**Justice and Peace Commission, Armagh Archdiocese Conference on**

**The Church, Women, and Authority: Why Not?**

**Dromantine, Co Down**

**17 October 2015**

**The Report (Narrative Version)**

As the Justice, Peace and Development Commission for the Archdiocese of Armagh we felt that it was essential that we should be asking one of the most fundamental questions on justice within the Catholic Church and that being, in our opinion, the one of the role of women within the Church and principally that of decision making positions therein.

To this end we decided that the best way to explore this question was to hold a half day conference with a couple of guest speakers who would be able to bring a broad outlook on the subject, thereby enabling all participants/attendees to discuss the question as fully as possible.

We consequently invited Baroness Nuala O’Loan and Fr. Gerry O’Hanlon S.J as our two guest speakers and also invited, through Church bulletins, and various other means of advertising, anyone from the Archdiocese and beyond who wished to attend to do so. The Conference was funded fully by the Archdiocese and held in the beautiful setting of Dromantine Conference Centre in Co. Down with refreshments supplied to all on the day.

The day was chaired expertly by a member of our commission Ms. Rhona Quinn and the itinerary was as follows:

Registration and Tea/Coffee  9.30 am -10.00

Conference Chair Introduction & Welcome  10.00 – 10.10

Chair introduces Commission Chairperson  10.10 - 10.15

Opening Prayer 10.15 – 10.20

Chair Introduces 1st speaker Baroness Nuala O Loan  10.20 -10.45

Chair Introduces 2nd speaker Gerry O Hanlon SJ 10.45 – 11.10

Group Discussion   11.10 – 11.30

Coffee Break  11.30 – 11.50

Plenary Session 11.50 – 12.40

Summary and Thank You and Closing Prayer  12.40 – 13.00

What follows is a summary of the chairs introduction, a full account of both speakers’ speeches on the day, feedback from the Group discussions, plenary session and finally feedback forms completed at the end of the day by the attendees.

Our chair for the day, Ms. Rhona Quinn, made a comprehensive introduction[[1]](#footnote-1) which covered the following points:

* The role of women in the Church reflects the role of women in society in general. Women are frequently underrepresented in organisations and their voices rarely heard.
* There are fewer women CEO’s in FTSE 100 companies than there are men with a Christian name John.
* The structures that prevent women getting to positions of authority in society are being addressed slowly, we need to do the same within the Church.
* There have always been women of power within the Church, in Holy Orders, Educational Establishments and Charities.
* You don’t need to wear a collar to have influence; some women have had a very significant impact without being ordained.
* We should recognise the important work that women do daily in support of the Church.
* We should not get focused on the ordination of women, rather focus on the things that we can change

After a brief welcome by the chair of the commission for Justice, Peace and Development for Armagh, Mr. Kirk Monaghan, we were led in prayer by Sr. Caitriona Gore who is also a member of the commission.

**Guest Speakers**

We then continued with the presentations from both guest speakers for the day starting with Baroness Nuala O’Loan followed by Fr. Gerry O’Hanlon S.J

**The Church, Women and Authority: Why Not? Baroness Nuala O’Loan**

Do you know how many Catholic women there are in the world? About 600,000,000.

The women here today are just a few of them. I wonder what your experience is as Catholic women? How do you feel about it? How do men feel about it and about their experience as Catholic men?

And when we feel what we feel, do we look back to other women in the Church and reflect on their role? I think for example of the women who gave everything she had to God - bearing his son, fleeing from danger within a very short time of his birth - a refugee in a dangerous world, caring for him, loving him, bringing him up and teaching him the things that mothers teach, losing him on a journey and searching desperately for him, wondering what could possibly have happened to him. Have you known that terror? Then watching him as he grew into a fine young man, proud possibly - the rest of us mothers are anyway, going with him to weddings and social events, watching him move out into the world for three brief years, losing him probably to his father’s business, when he really did not have so much time for her, then becoming more and more fearful as his teaching provoked the authorities, then seeing him seized, tortured, murdered, hanging crucified in the hot sun for hours slowly dying in agony, staying with him in his pain and desolation, able only to let him know that she was there, that she loved him despite all that others were doing to him, praying no doubt for the agony to stop. She is a wonderful role model for us in terms of self-giving love, generosity, fortitude and how to live with suffering and pain and fear.

I think of some of the great women of the church whose work lives on after their death - Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux, Mother Theresa, Chiara Lubich, Phyllis Bowman who fought so hard for the pro-life cause, Hildegard of Bingen who in the eleventh century recognised that sickness was not the punishment of God but something to be investigated, so that ways of healing could be found, Edel Quinn of the Legion of Mary. We could go on and on. They were women whose contribution to life was magnificent and who lived for God. They were all able to do great things. Like Mary, they may not have had access to the corridors of power, especially at the top of the Church, yet they were able to live the Gospel with courage and integrity. And at the end of the day maybe that is what really matters.

Sometimes I think that when we contemplate the role of women in the church we need to ask ourselves a lot of questions.

We might ask:

* What decisions are made in the church which really matter?
* Who makes them?
* How do we know about them?

and

* Where are decisions made and by whom?
* In the Vatican?
* In the diocese?
* In the parish?

and

* How do women get a word in?
* Do their words matter?
* Who is listening?

Are those the right questions? Given the shortness of our lives are there other questions we should be asking? What is it that makes a life truly well lived? What do we remember when people die? What matters?

I guess it depends on individual experience. We may feel excluded, marginalised, as we contemplate our situation. But actually that can be the experience of laymen too. Or we can live our lives as best we can in the changing situations in which we find ourselves, striving always for justice, for peace, for harmony in our homes, our workplaces, our parishes, our towns, our country.

In reality there can be no doubt that for women of my generation things have changed enormously. We have access to education, to a greater degree of material comfort than our mothers and grandmothers did, we have the ability to travel. We can drive. We no longer face a significant risk of dying in childbirth. We believe, and so we have hope.

You know, if you look around you in society, that in the professions, (with the exception of education), in law and politics, medicine, accountancy, there are only limited numbers of women, About 30% of public appointments in NI are held by women - 70% by men. The new commissioner for Public Appointments was talking about it yesterday - calling for targets of 50% for women appointed to boards. Women are more likely to be in low paid jobs. So things have improved but much remains to be done.

In Church terms progress has been similarly slow. For decades after Vatican 11 provision for greater involvement of the women was honoured largely in the breach. Expectations were raised by Paul VI (1965) saying that *‘the Church is proud to have glorified and liberated woman, and ….to have brought into relief her basic equality with man’ have not been realised. He went on to say, ‘the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. … at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling.’*

Things did change.We no longer have to wear black mantillas or hats to cover our hair in Church. We can and do now enter the Sanctuary, we can and do become Ministers of the Word and the Eucharist. Girls can be altar servers. Women do chair Pastoral Councils, in Diocese and Parish. We are no longer required to be “churched” after childbirth.

The language being used about women has changed too. In Evangelii Gaudium, para 103 Pope Francis stated

*“The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess. I think, for example, of the special concern which women show to others, which finds a particular, even if not exclusive, expression in motherhood. I readily acknowledge that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection. But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because “the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace” [72] and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures.”*

This is a very different interpretation of how women interact with the Church than that which we have known in the past.

More informally he said,

*"The presence and the role of women in the life and mission of the Church, although not linked to the ministerial priesthood, remain absolutely necessary and irreplaceable. [As the Declaration Inter Insigniores points out, ‘]The Church desires that Christian women should become fully aware of the greatness of their mission: today their role is of capital importance both for the renewal and humanization of society and for the rediscovery by believers of the true face of the Church'*

What else has he done or said?

• He undoubtedly focuses on women’s caring role within family, church and society, talking of how families benefit from women's "gifts of delicateness, special sensitivity and tenderness."

• He seems to be moving to bring more women into roles within the Vatican and the pontifical bodies. This will inevitably be slow work. Membership of such bodies normally lasts for several years so appointments are not made frequently. One would wonder also whether the Presidents have a strong role in the decision making. Traditionally these roles are overwhelmingly held by men, ordained and unordained. Nevertheless:

• He increased the number of women on the International Theological Commission from two to five, making them 16% of the Commission.

• A body tasked with carrying out a detailed inquiry into the Vatican's administration is made up of seven lay people, including a woman

• The Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors, (established last year to deal with sexual abuse etc) includes five women -- and just one cardinal. The women include Marie Collins described by French journalist JEAN-LOUIS DE LA VAISSIERE, as an “eye-opening appointment”

• A woman was appointed as a member of a Vatican Congregation: the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples, in Rome. She is the Superior General of the Combonian Missionary Sisters, Sister Luzia Premoli.

• The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education recently appointed a woman Franciscan Sr. Mary Melone, to lead one of Rome's seven pontifical universities, the Pontifical University Antonianum

• The Pontifical Council for the Laity has 24 lay members of whom 11 are women.

• The Pontifical Council for the Family has a Presidential Committee composed of 15 cardinals and 12 archbishops and bishops, plus 18 married couples from all over the world.

• The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has a Cardinal President who is assisted by a Bishop Secretary and a woman Under-Secretary.   
  
But:

Most congregations, councils, commissions, universities have no women members.

The Popes can be quite good at talking the talk, not so good at walking the walk.

Pope John Paul II said in 1988 that:

*“the Church gives thanks for each and every woman: for mothers, for sisters, for wives; for women consecrated to God in virginity; for women dedicated to the many human beings who await the gratuitous love of another person; for women who watch over the human persons in the family, which is the fundamental sign of the human community; for women who work professionally, and who at times are burdened by a great social responsibility; for ‘perfect’ women and for ‘weak’ women - for all women as they have come forth from the heart of God in all the beauty and richness of their femininity; as they have been embraced by his eternal love; as, together with men, they are pilgrims on this earth, which is the temporal ‘homeland’ of all people and is transformed sometimes into a ‘valley of tears’; as they assume, together with men, a common responsibility for the destiny of humanity according to daily necessities and according to that definitive destiny which the human family has in God himself.” (n 31)*

But there is of course one big issue in this context of women and decision making.

In para 104 of EG Francis said this

“*Demands that the legitimate rights of women be respected, based on the firm conviction that men and women are equal in dignity, present the Church with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded. The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion, but it can prove especially divisive if sacramental power is too closely identified with power in general. It must be remembered that when we speak of sacramental power “we are in the realm of function, not that of dignity or holiness”.[73] The ministerial priesthood is one means employed by Jesus for the service of his people, yet our great dignity derives from baptism, which is accessible to all. The configuration of the priest to Christ the head – namely, as the principal source of grace – does not imply an exaltation which would set him above others. In the Church, functions “do not favour the superiority of some vis-à-vis the others”.[74] Indeed, a woman, Mary, is more important than the bishops. Even when the function of ministerial priesthood is considered “hierarchical”, it must be remembered that “it is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ’s members”.[75] Its key and axis is not power understood as domination, but the power to administer the sacrament of the Eucharist; this is the origin of its authority, which is always a service to God’s people this is the origin of its authority. This presents a great challenge for pastors and theologians, who are in a position to recognize more fully what this entails with regard to the possible role of women in decision-making in different areas of the Church’s life.”*

And that is the nub of the big issue - ordination within the Church is reserved to men, and one of the consequences of ordination is that it brings with it the right to be a decision maker. If you can’t be ordained within our Church then you cannot ultimately be a decision maker in some spheres, arguably very important spheres.

Do I want this to change? I don’t know. I have difficulty with it but ….

I think there are other battles to be fought in the church today which are smaller but more immediate and which need to be won.

I want to share with you a document which was created by a group of women about the position of women in the Church today. They said this

*“A look at the present leads us to the risk of rhetoric and clichés. Women were the first believers, the first witnesses. And it is they, as mothers and grandmothers above all, whom Pope Francis has asked to continue to proclaim hope and resurrection. Women have always been a sort of silent rock of strength in the faith, to them has always been entrusted the task of educating children to life as believers.”* Do we recognise this description of women? Is it real? They went on….*”An army of teachers, catechists, mothers and grandmothers that, however, instead of being seen as figures of the Church seem to belong to a small ancient world that is disappearing. In fact, it is in the area of young women that the crisis is starting to be felt. In the West, women between 20 and 50 years old rarely go to Mass”,*  Is that your experience?  *“They opt for a religious wedding less often, few follow a religious vocation, and in general they express a certain diffidence toward the formative abilities of religious men.”* Think about that one!! *“What is not working, today, so that the image of womanhood that the Church has kept, does not correspond to reality? Today women no longer spend their afternoons reciting the rosary or taking part in religious devotions, they often work, sometimes as top managers engaged as much as, if not more than, their male counterparts, and frequently they also have to care for their families. They are women who, perhaps with great difficulty, have reached places of prestige within society and the workplace, but have no corresponding decisional role nor responsibility within ecclesial communities. There is no discussion here of women priests, which according to statistics is not something that women want. If, as Pope Francis says, women have a central role in Christianity, this role must find a counterpart also in the ordinary life of the Church.*”

This document was produced by women in preparation for a conference in Rome in February this year. It was called “Women’s Culture: Equality and Difference.” It was organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture headed by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi. The Council consists of 21 Cardinals and 14 Archbishops and bishops. It also has three Men of Culture but no women of culture. It has 28 Consultors of whom 7 are women.

Women were invited to make presentations on various issues to be taken up in the plenary assembly but the issues were discussed in private by men. There were a few women advisors present, but they had no decision making role. Cardinal Ravasi was reported as defining the process as “women directing the dance with men performing the steps.” It met to discuss issues such as domestic violence, commercialisation, and women’s role in the Church etc etc. The actual debate was among men only. In 2015!!

However I read that:

A permanent Women’s Consultation Group met for the first time Tuesday 23 June 2015 in the offices of the Pontifical Council for Culture. (20 names not given) Desired by Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi to give explicit feedback on the various projects he oversees, vision and shape to any new initiatives, as well as help in identifying cultural priorities for women, the group consists of university professors and mothers, diplomats and journalists, political activists and scientists, bureaucrats and women in the media.

In welcoming them, Cardinal Ravasi, to whom the Group will refer directly, said he looks forward to hearing their advice and being challenged by their insights.

You know, when I looked at the Vatican website, the photographs of all the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, the three men of culture, even the 28 Lay Consulters are there, but the 20 women in the women’s consultation group are unnamed and un- photographed!

The contribution which women can make has been much evidenced by their massive involvement over centuries, in the name of Christ, in the developing world, and in the poorest and most marginalised areas of the developed world. Women across the world make a massive contribution to law, medicine, the economy, philosophy, international relations and in so many other fields.

Over the past ten years they have been very slightly more visible at almost the highest levels in our Church. The responsibility for enabling that contribution rests with those who hold power now in the Church. It rests also with women themselves, for they must make the decision to devote their time, their energy and their faith to their Church in a multitude of different ways. When I go to speak I do not speak from just my own views. I must read and study and think before I can formulate things to say to you. I must be very careful to be as true as I can to the Gospel. I must not mislead.

People want to hear the voice of women but there are very few women who will step forward and allow their voice to be heard. I often question whether I have anything worth listening to say. You know, we must cast off the diffidence which makes so many of us think that we are limited in the contribution we can make, and value the work to which we are called, whatever it is, and we must be open to what ever God calls us to. We must have the courage to pray, in the words of St Alphonsus Liguori “Grant that I may love you always and then do with me what you will.”

And all that takes me back to my original questions - what kind of decision making do we really want women to be involved in as women sitting here today in Dromantine? I think there is a role for us which does not involve priesthood - but through which we can live the Gospel very fully. We can make a difference, and we do have a contribution to make to decision making in the Church. There is a challenge there for our Church. Francis said, “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church.” He is right.

Nuala O’Loan

**The Church, Women and Authority: Why Not? -Gerry O’Hanlon SJ**

I want to begin my reflections by noting, with Pope Francis, that ‘the most important thing’, the ‘first proclamation’, is ‘that Jesus Christ has saved you’ (SJ interview), it is ‘the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ’ (EG 36), so that ‘mercy is the greatest of all the virtues’ (EG, 37) and ‘Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy’ (Bull of Indiction). This is the mystery at the heart of the Christian faith, the joy of the Gospel, good news for all men and women – God as Trinity, as love, wanting to share this love with us, who are trying to be good but are also vulnerable and sinners.

It is from this basic starting point of enormous gratitude in response to the mystery of God’s love that we worship but also that we question. Faith seeking understanding (Anselm), as practised by the likes of Aquinas and so many others.

Our question is about the exercise of authority by women in the Catholic Church. And since the Church is meant to mirror, to reveal the love of God, the kingdom of God, it is right that we are disturbed, even angry, when it becomes apparent that in its practice the Church has become in this matter of authority and women an anti-sign, instead of a sacrament, of God’s love. But note, I am suggesting that the questioning, the disturbance, the anger, the campaigning for justice emerge from a deep appreciation of God’s love –otherwise it runs the danger of losing touch with its roots and becomes arid and self-consuming.

This disturbance is clearly shared by Pope Francis. He has spoken about the need to broaden the opportunities for a stronger presence of women in the church, stating that ‘the feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions’ and that the ‘challenge today is this: to think about the specific place of women in those places where the authority of the church is exercised for various areas of the church’ (SJ interview). In EG he speaks of the need for ‘a more incisive female presence in the Church’, stating that the presence of women must be guaranteed ‘where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures’ (103) and that this presents the Church ‘with profound and challenging questions which cannot be lightly evaded’ (104).

In facing this challenge Francis gives a hint of how to proceed: not, for him, by way of ordination (not open for discussion), but rather by distinguishing between sacramental power and power in general. He seems to be hinting here that there is too close an identification between the sacrament of Orders and jurisdiction/power in general, and that we ought to look to the dignity conferred by Baptism as a basis for a more generous participation in power and authority by lay women and men alike (102-104).

I want to proceed now in two steps: first by exploring a bit further the suggestion of Francis about power, and then by posing some questions to the current teaching on ordination.

I: Sacred Power

An historical perspective is helpful in this matter – as indeed in so many disputed issues: we sometimes imagine that because things are so they have always been so and must be so. This was the great discovery of Vatican II in their *ressourcement* approach: by going back to the sources they discovered that things could be and were sometimes different than they now are.

In this context, and for our question, the eminent canon lawyer and theologian Ladislas Orsy is most helpful (see Discourse about the Laity, 35-45). He notes that the ecumenical councils of the first millennium, called by the Byzantine emperors and empresses, were surely acts of jurisdiction by laymen and laywomen. The majority of participants at the Council of Florence were not ‘in orders’; therefore ‘lay votes’ had a real impact on the determinations concerning the reunion of the Eastern and Western churches. Abbesses for centuries exercised ‘quasi-episcopal jurisdiction’ in governing ‘quasi-dioceses’- except in dispensing sacraments for which ordination was necessary. Such ‘lay prelates’ had ‘the power of jurisdiction’ – with the full and direct support of the Holy See well into the nineteenth century (39). In short, the historical evidence of lay people participating in decision-making processes in the church is over-whelming, from at least the fourth century and well into the 20th (*America*, 1996).

Of course that is not the situation today. Orsy describes it thus: ‘In the beginning of this twenty-first century we live in the middle of a paradox- and the faithful are hardly aware of it. On the one hand, the pronouncements of Vatican II brought remarkable results and opened the door for an increased promotion of the laity. On the other hand, the official policy of the church based on a recent theological opinion that found its way into the revised code of canon law excludes the laity from any *major* decision-making processes – reversing an immemorial tradition’ (35-36).

What has happened is that a theological opinion about ‘the sacred power’, not sufficiently debated by theologians, has become standard and has been incorporated into the Revised Code of Canon Law (1983), in particular in Canon 129. This canon specifies that those who have received sacred orders are qualified for the power of governance, also called the power of jurisdiction; lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power. The words are carefully chosen: cooperate is not the same as participate, and means in effect that laypersons are excluded from significant decision-making processes, that no layperson is admitted ‘into the inner sanctuary’ that is to have a significant role in building the church from within. Consultation yes, deliberation no. Orsy, who is careful with words, says that the exclusion of laity from participation in government is ‘a novelty and an unwarranted ideology’ (America, 1996).

This trend was already apparent, post Vatican 1, in the first part of the twentieth century and led Pius XI to issue his famous statement shortly before his death in 1939: ‘ The Church, the mystical Body of Christ, has become a monstrosity. The head is very large but the body is shrunken. You, the priests, must rebuild that body of the church and the only way that you can rebuild it is to mobilize the lay people’. It is at the heart of the problem of clericalism which Pope Francis has clearly identified as blight on our church.

If the challenge of Francis is to be met – to imagine a role for laypeople, and in particular women, in the decision making processes of the church – then canon 129 has to be removed and we have to return theologically to the understanding of baptism outlined in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium which referred to church as the People of God. Through baptism each of these people – lay and cleric alike –receives a share in the 3-fold office of Jesus Christ as prophet (teacher), priest, and king (governance) – LG, 31. There is no historical precedent, as we have seen, for limiting this power of governance to matters external to the church.

What might happen if this challenge were met and the necessary theological and canonical work done? Well, it would seem that laypeople (including of course women) could be voting members of synods or councils; full members of decision-making bodies in the ordinary administration of the church – e.g. Roman congregations and offices; in charge of the assets of the church; duly qualified lay preachers of the word – all on the basis of the *sacred power* given to every Christian through baptism.

I simply note by way of conclusion to this point that decision making needs to change at all levels of the church. It is true that the role of laity is constrained by canon 129 – and so, for example, parish councils are only advisory, consultative, not deliberative. But diocesan councils, assemblies and even synods are also predominantly consultative – the bishop retains sovereignty. And then, at a higher level, the Synod of Bishops, as presently constituted, is purely consultative so that, technically, the Pope may decide on his own. Only Ecumenical Councils – with and under the Pope- have decision making powers. All this needs to change. In practise this is beginning to happen - the present Pope has made it clear that he wants open debate, real and not just token consultation, the ‘sense of the faithful’ to be attended to, a more dynamic Synod of Bishops which has real power. But all this, at this point, is discretionary and is not the law of the church – for it to be sustainable and flourish (also after the present pontificate) it requires proper theological and legal underpinning.

Why is any of this important? Because we have seen the terrible consequences of exclusively clerical power, and we know that it is a great loss –a sinful omission in fact- not to involve the wisdom of the wider People of God in the decision making as well as the making of teaching in our church.

The Question of Ordination

The principal document outlining the Church’s teaching on the ordination of women, Inter Insigniores, was published by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in October 1976. The teaching was reconfirmed by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter Ordinatio Sacerdotalis, May 1994, with the addendum (n 4) that this was not just a disciplinary matter, open to further debate, but was a ‘judgement to be definitely held by all the Church’s faithful’.

The principal argument in both documents is ‘that the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination’ (Inter Insig, Intro). This argument is based on the fact that Jesus called only men to be part of the twelve, that the early apostolic community maintained this ‘men only’ norm, as did the subsequent tradition down through the ages. The document maintains that the practice of Jesus ‘was not in order to conform to the customs of his time, for his attitude towards women was quite different from that of his milieu, and he deliberately and courageously broke with it’ (n 2). Similarly when the early apostolic community encountered Greco-Roman civilisation with its more liberal attitude to women they could have envisaged conferring ordination on women ‘if they had not been convinced of their duty of fidelity to the Lord on this point’ (n 3).

This argument –from Tradition, based on Scripture-needs careful examination. Apart from the questionable exclusive identification of priesthood with the 12 (they were the eschatological foundation of the new people of God, based on the 12 tribes of Israel, not just priests), there is the admission in Inter Insigniores itself that ‘it is true that these facts do not make matters immediately obvious...a purely historical exegesis of texts cannot suffice’ (n 2). This admission is more striking when one considers the Report of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (April 1976, part of which was leaked and published in July 1976 and whose membership included such eminent scripture scholars as Raymond Brown and Carol Martini). Their Report, in an unfinished document, recorded the following three votes:

1. A unanimous (17-0) vote that the New Testament does not settle in any clear way and once and for all whether women can be ordained priests
2. A 12-5 vote in favour of the view that scriptural grounds alone are not enough to exclude the possibility of ordaining women and
3. A 12-5 vote that Christ’s plan would not be transgressed by permitting the ordination of women

Now, given that Inter Insigniores itself acknowledges that the modern question concerning the ordination of women is posed in a way ‘which classical theology scarcely touched upon’, and given the admitted lack of clarity around the biblical evidence, it is surely strange that the appeal to Tradition can be couched in such absolute terms – ‘I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women’ (OS, 4). I note further that, despite the solemnity of the language in OS and undoubted authoritative weight, theological opinion is clear that we do not have here infallible teaching (see O’Donnell/Orsy).

A second argument is advanced in Inter Insigniores by way of showing the ‘fittingness’ (ex convenientia/analogy of faith) that theological reflection can discover to support the norm that has been claimed to exist. This argument states that the priest acts not in his own name but ‘in persona Christi’, that it is important in the Eucharist and in all the sacraments that the priest be a sign of Christ bearing ‘natural resemblance’ to him and that ‘Christ himself was and remains a man’ (n 5). This argument is sometimes developed theologically along the lines of an anthropology of complementarity which seeks to discern the ‘genius of women’ to reside in the activity receptivity that accompanies love, and to suppose that public leadership is more the domain of men.

Again, serious questions arise. Are not women also made in the image of likeness of God, who is neither male nor female? Cannot women also be ministers of sacraments (by way of exception in Baptism and quite normally in matrimony)? A basic principle of soteriology is that ‘what has not been assumed has not been saved’ – surely the humanity of Christ is more important than his sexuality, since otherwise female sexuality has not been saved which would be heretical? Are not superior in women’s religious congregations understood to be acting ‘in persona Christi’? And, finally, whatever about the real and pervasive differences between men and women (often denied by those who stress cultural factors only), can they really be described in terms of public leadership, at a time when in other domains the Church praises the leadership role of women in public life?

Conclusion:

There are, then, serious questions concerning the Church’s present teaching on the ordination of women. We need to acknowledge more openly that historically Tradition has developed and changed, often due to the ‘sense of the faithful’. In particular if we attend to the verse in Galatians 3, 28 – ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female’, we can observe that the mind of Jesus on these matters was not so obvious to the early church as to prevent, already within the New Testament corpus itself, a conflict about how to resolve the matter of Jews and Gentiles; that it took the best part of two millennia to sort out the Christian stance on slavery; and that, clearly, we are still in the throes of confronting the gender issue. The change of argument from the inferiority of women to their complementarity (understood to preclude from ordination) may well mask an ongoing misogyny and patriarchy, however unconscious.

Nonetheless, because the Church has been so vehement in its denial of female ordination it is arguable that to tackle this issue first and head-on would be to threaten unity at a fundamental level. It may be better to ask women with a sense of priestly vocation to continue for a time to patiently carry the pain they feel in being denied the realisation of their desire and instead quickly to open up the possibility of the ministry of diaconate for women. Our own Bishop Leo O’Reilly has already called for this. Apart from being less threatening to ecclesial unity this move would have the merit of testing the waters, allowing the ‘sense of the faithful’ to discern the aptness of this development of public ministry for women and the magisterium, accordingly, to read the signs of the times.

However there need be no delay or hesitation about following up on the challenge posed by Francis himself in envisaging a more visible and authoritative role for women in our church, apart altogether from the question of orders. I have indicated the lines along which we must proceed in this issue, and not to do so would be unconscionable.

Francis himself (‘the feminine genius’) may at times reveal a rather old-fashioned image of women in some of what he says. What is important however is his recognition of the problem, and, more significantly still, his opening up of the church to debate, real consultation, respect for the ‘sense of the faithful’, a collegial approach to teaching so that bishops (including himself!) are ‘to listen to everyone and not simply to those who would tell him what he likes to hear’ (EG, 31). This is surely the most hopeful sign for the future, a sign which can outlive the pontificate of Francis himself: a way of proceeding that is intent on listening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit through the voices of the faithful and which creates the appropriate structures and institutions to allow this to happen. In this way we can hope that the questioning and often just anger, which questions like the role of women in the church give rise to, may be handled in such a way that they are a clear manifestation of the ever-greater love of God and our grateful response.

Gerry O’Hanlon.

**Group Sessions:**

The attendees were then split into seven groups of six with the purpose of discussing the points raised by the guest speakers and whatever points that they wished to also bring up. Each group were asked to come up with three main points which we could then all discuss at the plenary discussion later in the morning.

The results from the group discussion were as follows:

* We are too deferential and therefore enablers of a clericalist culture
* Ordination is creating an elite.
* Complimentary: People are different, women do not want to be a threat to men
* Two directions are interesting: Ordination and Authority
* The best person for the job is surely the most important thing
* The route of gaining authority may be more realistic
* How decisions are arrived at within parishes/dioceses and Rome: Top down v bottom up
* Sense of discipleship: Holy Spirit Guidance
* It’s Lay/Clerical rather than women/Clerical
* How can you change Canon law?
* Why is the Diaconate limited to men?
* Why does the Papal Nuncio have to be a Cleric and male?
* Time for action no more talking
* Parish Priests take all the power
* Females can play an important role in encouraging young people to attend mass.
* Canon Law 129: Lay people should seek authority
* Lay people have lost their sense of discipleship
* The role of the Holy Spirit in directing the Church
* Ordination of Women: Political
* Authority: All about power lay people should run parishes
* Women must be proactive

When we arrived back from a tea/coffee break the floor was then open to a plenary discussion with all the above points put up on a PowerPoint presentation which we then used as a guide for the rest of the debate.

The discussion continued as follows which we have to record as accurately as possible.

**Plenary Discussion**

**Question**: what practical first steps should be done in a parish?

**Nuala**: you have to look at the current state of your parish. It is still very reliant on the parish priest and this is wrong. If the priest wants a positive, worshipping parish then things can happen. We need roles for laity, rather than women. In my experience most aspects are organised by women. So where else do we want to be engaged? Strategic planning is very important: Where are we? Where do we want to get to? How?

**Gerry**: there is a need for women to be visible because this encourages other women. Do you do visitation? Do you visit people who feel alienated? Especially to age group 20-50. There is now a fashion in the church for listening. That is good, but if nothing is seen to be happening as a result then it is deadly. It will do more harm than good.

**Question**: I really want to say thanks. I thought both inputs were empowering. I am just back from 4 years, mainly in Ethiopia and I am trying to re-engage in the Irish Church and I am encouraged. Limerick are having a Synod, but the conversation can lead to exhaustion, as you have said if there is no outcome. What is the legal situation of a Synod, and could it help real change?

**Gerry**: A Synod has canonical legal powers, but a bishop can still decide to act or not. A well run assembly or council should lead to results, but it can be used to massage things. One example of a positive outcome was in Killaloe was that they came up with a Diocesan plan after a lot of consultation, but then out the blue the Bishop introduced male deacons. They challenged the bishop privately and got nowhere. But then they went on Morning Ireland and within two weeks the Bishop changed his mind. This was an example of prophecy. The woman who did the interview was English, not long in the parish. She put her view across very well. People need to be trained for this.

**Nuala**: When I came to Ballymena I wanted a room in the parish for counselling and they refused. So I objected. And people said that I should not challenge the priest. But I persisted. Priests and people need to grow up and learn how to challenge without aggression but with firmness.

**Question**: Inputs were brilliant. Is it really the fact that there is no power for the laity? I was really surprised that there is no obligation on the parish to have a council, and that councils are purely consultative. That makes me feel hopeless.

**Gerry**: it is easy to feel hopeless. But in fact this is a hopeful time: we have someone at the top who says that he wants lay people, not just women, involved.

**Nuala**: ask yourself what decisions you want to be involved in. You can be involved in many. The main ones that people are excluded from are canonical. You are probably already making decisions. You cannot make decisions about communion for those in second relationships, but there are a lot of other areas in which we can be involved.

**Comment**: lay people need to be proactive themselves, including being willing to take on the work load. My experience is that we will not be held back if we do this.

**Chair**: we will be making a report which we will put on our web site and will also give to Archbishop Eamon Martin.

**Feedbacks from groups and comments in response to these points**

In what follows comments from Nuala O'Loan and Gerry O'Hanlon start with their name in bold and apply only to this paragraph**.** Any following paragraph is a comment from the floor, unless otherwise indicated

1. We are too deferential and have become enablers of a clericalist culture.
   * **Nuala**: it’s about living the gospel and keeping that as our base
   * **Comment**: We have to take responsibility. We are not being treated as adults, but we are allowing this to happen. Until we accept that we are equally loved by God we will uphold the clericalist culture.
2. Ordination is creating an elite:
   * **Nuala**: ordination is important. I try to work in the church. My work is encouraged by people who are ordained. They have studied and studied and are making a positive contribution. We do not want to damage real priesthood of service, and not throw out the baby with the bath water.
   * We are blessed with some wonderful priests.
3. People are complementary: we differ; women do not want to be a threat to men.
4. Two directions are interesting: ordination and authority.
   * Within canon law clergy are the final decision makers. That is an obstruction to moving forward because the priest has the authority to block things.
   * I had not considered separating ordination and authority and it seems an interesting way to go.
   * **Gerry**: it goes back to the importance of baptism. This was stressed in Vatican II. But John Paul II saw the role of the priest as being in the Church, laity in the world. I tried to show that this is not the way it has been in history.
   * **Nuala**: parish priests have experienced a mess from asking lay people to take on something: Volunteers come forward, set something up, then their circumstances changed and they can no longer do it. The priest then has to sort it out. That discourages priests from involving laity. There is a huge problem getting volunteers to come forward.

**Nuala**: question to Gerry: Re canon 129: did this exist in previous versions of canon law?

**Gerry**: no: previous versions allowed people with tonsure (a stage prior to ordination) to exercise authority.

In my parish people are asked to join the parish council. It is not put to the whole congregation. In my mother’s parish the whole community are invited. It is wrong to invite only an elite full.

I’m chair of my own parish council and when we tried to appoint a new one, only all the old members – minus two – turned up

1. Surely what matters is appointing the best person, irrespective of gender.
2. We need to focus on the way by which gain authority
3. Decisions within the church are made in a top down way.
   * Who has authority to get involved in decision making?
   * **Nuala**: it depends on what decisions you are talking about. Some are reserved to the priest, some to the bishop, and some to Rome. What matters is *how* we are involved.
   * **Gerry**: in current church teaching the following should be involved in decision making:
     + Bishops
     + theologians,

The sense of the faithful

We should have structures to allow input from all these parties. We should insist that our voices are heard in major decisions, such as contraception, ordination, etc. Before the Synod the Pope asked people to respond to a questionnaire. It was clumsy in the way that it was administered. But it was a pity that more did not get involved. How can you change canon law?

* + **Gerry**: the faithful need to be involved. That is why many of us have called for an Assembly of the Church to give them a voice.

1. Why is the diaconate confined to men?
   * **Gerry**: theologians are now recognising that ministries emerged in a non-systematic way. There are references to women deacons in the Scriptures.Our present system of bishops/priests emerged over time, in response to pastoral needs.
   * **Comment**: we could learn from the experience of women as deacons.
   * **Nuala**: When I had young children I was very busy. I wanted to go to church but I had little time for anything else. So we need to be realistic about what we ask people to do. I visit Spain and I go to Mass. The parish has a new priest and there were nearly 200 children at it because everyone was involved. So we need to work out what is it that will keep people in church. It is a special challenge for women as nurture.
2. Where is the scriptural evidence for orders, or for seeing deacons and not connected with orders?
   * **Gerry**: the scriptural evidence shows a variety of ministries emerging in response to needs. That is why the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1976 concluded that scripture cannot be used as a basis for ruling out the ordination of women. We need to be more responsive to the signs of the times.
   * **Nuala**: how do we communicate with younger people? We need to meet them electronically, e.g. on Facebook. Some nasty things can said: Breda O’Brien was attacked viciously during the gay referendum in the South. An example is EWTN but it could be done in a different way to appeal to a different audience.

**Conclusion:**

The day turned out to be a very successful exercise in addressing the question of the role of women and positions of authority within the church and this was in no small measure by the dedicated work of all the members of the commission, the excellent contributions from our guest speakers, and the many good people who turned up on the day.

The key points made on the day could be summarised by the following.

* The conference was useful as a first step in looking at the role of women in the Church and the authority that they hold.
* Everyone recognises the valuable contribution that women make.
* We need to start thinking about what role women want to have and the decisions that they want to make.
* Reviewing Diocesan and Parish committee make up would be a good start.
* We should make sure that there is a gender balance on all Synods and Commissions with opportunities for women to have their say and vote.
* There needs to be some fundamental structural and canonical changes if women are to get real authority within the Church.
* We should consider opening the Permanent Diaconate to women, which as well as being valid in its own right could also act as a way to “test the waters” in relation to full ordination.

Unfortunately at this point it became apparent that we had ran out of time and we asked everyone to finish off the day by filling in a feedback form, a summary of which follows.

**Summary of feedback**

**`\*’ =** another voice saying the same thing

**Question 1: Have you any comments that might improve future events?**

* Perhaps more ads, invitations personally to enable more people to be given a voice
* Thanks: v. fruitful. But who are you? How did you get to be on JPD? Please put something on web page
* No: it was excellent. Thanks. I would have loved young women to be here. Perhaps have an ins-school time conference and ask schools to bring faith groups/RE students.
* A practical point: chair should give synopsis of points or questions from floor before speakers answer
* Many thanks, but too short. Should have been full day
* V. worthwhile and informative
* A short break between speakers
* Could have had more sharing time\*
* Literature on JPD needed to be place around the room
* Prayer service: make it shorter: hymns in a key we can all sing
* Excellent talks; thanks; powerful. Perhaps have small groups’ feedback to plenary before opening discussion. Many, many thanks!
* The event was excellent, creating awareness not only about women within the church but also about the historical evidence of the involvement of the church as it is today.
* Thanks for excellent speakers
* No: very well organised and served its purpose
* More direction and focus on the outcomes from table discussions
* Absence of parish clergy
* More time on questions, as people’s comments were very inspiring
* Too short\*
* Half day was about correct length. Very interesting and inspiring speakers
* Very well run event and very interesting speakers.

**Question 2**: **Would you like to see regular events in the diocese on the role of women in the Church?**

* Yes\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*
* Yes: a slow but necessary process to build confidence
* Why not?
* Yes – but not in Armagh alone: bring other dioceses together.
* Yes, it would be important to encourage discussion on this topic
* Yes, on the overall laity in the church
* Keep going – you’re great!
* Yes, very informative and hope filling
* Yes: but include all laity, and women’s involvement will come naturally.

**Question 3: What would you like to see as priorities for the JPC (remembering that we are a small group)?**

* How can we bring in young to more church activities?
* Giving space to marginalised so that they voice their fears, needs, etc and shape future through, e.g., mornings like we have just had in Dromantine. I agree with Nuala that it’s difficult to get people to volunteer in a parish. How do we empower people to step forward?
* You are doing great work, about which I know nothing. I will look at the web site and see what other events you are doing before I make suggestions.
* Women included in diaconate
* Well done
* Ecumenical endeavour
* Don’t know enough about what you do, but I will look it up
* Role of laity, including women; please move this issue forward. Ask: what do we want to say? To whom? What are our key questions? As Nuala said, how do we communicate answers? Invite Nuala and Gerry to suggest specific ways forward to advocate for issues that we have discussed today. Let them mentor us as we move on.
* Keep knocking on door of hierarchical church for justice for marginalised and disaffected. Work towards creating more awareness within diocese on your already highlighted topics of injustice.
* Don’t know what Commission does investigate further possible separation of ordination and authority in parish life.
* Strategy for incoming refugees; food, shelter and comfort for the poor.
* More conferences in the archdiocese; follow up this conference by informing people of the outcome; more information about your group – meetings, talks, what you do as a group. Please send me the report by email.
* Present outputs from conference to higher authority
* Can the work carried out today have an impact, or it just an experience? Follow on with next step: change conversation to next level: set time limits and follow through. Words are only words without action.

**End**

1. See Appendix II [↑](#footnote-ref-1)