

concern for *yasha*: Isaiah, Hosea, Joshua, and Jesus. It would indeed be ironic if contemporary women were alienated by a community that proclaims *yasha*.

The issues of peace and justice or liberation theology do not refer *only* to the developing countries or to the farms and vineyards of southern California. At times it might be convenient to speak about such issues as if we always wore specially fitted binoculars enabling us to overlook the problems of race or of class under our feet. It is in that frame of reference that we recommend the following guest editorial.

—BERNARD P. PRUSAK

### THE OTHER SISTERS

This guest editorial by a member of the College Theology Society appeared as a "Letter to the Editor" in the February 7, 1976 issue of *America*. It is reprinted here with the permission of the editors of *America*. We may note that its author is also Chairperson of the Catholic Laywomen's Caucus in Springfield, Virginia.

I am one of that growing number of Catholic women who have become acutely conscious of their subordinate status in a clerically-controlled, male-dominated church. Therefore not from any lack of interest but due instead to the various exigencies of life (I am a housewife, mother of four, full-time religion instructor at an inner-city Catholic girls' high school, doctoral candidate in philosophy at Georgetown University), I was prevented from attending the ordination conference held in Detroit this past November. I have made it a point to read many of the reports about what happened there, and it was this that brought me to sharing my reflections.

There has been a general unanimity of opinion in most of what has been written about Detroit, that those preeminently concerned with securing justice for their sex in the church are the women members of religious communities. I would seriously doubt this to be true. What is true is that these women, although a numerically small segment of the American church's female members, have national—even international—organization, have penetrated to some degree the church's clerical circles and, of these, a few have managed to make themselves highly visible and vocal on this particular issue. The Catholic laywoman on the other hand, is not part of such a network, has no need for such organization, and, as a result, her allegiance and missionary effort is directed toward the church's local presence, the parish. There are laywomen speaking out against the injustice perpetrated against them by the male members of the Christian community, but these are only being heard within the limits of local jurisdic-

tions. Let me assure you, however, that consciousness-raising is going on and will continue throughout the parishes and dioceses across America.

Some have suggested that "Catholic feminism" in this country "has been primarily a movement of women religious." How does one define "Catholic feminism"? Does one mean feminists who are Catholic? Or does one refer to some particular expression of feminism that is "Catholic"? Part of the confusion would seem to stem from the fact that some writers forget that, unlike male and female celibates who constitute the "professional" church, neither laymen nor laywomen are generally identified by society primarily in terms of the category of religion. I know many Catholic women who are working hard in multitudinous ways for the advancement of women in all phases of society. They are feminists and also are Catholics who see their efforts as missionary. But are they, according to the definition of some commentators, "Catholic feminists"?

Feminists who bear witness to the gospel in that they work for the betterment of human society are at least deserving of the title Christian. And I would suspect, simply because of their numerical superiority, that Catholic laywomen who are feminists far outnumber those who are women religious. If one refers to the feminist movement *within* the Catholic Church, it does appear that women religious are in the vanguard. Although here it is noteworthy that, despite this current visibility of the nuns, the question of justice for women in the church was first posed by such laywomen as Mary Daly, Rosemary Ruether and Clara Henning. Indeed the ordination conference itself, although brought to fruition by the task force, was originally the brainchild of another active member of the laity, Mary Lynch. I believe it is fair to say that it is the consciousness-raising begun by these women that has been responsible for the heated discussion that is currently going on within the American church today.

I do find it somewhat puzzling that this entire subject of the status of women has suddenly been given new credibility and respectability now that the leaders of the women religious have associated themselves with this cause. To see that this is true, one need only look to Bishop Dozier's comment: "The conference was such that it must be taken seriously by the U. S. church. Those present occupy positions of leadership in religious orders and communities, and their intellectual credentials are superior." A similar note is sounded by Elizabeth Carroll, who says that "the theological competence, ability to communicate and maturity of the speakers destroyed stereotypes of women as stupid, overemotional and weak." There appears to be a natural tendency to assume that because women religious are "col-

lege presidents, social workers and scientists," they are the obvious ones to lead the church's women. And there is weighty evidence that many women religious tend to think of themselves as being natural to this role, for example, in the National Association of Women Religious newsletter *Probe*, dated October, 1975.

The crux of the matter, it seems to me, is that it is but a short step from regarding the sisters as leaders to conceiving of them as an elite and separate class of women. (On the other hand, isn't this as it always has been?) Laywomen, by virtue of their experience and the variety of their ecclesial work of teaching and service done at the essential but non-glamorous parish level, have a great deal to add to the discussion that will ideally lead to the explication of a new theology of ministry. But it is extremely likely that they will never be given the opportunity to be heard because they are not considered by the hierarchy to be members of the elite and thus to be given credence. Yet just the same, it is laywomen who are the majority of the church's population, and it is mainly laywomen, not women religious, who are now involved with the catechesis of young people and adults, who with their family or friends work for social justice, who seek, too, a life devoted to the practical application and implementation of the Christian gospel.

It is likely that unless ordination becomes equally an interest and an issue for both of the church's women, the question of celibacy as a requisite for priesthood will never have to be dealt with. It is not at all unreasonable to assume that if ordination for women must come, it would be far more palatable to the male clergy to accept women who share the same life style. But to ordain women religious only would be begging the fundamental question of justice.

The small number of laywomen at Detroit speaks mightily about the current state of "Catholic feminism." At present, it has to be seen as a movement for equal rights, perhaps even equal power, for only one small segment of Catholic women. And by being so exclusive, it precludes the evolution of any new theology of priesthood or ministry while leaving unresolved the problem of male domination of the church.

I do believe that the leaders of the Catholic feminists have not consciously intended to ignore laywomen, but the fact that at Detroit the nun/lay ratio was ten to one perhaps points to the isolation of women religious from their sisters in the church. The thrust for justice must be made equally the concern of religious and lay but first, far-reaching discussion and exchange between all the women of the church must be initiated. It is time for this dialogue to begin.

—GEORGIA M. KEIGHTLEY