

THE CONTINUING FEMINIST THREAT TO THE CHURCH

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Over the last few years, there has been growing concern about the activities of the dissident *Catholic Women's Network (CWN)* group, and in particular the fact that it is listed among the societies approved by the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in the *Catholic Directory*. After much protest from faithful Catholics, this position is, at the time of writing this piece, being reviewed by a committee headed by Bishop Vincent Malone, auxiliary bishop in the Archdiocese of Liverpool. In spite of this, many have little confidence that *CWN* will actually be removed from the Directory, even though it is blatant in its dissent from Catholic teaching. *CWN* is also a constituent member of the *National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW)*, which is an official consultative body to the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales. Unfortunately, dissidents from the *CWN* - either proven members or known sympathisers (not all *CWN* members disclose the fact that they are members) - have a disproportionate influence in the *NBCW*. This in turn, is having an increasingly detrimental effect on the life of the Church in England and Wales. This article brings together some recent examples to demonstrate:-

- How they are using the secular media to discredit and undermine the Church
- How they are spreading dissent through official Church structures and channels
- How they are getting the support of the bishops to spread this dissent

The valid concerns of faithful Catholics are now routinely marginalised and dismissed by both the bishops and their dissident feminist allies, who are gaining influence all the time. It is understandable that in these 'politically correct' times, bishops may think twice before taking action that could be misconstrued as being misogynistic, but action nevertheless must be taken. Although the dissident feminists would almost certainly play the 'sexism' card, the simple fact is that many of their opponents are indeed women themselves. Nobody has any objection to women having a greater role in decision-making in the Church, but unfortunately **the bishops are listening to, and involving, women who dissent from Magisterial teaching, in preference to women who are faithful to the authentic teaching of the Catholic Church.**

Using the secular media to undermine the Church

From time to time, *CWN* members have been able to get access to the secular media to air their grievances - usually about women's ordination or to promote dissent from some aspect of Catholic moral teaching, and this has generally had the effect of bringing the Church into disrepute. Some years back, on a BBC1 *Everyman* programme about the Church's position on women priests, a known

CWN member denounced Pope John Paul II as "evil" for declaring that the Church cannot ordain women. Although this prompted swift complaints from faithful Catholics, CWN never publicly distanced itself from this disgraceful comment. On Saturday 5th May 2001, Channel 4 screened a programme called *Queer and Catholic*. This programme was a blatant attempt by homosexuals who call themselves Catholic to undermine Church teaching on homosexuality, and it should come as no surprise to learn that one of them featured regularly throughout the programme is a member of CWN. Lesbian theologian Dr Elizabeth Stuart is listed in the CWN directory, as is her long-term partner, Jane Robson. In the *Queer and Catholic* programme, Dr Stuart stated: "*The Roman Catholic Church is in a mess on issues of sexuality and it knows that it is in a mess.*" Dr Stuart has been on public record for many years as opposing Church teaching on homosexuality. In an article in the *Catholic Herald* of 28th January 1994 she opined: "*I do not believe that two lesbians or gay men who enjoy a just and loving relationship commit a sin when they make love. My experience of lesbian and gay relationships and my conscience denies this. I do not stand alone in this belief – many Catholic theologians, priests, bishops and lay people stand with me.*" It would be very interesting to know to which Catholic bishops Dr Stuart is referring.

Spreading dissent via official structures

In the 1992 book *The Enemy Within*, a whole chapter entitled "*The Bishops' Dilemma – Radical Feminism within the Catholic Church of England and Wales*" by Christine Kelly and Valerie Riches was devoted to this subject. I strongly urge *Christian Order* readers to try and obtain a copy of this instructive and revealing book. Although denounced at the time as nonsense by dissident feminists, who were angry at having their plans revealed, what the writers prophetically warned of is now being fulfilled before our very eyes. On pages 23-24, five areas were identified where it was felt that dissident feminists were trying to push for change, in order to strengthen their position to help spread dissent throughout the Church. These were:-

- To set up, with Episcopal approval, Diocesan Committees for women's issues
- To set up, with Episcopal approval, Diocesan Contact Persons to 'liaise' with the Bishop on women's issues
- To get a separate Women's Page (or column) in Diocesan newspapers or magazines
- To appoint Parish Contact Persons to 'assist' the episcopally approved, on-going process of the National Consultation of Women
- At Parish and deanery level, to locate and identify alienated and dissenting Deacon's Wives

To date, the first three of these five areas have now been fully implemented. The fourth area is about to be implemented very soon. Diocesan committees for women's issues are invariably run by known dissenters and some Diocesan Contacts are blatant about their membership of CWN. In the Middlesbrough

Diocese, the first Women's Commission in England and Wales consisted almost entirely of CWN members, which was revealed in a letter from a concerned Catholic laywoman to the *Catholic Times*, published on 15th March 1998, which read:

"I was very interested in Moyra Sheldon's letter about feminists and her reference to the first Women's Commission in England and Wales which Bishop Crowley has happily welcomed here in Middlesbrough Diocese. Your readers might be interested to know that, although the inaugural meeting to set up this commission was only held a few weeks ago in York, the office-holders are listed in the Diocesan Year Book. This suggests that they were appointed quite some time ago. This becomes even more interesting, and some of us think sinister, when you discover that the women holding the offices of chairperson and secretary are members of the Catholic Women's Network (CWN) – a vociferous minority who vigorously oppose Catholic teaching on just about everything. Even the most 'friendly' reading of their journal Network reveals their contempt for what they term 'the official Church'. CWN supports women's ordination and in their letter to Cardinal Hume (March 11, 1997) supporting the dissenting We Are Church Declaration they wrote "a significant number of our members are 'non-practising' ". Only two of the 'contacts' named in the Middlesbrough Diocesan Year Book are not listed in the CWN Directory as members; this does not mean that they are not members because not everyone chooses to have their membership published. No prizes for guessing why! By any method of calculation the Middlesbrough Women's Commission is dominated by members of CWN and cannot, therefore, by definition, be representative of Catholic women in this diocese . . ."

The contents of this letter have never been refuted.

One of the areas where the dissident feminists have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams is that of a publication. Instead of just having a 'women's page' in diocesan papers, the NBCW now has its own journal *Catholic Woman* delivered quarterly and free to virtually every parish in England and Wales by *Gabriel Communications*. Already it has been noted that there has been a disproportionate input to *Catholic Woman* from known dissidents and CWN members. Although they are being careful not to reveal their ultimate aims too quickly, dissent and disobedience still gets published in this newspaper, which has a circulation figure of approximately 61,000 copies. For example, in the Winter 2001 edition, an article on a Day of Reflection held by the *Patchwork* group in the Portsmouth Diocese, run by a known CWN member, stated that *"The day finished with everyone assembled on the sanctuary of St Peter's Church for Mass celebrated by Canon Peter (Doyle - now Bishop Peter Doyle of Northampton Diocese) with women taking a major part in the liturgy, including the Readings, the Gospel and the homily (emphasis mine)"*. This lay involvement in reading

the Gospel and giving the homily blatantly contravenes the 1997 Vatican Instruction on the roles proper to priests and laity.

The Editor of *Catholic Woman* is Angela Perkins, who is the Development Officer for the *NBCW*. Although she has been careful to avoid having her name directly connected with *CWN* and other dissident groups, documented incidents regarding her behaviour and opinions have given grave cause for concern. I have a report written by a representative of a national pro-life charity, who attended a *NBCW* study day held on 15 -16 April 2000. The writer of this report stated that she was attacked by some of those present, most notably Angela Perkins and Bishop Malone, when she put forward a pro-life proposal – the same Bishop Malone who heads the panel that is deciding which groups remain in the *Catholic Directory* with ecclesiastical approval. An excerpt from this report states:

"When the pro-life proposal was put forward there was, in general, a very strong reaction from the delegates. There were a lot of people shouting all at once at me. Some people were even on their feet and waving arms and fingers around. The response, which bordered on a personal attack, because personal pronouns and my name were used, was vicious, disrespectful and, in my opinion, rude. In particular, Bishop Malone's and Angela Perkins' behaviour distressed me – they shouted the loudest etc. Angela carried this on even after I had sat back down in my seat. I stated at this point that I thought what had happened was a disgrace."

The report went on to state: *"The whole tone of the weekend was of 'marginalisation of women' and 'ball-busting' feminism. Yet these same Catholic women marginalised me for my pro-life beliefs."* While sympathising with the writer of this report, I cannot agree with her on one issue – she was not being marginalised by Catholic women – only by women who call themselves Catholic, while pushing an anti-Catholic agenda, aided and abetted by a compliant episcopate. If this weren't enough evidence of Angela Perkins' strange views, she was recently interviewed in the *Catholic Times* newspaper, and was asked if she was in favour of women priests. Instead of upholding Church teaching and saying that Pope John Paul II has declared that the Church has no authority to ordain women and that the matter is now closed, she replied: *"The important thing is to clarify the role of priests, who are being asked to do too much . . . **until this is done** we don't want women priests (emphasis mine)."* Well sorry Angela, but *WE* – that is faithful Catholic men and women, don't want women priests – full stop! The two co-editors of *Catholic Woman* are Verena Wright-Lovett and Freda Lambert. Verena is listed in the *CWN* Directory as a member. Freda is not listed as a member of *CWN* but as was stated before, not all women openly declare their membership. She has, however, vigorously defended *CWN* in a letter to the *Catholic Herald* published on 1st December 2000, so this should give readers some indication of where her loyalties lie. With three known *CWN* members or sympathisers at the helm, the future for the promotion of orthodox Catholicism in *Catholic Woman* looks very bleak indeed.

Episcopal complicity

One particular off-shoot of the *CWN* has been successful in spreading its work and gaining episcopal approval. This is the *Patchwork* initiative operating in Bishop Hollis's Diocese of Portsmouth. Because faithful Catholics have worked hard to expose the activities of *CWN*, its members have now recognised that more can be achieved by using different names to front their activities. This is how *Patchwork* operates. Although ostensibly a *NBCW* project which uses the *NBCW* heading for all its meetings, *Patchwork* is overseen by *CWN* member Verena Wright-Lovett, who is an executive member of, and diocesan link to the *NBCW*, assisted by fellow *CWN* member Roisin Gwyer. Various groups, known as 'patches' are set up in parishes around the diocese. This strategy was inaugurated at a Portsmouth Diocesan Day for Women held at Park Place Pastoral Centre on 4th July 1999, under the title *Women's Voices, Women's Silence*. The Diocesan paper *Portsmouth People* of September 1999 carried a report stating that the day was held under the auspices of the *NBCW* in association with the *Portsmouth Diocesan Religious Education Council*, with the aim of taking forward liaison with the *NBCW* in the Diocese. Angela Perkins opened the day explaining the role of the *NBCW* as a consultative body to the Bishops of England and Wales and as a forum for women's groups within the Church.

Among *Patchwork's* first speakers were radical feminists Vicki Cosstick, Dr Tina Beattie and the notorious Dr Mary Grey, and these latter two are listed members of the *CWN*. At a *Patchwork* event held at St Peter's Church in Winchester, 14th October 2000, Dr Mary Grey claimed there is a strong worldwide movement for the ordination of women in the Catholic Church which is looking to the experience of their sisters in the Anglican and Free churches. At the same meeting the group were directed to anoint each others hands with oil, whilst telling each other "*blessed art thou among women*". Apologies for absence at this meeting were sent by Verena Wright-Lovett who was unable to attend due to being in Leeds with the Joint Dialogue Group discussing with the bishops the theme of "*what it means to be a woman of our time*". To underline Mary Grey's claims about women priests, the Winchester group followed this up with a talk on 25th April entitled "*Journey of Faith*" given by Canon Caroline Baston, a local Winchester Anglican vicar. The facilitator for the Winchester *Patchwork* group is Dr Anna Wilson who has gained notoriety for advocating the benefits of the abortifacient "morning after" drug Levonelle in a letter published in the May edition of the *Portsmouth People*. As this is the sort of anti-Catholic propaganda that most parents would want to protect their children from, it was almost beyond belief to learn that she was also a member of the *Portsmouth Diocesan Child Protection Team*. Complaints about this letter addressed to Dr Anna Wilson and Bishop Hollis have received no satisfactory reply to date.

Though *Patchwork* clearly introduces dissent to women in the diocese, it has managed to secure the support of Bishop Crispian Hollis, who even attended a full day's *Patchwork* meeting on 12th May 2001. On this occasion, Dr Anna Wilson spent most of the day sitting companionably with Bishop Hollis. Verena Wright-Lovett pointed to the significance of the presence of a priest - the openly dissident Fr Derek Reeve - and also the presence of a bishop at this meeting. As many priests and bishops have been present at *NBCW* meetings in the past, one can only assume that she was expressing the significance because this is, in effect, the first time that *CWN* has managed to get a bishop and a priest to officially attend one of its gatherings - albeit a gathering operating under a different name. Bringing the meeting to a close, Bishop Hollis assured *Patchwork* of his support and took part in the circle dance that ended the day. It is, of course, very wrong that he should be seen to endorse a group of women who have publicly dissented from Catholic teaching at various times and places, and who by and large, are known members of dissenting groups, but anyone who has an inkling of Bishop Hollis's track record will hardly be surprised by this.

Further proof of bishops co-operating with and supporting dissident feminists – if it were needed – came from a document picked up by an observer at the Low Week 2001 meeting of the Bishops' Conference of England & Wales which shows that *NBCW* representatives met with the bishops during the Low Week meeting on Tuesday 24th April. The Episcopal Liaison was Bishop Vincent Malone, and out of the four women in this consultative group, one was Angela Perkins, and the other two were Rosemary Keenan and Mary McHugh – both known *CWN* members or supporters. So out of four women being consulted by the bishops on this occasion – three of them were known to support *CWN*. One of the topics listed for discussion at the Low Week meeting under 'Communications' was – surprise, surprise - the *Catholic Directory*. Did *CWN* use this meeting as an opportunity to ensure their entry in future editions?

Increasingly brazen

It is a measure of the influence that *CWN* and their sympathisers have over the bishops, that they can be so brazen in their dissent from Catholic teaching, while being checked for suitability for inclusion in the *Catholic Directory*. The Autumn 2001 issue of *CWN's Network* contained no less than five pages on the *Women's Ordination Worldwide* conference, which ended with an open letter from *CWN* on page 16 declaring:

“Catholic Women's Network believes that the gospel speaks about freedom from oppression and calls women to full participation in all aspects of life and the church as a matter of justice. We strongly endorse the aims of the world-wide movement for the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church, and of the recent conference in Dublin, for a renewal of priesthood within transformed and inclusive structures, where women's gifts are welcomed and accepted. We believe that it is totally wrong to attempt to

ban serious debate, reflection and research of this issue. We commend the vision of those who initiated the conference and are grateful that it has re-energised us all to work more vigorously for the above aims. Catholic Women's Network."

While *CWN* has made its stance on the ordination of women quite clear, it appears to be far from clear about the issue of abortion. On page 17 of the same issue of *Network*, after complaining about attacks from "fundamentalist" groups (by "fundamentalist" they mean those who accept all of Catholic teaching), the annual report states that "*CWN does not have a stance on abortion*". **How on earth can a group that publicly uses the name Catholic and which enjoys the approval of the Bishops' Conference not have a stance on abortion?** Clearly, *CWN* isn't able to take the one and only stance that Catholics *must* have about abortion, because many in their ranks are pro-choice, and this is confirmed in the same edition of *Network* on page 29, where *Conscience* – the journal of the pro-abortion lobby group *Catholics for a Free Choice* - is promoted, even though this group has been totally condemned by the U.S. Bishops' Conference. As usual, *CWN* offer the disingenuous disclaimer that publications mentioned in that section "*are not thereby endorsed by CWN*" – but if they don't endorse it, why do they promote it in every edition of their journal?

Monitoring and exposing dissidents

True pastoral care dictates that those in the visible structure of the Church who dissent from Catholic teaching should be made aware of the seriousness of their position. They should be told that their wilful and obstinate rejection of Catholic teaching places them outside of full communion with the Roman Catholic Church and endangers their immortal souls. Instead of doing this, our bishops seem hell-bent on being as 'inclusive' as possible by allowing known dissident feminists to hold influential positions in official ecclesiastical structures and co-operating with them.

Until our bishops begin to see sense, it is the duty of every faithful Catholic man and woman to make the effort to find out about *NBCW/CWN* activities in their parishes and dioceses, and to monitor, expose and undermine those activities when they fail to conform to Catholic teaching. Dissident feminists are very active for their cause – can faithful Catholics be any less active in the service of the Lord?

Our Lady, Conqueror of Heresies, pray for us.

Postscript from the Christian Order Editor:

Under the laughable pretext of his ongoing negotiations with the dissenting feminist organisations, aimed at confirming their "*fundamental commitment to the teaching of the Catholic Church*", Bishop Vincent Malone has included them in the 2002 *Catholic Directory* "*while the correspondence continues*". Of course, Bishop

Malone determining the orthodoxy of these groups is akin to relying on Jack Dominionian to assess the veracity of *The Tablet*!