

WOMEN MAKING CHURCH

By BÉNÉDICTE DU CHAFFAUT

WHO AM I? Bénédicte du Chaffaut, thirty-eight years old, married to a geologist. We have three children, aged nine, seven and five. By profession I work in communications consultancy for newspaper groups, with LERCI (Laboratoire d'Etude et de Recherche pour la Communication et l'Information), as a specialist in newspaper language (particularly that of images and artwork). After living for a long time in Paris I have now lived in Grenoble for four years.

The journey

Between 1976 and 1980, with my husband Simon, I helped to set up and develop an experiment at St Merri in the Beaubourg¹ district of Paris, as part of a small team in charge, with Xavier de Chalendar, of overall pastoral care. We gave a great deal of our time to this project. Nevertheless, it took second place to our own professional work. Our place in the pastoral team was, strictly speaking, part-time. In my own case, I found I was giving about one-third of my time. Even if we sometimes felt out of step with those who were full-time (and who, in this instance, happened to be priests), we still had the impression that we were fully part of the decision-making process; co-responsibility or power-sharing were certainly taken seriously, so that important decisions were only made within the framework of the meetings we shared together.

Thanks to this experience, I have become far more sensitive to certain questions. Firstly, in what way is the gospel message to be presented in today's world? This is especially relevant where society is in a state of flux, as for instance in urbanized areas. How is the Church to be present in city centres, in pedestrian precincts, in shopping zones? And so I became aware of how lay people might develop a new style of 'being Church' within a relationship of shared responsibility, and with or without priests.

As a result I now believe that it is important to envisage the presence of full-time lay people who would have the charge—even temporarily—of christian faith communities and experiments in

Church. This should be done not to cover up for the shortage of priests, but rather to set up a more open, diversified and responsible way of 'making Church'.

I think that such lay people should have a varied theological training. For instance, we should plan a more demanding and open formation, tied to real pastoral problems and to concern with spiritual development. All this is needed to satisfy our own personal quest, to be more competent and to have more to bring to the task and its responsibilities.

In Grenoble

When we came to Grenoble in 1981 I learnt that a new style of church presence was being planned, in the shape of a small shop in the centre of the old city. This would build upon the experience I had already had in Paris, even though, obviously, the project would be very different. The auxiliary bishop of Grenoble, François Bussini, whom I had been to see, put me in contact with the first members of the group.

I was very interested in what was being planned, and I felt able to offer to be in charge of planning and setting up displays (in 1981-1982 on birth, immigrants, and violence, in 1982-1983 on loneliness, human rights and the future), of arranging discussion groups and conferences, support groups and various meetings. My own previous professional training in sociology and communications clearly spurred me on.

Nevertheless, it did seem to me that in order to work in a genuinely responsible way I should give more time to the project, and back-pedal for a few years on my own career. I talked this through with the members of our group and reflected carefully, because it struck me as being an important decision.

In May 1982 I suggested to François Bussini that I should work two-thirds of my time, with overall responsibility for presenting the activities of what was to become 'Relais Fourteen'.² I told him that I hoped to be confirmed in this position of ecclesial responsibility by a personal letter of mission for the task, by a contract of employment and by a salary which would correspond to the minimum legal salary. I asked him to bear in mind my theological training (I am in the third year of a theology degree course at Meylan Theological Centre, which is connected with the catholic faculty of Lyons University). I told him how anxious I was to work explicitly as one of the team, as they had planned the project,

and, by extension, alongside all those who had been working for it throughout the wider Church of Grenoble. I also insisted on the importance of being asked to assess my work after a certain period of time, so that I should be accountable for it.

Each of these elements seemed to me likely to guarantee a feeling of mutual trust and dependency in this work of 'making Church' and to set up the boundaries and dynamic of genuine power-sharing, thereby promoting a way of proceeding which is going to become more widespread in the near future. These proposals were accepted and voted upon by the local deanery in June 1982.

What I do

For three years then, I have been working at 'Relais Fourteen', right in the middle of the pedestrian zone of rue Lafayette. There is a shop window display on the theme of our main exhibition, with discreet christian references. Inside there are adverts, papers and magazines for people to look at, books on sale relating to the exhibition, and a current affairs board. The exhibition itself, as the centrepiece of our visual presentation, is spread out over two rooms, with written material, photographs and drawings. We believe that it is extremely important for it to be very professionally mounted. Each exhibition is on display for three months, and the rest of our work is focused around it. Then, down in the basement, furnished with an aquarium, there is a silent area which allows space for self-awareness, meditation and prayer. On the first floor a room which serves as a library enables us to meet for longer or more serious conversations. There are two of us permanently on duty to provide a welcome, just by being there and by being attentive.

In all, about twenty of us work at the 'Relais'. Each of us works with particular gifts and areas of experience and concentrates, but not exclusively, either on welcoming people, or on the overall visual presentation of the centre. The core team is made up of six to eight people who take the chief responsibility for running the operation. It meets every week to make decisions concerning long-term planning or the daily routine of administration. The three people who work full-time are in fact in charge of the day to day running of the 'Relais'; they sort out the agenda for general discussion and see to the practical implementation of decisions that are made. The priest who is a full-time worker is not the only one to have controlling status.

My own work is to design the presentation of our themes, to set up groups who will plan and mount the exhibitions, to contact individuals or groups who are likely to take part in debates and discussion groups, to promote support and special interest groups, to organize meetings where books are discussed—sometimes with their authors—and to arrange conferences, either on the spot or in a local cinema or conference centre (for example, in March 1983 on the problems of immigrants). Then of course there is a long-term planning to be done by the group as a whole: decisions about our future displays, selecting issues that are likely to be topical in the near future, both in terms of what is happening in Grenoble, and what we are aware of elsewhere. Our own sensitivity is heightened by numerous links within the Church and with other groups and networks.

After three years, I feel that the experiment has begun well, and I find the work fascinating. Perhaps such a venture seems rather new, but as far as I am concerned it really is a way of 'making Church', and an essential one. Here is a place of grass-roots evangelization, a place where it is possible to meet and question the meaning of one's life at a very deep level, a place of silence and self-awareness, a place where ideas can be exchanged and shared, a place where one may meet a gospel which is good news, and which opens up the possibility of journeying Godwards, starting from where one is.

Not without difficulties

The type of involvement I have been describing does, of course, raise problems. Firstly, the fact that I asked to be salaried was not readily understood. I accept and obviously understand the principle of voluntary work, but it seems to me that beyond a certain level of responsibility and commitment, a contract including terms of employment and remuneration is both important and necessary.

There has been another difficulty too: that of letting those who work part-time have their fair share of responsibility, by communicating information, contacts and initiatives so that they are not left out.

Finally, and inevitably, I find myself asking how to balance such exciting and time-consuming work against the demands of family life. Obviously the same problem occurs for anyone pursuing a career in a secular job, because the same level of professionalism

is involved. The Church has a great deal to learn, I believe, from the way in which certain tensions in professional life are resolved.

The future

I do not intend to pursue this particular experience longer than is necessary to set it up properly, and would be perfectly happy to go back to my professional career. Such comings and goings between church-based and ordinary jobs seem necessary to me; this kind of mobility keeps a person balanced by ensuring that one is firmly rooted in the contemporary world with all its preoccupations and anxieties. In this way too one can safeguard against operating out of an over-clerical power structure. It is so tempting for women, precisely because they have been denied access for so long to certain areas of responsibility, merely to 'get in there' and perpetuate the same system. Nevertheless, I have not said my last words about what my commitment to 'making Church' may be. I feel myself called to work for a certain amount of time with the Church and in various fields such as formation, communication, and renewal of liturgical expression.

As to ordination, I do not believe that it is a necessary hoop which women must jump through in order to redeem their honour. This is to say that I do not exclude the possibility one day, along with other men and women, married or single, of presiding over the eucharist and of ordination to priestly ministry, that is if I am looking after a local faith community, exercising responsibility for administering the sacrament of the Word in its midst, and sharing the same pastoral concern. This could be written off as a dream, but it seems to me important that it should be said, and said calmly, by more and more lay people, and notably by women.

In the meantime, I am taking an active part as a lay person, a lay woman, in the profound process of change that is the life of the Church in today's world. I take my place calmly and resolutely where I may be useful in this process of 'making Church', trying to help the gospel message speak to those with whom I share the human quest. This seems to me to be so urgent, so very much more important than the Church's bureaucratic, organizational problems. The irony, of course, is that the two are not unrelated.³

NOTES

¹ The Beaubourg district of Paris corresponds to the Covent Garden area of London. Originally Les Halles, the main fruit and vegetable market of Paris, was sited there, but

now the area has been redeveloped and attracts large crowds who visit the Pompidou Centre in the Place Beaubourg.

² The word 'relais' means 'staging post' or 'halt'.

³ These notes are provided by Lavinia Byrne IBVM of the Institute of Spirituality, Heythrop College, who also translated the article.