**The Church, Women and Authority. Why not?**

1. Executive Summary[[1]](#footnote-1)
   1. The following report summarises the objectives and the key issues discussed during a conference which was held by the Justice, Peace and Development Commission for the Archdiocese of Armagh. The conference was held on 17 October 2015 in The Dromantine Retreat and Conference Centre, Co Down.
   2. The objectives of the conference was to:
      * Explore the role of women in the Church
      * Discuss how women are perceived within the Church
      * Assess the decision making process and the role that women play in making and shaping key decisions
   3. The format of the conference involved;
      * The chair, Rhona Quinn who gave an introduction
      * Two guest speakers to stimulate thought and debate - Baroness Nuala O’Loane and Rev. Fr. Gerry O’Hanlon SJ
      * Group discussion with suggested topics
      * Plenary session and feedback
   4. The key issues raised by guest speakers and the chair were as follows;

**Rhona Quinn, Conference Chair[[2]](#footnote-2)**

* + - 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.

**Baroness Nuala O’Loan[[3]](#footnote-3)**

* + - There have been many great women who have been role models and inspirations in the Church.
    - Mary, Our Blessed Mother is a wonderful role model for us in terms of self-giving, love, generosity, fortitude and how to live with suffering, pain and fear
    - Women like Teresa of Avila, Therese of Lisieux, Mother Teresa, Chiara Lubich, Edel Quinn of the Legion of Mary were women whose contribution to life was magnificent and who lived for God.
    - They may not have had access to the corridors of power, yet they were able to live the Gospel with courage and integrity.
    - If we are critical of the way the Church treats women in the roles that they play, we need to be clear about what we want to change.
    - The lives and roles of women have changed enormously, however there is still much to do. Progress has been slow and society needs to address inequality as well as the Church.
    - Even after Vatican II, things have not changed significantly although there have been some changes.
    - The language being used about women has changed; there is a recognition of the role that women do play in society.
    - Women have been appointed to a number of commissions and councils by the Vatican. However there are still a significant number of decision making bodies where women are absent.
    - Numerous Popes have recognised the important role that women play, however there has been little action in making practical changes.
    - The issue of ordination is a significant area of contention, the fact that ordination is reserved to men; and with ordination goes the right to decision making. This effectively reduces decision making roles for women.
    - There is a battle to be fought over ordination of women, however there are more important issues which are more immediate and which need to be won.
    - The contribution that women have and can make is significant and we all need to work to achieve an increased role for women.
    - We must decide what roles women should fulfil, what decisions we want to be involved in.
    - Pope Francis said, “We need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church.”

**Fr. Gerry O’Hanlon SJ[[4]](#footnote-4)**

* + - We must always remember that, “The most important thing, the first proclamation, is that Jesus has saved you, it is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ so that mercy is the greatest of all virtues.”
    - It is from a point of enormous gratitude in response to the mystery of God’s love that we worship but also that we question.
    - As the Church is meant to mirror, to reveal the love of God, the Kingdom of God, it is right that we are disturbed that the Church does not give parity to the authority of women.
    - There is a paradox in the pronouncements of Vatican II in increasing promotion of the laity, and at the same time Canon Law excludes laity from any major decision making.
    - Canon 129 states those who have received sacred orders are qualified for the power of Governance, lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of the same power.
    - Pius XI said, “The Church, the mystical body of Christ has become a monstrosity. The head is large but the body has shrunk. You, the priests must rebuild that body of the Church and the only way you can rebuild it is to mobilise the lay people.”
    - If the structures were reviewed and the necessary theological and canonical work done, lay people including women could be voting members of Synods and Commissions.
    - At this point, decision making needs to change at all levels within the Church. To make a meaningful change, Canon 129 needs to be amended.
    - The ban on the ordination of women is a continuing issue which is supported by the fact that Jesus called only men to the part of his twelve. This argument is not as persuasive as it appears and there is lack of clarity around the Biblical evidence.
    - Tradition is more likely to have shaped the role of women in the Church than Biblical teaching.
    - To address ordination of Women head on would threaten the unity of the Church directly.
    - We need to recognise the problem and begin the debate.
  1. After the guest speakers made their presentations, seven groups were formed and invited to come up with three points which could form the basis of the planning session debate. [[5]](#footnote-5) The issues which were identified were:
* We are too deferential and have become enablers of a clericalist culture.
  + - * Until we accept that we are equally loved by God we will uphold the clericalist culture.
* Ordination is creating an elite:
  + - * 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 throw out the baby with the bath water.
      * We are blessed with some wonderful priests.
* People are complementary: we differ; women do not want to be a threat to men.
  + - * 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.
      * 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.
* Surely what matters is appointing the best person, irrespective of gender?
* Decisions within the church are made in a top down way.
  + - * Who has authority to get involved in decision making?
      * It depends on what decisions you are talking about. Some are reserved to the priest, some to the bishop, some to Rome. What matters is *how* we are involved.
* Why is the diaconate confined to men?
  + - * 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.
* Where is the scriptural evidence for orders, or for seeing deacons not connected with orders?
  + - * 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.
  1. The following summarises the key areas of discussion from the plenary session[[6]](#footnote-6)
* What practical first steps can we take at Parish level?
  + Analyse the current situation
  + What are the roles for laity in the Parish?
  + Does the person have a strategy and what is the role for women In that?
  + Women should be more visible
  + Women can take on key roles, like visitation
* What is the legal situation of a Synod?
  + It has canonical legal powers but the Bishop has discretion
  + People need to learn how to challenge assertively.
* Do the laity really have no power and is there no obligation on the Parish to have a council?
  + The person at the top wants laity involved so that has to filter down
  + Laity need to start conversations about what power they want
  + It is important that the laity is pro-active and take on the workload.

1.7 The key conclusions were;

* 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 they 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.

1. See Appendix I for the narrative report of the day [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Appendix II for the full introduction [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Appendix III for the full speech [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Appendix IV for the full speech [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Appendix I [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Appendix I [↑](#footnote-ref-6)