

WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

By ROSEMARY HAUGHTON

EVEN IN the contemplative monasteries, the nuns are taking down the grilles. Sometimes they do it eagerly, anxious to obliterate a tradition that seemed to imply that women could not serve God wholeheartedly unless they were forcibly prevented from encountering worldly influences. Some are more reluctant. The tradition is old, there is a sense of loss of security.

Some of the fears are irrational, and due more to attachment to old habits than to anything deeper. Yet in trying to discover, now, possible roles for women in the Church, there is something to be learned by asking just why those locks and walls and grilles lasted so long and were valued so highly by the nuns themselves. To the outside world, especially the clerical world, they looked like a way of ensuring the nuns were kept from distraction and temptation, but if all those nuns had been as feeble as that implies they wouldn't have stuck it. There were times and places where girls totally without vocations were put into convents and monasteries by their families, and no doubt the poor things needed to be kept there by force. Yet the boys similarly disposed of never had that degree of enclosure, they could come and go. And men with true contemplative vocations, no doubt valuing silence and peace as much as the women, never seemed to want grilles, or to hesitate to leave the monastery for sensible reasons, and mix with guests when necessary.

I wonder whether, in fact, the situation looked different from inside? I wonder whether women who were perfectly well balanced and extremely shrewd didn't value those bars because they ensured that, *unlike all other women*, they should be immune from male rule and interference.

The grilles, after all, came into fashion when the change in public opinion no longer allowed abbesses to rule their territories like bishops, to receive the fealty of men, appoint priests and take a share in ecclesiastical politics. The resurgence of the greek mentality which regarded women as less than fully human meant that for a man to obey and serve a woman, as in the double monasteries ruled by an abbess, was regarded as unnatural. Women, it came to be assumed, could only live decently under total male rule. Married

women were ruled by their husbands, unmarried daughters were wholly disposed of by their fathers or elder brothers. Widows belonged to their in-laws. When, later, active congregations of nuns came into existence, their chief battles were always with clerics – bishops, chaplains, local clergy – who tried to run their communities, interfered, altered the Rule, and generally treated whole communities as their private property, to use as they thought fit.

No wonder foundresses battled for independence, and no wonder bishops battled for control of the monasteries where women *were* independent. For the great monasteries, within their walls and behind their grilles, were not answerable to the local bishop, nor even to an abbot, but only to Rome. (That could be a problem, too, but a different one.) If fathers, uncles, priests, bishops, politicians and dukes came, they could get no further than that grille. One would be polite, but there they were – on the otherside, powerless to affect the way one chose to run the place. Behind the bars, these women, alone of all women, made decisions, ruled, administered, managed their own lives. A little kingdom, perhaps – but a real one. Families could fume and bluster, priests rant and complain, but the Rule and the grilles made sure that was all they could do.

Things have changed, and women can run their own lives without grilles – at least in theory. But it is still all too possible for what appears to be freedom from restriction to be merely the surrender of a limited real freedom in exchange for a large but illusory one.

I think this is where we have to start, in thinking about women in the Church. The Church is well served by people who are sensible, mature in judgment, capable of initiative and able to bear difficulties firmly and patiently. It may be in small things or large things, bringing up children, keeping accounts, developing new communities, nursing, social work, growing vegetables, but whatever the work it cannot be done well by people who are unsure of their own value and constantly dependent on the approval of the male. It is noticeable that the women the Church has chosen to canonize have been remarkable not for their meekness and gentle obedience (though they often were, when necessary, meek and obedient) but for their powers of decision, their fortitude and vision and willingness to take risks and keep trying. Such qualities are not easily developed in a situation where it is assumed by all, including the women, that their role is always to follow. Everybody has to start at the bottom, but if it is built into the situation (by rule or by social and psychological pressures) that they stay there, they will

not develop as human or christian, and they will not serve the Church well – they are more likely to be destructive because of their constant need for approval and reassurance, and the lengths to which they will go to get these.

In the vexed question of the ordination of women, for instance, there is no clear theological argument against it; but if it came about, in the next ten years, that women were admitted to ordination (as priests or even as deaconesses) what would happen? In the present set-up, they would be there on sufferance, constantly and critically watched in the expectation (and hope) that they would make a mess of it. And they probably would, in the terms offered them, because they would be stepping into clerical roles and structures developed for centuries by males, and also shaped by special cultural notions of what a male should be and do.

There are places in the world where, even now, women could, in fact, do a good job as ordained deaconesses or even priests, but that is because the old imported western cultural situation has broken down, or the work of christians has not yet established itself within a particular cultural pattern at all; so that by and large people can simply do what is seen to need doing, without acquiring labels beforehand to qualify for the job. It seems likely that, if ordination of women comes, it will come first in such places as the remoter bits of latin America and Africa, in some newly communist countries, or anywhere where the Church is under attack and few in numbers, such as China. But equally, in such situations, people of either sex will not wait for official recognition in order to undertake pastoral work, though they may not (just yet) celebrate the Eucharist.

If the way for women to serve the Church is not, at present and in existing circumstances, through ordination – what should they be trying to do? I think the answer lies in the moral I drew from the example of those enclosed nuns. They knew that if they wanted to serve God they had to have some spiritual and psychological elbow-room, freedom to grow and discover themselves and God's will. Now, religious or not, women need to discover their ability to serve and to give in whatever capacity is needed and is within reach of individual abilities and talents. And the opportunities are enormous precisely because women have not become inextricably enmeshed in the attitudes and career-structure of a clerical profession designed (and very well designed, in most cases) for a world that no longer exists.

Many clergy have, in fact, discovered the need to change direc-

tion, and have stretched and bashed the system in all directions in their attempts to make it do what it was not designed to do. Some have succeeded extraordinarily well in adapting it, but many have given up and got out – not necessarily out of the priesthood but out of the parish structure. They are doing extremely valuable work in all kinds of odd ways, in the highways and hedges of society, where potential citizens of the kingdom are most likely to be found. And in this sort of work they have often encountered women doing the same kind of thing.

Sometimes these are married women, who together with their husbands keep open house for people in need, and find themselves at the heart of *ad hoc* communities of people who are disenchanting with 'normal' life. These may be young 'offenders', social 'rejects', rootless 'teenagers'; or they may be people who have simply set aside the usual educational and career programming to try to find an alternative way of life. The two kinds mix well, but stormily.

Sometimes such women are single, odd and even eccentric characters who may have a background of social work or medicine, but who have become disillusioned with the professional set-up, and launched out (often more or less accidentally) into a more direct approach to the problems they see. Because public opinion is now quite accustomed to women acting independently, this is much easier than it once was, though below a certain level of misery conventions don't apply anyway.

When an individual, man or woman, has set in motion the chain of cause and effect which leads to the creation of such communities, there is a ripple effect. (Forgive the mixed metaphor.) The original group may remain gathered around its founder, because in some kinds of groups many of the members are at first too unstable to cope without strong and continuous support. But the community may develop a coherence and momentum of its own, and the one who began it can move on to begin again somewhere else. In all this, it will be found that women are important. Sometimes they are in mixed communities, married couples acting as stabilizers to the less secure and the impermanent. Sometimes, when an all male group is the best thing for a particular set of circumstances, women come in and out, acting as valuable 'leaven', bringing a different atmosphere. Sometimes women, married or not, are especially valuable in communities that include children and teenagers.

But such odd communities have an effect beyond their own members. Families and individuals get the message, are involved in the

work in various ways, offer hospitality, come in to help, and often develop a kind of community life of their own, though where there are young children they will normally work with people whose difficulties are less severe. Some of these are rural communities, not pursuing an ideological 'back to the land' vocation, but discovering that working the land is a service to themselves, to others, and to the land itself, by its productivity and by the way of life which grows around such work. So there comes into being a wide-ranging network of communities of many kinds and sizes, urban and rural, 'therapeutic' and educational, religious and secular, family-based or of single people, all with a christian motivation, though including many who are not believers. This is a real 'alternative society', and it exists now, and it is the creation of christians; it is proper pastoral work of a kind which women can and do undertake together with men, bringing to it all the real feminine talents, not in competition with men but in partnership with them.

Is it only in these 'abnormal' social situations that women can discover a real christian vocation? Odd as it may seem, by and large I think the answer is – yes. Women, religious and lay, are doing valiant work in the normal 'caring' professions – medicine, social work, family life, teaching – as well as by trying to inject a little human sense and love into the 'ordinary' jobs of a society whose whole economy is built on the encouragement of greed and the discouragement of concern for others. But it is noticeable that the better such women become at applying christian judgments to these situations, the more uncomfortable they become, the less they are satisfied with the opportunities open to them or the values which they must tacitly accept in order to go on doing what they are expected to do.

More and more often, nowadays, groups of christians meet together to discuss, to pray, to share experiences. There are professional groups, but most of them are people who just happen to live in the same neighbourhood. Many of these groups are begun by parish clergy who see the need to create opportunities, and a large proportion of the members of such groups are women. And more and more, whether they meet for prayer or study or both, women in such groups discover in themselves and each other a dissatisfaction with their scope as christians, a need to widen or change it. Alone, they might have gone on simply being vaguely discontented and feeling guilty. Together, they learn to recognize the basis of their feelings in the gospel demands, and they begin to find the

desire, and the will, and the ability, to act on them. Such women are beginning to be a real headache to the institutional 'caring' set-up, whether religious or secular, because they ask awkward questions, reveal uncomfortable facts, do unorthodox things – and succeed where orthodoxy fails. (One woman I know, doing voluntary social work, was told by the professional social worker to get to know a couple in which the husband was suicidal, so that when he eventually killed himself she might have some contact with the wife and be able to help her. She discovered that the man's suicidal tendency was due to a feeling of extreme isolation and consequent hopelessness, caused by circumstances which I cannot detail or they might be identified. The voluntary social worker took steps to relieve this isolation in a way which was obvious but expensive, raising money for it with the help of a few others who, like herself, were prepared to go beyond what is laid down as possible in the rules. So the man did *not* kill himself – but the professional social worker was not pleased. According to the rules he should have. The voluntary worker had exceeded her instructions and upset the system. This is a true story.)

Such 'uncomfortable' women are serving the Church, and more and more of them, of many ages and situations, are discovering pastoral roles in ways not normally recognized. Yet they are, as christians, very traditional. They find that following the gospel requires a break with the world, and this is not a new idea. Having broken with the world's customs, assumptions and aspirations (and this is often very hard for people programmed from birth to fit into the niches created for us by the consumer society), they are free. They are really free, like those nuns behind their grilles who could afford to laugh gently at the world's notion of the reasons for the walls and bars. They are free to develop whatever work appears to them to need doing, and to associate in that work with any others, of either sex, who share their vision.

It has its effect on family life, too, for women who care about the christian education of their children know that such a thing is not possible with the normal educational and career structure. The children may be obliged by law to go to school, but the schools, even the best and most expensive, will only equip them to fit into careers designed by the capitalist economy for its own preservation and enlargement. They cannot and do not help people to discover what being human and christian is all about. (They *try* to, as a side line, sometimes. It is sad, really – so much effort cancelled out be-

cause the nature of the system contradicts all they try to do.) So it is at home that the children have to learn what really matters – and home cannot do that if it conforms to the ideals inculcated by T.V. commercials. That is why more and more christian women are looking for other ways, and finding it sometimes in the ways I described earlier, involving their children in coping with the things christians have always tried to cope with – in the care and love of people in every kind of trouble, in studying and learning with many kinds of people who are looking for answers to real questions, in worshipping with other christians, both those who are local and those who come and go. It is difficult to do this kind of thing in a little house for a little family, so families begin to share, in various ways and degrees, and form loose communities.

In all this turmoil of new life, new ways (but they are really very old ways for christians) there are nuns. Some of them are finding it very hard to adapt, and some scarcely need to because their work has always been with those at the bottom of the heap, so they did not have much chance to become respectable. But more and more often a group of sisters is to be found working in a mixed community, sometimes having their own 'family' life, separately, sometimes sharing the life of the group like everyone else. Both ways are good for different circumstances. They are of immense value, because their overt and unmistakable dedication identifies and encourages the virtues which all christians need to develop – single-mindedness, selflessness, unlimited giving, deep and genuine prayerfulness, humility, patience and courage. Of course not all nuns display all these virtues, but they are all explicitly committed to *trying* to develop them, and a remarkable number of them succeed – once they are free. To be free, in this sense, does not mean necessarily to change or discard religious dress, do secular work, or live in a flat. It all depends what their main abilities are, and what are the needs of the situation. The needed freedom is the kind that comes from a conviction of being loved by God, and able to respond to that love, whether or not other people approve.

Perhaps we can end where we began. Women, now, have a unique opportunity to serve God and the Church in just those places and people which God has always loved the best – the poor in spirit, the rejected and downtrodden, the unwanted, the failures. The whole ministry of the Church is painfully changing to meet new needs, and from this change new kinds of ministry emerge, in which women can work as well as men, with no sense of oddness at all. In the past,

when christians have responded to needs, and done so successfully over a period, the Church has recognized this fact by official consecration, blessing and support. This is likely to happen again. Then, and meanwhile, all those engaged in the hard and varied pastoral work which is needed to help the victims of a civilization visibly crumbling, desperately need to learn the meaning of real prayer. Otherwise they cannot survive, their ideals will fade or be distorted, their hope will be extinguished, they will become cynical, or callous, or career-minded, or timid. Real prayer is hard, it needs to be learned, and it needs to be learned for those who understand it best – those whom God calls to a contemplative life in some form. These are not all nuns and monks by any means, but there is, and will continue to be, a need for communities of dedicated contemplatives who can create around themselves a place where others can come, for short or long periods, to learn about themselves, and God. More and more people – not all christians by any means – recognize a need for this, in a world dying of spiritual malnutrition. The nuns have given this help, created these places, for centuries, but they could only do it by preserving their freedom behind walls, and this limited their contacts, though the extent of their influence, in spite of this handicap, is enormous. If, now, they can extend the scope of their hospitality, recognize a need to teach and help more widely, not only in words but simply by being there, they will be doing probably the most important thing a human being can do. And women have always done this more often than men, at least in the west. They need to keep their privacy and peace, to have their own home as any family does, but perhaps to make the outlines of community life less precise, and include *in it* some who come only for a time, as well as welcoming many who only want to be around, to learn and be quiet.

Women can serve the Church, now, in many ways that have been hard for men, just because women's roles have suddenly become fluid, questionable. They can make their discoveries, explore new ways, respond to needs others may not notice. So I would say to the men of the Church what St Paul said to the roman Church in his day: 'I commend to you our sister . . . that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many'.¹

¹ 1 Rom 16, 1-2.