

The Feminist Threat to the Church – Part IV **by Patricia Phillips**

This is the fourth in a series of occasional updates on the activities of dissenting feminists in general and the *Catholic Women's Network (CWN)* in particular.¹ In previous updates I have tried to demonstrate how serious the situation has become, with the Bishops of England and Wales increasingly falling into line with the dissenting feminist agenda - even to the extent that one of the Bishops' Conference recently asked if it is time to consider whether women could hear Confessions and administer the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick! The bishop in question was Vincent Malone, Episcopal Liaison to the CWN-controlled umbrella group *National Board of Catholic Women (NBCW)* who made his unbelievable comments in the book *Healing Priesthood*, which was edited by CWN member Verena Wright and NBCW Development Officer Angela Perkins – but more about this appalling book later.

There is widespread ignorance among Catholics today about Church teaching, so it wasn't surprising that the question about women administering the sacraments was raised, but that a *bishop* should raise it – and so publicly – is beyond belief. After all, this was not an enquiry about some obscure point of theology, but about basic Catholic teaching on the nature of the Priesthood and the Sacraments – and this from one whose role it is to teach, sanctify and govern his flock! Many hoped that the revelation of Bishop Malone's apparent need for basic catechesis would prompt Rome to act, by insisting – at the very least - on his removal as Episcopal Liaison to the NBCW. Apparently however, even though many did write to Rome and sent copies of the book and press statements containing Bishop Malone's bizarre comments, nothing has been done, so it's business as usual for Bishop Malone and his dissenting feminist friends. Indeed, it appears that many of them found the whole episode highly amusing. An observer at an NBCW meeting reported that there was much hilarity over the press furore surrounding Bishop Malone's contribution to the book, and it was also announced at the same meeting that Bishop Malone had phoned Angela Perkins while in Rome, on his *Ad Limina* visit, to apologise for his absence at the meeting. Perkins said she feared he had been arrested for his article in *Healing Priesthood*, which caused prolonged laughter.

Ongoing scandal

CWN still promotes dissent from Catholic teaching in its journal *Network*, while being listed in the Catholic Directory as having episcopal approval from the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, and while being allowed to remain a constituent member of the NBCW. On page 13 of the September 2003 issue of *Network*, in the Annual Report, the following statement is made:- “*Catholic Directory: This issue re-surfaced for our December meeting. After correspondence and phone calls we agreed to add our acceptance of ‘the authentic teaching of the Church’ in our entry for the Directory*”. This cynical little exercise has apparently paid off, as Bishop Malone has already started quoting the CWN party line on this sham “acceptance” of authentic Church teaching, as

noted in his response to a letter written by a *Christian Order* reader, in which he said: “*The reason why the Catholic Women's Network retains its place in the national Catholic Directory is that they agreed to include the words ‘acknowledging and accepting the authentic teaching of the Church’*”. So that’s all right then. As long as one **says** one accepts the authentic teaching of the Church, one can go on openly promoting the work of groups that oppose Church teaching on abortion and contraception (*Catholics for a Free Choice*); homosexuality (*Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement*); women priests (*Catholic Women’s Ordination*) and any other form of dissent that takes your fancy, all with episcopal approval.

The same CWN Annual Report went on to say:- “*Further attacks: Allegations about CWN’s supposed financial and other support for Catholics for a Free Choice (based in USA) continue to be made to the Bishops and the NBCW*”. This apparent denial of support for *Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC)* is either a smokescreen, or these women don’t read their own journal, otherwise they would see that each issue devotes the best part of one page to promoting “*Conscience*” which is the journal of the *CFFC*. This is not a mere “*allegation*”, but a *fact*. The U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops has roundly condemned the work of *CFFC*:- “*For a number of years, a group calling itself Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) has been publicly supporting abortion while claiming it speaks as an authentic Catholic voice. That claim is false. In fact, the group’s activity is directed to rejection and distortion of Catholic teaching about the respect and protection due to defenceless preborn human life*”²

Rank subversion

It is very interesting to note that CWN is now thinking of changing its name. The CORE group of CWN, which regularly reviews the aims, purposes and approaches of the organisation, issued an open letter to CWN members on page 10 of the December 2003 issue of *Network*. This open letter contains explicit admissions that this group: a) is not Catholic:

“Core meetings – these again show a difference over the past few years in the amount of time and attention given to specific RC Church matters, while Core itself currently has some members not from Catholic backgrounds, or who are detached from the organisation of the RC Church . . .”

“We have members along a wide continuum, from women active in the Catholic Church, those active in other churches or not active in any formal church, and others who are ‘post-denominational’ . . .”

“Many others say that they are deterred by the word ‘catholic’, even though we explain that the term is used in a wide sense . . .”

b) does not have Catholic aims:

“These show a wide range of justice and peace issues, ‘saying yes to God’ women’s liturgies, Taoism and Buddhism, mediation,

theology for the 21st Century, writing our funerals. The groups around the country report on action from NBCW, vigils outside Cathedrals, ³ activities in diocesan organisations, deaneries and parishes. . . .”

“Other predominantly Catholic interests include the activities of We Are Church and Catholic Women’s Ordination . . .”

“We know that CWN has members along a wide continuum from those very active in parishes and local ministries, committed to study and **working to change the church from within**, and also those whose origin was Catholic but who now place themselves on the margin and either campaign for change from outside or seek to build alternative ways of pursuing spirituality, theology, ministry and liturgy . . .”

c) has still been very successful nonetheless, in infiltrating and taking control of the NBCW and influencing the Bishops of England and Wales:

“Our main and important Catholic contribution is through the National Board of Catholic Women . . .”

“CWN has made a major contribution in the specifically Catholic world, **particularly through our membership of the NBCW and its relationship with the hierarchy** . . .”

The following is one such example of a “major contribution” by the dissenting NBCW / CWN feminists. An *Independent Catholic News* report dated 24 May 2004 contained a statement by Bishop Mark Jabale, titled “*Bishops regret release of draft Missal text*”, which lamented *The Tablet*’s publication of ICEL’s first draft translation of the *Ordo Missae*. Some of us found far more to lament in the statement than the alleged leaking of a draft Missal text, such as the following paragraph:-

“In preparing for their plenary meeting the Bishops consulted widely amongst their diocesan advisers, both clerical and lay. The Bishops’ Conference’s Department for Christian Life and Worship, which coordinated the consultation, also ensured that there was proper consultation with the Conference’s Consultative Bodies, including the National Board of Catholic Women, the National Conference of Priests, the Conference of Religious and the National Council for Lay Associations. Care was taken that the voices of women and men, lay people, religious, and ordained ministers were heard and listened to.”

At a more local level, the CWN are trying to bolster their profile by passing their activities off as diocesan events. An example of this can be found on page 3 of the Spring 2004 issue of the NBCW newspaper *Catholic Omnibus*, which carried an advert for an NBCW “*Diocesan Day*” in the Portsmouth Diocese, titled:- “*Mary Magdalen in Scripture, Art and Story*”. All of the women associated with the event and named in the advert are listed CWN members – including the ubiquitous

Verena Wright, who was also featured in a *Catholic Times* profile in November 2003.

Feminising priesthood

In this profile, a large picture of Verena - elegant, poised, charming – was put alongside the headline “*Feminism is not at odds with a Catholic viewpoint*”. The article sings Verena’s praises and she in turn sings the praises of feminism. What it failed to mention is that she is a listed member of CWN, and one wonders how membership of a group which promotes dissent from Church teaching on abortion, contraception, homosexuality, women priests and a range of other issues, can be deemed to be “*not at odds with a Catholic viewpoint*”. As mentioned earlier, Verena is also co-editor of the book *Healing Priesthood*. In the *Catholic Times* profile, she said that the idea for the book “*was stimulated by the National Conference of Priests (NCP) a couple of years ago. They had a three-year plan for looking at priesthood and in the first year, the issue was healing priesthood*”. The controversial NCP has, unsurprisingly, been unstinting in its praise for *Healing Priesthood*. An observer at an NBCW meeting reported that the NBCW felt it had achieved a “*real partnership*” with the NCP, who in turn said that the NBCW had done a “*loving service*” to the Church by producing this book. *Healing Priesthood* attempts to give the impression that it represents “*women’s voices worldwide*” but in reality it only represents the views of a dissenting minority. Below is an excerpt by CWN member Tina Beattie, which is little more than an outright attack on the discipline of priestly celibacy, and gives some idea of the flavour of the book:-

“Women and priests in the modern Catholic Church have much in common. Together, we are counting the cost of a history of repression and denial. In the inability to celebrate God’s great gift of sexuality, the Church has inflicted many psychological and physical wounds because of a pessimistic theology which is too preoccupied by the dangers of sexuality, and not attentive enough to its capacity to express love and to build relationships. As a result, a cult of celibacy has developed in which female sexuality, epitomised by Eve, has come to be seen as the greatest threat to godliness. For men, this has meant avoiding contact with women as far as possible, or keeping them in carefully circumscribed roles as virgins, mothers and wives so as to minimise the threat they pose, while denying them any significance in the liturgical and worshipping life of the Church. After all, the female body has no symbolic significance in our worship, since there is no liturgical role that cannot equally be performed by a man. For women, men’s fear of sexuality has often meant denying our own bodily capacity for joy and celebration, forcing ourselves to conform to religious and social roles that have been imposed upon us, rather than developing the fullness of our humanity according to our own God-given insights and wisdom. In this climate of denial, negation and fear, sexuality risks becoming so warped that it loses its capacity to unite

people together in love, and becomes instead an instrument of power, control and abuse”⁴

Confused? Don't worry – even Beattie's fellow CWN members have difficulty making any sense of her work. A review of her book *“God's Mother, Eve's Advocate”* in the December 2003 issue of the CWN journal *Network* opined:-

“This book is not an easy read . . . I had to keep a dictionary by me, and I am by no means theologically illiterate. Some words – ‘dirempted’ ‘sexuation’ ‘imaginary’ (as a noun) – defeated the combined word power of four dictionaries. I suspect that I lost much of Tina Beattie's argument through puzzling over the words in which it is expressed, which presented a distraction even in cases where the meaning could be established . . .”

Beattie is also featured on the latest leaflet issued by *Womenpriests* campaign, giving the following commendation:-

“The Women Priests website is an excellent resource for all those who value the importance of informed and intelligent debate concerning the question of women's ordination in the Roman Catholic Church in our time, when the Church needs to re-examine its stand on many issues within our complex new social and cultural world order, initiatives like this deserve our wholehearted support in word and deed”.

This is in spite of the fact that the Holy Father declared in 1994 that the teaching on women's ordination is to be *“definitively held by all the Church's faithful”* and was confirmed a year later by Cardinal Ratzinger as *“belonging to the deposit of the faith”*. Another dissenter featured on the same *Womenpriests* campaign leaflet is Jackie Clackson, who is also a listed CWN member and part of *St Joan's International Alliance*, which is a constituent member of the *NBCW*. Such are the views of the type of women currently enthraling the *National Conference of Priests*, and supposedly *“healing priesthood”* into the bargain.

Feathering the feminist nest

In 2003 the *NBCW* held a national conference for women, titled: *Women – Evangelisers for the 21st Century*. The resolutions from this conference will set the programme for the *NBCW* for the next three years, and they were published in the Sept 2003 issue of *CWN's Network* and the Autumn 2003 issue of the *NBCW's Catholic Omnibus*. The first resolution is titled *“Gender and Leadership”* and states:- *Informed by our experience of positive relationships and constructive collaboration – the NBCW should pursue vigorously an end to the current practice within the Church, where gender determines Leadership, and seek to replace this by the appointment of people with appropriate gifts and skills”*. This resolution was passed unanimously. In *Catholic Omnibus*, it was followed by this note:- *“Work with the Joint Dialogue group (meeting with Bishops' Conference and NBCW on the role of women in the Church)”*. As I pointed out in my last article,

most of the *NBCW* personnel who take part in the *Joint Dialogue Group* are listed *CWN* members or known *CWN* supporters, so one can see how the dissenting feminist agenda is rapidly gaining ground.

This resolution also indicates one of the methods used by dissenting feminists to usurp authority in the Church. Having been major players in engineering what Archbishop Elden Curtiss has called an “*artificial and contrived*” vocations crisis⁵, they are now seeking to fill the void they have deliberately helped to create, by calling for the appointment of people who they consider to have “*appropriate gifts and skills*” (usually themselves) to what they call “*leadership*” positions. For “*appropriate skills*” read qualifications. The feminist movement has spawned a veritable industry where all manner of qualifications in theology, liturgy, ministry, spirituality and pastoral work are on offer. I hope to make this industry the subject of a more in-depth article in the future, as there is concern that dissenting feminists are using such qualifications to pull academic rank on clergy and laity alike, and secure highly-paid positions within Church structures.

Like liturgical abuse, the feminist problem has become so widespread and ingrained in the Church that it can be tempting to throw one’s hands up and give in, and just let things take their course. Obviously, we know we cannot do that. Please, do all you can to help monitor and combat this problem, and most importantly, please remember to offer prayers and sacrifices every day for this intention.

St Philomena, Virgin and Martyr, pray for us.

***“Pray to St Philomena. Whatever you ask from her, she will obtain for you”
(Pope Gregory XVI)***

¹ See *Christian Order*, issues Jan 2002, Dec 2002, Oct 2003.

² Status of ‘*Catholics for a Free Choice*’ – Bishop Joseph A Fiorenza of Galveston-Houston, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, United States Catholic Conference, May 10, 2000.

³ These vigils protest against the Church’s teaching on women’s ordination.

⁴ *Wounded Healers: The Healing Ministry of Priests and Women* by Tina Beattie, from *Healing Priesthood*, page 42.

⁵ *What Vocations Crisis?* Archbishop Elden Curtiss, *Christian Order*, February 2002