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Called to Reconciliation:

Churches and the "Sensitive" Issue of Female Leadership

When thinking of reconciliation, I like to think of reconciled people, of people enjoying peace, harmony, joy among themselves, of people enjoying mutual understanding and acceptance. I like to imagine a state of grace. But the compound term "reconciliation" does not allow me to fix it within the limits of a state: as an arrow, it points to something outside the picture I am unfolding in front of my eyes, it points to events that happened before people were actually reconciled. It also points beyond.

RENOVATION OF UNION

Reconciliation literally means "back to union, association". It implies a process of at least three stages: an original good relationship between two or more parts; the arising of a conflict; and the restoration of the good relationship. Another of its meanings is "renovation". In the process of reconciliation, restoration and renovation are in creative tension. It is not possible to go back to the past without moving ahead, without introducing elements of novelty. It is not possible to reconcile without being open to the new.

Reconciliation is a process that embraces past, present and future, it is a process that develops through many and different stages. A crucial step in the process of reconciliation is removing the factor that produces enmity. It is not always possible, and when it is possible, it is not an easy task: it requires the courage to identify and name the factor of enmity; it requires the courage and strength to dismantle it. It also requires the readiness to understand, repent and forgive.

In our attempt to substantiate our reflection on reconciliation, we need to move from the level of general rules and statements to that of concrete situations and people: the parts involved in the process will need to acquire faces, names, roles, memories, thoughts and feelings; conflicts will have to get dates, locations, reasons, premises and consequences.

Churches and ecumenical institutions are engaged in a process of reconciliation. The gift of reconciliation that we all receive from God in Jesus Christ, calls us all to a ministry of reconciliation. On some issues, though, churches are not ready yet to reconcile. Sadly one of these issues is the role of women in the Church, more precisely: female leadership.

WOMEN: ISSUE OR SUBJECT?

The *Framework for Common Prayer*, a document recently issued by the World Council of Churches (WCC), under the paragraph "Considerations on Responsible Approaches to

some Sensitive Issues", the paragraph 30 on "Leadership of Women", says: "In an ecumenical context, we come together with a range of positions on the question of ordination of women, both between and sometimes within our churches, and we are not yet ready to reconcile these differences". Not ready to reconcile. The same document says in another place: "We do not wish to judge each other. Neither do we wish to put a stumbling block before each other."

Women and their role of leadership, "sensitive issue", come out of the document as one of the stumbling blocks on the path towards the unity of the Church and in the process of reconciliation among Christians. The ordination of women is a stumbling block for those churches that are not ready (yet?) to accept female leadership.

On the other hand, the refusal by some churches to ordain women is a stumbling block for those churches and Christian women and men who consider the equality of rights and roles within the Church as a fundamental ecclesiological principle. Most of all, the exclusion of women from roles of leadership and the relegation of women to lower roles in language, theology, liturgy and ecclesiology is a stumbling block for women themselves. Not for all of them, surely for many.

It is not enough to talk about reconciliation among churches over the issue of women's role. In this way women remain "an issue", a "sensitive issue", among churches, in this way women remain the table over which churches discuss reconciliation. We need to move beyond this approach. Women have to be considered the subject of a process of reconciliation. We need to talk about reconciliation between churches and women: Churches need to reconcile with women over the issues of exclusion and marginalisation in language, theologies, liturgies and ministries.

THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS

As I said before, reconciliation contains the element of *restoration*: it refers to the past, a past considered good, often considered good exactly because it is the past. When talking about female leadership within churches, reference to the *past* is indeed a crucial issue. To which past, to which stage of church history should women refer to? The past of the Church is quite heterogeneous, the role and consideration of women in the Church has been different at different stages. What stage of church history should be normative for us?

Besides, *historiography* is not a neutral, objective discipline. Every historiography is a selective interpretation



of the past. It is possible to get closer to historical objectivity only critically reflecting on theoretical assumptions and personal political choices.

The experience of the *community of Jesus* is normative for us. Then women lived with Jesus, listened to him, were taught by him, talked and posed questions to him. Some of these women, like *Mary Magdalene* or the *Samaritan woman* that Jesus met at the well, were sent by Jesus to preach the good news of the Gospel. Jesus himself called these women to spread the good news, i.e. to be apostles and missionaries.

WOMEN AND MINISTRIES IN THE EARLY CHURCH

And then there is the past history of the communities of the first century ministered by the apostle Paul and by his many female co-workers: *Priscilla* was a missionary, a leader of a home-church and a teacher; *Phebe* was a *diàkonos*, deacon, and *prostàtis*, a patroness of Paul; *Junia* was an apostle (surely a woman according to CHRISOSTOMOS' *Homilies on the Holy Women of Romans 16*).

In chapter 16 of his letter to the Romans, Paul greets twenty-seven people: among these, sixteen men and eleven women. The percentage of women involved in the life of Pauline communities and in missionary work is quite high, beside *Phebe*, *Priscilla* and *Junia*, mention is

made of *Maria* "who bestowed much labour on us", *Triphena* and *Triphosa* "who labour in the Lord", the "beloved *Persis*, who laboured much in the Lord", the mother of *Rufus*, *Julia*, the sister of *Nereus* and *Olympia*. About many of them Paul says that they have "worked hard" in the Lord, a verb, *kopiaio*, usually used by the apostle Paul to refer to his own missionary work and teaching.

But the "idyll" did not last long: already in the pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) the role of women in the Church seems to have radically changed. The author of the first epistle to Timothy "cannot suffer a woman who teaches and usurps authority over a man": she has to be in silence. Women will be allowed to be deaconesses, their ministry being limited to the training of other women.

In many translations of the Greek New Testament, *Phebe*, *diàkonos*, deacon, and *prostàtis*, patroness, is "deaconess", a term not yet in use at the time the letter to the Romans was written, and a ministry not yet established. *Prostàtis* is translated with "servant". In many translations of the Greek New Testament, *Junia* the apostle has become a man, only because for many translators it was inconceivable that a woman could be an apostle.

COSTS TO BE PAID

From the second century on, women will see their role more and more limited, their leadership denied. Why so? One theory is that female leadership was well established in heretical movements such as Montanism, Gnosticism

and Marcionism. Fight against *heresies* lead the Church to drastically limit the role of women.

Another reason might be that at the time when Christianity started, the role of women under Roman law and culture changed radically: if Roman women in the republican age had enjoyed a great deal of freedom and privileges, in the imperial time women would see their rights and freedom notably reduced. The Church would adapt to the moral of the *Roman Empire* to prove not to be subversive, to ensure Her survival. Order against heresies and the establishing of good relationships with the authorities of the Roman Empire had their costs, part of these costs were paid by women who saw their role and space within the Church lowered and diminished.

It would be interesting to analyse the understanding and self-understanding of women's role in the Church in other times and under different circumstances, but it is not possible due to the limited length of this essay. Besides, it would not dramatically change the pattern I am trying to illustrate.

RECONCILIATION BETWEEN WOMEN AND CHURCHES

Women need to go through a process of reconciliation with the tradition as fixed in the Bible and in the praxis of the Church, a tradition that has contributed to make their role less and less relevant, until it became marginal in normative texts and church history.

Reconciliation between women and churches is indeed a difficult process, especially for those women who are aware of the role a certain interpretation of the Bible, tradition and theology have played in legitimising women's submission and their marginalisation in the life of the Church.

Still I believe that those women who decide to remain inside the Church and who decide to ground their faith on the Bible are ready to engage in that process. We hope churches will accept the invitation to get engaged in the same experience.

The vision ahead, the *state of grace*, is the Church as a fully inclusive community, a community of equals, where the difference of gifts does not overlap with the difference of genders and is received as richness of the whole body.

Suggested Reading

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