

The message of Beijing

Challenge to the Church

Joan Chittister

‘IT REQUIRES WISDOM TO UNDERSTAND WISDOM; the music is nothing if the audience is deaf,’ Walter Lippman wrote. These words may never be truer than when read in relation to the question of the role and place of women in Church and state. There is a wisdom abroad in the land that cannot come to fruit because it is being met with deafness aplenty. There is, of course, lip service to the notion of the equality of women everywhere but real change is slow in coming. In Beijing at the Fourth UN Conference on Women, for instance, the delegates of 189 nations of the world endorsed the Conference recommendation that governments commit themselves to providing equality of opportunity for women. Nevertheless, fewer than fifty governments agreed to commit any funds whatsoever to the project.

Corporations now hire women to do the same work that men do but pay them less to do it.¹ Women, in fact, are now allowed to work two jobs: one full-time job outside the home to help pay household expenses and 70 per cent of the household work as well.² In the United States of America, that supposed bastion of equality and feminism, women are still paid 25–33 per cent less than men for doing the same type of work.³

In the Roman Catholic Church itself, equality is preached but invisibility is practised. The pope apologizes to women for the sins of the past and then reminds them that they have ‘a unique role’⁴ in the enterprise called Church. Whatever its uniqueness, a woman’s role obviously does not take her to the theological arenas of the Church – the synods, the congregations, the councils – where, as a consequence, everything that is written about women is written without women. The only ministry left to a woman in such a situation is the ministry of dissent.

Most disturbing of all, perhaps, is the fact that the imbalance of men to women in the civic sphere and the complete absence of women in the institutional innards of the Catholic Church is being blamed by the Church on God. God, we are apparently to under-

stand, made women with brains in order to taunt them by not allowing them to use them in public places. Woman's place in the home and her subservience to men derives from the teaching of male clerics. From the time of Tertullian, who in the third century railed against the essential evil of women, to the most recent pronouncements that the Church 'does not have the authority'⁵ to change the secondary status of women in the sacramental system, church norms have treated women as less than adult disciples. The Church has regularly assumed, on the other hand, whatever authority it needed to redefine anything else: to name the sacraments, to impose celibacy on the priesthood – whatever the witness of the apostles themselves – to expand the participation of non-whites in the ministry of the Church after years of debate on their full humanity, or to regulate moral norms purporting to determine the very essence of human salvation. The truth is that the Catholic Church has changed a great many things in the light of new discoveries and understandings of the nature of reality.

At the same time, theological positions contrary to the full humanity of women have been translated into institutional norms everywhere. God made two sexes, both of them 'in God's image', we learn all our lives – and then find ourselves in a church that erases the face of one of them. In litany after litany, collect after collect for generations, the Church calls God 'rock, key, lamb, dove, door, father, gate, spirit' but never, ever 'mother'. The God whom the Church teaches and the God whom the Church models in its dealings with women are clearly two different divinities. The conflict is a deadly one, both socially and spiritually. The idea that God is sexist appals. Yet institutions everywhere run on that very notion: the Church, the home, the nations of the world.

A subject that will not go away

The UN Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, was the fourth of its kind on a subject that is not resolved and will not go away. Half the people of the world are being held in bondage – social, economic, political and theological – while the Church operates on a philosophy that is Greek and an organizational system that is Roman in origin. Dualism, the philosophy that separates rather than integrates spirit and matter and then calls matter bad and spirit good, women one and men the other, women natural and men spiritual, not only divides men and women but also divides women from a full knowledge of themselves. Patriarchy, the Roman notion that

the male head of a family was the law in a society without a federal system, was simply transferred to the organization of the Church. But patriarchy is not a revelation any more than is the theocratic state. Patriarchy is a social system that is eroding around us as the consciousness of the full humanity of women becomes the subject of secular thought. At the same time, factors which obstruct its demise continue to be given theological support by the Church.

As a result, the United Nations puts a major question before the Catholic Church. For the first time in history an organization has raised the question of the nature and role of women to full global import. Though Pope John XXIII in *Pacem in terris* recognized the women's issue as one of the 'signs of the times' along with nuclear proliferation and poverty,⁶ it is a secular organization that has raised a serious spiritual question, a fundamental theological issue, just as it was secular organizations that led the protest about slavery, the rejection of the theocratic state and the adoption of Magna Carta. In our own time, the position of the Church on the nature, equality, humanity and role of women is fast becoming the measure of the Church itself. That the Church, which has had such a major role in delimiting the nature and role of women, now has a key role to play in the recognition of the full humanity of women is painfully obvious. God-talk is serious argumentation in any circumstance.

Twenty years after the first UN Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975, Beijing has repeatedly been called 'historic'. For the first time in history, according to Gertrude Mongella, Secretary-General of the Conference, women's issues have been recognized as societal issues, issues which unless we attend to them will in the long run affect the entire society negatively. The parallels are clear: if mothers are uneducated, families are weakened. If women as a class are poor, the country is underdeveloped. If women are regularly, routinely, universally abused, the country is barbaric. If women are used and misused, the society is sick. Women's issues are the societal issues that measure the health, the quality, the humanity of the whole world. They are also the issues that assess the integrity of theology. If the abuse of half the population of the world can be theologically justified under the rubric of subservience, then any level of inhumanity is possible.⁷

Twelve major dimensions of a woman's life

The Beijing Conference focuses world attention on twelve major dimensions of a woman's life and requires governments to respond

specifically to each facet of the far-ranging programme. We can see in each of the categories challenges to the Church as well. The issues identified have deep roots in theological constructs long accepted and only recently opened to question, to debate and to contention.

Poverty

Beijing calls countries to review and modify, with the full and equal participation of women, the macro-economic and social policies which determine the world's distribution of resources. The slow pace of development, especially in rural areas, the UN contends, is a direct result of the neglect of women as a key element in development policy. It is women by and large who farm those areas but it is men who have been given the farm equipment granted under international aid programmes. The Church in its own convening of international groups to debate and develop international recommendations for global development must model the equal participation of both male and female delegates for which no canonical prohibition can possibly be claimed.

Education

The Beijing Platform for Action sets the year 2000 as the target date for the reduction of female illiteracy by half its 1990 level, and 2015 as the point at which the gender gap in primary and secondary education ought to be eliminated. According to UN statistics, two-thirds of the world's nearly one billion illiterate people are women. To be seen as sincere in their word-play about the value of women, the Church itself needs to institute a study of its own school systems, asking how much money goes to the education of girls and women in comparison to the amount given to the education of boys and men. How much diocesan money is being put into the education of nuns in third world countries, for instance, as compared to that being put into the education of seminarians? It is the nuns, after all, who will be left to educate the country – men, women and children.

Health

The Beijing document requires governments to institute health-care programmes which give priority to programmes in rural and poor urban areas where women are most sick and least cared for. In one region of India, according to Dr Nafis Sadik's work, *Investing in women*, girls are four times more likely than boys to suffer from acute malnutrition and forty times less likely to be taken to the hos-

pital.⁸ In Bombay, according to World Watch Institute, of 8,000 abortions performed after amniocentesis in 1995, 7,999 were of female fetuses. The value of a woman as person, as thinker, as image of God must be clearly and consistently preached throughout the world and modelled at the highest levels of the Church. If people do not see Christianity honouring, respecting, engaging and learning from women as clearly and distinctly as from men, what is the spiritual effect likely to be? Who is to believe that Jesus valued women, that God does, that we do or that the Catholic Church's designation of Mary as Queen of Heaven is anything other than an attempt to disguise the devaluation of women on earth by promising them the life in the world to come that men will not allow them now? The Church must speak out clearly and consistently to men about the sinfulness of the exploitation, mistreatment and invisibility of women. But first, it must itself lead by example.

Violence

To eliminate violence against women, the Platform for Action urges governments to condemn it. But condemnation is not enough. To provide shelters and support for the women and girls who are victims is not enough. The governments of the world must also provide women with access to the mechanisms of justice which enact and enforce legislation against the perpetrators of violence against women, as well. In France, a traditionally Catholic culture, 95 per cent of the victims of violence are women – over half of these at the hands of their husbands.⁹ In the United States, more women are injured in domestic violence incidents than in car accidents, in muggings, and in all the rapes outside the home put together. US Surgeon-Generals have warned the public repeatedly that domestic violence – not heart attacks, not cancer, not strokes – poses the single largest threat of injury to adult women in the USA. The Church must invest in women's centres as they once did in schools. They must revise marriage guidance materials (e.g. Cana Conference) to reflect a feminist philosophy of marriage and equality. They must preach a prophetic gospel of equal rights and women's place in the public arena in parts of the world where women rank lower than cattle.

Armed conflict

Since women and children constitute 80 per cent of the 23 million refugees and the 26 million displaced persons in the world – all dislodged by the wars men fight for power and territory – the UN

Platform for Action calls for the inclusion of women in national reconciliation programmes. It argues for special steps to ensure refugees and displaced women safety, civil rights and safe passage through systems that become more rape camps than refugee camps. The 'just war' theory is not a sufficient response to the kind of violence that makes women and children its greatest victims. Soldiers do not fight soldiers any more. They fight civilians in order to break the spirit of soldiers. The distinction between combatants and non-combatants went with the pictures of US soldiers napalming women and children. A UN fact-finding team estimates that more than 20,000 Muslim women were raped in Bosnia and then murdered or made to bear Serb children in order to humiliate Muslim men and perform an 'ethnic cleansing'.¹⁰ Rape has become an instrument of war, a form of penal punishment. But we heard nowhere near the same rage we heard about altar girls or the use of female pronouns in the liturgy of the mass. A church that itself works steadily to keep women out of its male enclaves cannot expect to be able to teach the gospel of Jesus to the rest of the world. It becomes incredible.

Economic participation

In most parts of the world women are virtually absent from economic decision-making. The Platform for Action calls for the end of economic discrimination, for equal pay for equal work and for the valuing of women's unremunerated work. Women are not charity cases. Their work in the home is the foundation of the entire economic system. Women deserve every programme they get. Argentina, for instance, has calculated the value of domestic activity carried on by Argentinian women and estimates that it amounts to between 28 and 49 per cent of its GNP.¹¹ If women's work in the home – all 9 trillion dollars worth of it – is as valuable as men say, as necessary to the system as economists say, as dignified an occupation as churches say, then it must be counted in the Gross National Product everywhere. And the Catholic Church, which has traditionally promoted the concept of three equally sanctifying states of life – the married, the religious and the single vocation – must begin to speak out for wages high enough to make it as possible for an independent woman to lead a single life as it is for a man.

Power

Women, the Platform argues, must have a place in the decisions that threaten the life of the planet. If women are really judged to be

closer to life issues than men, as many theologians, philosophers and psychologists have argued, then they must be given an equal role in the fate-of-the-earth decisions or all our lives will be in danger from the so-called 'rational' decisions that have been made before us. They must have the power to make a difference. To publish documents on moral theology, ethics and ecology without including women in their development is simply to perpetuate the notion that men know what is good for everyone. The fact, of course, is that they are claiming to make judgements about things they themselves do not and cannot experience.

Mechanisms for advancement

Mechanisms for the advancement of women are called for at every level, local, regional and national. On average worldwide, only 10.5 per cent of all legislators and only 6 per cent of all government ministers anywhere are women at the present time, though the number is growing slowly everywhere.¹² Yet no percentage of any Catholic Church synod anywhere, any Vatican Prefecture, any church council or any diocesan consultors are women.

Human rights

The recognition that women's rights are human rights, and not to be dismissed as 'a unique situation' or some kind of social gift granted by men to women in a grand gesture of gratuitous generosity, requires the complete overhaul of the entire system. It assumes the total elimination of discrimination in all areas of human activity. To theologize about humanity and then to talk about Jesus' maleness as a criterion for ministry is to undermine the basic principles of the faith itself. Either Jesus became 'flesh' as earlier versions of the Creed stated or Jesus became 'man' (male) – an arguable rendering of the Creed since the advent of the women's movement. To argue that women cannot be ordained because the apostles were male (when scripture scholars do not see the apostles as signs of priesthood so much as signs of the Twelve Tribes of Israel with whom Jesus is making a new covenant), at the very least leaves the topic ripe for discussion. To close an issue that is obviously open makes the question more a matter of suppression than of sacrament. As a consequence of that kind of thinking, when forced to choose between maleness and eucharist, the Roman Catholic Church is choosing maleness. A sacramental Church stands on the brink of losing the sacraments because the inadequacy of femaleness is a

more important point to make, it seems, than the integrity of the theology itself. What kind of a sign is that to a world starved of the eucharist? What kind of sign is that to a world where discrimination keeps the world gender-blind and therefore deaf to half the people of the planet?

Media images

The continued projection of negative, degrading and pornographic images, the Platform insists, requires balanced presentation of the intellectual and spiritual qualities of women. The access of women to the media, to the public forum and to the language itself is an integral part of the process required to erase the idea of woman as sex object. A church that has long taught the danger of women to men must now begin to teach the value of women to men. It is hard to imagine an edict that insisted that no priest was fit to be a spiritual director to a nun. Yet the edict that a seminarian may not have a woman as spiritual director or theological guide gives a strong signal that men in the Church have little or nothing to learn from women in the Church. If the Church fails to engage the intellectual qualities of women beyond cooking for church socials, who can wonder that other men will do the same?

Environment and development

The involvement of women in environmental decision-making, the Platform for Action warns us, is necessary to the very preservation of the globe. It is women, in many regions of the world, who tend the fields, raise the crops and find the fuel that saves the family. What women do not know or are not taught about science, ecology, agronomy and law, or – just as important – what women do know and are not asked, can destroy us all. The exclusion of women from the analysis of issues in both Church and state that touch on the development of peoples, both local and international, leaves us with a Church full of laws and a world full of bombs in a Church that needs love and a world that needs peace. The Church needs women at the highest levels of theological, pastoral and canonical development not for the sake of the women, but for the sake of the wisdom, the vision and the integrity of the pronouncements of the Church itself.

The girl child

The protection of girl children from trafficking, sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced labour and all forms of economic

discrimination and cultural oppression, the Platform states, requires national legislation and implementation. According to the UN Commission on Human Rights, more than one million girl children are sold or kidnapped, drugged and coerced into prostitution for the convenience of business, tourism or soldiers every year. According to the 1993 Human Rights Watch, 1,400 Filipina maids in one Middle Eastern country in one year fled to embassies seeking protection from their employers.¹³ The Church must teach with a straight tongue: women are not toys, women are not machines, women are not property, women are not simply the litter-bearers of humanity. But until the Church itself begins to concentrate on a woman's spiritual-intellectual potential rather than confine her within the role of mother, women are doomed to be seen as the sexual servants of the human race. No man is defined by fatherhood. Why should women be limited by being defined only as mothers? The Church must begin to emphasize parenting rather than motherhood, or the use of one sex for the convenience of the other will continue unabated.

The women's question is the world's question

What Beijing began is more erosion than explosion. Women are not defining problems any more. They know the problems. They are designing solutions – and that may be a problem in itself. Institutions that are not true to their own best ideals where women are concerned will be all the weaker for the absence of women as other institutions rise to fill the gap, to recognize the resource, to come to new insights about what it is to be a person, a woman, a man.

The very size of the Beijing Conference attests to the slow but steady influence of these UN Conferences on women. According to UN sources, attendance in Beijing doubled the attendance record of the Third UN Conference in Nairobi. Over 40,000 women – delegates, observers and representatives of NGOs from around the world – went to Beijing. The Fourth UN Conference was the largest international conference in the history of the world. One thing is sure: Beijing is not North American, not Western and not white. Beijing is everywhere now – in every country of the world, in every women's organization anywhere, in every institution everywhere, in every government consciousness, including the Vatican's.

Beijing is a Greek chorus of warnings. If the men of the world do not heed the women of the world, women will suffer, yes, but more

than that, that part of the human race that is killing itself, poisoning the globe and wasting the planet will perish with them and at their own hands, like dinosaurs in a snow storm. The women's question has come of age. It is not a women's question any longer. It is the survival question of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: the coming of accountability – a warning for the Church

In Beijing, the Vatican endorsed the document on women and emerged as a strong supporter of resource allocation for women's programmes. The Vatican supported the Cairo Document on population control with its clear awareness of the need to promote birth control, as well. And yet, at the same time, when asked what steps the Vatican itself would take to assure women positions in decision-making roles in a church that limits authority to the clerical state, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, press secretary of the Holy See, responded that the delegation 'did not speak for the 400 citizens of the Vatican but only for the 900 million Catholics around the world'. Clever answer – too clever by far. The Vatican, it seems, will call others to honour the needs of women but is hard put to say what it will itself do within its own confines to promote the full and equal participation of women in the Church as well as in the state. The authenticity question looms larger every day. But accountability is coming. Theocracy will not save us from the gospel for ever.

It is a strange and decisive moment for women, for the world. In many instances, the statistics describing the role and status of women are getting worse every day. On the other hand, the notion that discrimination against women is moral is also getting thinner every day as well.

A Church that does not lead the proclamation and practice of the wisdom of equality will not be an effective or credible Church, and has, if the gospel is to be our guide, already ceased to be a holy one. Women are already looking elsewhere for spiritual leadership, spiritual models and spiritual sustenance. For many, the Church has ceased to be the voice of truth and justice. Faith in the Church has diminished for both women and men who see the truth of creation being held ransom to a patriarchal structure, while faith in the God of the Exodus has increased. The spirituality of women will continue to develop outside the Church until the Church is true to the gospel and so true to itself. But every day it is less and less the spirituality of women that is in danger. It is the spirituality of the Church itself

that stands to lose. As Matthew reminds us, 'Let those who have ears to hear, hear'.

Joan Chittister OSB attended the Fourth UN Conference on Women as a media representative for the *National Catholic Reporter* and is a regular columnist for that paper. An internationally known author and lecturer, she is executive director of Benetvision: A Resource and Research Center for Contemporary Spirituality in Erie, Pennsylvania. Among her many books are *Beyond Beijing: the next step for women*, *Passion for life: fragments of the face of God*, and *Heart of flesh: a feminist spirituality for women and men*.

NOTES

1 United Nations Department of Public Information, *Notes for speakers on the advancement of Women* (1995), p 2. The statistics used in this article come from a number of UN sources summarized in the 'Speakers' notes'.

2 Fourth World Conference on Women, Fact Sheet 4: 'Women in the global economy' (September 1995).

3 Beth Belton, 'Tight job market helps women close pay gap', *USA Today* (5 June 1998), 1B.

4 Pope John Paul II, *Mulieres dignitatem* (Vatican City, 15 August 1988) in *The pope speaks* vol 34 (1989), pp 10-47.

5 Pope John Paul II, *Ordinatio sacerdotalis* (Vatican City, 22 May 1994) in *Origins* vol 24, no 4, p 50.

6 Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* 41 (Vatican City, 11 April 1963) in David J. O'Brien and Thomas Shannon (eds), *Catholic social thought: the documentary heritage* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1992), pp 134-137.

7 The statement of the Southern Baptist Convention that a wife should 'submit graciously to the servant leadership of her husband' was praised by a Roman Catholic bishop in the United States as showing 'perception, fidelity and courage' (Bishop James T. McHugh, *Catholic Star Herald*, Camden, NJ, 19 June 1998).

8 Dr Nafis Sadik, *Investing in women: the focus of the '90s* (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), 1989).

9 United Nations Department of Public Information, *Notes for speakers on the advancement of women* (1995), p 62.

10 United Nations Department of Public Information, 'Focus on women: violence against women' (January 1995).

11 United Nations Department of Public Information, *Notes for speakers on the advancement of women* (1995), p 25.

12 *Ibid.*, p 75.

13 *Ibid.*, p 69.