

The Working Document and the Position of Women in the Church

Sense of the Faithful Editorial Committee

Several of the Writing Group reports, prepared to pull together the feedback from the faithful as a precursor to the Working Document, highlighted the extent and urgency of concern about the position of women in the Australian Church. By the time we get to the Working Document, this concern has largely disappeared. When in para 14 the major topics to be discussed in the Document are listed, the position of women is not mentioned. At the end of Chapter 3, *Looking Within: Renewal for a Christ-Centred Church*, the authors list ten questions arising to be carried forward (p148). None of these concern the role of women. Overall, the Working Document says little about the status of women, mentioning their roles and standing in the Church only in four paragraphs.

The document recognises the contribution of women in paras 54 and 55 in the section 'The story so far', stressing the increasing number of women in 'senior management roles in dioceses and Catholic agencies' (para 55). However, the concluding comment emphasises first the need for greater awareness and promotion of the existing roles of women in the Church and, secondly, the need for an expansion of these senior management roles in the Church.

In the section of the document entitled 'Looking within', under the heading of 'The gift and challenge of synodality', a stronger point is made about the need for change in the Church by referencing the Governance Review Light from the Southern Cross:

The Governance Review also identifies synodality as an essential component in promoting inclusion and co-responsibility in the Church's exercise of governance. This includes a significant emphasis on the need for the Church to open more the gifts, charisms and contributions of women in leadership and decision-making at appropriate levels (para 116).

Under the heading, 'The Call to Co-Responsibility in the Church', para 127 includes the following rather indirect call to PC participants to improve the position of women in the Church. This is after noting that lay women and men already hold significant positions of leadership in many Church ministries:

It is open to the Plenary Council to explore ways in which this co-responsibility might be formalised and expanded, and the ways in which women in particular might be more fully involved in all aspects of the Church's life while upholding the Church's teachings on the nature of ordained ministry in the Catholic Church.

Finally, in Chapter 4 of the document headed 'Going Forth: The Church at the Service of the World', and under the heading 'Developing a Culture of Listening and Care', para 166 acknowledges problems that 'some' lay Catholics 'feel unseen and unheard by Church leaders', and notes that

...some Catholic women have encountered patriarchal and misogynistic attitudes within the Church; some have experienced harassment or other abuses of power...

However, the need to improve the position of women in the Church is again not mentioned in the list of issues to be addressed at the end of this chapter, under the heading 'Journeying Together In Discernment'.

In summary, the Working Document fails to make a strong case, based on evidence from summary of the initial consultations and the thematic papers, on the current undervaluing of the role of women in the Church. The document also fails to propose concrete changes that are within the authority of the Plenary Council to make and which can be implemented quickly.