

## CHAPTER 9

### OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

#### 9.1 Background to the Research Project

The Research Project on "The Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia" was the initiative of the Catholic Bishops of Australia. Issues relating to women in the Catholic Church had been raised with the Australian Bishops for some time. As a result, the ACBC requested that the BCJDP organise a Research Project on "The Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia". The Research Project was conducted for the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) by the Bishops Commission for Justice, Development and Peace (BCJDP), Australian Catholic University (ACU) and the Australian Conference of Leaders of Religious Institutes (ACLRI).

In 1993, the BCJDP agreed to explore ways to respond to issues concerning women and the Catholic Church in Australia under the guidance of Bishops Brennan and Manning. On June 23, 1994, a working party comprising representatives of ACU, the Research Department of the ACBC and the BCJDP met to develop a detailed research proposal. On August 21, 1996 Cardinal Clancy, the President of the ACBC, launched the national study. The BCJDP subsequently asked the working party to take on the role of the Research Management Group (RMG).

In the apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, released by the Vatican on May 30, 1994 immediately before the first meeting of the working party, Pope John Paul II declared that the Church did not have the authority to ordain women as priests and this teaching was to be "definitively held by all the church's faithful". It is important to note that the publication of this apostolic letter on "Ordination and Women" had much significance for the Project. The position of Pope John Paul II was very clear and it was the intention of the Research Project to be true to the Pope. The ordination of women was not the focus of the research. The question of the participation of women in the Church was seen as a broader issue. However, in any discussion open to all people on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, it was inevitable that this issue would be raised by some who responded to the Project.

During the conduct of the Research Project, there were several media releases which provided updates on its progress. Regular progress reports were provided to the BCJDP, personal briefings given to the Cardinal and Bishops associated with the BCJDP and the Central Commission, and a detailed presentation made to the Plenary Meeting of the ACBC on May 26, 1998. Such reports concerned the progress and processes of the Research Project, not the findings. The Report of the Research Project Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus was given to the BCJDP on April 7, 1999, and to the Plenary Meeting of the ACBC on April 12, 1999.

## 9.2 Purpose of the Research Project

The overall aim of the study was to gather data on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia. In order to achieve this aim, the Research Project addressed four key questions:

1. What are various ways in which women participate in the Catholic Church in Australia?
2. What assistance and support are currently offered to women to participate in the Church?
3. What are barriers to women's participation in the Church?
4. What are some ways in which women's participation can be increased?

Development and piloting of the key questions occurred over a period of fifteen months with women and men from a range of backgrounds. The four key questions were designed to give coherence to all aspects of the research.

It was intended that the information obtained would provide a solid basis for:

- theological reflection,
- pastoral planning, and
- dialogue with women and women's groups on particular issues.

At the inaugural meeting of the working party, the following three points were made about the purpose of the Project. It was intended to provide a foundation for the Bishops' responses to the concerns of women rather than being the total response in itself. The study would be of interest to other Church agencies and Committees of the ACBC, for example the Committee on the Laity, the Committee on Doctrine and Morals, and the Committee on Family and Life. Its findings could also be of use to lay movements and local faith communities.

The *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, July 1995, has been a source of inspiration for the Research Project. The following section was cited frequently as part of information on the Research Project:

Women's dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude. This has prevented women from truly being themselves and it has resulted in a spiritual impoverishment of humanity. ... And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed, on the part of the whole Church, into a renewed commitment of fidelity to the Gospel vision. ... Yes, it is time to *examine the past with courage*, to assign responsibility where it is due in a review of the long history of humanity. (n. 3)

The nature of the Research Project as a data-gathering exercise was stressed by the ACBC. While findings and conclusions of the Project are provided, it was not part of the RMG's brief to provide recommendations, as the formulation and promulgation of recommendations remain the responsibility of the Bishops of Australia.

## 9.3 Methods of Investigation

### 9.3.1 Use of Both Quantitative and Qualitative Research Methods

Over many months, the RMG discussed how best to carry out this investigation for the BCJDP. Chapter 1 of this Report details how the RMG worked through the issues which led to the choice of the following methods:

- contextual papers relating separately to:
  - (i) the history of women's participation in the Catholic Church in Australia,
  - (ii) the role of Catholic women in the ecumenical movement;
- written submissions called for in various ways throughout the Australian community;
- public hearings at a large number of centres across all States and Territories to allow the Bishops to hear presentations and individuals and groups with different views to listen to each other;
- analysis of the data from the CCLS, especially from Questionnaire H relating to the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia;
- discussions with some fifty targeted groups whose voices had not been heard to a significant extent in other forms of data gathering;
- analysis of data concerning the four key questions provided by Catholic organisations in the health, social welfare and education sectors, theological institutions and other groups.

The choice of methods to undertake such a complex investigation is essentially controversial. Why these methods? Why not others? The RMG decided that, within budgetary constraints, the use of the above-listed multiple perspectives allowed maximum participation in the research and would provide the BCJDP with a wealth of data gathered from many thousands of people through a variety of methods.

The methods utilised are those of the social sciences. As Ian Castles, formerly the Commonwealth Statistician, stated in a recent essay (July 1998) for the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, there is no "wide measure of agreement about the meaning of the word 'method' in this context" (p. 295). Indeed, in this same essay, Castles noted the divide in the social sciences between those who "make more and sophisticated use of statistics in drawing inferences from the results of surveys and experiments" and those "who reject entirely the use of statistics in their work" (p. 305).<sup>1</sup>

The approach of the RMG was to use both quantitative and qualitative methods to shed light on the investigation's four key questions. In this inquiry, basic quantitative methods associated with the large-scale sample survey have been used. In relation to the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups, more qualitative methods have also been employed to understand some thousands of people's views, expressed in their own words and contexts, about the four key questions focussing upon the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia.

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<sup>1</sup> I. Castles, 'The Methods of the Social Scientist', Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Challenges for the Social Sciences and Australia, vol. ii, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, July 1998, pp. 295-306.

A brief description of each method is set out below, followed by a chart presenting an overview of the various research approaches. In summary, each research approach, with its own particular audience and research methodology, was seen to be essential and complementary.

### 9.3.2 Written Submissions

The first of the main ways in which the community was invited to assist in the Research Project was through written submissions from individuals and groups. The call for written submissions was made at the launch of the Project on August 21, 1996. Responses were sought from women and men, young and old, those who are actively involved in Catholic Church structures and those who are not. An overwhelming response was received - more than 2,500 submissions from individuals and groups. Group submissions comprised approximately thirty percent of the submissions and often represented large group responses from parishes, Church organisations and other groups.

A comprehensive framework to code the submissions was developed over a period of twelve months. Thirty-four coders were involved in coding the submissions on a voluntary basis. They included women (the majority) and men, religious and lay professional people with a background in theology. Two tests revealed high levels of accuracy. The coding was completed by the end of June 1998. The coding frames were then processed by an experienced data processing company which used a process of data verification to ensure 100 percent accuracy in data entry. A database containing the codes from all submissions was then constructed. Additional comments which could not be accommodated by the coding frame were collated and used to complement the database. Coders identified 676 submissions as containing a range of material suitable for quotation or as being especially significant. These were analysed in conjunction with the results in the database and the additional comments.

The main findings of the written submissions represent those which were identified in 200 or more submissions, that is eight percent or more of the submissions. In addition, particular or unique insights offered by only a few submissions and identified by coders as significant were also used to shed further light on these findings.

### 9.3.3 Catholic Church Life Survey

The CCLS, a pastoral project of the ACBC, was conducted in November 1996. It was constructed so as to include a sample that would represent statistically urban and rural parishes from each of Australia's 28 territorial Dioceses. The sample incorporated 281 parishes and resulted in about 102,000 people participating in the Survey.

Every attender aged 15 years and over at all Masses in participating parishes on a particular Sunday was requested to complete a questionnaire. In most parishes, the Survey took place during the time normally reserved for the homily but in others it was completed before the beginning of Mass or at the end of Mass. Parishes found that most people needed about 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

One component of the Survey was an additional multi-choice questionnaire commissioned by the RMG and containing a series of questions related to women's participation in the Church. The questionnaire was completed by approximately 4,500 attenders in Catholic parishes throughout Australia representing about 5 percent of attenders in each parish in the sample.

#### 9.3.4 Public Hearings

The third of the main ways in which the community was invited to assist in the Research Project was through a series of public hearings conducted between May 13 and July 24, 1997. Responses were sought from the same wide range of individuals and groups invited to make the written submissions. To accommodate the unprecedented number of requests from both Bishops (to host a hearing) and members of the public (to make a presentation), hearings took place in 22 of Australia's territorial Dioceses. In total, public hearings were held over 32 days in 23 centres throughout Australia with nearly 500 people making presentations at the hearings, either individually or in small groups. Given the overwhelming number of requests to make a presentation at the public hearings, a process was required to select presenters. So that each individual and group had an equal chance to present at the hearings, a ballot system was used in most of the capital cities. Those who were unable to present at a hearing as a result of not being selected in the ballot were invited to submit their intended presentation in writing.

It was seen as important that the hearings should be authentic listening exercises, open to all people wishing to make their voices heard. For each hearing, panels, which included at least one Bishop, usually the local Ordinary, and one or more members of the RMG, were formed. On almost every occasion, at least half of the panel members were women. Each hearing was chaired by a woman appointed by the local Bishop.

At the conclusion of each day of hearings, a synthesis of the hearing was prepared by the panel members including the Bishop. Written presentations from people who did not have the opportunity to present at hearings were included in a national synthesis. All points recorded in the synthesis of each hearing were incorporated into the findings of the public hearings.

#### 9.3.5 Targeted Groups

After the public hearings concluded in July 1997, the RMG identified a number of groups whose voices had not been heard to a significant extent in the research to that date. They were: women in the Ukrainian Catholic Church, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women; refugee women; women from non-English-speaking backgrounds and from migrant communities; solo mothers; women from lower socio-economic status groups; women with disabilities and their carers; young women; clergy and lay men. For some of these groups, techniques like written submissions and public hearings may have been too formal, intimidating or culturally inappropriate. As the RMG wished to hear the views of all sectors of the Church, it was decided to hold targeted group discussions to collect information on the experiences, perceptions, beliefs and opinions of these groups in relation to the key research questions. Information was gained from approximately fifty groups across Australia over a period of thirteen months.

#### 9.3.6 Survey of Catholic Organisations and Catholic Theological Institutions

At the time of the launch of the Research Project (August 1996), a survey on the participation of women in Catholic Church organisations was sent to national Church agencies to collect data about women in their sector. The national agencies were asked to provide such data if they held it centrally or to seek the data from individual institutions under their umbrella. Data were particularly sought from the health, education and welfare sectors but also from other agencies.

Information was elicited on the proportion of women involved in various roles and tasks, assistance and support offered to women to enable their participation, barriers to their participation, and ways to increase women's participation. Responses were received from 79 organisations.

In both the written submissions and the public hearings, there were frequent references to the large number of women in Australia undertaking theological education. As a result, the RMG wished to provide comprehensive and accurate statistics about the number of women and men doing theological studies in Australian Catholic tertiary institutions. In April 1998, the RMG undertook a national survey of all Catholic institutions which provided undergraduate and/or postgraduate theological courses. Responses were received from all theological institutes offering courses in theology in Semester One 1998 including eight theological colleges, two Catholic universities and one other Catholic institute.

#### 9.3.7 Use of Contextual Papers and Contextual Information

To position the Research Project within a broader picture of society and the Church, the Report contains two contextual papers and, in an appendix, an overview of the role of women in contemporary Australian society.

The first contextual paper concerns the history of women's participation in the Catholic Church in Australia, especially since the Second World War. The second paper places the research in the ecumenical context by considering the wider participation of women in the Christian churches. In Appendix 20, the role of women in Australian society is presented through extracts from recent editions of *Australian Social Trends*.

9.3.8 An overview of the five research approaches is set out below.

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Response</b>
<i>Written Submissions</i>	August - December 1996	Women and men who are actively involved in Catholic Church structures and those who are not	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 2,500 submissions from individuals and groups</li> <li>• Group submissions comprised 30% of responses</li> </ul>
<i>Catholic Church Life Survey</i>	November 1996	National survey of Church attenders aged 15 years and over	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4,500 Church attenders from each of Australia's 28 territorial Dioceses</li> </ul>
<i>Public Hearings</i>	May - July 1997	Women and men who are actively involved in Catholic Church structures and those who are not	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hearings took place in 22 of Australia's territorial Dioceses over 32 days in 23 centres with nearly 500 people making presentations, either individually or in small groups</li> <li>• Written presentations from people unable to present at hearings were included</li> </ul>
<i>Targeted Groups</i>	October 1997 - November 1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women</li> <li>• Clergy</li> <li>• Women with disabilities and their carers</li> <li>• Lay men</li> <li>• Women from lower socio-economic status groups</li> <li>• Women from NESB and migrant backgrounds</li> <li>• Refugee women</li> <li>• Solo mothers</li> <li>• Women in the Ukrainian Catholic Church</li> <li>• Young women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reports from approximately 50 groups</li> </ul>
<i>Survey of Catholic Organisations and Theological Institutions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• August - December 1996 (Catholic organisations)</li> <li>• April 1998 (theological institutions)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Catholic Church organisations</li> <li>• Catholic theological institutions which provide theological courses</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responses received from 79 Church organisations</li> <li>• Responses from all institutions offering theological courses</li> </ul>

## **9.4 Summary of Findings**

### **9.4.1 Overwhelming Response to the Research Project Highlights its Critical and Controversial Nature**

The response throughout Australia to the requests for written submissions and presentations at public hearings was overwhelming and represented a significantly greater response than to similar consultations conducted both within the Australian Catholic Church as well as in the broader society. This outstanding response is, in itself, a major finding indicating that the issue of the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia is critical and controversial.

### **9.4.2 Wide Spectrum of Views and Emotions**

In summary, it must first be recognised that a wide spectrum of views and emotions was identified in the research, from varying levels of satisfaction with the current participation of women, to varying levels of dissatisfaction arising from perceptions that equality of role, status and opportunities for service is denied to women by the Catholic Church in Australia. In many aspects of the research, there was a polarisation of views: there were those wishing to maintain the current participation of women in the Church or even return to the position of the pre-Vatican II Church, and those seeking an expanded role for women. A great diversity of views about the nature of the Church was also evident. Different models and visions of Church were presented either explicitly or implicitly.

It is clear that Catholic women in Australia are not a homogeneous group but are, in fact, extremely diverse with regard to education (including theological education), age, social and economic situation, ethnic background, religious tradition (even as Catholics), life experiences, and sexual and marital status.

A major finding of the Research Project is the pronounced contrast, summarised below in sections 9.4.3 and 9.4.4, between the views and feelings of the Church attenders who responded to the CCLS and participants in the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups. In reflecting on this difference, it is important to recall the different audiences addressed by the various research approaches, as outlined above. However, it should also be noted that the different audiences are not mutually exclusive groups. For example, the involvement of many Church attenders was evident in the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups where many individuals and groups (often representing parishes) spoke of their Mass attendance.

### **9.4.3 Feelings of Belonging Expressed by Respondents to the CCLS**

An overview of the profile of respondents to the CCLS reveals that:

- they have a considerably older profile than the Catholic population in general - the median age of Church attenders aged 15 and over at the time of the survey was 52 years; the median age of Catholics of the same age range in the 1996 Census was 38 years;
- nine-tenths of them attend Mass every week or more often;
- women outnumber men in the ratio of about three to two;
- in most forms of participation in Church life, women are more likely to be involved than men;
- more than half of Church attenders are not involved in any regular way in other parish activities;



- young people and separated and divorced people are under-represented;
- those aged 15-39 are less likely than respondents aged 40 or more to participate in parish groups, to feel a sense of belonging to their parish, to agree that the parish is meeting their spiritual needs, and to accept without difficulty the authority of the Church to teach on matter of faith or morals.

The majority of respondents to the CCLS reported that:

- they felt a strong sense of belonging to their parish;
- their spiritual needs were being adequately met in the parish;
- they had never felt unwelcome in the Church in recent years;
- those who accepted responsibility in the parish were given sufficient assistance to complete the task;
- they experienced or observed no barrier to women's participation;
- the two best ways to increase women's participation were through prayer and increasing women's involvement in decision-making and Church administration.

#### 9.4.4 Feelings of Pain and Alienation Expressed by Participants in the Written Submissions, Public Hearings and Targeted Groups

The dominant feeling of participants in the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups was one of pain and alienation. A dichotomous relationship with the Church was experienced by both individuals and groups characterised by such feelings as love and commitment yet anguish and alienation. Pain, alienation and often anger resulted from a strong sense of women's marginalisation, struggle, disenfranchisement, powerlessness, irrelevance and a lack of acknowledgment within the Church. The frustration yet persistence of both women and men in trying to stay in the Church despite their dissatisfaction with the Church's treatment of women was evident. The frankness and sadness of those who had left the practice of the faith and of those who have considered "unbecoming" a Catholic as a result of the Church's treatment of women were obvious. It was clear that many people have hope but in many cases it is faint. There was a heightened sense of frustration at the blockage of the much-needed gifts of women from service to the Church.

The sense of alienation and anguish resulting from the issues concerning women and the Church was shown by all categories of individuals and groups such as the young and elderly, women and men, laity and religious, and was not characteristic of any particular group.

It was reported that many of the Australian Catholic women involved in the ecumenical movement, both within Australia and internationally, experience quite acute frustration and anger with the Catholic Church today. Unlike their counterparts in other Christian churches where all roles of ministry and witness are now available to women, they feel consistently debarred from participating in any significant decision-making, leadership or consultative roles within their own Church. For them, the Catholic Church, in stark contrast to most other Christian churches in Australia today, continues to pursue a policy of gender discrimination and inequality. This situation they both lament and deplore.

#### 9.4.5 Concern over the Loss of the Young Seen as a Matter of Urgency

The ongoing decline in Church involvement in Australia, especially by the young, was a source of much anguish and pain. A sense of urgency marked many of the calls for change regarding the participation of women - the need to act now, especially to bring the message of Jesus Christ to the young women (and men) who feel that the Church is out of touch with contemporary life.

#### 9.4.6 Need for Action to Flow from Research Project

There were many expressions of gratitude to the Australian Bishops for the Research Project. It was seen as a sign of hope and a gesture of goodwill towards women in the Australian Church. However, there was also an accompanying concern about action flowing from the Project. The comment was frequently made that, if there is no follow-up action from the Project by the Bishops, it would have been better if there had been no inquiry.

### **9.5 Various Ways in Which Women Participate in the Catholic Church in Australia**

#### 9.5.1 Women Seen as Integral and Central to the Life of the Church

That women are integral and central to the very nature and life of the Church was highlighted in all aspects of the research. Women and men were seen as equal in Baptism and together to form the "Body of Christ". An understanding of the Church as "the People of God" involving "a Discipleship of Equals" was stressed. It was considered that the future of the Church and the participation of women were closely linked.

#### 9.5.2 Women's Contribution since the Earliest Days of the Australian Catholic Church

Since the earliest days of the Catholic Church in Australia, it was found that women have made an immense contribution to the life of the Church whether as religious sisters, as mothers of families or as dedicated single people. Their incalculable contribution was characterised by the enormous energy and love that women have put into promoting the life of the Church in Australia in increasingly varied ways. The figure of Blessed Mary MacKillop was seen as a symbol of this contribution. Two obvious features of the history of women's participation in the Catholic Church in Australia were the ongoing involvement of women in the mission of the Church beyond the home, and the desire of women to be accepted as fully-functioning adults, seriously included in the decision-making processes of the Church.

#### 9.5.3 Women Greatly Outnumber Men in the Vast Majority of Forms of Participation in the Church

Women were described by all sectors as "the backbone of the local Church". It was strongly emphasised that it is the women who keep the Church going, especially in rural areas.

#### 9.5.4 Limitations to the Ways in Which Women Participate in the Catholic Church in Australia

Those who described various ways in which women participate in the Catholic Church in Australia emphasised frequently the limitations to women's participation imposed by the hierarchy. The fundamental issue was not the various ways in which women do participate but rather the significant ways in which women are debarred from participation.

It was stressed that there was significant participation at all levels except in ordained ministry and decision-making roles. Many characterised the roles of women as serving and supporting, nurturing and assisting roles rather than decision-making and leadership roles. Young women, in particular, highlighted the perception of the role of women in the Church as marginal, limited and voluntary. It was considered that there was manifold participation of women but lack of recognition by the Church. The need for recognition, affirmation and celebration of women's contributions to the Church was highlighted in the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups.

#### 9.5.5 Major Contribution of Women through a Great Diversity of Roles and Tasks

Women's participation in the Catholic Church in Australia was presented as diverse and myriad. Much attention was given to describing the great diversity of roles and tasks which women undertake in the Australian Church, mostly on a voluntary basis.

#### 9.5.6 Women's Visible Participation in the Liturgy since Vatican II

A major way in which women currently participate in the Church is through liturgical preparation and involvement, especially as ministers of the Eucharist and as readers. Women's visible participation in the liturgy since Vatican II was seen as most significant. However, it was frequently noted that practices concerning the role of women in the liturgy vary considerably from parish to parish, depending on the attitude of the parish priest. For the women in the Ukrainian Church, their exclusion from the liturgy of the Church was seen as their greatest barrier and concern.

#### 9.5.7 Women's Participation in the Parish

In addition to women's involvement in the liturgy, another major form of participation involved community service, social welfare and social justice activities and other voluntary caring roles in the parish. Women's participation as members of parish councils was highlighted.

#### 9.5.8 Women's Participation in the Home

Motherhood and family roles were seen as central and given much emphasis. As mothers, Catholic women participate at the heart of the Church, in the "domestic Church". Through their daily work as mothers, in raising a family, in imparting values, and in educating children in the faith in the home setting, women were seen as participating explicitly in the Church. The importance of motherhood and family for both the Church and society was emphasised. In contrast to the prominence given to motherhood, the married woman in her role as wife received much less attention.

#### 9.5.9 Increasing Participation of Women in the Wider Church

It was noted that, today, women participate at various levels of the Church at parish level, diocesan level, and at national and international levels through women's groups. Women are also assuming greater responsibility and diversity of roles. Women's leadership roles in education, health care and social services were identified. The catechetical and educational roles of women were highlighted. Prominence was also given to women's participation in the Catholic Women's League, especially in relation to wider Church and Catholic organisations.

#### 9.5.10 Predominance of Women among Students of Theology

The large number of theologically educated women in the contemporary Catholic Church in Australia was frequently referred to and seen as a great but often untapped resource. It was noted that most women undertake theological education at their own expense and in their own time. In a national survey of Catholic institutions which provide theological courses, women comprised almost 74 percent of persons undertaking undergraduate studies in theology and almost 64 percent of students undertaking postgraduate theological courses. The data from Catholic institutions and universities also highlighted the relationship between theological study and the teaching profession.

#### 9.5.11 Women as Members of Religious Congregations

The witness of women as members of Religious Congregations was valued. The varied participation of religious sisters in the contemporary Church was stressed. Particular mention was made of their leadership roles in education, health care and social welfare, and their ongoing contribution to rural and outback regions of Australia.

#### 9.5.12 Witness of Caring Women

The contribution to the Church of particular women through their very presence was noted, especially through the witness of the disabled and their carers and the strength and determination of solo mothers. Women's participation in the Church through the care of others was noted especially by women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, disabled women and Aboriginal women.

#### 9.5.13 Ecumenical Dimension of Women's Contribution

The ecumenical dimension of women's contribution to the Catholic Church was highlighted. Many Australian Roman Catholic women currently participate in myriad diverse ways in the official ecumenical church structures and projects, both within Australia and internationally. In a broader context, it was found that women from all Christian churches have contributed significantly to the development of the modern ecumenical movement since its inception.

### **9.6 Assistance and Support Currently Offered to Women to Participate in the Church**

#### 9.6.1 Satisfaction with Assistance and Encouragement by Respondents to CCLS

Data derived from the CCLS revealed that both women and men had received sufficient practical assistance and encouragement when they had accepted responsibility for doing something in the parish or the wider Church. However, it should be noted that just over half the respondents said that they had not accepted any such responsibility. Almost three quarters of the respondents who had accepted such a responsibility reported that they had received all the practical assistance and encouragement they needed with one-third of the remainder saying they experienced a lack of support from the people but not from the leaders.

The satisfaction with the level of assistance and support by respondents to the CCLS stands in contrast to the responses from the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups who stated that little assistance and support were offered to women to participate in the Church.

#### 9.6.2 Little Assistance and Support from the Church Identified by Respondents to the Written Submissions, Public Hearings and Targeted Groups

Responses to the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups revealed that only a small minority were satisfied that there was sufficient assistance and support for women to participate in the Church. It was considered that little support was offered structurally, with only occasional financial support from parishes and individual priests. Greater assistance and support were requested to enable women to participate more fully and equally in the life of the Church.

#### 9.6.3 Assistance and Support from Theological Education and Faith Formation

All aspects of the research identified that the highest level of assistance and support came from access to theological education and other forms of adult faith formation, especially training for catechetical work and pastoral ministry programs. However, it was frequently added that this was usually undertaken at the women's own expense. It was considered that access to theological education helps women to participate in the life of the Church.

#### 9.6.4 Lack of Assistance for Participation in Decision-making and Leadership Roles

There was agreement across all aspects of the research that the lowest levels of assistance and support received concerned participation in decision-making, leadership roles and social action and social justice activities. It was frequently mentioned that women only received encouragement, assistance and support to undertake ancillary and support roles. Young women, in particular, felt that women were not encouraged to make a contribution beyond safe "household" tasks and that channels were not open to facilitate participation. Ukrainian women noted that support was offered when women were seen to be "doing the right thing". The clergy acknowledged significant limitations as "the glass ceiling is pretty low". It was noted also that the Catholic Church was not as supportive as other Christian churches.

#### 9.6.5 Greatest Source of Assistance Received from Other Women

Where assistance and support were received, the greatest source came from other women including support from women religious and women's groups. The clergy were also named as a source of support with special reference to the parish priest. It was noted that some priests and Bishops were supportive and encouraging although this support varied depending on the priest, parish or Diocese. Where encouragement was given, it was principally in the form of assistance for women to participate in parish lay ministries.

#### 9.6.6 Assistance and Support for Women in Catholic Organisations

The synthesis of the data from Catholic organisations showed that certain common measures of assistance and support were available for women across these organisations including part-time work, job-sharing, flexible work hours and in-house training programs and seminars. However, many organisations offered additional assistance and support for women such as affirmative action, career planning and mentoring programs for women.

#### 9.6.7 Assistance and Support from Role Models: The Centrality of Jesus

In the public hearings, it was stressed that role models offered particular assistance and support. Mary and, less frequently, saints and other people were seen as important role models.

However, there was some criticism of faulty Mariology and some forms of Marian devotion. The central role of Jesus and the example of Jesus' relationship with women were also seen as critically important and cited as a source of hope and inspiration. Jesus' liberating attitude to women was emphasised.

## **9.7 Barriers to Women's Participation in the Church**

### **9.7.1 Great Majority of Respondents to CCLS Did Not Experience Barriers to Participation**

Results from the CCLS indicated that the great majority of Mass attenders do not feel unwelcome in the parish and do not experience barriers preventing them from participating in the Church in the ways they wish. However, certain Church teachings or policies are perceived by some women and men as inhibiting participation, especially when it comes to having a greater say in making decisions. These perceptions were stronger among frequent Mass attenders than they were among less frequent attenders, and were particularly strong among those who are currently divorced. Although the majority of respondents have not experienced a barrier preventing them from taking on leadership roles in the Church and have not known a woman who has experienced a barrier to her participation, a substantial minority (25%) of female respondents and almost as large a proportion of male respondents (23%) have observed such a barrier. The barriers most likely to be experienced arise from the exercise of authority in the Church, Church practices that favour men for certain positions, and opposition or lack of support from priests.

### **9.7.2 Barriers to Women's Participation a Major Focus for Respondents to the Written Submissions, Public Hearings and Targeted Groups**

The question concerning barriers to women's participation drew the greatest response from participants in the written submissions, public hearings, and targeted groups. Only a small minority of responses supported current forms of participation and believed that there were no barriers to the participation of women in the Church. This strong response stands in contrast to the results of the CCLS where the great majority of Mass attenders did not feel unwelcome in the parish and did not experience barriers preventing them from participating in the Church in the ways they wanted.

A short discussion of the major barriers to women's participation is presented below along with a list of other frequently-mentioned barriers.

### **9.7.3 Patriarchal and Hierarchical Nature of the Church Seen as the Fundamental Barrier to Women's Participation**

The fundamental barrier concerned patriarchal attitudes and traditions, which were seen to be inconsistent with the person and message of Jesus Christ, and which failed to take into account developments in the social sciences and changes in the role of women in the wider society. It was felt that such attitudes had been reinforced by John Paul II and the Vatican bureaucracy in recent times to the detriment of the teachings and spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

The structures of the Church were experienced as male-dominated, hierarchical and authoritarian. Authoritarian attitudes and the misuse of power and position were seen as serious barriers to women's participation.

A fixation on rules and regulations, a rigid and unbending manner, and a lack of compassion and openness to dialogue were frequently-cited characteristics of a Church in need of renewal. The negative attitude towards women on the part of some of the clergy, especially parish priests, was also experienced as a significant obstacle.

#### 9.7.4 Discrimination in the Church on the Basis of Gender

The failure of the Church to grant equal roles and status to women was experienced as a most significant barrier. The lack of gender equality and the exclusion of women from some areas of the Church's ministry and governance, sometimes described in terms of the "sin of sexism", were a source of alienation for both women and men. Many areas of Church life, whether in teachings or actual practice, were seen to exclude women's views, experiences and involvement either directly or indirectly. The issue of gender equality was raised in terms of both theology and justice. Fundamental issues concerning the theology of personhood and the theology of sexuality were seen to underpin the Church's position on the role and status of women. It was felt that basic theological principles, such as the true and equal dignity of all men and women, made in God's image and likeness, and the goodness of sexuality, receive inconsistent treatment in the teaching and practice of the Church. For many people in the Church, the exclusion of women from leadership and decision-making roles meant that women were treated as second-class citizens. Within Catholic organisations in Australia, a lack of mentoring for women and a lack of affirmative action policies were identified as barriers. Further, it was considered that the Church was not reflecting sound advances in society. This gap between the ecclesiastical and secular worlds was experienced as a scandal, as it was felt that the Church should be leading the way in the recognition and promotion of the true equality of all people. The absence of young women in the Church was evidence of a disparity between the attitudes of society and Church towards women.

#### 9.7.5 Exclusion from Decision-Making and Leadership

The exclusion of women from the decision-making processes of the Church was seen as a most significant barrier to full participation of women and a serious impediment to sound decision-making in the Church. Decision-making and leadership were generally seen as being concentrated in the hands of the clergy and Bishops, who are all male and celibate, in a hierarchical leadership model. This situation effectively excluded all women and married people from most decision-making in the Church. It was strongly felt that women were excluded from decision-making even concerning issues which directly affected them, especially moral teachings on issues such as sexuality, contraception, marriage, divorce and abortion. Because of the gender barriers to leadership, the Church was thought to be deprived of both the views and approaches of women. Even where women are present in such roles, the processes were still seen to be male-oriented. Further, it was felt that current leadership in the Church was not exercised in a collaborative or accountable manner. Not only were there few opportunities for input but there was also no forum for appeal against decisions.

Overall findings of the survey of Catholic organisations and theological institutions revealed that the participation of women as employees or students of these Catholic organisations is high, but at the senior level for both branches, that is, participation in leadership roles and in doctoral degree studies respectively, the percentage of women declines significantly. A cultural view was perceived that some positions, especially senior positions, must be held by men. The data from employer organisations highlight the structures and processes in Catholic Church organisations needing change to improve women's participation, particularly in management-leadership roles.

#### 9.7.6 Exclusion of Women from Priestly Ordination

The exclusion of women from ordination and from other crucial ministry roles such as the permanent diaconate was experienced as a major obstacle to the full participation of women. The exclusion of women from the priesthood was seen as a denial of women's right by Baptism to full participation in the Church, as well as a denial of their gifts and talents in the service of Christ and the Church at a time of great need. For many, the nature of ministry was viewed as the broader and more fundamental issue which needed to be addressed. It was stressed that what was important was the centrality of the Eucharist rather than an exclusively-male priesthood. In various aspects of the research, it was noted that respondents were reticent to speak about the ordination of women believing it to be "off limits" for the Project. Others took the pragmatic view that change was unlikely and therefore it would be more constructive and effective in the short term to turn one's attention to other issues and strategies.

The ban on the discussion of the ordination of women was seen as a barrier and a matter of justice in the Church. There was much agreement, even among people who took differing positions, that the issue of women's ordination be discussed. While views differed on the question of whether women should be ordained, there was support for an open discussion of the issue.

#### 9.7.7 The Question of the Ordination of Women Has Not Been Received by the Faithful as Expressive of their Catholic Belief

The findings of the research from the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups indicated that the question of the ordination of women has not been resolved in that it had not been received by the faithful of the Church as expressive of their Catholic belief. This finding is supported by the results of the CCLS concerning respondents' acceptance of the Church's teaching on the ordination of women. Only 42 percent of Church attenders accepted the teaching with no difficulty. A particular characteristic of the response to the question on the ordination of women was the high number of respondents (27 percent) who stated that they do not accept the teaching that women cannot be ordained priests. Younger adults were most likely to reject the teaching on the ordination of women (34 percent of women and 28 percent of men aged 15 to 39) and these figures are only marginally higher than for women and men in their 40s and 50s. What is particularly noticeable is the quite high proportion of older respondents aged 60 or more who also reject this teaching - 20 percent of women and 23 percent of men. This contrasts sharply with the fact that only 3 percent of this age group do not accept the Church's teaching authority in general.

#### 9.7.8 A Range of Other Barriers

A range of other barriers was identified including:

- compulsory celibacy of priests;
- the Church teaching and practice in relation to sexuality, marriage and the family;
- traditional teaching on artificial contraception;
- discrimination against the divorced and remarried;
- lack of role models, especially for young women;
- lack of relevance of the Church to young people;
- failure to identify the changing role of women in society as a "sign of the times";



- inability of the official Church to listen to women's voices;
- sacramental limitations of women chaplains;
- women's contribution being undervalued;
- lack of recognition of women's experience and spirituality;
- lack of education of clergy about women;
- the tradition of social, professional and religious inferiority concerning women;
- systems and structures of the Church not being in touch with the contemporary needs and experience of people;
- entrenched ideas which are resistant to change;
- sexual scandals within the Church;
- the Church's traditional teachings concerning women;
- decision-making reserved to clerics;
- the clergy's fear of women's participation;
- few opportunities to participate in leadership of the Church;
- lack of inclusive religious imagery and language;
- lack of inclusive social language;
- family responsibilities;
- lack of value placed on motherhood and family roles by society and Church;
- the current attitude of the superiority of men in our society;
- lack of adequate consultation and communication;
- failure of the Church to embrace diversity;
- lack of understanding of Aboriginal peoples and their culture;
- failure to integrate Aboriginal and Christian spirituality;
- lesbian members of the Church being ignored;
- lack of educational opportunities;
- lack of Catholic ethos and teaching in some Catholic schools;
- limitations and inequality in professional service and employment of women in the Church;
- worldly influences, involving secular pressures, consumerism and the secular culture;
- women themselves, especially those intolerant of change;
- radical feminism;
- lack of acceptance and support for solo parent families;
- significant concerns about the nature and process of annulment;
- difficulties of rural communities involving isolation and lack of information;
- lack of facilities and support for families with young children and for the disabled;
- lack of understanding and assistance given to people with disabilities and their carers;
- lack of true and full Catholic teaching and practice;
- lack of transport and child-minding facilities for women from lower socio-economic backgrounds;
- ignorance of some Australians and Catholics about the Ukrainian Church.

## **9.8 Ways in Which Women's Participation in the Church Can Be Increased**

### **9.8.1 Greater Participation Sought for Women in the Catholic Church in Australia**

More than half of the attenders who completed Questionnaire H in the CCLS responded to the invitation to say what they thought were the two most important ways of increasing women's participation in the Church. They indicated that the most important ways of promoting women's participation are prayer, increasing involvement in decision-making and Church administration, reforming beliefs and practices that do not promote equality, appointing women as spokespersons for the Church and creating opportunities for theologically qualified women to make a greater contribution to the Church. All of these were seen as more important than making greater use of inclusive language.

Given that the Survey was conducted after the publication of the apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, as outlined in Chapter 1 of this Report, it should be noted that a list of nine suggestions to increase women's participation did not include "Ordaining women as priests". It was not included as the list contained only those means of promoting women's ordination that could be acted upon. However, reference to beliefs of the Church was included in the suggestion "Reforming beliefs and practices in the Church that do not promote equality".

The overwhelming response of the written submissions, public hearings and targeted sought greater participation for women in the Church, in particular through the involvement of women in decision-making at all levels of the Church; an examination of the nature of ministry and of the ordination of women; reform of Church structures and practices to remove gender inequalities; establishment of a balance of men and women on all Church advisory groups; promotion of opportunities for women to participate in the leadership of the Church; and the full utilisation of women's talents in the service of the Church.

### **9.8.2 Importance of Prayer in the Promotion of Women's Participation**

When asked to nominate the best way to increase women's participation, by far the most popular choice of respondents to the CCLS was "Prayer". This contrasts with the responses received in the other research approaches where prayer was not identified as a suggestion in its own right. In both the written submissions and the public hearings, prayer was noted to precede, accompany and/or follow specific suggestions for action.

A short discussion of the major ways which were proposed to increase women's participation in the Church is presented below along with a list of other frequently-mentioned suggestions.

### **9.8.3 Increasing Women's Involvement in Decision-making at All Levels**

The request to increase women's involvement in decision-making at all levels was by far the most frequently-made suggestion. Involvement in decision-making was often linked with a call for women's participation in leadership. It was felt that decision-making and leadership should be inclusive of both women and men, clergy and laity, and should be undertaken in partnership at all levels. The need for women to be involved in decision-making and policy formation, particularly on issues which affect women, such as sexuality, contraception and marriage, was emphasised.

An urgent need was identified for informed discussion and broader consultation on issues to arrive at decisions. At diocesan and parish level, it was frequently recommended that a task force of lay men, women and clergy be convened to develop collaborative decision-making processes to be implemented at parish, diocesan and agency levels and to identify key occasions when such processes should be used.

#### 9.8.4 Call for a Re-examination of the Nature of Ministry

A major finding concerned the identification of an urgent need to acknowledge that the ordination of women was an issue. This was proposed by all sectors of the Church - those in favour of the ordination of women and those who were either unsure or opposed to women's ordination. With the exception of the findings of the CCLS explained above, the request to permit women to be ordained priests was a constant theme in the written submissions, public hearings and targeted groups. Proposals related to this issue were most frequent in the written submissions which ensured the greatest degree of confidentiality of authorship.

There were frequent calls for a renewed priesthood that would be inclusive of men and women, married and celibate. Revision of the Code of Canon Law, especially Canon 274 regarding ordination, was requested. It was proposed that the issue of the ordination of women be explored in the broader context of an examination of the nature of ministry and that the question of women's ordination remain open for discussion and further discernment. The proposed outcome would be the exploration of new possibilities of ministry for both women and men. Further, it was suggested that the Bishops of Australia raise these issues in Rome.

There were many suggestions concerning a re-examination of compulsory celibacy and the priesthood. It was felt that women and the entire Church would benefit greatly from the inclusion of married clergy. The positive experience of the inclusion of married priests in the Eastern Rite was noted.

In addition, it was proposed that the Church explore the expansion of the deacon's role to include women as deacons and also explore the possibility of women acolytes. An examination of particular ministries of many women in pastoral care, such as hospital chaplaincy, was seen as a matter of urgency. It was strongly recommended that women working in chaplaincy should be able to anoint the sick and the dying.

There were strong and heartfelt requests for the training and authorisation of both Aboriginal women and men for leadership and ministry. It was felt that there are people prepared to be trained and that there is support from their communities. There were many requests for funds to train Aboriginal people to minister to their own people. Aboriginal married clergy was seen as consistent with their culture and important and would bring women forward as "men and women are always there doing things together".

#### 9.8.5 Reforming Beliefs and Associated Practices That Do Not Promote Equality of Men and Women

The need to reform beliefs and associated practices that do not promote equality was recommended in all aspects of the research. It was proposed that the Church's teachings about non-discrimination need to be applied to its own affairs. The Church must refer back to Jesus and his way of relating to women and men in the Scriptures. Attitudes towards women, for example as saints or harlots, need to be addressed.

In the wider Church, there was a need to read the "signs of the times" in relation to the changing role of women, to discern the will of God and to be attentive to the movement of the Spirit.

A need to reform Church structures to remove gender inequalities and establish a balance of men and women on all Church advisory groups was emphasised. While it was acknowledged that entrenched attitudes and structures take time to change, it was felt that the Church could act positively by increasing female representation at all levels, in pastoral, ministerial and administrative areas.

#### 9.8.6 Promoting Gender Equality and Opportunities

The importance of the promotion of gender equality and equal opportunities, both within the wider society and in the Church, was stressed. It was felt that a policy of non-discrimination between men and women in the Church leadership would represent "no more than catching up with what is recognised, and indeed lawful, in other fields of human endeavour". Much attention was given to the need for affirmative action and the development of policy and programs. It was suggested that an affirmative action plan is needed in the Church and that women should be more visible at all levels of the Church. Public gestures of equality are needed. It was requested that women play a role on marriage tribunals and Bishops' committees, and be present at Bishops Conference's Plenary Meetings.

There was overwhelming agreement by all sectors of the Church that there should be no unjust discrimination in the Church on the basis of gender as both man and woman were created "*in the image of God*". Every effort must be made to abolish discrimination in a genuine attempt to break down barriers to women's participation. It was proposed that the major way in which the Church can increase the participation of women is by taking to heart the words of Paul in Galatians 3:28: "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*".

#### 9.8.7 Promoting Opportunities for Women to Participate in Leadership in the Church

In conjunction with suggestions to foster the equality of women, it was further proposed that opportunities be provided for women with suitable qualifications and backgrounds to assume positions of leadership at all levels. It was recommended that a range of educational and training opportunities be provided so that leadership positions can be taken up by an informed laity. There is a need to see women as Church spokespersons as well as men. It was stressed that women should be quoted along with men and seen in the official party at Church functions.

#### 9.8.8 Fostering Women's Participation in Management-Leadership Roles in Catholic Organisations

Results of the survey of Catholic organisations indicated the following five commonly-identified means to remove barriers and to increase women's participation in Catholic Church organisations:

- deliberate active recruitment of competent women to the executive, decision-making level in Catholic organisations. These women, acting as mentors, will give confidence to other women to apply for such senior positions;

- deliberate encouragement of women to display leadership skills and abilities by giving them opportunities to do so and responsibilities within the organisation to prepare them for promotion;
- involvement of women in planning, formulating and delivering organisational policies and programs;
- job redesign to help women to cope with the responsibilities of both careers and families; and
- fundamentally changing the culture of Catholic organisations to facilitate the participation and collaboration of men and women, clerics and laity, in the Church's mission.

#### 9.8.9 Allowing Women's Talents to Be Fully Utilised

It was recommended that women's talents and gifts be utilised more fully in the service of the Church. With a more mature understanding of sexuality, women's wisdom and experience would benefit the whole Church. Acknowledgment and affirmation of the diversity of women's experience and strengths, which could be offered to the Church and wider community, were sought. It was frequently noted that the large number of women graduates in theology represent a valuable and untapped resource for the Church. It was recommended that possibilities for placing the education, gifts and faith of such women at the service of the Church be investigated.

#### 9.8.10 Other Ways to Increase Women's Participation in the Church

Other major ways to increase women's participation in the Church included suggestions to:

- provide access for women to pastoral, religious and/or theological education;
- encourage women to have a voice in the Church;
- educate women and men in the vision of shared leadership;
- recognise women's great contribution to the Church;
- use inclusive religious imagery and language;
- use inclusive social language;
- allow women to preach;
- foster respect for women's unique contribution to the Church;
- increase women's involvement in the parish;
- set up communications processes within the Church with broad consultation;
- address Church teachings associated with sexuality and marriage including the exclusion of many people from full participation in the Church on grounds related to sexuality and marriage;
- promote continuing education of the clergy;
- develop processes for dealing with sexual abuse;
- value diversity, including the diversity of women, in the Australian Church;
- provide lay female role models in the Church, especially for the young;
- develop more collaborative ministries, especially through the establishment of diocesan pastoral councils;
- provide greater support for marriage and the family;
- revise the teaching and preaching on birth control;
- bridge the gulf between feminism and the Church's position;
- foster the active involvement of young people, especially young women;
- recognise and promote women's spirituality;
- address unjust remuneration and employment conditions for women in the Church;

- recognise and promote racial equality for ATSI peoples;
- integrate Aboriginal culture and Church celebrations;
- foster greater sensitivity, education and dialogue concerning lesbian women and the Catholic Church;
- publish the results of the Research Project;
- ensure that the Research Project is followed by action.

## 9.9 Conclusions

The Research Project has produced a wealth of data on the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia through a variety of research methodologies. The investigation has highlighted:

- a wide spectrum of views and emotions experienced as a result of the Church's stance on the role of women;
- the diverse and myriad contribution of women to the life of the Australian Church where women outnumber men in all forms of participation except in the ordained ministry, leadership and decision-making;
- varied perceptions concerning assistance and support currently offered to women to participate in the Church, but overall agreement about the lack of assistance for participation in decision-making and leadership roles;
- where barriers were identified, they related to Church structures and practices including the process of decision-making, the exercise of authority in the Church, practices and beliefs that favour men for certain positions, and opposition or lack of support from priests;
- that women's participation be increased through prayer; involvement in decision-making at all levels; acknowledgment that the ordination of women is an issue; examination of possibilities concerning a renewed priesthood inclusive of men and women, married and celibate; reform of beliefs and associated practices that do not promote equality of men and women; promotion of opportunities for women to participate in leadership roles in Church administration and organisations; and the full utilisation of women's talents.

### 9.9.1 Two Contrasting Perceptions of the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia

In the conduct of the Research Project, two broadly contrasting perceptions emerged concerning the participation of women in the Church in Australia, each involving a cluster of characteristics. While the following features of these two approaches are not exhaustive, they include those characteristics which can be identified with some confidence as a result of the Research Project. It is clear that these two broad perceptions of the role of women are not gender-specific. In dealing with women's issues, as with any social problems of great complexity, it is necessary to be wary of rigid dichotomies. However, the following table of contrasting perceptions highlights a polarity which is evident in the Catholic Church in Australia and which has theological and pastoral implications.

<b>Those who show satisfaction with the current role of women in the Church:</b>	<b>Those who seek to expand the current role of women in the Church:</b>
Seek maintenance of the <i>status quo</i> or a return to traditional teachings and values	Call for renewal based on the vision of Jesus and the Gospels
Stress obedience to the Pope and the hierarchical nature of the Church	Desire to see the spirit and vision of the Second Vatican Council implemented with emphasis on the Church as the People of God
Refer to Church documents, especially the <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i>	Refer to Scripture and the early Church
Emphasise authority and doctrine	Stress the need to consider contemporary biblical and theological scholarship
Are concerned that tolerance undermines truth	Value diversity in unity
Highlight the traditional role of women as wives and mothers, and in consecrated life	Highlight the increasingly varied contribution of women to society and to the Church
Are concerned that men and boys are not sufficiently present and active in the Church	Display feelings of pain and alienation concerning the limitations of the role of women in the Church
Emphasise concerns about worldly influences, involving secular pressures, consumerism and the secular culture	Experience as a scandal that the wider society is leading the way concerning the equality of women
See the Church as being in conflict with a hostile world	Lament the failure of the institutional Church to read the "signs of the times" concerning the equality of women
Express concerns regarding the lack of Catholic ethos and sound teaching in Catholic education	Identify the value of the large group of theologically educated women in Australia
Perceive that women seeking ordination seek power and status	Perceive that women seeking ordination wish to be of service to the Church
Believe that feminism is incompatible with Church teaching	Value moderate feminism
Are comfortable with exclusive social language and religious imagery	Call for the use of inclusive religious language and imagery and inclusive social language

#### 9.9.2 Dominant Common Characteristics of Perceptions Concerning the Participation of Women in the Church

While the characteristics listed above highlight differing perceptions of the role of women, there are some characteristics which both groups have in common. Dominant common characteristics identified in the research include:

- love of and commitment to the Church;
- concerns for the future of the Church, especially in relation to the alienation of young people;
- agreement that there be no unjust discrimination against women in the Church on the basis of gender;
- recognition and affirmation of the great contribution of women to the Australian Church.

### 9.9.3 Need for Listening and Dialogue

In some of the public hearings, the distinguishing characteristics presented were so pronounced that a polarisation of views on the role of women in the Church was evident. One of the greatest challenges to emerge from the research is the need for the Church to listen to women when they speak about their experiences, needs and aspirations. The public hearings, as authentic listening exercises, were appreciated greatly as rare opportunities in the Australian Church. It is necessary that a variety of forums be available for respectful listening to the range of views about the role and status of women from various sectors of the Church and for promotion of genuine dialogue. It is instructive that the first encyclical of Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (August 6, 1964), noted the following characteristics of dialogue:

1. *Clarity* before all else; the dialogue demands that what is said should be intelligible.
2. Our dialogue must be accompanied by *meekness*... It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity.
3. *Confidence* is also necessary; confidence not only in the power of one's own words, but also in the good will of both parties to the dialogue.
4. Finally, the *prudence* of a teacher ... who is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of his audience. (n. 81)

In a dialogue conducted with this kind of foresight, truth is wedded to charity and understanding to love. (n. 82)

### 9.9.4 Equality of Men and Women Created in the Image of God: An Issue for the Whole Church

The dominant issue arising from the research is gender equality recognising the equal dignity of women and men created in the image and likeness of God. This understanding of equality does not imply the sameness of men and women, but rather complementarity and mutuality. The findings of the research demonstrate that, while there is a range of views concerning women and the Church, there is virtually no disparity of views based on gender. It is concluded that issues concerning gender equality are not just concerns for women only but rather issues for the Church as a whole. It is true that many women are alienated from the Catholic Church. It is also true that many men are alienated.

### 9.9.5 Tensions in the Findings

The results of the Research Project highlight tensions in the Catholic Church in Australia and in the universal Church:

- An understanding of the Church as the saving presence of Christ was seen as fundamental to its nature. However, the contemporary Church was experienced by many as failing to reflect the person and message of Jesus, especially in his radical relationship with women.
- The alienation of many women from the Church arises, not because the demands of serving the Gospel and the Church are too great, but rather because there are too few and limited ways to be of service in the decision-making, leadership and ministerial roles of the Church.



- Of those currently studying theology in Australia at present, women form the majority at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, usually undertaking their studies at their own expense. However, there are few opportunities for such women to utilise their qualifications and experience beyond the teaching profession.
- In recent years, the Church has given prominence to human dignity and rights and yet the official Church is seen as having failed to apply fully its own social justice teachings to the participation of women in the Church.
- The demands of the Gospel are proclaimed to be counter-cultural. However, the Church is seen to be lagging behind the wider Australian society in recognising and affirming the equality of women.
- The task of the contemporary Church to discern God's revelation in relation to the equality of woman and man as one in Christ (Galatians 3:28) requires that, in the examination of its tradition, the Church differentiate between cultural norms and the Gospel message.
- The current priority given to a celibate male priesthood is seen to be at odds with the proclamation that the Eucharist is the source and summit of Church life.
- The Catholic Church in Australia is experiencing a crisis in vocations to the male celibate priesthood. The current priesthood is ageing and declining in numbers. Many women in the Church experience what they regard as a strong call to use their talents and gifts in the service of Christ and the Church through the priesthood. It is felt that the Church is failing to recognise genuine signs of the presence and purpose of God.

#### 9.9.6 A Moment of Grace in the Catholic Church in Australia

In 1963 Pope John XXIII, reflecting on the "signs of the times" identified the emergence of women asserting their right to be treated with dignity and equality as one of the major thrusts of our times (*Pacem in Terris*, n. 41). In the contemporary Church there is an urgent need to read the "signs of the times", to discern the will of God and to be open to renewal. The scope of the task and the demands of this change of consciousness are not to be underestimated. Yet, at the commencement of the third millennium, many see this challenge as a unique opportunity, a moment of grace in the Catholic Church in Australia. The participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia has been examined with courage. Leadership is required to articulate a vision that is more inclusive of women and men who have come to feel they are on the margins, that they are not being listened to. Effective management of such change is then required.

It is hoped that the results of the Research Project will provide a basis for renewed theological reflection, pastoral planning and dialogue with women. It was stated at the commencement of this Report that the *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women* was a source of inspiration for the Research Project. The words of this letter are recalled once more to highlight our need to follow the example of Jesus Christ in his relationship with women:

It is thus my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the "genius of women", not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God's plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church. (n.10)

When it comes to setting women free from every kind of exploitation and domination, the Gospel contains an ever relevant message which goes back to the attitude of Jesus Christ himself. Transcending the established norms of his own culture, Jesus treated women with openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honoured the dignity which women have always possessed according to God's plan and in his love. As we look to Christ at the end of this Second Millennium, it is natural to ask ourselves: how much of his message has been heard and acted upon? (n.3)