be defined as the mutually recognized right of self-determination according to the Gospel which is the basis for complete mutuality between men and women in the Church. Inequality, which is the situation that presently obtains, is the assumption by one party, men, of the right to determine the Christian nature and identity, and therefore the role and functions in the Church, of the other party, women. This inequality is the basis for the actual domination of women by men in the Church.

Thirdly, I regard *the exclusion of women from ordination as the symbol of this domination of women by men*. The exclusion of women from Orders both expresses and realizes the assumed right of men to determine the nature and identity as well as to limit the role and functions of women in the Church. Thus it is an eloquent symbol, in the strict sense of that term, for the inequality which grounds the domination, and it has appropriately become the most visible and painful locus of the power struggle which is being acted out in parishes, mission fields, chancery offices, religious orders, and sacramental situations.

The domination of women by men in the Church is an exercise of power which presents itself as an exercise of the divinely sanctioned authority of office or jurisdiction. For the sake of clarity, then, we must distinguish power, authority, and jurisdiction. In brief, power is the most basic term; authority is a kind of power; and jurisdiction is a kind of authority.

*Power* is the capacity to move oneself or an other (person or thing) in some way. This capacity can be physical force or interpersonal influence—moral, intellectual, affective, aesthetic, or spiritual. The most evident kind of power is physical force as it appears in nature, e.g., in the power of the avalanche or the raging forest fire or as it appears in human affairs, e.g., in the physical violence of the warrior or the rapist. But specifically human power is interpersonal influence by which one person moves another freely, without violating the integrity of the other, the way God moves human creatures.

*Authority* is the proper name for this specifically human power. Authority is the right to be heard and heeded, the power to move another freely by placing an intrinsic claim on the mind and heart, i.e., on the conscience, of the other through the exercise of truth and love. Anyone who speaks the truth or reveals the good to us, places a claim upon us to respond affirmatively. The person who is "of the truth" will hear that claim and respond (cf. Jn 8:47; 18:37b), will experience authority as genuine power moving one from within toward the true and the good.

*Jurisdiction* is a special kind of authority, one exercised in virtue of office and buttressed with external sanctions of a coercive nature, i.e., with physical power. The right of the police officer, the judge, or the mayor to be heard and heeded arises from his or her office, not from the intrinsic truth or goodness of what is commanded and it is sanctioned by penalties. However, if jurisdiction is to be legitimately exercised it must serve the common good which it can do only if it is in accord with truth and goodness. The person in office who claims to be above the law (i.e., above the control of the codified common good) is a tyrant, not a genuine authority exercising legitimate jurisdiction.

With these presuppositions and distinctions in mind, let us turn to the power struggle between women and the male hierarchy in the Church. I want to talk, not about the power women already enjoy in the Church or the ways in which they might achieve more power, but about the experience of women as the victims of power, as powerless in the Church. I have chosen this aspect of the problem for two reasons. First, as an ecclesial community, we need a more biblical and theological analysis of this struggle which can easily degenerate into a purely political war, even when the weapons are theological or biblical arguments. Second, I think we are in desperate need of spiritual resources to deal with the agonizing pastoral problem of growing disaffection and disaffiliation from the Church of increasing numbers of women who can find no other coherent way to deal with what they experience as institutionalized hatred in the use of ecclesiastical power to exclude them from the free exercise of their discipleship.

I propose, then, to use the passage in John 19:9–11, the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate about power and authority, as a hermeneutical key for understanding the power struggle between a male hierarchy and women disciples in the Church.

As most scholars recognize, the Gospel of John operates on several levels. First, it recounts the story of the historical but now glorified Jesus. Second, it interprets the experience of the Johannine community which experienced itself as living the Jesus-event in its own history. Third, it presents in paradigmatic form the inner structure and exercise of discipleship as it is realized in the life of "Every Christian." It is this third level with which we are primarily concerned.

In John's Passion narrative there are three main actors. Jesus, who is historically on trial, is innocent Truth and Grace who actually places his opponents on trial in the arena of their consciences. He stands before Pilate in an exercise of pure authority devoid of all physical power for either defense or attack (cf. Jn 18:36) and without claim to jurisdiction in either the religious or the secular spheres.

The second actor is the group whom the evangelist calls "the Jews." Historically, these are the Jewish leaders who have decided to kill Jesus (cf. Jn 11:47–53), but theologically they are what John calls "the world," i.e., all those who have seen the Light and resolutely turned away from it to continue under the protection of Darkness to do evil (cf. Jn 3:19–20). This group, which is actually devoid of real authority, i.e., any power rooted in truth and goodness, is also without jurisdiction in capital cases (Jn 18:31). They possess only the brute force to apprehend Jesus, turn him over to Pilate, and then to blackmail Pilate into carrying out their murderous will.

The third actor is Pilate, a neutral agent who wants both to do what is just in Jesus' regard and to avoid the wrath of the religious establishment which threatens to destroy him politically unless he destroys Jesus. Pilate has physical power, authority, and jurisdiction and so becomes the fulcrum of the power struggle between Jesus and the religious establishment. After three times truthfully declaring Jesus innocent (Jn 18:38; 19:4; 19:6), Pilate yields to the pressure of Jesus' enemies and unjustly condemns him to death (Jn 19:16), becoming thereby the Johannine symbol of the ultimately tragic consequences of remaining neutral in the struggle between Light and Darkness. Pilate, who thinks

he is judging Jesus, actually passes judgment on himself, fulfilling Jesus' pronouncement: "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil" (Jn 3:19).

In the power struggle between women and the male hierarchy in the contemporary Church, women can easily recognize themselves in Jesus. They confront the guardians of the religious establishment with the simple truth that, empowered in baptism by the Spirit of Jesus (cf. Jn 3:5-6), they rightfully claim equality as children of God, disciples of Jesus, and apostles in the community of believers (cf. Jn 20:17-18). But they have only the authority of truth and grace. Like Jesus, who was a Jew devoid of political influence and a layman without office-authority in the ecclesiastical institution, they lack any political or ecclesiastical power to vindicate their claims. Like Jesus, caught between the fear and hatred of the religious authorities and the moral weakness of one with legitimate jurisdiction, they are "powerless" even though they possess the only genuine authority, the power to appeal to the conscience of their oppressors with the truth of their claim.

Like the Jewish authorities, in the Passion narrative, some of whom refused to examine Jesus' teaching lest they be forced to conclude to its truth, and some of whom had examined it and knew that it was indeed true, but all of whom had reached agreement to repudiate Jesus and his teaching because it threatened the status quo within which they enjoyed status and power, many of the authorities in the contemporary Church either refuse to examine the issue of women in the Church or, having examined it, know that the truth demands the liberation of women from age-old patterns of discrimination but refuse to act in favor of the truth. To recognize the fullness of discipleship in women and their right to exercise their discipleship freely according to their vocations would, in the minds of these men, upset the institutional status quo. Like their Jewish forebears who hypocritically claimed to be defending the honor of God against the supposedly blasphemous claims of Jesus to a special relationship with Yahweh (cf. Jn 19:7), these church leaders claim to be defending the will of Christ against the claim of women to exercise freely their relationship with Jesus. As the evidence mounts that there are neither biblical nor theological grounds for this institutional intransigence, that the pastoral needs of the Church urgently demand the full participation of women in the decision-making and the ministerial tasks of the community, and that nothing is really at stake except jealously guarded power, those people in the Church, notably pastorally sensitive bishops, priests, and laypeople, who cannot but judge that the cause of women is just, are being forced from their neutrality to declare themselves for or against the truth.

Some, like Pilate at the outset of Jesus' trial, have power, authority and jurisdiction, and are finding themselves, in virtue of their office, in an uncomfortable position between the Roman establishment on the one hand and their women co-disciples on the other. The establishment, of which they are part, has the power to destroy them ecclesiastically unless they continue to execute its will by enforcing the exclusion and domination of women. Most would like to remain neutral; they see their compliance as a matter of political expediency, as Pilate did. But it is not; it is an issue of truth and justice and one can only avoid decision for so long. Finally, not to decide against the oppressors is to



decide against the truth. As in the case of Pilate, the interior decision has external consequences. Not to decide against the Jewish leaders necessarily entailed sentencing Jesus to death. Not to decide against the oppression of women in the Church necessarily entails undermining their Christian freedom and dignity and eventually driving many of them out of the Church.

But what of women who stay? How are they to deal, spiritually, with the violence done to them by the abuse of ecclesiastical power and jurisdiction falsely presenting itself as divinely-sanctioned authority? It is here that the scene between Pilate and Jesus can, perhaps, be enlightening and strengthening. When Jesus stands authoritatively silent before him, Pilate threatens, "I have the authority to release you and the authority to crucify you" (Jn 19:10). He speaks of *exousia*, the power of legitimate authority operating in virtue of his civil office. Jesus corrects him, "You would have no authority over me if it were not given you from above" (Jn 19:11). Jesus seems to admit that Pilate does have authority over him and that God sanctions that authority. This is the galling recognition with which so many women in the Church struggle. Male power figures seem to have a real and divinely sanctioned authority, in virtue of their offices, to grant equality or to deny it to women according to their whim.

Jesus' answer to Pilate can be understood on two levels. First, Jesus does recognize the legitimacy of civil authority. Pilate has jurisdiction in this case. But he can exercise, with divine sanction, only just jurisdiction. He does indeed have the *exousia*, the authority, to release Jesus. He has the power, the brute force, to condemn him, but he has no authority to do so. God does not stand behind the unjust exercise of jurisdiction in either Church or State. But, on a second and deeper level, Jesus is pronouncing that God has, in a mysterious way, given Pilate the power to condemn the Just One. Pilate, by his free choice against the truth, has delivered himself into the power of Darkness and in God's boundless and all-powerful mercy that evil power will be used despite itself as an agent of God's salvific will. Pilate's condemnation of Jesus will lift Jesus up so he can draw all people to himself (cf. Jn 12:32). His suffering will give life to the world by revealing definitively the infinite love of God against which hatred cannot prevail. The condition for this paradoxical triumph of truth and grace through the very operation of diabolical hatred is the powerlessness of Jesus' authority in the face of the unauthoritative but irresistible power of evil.

It seems to me that women must learn to understand their own position in the contemporary Church on both levels. The officials of the Church do indeed have a divinely sanctioned authority and more, a divine obligation, to free women from their unjust imprisonment by the ancient fear and hatred which both sacred and profane studies have uncovered, in our day, as the basis of discrimination against women. But they have no authority, human or divine, to shackle women and deny their right to exercise their discipleship in whatever way Jesus calls. Women are not the victims of God's authority exercised by some of the male hierarchy. They are victims of the unjust violence of those who knowingly abuse their jurisdiction under the illusion that it gives them some absolute right to dispose of others according to their wills.

But on a deeper and more mysterious level, women participate in the mystery of the salvation of the world which God works out through the suffering of

the just at the hands of the unjust. The authority of truth which women command is, like that of Jesus before Pilate, powerless in that it lacks both physical force and institutional leverage. Like Jesus, who went to his death in faith that the truth he embodied was stronger than the hatred of his enemies, and that the love of his Father would turn his death into glory and his destruction into the salvation of the world, women are perhaps being asked to participate in the mysterious salvific will of God in a way more painful, in a sense, than martyrdom by infidels. Like Jesus, they do not suffer at the hands of a neutral power, but ultimately at the hands of the Church they belong to and love.

I do not want to suggest that there should be any slackening of the effort, by every non-violent means, to end the current power struggle in the Church with full recognition of the equality of women and men as disciples of Jesus in the Spirit. And I am convinced that the struggle will continue to be waged around the symbolic issue of ordination. But it can only be a struggle according to the Spirit of incarnate Truth and Grace if external efforts are interiorly fired by the conviction that there is no real authority that does not act out of the justice of God and that, finally, no unjust suffering of the Christian, willingly accepted for the salvation of the world, is undergone alone or fruitlessly. When women break their silence before the abuse of power in the Church it must be to declare in full knowledge and salvific acceptance, "You would have no power over me unless it were given you from above."

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### SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

Discussion after the panel of presentations centered on several issues. (1) Sandra Schneiders clarified the distinction she proposed between power and authority as exemplified in Jesus and Pilate, pointing out that she was not advocating a self-sacrificial attitude for women but rather illuminating the Christian meaning of the suffering that women in fact experience at the hands of the Church. The example of Jesus is one of resisting evil in standing for the truth. (2) The relation between the women's movement in the Church in the first world and the concerns of third world women was further probed; it is important that women in the Church develop a cross-cultural perspective, to see that "all of us are capable of being oppressors," and that each group in the Church has only a "piece of the truth." In this context, Margaret Farley pointed out that feminist theology is, in a very basic sense, not individualist but cooperative. The bonding of women envisioned by feminist theology is radically inclusive of lay women and nuns, middle class and poor, within all racial and cultural groups. (3) One participant argued that the central issue that women raise in the Church is clericalism. He pointed out that when women claim power in the Church they are attacking the concept of a male celibate caste. Panelists countered by saying that women do not seek to "take power" in an aggressive sense but operate with a definition of power that involves the empowerment of others.