

FOURTH PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE**TOWARDS A NEW UNDERSTANDING OF WOMEN'S ROLE****I. INTRODUCTION**

The bishops of Asia are today in positions of power and influence in the Church and in society in the Asian continent. Women form the larger part of the local Churches in Asia, of which the bishops are the pastors. When they meet and wish to discuss the role of women in the context of Church and society, do women believe that the bishops are serious about this question? Or do they wonder if the bishops want merely to hash and rehash the question to get a feeling of satisfaction? Could it be that they are aware of the importance of women in handing down the faith from generation to generation, and therefore do not want to leave women out of their discussions? Or do they think that women are becoming vocal — and so getting out of hand, and therefore it is essential that they are brought back under control?

Whatever is the motivation of the bishops, the concern of women is to try to enable them to be honest with themselves and honest with the women, so that a new understanding of the role of women in the society and the Church becomes possible. If this can be accomplished, there can be hope for the Church in the world in general, and in Asia in particular. Otherwise, it will mean that, as long as the bishops are in favor of continuing the status quo, they will raise false hopes in the minds and hearts of Asia's women.

Asian women are endowed with intelligence and talents as much as men are, and therefore they cannot be put off any longer. Their alienation — particularly that of young women — which has started will worsen. The Church will be the poorer for it, if we waste any more time discussing and not arriving at any conclusions and concrete action.

This discussion guide has been prepared for the workshop sessions of the Fourth Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC), convening at the Major Seminary, Tokyo, Japan, September 16-25, 1986. The theme of the Plenary Assembly is: "The Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World of Asia."

The plea, therefore, of “concerned” and “thinking” women in Asia to the bishops is to help evolve a Christian theology and Christian way of life free of sex discrimination, so that women can respond to the needs of people in society and Church, in grace and in freedom, as they did in the early Church.¹

II. THE MISSION OF CHRIST

Christ’s mission on earth is beautifully expressed by John 10:10: “I have come that all may have life and have it to the full.” He suffered and died on the cross to attain this goal.

Baptism confers on all Christians the duty and obligation to continue this mission. In baptism all Christians, irrespective of class, caste or sex, become disciples of Christ.²

A disciple is one who accepts and promotes the teachings of the Master. The Gospels agree that a true disciple of Jesus is one who hears the word of God and acts upon it. The sex of the person is immaterial — the person who is baptized makes the ultimate choice of Jesus, to follow him faithfully.

Mary the Disciple of the Lord

Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a very young girl heard the word of God and responded, accepting motherhood of the Savior, with all its challenges and pains. Right from the start, she displayed a great sense of service towards Elizabeth who was in greater need of help than herself. Her Magnificat shows her sense of justice. She predicted “rewards for the downtrodden and the fall of the mighty.” When the child Jesus was lost, she questioned him. Jesus went with her to the marriage at Cana, where at her bidding he performed his first miracle. She stood at the foot of the cross till the end and at Pentecost was filled with the Spirit of prophecy and justice together with the other disciples.

Mary was certainly a loyal and conscientious disciple of Christ, a model for all Christians. This aspect of discipleship in Mary’s life has not been studied and explained adequately to Christians, for whom she is an excellent model — be they male or female. Mary’s role as a disciple has been underplayed and her sex roles of virgin and mother have certainly been overplayed throughout most of Christian history. Jesus himself points out that “whosoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, my sister and my mother” (Mt 12:49-50).

Mary’s special claim to greatness is not in her having given birth to Jesus — this is important — but in this, that she qualified to be and formed

part of Jesus' family of disciples through her unconditional response to God's word. "Blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it," said he when the cured woman referred to the physical aspects of his mother's role in Jesus' life.

Women followed Jesus during Christ's public life; they formed a part of his community of disciples. This role of women during the time of Christ and in early Christianity has certainly been de-emphasized, both by the Gospel writers and the interpreters of the Gospels. Therefore, women have not been viewed as the dynamic force that indeed they were in the early Church.

Women biblical scholars today are reconstructing the history of the early Church in a non-androcentric manner in order to reveal that in the Jesus-movement in Israel women were full-fledged disciples and missionaries, prophets, church leaders and apostles, on equal terms with the men.³

At that time, the main focus was the furthering of Christ's mission — "bringing life to the full," particularly to women imprisoned and dehumanized as they were by patriarchal Judaism. No wonder, Christ the liberator found many followers among women and girls!

III. THE CHURCH'S ROLE

Church leaders — both men and women — have first to have clearly in mind the goal of the kind of Church they want to plant and take root in Asia. Once the goal is clear, the situation of Asian women has then to be examined; and the part played by religion in bringing about the present sorry state of women has to be acknowledged. Once that is done steps have to be taken to set matters right — if Asian women are to play their role without obstacles placed in their way. If this process is not envisioned, women cannot assume the role of true disciples of Christ. Today, the Church needs truly to break away from its patriarchal structures, and restore to women the emancipation and independence they had in the early Church. The Church needs to shed the Aristotelian patriarchalism that "found its way into the New Testament," which demanded subordination and obedience from wives, children and slaves.

The Original Jesus Movement As Model

We, the people of God, need to revert to the Jesus-movement in Israel. Christ promised his empire not to the rich, the "pious" or the (theologically?) learned, but to the poor, the destitutes, the prostitutes. The Jesus-movement allowed women and as well as men, poor and as well as rich, and even the culticly unclean, to become his followers. What the

Church needs to do is bring about a coequal discipleship. Women must be helped to break the shackles of subordination, submission and obedience, as these have been institutionalized by a patriarchal ethos, and replace these by a more realistic and authentic Christian ethos of equality and justice. If the Church is truly to authenticate the Second Vatican Council's participatory model of Church as the "people of God," then what we must make real is the "constitutional sacrament for this model," which is baptism and not ordination.

IV. ASIAN WOMAN AND GIRLS

Once the Church's role is clear to us, let us then examine the situation of women in Asia to see if they can be disciples.

A poem may help us visualize the Asian woman's dilemma.

She has a round face but is hidden behind a veil,

She has curved eyes which are shut in daytime as she entertains men
at night.

She has a small nose which has gotten used to the stench of the slums
and the pollution of the city.

She has short legs — or are they simply an "elephant's hind legs."

She is short in height and getting bent because of the double or triple
oppression she bears.

She is elegant and graceful but no one notices since she's busy all
day taking orders from men.⁴

Life's Expectations

Women and girls constitute nearly 50% of the population of Asia. For girls born in Asian societies which are patriarchal, "biology is destiny." Concerned men and women are aware that the process of socialization of boys and girls in Asian societies, generally speaking, differs, because different roles and functions are assigned to them as adults, based primarily on sex and not on their talents or capabilities.

Looking at the Asian continent, we see the dehumanization of men and women by poverty and exploitation. In whatever class of society, women find themselves one rung lower than the men. So even the poorest man feels at ease and justified in taking out his frustrations by beating his wife. Patriarchal societies the world over have built up a theory that operates among men, that it is their right, nay, almost their obligation, to beat wives regularly.⁵

While we study the plight of women, it is vital to realize that certain theories operate in society that keep women in an inferior position. These theories may not be explicit or well-formulated but they do exist. Most members of society are unconscious of these theories. Feminists are trying to unearth them to see how they operate throughout the globe.

A Status Confirmed by the Culture

Man's sense of superiority is a matter of religious belief for him as well as for woman. Yet we are sure that God created all human beings to his image and likeness. The Christian belief of equal creation has to replace other false theories; otherwise things will never change, and men themselves cannot be free if women are caged. Because these theories are operative and societies also develop inbuilt characteristics, some characteristics of rural Indian societies prevail elsewhere in Asia also.⁴ We examine some here to help us realize why and how society stratifies girls to fulfill certain functions vital to society.

Today, due to advanced technology, the female foetus faces extinction (through abortion), at least in many communities of India. The sex-ratio has steadily declined in India. According to news reports this is also true in China where only one child is the legal norm.

A girl (potential woman) is not welcome at birth. The treatment which follows affects adversely her growth and personality. The opposite is true for boys. They are made much of from birth. They realize that being a boy is privileged in their society, and they act accordingly. They expect to be served. Thus the seeds of discrimination are sown from a most tender age.

Characteristics, such as submissiveness and "to be always at the service of others," are inculcated in girls but not in boys. To be self-effacing and constantly to sacrifice oneself for the family or kin is expected all the time of girls, while boys develop elements of selfishness.

The girl is made dependent, first on the father, then on the husband, and finally on the son. This deprives her of independent status and human dignity. Yet much of the social security of children and men comes from their women in a large number of families, even when the husband is living.

A Status Confirmed by Work and Finances

The work assigned to her by society, though vital for its very existence and survival, is not valued and not paid for. Thus, in spite of her toil, she becomes economically dependent and exploited.

— She is not considered a person in her own right, though she brings forth human beings and nurtures them to adulthood. In fact, she is made to think she is inferior to men.

— Deprived of rights and undervalued, her subordination is assured. Others thrive at her expense — much as the master does through the labor of the slave or the landlord by the toil of bonded labor, or the high caste by the services of the low castes.

— In response to the expectations of society, many internalize its values in order to maintain harmony (of a false nature), and to survive. Thus she meets its expectations. Often this internalization of society's expectations is so complete that she herself becomes a tool of society in reinforcing these values. She thus becomes a block to the development of other women. She lives and dies with these values, unless, of course, at some stage in her life she begins to become "aware" of herself as a person in her own right, created by God in his own image.

— Marriage is considered a "must" for her for the sake of security and protection. This security and protection she herself provides for her husband and children in many cases by her labors. At times, she is harassed, or even burnt to death, for not bringing material goods or cash from her father at the time of marriage. This is because she was deprived legally of property rights in the past. Thus, marriage becomes an unequal and unjust partnership, where the young woman (and even the man) is lost sight of in the midst of bargaining for goods.

— Proverbs, songs, sermons and other modes of expressions in society abound in different languages which belittle women and boost up men. (An analysis of jokes made about women in seminaries should make fascinating studies to show the attitudes of prospective priests towards the female sex).

— As a single woman or a widow she has no status. If the former, she is considered "odd," and even though celibacy is valued in the Church, a single woman's vocation is not accepted. If a widow, she is ill-omened and cannot participate in the normal life of society.

— The entire burden of childbearing and rearing falls to her lot. This continues to be so even if she is the breadwinner of the family or adds to the family income. Thus, she often carries a double burden during the greater part of her life. Yet in old age, having spent all her resources, physical, mental and economic, she becomes dependent on others and is deprived of living and dying in dignity.

This, then, is the upbringing of the (potential) Asian woman. What kind of a role can she therefore expect to play, unless positive theories are upheld about her role in society, and steps taken to implement these theories, for it is said that "there is nothing more practical than a good theory."

Most societies in the world are patriarchal or male-dominated. They continue to exist and thrive by using all the tools in their possession, namely, religion, home, schools, textbooks, legal system, mass media and even women themselves (who have internalized society's values and expectations) to reinforce and continue woman's subjugation and the maintenance of a second-class citizenship. Even the words "woman" and "feminist" do not connote beings endowed with human dignity.

These are some of the characteristics of patriarchal societies quite well known to us. The techniques and methods to sustain them may vary in Asia but the ideology and philosophy are the same, even if our nations are separated by towering mountains or high seas.

A Status Confirmed by Religion

To the bishops of Asia, obviously, religion is important. Yet a deep look at Christianity and other world religions will be helpful to them at this juncture.

Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam, all born in Asia about 3000 B.C. or later, flourish in different Asian countries. They have their in common: they are all patriarchal.

Hinduism. In Hinduism Manu, the lawgiver, said that a woman must be subject to her father in childhood, to her husband in marriage and to her son in widowhood. She was not permitted to study the Vedas. She is treated on par with the lowest caste, the Sudras. Her most important role is to be wife and mother. Her virtue is assessed by the service she renders her husband. Though considered impure, a Hindu woman still has to perform special rituals (*vratas*) for the long life and special protection of her husband and sons. A widow is regarded as ill-omened and a misfortune, but not so a widower.

Yet Hinduism even in modern times permits worship of goddesses who are loved and feared. Wealth, wisdom, learning and creative power are represented by goddesses.

Buddhism and Jainism. Though Buddhism and Jainism started as protest movements within Hinduism, they also continue to regard women first as wife and mother. The male Buddhist monk enjoys a higher status than a Buddhist nun. Even though Jain women were given a legitimate position in congregational life, they were often severely condemned. Buddhism and Jainism, however, provide an alternate way of life for women as nuns; this was not so in Hinduism.

Zoroastrianism. The religion of the Parsees gave women a place of honor; they were also permitted to divorce and remarry. However, menstruation was considered evil; and therefore women were not permitted to participate in religious activities. Though priests are permitted to marry, during menstruation their wives are segregated. When a Parsee male marries a non-Parsee, his children are accepted into the religion. But if a Parsee woman marries outside the religion, she is not even permitted to enter the fire temple.

Islam. The Quran regards both women and men as equal, and conferred on women a status higher than the one prevalent at that time. Interpreters of the Quran have imposed "injunctions" over time and they are responsible for women's present low status. Though considered equal in the believing community of women and men, religious leadership is denied her. Women cannot be a *kasi*, and have no place in formal religious organizations and legal affairs. Marriage contracts provide man a unilateral right to divorce his wife, and also allow polygamy.

In all these religions which flourish in Asia women have had no part in composing their sacred scriptures or of interpreting them. Restrictions imposed on women have not permitted this kind of religious activity.

Christianity. A workshop of FABC's third plenary assembly in 1982 covered the situation of women in Asia, as well as in the early Church, in a comprehensive manner. The paper calls for a return to the beginnings of Christianity, when women were in the forefront of spreading the faith and building Christian communities.⁷

However, as is well known and realized, values and structures of the prevailing patriarchal Jewish society took over the infant Church, relegating woman to a subordinate — a non-person — type of role to her detriment and that of the Church. Greek philosophies incorporated into Christian thinking further sealed her doom.⁸

In ancient civilizations female divinities ruled the heavens and the underworld. Gradually, patriarchal cultures, with their male gods and men at the top, reigned supreme ideologically and technically for over 5000 years. This transition from matriarchy to patriarchy is considered by Fredrick Engels "as the great historical defeat of the feminine sex."

Thus "history" has been, as feminists have discovered, "his story" and not "her story." It is the story of conqueror man and woman the victim or slave. Hence, aggressive behavior of men towards women is condoned and justified. In fact men believe they have a right over all of women. This gives rise to wife-beating, rape, prostitution, even murder, for slight provocations or no provocation at all. This is typical of the behavior of the conqueror towards the conquered.

The Negative Role of Religion

To the dismay of women and men concerned about justice it is now seen that it is religion that has assigned women their role in society. Unfortunately, Christianity, and more especially the Catholic Church with its hierarchical structures, has also been guilty of negative thinking about women and continues to do so "happily."⁹

Once this is recognized and acknowledged by large numbers of Church leaders, it will be a new beginning for Christianity, when more than half of its membership, which has remained a "sleeping giant," will wake up from its tranquilized sleep and give it a new dynamism. For the Holy Spirit is moving and will continue to do so in the world in general and in the Church in particular.

But the problem of women in Asian societies has to be looked at in the context of all world religions and not of Christianity alone. There are hopeful signs to show that Christianity has made a head start. Will this phenomenon live to grow or will it be squashed to death? This is a question on which the people of God have to reflect.

To liberate woman from the subordinate role assigned by antifeminist religious ideologies and cultures, all men and women of goodwill have to look at these religions critically, weigh their consequences on women in particular and on society in general, admit the wrongs and begin to set them right.¹⁰

For women realize that:

Sexism is not the problem of women alone but of the entire human race and particularly of its religious leaders who have consciously or unconsciously (perhaps) let it thrive.

But one must admit that in spite of a liberated secularized world which gives women their final role of being equal partners in the world, it will take quite a time for the antifeminism of religions and cultures, shaped by their misogynist ideologies, to die and vanish. Yet a beginning has to be made for "if one has to walk a thousand miles, the first step have to be taken."

V. PURIFICATION REQUIRED

Pope John XXIII, with his vision of a Church free of destructive customs and regulations, tried to rescue it, urging the people of God to read the signs of the times and to take account of the aspirations of women to personhood (humanhood). This is no easy task when an analysis of the woman's condition is understood and the need for change is accepted. The task is impossible, if those who have power and are in privileged positions fail to grasp the situation or do not use the goodwill to reverse the trend of the deteriorating condition of women and girls in the world in general and the Asian continent in particular.

Fr. Engelbert Zeitler, in a paper prepared for the meeting of Christian women theologians in Bangalore in November of 1984, asserted that all this calls the Church to undertake a cleansing process.¹¹ Purification means that we have to raise some very fundamental questions and try to answer them honestly. The rethinking of some vital parts of Christian theology is required. Though it may be extremely painful, in the long run it will be worth the cost, the pain and the confusion.

A Rereading of the Scriptures

The Catholic Church, which is well-organized and has vast human resources, should consider this seriously. It should encourage its women to bring their perspective and new insights to the understanding of the Bible. One has to examine and see if statements about women in the Bible and tradition contain authentic Christian theology. Or are they polluted by cultural, anthropological and sociological elements which give their theological content a false tone and ring?

The Holy Scriptures were written by men when patriarchy reigned supreme. It was therefore inevitable that patriarchal ideas, styles and cultures crept into them.

Scriptures are the foundation of all theology on women. They contain distortions created by the human minds that were trying to transcribe divine revelation in human forms which suited current thinking. It is therefore our responsibility to go through Christian writings, dogmas and ideas till we reach firm ground on which a Christian theology of women can be built. Zeitler warns that one must be careful in drinking the waters of "revelation" which are poisoned by men's sewerage waters. One would have to "soar" to great heights to seek the purity of the original revelations.

For Christianity struck the hardest blow of all at women, at the commencement of the modern era. The wars, famine and other disasters which plagued the world at that time were attributed to evil spirits.¹²

These wicked spirits, it was claimed, entered the world through witches — women who consorted with the devil. In many cases it is said that these were women who had some power and influence, and therefore had to be controlled.

Forgiveness Sought — Forgiveness Found

This gave rise to a period of frenzied witch-hunting where Churches identified the women as witches and secular powers burnt them at the stake. The so-called reformers and the popes had no difference of opinion about this most atrocious phenomenon which claimed thousand, or better, tens of thousand of lives. (Some estimate a million died in Europe). This has left an ugly blemish on Christianity which can be purged only if the crime is confessed and atoned for. The Church as a human society can cleanse itself from this guilt only if it admits it and atones for it.

To the great credit of the Catholic Church after Vatican II it has publicly confessed several mistakes of the past. This action was initiated by the recent Holy Fathers.

To enumerate a few:

- The Pope kissed the rock of Galilee to make atonement for the slaughter of six million Jews by their Christian brethren.
- He embraced the Patriarch of Constantinople. The two main Christian Churches had long ago excommunicated each other in the name of Jesus.
- 2500 Vatican Council fathers apologized for what had been done to those formerly called “heretics.”

Only one large group — the biggest of all — has not been asked their pardon and forgiveness — our Catholic women — this in spite of the atrocities women have suffered, theologically, socially and physically for centuries.¹³

In addition, in order to solve the “the women’s problem in the Church,” a thorough catharsis is required — not merely on the intellectual level but on a deep psychological and emotional level to remove the blocks to the “women’s question.”

Can this be done? Will the bishops of Asia have enough courage to initiate this process within the Catholic Church? Women put their firm faith in the Holy Spirit who will guide the bishops and will give them the strength they need!

A Concerted Effort of All Religions

Yet it must be reiterated that working only within the context of the Catholic Church is not sufficient. All religions have "committed grave errors" against one half of humankind. Christian Churches can give the lead if need be, to enable Judaism, Hinduism, Islam and other world religions to realize that they have "erred against women." Everywhere religions — every religion — show that they are not on the side of women. This is true of religion born in different parts of the globe. This would be one task of any religious preaching in Asia — cleansing patriarchal society of its "biases against women."

But to achieve this, all patriarchal religions must join hands and acknowledge the wrongs said and done against women and try to make amends, in the same way Gandhi acknowledged the discriminations against the "untouchables" of India, and enabled the Indian nation through its leaders to make concerted efforts not only to undo the wrongs but even to give them special treatment to compensate for the injustices done to them over the centuries. Although the achievements are far from perfect, the attempts have been genuine. With Christ working through the Holy Spirit this and more will be possible.

To build a better world men and women must accept that they are partners in the stupendous task given to both: to complete God's work on earth.

God created the human being as man and woman to live and work together. If this ideal of the human being is destroyed — as has happened all these centuries, everything else goes wrong. If one continues to go against this fundamental principle of the Creator that the human being is one, if philosophies or theologies try to justify the unjustifiable, the sins and errors they are committing against women will continue. So what is the solution? We will not realize our goals with Catholics only, who are only the 18.5% of the world's population, but we must work with the greater majority of about 80% who are religionists to bring about a real change of heart and mind about the "women's question."

VI. THE SPIRIT IS MOVING

The women's movement, for the first time in the history of the world, has become global after localized attempts. Women are networking world-wide; new ideas and concepts are not only spreading but are finding echoes in the minds and hearts of women who have found a common oppression because most societies of the world are patriarchal.

An American visitor for the first time to Asia had expected to find meek and docile women but discovered that the many she met were intelligent, strong and committed to the cause — in other words she said “they were Third World, second-class but first-rate.”¹⁴ This discovery led her to the realization the Holy Spirit was working throughout the world, and women were responding. Who can and will stand in the way of the Holy Spirit?

Bishops, priests and lay men must realize that if women, at least “thinking” women, who are already alienated, are not given a “listening ear,” their alienation will be complete. This is happening in some Western societies. The generations to come will not be evangelized by their mothers, who are really the carriers of the faith. They will not encourage their children to respond to the call of a religious vocation, for they will not want their sons as priests to be “real male chauvinists,” or their daughters to be dominated by superiors on one side and priests on the other. This certainly will affect the Catholic Church adversely.

Already some of the most intellectual Christian women in Asia do not find satisfaction in the Church, due to its antifeminine stand. They embrace other ideologies and dedicate their lives to the cause of the downtrodden. This indeed is a great loss which is little recognized by bishops who often are not alert to Catholic women’s aspirations. One Indian bishop who had two days with 15 women leaders of 5 dioceses said:

I have heard women speak for the first time. I have listened and have learned more about their problems and aspirations in two days than I have learned during my whole life.

He was young, he was a tribal, and he had the honesty to admit to women his previous ignorance.

The Ecclesiastical “Put Down” Technique

Can Catholic women therefore be taken seriously? Can bishops listen to them more intently? Asian Catholic women wonder whether Asian bishops are prepared for such listening. In another instance a bishop presided over a session during a Christian consultation, in which a woman minister read a well-thought out and researched paper on women’s work. When she had finished, the bishop, instead of commenting on the paper, cracked a joke about women, thus trivializing the seriousness of the subject and the effort made by the speaker. The woman speaker reacted and said it was “a real put down” for her and for women. The bishop was taken aback and apologized. A fellow bishop exclaimed that “women lack a sense of humor.” Certainly they do, when it is at the cost of their human dignity.

At another meeting of women, after a day's serious discussions by women of women's problems and their solutions, excellent reports were read. The presiding bishop in his remarks picked up the dowry problem. He attributed the phenomenon of dowry and its aftermath to women's love of gold, (he himself was wearing a thick gold chain), thus simplifying a very complex problem and throwing the blame on women in the bargain.

In addition, he held up Hindu women to Catholic women as models of devotion to husbands and home, thus almost unconsciously agreeing with the Hindu philosophy "that only through serving your husband "like a god" can you attain *Moksha* (salvation)." So, the impact of the entire meeting was "lost" on most of the women except for a "conscious few" who recognized the "put down technique."

The Church perhaps is at a transitional stage. Only a few year ago the same remarks by these bishops would have been accepted by women "as water on a duck's back," as routine. They will not do so much longer.

Catholic women will either leave the Church or confront their parish priests and bishops, as is happening in many places. This in itself is a hopeful sign, if one reads these events accurately. It means there is need for bishops and women to enter into a dialogue on many levels:

- the local level (parish, congregation or diocese)
- the regional level (by countries or continents)
- the global level, with women's organizations and the representations of the Holy See
- theological, psychological and other levels as well.

Will this happen? The Holy Spirit will work and she will take care of the Church on planet Earth.

VII. FINDING SOLUTIONS — TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

Having made an attempt to understand the role women are "pushed" into playing, we have to seek solutions. Therefore, in accordance with the new Code of Canon Law (212, 3) the following could be reflected upon by Asian Catholic leaders.

1. Our Jesus Movement. Are we prepared to look more realistically at the life of Jesus, and with deep integrity discern whether he discriminated against women? Does he want the present discrimination in society and the Church to continue?

2. Vatican II. In the light of Vatican II can the people of God be more consistent in precept and practice? While the Church teaches that all persons are coequal sharers in the mission and life of the Church, how can women as a category at the same time be treated as “objects” of pastoral care and “consumers” of sacramental liturgical goods, or as a subsidiary workforce, but not as “fully responsible ecclesial participants and decision makers?”

3. Canon Law. The Code, based on Council documents, acknowledges an equality: “Women claim for themselves equality with men before the law and in fact where they have not yet won it.”¹⁵ Is that which is wanted merely a “claim” for equality? Or is it rather a staking of a legitimate right to the baptismal promise made to every Christian man and woman?

The Code, presuming this equality, addresses all in the section entitled “People of God” as “Christ’s faithful,” and to this extent acknowledges women’s and men’s equality. In spite of this, will there be a continuation of discrimination based on sex?

4. Vocation and Woman. Is the Church prepared to understand vocation as a “call” equally for women, as this is taken for granted in the case of men — who to date appear to be the only ones “called”?

5. a) Tradition and Women. Even rooted as the Church is in a Christian tradition, which is riddled with contradictions, can we look afresh without bias or prejudice at research-stimulated new findings in theology, economics, sociology, psychology, politics and linguistics, in relation to the present context of women’s lived experience to find whether a catharsis might in fact be the answer to the sexual-equality—God-image gap? This will contribute to a new beginning and an evolution of new roles for women in a renewed Church.

b) Remold the wife-mother/nun/spouse-of-Christ image to accommodate women’s talents and skills, and thereby add a new dimension to “quality of life” both of Church and society.

c) Refrain from causing in women (who have other needs to satisfy according to their talents and calling) guilt-feelings through continually dinning the wife-mother role, when they are desperately attempting to be more Church in letter and spirit by converting their surplus energies for economic, social, political and religious purposes, and thereby stimulate their growth, and that of the community.

d) Inculcate in “Christ’s faithful” a respect for the single state as a vocation, particularly those women who have chosen to remain single (apart from nuns) for their own reasons, e.g.:

- (i) women belonging to a secular consecration;
- (ii) those who have dedicated their lives to support aged parents or siblings;
- (iii) or are committed to their professional careers, as social workers, doctors, teachers, nurses, domestic workers, etc.;
- (iv) those who wish to marry but fail to find suitable partners;

Others who are single by circumstances, e.g.:

(i) Unwed mothers (remember there is also an unwed or wed-to-another father!). By condemning the mother (only partially responsible), we condemn a child who is "made in the image and likeness of God" as a product of an evil act. The child is God's gift, and never asked to be born. What is termed illicit/illegitimate, (which can at most be relative) in the eyes of the Maker, may be perfectly licit/legitimate (e.g., in the instance of rape).

(ii) Divorcées (what about divorced men?). The causes may be several. Should women always be blamed?

(a) Alliances between two persons living in different continents; when the girl agrees to marry, but later discovers that the man is married, and has a wife and children.

(b) Coercion by the family, driving a girl to enter wedlock under threat.

7. Women in Religions

a) Removing biases against women in the Scriptures and traditions of Christianity, and through dialogue enabling other patriarchal religions to do the same.

b) Encouraging and giving scope to women to engage in serious studies of Scriptures and doctrines. Then providing them with opportunities to make use of them in institutions of learning, planning and decision-making bodies.

8. Education and Women

a) Encourage coeducation from the primary to the professional levels, rather than education segregating the sexes, thus causing complexes in both.

b) Foster new attitudes among seminarians and young priests so that they consider women with the same respect as they do men, and not shy away because of the patriarchal prejudice towards the so-called "evilness" of women. Refrain from dominating lay and religious women.

(i) Reorientate parish priests about their pastoral role, so that they understand their "call" in relation to the laity as servant of the servants of God.

(ii) Stop taking the laity for granted by "bossing over" and filling them with awe, or, as happens in many cases, not permitting them to take initiatives or exercise leadership.

(iii) Respect the laity, women and men, and involve them in building parish communities, by encouraging them to assume more responsibilities, rather than engage the parish/pastoral councils to build large commercial buildings or to raise funds. Such lay involvement will provide sufficient scope for the parish priest to perform more efficiently his own spiritual obligations to the laity. Partnership is a two-way street.

(iv) Prepare homilies relating Gospel values to human lived experience. Priests should encourage right attitudes towards equality, rather than expect women to be obedient, passive and silent. By affording the right ecclesial orientation, outspoken and committed women who are trying to help transform hierarchical and clerical structures will cease to appear as threats to the Church and will no longer be perceived as unfeminine, disobedient and arrogant.

(v) Priests should refrain from using "sisters" to do their menial chores, like cooking, cleaning, dressing altars, and looking after parochial houses, but include them in planning and decision-making bodies and in administration. Otherwise their services are lost to the community.

d) (i) Encourage and engage theologically-trained sisters to teach in seminaries, institutions and parishes where they can impart their knowledge also to lay women and girls, who may not be in a position to avail themselves of theological formation in seminaries and other institutions.

(ii) Formation should be more of the grassroots and based on Asian ways of life rather than on the present Western-oriented way of life, catering only to the elite and middle classes. Religious sisters and brothers should be encouraged to work closely with families in their dioceses.

(iii) Sisters should be helped to feel that they are not above other women because of their celibate state and religious calling. All Christian vocations are responses to "God's call" and therefore are equally important and need to be taken seriously.

(iv) In organizing and training children and youth, give equal opportunities to girls and young women.

(v) 1. Support women's groups that are trying to study women's issues and take action, be it in secular or Christian settings.

2. See whether women's church organizations have full autonomy or are they controlled by men chaplains or religious sisters (who may be more loyal to their congregations than to the lay women)?

3. Encourage Christian women to cooperate, and if necessary give leadership, to fight for justice and against atrocities perpetrated against women.

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2. Sister Virginia Fabella M.M., "Mission of Women in the Church in Asia: Role and Position," *In God's Image*, December '85/Feb.'86, C.C.A. Singapore, pp. 4-9.
3. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Women in the Pre-Pauline and Pauline Churches," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, vol. 33, Nos. 3 and 4, pp. 155-158.
— "Patriarchal Structures and the Discipleship of Equals," *Probe*, Feb/March 1984.
4. Poem quoted by Sr. Virginia Fabella in the article already mentioned.
5. Here are some quotations taken from Merlyn Lobo Brito, "Wife-Beating," *Indian Womanhood: Then and Now*, ed. Jessie B. Tellis Nayak, Satprakashan, Indore 1983.
— "Some women should be struck regularly like gongs." (Noël Coward).
— "Man is the hunter, woman the game." (Tennyson)
— "A wife may love a husband who never beats her, but she does not respect him."
— "A wife isn't a jug ...
She won't crack if you hit her ten times". (Russian Proverb)
— A spaniel, a woman and a walnut tree, the more they are beaten the better they be". (English Proverb)
6. Margaret Kalakdina, "The Upbringing of a Girl," *Indian Women*, (ed) Devaki Jain, Delhi M.I. and B. Government of India Publication Division, 1975.
7. Cf. *FABC Paper* No. 33g.
8. Fr. Engelbert Zeitler, S.V.D. "Woman in Catholic Theology," a paper prepared for the National Consultation, "Theology for Humanhood," Bangalore, November 1984.
9. "A woman is a mis-begotten man" (Thomas Aquinas) "Woman the gateway to hell" (Tertullian). "They should go in rags and mourning because all the evils had come into the world through them" (Ambrose). "There are plenty of dangerous and harmful animals in the world, but none of them as dangerous and harmful as woman" (John Chrysostom).

10. Millions of women have died through the practices of sati and dowry in India. In China footbinding has caused years of excruciating pain to young women of the better-off classes. Female genital mutilation has and is affecting over 75 million women and girls in Africa. Europe has had its witch hunts!
11. Zeitler, *loc. cit.*
12. Zeitler, *loc. cit.*
13. Zeitler, *loc. cit.*
14. Regina Coll, (ed.) *Women and Religion — A Reader for the Clergy*, Ramsey, N.J., Paulist Press, 1982.
15. R.H. Lesser, "Women in the New Canon Code," pp. 263-265. Helen and Josanthony, "Moral theology — From a Feminist Perspective," *The Emerging Christian Woman — Church and Society Perspectives*, (eds.) Stella Faria, Anna Vareed Alexander, Jessie B. Tellis-Nayak, Indore: Satprakshan, 1984, pp. 121-133.

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