Chapter III
A Papal Commission on Women: Hopeful Promise or Consolation Prize?

III.1 The Announcement
An announcement was made in Pope Paul VI’s name by Mgr. M. Uylenbroeck, in the presence of Pilar Bellosillo, from the Vatican Pressroom on the 3rd May 1973 (almost 18 months after the end of the Bishops’ Synod) to appoint a ‘Special Commission on the Function of Women in Society and in the Church’ (see Appendix 1). It was to be a temporary commission with as its tasks the study of the specific role of women in society and the relation of man/woman on the basis of their radical equality, but also in the light of their essential differences and their complementarities. The commissions’ mandate also included investigation of the position and role of women in the Roman Catholic Church.

At this presentation Mgr. Uylenbroeck explained that the commission would be inspired by two papal addresses, namely:
1. The historically important address on the role of women by Pius XII, which had almost the weight of an encyclical; 40
2. The message of Pope Paul VI to women in the whole world at the closing of the Vatican Council. 41

III.2 Memorandum
Some days before the presentation the Vatican Secretary sent a secret memorandum to the heads of the Roman Curia and to several nuncios with instructions to draw it to the attention of all Bishops’ Conferences (see Appendix 2). In this secret document the Pope indicated exactly what should and should not be studied by the commission. 42 The starting point of their research was to be the specific task of women and the complementarities of man and woman. It was also strictly forbidden for the commission to study the possibility of admittance of women to the priesthood.

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40 This was probably the address of Pope Pius XII to women leaders of the Catholic Action movement in Italy on 21 October 1945(!). In this discourse men and women were recognised as fully equal in their personal value as children of God. At the same time, however, the specific qualities that nature had given each of them were stressed. Motherhood was the natural task for women and the work of women in society had to be in keeping with their specific qualities. For the text of this discourse see Wolfgang Beinert (Hrsg), Frauenbefreiung und Kirche, Darstellung, Analyse, Dokumentation, Regensburg 1987, 120-123.
41 In this address of Pope Paul VI woman was mainly seen as bride, mother of the family, and educator in the enclosed world of home and hearth. Single women were mentioned only as consecrated virgins. Ibid., 132-133.
42 To muzzle a commission before it even begins gives a strange impression if one does not know the background: ‘The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith under the direction of Cardinal F. Seper did not appreciate this new cuckoo in the nest. He feared that it could end in tears, just as happened at the commission on birth control.’ See Peter Hebblethwaite, Paul VI. The First Modern Pope, London 1993, 603. At the time of that commission the Pope had made a decision directly contradicting their conclusions on birth control, with all misery which followed. This memorandum was drafted to prevent something similar from happening again. See also: Robert McClory, The Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission, New York 1985.
III.3 Reaction

For many who had looked forward to this commission with genuine hope it was a great disappointment. Instead of a study commission on the full participation of women in the Roman Catholic Church as Cardinal Flahiff had proposed during the Bishops’ Synod, it became a Study Commission on the Function of Women in Society and in the Church. The very title in itself was significant. In the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church the ‘function of women’ was always understood as that of mother and spouse.  

Reactions and expressions of disappointment were bound to come. In letters and petitions to Rome, Catholic women’s groups expressed their concern for the freedom of the commission members; the prescribed starting point and the limiting stipulations were likewise criticised. Thus the Joint Committee of Organizations concerned with the Status of Women in the Church from the United States wrote in a letter to Mgr. Bartoletti, the president of the commission:

“We submit that women do not have a special role in society different from that of men, and that all women certainly do not have the same aspirations or frustrations. Do you think that an ad hoc church commission could possibly study what role or roles men have, or could determine what men’s aspirations or frustrations are?

(…..)

We were especially concerned with the rumour that your commission had been instructed not to consider the question of the ordination of women. We do not see how the commission can possibly carry out its tasks without considering this important question.”

A number of periodicals and newspapers were quick to respond. The French press was extremely critical. In Etudes and in Femmes et Hommes dans l’Église critical articles appeared, including those by Marie-Thérèse van Lunen-Chenu and by René van Eyden.

The criticism focused on four points:

1. The initial secrecy of the memorandum;
2. The emphasis on the specific function of women;
3. The prohibition of the study on women and priesthood;
4. An offer of adapted ministries for women.

I. The Secrecy

A secret document that is not even sent to commission members, let alone submitted to them for discussion, excited indignation. It did not match the open atmosphere and responsibility of the whole church at that time. Why was it necessary to send this secret memorandum via nuncios to the Bishops’ Conferences? Did Rome want to let it be known that the Curia was putting a strict restraint on the commission? Were these means also to be employed to make clear to the faithful, women and men who were

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44 Even before the first session of the commission the word ‘function’ was changed into ‘role’; in later documents ‘study commission on women in society and the church’ was used.
looking towards this commission with high expectations, that these could not be fulfilled?\footnote{48}
Scientifically it is, of course, inadmissible to limit a study in such a manner that free and objective research is made impossible. It indicates neither trust in the competence of the commission members nor any great faith in the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. Specific role and complementarity

In the presentation as well as in the memorandum a preconceived ‘nature’ of woman was constantly repeated. In the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church up to the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century the view of ‘\textit{subordinatio}’ (the subordination of women) based on Genesis 2 and 3, Paul and the Church Fathers, was maintained. During the most recent decennia, however, the Vatican had used the model of complementarity in which the specific nature of man and woman was stressed. This nature is so strongly emphasised that women were almost exclusively defined by their gender: ‘das ewig Weibliche’ – but no reference to ‘das ewig Männliche’!

This notion was never, and also not in the memorandum, scientifically supported. Female characteristics and qualifications were derived from woman’s corporeality and defined from her traditional role in society. Qualities such as emotionality, sensitivity, tender care and passivity were thus ascribed to women. Ergo, their task in society should be seen in the light of these specific qualities whereby motherhood was considered as the fundamental task.

Karl Rahner said later in an interview with Anita Röper on this subject:

“It is however absolutely obscure and indistinct what the masculinity and femininity should consist of and exactly what distinguishes between them. This question is in general never answered. You usually know far too quickly and easily wherein the specific masculine and the specific feminine would consist. One very easily describes men and women by their differences and refers thereby to experiences which do not probably on the whole justify such a difference as fundamentally standing firm.”\footnote{49}

It is clear that this polarity model has a discriminatory outcome for women. The so-called masculine qualities such as rationality, creativity, will power and assertiveness are after all more highly valued in society than the so-called feminine qualities. In the Sixties and Seventies, however, this notion was already seen as outdated. ‘It is a static concept of humankind, whereby what the man is and what the woman is have been defined beforehand. The inter-subjective relationship herein is of only minor importance.’\footnote{50} A human being is first of all a person, an image of God; although she/he is at least partially defined by her/his own sexuality, the value of each person still resides in his/her subjectivity. Every person is unique. Differences between men and women are sometimes smaller than those between men and other men or between women and other women.

3. Women and Priesthood

The greatest number of reactions concerned the prohibition on studying the admittance of women to the priesthood. For many years voices had been raised in the Roman

\footnotetext{48}{Ibid., 31.}
\footnotetext{49}{Anita Röper, \textit{Ist Gott ein Mann? Ein Gespräch mit Karl Rahner}, Düsseldorf 1979, 49.}
\footnotetext{50}{van Eyden, op. cit., 28.}
Catholic Church, locally and internationally, demanding the admittance of women in priestly-ministry:

? The David’s Foundation conducted an inquiry among a great number of Catholics in Flanders in 1966 which indicated that ‘ministry and hierarchy should be made available to women; the arguments against this position are not valid and belong to the past’.\footnote{C.De Ridder, Meningen over de vernieuwing van de Kerk in Vlaanderen (Opinions about the Renewal in the Church in Flanders), in Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven, no. 1, januari 1968, 39-63.}

? As already mentioned in chapter II, the World Congress of the Laity in Rome in 1967, the Dutch Pastoral Council in 1970 and the Canadian Bishops in 1971 had asked for a study on women and ministry in the Roman Catholic Church. The colloquium of Pro Mundi Vita in 1973 pleaded also for the admittance of women to all ministries in the Church.

? The American Bishops’Conference ordered, with relation to the crisis in the priesthood, a comprehensive study on priesthood under the title: ‘Study of the Priestly Life and Ministry’ (1967-1971). One of the 7 commissions, presided by Carl J. Armbruster S.J., brought out, in April 1971, the report ‘The Systematic Theology on the Priesthood’ in which was stated that there are no biblical or dogmatic arguments against the ordination of women but that on the contrary there are several theological and pastoral reasons to admit women to the priesthood.\footnote{In: The National Catholic Reporter, April 30, 1971.}

The memorandum from the Vatican did not give reasons for its prohibition but pointed out that to women as well as to men, on the basis of baptism and confirmation, ‘the fullness of their christian vocation is granted and that they therefore have the right to participate as laypersons in the hierarchical apostolate of the church’. Exactly for this reason it is not necessary to grant priesthood to women. Several critics rightly pointed out that, if this is so for all laypersons, there is then no need for men to become priests because they also possess by baptism and confirmation the fullness of their Christian vocation.

4. Adapted Ministries
As a ‘consolation prize’\footnote{Van Lunen-Chenu, La Commission pontificale de la femme, in :Etudes 1976, 885.} the memorandum proposed a study of adapted ‘ministries’ for women in accordance with their specific qualities. Ministries such as teaching, nursing, social work, missionary work…. By a special rite such an adapted ministry would receive a ‘sacred value’.

It is unfortunate that the commission was not given the task of studying the possibility of admitting women to the ministry of deacon, a ministry that was in fact allotted to women in the early church. Indeed, among the ‘adapted ministries’ even the liturgical tasks of acolyte and lector (reader) were omitted. They remained, according Ministeria Quaedam of 15 August 1971, still reserved for laymen. One cannot but ask: were these liturgical tasks seen to be at variance with the specific nature of women? Contains such an adapted ministry not the danger of clericalisation?

III.4 The Commission Members

Mgr. Enrico Bartoletti, Coadjutor of Lucca, and General Secretary of the Italian Bishops’ Conference (an extremely important function in the Italian church) was
named president of the commission. He was regarded as the most effective ally of Pope Paul VI.\textsuperscript{54}

Rosemary Goldie was appointed secretary of the study commission. She had acquired much experience as executive secretary of the COPECTIAL (the permanent committee for international congresses for the lay apostolate) and later as undersecretary of the Council for the Laity. She got to know Rie Vendrik through both of these bodies. Rosemary went to Mgr. Bartoletti’s Eucharistic celebration at the Secretariat of the Italian Bishops’ Conference most days, which helped affairs to run smoothly.\textsuperscript{55}

Besides the President and the Secretary the Pope appointed 24 members of the commission (see Appendix 3). An analysis of these appointments leads to several interesting discoveries and questions:

? In view of the study commission’s subject, the majority of the members consisted of women, a unique situation among Roman commissions. It would, of course, have testified to a still greater recognition of women if the Pope had appointed a woman as president.

? Geographically the women represented a greater part of the Catholic community than the men did. Although the majority of the women came from European countries,\textsuperscript{56} every continent had at least one representative. It was surprising however, that no Canadian women were appointed to this commission since it was the Canadian Catholic women’s organisations which, via the intervention of Cardinal Flahiff, has especially urged the formation of the commission. It was also incomprehensible that the only representative from the United States was a young student (who got married during the period of the study commission). Of the male commission members most were working and living in Rome, while one had his domicile in Naples, another one in Paris.

? It would have been enrichment if couples had been invited to participate in the commission.

? Most of the women members held important positions in Catholic women’s organisations, nationally and internationally. They could therefore rely upon a great range of experience and knowledge of the possibilities, difficulties and wishes of women. They also came from different life situations: six were married, one a widow, five were single, two were religious and one a member of a secular institute. Notably lacking were women from the scientific world. Although one medical doctor (a rheumatologist) was appointed, one could have expected that more academic women from the social sciences would have been invited.

? Of the eleven men eight were priests, three were married laymen (although one of these never participated in the study sessions). Six men belonged to the Roman Curia, one of them a theologian, one a sociologist and another one a journalist. Almost all the male members represented one discipline: theology. None of them had experience in working with women in church or society, neither through study nor through pastoral work. It is also surprising that next to the male theologians no women theologians were appointed. In the years before the study commission several women theologians had taken up clear positions to particular questions and

\textsuperscript{54} Hebbletwaite, op. cit., 662.
\textsuperscript{55} Hebblethwaite, ibid., 641.
\textsuperscript{56} The Scandinavian bishops were disappointed that no woman from their countries was invited into the commission. In Scandinavia efforts for equality of women had had considerable success; In: \textit{de Tijd}, 11 juli 1974.
also published these opinions. Only one woman in the commission, Sister Theresa McLeod, had received a theological training.

Representatives of the World Council of Churches had been invited to the Second Vatican Council. One could have expected that this ecumenical trend would be continued and that women from the World Council of Churches would be invited, at least as observers, to this commission, all the more because the World Council had since its foundation in 1948 accumulated much experience in the realm of ‘Women in Church and Society’. Would it not have been obvious to nominate a woman from the *Groupe de Liaison Féminine Oecumenique* to this commission?

In conclusion, one wonders what the criteria for the choice of the commission members were. The composition was not particularly representative and, as Marie-Thérèse van Lunen-Chenu wrote: ‘One notices that the choice determining the nominations rests on traditional and accepted roles. On the part of the women: varied experience and expertise but damaged by the handicap of being ‘not scholarly’; on the part of the men: a narrow-minded selection – indeed a thorough expertise, but that almost exclusively limited to one single discipline’.

### III.5. Commentary

Although in the beginning of the presentation of the commission as well as in the memorandum references were made to the wish of the Bishop’s Synod of 1971 to create a study commission on women in the Roman Catholic Church, one has to conclude that the task for the commission did not correspond with the wishes of the bishops as expressed in their discussions on priesthood: ‘a commission to study thoroughly the position of women in the church, in the light of the signs of the time’.

With regard to the ‘secret memorandum’ there are three noteworthy aspects: the absolute refusal to admit women to the priesthood, the prohibition on discussing this subject publicly and the compulsory confidentiality of this prohibition. The enforced secrecy is not something secondary but is rather essential to Vatican politics. Secrecy is an indispensable weapon in a hierarchical system. The Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (A.R.C.I.C.) was a striking example of how these three aspects were combined. The Roman Catholic members were “to consider women’s ordination only as an additional obstacle to future union, and if Anglican orders might eventually be recognized, a distinction would have to be made between those of men (possibly valid) and women (in no circumstances valid). This was a secret clause whose existence was not publicly revealed.”

The clerical authority continued to use an outdated image of women, based on their traditional role. This by nature given division of roles, which in Society designates the respective tasks, is of course also effective within the Church. However, a division of tasks between women and men, based on historical, social and cultural factors, is here presented as beyond time, determined by the nature of men and women. Many women in modern times do not recognise themselves in this image as they fulfil functions equal to those of men in society and undertake many and varied responsibilities in the church.

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57 Van Lunen-Chenu, op. cit., 887.
58 Peter Hebblethwaite, *In the Vatican*, Oxford 1987 (paperback), XXIII. Hebblethwaite added here: “It looks like a recipe for getting nowhere immensely slowly”.”
The Vatican anthropology is based on Genesis 1 and 2 and stipulates that, because of the order in which man and woman were created, womanhood and manhood were embodied in society right ‘from the beginning’ and remained there for ever after. This view is based on ‘unchanging physical and natural qualities which nature has given each of them (woman and man) and wherefore the order cannot be changed without nature itself intervening to restore this order’.  

One wonders why many commission members did not withdraw after reading the memorandum. Did they hope that, notwithstanding the compulsory limitations, they would be free in their commission meetings to study in their own way and according to their own perceptions of women in the church? This was probably the case for some of them, judging from the statement of Rie Vendrik, the only Dutch member of the commission, in an interview in which she said, “…otherwise I certainly would have refused when the nuncio asked me to accept the nomination. If I had thought for one moment that the creation of the commission was a purely formal affair to keep women quiet, I would have had nothing to do with it.”

Actually, the main function of the commission was to make Pope Paul more sensitive to women’s questions and to ‘help him make an enlightened contribution to the International Women’s Year fixed by the United Nations for 1975’.

All in all it seemed almost impossible for the study commission to devote itself in a free, open, creative and objective way to the study of women in society and church. Or, to conclude with the comments made by René van Eyden: ‘The study commission could exhaust itself for years and years in the most profound studies, but the final conclusions, however, have been the same as those so cleverly predetermined in the secret instructions. To all requests from the Universal Church for extension of the possibilities for women in church functions, Rome could refer to the study commission which ‘is studying the case.’ It is difficult to see the creation of this study commission other than as an expression of repressive tolerance.”

### III.6. The State of Church Politics

What were the political relationships within the Roman Catholic Church during the period when the study commission started its task in Rome?

After the ‘aggiornamento’ of Vatican II an optimistic atmosphere prevailed and there was a positive expectation of a revaluation of women in the community of the faithful. Hans Küng wrote thus about ‘Special Reform tasks concerning Leadership in the Church’:

“Revaluation of the position of women in the church, full participation of women in the life of the church based on equality, competent women in all decision-making from parish commissions up to the council of the laity of the whole Church.
Training and education of women for active co-responsibility on different levels. Promotion of the study of theology by women and corresponding activity as lecturers in theology.

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59 Address by Pius XII to Italian women. In: W. Beinert, op. cit., 121.
60 Interview in De Telegraaf, May 12, 1973.
61 Hebblethwaite, Paul VI, 603.
Revision of the many liturgical texts and canons of church law that discriminate against women.
Admittance of women deacons and serious study of the actual conditions for the ordination of women to the priesthood, against which no biblical or dogmatic arguments exist."\textsuperscript{63}

The World Congress of \textit{Concilium} in Brussels, September 1970, stipulated in Resolution 12 that: "The discrimination against women as it is practised in the Church as well as in Society should also be rejected. It is high time to seriously investigate the position of women in ministerial functions."\textsuperscript{64}

During the Seventies the optimistic atmosphere changed into a strained relation between the central Roman authority and the local churches. The Vatican and the Roman Curia were systematically slowing down and even reversing the renewal process. Disappointment among clergy and believers, as well as distrust in Rome, increased more and more. Within a few years’ time a fundamental crisis of authority and a related crisis of confidence unexpectedly appeared. This ambivalent development after Vatican II is elsewhere described at great length.

The political climate in the Roman Catholic Church was not beneficial for the study commission to dedicate itself open-mindedly and independently to its assigned task. For the Roman authorities it was extremely important that the study commission should be a reliable instrument: the members of the commission were selected according to Roman criteria; the meeting room was in the Vatican; the study subject was so limited that the outcome could not contradict Roman policy. How much room was there left for reflection and discussion by the commission members?

Here I will only mention one document, which is particularly characteristic for this period of growing tension between the centre and the base. On 24 March 1972 an international group of 33 theologians from Germany, Spain, Switzerland, Canada, the United States and the Netherlands published a declaration ‘\textit{Against discouragement in the Church}’.\textsuperscript{65} The text starts with the observation: the Catholic Church is suffering at many levels today from a crisis of leadership and confidence.” The cause of this crisis, they asserted, should not be thought in individual persons, because “the crisis is largely due to the ecclesiastical system itself, which in its development has remained behind the times and still exemplifies numerous qualities of monarchial absolutism: pope and bishops remain for all practical purposes the exclusive rulers in the Church.” During the period after the Council, the Vatican’ policy pursued more and more openly a restorative reinforcement of the Roman Authority. This has gradually dashed all hopeful expectations. The credibility of the authority in the Church has decreased to a disquieting degree, and there spreads a sense of discouragement and apathy. In this situation the theologians make an appeal to the faithful not to wait passively for a change at the top but to breach the deadlock themselves. In view of this they want to offer some guidelines that will help to overcome the present stagnation and resignation. How should a Catholic conduct him/herself in this situation? Therefore actual

\textsuperscript{63} Hans Küng, \textit{Wahrhaftigkeit, zur Zukunft der Kirche (Trustfullness: The Future of the Church)}, Freiburg 1968, 224-225.
\textsuperscript{65} In: \textit{The Tablet}, 25 March 1972, 290-291. This declaration is published at the same time in several magazines throughout the world.
suggestions are offered under the headings: 1. Do not remain silent! 2. Do it yourself! 3. Act together! 4. Seek provisional solutions! Don’t give up!

A Roman rejection of the declaration followed immediately in an article by Cardinal G. Garonne in the Observatore Romano of 29 March 1972. However this document by concerned theologians gave encouragement and inspiration to many at the grassroots level. Undoubtedly the more critical members of the study commission would have been heartened by the declaration. Especially the exhortation ‘Don’t be silent’ would have had resonance in their situation. For Rie Vendrik it definitely confirmed her position: Stand up resolutely for a church wherein women and men are equal partners regardless of manipulation and intimidation from the ‘powers that be’.

III. 7. Preparatory meetings

On 5 June 1973 Mgr. Bartoletti invited 12 members of the study commission, who were at that time in Rome, for an informal meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to draw up a plan and documents for study and discussion, in order to present these to all members in preparation for the plenary sessions. Much work had to be done in a short time since the Holy See expected the results of the commission in the summer of 1974.

The president asked everyone who was in a position to make proposals of subjects and working methods to present these to him before 15 June. These papers could then serve as a basis for discussion in the next preparatory meeting. At the same time the president emphasised that all members of the commission were compelled to secrecy about the subjects which were to be discussed in the next meetings. Any requests from outside for information about their work should be referred to the Holy See’s press agency.

Three weeks later, on 26 June, the preparatory group met again and five proposals and documents were discussed. The outline on ‘Social and Sociological Studies Concerning Women’ by Mgr.Franco Biffi met with immediate approval; the notes of Pisa Colini Lombardi on ‘The Position of Women in Society and Church’ and the proposal of Marie-Thérèse Graber-Duvernay on ‘Woman as Person’ were, after some discussion, also accepted as documents for the general meeting. However the subject presented by Mgr.Antonio Magnoni, ‘Special Ministries for Women’, was problematic for several of the women. It seemed that the Congregation of the Sacraments, in which Magnoni was under-secretary, had constituted a workgroup for a study on ‘ministères’ for lay men and lay women. Since no women had participated in this workgroup Magnoni proposed that some women from the study commission should reinforce this workgroup of the Congregation of the Sacraments. During the discussion it emerged that the International Theological Commission was also concerning itself with ministries for women.

Some women were of the opinion that this subject was not important for their own study commission. They did not see why the church would assign special tasks to women. The French use the word ‘sacerdoce’ for priesthood and ‘ministères’ for non-ordained ministries. In order to avoid confusion the French name ‘ministères’ will here be used for non-ordained ministries.

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66 Next to the president Mgr. Bartoletti were invited Mgr. Biffi, Dr. Carriquiry, Mrs. Colini Lombardi, Mgr. Csertő, Ms. Goldie, Mrs. Graber-Duvernay, Sister McLeod, Mr. Narducci, Mgr. Noè, Prof. Petroncelli, Rev. de la Potterie.

67 Sr. McLeod and Mgr. Noè were absent. Ms. Bellosillo, Mrs. Delva and Sr. Hermann had joined the group.

68 The French use the word ‘sacerdoce’ for priesthood and ‘ministères’ for non-ordained ministries. In order to avoid confusion the French name ‘ministères’ will here be used for non-ordained ministries.
women and they thought that the commission should not concern itself with this subject. Others were quite positive about ‘ministères’ and saw such tasks as encouragement for women in the apostolate of the church.

More serious opposition arose against the presentation by Father Ignace De la Potterie S.J. on ‘The View of Women in the Plan of God and in Revelation’, in which he saw the nature of women as an ontological given. He founded this view on theological exegesis: in his opinion the creation story in the Jahwist text (Gen. 2, 4a-25) referred on the one hand to the fundamental unity of man and woman and on the other hand to their complementarity. Moreover, the priestly text (Gen. 1,1-2, 4a) laid the foundation of this complementarity in the nature of God, stating: ‘So God created man in his own image’ (Gen. 1-27). Here masculinity and femininity each expressed something of the mystery of God. Moreover the work of Redemption was realised by the man Jesus, the incarnation of the Son of God. His mother, the virgin Mary, co-operated wholeheartedly in this task but the role of Mary, ‘woman’ in the Redemption, consisted of openness in faith to the gift of God. In this role she stood as an example for the faithful.

In the Old Testament the Covenant between God and humankind was represented by the image of the relation between man and woman. In the New Testament this image was further developed by Paul who saw the sacrament of matrimony as a sign of the unity between Christ and the Church. Out of these images a universal symbolism emerged, namely that the role of humanity in the work of redemption and in the Covenant found its best expression in the fundamental roles of woman: virgin, spouse and mother. Woman was not only the symbol of the church, mother of believers, but also the symbol of the working of the Holy Spirit in the church. Therefore the specific charisma of women lay not so much in the order of structures and institutes but rather in the order of grace.

Several of the women in the commission were bewildered by this theological-exegetical explanation. They rejected the strong emphasis on the complementarity of men and women and on the specificity of women’s nature. A woman, they felt, is first of all a human being, equal to a man. The difference between them is not fundamental but exists rather on the level of functions. Moreover they took notice of the reticence of contemporary scholars to regard masculine and feminine functions as ‘destiny’. One of the Roman theologians also warned that stressing complementarity too much could lead to a misunderstanding of the value of celibacy. The argumentation on symbols by De la Potterie was likewise criticised. Was the Christ symbol masculine and the Mary-church symbol feminine? This distinction between masculine and feminine charismata was hard to accept. Should not man and woman both answer ‘yes’ to the call of God?

Pilar Bellosillo emphasised that theological reflection should start with life. Revelation does not always offer ready-made answers on actual questions of this time and one should also call upon the social sciences. She added that in the Roman Catholic Church, which after all had acknowledged the essential equality of man and woman and had condemned all discrimination, the full equality and fundamental rights of women were not yet fully recognised. She wondered if perhaps the fear that women would claim admittance to the priesthood was playing a role here. If so, she felt that

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69 One of them burst into tears, another couldn’t help laughing, while a third one had difficulty controlling her indignation
this question should first be resolved so that in all righteousness the Roman Catholic Church would herself be in harmony with what it was demanding from civil Society.

Agreement was readily achieved on methods of working. At the suggestion of Dr. Carriquiry the commission would make use of already existing research and publications from international organisations such as UNO, UNESCO, IOC., as well as from international Catholic organisations, such as Groupe de Liaison Féminine Oecuménique, women’s liberation movements, etc. (In his summary of this work method the president omitted the use of material from UNO and UNESCO).

After ample discussion the following subjects were chosen as the focus of the study:
1. Theological research about women;
2. Contributions from the social sciences;
3. The vocation of women in society;
4. The vocation of women in the church;
5. Sociological research, including the development of a questionnaire.

A sub-commission would be formed for every topic.

The questionnaire concerning ‘ministères’ for women would be developed and presented to all members of the commission and perhaps also to some experts. The results thereof could provide data which would be used for the investigation. The dates for the first plenary meeting were to be 8-11 November 1973.

On 20 July the report of the preparatory meetings was sent to all members and on 18 October a letter went out with the proposed programme for the plenary meeting, which was postponed to 15th-18th November. At the same time a questionnaire on ‘ministères’ was sent, accompanied by a request to all commission members to take soundings in their own countries. The statement that ‘all soundings should be conducted under one’s own name and not in the name of the commission’ was clearly underlined.

III. 8. Commentary

Reading through the reports of these two preparatory meetings, one notices several points:

? It does not seem realistic that such an important study about women in society and church could be completed in such a short time. From 8 November 1973 till the summer of 1974 is less than eight months.

? Two opposing opinions about the starting point of the study came up during the discussions. The Roman theologians, especially De la Potterie, wanted to start from a theological reflection on the essence of woman and follow from there to draw conclusions for the actual situation of woman and her own specific mission. On the other hand some women, especially Pilar Bellosillo, thought that they should start with the actual situation of women and that the commission should also use contributions from the social sciences, basing their theological reflection on these.

? It was to be expected that in the plenary sessions the theological-exegetical opinions of De la Potterie, with his stress on specificity of women and his symbolic argumentation, would lead to problems. Roman traditional theology was not the only possible resource; there were also more contemporary theological opinions. It would be important for the commission to make use of these.
Here one could already feel the absence of women theologians. The women in the commission sensed intuitively that the theology of De la Potterie was wrong but they lacked the theological training to refute it with arguments.

A small group in Rome had already established the five subjects for study without a possibility for the other members to give their opinions or propose any other subjects. The composition of the nucleus commission, consisting of persons staying in Rome, was one-sided and missed the necessary pluriformity of life experience.

It is strange that at that time secrecy was still demanded from the commission members. Was this a Roman custom and, if so, for what reason? Why should no one be allowed to know that the soundings about the ‘ministères’ for women emanated from the study commission?

This was the situation at the beginning of the first plenary meeting.