

## Chapter IV

### Plenary Meetings

After the preparatory meetings of 5 and 26 Jun 1973, six plenary sessions took place:  
15-18 November 1973; 26 February-3 March 1974;  
20-26 June 1974; 2-5 December 1974;  
15-19 April 1975; 25-31 January 1976.

It soon became clear that the study time assigned to the commission would be insufficient; at the second plenary session the president announced an extension to January 1976. Six plenary sessions finally took place, although the task was somewhat changed after the first three meetings.

How did this favourable decision for the commission come about?

The president became aware that the commission would otherwise become pressed for time. Still more important: the Vatican realized, at the approach of the 'Year of Women', how great worldwide the expectations were with regard to the results of this commission. Even the pope became more aware of the importance of a favourable press opinion.

Worth mentioning is the surprising fact 'to find the arch-feminist, Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (New York 1963), entering the Vatican for a private audience with pope Paul VI <sup>70</sup>; she gave him "The Sign of the Women's Movement", hoping that the 'Commission on the Role of Women', which he had created, would confront the barriers to true equality and participation of women in both society *and* the church

This chapter is devoted to the plenary sessions of 15-18 November 1973, 26 February - 3 March and 20-25 June 1974, as well as to the study-gatherings of some of the women members in the interim periods. The next chapter will deal with the last three meetings.

The study of the processes that took place in the meetings is based on the official French texts of the presentations<sup>71</sup> and the reports of the meetings. These reports, written by the secretary Rosemary Goldie, are sometimes superficial: controversial points of view and questions were often simplified or omitted and remarks of certain members were sometimes summarised rather than recorded as delivered. Reports, letters and individual notes<sup>72</sup> as well as interviews with Claire Delva, the Belgian member of the study commission, have also been used. Access was likewise granted to

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<sup>70</sup> See: Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI. The First Modern Pope*, London 1993, 638.

<sup>71</sup> Some commission members gave their texts in Italian, to the great displeasure of the non-Italian participants.

<sup>72</sup> See archive 414 of Rie Vendrik in the K.D.C (Katholiek Documentatie Centrum) of the University of Nijmegen and in the archives of Claire Delva.

the archives of Drs. René van Eyden, which contain reports of conversations with Rie Vendrik.

#### **IV.1. The first plenary session**

1. The meeting of 15-18 November 1973;
2. Commentary;
3. The 'group of five';
4. Criticism;
5. Continuation of the 'group of five';
6. Five supplementary Notes.

##### **IV.1.1. The meeting of 15-18 November 1973<sup>73</sup>**

At the beginning of this session, held in Palazzo San Calisto in Rome, the president, Mgr. Enrico Bartoletti, gave all those who had not participated in the preparations the opportunity to offer comments. Rie Vendrik read a French translation of the 'Resolution on Women in the Church' by the Dutch Pastoral Council.<sup>74</sup>

The five proposed themes were discussed during the three days and on 17 November the commission members had a special audience with the Pope.

Dr. Marie-Thérèse Graber-Duvernay presented the subject **The Woman as a Person**, especially seen from the biological and physiological point of view. She emphasized the complementarity and specific nature of women and men as well as motherhood as the vocation of women: "Motherhood is for a woman the essence of her being (...); receiving, listening, protecting, preserving – these seem to me the activities which belong to the realm of women".

In the discussion that followed, some women, especially Sister Teresa McLeod, Claire Delva, Pilar Bellosillo and Rie Vendrik, as well as Mrs. Dulcinea Rodrigues, expressed their criticism of the accent on motherhood: "A woman is first of all a human person, before being a mother". They also thought that the concept of complementarity needed further clarification. Two Roman theologians supported this last point, especially in relation to a better understanding of the value of celibacy.

Father Ignace De la Potterie S.J. then spoke on **The Role and Mission of Women, seen from a Theological Point of View**. After the criticism of his theological-exegetical views during the preparatory commission meeting, he had presented his text to four theologians: Two of them members of the study commission, Father Marie Joseph Le Guillou O.P. and Father Edouard Hamel S.J., and two other theologians: Yves Congar and Karl Rahner.

Le Guillou not only agreed with De la Potterie but he himself gave an exposition on **The Role and Function of Women from a Theological point of view**. He declared that men by nature are more fit than women for activities in the world and for exercising power: "Vir est caput mulieris, that is a law of nature". Furthermore he stressed the specificity of man and woman: "The human soul is masculine or

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<sup>73</sup> For the reports of the plenary meetings see: K.D.C. archive 414 of M.H.C. Vendrik, file 467-485.

<sup>74</sup> For more on this resolution see Chapter II.

feminine...therefore it maintains its masculine or feminine individuality after death and in the universe of the resurrected there will always be men and women”.

Hamel distributed an article on **Christ and Women**, which he had written some months before. In this text, which was not discussed during the meeting, Hamel also stressed the specific nature and complementarity of man and woman, which meant for him an enrichment of church and society. However he went on to express the striking opinion that an important reason for the past underestimation of the role of women in the church was an unconscious fear of women. To be a mother or wife would be fine, but to be a co-worker, as in the time of Paul, would be too dangerous. He further pointed out that, in the analytical index at the end of the complete works of Suarez, one only finds under the word ‘woman’: ‘Woman, see occasion of sin’.<sup>75</sup> Many founders of religious congregations gave young religious men the advice to regard every woman as if she were a devil incarnate.

Thus, he concluded, the cultural and apostolic inferiority of women could well have its origin in the fears of many priests who were unable to maintain healthy social relations with women. In this way, had the promotion of women in the church not been sacrificed for the spiritual safety of men? The fierce opposition of some against the ordination of women might therefore be dictated by motives which had nothing to do with theology.

Hamel also made a plea for female theologians who could make original and enriching contributions to the field. All of moral theology, for example, was created by men and almost exclusively *for* men. A feminine approach to ethical problems, such as those related to marriage and sexuality, did not exist. Precisely on account of her different view of moral problems, woman could play a unique role in theology. It is striking, said Hamel, that most articles about the question of priesthood for women and their role in the church were written by men. Have women nothing to say to us, he wondered, about this question that concerns them directly?

Yves Congar thought, according to De la Potterie, that the text of De la Potterie should certainly first be presented to women. The present document ran the risk of confirming men in their traditional conceptions. Moreover the active role of women in building up the people of God should be brought more into focus.

Karl Rahner responded with wide-ranging criticism. His most important points, according to De la Potterie, were:

1. In The Scripture nothing is revealed about the differences of the sexes; what one finds derives from general anthropology and is doubtless conditioned by the culture and history of the period. Moreover, no general conclusion can be derived from the facts that Jesus was a man and that the Covenant relation was expressed in The Scripture in symbols of relations between man and woman.
2. The characteristic charisma of women is also not to be found in The Scripture.<sup>76</sup>

The theological-exegetical explanation of De la Potterie was on the whole similar to the ideas he had put forward in the preliminary session. He had expanded his text with

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<sup>75</sup> Franciscus Suarez was a Spanish philosopher and theologian of the sixteenth century.

<sup>76</sup> For the entire critical text of Karl Rahner see Appendix 4.

Karl Rahner wrote this letter with commentary to De la Potterie and not to ‘one of the five’ as Peter Hebblethwaite wrote. See: Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI*, 642.

references to other authors and with a few new ideas, for example, basing the complementarity and specific nature of woman and man not only on the mystery of God but also on the Trinitarian mystery of the divine persons, in which the Holy Spirit represents the feminine principle. According to many church fathers the Holy Spirit expresses what in God corresponds with femininity. The theological understanding of the nature of woman and her characteristic tasks requires therefore a reflection on the specific function of the Spirit in relation to the Father and the Son, as well as on the activities of the Spirit in the church.

The symbol of the virgin as one finds it in the Old Testament (Jer.18.13) and especially in the New Testament (2.Cor.11, 2; 1Cor. 7.32-35; Apoc.14, 4) is a fundamental symbol of total dedication and a female image. The Scripture, concluded De la Potterie, shows us clearly the specific role of women in God's plan:

- a) In her deepest being a woman is the one who says 'yes' to God's Word, the one who in the name of humanity represents the attitude of faith, openness to God and the religious sense.
- b) As the living symbol of mother and spouse, a woman is called to give and preserve life; more than a man, she personifies and represents love, dedication, self-giving and fidelity.
- c) In the whole theological and iconographic tradition, a woman is also the symbol of virginity, which involves in its deepest sense unconditional devotion to the Lord, love without reservation, total dedication, perfect faith and purity.
- d) Finally, a woman is a symbol of the Church, mother of the faithful, a symbol also of the activities of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Her characteristic charisma lies less in the order of structures and institutes, but rather in the order of grace.

This theological-exegetical explanation evoked serious criticism from some women, i.e. Sister Teresa, Rie Vendrik, Claire Delva, Pilar Bellosillo and Mary Pyne, who had doubts about the exegesis of Genesis 1 and 2. They referred to *Gaudium et Spes* which sees in the 'true freedom' of the human being a privileged sign of the image of God. The symbol of the virgin was also criticised. Is not virginity as valid for a man as for a woman? No indication of specific female attitudes is to be found in The Scripture. ("Who has the more feminine characteristics, Martha or Mary?") Does not the Holy Spirit also work in men?

Rie Vendrik expressed a certain discomfort about the value given to symbols, saying: "One should not confuse the image with the reality". From an article by René van Eyden she cited Thomas Aquinas who "...refuted even more strongly the symbol-argumentation: 'These expressions are symbolic; and it is impossible to debate about symbolic theology and to furnish proof by such means' ".<sup>77</sup> (*Symbolica theologia non est argumentatvia* : 1 Sent.11)

Pilar Bellosillo then explained her outline of the subject **Women in Society** in which she suggested taking the real situation of women as the starting point for study, utilising material from the life- and social sciences. This view showed that women were more and more often taking up tasks which had previously been seen as specifically

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<sup>77</sup> Van Eyden, Man en vrouw in het kerkelijk leven (Men and Women in the life of the Church), in *Kosmos + Oecumene*, jrg. 1967, no. 2, 55.

masculine. Therefore it was necessary to question the traditional notions about the roles and functions of women and revise these in the light of present realities.

Discrimination against women as it still existed, if not 'de jure' then certainly 'de facto', clamored for attention. One of the causes of this discrimination lay in the demands of motherhood, and especially in its social consequences. Men had interpreted the function of women in terms of motherhood and thereby confined women to the sphere of home and family but the traditional division of work between home and public life was no longer appropriate to an industrialised society. According to her, the commission ought to ask itself:

- ? What are the big problems for women in this day and age?
- ? How can women participate in social, economical, cultural and political life? Where can they give their contributions to development of different countries?
- ? Women have been granted certain rights but to what extent does the real situation of women reflect these rights?
- ? How can a better and broader participation of women in the building of a new society be promoted?

The condition of women in various countries and life situations was examined in this discussion. Education was seen as indispensable by all, but the plea to start from the actual situation of women – the inductive, contextual approach – was not accepted by everyone.

De la Potterie preferred a deductive, metaphysical method and he warned against the danger of starting from the real situation of women: The exclusive emphasis on *en bas* can reflect a slide, often unconscious, into Marxist viewpoints which have developed during the last 20 years in certain catholic movements” .

Le Guillou seconded the warning against Marxist concepts.

Sister Claire Hermann put then forward her working plan focussed on **Women in the Church**. Referring to 'the common priesthood of all the faithful' emphasised in *Lumen gentium*, she asserted that women are as much the image of God as men and thus want to play a role in the church equal to that of men. She then proposed several questions for investigation:

- ? Which levels of participation in church activities or organisations are appropriate for women, lay or religious? What are the requirements for such participation? To which ministères and responsibilities can women be admitted: prophetic, liturgical, and charitable?
- ? Taking into account the differences of needs and the mutability of situations in various countries, what are the fixed, accidental or spontaneous tasks assigned to lay or religious women? Were, or were not these tasks as ministères acknowledged and accepted, desired and understood by the faithful?
- ? Do women, in spite of their exclusion from the functions of reader and acolyte in *Ministeria quaedam*, perform liturgical tasks? If so, does the community of the faithful react positively or negatively, and why? Do these tasks require an official acceptance by the church in a liturgical rite?

The discussion of Sister Claire's points was postponed in order to give the commission members the possibility to attend the audience with the Holy Father. There was hardly any space given to this discussion later on.

## Audience with the Pope

In his speech to the members of the commission Pope Paul VI recalled once more the principal goal of the commission:

“It is important to collect, test, interpret, revise and purify the publicly held ideas about women in modern society. This work clearly aims to defend, protect and affirm the dignity of women, with all the conviction and pride that this ideal demands. Moreover, one should not only consider the personality, the essence of women, but also the corresponding female values and functions. This will undoubtedly ask for a certain defensive attitude against everything that would underestimate woman’s true dignity. In this regard, the concepts developed in the Christian faith remain more than ever valid, modern, fruitful and, in a certain sense, inviolable”.<sup>78</sup>

For the discussion of the theme **Ministères for Women**, the president had invited seven members of the Curia with competence on this subject.<sup>79</sup>

Le Guillou first gave a short exposition on **Admittance of Women to the Priesthood**. He stated that the ‘manhood’ of Christ precluded the priesthood for women because:

- ? ‘A sacrament instituted to represent Christ in his person and in his work of redemption therefore necessarily requires persons of the same gender’;
- ? ‘In the life of the church, man represents more the level of *sacramentum*; woman stands for the *res*’.

In a short historical outline about women as deaconesses, he declared that in early times deaconesses were never ‘ordained’, only ‘appointed’ for special tasks which were not suitable for men, such as baptising and anointing the sick. Later the role of deaconess became an honorary function for abbesses and higoumènes.<sup>80</sup> For the study of ministères for women in this day and age, he concluded, one should avoid every archeologism. In short, women could not be admitted to the order of deacon.

Mgr. Antonio Magnoni then gave an account of a proposal made by a study group of the Congregation of the Sacraments on **Ministères**. This group thought that these ministères could not be reserved for women only as that would constitute an unjust discrimination between men and women.

The names ‘adiutor’ and ‘adiutrix’ had already been proposed and the study group had also thought about the task of these officially appointed persons. Five fields of activity could be distinguished, namely in pastoral work, in the liturgy, in catechesis and education, in charity and social work and in missionary work. An official appointment could be confirmed by a blessing in a liturgical rite. Next to permanent ministères there was also the possibility of temporary ministères within a parish, which could be filled by rotation. A simple blessing by the parish priest could confirm such a temporary appointment.

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<sup>78</sup> *Osservatore Romano*, 18 November 1973.

<sup>79</sup> Jean Beyer S.J., advisor of the Congregation for the Clergy, Religious and Lay Institutes; Paolo Dezza S.J., advisor of the Congregation for the Sacraments; Agestino Favale S.D.G.; Elio Gambari, under-secretary of the Congregation for the Clergy; Brunero Cheraldini, advisor of the Congregation for the Clergy; F. van Gunten O.P. and Canon William Burdy of the Secretariat for Unity.

<sup>80</sup> In the early church and in mediaeval times higoumènes were superiors of convents for women in Palestine, Egypt and Byzantium. They had the same rights and duties as their male colleagues, caring for the material well-being of and giving spiritual direction to the religious in their charge. See, among others, Irenée Hausherr, S.J., ‘Directions Spirituelle en Orient Autrefois’ in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 144, 254.

The study group had a further proposal for a 'ministère supérieur' for women who, without being religious, had dedicated their lives to the Lord and to service in the church (virgins, widows, etc.). The first idea for a name for this higher ministère was 'deaconess'. This name had an ecumenical value since other Christian churches had deaconesses. They decided, however, not to use it because it might give rise to confusion. The ministry of the deacon is received through a sacrament whereas the role of deaconess is an appointment. A good name was still needed for this church-appointment, which corresponded only in content and not in name with the ministry of the deacon.

During the discussion almost all the female members rejected this notion of ministères for women. They agreed with one amongst them, Sister Claire, who had conducted research among women in the church. Her inquiry showed that a great aversion existed to these ministères. It was felt that they were inappropriate for the laity; in fact, in this way lay people would be clericalised. Ministères were seen as synonymous with an authority which demands obedience. Many women who conscientiously served the church would refuse such a ministry and anything else that might resemble clericalisation, institutionalisation, blessings and rites. On the other hand, they demanded recognition for their competent participation, a share in responsibilities and a say in pastoral decisions.

Finally, the women in the commission thought that, if ministères were to be a subject of study, it belonged rather to the task of the International Council for the Laity. Actually, Rie Vendrik suspected that the question of ministères had already long been settled. However, when she queried this matter, she was told that everything was still open.

On the basis of all the discussions, and at the end of those four days of meetings, Mgr. Bartoletti determined the subjects for further research:

- ? The theme **The Woman in God's Plan** - her complementarity with man, her specific vocation and functions, could be entrusted to a separate theological commission.
- ? It was of particular importance that their own commission should put special emphasis on a study of **Woman in Her Current Situation**. This would involve an inquiry into the demands of women and the difficulties and injustices which they experienced, as well as a study of womens' movements in various countries.
- ? **The Position of Women in the Church** would require the study of ministères for lay people with special reference to women, but without speaking of 'female ministères'.
- ? Starting from the document *Gaudium et Spes*, a study could be undertaken about **The (Christian) Woman in Society**.

Finally the president pointed out again the confidential character of the meetings. Only the outline of their programme could be communicated to others.

A draft text for a final document on **The Woman in God's Plan** would be sent to all commission members. They could study this text as preparation for the next plenary session.

#### IV.1.2. Commentary

One is struck by several points when reading through the reports of this first plenary session

- ? The president's words took up a great deal of space in the reports, almost one third of the whole (roughly 225 of the approximately 700 lines). His language tended to be both cumbersome and obscure. After every discussion the president gave an elaborate summary and sketched the broad outlines for further study. In these summaries it were primarily the voices of the Roman theologians which were expressed. The opposing views of the women received almost no attention except that occasionally the arguments of the women were refuted 'between the lines'. For example:
  - ? Although in the discussion on Woman as a Person several members questioned the emphasis on complementarity, Mgr. Bartoletti declared, without mentioning this criticism, that the complementarity of the sexes should be considered as ontologically given by God and as an order assigned to them by God.
  - ? After the discussion on The Woman in God's Plan (apparently a rather heated debate since the president had to admonish participants to calm down) Mgr. Bartoletti stipulated that only the theological categories creation-redemption-eschatology could lead to a good understanding of the human person – in other words, the deductive method. The use of images and analogies would be a help in this effort. For those who didn't agree with the views of De la Potterie about the specific nature of women, he said that The Scripture reflects the difference as a gift and not as a restriction of the human person. He concluded his summary with the warning that the commission should not occupy itself with 'chimeras' ('*elucubrations*').
  - ? The lack of attention to the criticism of the women can clearly be seen after the discussion about the ministères for women. The president completely ignored the rejection of this idea by all the women present. He stipulated that for a better understanding of this ministère concept, clarification was needed about the concept of the church as a living community with the Holy Trinity, in which equality of all who are baptised was recognised but also God-given structures were indicated. Then he continued with a specification of the possible functions in the church for permanent or temporary ministères. He agreed that the question of these ministères should be presented to the International Council for the Laity but also asserted that "it belongs in a very special way to our commission". As a consolation for the opponents of this idea he added: "There appear to be imbalances and injustices but we should also trust the Pope and the bishops". Against the objection of the danger of clericalisation his believe was that: "the separation between clergy and laity is obsolete, but this has not yet been realised, something which has still to be corrected" .  
It seems to me that this was a form of manipulation. The ministères for women *must* be founded. Alone the fact that seven members of the Curia were elected to the commission surely indicates the high level of built-up resistance of the acceptance of ministères for women.
- ? After reading the letter of Karl Rahner to De la Potterie it seems incomprehensible that the fundamental and devastating criticism in this letter was not taken into account. Is that possibly also the reason that neither this letter nor the letter of Yves

- Congar was given to the commission members? Only later was, at the urgent request of Rie Vendrik, Rahner's letter handed over to the members.
- ? Questions should also be raised about the remark of Magnoni that, if ministères should be granted exclusively to women, this would mean an unjust discrimination between men and women. How does this square with the priesthood as well as the ministries of lector and acolyte which were open exclusively to men?
  - ? One can also question the firm assertion of Le Guillou that in earlier times deaconesses were 'never' ordained. Various academic studies have shown that in the early Christian period and in the early Middle Ages deaconesses were indeed ordained. "The ministry of deaconesses in several traditions of the undivided church of Jesus Christ can be demonstrated with certainty as 'Ordo' (ordination) and as 'Mysterion' (sacrament)".<sup>81</sup> It would therefore have been more appropriate to pursue these 'archeologisms'.
  - ? It is noteworthy that, although the discussions during this meeting were held in one and the same language (French), the members did not always understand each other. The language field of the Roman men was characterised by deductive, abstract principles, whereas the language field of several of the women, especially the 'group of five', started from concrete reality and experience. This led sometimes to misunderstandings and frustrations. The Roman theologians, for example, did not understand why these women rejected the 'specific nature of women' which was (for the theologians) clearly an ontological given. The women, however, starting from their own experience of discrimination, saw in this emphasis on specific nature a more or less veiled strategy of men to place women on a lower rung and exclude them from the priesthood.
  - ? It is also remarkable that in the reports the contribution made by women is minimal. Were they, in this first meeting, still a bit timid and impressed by the solemn surroundings and the many 'monsignori' or did the report simply take less account of them? Only a few of the women took clear positions and these women decided to get together and study the documents which had been presented to the commission.

#### **IV.1.3. The 'Group of Five'**

During the months preceding the first plenary sessions some of the women, conscious of the problems around the participation of women in society and in the church, had seriously prepared themselves for the commission meetings. They had studied articles and consulted theologians and other experts in their own countries. Equipped with knowledge, articles and a high level of enthusiasm, they left for Rome.

Alas! As early as the second day of the meeting they began to feel a sense of uneasiness about the way things were going. Five women, who were almost unknown to each other before the meetings and who had not failed to rise the occasion during the discussions, found themselves agreeing with each other. In conversations, especially during the evenings, they discovered that they had the same views on social,

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<sup>81</sup> 'Der Diakonat der Frau ist in den verschiedenen Traditionen der ungeteilten Kirche Jesu Christi, gültig nach zu weisen, und zwar als Ordo (Weihe) und als Mysterion (Sacrament)', Abraham Andreas Thiermeyer, 'Der Diakonat der Frau, Liturgiegeschichtliche Kontexte und Folgerungen' in Walter Grosz (Hrsg.) *Frauenordination – Stand der Diskussion in der Katholischen Kirche*, München, 1966, 62. See also: Dirk Ansorger, 'Die wesentliche Argumente liegen auf dem Tisch, – zur neueren Diskussion um den Diakonat der Frau' in *Herder Korrespondenz*, jrg. 47, Heft 11, 1993, 581-586 and Roger Gryson, *Le ministère des femmes dans l'Église ancienne*, Gembloux, 1972.

theological, liturgical and other issues. They also experienced the same uneasiness about and critical response to the meetings up till then. Claire Delva even went to the president on the second evening to tell him she was going to leave. Only with great difficulty did Mgr. Bartoletti persuade her to stay.

In the following days these five women – partly due to their struggle against reactionary views – spontaneously formed a group, deciding to undertake an in-depth study of the documents which had been presented. All five women, Pilar Bellosillo, Claire Delva, Marina Lessa, Vitoria Pinheiro and Rie Vendrik, could boast of vast experience with, and knowledge of women's problems.<sup>82</sup> They realised, however, that for an in-depth study they would need the help of experts in the fields of theology, biology and anthropology. They agreed therefore that each of them would seek contact with scholars in their own countries who could advise them so that they would be better prepared for the next plenary session. Initially Sister Teresa McLeod, a Scottish Dominican, wanted to join this group but, as she was president of a training centre for religious in Rome, it seemed wiser to her not to do so. Some other women also hesitated but finally withdrew from the group.

#### IV.1.4. What did the 'Group of Five' criticize?

- ? *Procedure*: Instead of space for free and open exchange on themes regarding women in society and in the church, the days had been filled with long explanations, in which one got the impression these were already pre-planned ('*préconditionées*') and with which everyone, after some discussion, was expected to agree. In all fairness and respect as laid down in *Ecclesiam suam*, the latter is no investigational freedom and is not in agreement with the rules of decent debate. Moreover, the time set aside for discussion was quite inadequate. There was also hardly any time allowed for informal contacts, so necessary for the exchange of ideas and sharing of opinions. The women were likewise critical of the late arrival of the documents. Some had been distributed only during the presentations and consequently there had been no possibility for serious study.
- ? *Experts*: There was considerable doubt about the actual expertise of the appointed experts - on the study of women - especially in the fields of theology/exegesis and biology. These experts belonged, as did almost all the theologians present, to the same traditional school of thought, clinging to views which modern science had long since regarded as 'obsolete'. These experts, however, were convinced that their own views and principles were the correct ones and had no openness to other approaches. Continually stressing the differences between men and women, they attached a dominant value to biology; on that they then based an ontology of

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<sup>82</sup> **Pilar Bellosillo** (Spain) was president of WUCWO, president of the Conference of International Catholic Organisations, auditrice at Vatican II, expert during the Synod on Justice in 1971 and member of WELG; **Claire Delva** (Belgium) was president of the Association Internationale des Charité, member of the council of WUCWO, president of the Mgr. Belpaire Foundation, member of the Regional Pastoral Council in her own diocese and secretary-general of the National Council of Belgium Women; **Marina Lessa** (Brazil) was a member of the JEC and nationally responsible for the AIC; **Vitoria Pinheiro** (Portugal) was national president of the JOC, national president of the Women's Workers League, secretary-general of the World Movement of Christian Workers and a member of Workers' Pastoral Care; **Rie Vendrik** (Netherlands) was general president of the International Catholic Feminine Youth Movement, president of the OIC Conference, auditrice at Vatican II, member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, a member of the Council of WUCWO and a member of WELG.

woman and an untenable symbol-theology. They also gave the impression that they wanted to maintain the existing discriminatory practices against women in the church. This was especially clear in their defence, against the objections of almost all the women members, of the ministères for women.

- ? There was also indignation about *the oath of secrecy*, demanded in the preparatory meetings and now also repeated by the president. Claire Delva wondered why the members of the commission could not seek advice from outside experts: 'During the Second Vatican Council bishops were accompanied by their theological advisors. It should be possible for us to consult advisors.'
- ? It was astounding that the letters of Karl Rahner and Yves Congar *were not distributed*. Only after deliberation between De la Potterie and Mgr. Bartoletti was Rie Vendrik promised, in response to her urgent request, that Rahner's letter would be sent to her. After receiving this letter, Rie wrote to De la Potterie: "I think that it is unjust that not all members of the commission received the reactions of Congar and Rahner. I believe that we, considering our responsibility for the results of this commission, have the right to receive these letters".<sup>83</sup> None of the women ever saw of Yves Congar's commentary.
- ? The five women and some other female commission members could not escape the impression that some sort of skulduggery was going on. Rie Vendrik wrote to Mgr. Uylenbroeck, secretary of the Council for the Laity: "Several of us feel that we are, in a certain sense, being manipulated".<sup>84</sup>

#### IV. 1. 5. The 'Group of Five', continued

Although each of the five women asked advice from theologians and other scientists in her own country,<sup>85</sup> it is clear from the correspondence between them that they felt a need to study together. They asked Claire to organise a meeting in Brussels with Pilar, Vitoria, Rie and herself (Marina lived too far away, in Brazil) and some theologians, in order to study together on subjects from the first plenary session. Claire, after consultation with Cardinal Suenens in Brussels, found three theologians willing to help: Dr. Maria de Merode, exegete<sup>86</sup> Professor Gustave Thils, theologian at the University of Louvain and Abbé Philippe Weber, philosopher and seminary professor in Brussels.

This study meeting took place in Brussels on 28 - 29 January 1974, when they studied and debated for two whole days. On the basis of this common study the experts formulated some theological and anthropological texts, which the four women would take with them to the second plenary session. On 14 February Pilar, on behalf of all five women, wrote a letter to the president in which she expressed their uneasiness about several matters during the first plenary meeting. She also informed him that four of the five, together with some experts, had discussed the texts of the first session and

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<sup>83</sup> Letter of 4 February 1974. The correspondence between the members of the 'group of five' between November 1973 and January 1976 are located in the K.D.C. archive 414, file 485.

<sup>84</sup> Letter of 6 February 1974, *ibid*.

<sup>85</sup> Rie Vendrik asked advice from René van Eyden.

<sup>86</sup> She was asked, among other things, on account of her article: Maria de Merode-De Croy and Emma Vorlat, *De lichamelijkheid als weg naar zelfbeleving (Experience of the Body as a Mode of experiencing the Self)*. *De vrouw in huidige ervaring en in bijbelse interpretatie*. In: *Tijdschrift voor Theologie* 15 (1975) Nr. 4, 410-438. 'Note sur le problème de l'accès de la femme au ministères pastoral' in *Verbum Caro* 20, 1966, 54.

that they were developing documents which they would take along to the next general meeting.

On 25 February, the day before the beginning of the general commission meeting, the four (now joined by Marina) had a preliminary discussion in Rome. They decided that Claire should distribute their memoranda to all participants at the meeting. However, in order to prevent possible repercussions for those who drew up these documents, the names of these experts would not be revealed.

#### **IV. 1.6. The Five Memoranda**

The five memoranda, presented under the name ‘Travail réalisé en équipe internationale’ are briefly summarised here.

##### **A. Analysis of the whole text: Women in God’s Plan**

It is important for an exegete to take into account the cultural and social situation of the sacred author and also to pay attention to the literary genres, in order to discover what is clearly God’s plan.

- ? In the **Creation Story** the question of the specific task of woman was not an issue. In the Jahwist text the ‘solidarity’ between man and woman rather than ‘complementarity’ comes to the fore. This last term leads easily to the assertion of specific functions for each sex which cannot be exercised by the other. The Priestly text certainly indicates that God created the sexes, but Genesis 1 is not concerned with differences between man and woman under the aspect of image of God. It is clear, however, that the task of populating the earth and having dominion over it is given to both man and woman.
- ? **Mary** as a believer is significant for men as well as for women. Abraham is also an image of faith, even called father of the faithful, yet no one points him out as a special example for males.
- ? The interpretation of **symbols** in relation to the role and specific charisma of women asks for great prudence. The Covenant seen as the relationship between man and woman is only one image. In The Scripture we also find Father-Son, Mother-Child, Sovereign-Vassal and Master/Mistress-Slave images. These last two, however, do not justify the feudal system or slavery; the author did not intend the images for that purpose. Finally, the symbol of the **Virgin** as an image of total dedication is meant for everyone; virginity is an answer to a personal call from God.
- ? There were several **omissions** in the texts: References to the great women in the Old Testament were missing. These were women such as Deborah and Jael, Judith and Esther, whose task was not limited to that of mother and wife. On the contrary, through a personal call or charisma, they made great contributions to their societies.
- ? For **Jesus** the differences in sex, race and social situation were unimportant, seen in the light of the fundamental value of the human person in relation to God. “Who are my mother and my brothers?...Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister and mother” (Mark 3, 33; 35). Jesus had a remarkably open attitude towards women.
- ? **Paul** is, on the one hand, true to the teaching of Jesus (Gal. 3, 28) but on the other hand he is still fixed in the prevailing views of his time (1 Cor. 11, 3-16). He did not condemn slavery; the Church did that only later. The present question is: should not the Church take a stand against all discrimination against women in this time?

## **B. Biblical-Theological View of Women**

The text on women in God's plan was presented to several outstanding theologians, philosophers and anthropologists. They were all amazed, to put it mildly, at the 'ontology' of women as it appeared in the text. That is to say, they agreed that it would be extremely difficult to determine what 'authentically' or 'according to God' belonged to the nature of woman and what elements were stereotypic images or outgrowths of other philosophical systems. 'Nature' exists only as it is interwoven within 'culture' (see also *Gaudium et Spes*, 53). It would be incorrect to draw a conclusion, based only on some biblical texts and anthropological symbolism, about the 'ontology' of women and a 'sub-specific typology' ('typicité') and then present this as based upon and guaranteed by divine revelation. That was, simply put, manipulation of The Scripture. Some scholars asked themselves if, after a 'cosmological Galileo' the church would now get an 'anthropological Galileo'.

In short, this text on the ontology of women was unworthy of a pontifical study commission. Only a theological reflection supported by serious scholars from different fields, who co-operated in the spirit of *Gaudium et Spes*, could lead to a valuable result.

## **C. Proposal for a Document on Women Today.**

The following method was suggested:

- a. Analysis of the current situation, including an inventory of discrimination against women and the causes of that discrimination, as well as a study of what women were actually seeking.
- b. Anthropological reflection, especially on the essence of Western anthropology: the concept of person and the genesis of the human person in social situations with the resulting functions and roles therein.
- c. Theological clarification: christian revelation in relation to anthropology ; revelation in The Scripture, tradition, church documents and signs of the times.

Study on women according to christian revelation: evolution of female functions throughout history, examples of women in the Bible, bridal symbolism in The Scripture, Jesus and women and the participation of women in the common priesthood of all believers.

## **D. Controversial Procedures in Relation to Ministères Ordonnées**

The various texts presented to the pontifical commission seemed to have been focussed beforehand on an 'ontology' and a 'specific nature' of women, which exclude her from fulfilling leading liturgical functions. The presenting theologians were obviously convinced that this 'ontology' was based on 'divine revelation', which made the ordination of women 'unnatural' and 'against the will of God.' This ontology was not convincing and remained unproven. Recent studies had shown that cultural and social factors had exerted a decisive influence on the exclusion of women from the priesthood.

## **E. Concerning the Name of the Pontifical Commission**

The name of the commission would become more intelligible if it were expressed as 'Women in Society and in Particular in the Church'. The church is in the world of this day and age (see *Gaudium et Spes*). Therefore two points would require special attention:

- a. The church community lives in osmosis with several human communities and with other viewpoints which have been paid homage to and experienced. Exactly in the fields which concerned the commission (anthropology, views on women, family,

sexuality) the osmosis had been especially active and effective. Therefore one had to distinguish between what stemmed from faith and what from theories and cultural as well as social situations.

b. In spite of warnings to clearly distinguish between faith, theology and the prevailing views on women, the whole of christian doctrine was in general presented in a spirit of 'hidden divine guarantee' and a 'diffuse infallibility'. Such an approach involves the danger of (mis)interpreting the Holy Spirit on the basis of ordinary human data.

## **IV.2. The Second Plenary Session**

1. The meeting of 26 February – 3 March 1974
2. Commentary
3. The 'Group of Five'

### **IV.2.1. The Meeting of 26 February – 3 March 1974**

The agenda for the second general meeting and a summary plan of the content for the final document was sent to the commission members on 18 January. However De la Potterie's complete text was not distributed until after the meeting had begun. Claire Delva and Rie Vendrik complained about this late distribution via the reports and queries at the beginning of the meeting. Ample time to study the documents before the meeting should have been allowed, the more so for the participants who were not French speakers. Vitoria Pinheiro also pointed out that the report of the previous meeting was incomplete: she had failed to find many of her own objections and comments in it. During these reports and queries several commission members expressed uneasiness about the first plenary session. It seemed difficult for several participants to cope with the contrary opinions.

This second meeting, on the other hand, took place in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere.

On behalf of the 'group of five' Claire Delva distributed the documents drawn up by the theologians with whom they had studied, although the names of the experts were not given. At first the president appeared less than enthusiastic but these texts were included in the discussion. The French translation of Karl Rahner's letter was also circulated.

The main part of this general meeting was dedicated to the text of De la Potterie and to the question of the ministères. De la Potterie admitted at the beginning of the meeting that his first draft had been put together too quickly and without sufficient preparation. In fact, outside the meeting he disclosed that the issue did not interest him but that he nevertheless had not wished to refuse to co-operate in the commission.

His second draft, now under the title **Man and Woman in God's Plan**, did not differ substantially from his first text. True enough, in this draft he gave more room to passages on the attitude of Jesus in relation to women, on women in the early church and those associated with Paul. However, Rahner's criticism had been completely ignored and Congar's advice to involve women in the preparation of the text had likewise been disregarded.

This new draft started, just as the first one had, from trinitarian speculations on which the specific nature and special functions of women were based. De la Potterie also maintained his symbol-argumentation based on a universal symbolism of femininity and the specific charisma of women – e.g., the way in which women in the Gospel accepted the Word showed clearly the characteristic charisma of women. In support of

this view he cited certain authors such as Paul Brand, who said, “It is a modest, hidden way [in which women accept the Gospel] and their participation in this Word is through submission, through thoughtful and obliging hospitality.”<sup>87</sup>

A lively discussion followed this exposition, in the course of which the ‘group of five’ was notable for their contributions.<sup>88</sup> Their remarks concerned in particular:

- ? *The trinitarian speculations*: Pilar Bellosillo said that she was baffled by the way in which a trinitarian foundation was given for a christian anthropology.
- ? *The symbol argumentation*: Marina Lessa warned against the danger that men could use these symbols, in the name of the Gospel, for the suppression of women.
- ? *The stress on the specific nature of women*: Claire Delva and Rie Vendrik observed in the whole text a tendency to emphasise the particular role of women as well as a female and male specificity. Other exegetes did not find this view in The Scripture.
- ? Several times they asked that attention be given to the paper *Proposals for a Document on Women Today*, which they had brought with them.

Mrs. M.Th.Grabber-Duvernay expressed her displeasure over the comments of the ‘group of five’ of which, she felt, Rie Vendrik was the representative. She also informed the others about her meeting in Paris with some theologians, sociologists, psychologists and experts in the medical field. In support of her biological-physiological exposition she showed x-ray photos of the pelvises of men and women.<sup>89</sup>

Although De la Potterie did not agree with all the comments in the newly contributed documents, these texts and the interventions of the commission members did have some influence on him. He even asked Claire Delva and Rie Vendrik to send him some articles. Several suggestions of the ‘group of five’ were adopted and after deliberation with Father Mollat<sup>90</sup>, De la Potterie decided to revise and elaborate his text according to a new plan, as proposed by the ‘group of five’:

1. Description of the actual situation of women in the world;
2. Development of a secular anthropology;
3. Development of a christian anthropology;

Attention would be given to Mary in the last chapter of this text, following the example of *Lumen gentium*.

It was then planned that some members of the commission would collaborate in the editing of a final document which would be presented to the Pope and eventually to the Synod of Bishops. It was likewise thought necessary to draw in some experts from outside the commission for the content of this document. Mentioned were: P. Alszeghy, Professor of Dogma and History of Dogma at the Gregorian University, Miss Suzanna Nouvion, director of the centre ‘Recherche et Rencontres’, Jacqueline Bergeret, psychologist as well as Mrs. Yvonne Pellé-Douel. Rie Vendrik advocated written consultation with various sources in the United States, while Claire Delva proposed contacting Sister Agnes Cunningham, Professor of theology at St. Mary’s of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois. All members agreed fully with these proposals.

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<sup>87</sup> Paul Brand, Notes sur le problème de l’accès de la femme au ministère pastoral, in *Verbum Caro* 20 (1966). 52.

<sup>88</sup> 20 of the 26 interventions were made by the members of the ‘group of five’.

<sup>89</sup> Some theologians took these x-ray photos to the window to be able clearly to see the differences.

<sup>90</sup> Father Molat was probably invited by one of the theologians of the study commission.

On Saturday morning Mgr. Bartoletti raised the question of the **Ministères**. Although there did not seem to be much interest, the subject was discussed at the insistence of the president and out of respect for the Pope's wish. Many questions were asked, doubts and criticisms expressed, while several commission members insisted on more extensive soundings on this potentially official church function. Mary Pyne declared that in Britain there was a fear of clericalisation and that *Ministeria quaedam* suggests serious discrimination against women. Women had already been reading the Gospel in the liturgy for a long time and they were demanding women deacons. Mgr. Franco Biffi observed that all the comments they were hearing had already come up during the first session. He added, in a questioning tone:

“Undoubtedly the time was not ripe for this acceptance, for receiving the Holy Spirit?” (*Sans doute n'était-on pas prêt pour le saisir, pour recevoir l'Esprit Saint?*). He also observed that the women were concerned that there was a strategy directed at the exclusion of women from ordination, fearful of a 'diplomatic' method of keeping women away from the priesthood. Rie Vendrik confirmed this idea. She remained uneasy about it, in spite of the reassurance of the president that there was no cause for such fears.

Although the subject of ministères was brought to a close Saturday afternoon, to the amazement of many, the president brought the subject up again during the last afternoon. He asked the commission members to take a vote on a text that he had formulated on the basis of all their discussions and which would be presented to the Pope as the general opinion of the commission members:

‘Ministères (or ‘offices’ or ‘functions’) can be instituted by the Church as ‘ministères non-ordonnés’ and as an expression of communal priesthood. They have a typically lay character and are open for all the baptised who can fulfil these ministères, each according to their own personal vocation.’

Further, five fundamental points were meant to be kept in mind:

1. The instituted ministères must be clearly distinguished from the ordained priesthood;
2. The ministères would be open to all members of the People of God;
3. By the institution of ministères, the sense of responsibility as well as the missionary spirit of the whole People of God should not be reduced, and charitable and other activities should not be devalued by the ministères;
4. It will be necessary to take into account the opposition and lack of understanding that the realisation of ministères might bring out;
5. It should be left to the Conferences of Bishops whether or not they institute these ministères in their own dioceses.

A confusing discussion followed. Members were amazed that this vote was suddenly asked for. Why the hurry? Rie Vendrik asked: “If I vote ‘yes’ on this text, does that mean that I agree with the whole phenomenon of ministères?” Other members insisted anew on extensive soundings. Such a commitment seemed premature and some feared a “trap” (*un piège*).

Pilar Bellosillo proposed that they present to the Pope only a report of their discussions, which would include all the unanswered questions, comments and doubts. This proposal was unanimously accepted, although the president's text would be presented

as the starting point. Rie Vendrik insisted once again that it should be clearly stated that the commission members were not declaring themselves for or against the ministères.

Two other subjects were briefly discussed during this session: 'Women in Society', by . Biffi <sup>91</sup>, and 'The Position of Women in the Church', by Sister CLaire. Both texts were accepted without much discussion.

On Friday 1 March Mgr. Bartoletti read aloud a letter from the Vatican Secretariat of State, which stated that the Pope had decided to extend the mandate of the commission to 31 January, 1976.<sup>92</sup>

During this plenary session several interventions were focussed on the issue of women deacons as well as the request for a clear pronouncement by the church on women and priesthood. The president gave as his opinion that "the commission certainly can ask the Holy Father to define clearly the question of the admittance of women to the priesthood, and to state the grounds for his position in such a way that the uneasiness, alive in certain groups, will be taken away. The answer should not, thus, be limited to the stating of facts, but rather, starting from the Bible and the tradition of the church (Eastern as well as Latin), should give a well-founded answer (undoubtedly negative) before the end of the work of the commission".

The next plenary session was scheduled for 20 - 25 June 1974, with the following agenda:

1. Discussion and voting on the document **Man and Woman in the Plan of God** by De la Potterie;
2. Study of the document **Women in the Church** by sister Claire;
3. Consideration of the state of affairs concerning the document **Women in Society** by Biffi.

It was also agreed that there would probably be another plenary session before Christmas.

#### **IV.2.2. Commentary**

- ? The atmosphere during this second session was noticeably better than in the preceding plenary session. The exchanges were free and open to the ideas of everyone. There was also a willingness to call upon experts from outside the commission and the texts brought along by the 'group of five' were considered in the discussions. Their withholding of the author's names, however, was not well accepted. "Who wrote these texts?" someone would ask the 'five' in the corridors, or – less affably – "How did you dare to take those texts away with you? How did you dare to show commission documents to other theologians?" Claire Delva and Rie Vendrik in particular were harassed by such critical remarks. This point raises the question: Would the disclosure of the names of those theologians really have caused danger to them?
- ? It must have mattered a great deal to the Vatican to push through the ministères for lay people, and in particular for women. Why else the repeated presentation of this

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<sup>91</sup> His 38-page text was made available only in Italian.

<sup>92</sup> That same day the mandate of the Council of the Laity and of *Justitia et Pax* also expired, probably in relation to the proclamation by the United Nations of the Year of Women.

subject? The near unanimity of the women in the commission against the issue did not, however, prevent the bringing of the *ministères* point to a vote.

- ? During this second gathering it became clearer than in the meeting of November 1973 that there were great differences of opinion amongst the commission members. M.Th.Grabber-Duvernay expressed it as follows: “Some believe that the commission must ask the church to liberate women from injustices in the world and in the church; for others the focus is less on the liberation of women than on making them aware of their value and accept themselves (*faire la conquête*)”. There was, however, still a third group, who did not choose one side or the other and often, in fact, could not choose, since they did not have a thorough command of the French language. This led them to miss nuances of many discussions. Is it possible to formulate a final document which is representative of people with so many differences?
- ? On reading the report one can only conclude that there was a distinct lack of efficient work and discussion methods. The meeting was characterised by much confusion and the report is vague in many places. After receiving the report, Claire Delva wrote to Mgr. Bartoletti: “Actually, reading the report has left me astonished because many points seem vague and some do not accord with reality.” The use of English and Spanish as well as French for the official documents would have been a great help to the non-French-speaking members.
- ? The preparatory texts were again sent to the commission members very late or, in some cases, only distributed during the meeting. The commentary of the ‘group of five’ was likewise only given to the other members during the meeting. The ‘five’ blamed their slowness on the late arrival of the reports and documents which had to be studied before they could compose their memoranda .

#### **IV.2.3. The ‘Group of Five’**

Claire, Marina, Pilar, Rie and Vitoria left Rome in a far more positive state of mind than after the first session. They agreed that each of them would, if possible, take soundings on *ministères* in their own country, and consult theologians and other experts in their home countries. They also agreed to keep in contact with each other.

Marina sent 3000 questionnaires from Brazil throughout South America. She received only a handful of answers but put these together in a synopsis for the coming plenary session.

On 17 April Rie had a conversation with Cardinal Bernardus Jan Alfrink about the Dutch policy and vision on *ministères*. She also sent a questionnaire about the question of ‘*ministères*’ to a number of lay people, women pastors and theologians.<sup>93</sup> In consultation with René van Eyden she sent some articles to De la Potterie. Meanwhile, Claire consulted the three theologians and, together with them, she reported to Cardinal Suenens. The theologians had advised not to ask a quick pronouncement on women and priesthood from the Holy Father, believing that it would be unwise to urge a definitive pronouncement upon a question which was not yet well thought through. Claire as well as Pilar wrote to Mgr. Bartoletti, asking him to hold back this process.

The ‘group of five’ may possibly also have been encouraged by a letter from Karl Rahner, in which he wrote that a negative pronouncement on women and priesthood

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<sup>93</sup> Among others Ruud Bunnink, René van Eyden, Frans Haarsma, Tine Halkes and Nico Vendrik

could in the end not prevent the advent of women priests in the Roman Catholic Church:

....."However, even if this commission (The International Theological Commission) and the authority in Rome were to definitely turn against the ordination of women, I cannot imagine that it could take place in a more binding way than it happened with, for example, the question of birth control by 'Humanae Vitae'. In other words: this matter would continue as a Catholic one and one to be further researched. A temporary decision which is open to reform (I cannot actually imagine anything else in this case) would only be a retarding moment in an ongoing process of church consciousness."<sup>94</sup>

There was still more correspondence between the 'group of five' and the Roman Commission members. Biffi wrote to Claire that he was very pleased with what the 'group of five' had been able to achieve.<sup>95</sup> And Rie shared these concerns with De la Potterie:

"I am still somewhat perplexed by the fact that we are expected to produce in such a short time a responsible text on the subject 'women in the church'. In many countries the hierarchy as well as theologians and lay people are still seriously considering this question.... I think that we therefore must have a very careful editing of the "document final", so that it does not in any way cut off future developments. That would mean a great disaster for the church."<sup>96</sup>

In the same letter she pleaded for openness to other opinions on women in the church, referring to the criticism of Rahner:

"I must say that I find the way in which the criticism of Prof. Rahner has been put aside and not taken at all seriously very bad indeed. This has profoundly shocked me."

Rie also asked De la Potterie quite emphatically not to take symbolism as the starting point in his exegesis, certainly not the symbolism of the Trinity. De la Potterie answered that in the third exegetical draft the symbol of the Trinity does not occur and likewise no references to the Holy Spirit and femininity.<sup>97</sup>

On 29 and 30 April, the four European members of the 'group of five' met again in Brussels with Professor Thils, Professor Weber, the philosopher-theologian Yvonne Pellé-Douel and the medical-biologist Odette Thibault. They decided to draw up some new documents for the coming plenary session.

As the preparatory documents for the meeting of June gradually arrived, the optimistic mood of the 'group of five' changed completely. The texts they received showed no improvement. There were only 'formal' changes; the content and the basic principles from the first meeting had been retained.

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<sup>94</sup> Letter on the occasion of the ordination of a Lutheran woman pastor. A copy of this letter was sent for publication to *Femmes et Hommes dans l'Eglise*. See Bulletin no. 8, March 1974. For the complete letter of Karl Rahner, see appendix 5.

<sup>95</sup> Letter from Claire to the members of the 'group of five', 22 March 1974.

<sup>96</sup> Letter of 9 April 1974.

<sup>97</sup> Letter of 10 May 1974.

Rie wrote to Claire that the documents had arrived so late that there was not enough time to study them well and consult others about them. In this letter she remarked dejectedly: "If we are forced to accept the document, I ask myself if the moment has not come to withdraw from the commission. It would be sad, but better than to sign a document that goes against our convictions."<sup>98</sup>

On 19 June the 'group of five' met for a last preliminary talk in Rome, in order to go over their position. They also had with them five texts, drawn up by some experts who had conferred with them.

### **IV.3. The Third Plenary Session**

1. The Meeting of 20 - 25 June 1974;
2. Five Memoranda;
3. Commentary;
4. The 'Group of Five';
5. Letter to the Pope.

#### **IV. 3.1. The Meeting of 20 – 25 June 1974<sup>99</sup>**

The president announced at the beginning of the meeting that this third session had as its purpose, in accord with the wish of the Pope, to draw up a dogmatic and pastoral document. This document, which first of all required the approval of all members of the commission, would be presented to the Pope in July and to the Synod of Bishops in September. The plan of this document was as follows:

##### **I. The Human Being, Man and Woman, in God's Plan**

- a. Introduction, by Biffi;
- b. Contribution from the life- and social sciences by M.Th. Graber-Duvernay;
- c. Biblical-theological contributions, by De la Potterie with the help of Hamel and Mollat.

##### **II. Women in the church**

- a. Participation of women in the church, by R. Goldie;
- b. The religious communities, by Sister Claire with the help of some commission members;
- c. Definite proposals, by Sister Claire.

During this plenary meeting, the main discussion was around the three texts of **I: The Human Being, Man and Woman, in God's Plan**, which were then put to a vote.

At the beginning of the meeting Rie Vendrik asked to discuss the report of the preceding session. According to her, this report had mistakenly smoothed over many significant points on which opinions varied. The president was somewhat annoyed and referred the approval of the report to the end of the week.

First Biffi presented his **Introduction**, which he had arranged in five points:

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<sup>98</sup> Letter of June 10 1974.

<sup>99</sup> Due to illness of Le Guillou, Paul Toinet O.P. was appointed as his replacement. Domenico Grassy, S.J., was also present as an expert.

1. One of the striking phenomena of this day and age is the ‘revolution’ of women, which signifies a turning point. A society in which women were discriminated against is gradually changing into a society in which women demand and secure their own place.
2. The woman herself is the advocate (*‘protagonist’*) in the improvement of her own fate. She is more and more conscious of her human dignity (see *Pacem in terris*, 39).
3. The obstacles which stand in the way of women are cultural, social, economic, political and religious forms of discrimination as well as ‘atavistic’ prejudices, based on male stereotypes of women. The result of these attitudes has been a division into masculine and feminine roles and the marginalising of women in education, training and legislation.
4. In the struggle against these obstacles women have not received adequate help, neither from the women of preceding generations nor from society nor from the church.
5. Fortunately, the liberation of women has [recently] received considerable support. The human sciences have, on the one hand, stressed the fundamental equality, dignity and responsibility of all people and on the other hand indicated the essential biological, psychological and intellectual characteristics of women. Cultural and social influences have likewise taken part in defining the position of women. The situation of women has changed profoundly in society. The church, guardian and proclaimer of the Word, wants to open herself to the desires of women, and help create a situation that does justice to their human dignity.

The discussion indicated that everyone agreed in general with the direction of the text but it was thought to be very short, as a result of which necessary nuances were not visible. Vitoria Pinheiro criticised expressions that seemed to marginalise women, such as ‘revolution of women’ and woman as ‘protagonist’ of her own liberation. Rie Vendrik criticised point five, where one hand gives and the other takes away. Later she said to Biffi that she thought somebody else must have written the last point and he did not deny it.

During the last day of the meeting, Biffi read his revised **Introduction** to the commission members. He had incorporated the amendments of the first three points of his text.

During the discussion it was Toinet especially who proposed changes. He wanted to put the word ‘liberation’ in quotation marks because some extreme philosophies also use that term. Point five of the Introduction was, according to him, unbalanced. He felt that the Catholic Church had, with only a few exceptions, always promoted the christian dignity of women. Toinet also demanded that it should be clearly stated that only the church can help women to realise their destiny. Mgr. Bartoletti wished to add nuances to the last section, in order to indicate that the male domination in church structures was the result of historical and cultural situations in preceding times. The president then asked for a temporary consensus on this Introduction text, while the definitive editing was entrusted to Biffi. There were 16 votes for and 2 abstentions.

M.Th. Graber-Duvernay presented her text on the **Contribution of the Human Sciences**.<sup>100</sup> First she gave four basic notions: 1. the principle of unity: “God created

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<sup>100</sup> An outline of three pages in English and French was sent beforehand to the commission members. The original text was, according to M.Th. Graber-Duvernay, too specialised to distribute to everyone.

man in His own image”. 2. the principle of difference: the human being as man and woman: “male and female He created them”. 3. the human being is a psycho-somatic unity, physiologically and psychologically interwoven in complex ways. 4. from this psycho-somatic composition and the principle of difference follows the principle of sexuality which is characteristic of human existence.

These four fundamental principles are found in scientific observations under the headings of biological-physiological observations: genetic, embryonic, hormonal and physiological. The somatic difference between man and woman is confirmed in psychology, she asserted: man is essentially dynamic and outwardly oriented, woman is more reserved than expansive. She has a capacity of receptivity which has nothing to do with passivity or subordination but which can reveal to the world the mystery of encounter.

If women refuse to accept their femininity, they withhold from humanity an aspect of human values which humanity badly needs. She also suggested that ideas pointing in the same direction can be found in sociology.

The discussion on this contribution of life sciences took place in a less pleasant atmosphere, with occasional outbursts of emotion. Most of the Roman theologians and some of the women agreed with the text of M.Th. Graber-Duvernay. The ‘group of five’, however, expressed serious criticism. Pilar Bellosillo introduced, with a written text, another anthropological approach:<sup>101</sup> She held that the main problem for women at that time lay in men’s attribution to women of a special physiological nature. Women were (and are often) seen as essentially bound to nature, to fertility, which had led to a special ontology and theology of women. These ideas were also present in the church, but deeply hidden, and that was a serious problem, actually blocking the Gospel message. Jesus’ attitude placed the person – image of God – beyond the sexes. She felt that the time had come for the church to make a courageous analysis, to take a radical look at what up till now were the accepted views on women and the consequences of these notions. Further, she asserted that the task of their commission was to clarify the message of Christ which removes all obstacles and restores the original equality of man and woman. That was the message the world expected from the church and *Marialis cultus* gave an essential contribution to this task.

Claire Delva requested consideration of the text on anthropology that the ‘group of five’ had brought along and through which concepts of other experts could make a contribution in the discussion. She pointed out that there were still many open questions and the human sciences were still in full evolution. Vitoria Pinheiro likewise urged openness to other opinions. The report says here: “It seems to her that there is a systematic disdain for the contribution of other experts”.

Rie Vendrik best formulated the criticism of the ‘group of five’ in two remarks:

1.’This chapter contains a primarily biological exposition. However biology is only one of the human sciences and for our purpose not the most important one. We are completely missing the philosophical and cultural anthropology which

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During the meeting she presented a five-page paper, in which the essential points of the complete text were presented.

<sup>101</sup> It was a summary of a discussion of Pilar Bellosillo with Ida Magli, Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the University of Rome and in Sociology at the University of Sienna,. She was consulted because of her book *La Donna: un Problema aperto, guida alla ricerca antropologica*, Firenze, 1974.

was promised to us in the plenary session of February, and which should have appeared, not as some added-on paragraphs, but as an essential contribution in this chapter.

2. Why is the difference between man and woman repeatedly emphasised? We agree 100% that there are differences, certainly! Our aim is, however, to stimulate the participation of women. Is this the right way to do that? For centuries only the differences have been seen. Has not the time come to highlight the other side of the picture: the equality in a human balance, in a human reality? I am afraid that this biological chapter gives no answers at all to the problems that christian women are presenting to the church, and therefore also offers no response to the signs of the times”.

Several other commission members likewise observed that there was an absence of philosophical anthropology and the president felt that the elements of dogmatic theology were lacking. According to him, however, it would not be possible to fill these gaps during this meeting. He further warned them to guard against terminology taken from anthropological concepts that might be incompatible with christian doctrine.

Before the vote on the text of the human sciences, the president explained the procedure for the approval of documents:

“This means a rough approval by which it is possible to take a text as a basis for the definitive editing which will take into account the proposed corrections”.

Pilar Bellosillo and Claire Delva asked if these re-edited texts would be presented again to the commission members for approval and, if so, when would these texts be sent to the members. The president surmised that a philosophical-anthropological text would require the work of a team and would certainly take considerable time.

Vitoria Pinheiro, Pilar Bellosillo and Rie Vendrik thought that they were not able to judge the text of M.Th. Graber-Duvernay unless they could actually read the complete document. Mgr. Bartoletti nevertheless proposed the following procedure:

1. vote on the text of the human sciences section;
2. vote on incorporating this text into the report but not presenting it definitively;
3. ask agreement that a later theological and philosophical supplement be developed, which would be discussed and possibly approved by the commission members in order to be added to the rest of the final document.

At the vote on Point 1, with 20 persons present, there were 16 votes for and 4 abstentions (Pilar Bellosillo, Claire Delva, Vitoria Pinheiro and Rie Vendrik). At the vote on Point 2 there were 16 votes for and 4 abstentions, and at the vote on Point 3 there were 19 votes for and 1 vote against.

During the discussion on the human sciences text, the documents brought along by the ‘group of five’ were rejected by several voices. M.Th. Graber-Duvernay turned down the intervention of Pilar Bellosillo on cultural anthropology as “an echo of a reflection by a cultural anthropologist from whom we neither know the name nor the age nor the nationality, and who is, in view of the formulations, not French-speaking.... The other texts are also introduced without names or qualifications. They are probably texts by professors from the University of Louvain”. She was willing only to insert the Introduction to the philosophical anthropological text. De la Potterie likewise raised objections to the inclusion of ‘documents from Louvain’. Although Claire Delva denied that the memoranda were ‘Louvain documents’ – “they come from our group in co-operation with some experts” - the memoranda were rejected. Mgr. Bartoletti thought

that these documents should not be used because they came from outside the commission. R. Goldie thought that “openness does not mean including a philosophical text that is not in line with our work”.

That these remarks aroused a climate of tension and strained emotions became clear from the admonition of the president: “We should avoid a climate of suspicion and pessimism”.

The next text for discussion was the document **Biblical-Theological Contribution** by De la Potterie.

He had revised his earlier text, omitting some ideas such as the trinitarian speculation and the reference to the Holy Spirit as image of the feminine. De la Potterie also used less symbolic argumentation and he hardly mentioned the ‘ontology’ of women. New in this text was the reference to the Fall as communal guilt of the first human couple. Because of sin the divine order was reversed: from companion the woman became temptress and love for her mate degraded her to lust. From then on man dominated woman and in the Old Testament he was seen as ‘master’ and the woman as ‘his property’.

Elaborate attention was given to women in the Old Testament who had contributed substantially to their people.

Jesus’ relationship to women and women in the early christian era was emphasised in this new document.

Covenant symbolism reflected the deep meaning of the creation of humankind and the ultimate significance of sexuality. In the mutual gift of people to each other they discover a higher love. The fiery strophes of the Song of Songs show likewise the significance of the relation of man and woman in equal dignity. In this bride-imagery can be found an ‘anticipation’ of what will later appear in full light, namely the revelation of the love-relation between Christ and his church. In this perspective woman plays an important role. She discovers in herself what humankind is to God. The church sees itself as a wife and mother. At the end of his text, De la Potterie held Mary up as an example for women. Mary was the image of female existence, model of evangelical life and image of the church. The christian tradition had always seen Mary as the one in whom the life of a woman as virgin, wife and mother revealed itself most fully. She was an example for contemporary women, because:

- ? she co-operated in the redemption by her ‘Fiat’;
- ? she took the initiative to persuade Jesus to change water into wine, which also gave evidence of her faith;
- ? she stood under the cross, not so much as mother but as woman.

De la Potterie’s conclusion was that in Revelation as well as in the first christian communities the equality of man and woman before God was recognised. Scripture, however, also indicates the difference between man and woman, not as a relation of superiority and inferiority, but as a ‘complementary’ relation, which finds its deeper significance in the unity of Christ with his church, and its most perfect expression in the attitude of Mary in relation to God. Woman represents in her womanhood what the church and humanity is for God. “She has therefore to take upon herself her femininity as a sacred reality. Being woman is a personal vocation”

During the discussion on this document, it became clear that this text of De la Potterie was judged more positively than his preceding ones. The 'group of five' was pleased that De la Potterie had taken their remarks into account. Some further critical comments were, however, made by Sister Teresa, Deborah Schellman, Claire Delva, Marina Lessa, Pilar Bellosillo, Vitoria Pinheiro and Rie Vendrik:

- ? Mary is an example for all Christians, men as well as women;
- ? A certain sinfulness is described in the text of De la Potterie: "Recent traditions underline the danger that women sometimes represent". Do men represent no danger?
- ? In the Covenant and bridal symbolism the bride represents the whole of humankind, not only women;
- ? In the conclusion the complementary relation between men and women turns up without connection to the preceding text. In it woman is urged to take her femininity upon her as a 'sacred reality'. That conclusion appeared to be stuck on to the text later without any demonstrable connection.

De la Potterie acknowledged that the conclusion was not in balance and did not adequately follow from his text. The whole document still bore signs of unbalance. Some commission members, however, according to him, only wanted to see the emphasis placed on equality, but that was impossible from a theological point of view: one cannot neglect the difference between men and women. He added: 'One should become accustomed to reflecting from faith without 'secularising' theology. Theology finds its source in the Word of God; one can actualise it, but not reduce it to mere phenomenology.' He clearly sensed the presence of the question of priesthood hidden, as it were, behind all these discussions, but that did not lie within his subject.

It was the 'group of five' which still had objections to the text, even after De la Potterie and Toinet had worked on the amendments. They felt that the document still contained so many difficulties and ambiguities that it could not be presented in this form to the Pope, the Synod of Bishops and to all Christians, especially to women. The president emphasised that the document had been written by a member of the commission chosen for his competence in biblical exegesis. The authority of the text would therefore lie in the competence of its author and of the (at least broad) consensus of the commission members. When the text was put to a vote, it was accepted with 15 in favour and 5 abstentions.

On the last day of the meeting the report of the preceding plenary session was unanimously approved. To Rie Vendrik's question about the ministères, Mgr. Bartoletti answered that the subject of ministères had been entrusted to the Congregation of the Sacraments. The contributions of the commission were very much appreciated and their expressed proposals, difficulties and wishes would be taken into account.

The president indicated in his summary that philosophical and anthropological additions to the theme 'Man and Woman in God's Plan' would be entrusted to some members of the commission, in collaboration with other experts. Biffi and Dr. Guzman Carriquiri were also asked to prepare a sociological study.

At the end of the meeting Mgr. Bartoletti thanked all the commission members for their contributions and, referring to the differences of opinion which had arisen, he said:

“Nobody should leave this session in bitterness, but we all can be pleased and grateful to God for the work we have accomplished”.

The next plenary meeting was scheduled for 2 - 6 December 1974.

### **IV 3.2. The Five Memoranda**

The notes brought forward by the ‘group of five’ and which were rejected during the June plenary session are briefly summarised as follows:

#### **F. Anthropology and the Actual Situation of Women**

1. Many disciplines - biology, psychology, sociology - are concerned with the study of the human person. The classical concept of anthropology is that it seeks a philosophically integrated vision of the totality of the human being. The data from many sciences are herein combined.

2. There is a variety of orientations in anthropology. One cannot speak about *one* anthropology that pretends to know all of human reality. The nature of the person goes beyond our knowledge, not because our intelligence is too limited, but because human reality is essentially dynamic, free and always moving. The life sciences are continually developing. Today one can no longer defend the postulate of an unchanging ‘essence’. We are conscious that philosophy is ‘contextual’, situated within a particular culture.

3. Regarding anthropological analysis one has to consider the question of the relationship between nature and culture. Contrasting the two seems to suggest that there is ‘something’ in the human being that would be protected against every cultural influence (something that *should* exist in what *is*) and that science should be able to discover this mysterious reality. That is, however, impossible because nature is always permeated by the surrounding culture. It does not make sense to set these two in opposition to each other.

4. Equality is incompatible with discrimination, as the latter affects the fundamental rights of a human being, both socially and culturally, be it based on sex, race, colour, social situation, language or religion (see *Gaudium et Spes*, 29.2).

There are many differences between people and sexuality represents one important distinction. It colours the entire personality and genital identity is in itself one of the dimensions of the sexual personality, the one involved in reproduction. It is, however, questionable whether sexuality necessarily results in special psychological characteristics and a predisposition to special tasks.

Ethnology and history show a certain mobility of male and female roles. Sociology shows how roles of men and women are connected with the prevailing socio-economic organisation. Such roles evolve in a society and the roles fulfilled by the sexes may change more rapidly in practice than in social theory or stereotypical notions. In our society women are less and less oriented towards defining themselves by their reproductive functions. Western society is tending rather towards reorganising social tasks on the basis of individual competence than on division according to race or sex. In psychology there are various opinions. Some psychologists see potential motherhood as the source of a specific psychological orientation for nurturing and protecting life; others deny strongly the existence of a relationship between physiology and psychological orientation.

5. There are many pitfalls in the anthropology of persons. Modern anthropologists are not inclined to define personal destiny on the basis of psychological or social

observations. In history there are too many regrettable examples of prematurely defining things, which later proved unfounded. The human person is defined as the centre of relationship, freedom and initiative. The only restriction that one reasonably can make to personal creativity is that it does not hinder the personal development of others.

### **G. Reflections on the Biblical-Theological Document**

The new document was good in general but there are rather some important remarks:

Mary's motherhood was certainly physical but primarily moral. One cannot use her to tell women that they should follow her example by being above all (physically) good mothers and staying away from a role in public life or in the church. Mary is, as a human being, an example for all believers. Her being female is historically secondary. That Christ was a white man is true but secondary to his being human.

- ? What does the author mean by 'femininity as a sacred reality'? Everything is sanctified by God, including masculinity and sexuality. Why that 'in cauda venenum'? One could accept that being woman is a vocation of the person provided it does not mean being mother, virgin and wife. Every person should realise her/his self, starting from her/his sexual, social and cultural conditions but not being hindered by these conditions. That is the significance of Gal. 3.28. The final text of the commission, however, seems to insinuate that the human person can realise her/himself in two directions, either as man, which means anything one wants, or as woman, which means primarily as wife and mother. The bridal mystery of human love makes us understand the love of God rather than the relation between man and woman, which is tributary to the historical context. It is exactly the task of exegesis to clarify Revelation by providing insight into the historical situation in which the words of Scripture were written. Woman represents humanity in the biblical example of the bride's love, that is clear. De la Potterie, however, cannot assert that woman represents humanity in an absolute and definitive way and draw from that the conclusion of a fixed 'complementarity'. The meaning of these bridal texts is: human love is good and reflects the love of God and makes this more understandable, and that is all!

### **H. Bridal Symbolism**

The image of bride and bridegroom in The Scripture does not primarily tell us something about the man-woman relation but about the love of God. It lets us discover who God is and what the love of Christ is.

In the concept of the Covenant and in the Song of Songs the image of the bridegroom represents God both as the almighty and also as the beggar, one who has nothing, who expects something from human beings, who begs because He loves.

In the New Testament the image of the bridegroom, who is Christ, means likewise something different from the usual masculine qualities (that is, power = masculinity). He also manifests total weakness and total obedience. The bride is the image of all of humanity. The bride as Church consists of both women and men. The bride is Church in so far as she is human. In the bridal symbolism men as well as women thus identify themselves with the bride, they are the bride.

The language of the Song of Songs is a language of absolute reciprocity. Not once do we find in it images of 'complementarity'. Going against the stereotypes, it is the woman who takes the initiative: she goes out into the streets, through the woods, over borders, she is the one who interrogates the night watchmen....

In certain Catholic traditions the bridal symbolism has been understood and interpreted literally on the basis of the man-woman relation as it existed in society, and then this approach was sanctified and never traced back to what the symbol really was intended to mean. Symbolism is an existential language through which meanings can be illuminated but only under the condition that it is understood on the level of interpretation of meanings rather than literally and materially. The characteristic of a symbol is that it makes one think (Ricoeur).

The great symbols in The Scripture, and particularly the symbol of the bride, are preceded by their meanings. If men and women exist and if God created man and woman and also especially the sexual relationship with its existential bond, that is because it tells us something about God. We know that God is love and know what this means for our human love. The duality of man and woman and the history of their relationship is intended to tell us something about God. It is full of meaning, still to be unravelled. Only in experiencing this relationship in our human history, living and searching in our real existence, can we unravel and understand the meaning of the symbol. In the image of marriage we discover God's love for the whole of humanity, and of the bridegroom Christ for the Church, and one must go so far in understanding the bridal symbolism, because therein lies the crux of the matter.

#### **J. Position on the Ministères**

Our view of ministères is unanimous in spite of some differences in expression. Our wish is that women be admitted to all tasks, functions and offices in the church.

Concerning the ministères, some of us think that these can be useful for our time; others, on the other hand, think that these tasks or functions should be fulfilled without institutionalising them. Men and women have the same perception of the flaws of ministères: clericalisation, cast-building, motivation from the shortage of priests, etc.... Moreover, women in particular reject this institution radically, less because of the ministères as such but more because of the motives and explanations offered, the consequences drawn from them and the lack of clarity on the level of the church authority that has appeared.

In summary: the study of ministères does not belong to this commission on women, except in collaboration with the Council for the Laity and the International Theological Commission.

#### **K. Remarks on the Text 'The Woman as Person'**

Odette Thibaut, medical biologist, registered sharp criticism of the elaborate biological-physiological text of M.Th. Graber-Duvernay. She questioned many passages and demonstrated medical-physiological errors. She further disagreed with the proposal by Mrs. Graber-Duvernay to consider women as those who, 'by definition', guard the values of the past.

### **IV.3.3 Commentary**

- ? It is customary that the report of the previous session is discussed and approved at the beginning of a meeting. Is this not a custom in the Vatican? Rie Vendrik's request was intended to highlight some omissions and inaccuracies. The unanimous approval of the report at the end of the meeting can be understood as a result of the stressful study days, or was that perhaps the intention of the president?
- ? The meeting developed in a steadily worsening atmosphere, starting with the criticism of the text on 'The Woman as Person', through the rejection of the notes

brought along by the 'group of five' and into the vote on the basis documents. The disappointment of the 'group of five' was also due to the non-observance of the promises made in the second session of a revised document in which secular and christian anthropology would be fully developed and in which experts from outside the commission would co-operate. There was no evidence of any contribution from those experts in the document produced. Madame Pellé-Douel, mentioned as one of the experts, was then consulted by the 'group of five' and had written a text about bridal symbolism. Were the other experts really asked? Did they refuse? Why was nothing said nor asked about these experts during the meeting?

- ? The 'group of five' were continual targets for negative remarks: poor philosophy, secularised views, all thought-up by Louvain University, not in accordance with the wishes of the Pope, objectionable positions, little insight into 'theological anthropology' ....
- ? It is striking that the question of the ministères was no longer discussed. All the more so because in the previous sessions this subject had been repeatedly imposed on the commission, even against the wishes of the women. Did the Vatican finally realise that outside the Roman Curia hardly any interest existed in this subject? During the Synod of 1987 the bishops expressed the wish to revise the *Motu proprio Ministeria quaedam* (15 August 1972), taking into account the needs and customs of local churches.<sup>102</sup> This revision has not yet taken place. Indeed, since then practically no attention has been paid to this *Motu proprio*. In the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1993) the concept of ministry for lay people does not occur except in the following extremely vague terms: ".....there exist also other special services, not confirmed by an ordination's sacrament, and whose functions are determined by the bishops according to liturgical traditions and pastoral needs" (no. 1143).
- ? The bridal symbolism used to indicate the relationship between God and humanity, between Christ and the Church, presupposed two views typical of traditional theology: a one-sided masculine image of God and a traditional concept of man-woman relationships. Although in the previous meetings criticism was expressed about these traditional concepts (criticism also expressed in the notes by the 'group of five') hardly any light was thrown on these presuppositions during the discussions about the bridal symbolism.
- ? At the beginning of the meeting as well as later in the discussions the president said that the document required first of all the unanimous approval of all members: "What we, in all sincerity, present to the Pope must be that about which we have come to a real consensus. " .....This consensus appeared to be impossible. The voting procedure itself raises questions. The texts were provisional and one of these had been seen by almost none of the members at the end of the session. The vote, in three steps, on the document 'The Woman as Person' was confusing. This vote did offer for the 'group of five' a possibility to express their dissatisfaction with the views prevailing in the commission. However, they did not dare to vote against it. In Vatican circles abstention is quite unusual and therefore a courageous deed indeed.

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<sup>102</sup> Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, concerning the vocation and mission of the Laity. In *Church and Society*, 1988,23.

? Nobody knew exactly how the document, which was to be presented to the Pope, would eventually look like.

#### **IV. 3.4. The ‘Group of Five’**

Frustrated and disappointed, the five women left Rome for their respective homes. Claire wrote to Pilar:

“After arriving home I did not want to look at a single paper and, as Rie and Vitoria also have said, we are also sad and tired, yes, I dare say discouraged (*‘écoeurées’*), that we must put everything aside for the time being.”<sup>103</sup>

For Claire, however, the rest was soon over. From her house in Lasne (near Waterloo), she got in touch with Rie and Vitoria by phone and she conferred with the other members by correspondence on ‘how to proceed’. Meanwhile she reported to Cardinal Suenens and Professor Thils.

On 28 July Pilar, Vitoria and Rie met to evaluate the June session and to deliberate about the next steps. Several times that day Marina in Brazil was consulted by telephone. Finally, after much prayer and discussion, they decided to send a letter to the Pope, in which they would describe their anxiety about developments in the commission. Claire and Vitoria assumed the task of drawing up a draft. At the beginning of August this draft was sent to the other members of the group with a request for reactions. After the arrival and processing of these, Claire showed the letter to Professor Thils who, with some corrections, gave his approval. Rie showed the letter to Marga Klompé (Catholic Minister of Social Services in the Netherlands) who praised the letter. Cardinal Suenens was willing, at Claire’s request, to arrange that the letter be presented to the Pope in September, during the Synod of Bishops.<sup>104</sup>

#### **IV.3.5 The Letter to the Pope<sup>105</sup>**

8 September 1974

Holy Father,

On 3 May 1973 Your Holiness kindly named five women among the members of the Papal Commission on the Study of Women in Society and in the Church. These five women hereby take the liberty to write this letter.

We wish to express anew to the Holy Father our heartfelt gratitude for the trust has put in us.

We have gradually but increasingly felt the need to reflect together because we have become aware of communal wishes, not only in ourselves, but also in millions of women, lay as well as religious. Moreover, we have found these same aspirations among men, priests and laymen, who are desirous of a broader and more just co-operation.

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<sup>103</sup> Letter of 12 July 1974.

<sup>104</sup> Rie gave a copy of the letter to the Pope to Cardinal Alfrink before the Synod of Bishops met.

<sup>105</sup> For the original French letter, see appendix 6.

On the occasion of the audience granted to the commission on 17 November 1973, Your Holiness gave us directions concerning the objectives of our commission: “Collect, test, interpret, revise and clarify the ideas expressed on the function of women in modern society... Thus is the task entrusted to you clearly described: observation, research, reflection. Theologians and experts will assist you in order to give the best possible service to women as well as to Society and the Church.”

We were convinced that on this basis the commission would provide the opportunity for genuine research, permitting a serious and objective confrontation of life experiences, scientific thought and the Word of God.

In our eyes, the criteria given by Your Holiness in the document *Marialis Cultus* confirmed the directives given to the commission some months earlier. The anthropological and exegetical orientation [of that document] were especially notable.

After one year of work, three plenary sessions and numerous interim studies, we felt the need for a thorough evaluation. Out of that evaluation we are forced to conclude that the task given by Your Holiness has not been realised, neither in regard to the fundamental content of the work within the commission nor in its working methods.

Much data has been presented by experts and members of the commission, as well as sent in from outside the group. In our wish to respond to the call of the Holy Father, we have, in between the meetings, conferred intensively with some experts from various scientific fields and several countries. Unfortunately, only the contributions from those members of the commission who represented a particular viewpoint were accepted as discussion documents and were put to the vote; there was simply not enough attention paid to opposing views on fundamental concepts.

Regarding what Your Holiness expected from us and on the basis of the hope expressed in the whole world at the formation of this study commission, we view it as a very serious matter that contributions representing other approaches, which would then offer the possibility for a genuine scientific study, were not properly considered. Furthermore, this wide-ranging and significant work has, in our opinion, barely begun, although some commission members consider it now to be more or less completed.

Indeed, the work situation as well as the working methods - methods which none of our organisations would use nowadays - made open dialogue, real confrontation and authentic research impossible.

We feel it our duty to say to you that we have not seen the document which was presented to Your Holiness as the result of the work of our commission and which probably makes use of supporting documents which we - in good conscience - cannot approve.

We have been astonished by this situation and indeed have become anxious about the life of the Church in this day and age. Knowing the expectations of women and men, we are apprehensive when we think that pronouncements of Church authorities could be founded on results drawn from the provisional and one-sided research which took place in this commission. Moreover, we feel this all the more because the Synod of

Bishops with its theme of 'Evangelisation', and the International Year of Women, are two world-wide events in which women are directly involved.

Given this situation and conscious of the responsibility entrusted to us, after intense prayer, careful consideration and with sincere loyalty to the Gospel and to the people of our time, we feel obliged to tell you, Holy Father, that it is impossible for us to carry this responsibility if the work situation remains as it now is. We could not participate in the next meeting without the certainty that we can properly fulfil the task assigned to us.

In this spirit we wish to ask His Excellency the President, whose qualities and competence we appreciate, to be able to work in the following manner:

- ? To make realistic use of the contributions of different sciences and a variety of approaches, especially in the field of theology and life sciences;
- ? To profit from methods required in this day and age for international work. We consider it especially appropriate to use the three main languages for all documents, ample time for previous study, as well as for discussions on fundamental issues. Texts to be voted upon should be presented in writing, and specification should be included about the intended use of the documents.

To conclude this letter which we address to Your Holiness in full confidence, we wish to express again how heavily the concern we carry burdens on us. It represents the concern of so many women and men, members of the people of God, who wish to participate in the task of bringing about a successful future for the world in the stage of history we are in today

The movement of women toward their full development as human beings is one of the signs of the times which has been recognised by many pastors and cited by Your Holiness, especially in the letter "Octogesima adveniens".

With true filial sentiments we permit ourselves to present to Your Holiness the assurance of our deep respect and profound attachment to the Church and to her Pastor.

Maria del Pilar BELLOSILLO  
Claire DELVA  
Marina LESSA  
Maria Vitoria PINHEIRO  
Maria VENDRIK