

A Research Project undertaken for the Australian Catholic
Bishops Conference by the Bishops' Committee for Justice,
Development and Peace, Australian Catholic University and the
Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes

WOMAN AND MAN

ONE IN CHRIST JESUS

Report on the Participation of Women in the
Catholic Church in Australia prepared by
the Research Management Group

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. The Research Project on "The Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia" was undertaken for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference by the Bishops' Committee for Justice, Development and Peace, Australian Catholic University and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes. The Project was launched by Cardinal Clancy on August 21, 1996 and the Report on the Project presented to the Plenary Meeting of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference on April 12, 1999.
2. The overall aim of the study was to gather data on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia. In order to achieve this aim, the Research Project addressed four key questions concerning various ways in which women participate in the Catholic Church in Australia, assistance and support currently offered to women to enable their participation, barriers to women's participation and ways in which women's participation could be increased. It was intended that the information obtained would provide a solid basis for theological reflection, pastoral planning and dialogue with women and women's groups.
3. The Research Project used both quantitative and qualitative research methods including contextual papers, written submissions, public hearings, a large-scale sampling of church attenders undertaken as part of the Catholic Church Life Survey, a survey of Catholic organisations, and targeted groups involving voices which had not been heard in the written submissions and public hearings. In the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups, responses were elicited from women and men from a variety of backgrounds and ages, those actively involved in Catholic Church structures and those who were not.
4. The project attracted an overwhelming response, significantly greater than the response to similar consultations conducted in recent times in the Catholic Church and in the broader Australian society. This in itself is a clear indication that the issue of the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia is crucial and controversial.
5. The research identified two broad approaches to the participation of women in the Catholic Church: one oriented towards maintaining the current participation of women, or even returning to the position of the pre-Vatican II Church, the other seeking an expanded role for women.
6. The dominant issue arising from the research was gender equality, recognising the equal dignity of women and men created in the image and likeness of God. This understanding of equality did not imply the sameness of men and women, but rather their complementarity and mutuality.

The Church was seen to be lagging behind the wider Australian society in recognising the changing role of women as one of the "signs of the times" and affirming the equality of women. The very limited participation of women in decision-making at present and the need to increase women's involvement in decision-making at all levels were constant and major themes. Involvement in decision-making was often linked with a call to promote opportunities for women to participate in leadership in the Church.

7. The research found that, while there is a range of views concerning women and the Church, there is virtually no disparity of views based on gender. It is concluded that the issue of the participation of women in the Church is not just a concern for women only but rather an issue for the Church as a whole.
8. Results of the Catholic Church Life Survey revealed that church attenders have a considerably older profile than the Catholic population in general, that women outnumber men in the ratio of about three to two and that more than half of all attenders are not involved in any regular way in other parish activities, although women are more likely to be involved than men are. There is an under-representation of young people and of those who are separated or divorced.
9. The Survey found that the great majority of church attenders have a strong sense of belonging to their parish and feel that it is adequately meeting their spiritual needs, have never felt unwelcome in the Church in recent years, and have been given sufficient assistance to complete a task when they have accepted responsibility. Respondents suggested that the best ways to increase women's participation were through prayer, increasing women's involvement in decision-making and Church administration, and reforming beliefs and practices that do not promote the equality of men and women. Three quarters said they have neither experienced nor observed barriers to women's participation in the Church but more than a quarter said they did not accept the Church's teaching on the ordination of women.
10. By contrast, the overall findings of the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups revealed a strong sense of pain and alienation resulting from the Church's stance on women. The results of these research approaches highlighted the enormous contribution of women to all aspects of the life of the Church, except in the ordained ministry, leadership and decision-making. It was perceived that little assistance and support were received from the institutional Church to undertake anything other than ancillary and support roles. Significant barriers to the full participation of women were experienced. The fundamental barrier concerned traditions and attitudes which were seen to be inconsistent with the person and

message of Jesus Christ and especially his relationship with women. The major suggestions to increase women's participation were the involvement of women in decision-making at all levels, a re-examination of the nature of ministry with exploration of the possibility of more inclusive roles for men and women, and reform of beliefs and associated practices that do not promote the equality of men and women.

11. There was much agreement, even among those with different views on the question, that there should be open discussion of the issue of women's ordination.
12. One of the greatest challenges to emerge from the research is the need to create a range of opportunities in the Church for respectful listening and dialogue concerning the experiences, needs and aspirations of women.