

# **The Place and Role of Women in the Catholic Church**

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**Abstract:** Women are stepping out of the *restricted space* of domestic walls to wider horizons in life, thus affirming their personhood and equality with men. The very integrity of the church and the credibility of its mission demands a new understanding of where women stand and how women and men together can make of the church a sacrament of God's vision for humanity. This re-imagining is not something that would happen by itself. It calls for a constructive and innovative move on the part of the church to address this question openly.

**Keywords:** Women in the Church, Prophetic Challenge, pro-active response, the paradox of women's place.

## **Introduction**

This is indeed an historic moment: Women are stepping out of the *restricted space* of domestic walls to wider horizons in life, thus affirming their personhood and equality with men. The changing role of women in society has been identified as one of the most significant trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The myth: '*biology is women's destiny*' is being deconstructed existentially, proving its falsity and deceptiveness. Women are increasingly seen and heard among politicians, entrepreneurs, professionals, activists, and artists. More and more women are leading NGO's and People's Movements. Moving beyond kitchens and child-care centres, they have reached law courts, parliaments, research laboratories and even outer space. Discovering the 'power within', women are courageously making a breakthrough into the space reserved for 'men alone', thus leading humanity to a new consciousness of being human.

But this is not *her-story* in its entirety. A great majority of women continue to be silenced and suppressed, battered, bargained and burnt alive. The startling statistics of violence and rape is revealing of women's subjugation and 'objectified' status in society (UN 1995: 17-24). The 'feminization of poverty' is no longer a concept that needs explanation. Millions of women are spending themselves toiling for the mere survival of their children and families. At its worst, women are not just deprived of resources that foster life and growth into personhood. Many are denied even the very right to life as clearly evident from the alarming rate of the falling sex ratio in India. In a write-up on '*Our missing women*', Amartya Sen is quoted as holding India responsible for 32 million missing women in the world. These women ought to have been present in India if our sex ratios were on a par with the world. But some inhuman conspiracy of "gender fixing" is gradually eliminating India's females. The writer asks a very poignant question at the end: "*Is anyone noticing?*" (India Today 2003: 14-20).

Is the Church noticing what is happening to women worldwide? The 'place and role of women in the church' would have meaning, when seen against the backdrop of the global reality of women. Women are awakening to a new consciousness of who they are, claiming agency to the discovery of their true identity and personhood. This collective awakening of women is indeed a global experience cutting across the barriers of nation, race, colour or creed. Down the road of historical unfolding of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *her-story* has gained greater import in its struggle to find expression. Women's experiences of marginalization and their struggles as subalterns in search of their trueselves, are gradually pervading the human consciousness. Women's issues are becoming global concerns.

Certainly, we have indications of the Church's sensitivity to women's reality in the official documents. The opening words of *Mulieris Dignitatem* considers '*the dignity and the vocation of women – a subject of constant human and Christian reflection*' and expresses awareness of '*the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved* (MD 1). The '*hour*' is at hand, a *kairos* that calls for new responses. In this paper, we shall look at the place and role of women in the church

in the light of the awareness of this 'hour'. We will analyze first the present situation of women in the church, explore the emerging trends of the women of our times, and spell out some responses to the current challenges in the light of our Christian heritage.

## **1. Women's Place in the Church: The Great Paradox**

Traditionally, catholic women are known for their loyalty to the church: the church in which they have grown up, where they have found space for devotion, scope for charity and peace. For centuries women have conformed unquestioningly to their roles as submissive wives, self-giving mothers or docile and disciplined religious, the roles which the church has assigned to them. Through their uncompromising commitment, women have been the pillars of the church, internalising these roles and expectations. One might ask: If women are at ease with the 'place' given to them in the church – as it seems to be – what is the problem?

Analysis of the pastoral praxis of the catholic church from a woman's perspective would reveal the crux of the issue at stake: the paradoxical tension between women's presence and absence is what defines their place in the church.

### **1.1 Visible yet Silent**

A cursory glance at the local communities, whether in sophisticated urban parishes or remote rural villages, discloses women as the most visible lot. One can't help but see them everywhere. They fill up the pews in all the services as they are a majority in most parish congregations and participate strongly in the spiritual and liturgical life of the church. Besides, women are always present decorating altars, clearing up the sacristies, running community centres, visiting the sick and the aged, teaching catechism in Sunday schools, and animating Basic Christian Communities. A wide variety of ministries – fund-raising, teaching and counselling have been women's lot. Without women's active participation it would even seem that the life and dynamism of the local communities would grind to a halt.

The irony of the issue is that in spite of the 'high visibility' of women in the pastoral field, they are not involved on the level in

which strategic planning is done. Women may be members of parish and diocesan councils, but they have little access to participation at the core, central, nerve centres, where decisions that affect the life and mission of the church are deliberated and made. The link between Orders and jurisdiction keep women out of leadership in the Catholic Church. Women are absent or minimally present in the consultative bodies, which lend assistance and advice to Bishop's Conferences, Synods and other decision-making organs. They do not have the opportunity to participate in discourses that shape Christian identity and mission. In the words of Sandra Schneiders:

Women have been virtually excluded from any participation in the shaping of the church's internal and external policy. The church's laws regarding marriage have been formulated without the contribution of the women whose experience is in question. Canon law regarding religious, of whom three out of every four in the church are women, has been formulated by men without the input of the women whose lives it governs and, in most respects, it is also enforced by men. Official church documents on every kind of social problem — poverty, war, economics, labour, medical ethics, political involvement — have been formulated without the contribution of women who constitute the vast majority of the poor and the starving throughout the world, who make fifty-nine cents to every dollar made by men for comparable work in this country, who experience in their bodies as mothers, a disproportionate number of the medical problems that raise moral issues, who almost always find themselves the sole support of dependent children when marriages collapse (*Schneiders in [http: www.spiritualitytoday.org](http://www.spiritualitytoday.org)*).

Women lack voice, and the dearth of catholic women in leadership speaks volumes of women's place in the church. Women incarnate the '*diakonia*' of the church in the literal meaning of the word 'waiting at tables' in all that is implied by service, but they are barred from diaconate as ministry.

The category of women most visible in the church are the women religious: a group known for its fidelity and dependability. In their public dedication to the cause of Christ, they incarnate the mission of the church even in the remotest corners of the world through varied commitments. They minister to the poor and the marginalized in ways that make the church visible and credible.

Though traditionally confined to institutionalized tasks, women religious are searching for ways that would give expression to their true identity and vocation in the church. Yet, their subordinate status makes obvious the subservient role of women in the church.

## 1.2 Conditioned by Gender

Gender inequality permeates all aspects of life. Socialization of women and men in gender role stereotyping, is a major characteristic of patriarchal conditioning. Women are considered to be weak, sensitive, emotional, loyal, gentle, dependent, submissive, passive and the like, whereas men are taken to be strong, ambitious, independent, rational, decisive, logical, and achievement oriented. Consequently, only men are expected to think and make decisions, whereas women are expected to obey in loving service. Regina Coll, in an essay titled '*The Socialization of Women into a Patriarchal System*,' holds the family, the educational system and the church responsible for reinforcing stereotypic gender roles. Pointing to the role that religion plays in this conditioning, she identifies the Christian virtues most honoured in women as passivity, dependency, self-abnegation and other-centredness. Consequently women are not treated as full and equal members in society or in the church (Coll 1982: 5-15). What is worse, women can be thoroughly exploited under the guise of being virtuous.

Women tend to internalize stereotyped role expectations and it becomes detrimental to their growth as persons. When stereotyping has religious sanctions, it becomes all the more conditioning. Feminist theologians are questioning certain ways by which women are religiously socialized into self-denial as a feminine virtue (Schussler Fiorenza 1994: 302, Oseik 1986).

As a consequence of this socialization, women tend to suppress their real self and do not realize their God-given potential and personhood. Studies have demonstrated the debilitating effect of stereotyping women. According to one study, women experience anxiety when confronted by the possibility of success because the competence, independence and competition prerequisite to such success are considered inconsistent with the stereotypic view of women. When a woman believes that being in leadership is contrary to her

definition of womanhood, she will opt for subservient roles rather than experience threat to her femininity (Durka 1982: 45-59).

Gender role stereotyping is also detrimental to the mission of the church. For a great majority of women, the only 'mission' opportunities available are the traditionally "feminine" tasks of nurturance and service. Women's other ministerial gifts remain dormant and underdeveloped. Polarization of sexes, consequent of gender role stereotyping, keeps women and men apart as two unrelated groups without a common search and vision. When women are excluded from active involvement at the planning level, the pastoral vision can become partial, patriarchal and clerically biased. Deprived of women's contribution from their experiential knowledge and wisdom, the church's mission is often impoverished.

### **1.3 As 'Perceived' Officially**

Woman's image as projected in the ecclesial documents unveils the place given to women by the official church. The church has gone a long way from the horrendous misogyny of the patristic times (Rueither 1974: 150-183) to affirming women's dignity as persons created in God's image. However, questions are raised regarding the Catholic Church's sensibilities to women's issues. "Are the contents of the official texts compatible with the emerging consciousness of women?" asks Nadine Foley. In her opinion, the important new developments taking place in the human consciousness need to be perceived. And it is appropriate that the import of such trends become matter for inclusion in the continuing experience of a living church, as well as for comments and observation by a teaching church (Foley 1977: 82-108).

The official teaching has evolved in successive periods of the church's history, in response to the attempts the church has made to dialogue with the modern world. Yet the struggle to define woman's rightful place in the church is clearly evident in the official texts. A few significant passages from the conciliar and post-conciliar documents will throw light on our search.

Various texts show awareness of women's changing position in the contemporary world. In the 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, the visionary Pope John XXIII spoke of women coming into public life as one of the 'signs of the times' and gave expression to women's deeper questions: "Since women are becoming more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life" (41).

The Second Vatican Council showed sensitivity to the women's question as expressed, though scantily, in some of its documents.<sup>1</sup> In its Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, the Council urges: "Since in our days, women are taking an increasingly active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that they participate more widely also in the various fields of the Church's apostolate" (AA 9). Nadine Foley questions the church's agenda if it is not too tentative in responding to the fact that women are becoming more active in the present society. According to her, the argument that women should participate in the community life of society, and likewise of the church, has its positive value insofar as it respects the fact that the church is enculturated as a human institution, that true social and cultural transformation has its repercussion within the church. It is deficient however, since as an operative principle it renders the church a follower rather than a leader in proclaiming and manifesting the full equality of the human person (Foley 1977: 56).

Women's concerns are further voiced in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "Where they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves equity with men before the law" (9). *Gaudium et Spes* also refers to discrimination based on sex as contrary to God's will and acknowledges the involvement of women in almost all spheres of activity<sup>2</sup>. Yet the fundamental position of the church on women is repeatedly expressed in reference to women's role in the family. While mentioning the parents' joint deliberation in the education of the children, the Council underlines the mother's role: "The children, especially the younger ones among them need the care of their mother at home. This domestic role of hers must be safely preserved, though the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account" (GS 52).

While observing the fact that women are employed in almost every area of life, *Gaudium et Spes* continues to affirm women's proper role: "It is appropriate that they should be able to assume their full proper role in accordance with their own nature" (GS 60). What is implied by "full proper role" is not explicit in the text though it is repeatedly hinted at in other documents and statements<sup>3</sup>. The Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of John Paul II on the dignity and vocation of women spells out motherhood – virginity as two dimensions of women's vocation.<sup>4</sup> This focus is also well reflected in the Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women on the occasion of the Beijing Conference in his expression of gratitude to women for what they represent in the life of humanity (Paul II 1995).

The official church does uphold the dignity of women and strives to promote women's participation in the different areas of non-ordained ministries and tasks. However, in the repeated allusion to the "specifically feminine" characteristics and roles of women, one would suspect – applying the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' – a betrayal of the official church's understanding of women in stereotyped roles. Here we see the continuous struggle on the part of the official church to really comprehend women's place as partners in mission, which would imply going beyond complementarity to mutuality.

## **2. The Women of Our Times: Emerging Trends**

In affirming the full equality of woman as a human person, would the church be a leader or a follower? This question, already insinuated by Nadine Foley needs a deeper analysis, which is beyond the scope of this reflection. As the church tends to take a 'follower mode' in responding to the *signs of the times*, reading the *signs* could throw light on its implications *vis-a-vis* women's role in the church.

"*One is not born a woman, one becomes one*". This much quoted phrase of Simone de Beauvoir from her legendary work *The Second Sex*, gives expression to the process beneath the emerging trends affecting womankind across the globe. Over the last two centuries, women: rich, poor; white, coloured; with or without any religious affiliations; and with different sexual preferences are all



moving towards a new consciousness of what it means to be a woman. Women are '*becoming*'. The Women's Movement set in motion in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century and revived in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is sweeping like a wild fire across the north-south/east-west divide, creating ripples of awakening among women, though in varying degrees. The following excerpt from *A Gender Diary* would throw light on this evolving consciousness of women:

In the early days of this wave of the women's movement, I sat in a weekly consciousness-raising group with my friend A. We compared notes recently: What did you think was happening? How did you think our lives were going to change? A, said she had felt, 'Now I can be a woman; it is no longer so humiliating. I can stop fantasizing that secretly I am a man, as I used to. Now I can value what was once my shame (Snitow 1996: 506).

The women's movement, in spite of its limitations and anomalies, is affecting women's lives in myriad ways. Women are recovering their bodies, their minds, their voice and their agency. Even in the so called 'third world' countries, women are waking up to an awareness of their dis-empowered state, and are learning to identify without fear the cultural, political and religious forces that are marginalizing and domesticating them. Women's resistance to the powers of death is giving visibility to the emerging woman who refuses to be a victim.<sup>5</sup>

Women are not just naming the life denying influences at work in human relationships in society. They are claiming agency for their lives. Taking back the 'lost opportunities' in different fields such as education, employment, socio-political involvement and the like, women are taking leaping strides in the process of becoming '*who they are*.'<sup>6</sup> For more than a decade, the concept of 'empowerment' has become prominent in development debate, and particularly so with regard to women. The term empowerment is frequently used to describe a process wherein the powerless or disempowered gain a greater share of control over resources and decision-making. Empowerment is about power and changing the balance of power. Since women are generally accepted as the most disempowered members of the oppressed classes, the term 'women's empowerment' has come to be associated with women's struggle for justice and equality.<sup>7</sup>

Education is identified as central to the process of empowerment. From the women's perspective, education is seen as a dynamic process of learning in which women gain access to meaningful information, engage in critical reflection, and act as a collective to transform the material and social conditions of their existence in some way. Women's Groups popularly known as *Mahila Mandals* be it in rural villages or urban slums are constantly engaged in providing this empowering education to the poor women. The middle class and the rich women, who may have access to university education, also avail of empowering education through consciousness-raising programmes. In these programmes women share their experiences of powerlessness, oppression, anger and pain; engage in gender and societal analysis, which enables them to link their experiences to structural factors. Women who are rich or poor are finding ways of developing new skills and organization-building so as to look for ways in which they can change their situations through their own strength and actions.

Today we hear women speak of empowerment through economic interventions. Strengthening women's economic status has an immediate effect on their self-image and family life. When women have greater access to resources, their self-esteem increases, enabling them to move from passive dependency to self-confidence. Women's economic empowerment has a direct bearing on their family life. Women are becoming more assertive in decision-making and are contributing constructively to the welfare of the family and the larger community. The rapidly mushrooming Micro-Credit projects and Self- Help Groups (SHG's) across the country, give ample evidence to the effects of women's empowerment through economic intervention. NGOs working with women's groups at the grassroots, testify to the process of women growing in self-confidence as they become economically independent. The profile of the simple village woman is changing from subservience to self-reliance.

On the political front too women are claiming agency. Women's political consciousness, which marked the suffrage movement, has evolved over the century to a greater involvement and commitment in the field of politics. Women are making their presence felt and their voice is beginning to be heard from the higher levels of political

advocacy, to the local self-government at the level of the Gram Panchayats.<sup>8</sup> India can boast today of having five women Chief ministers even though the 33% reservation issue continues to be debated.

Women's awakening is also voicing concern over the health and well-being of the planet. The eco-feminist movement over the last two decades has contributed much towards creating an ecological sensitivity in the human consciousness<sup>9</sup>. Within the patriarchal framework, women are considered to be 'women's worst enemy'. Women are identifying the undercurrents of this myth and are making a breakthrough from isolation to a new bonding, which they name as sisterhood. In this bonding they are finding the space for reclaiming their power and their emerging identity. Women's collectives and the different forums of solidarity and networking ([www.unifem.unep.org](http://www.unifem.unep.org)., [www.un.org/womenwatch](http://www.un.org/womenwatch)., [www.twinside.org](http://www.twinside.org).) are bringing women together to become a collective force, to give voice to their shared struggles and concerns, hopes and dreams. The United Nations has played and continues to play a leading role in assisting this process of women's global awakening.<sup>10</sup>

Women are coming of age. Even though the fact of being conditioned to an infantile state for centuries continues to have its impact, they are on the path of reclaiming their personhood and human dignity. Women's concerns are no longer considered the problem of one half of humanity alone. They are becoming human concerns on which would depend the health and well-being of the human family. The path ahead for women may not be smooth. But it has reached a point of no return.

### **3. The Emerging Christian Woman: A Prophetic Challenge**

Having analyzed the experience of women in the Catholic Church and having looked into the evolving trends affecting women today, it is necessary to interpret this human reality in the light of faith. This hermeneutic task is possible by exploring our Christian heritage encapsulated in the Jesus experience and the praxis of the early church. And it requires a prophetic vision to bridge the human experience with the divine wisdom. This is the challenge before the church in

examining the place and role of women. The church's prophetic consciousness found some lucidity in the awareness of making the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the people its own, (cf. *GS*. 1). But to discover its full import, which would make the church, a '*sign and sacrament of salvation*', we need to follow the footsteps of the Master.

### **3.1 Remembering the Jesus story**

The Gospel narratives are dotted with the many encounters and experiences of women with Jesus. We shall deploy the 'hermeneutics of remembrance' to receive Sophia – Wisdom personified in the life of Jesus.

Jesus' encounter with women does not begin with his public ministry. Being '*born of a woman*': a woman of the margins '*who had no place at the inn*', and who proclaimed loudly of God's subversive ways in '*bringing down the conceited and raising up the lowly*', Jesus certainly was present to the subaltern realities of the women of his times. The periphery where Jesus pitched his tent was not a strange place for the women as well. It was the place that the Jewish society had so clearly demarked for them in the socio-political, economic and religious spheres. No wonder, women were among the primary and active recipients of the gift of the *Good News* offered to the *anâwîm*. We shall look at a few gospel stories which could give us light in understanding women's place in the church of today.

#### **3.1.1 A Sense of Being 'at Home'**

Jesus and the women felt at home with each other as is clear from the many texts, which speak about their encounters. Jesus certainly did not shun the company of women as though they were the '*devil's gateway*', whose proximity would impede access to the Holy of Holies. Luke tells us that women were among the close circle of disciples who accompanied him, sharing his life and ministry. They are even named: Mary, Joanna, Susanna... (Lk 8:1-3), and at a time when a woman's legal identity was most insignificant. Jesus relaxed in the company of his women friends like Mary and Martha, broke through the well defined 'theological boundaries' that

alienated the women and men of his time, by making them participate in his teachings. Women are there with Jesus from birth, through his growth and in his ministry, and all the more at the most crucial moments: at the foot of the cross, at the tomb, and as the first witnesses of His resurrection, accompanying him on his journey of life from the womb to the tomb and still beyond.

What has happened to the women in the bargain? They were *converted to life*, affirmed as human persons who reflect God's own image and likeness (Gen 1:27). Conversion from the perspective of those in the margins is not to a denial of themselves, but to a greater affirmation of their true self, their worth as persons. In traditional Christian theology, conversion is interpreted, as turning away from sin and sin is understood as pride and rebellion against God. In the words of Anne Carr, such categories relate more to the experiences of men, in cultures that encourage them towards roles of domination and power. Women's temptation or "sin" conversely refers to lack of self-assertion...failure to assume responsibility and make choices for themselves, failure to discover their own personhood and uniqueness rather than finding their whole meaning in a too easy sacrifice of self for others<sup>11</sup>. In being with Jesus, women, discovered their uniqueness, their meaning and their mission.

### 3.1.2 Breakthrough into Wholeness

'Breaking,' colours many of the gospel stories that involve Jesus with women. Prominent among them is the story of Jesus healing the bent woman (Lk 13: 10-17). The woman was 'bent' (*ânâh*), that is diminished, deprived of the means, the capacity or the dignity she needed, to lead a full human life (Soares-Prabhu 2000: 175). Certainly, to notice this bent woman Jesus had to *break* the rule of sex-segregation in the synagogue as women were not allowed anywhere near the space reserved for men. What is more significant is the breaking of the Sabbath law. As observed by Soares-Prabhu, Jesus breaks the Sabbath whenever human need demands it. Every human institution or law no matter how sacred, is thus subjected to human need (Soares-Prabhu 2000: 284). Jesus stresses the *urgency* to free the woman from her dehumanizing condition. Her Personhood is affirmed in addressing her as '*daughter*'. He extends to her the life-

giving touch at the cost of infuriating the self-righteous onlookers. Jesus' prophetic stand reveals the liberative thrust of the Christian vision.

Another significant 'breaking' story is the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (cf. Lk 8:43-48). Considered ritually impure and polluting (cf. Lev 15:25), the woman is far beyond the precincts of the religious establishment. Here again, healing is accomplished through touch. Courage begets courage. Freedom begets freedom. The freedom of Jesus to breakthrough the oppressive religious conditioning, liberates the woman and makes her whole. Jesus' prophetic courage and freedom comes from his understanding of life from the viewpoint of the subalterns, something that we have yet to learn.

Women continue to be 'bent' in society and in the church.<sup>12</sup> Unless she is straightened up how can she play a role in the church that corresponds to her dignity and personhood? The challenge today is to revive in the church the prophetic mission of Jesus.

### **3.1.3 Collaborators in Mission**

Women collaborated in the mission of Jesus in different capacities. Mary, his mother, anticipates the hour of his entry into public ministry (cf. Jn 2:1-11). Ruether defines Mariology as symbolic ecclesiology and points out that Lucan Mariology suggests a real co-creatorship between God and humanity, in this case, woman (Radford Ruether 1983: 154).

The co-creatorship between God and women according to the scriptural data is not limited to the biological birthing. Women are dynamically involved in the Jesus movement. Fiorenza calls women the first non-Jews to become part of the Jesus Movement. A woman's primary role in the beginnings of the Christian community in Samaria is clearly illustrated in Jn 4: 1-42. Another significant woman-leader is the Syrophoenician woman (cf. Mk: 7:25-30). Although she respects the primacy of the "children of Israel", she nevertheless makes a theological argument against limiting the inclusive messianic table community of Jesus to Israel alone. Fiorenza opines that "The Syrophoenician woman whose adroit argument opened up a future of freedom and wholeness for her daughter, has also become the

historically-still-visible advocate of such a future for gentiles. She has become the apostolic ‘foremother’ of all gentile Christians (Fiorenza 1983: 130).

The Galilean women disciples, whose leader was obviously Mary of Magdala, needs a special mention. Even when most of the other disciples fled Jerusalem after the dark hours of Jesus’ arrest and execution, these women stayed back for his burial. In their persistent following of Jesus even after his death, they become the privileged ones to be the first witnesses of the resurrection. “By keeping alive the good news about the manifestation of God’s life-giving power in Jesus of Nazareth, among the followers and friends of Jesus, the Galilean women continued the movement initiated by Jesus”(Fiorenza 1983: 139). These women’s fidelity and commitment to realizing Jesus’ vision are foundational in the birthing process of the church.

Remembrance of these Gospel stories has tremendous theological and pastoral import for our times particularly on the question under consideration: women’s place and role in the church. Affirmation of women’s personhood and their participation in ministry, calls for a breakthrough of set theological categories and thinking patterns. The jar that holds the ‘*pricey nard*’ needs to be broken even at the cost of going beyond our calculative conclusions. Then only can the redeeming grace gush forth bringing abundance of life to the church, to women as well as men, thus making of the church a credible sign to society.

### 3.2 The Praxis of the Early Church

The significant role that women have played in the early Christian community could also help us in the search for finding women’s place in the church of today. Scanning through the sketchy information available in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul, the feminist theologians<sup>13</sup> have brought to surface women’s vitality in the early church. Fiorenza calls the early Christian missionary movement *Equality in the Power of the Spirit* (Schussler Fiorenza 1993: 160).

This equality is demonstrated mainly in women’s role as foundresses of house churches and co-workers of Paul. The book of Acts mentions many of these women in whose houses the Chris-

tian community gathered. The house churches were a decisive factor in the missionary movement in so far as they provided space, support and actual leadership for the community (Elisabeth Schüssler 1993: 175).

Mary, mentioned in Acts 12: 12-17, was in charge of the house church in Jerusalem. Other prominent women include Lydia (16: 14), Damaris (17:34) and Prisca (18: 2ff).

The women mentioned in Pauline letters are also significant for understanding the role women have played in the early church. Phoebe is addressed as diakonos (Rom 16: 1) and Junia as apostle (16: 7). Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis are referred to as having “laboured hard in the Lord” (16:6,12). In Phil 4:2-3, Euodia and Syntyche are mentioned as having contended side by side with Paul. More names of women can be detected on a closer scrutiny of the book of Acts and the Pauline letters. But what is important is to acknowledge women’s close collaboration with men in the early phases of Christianity. This Christian heritage can help us to re-examine the roles that women are now playing and ought to play in the mission of the church today.

### **3.3 Towards a Pro-active Response**

Having remembered the Jesus story and the praxis of the early church against the ‘sign’ of women’s changing role in society, we shall look into the Christian response. Anne Carr calls the phenomenon of women coming to a new consciousness, a transforming grace to the church (Schüssler 1990). Receptivity to the grace of this hour implies certain creative steps, which would involve:

#### ***3.3.1 Initiating a creative dialogue between the official church and women***

A role model to this dialogue we have in the Johannine account of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. Jesus meets her where she is: at the well, a subaltern space where her human reality and the divine potential meet. She is a resourceful dialogue partner though initially reticent due to her own socialization. But in this sacred space of their encounter, she discovers her mission.



The church of today needs this space of dialogue. Just as the church has entered into a creative dialogue with other religions, cultures and ideologies, dialogue with its women is imperative. Women need to speak aloud their concerns, their search and their vision. They need to be heard. Feminist theology is coming of age and that needs to be discussed on an adult level. An open discourse on ministry, taking into consideration the updated biblical expertise, ecumenical sensibilities, and the changing reality of women in today's world is crucial. Only through a constructive dialogue can the untapped potential of women's resources be explored and shared so as to live the mission of Christ with greater meaning and relevance.

### ***3.3.2 Greater Inclusion of Women in the Life of the Church***

A conspicuous characteristic of Jesus' ministry was inclusiveness. In contrast with the Jewish traditions of social and religious segregation and discrimination, Jesus' vision is presented as the great table fellowship, which is open to all and inclusive of all. Fiorenza calls the 'Basileia vision of Jesus as the praxis of inclusive wholeness' (Elisabeth Schüssler 1993: 118).

Women call for a greater inclusion into the life of the church, in its policy making and decisions. The feminist slogan '*We make policy, not coffee*' is perhaps beginning to be heard within the ecclesial boundaries too. For long women have been passive recipients of spirituality, understanding of Christian ethics and the pastoral vision. Today, women's voice, experience and expertise need to be included into the dynamic process of religious symbol-making, planning and mission responses. Failing to do so affects not just women's position, but the church's very identity as expressed by a woman when she said: "the church gets reduced to its masculine part, like a body which has decided to live with only half of itself, with half of its possibility of loving, feeling, deciding, acting. A half that remains always identical without the novelty and fruitfulness that the other half could bring."<sup>14</sup>

### 3.3.3 *Finding pathways to effective partnership*

Much is spoken about partnership.<sup>15</sup> Women are weary of a tradition in the Catholic Church that understands the male-female partnership in mission as ‘complementarity’, which reinforces gender-role stereotyping, and the consequent dichotomy in the church’s being. There is need for greater mutuality in mission, which implies working out new structures of collaboration at the parochial and diocesan levels and at the national and international commissions. More women need to be seen and heard in the field of theological formation, spiritual direction and leadership and more men in creative expressions of *diakonia*. Partnership is a concept that needs to be delved into at greater depth so that women’s place and role in the church becomes clearer.

### Conclusion

In these present times at the beginning of the third millennium, when humanity is being bombarded by rapid evolutionary changes, a re-imagining of women’s role in the mission of the church is a vital issue. The very integrity of the church and the credibility of its mission demands a new understanding of where women stand and how women and men together can make of the church a sacrament of God’s vision for humanity. This re-imagining is not something that would happen by itself. It calls for a constructive and innovative move on the part of the church to address this question openly.

Women on their part, in their struggle to find their rightful place in the church, experience the birthing of a new self as expressed in the poem:

*“...part of me is missing”  
“Where is “me”  
A part of me is missing  
Aborted-still born-  
Since that Garden time  
Yet without plan or warning  
Ever and ever again moving  
Deep within my body and soul  
A person “image of God”*

## WOMAN

*Comes gasping, grasping*

*For the breath of life*

*Struggling to be born and live free...*" (Bennet 1975: 3).

The challenge of the hour is to *midwife* this *birthing* in women. Then only will they find their true place and role in the church.

## Notes

1. At the end of the second session of the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens of Belgium seemed to have asked his fellow bishops: "Why are we even discussing the reality of the church when half of the church is not even represented here?" This provocative question, midway through a council that was then totally male, was a breakthrough that prodded council members to invite a few "token" women to the ensuing sessions. According to Mary Luke Tobin, one of the auditors at the Council, "that women auditors were at the council-only 15 of us were invited from as many countries-was at least an important first step. And there was the further valuable insight of a council theologian, Bernard Haring, C.S.S.R. that if women were invited, they should have a place in the commissions formulating the documents. As a result, some were invited to attend commission meetings. There we were allowed to speak as freely as we wished, and each of us did speak. Although we did not create a countervailing current turning around the attitude toward women, the press noticed our presence immediately, and at least a few bishops began to see the problems more clearly. There was some effort within the Commission on the Church in the Modern World to take a stand for women by recognizing the prevailing discrimination against them." Available from <http://www.catholicdigest.org>.
2. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* nos. 29, 60, Abbot and Gallagher eds., *The Documents of Vatican II*.
3. In the 1975 document *The Role of Women in Church and Society: Disciples and Co-Workers*, Pope Paul VI referred to complementarity of roles, "... to speak of rights does not resolve the problem, which is more profound; it is necessary to aim at an effective complementarity, so that men and women bring their *proper riches* and dynamism to the building of the world" See Nadine Foley (1977), 90.
4. Numbers 17-22 of *Mulieris Dignitatem* is dedicated to explain theologically the essential vocation of women as mothers as virgins.
5. The heroic story of Nisha Sharma, a Delhi girl who refused to become

the victim of dowry harassment hit the headlines of leading newspapers and magazines in May 2003. Through her courageous stand, she has become a role model to the many young girls haunted by the same evil of dowry.

6. Women's journals like *Womens Link*; *Women in Action*, *Manushi*, *In God's Image* etc. give much information and reflections on women's awakening which has become a global event.
7. In a month long South Asian workshop on women and development organised in 1991 by FAO's Freedom from Hunger Campaign –Action for Development, in which 36 women from six countries participated, shared information and reviewed experiences of different organisations involved with women's development/empowerment. This workshop spelled out the indicators of women's empowerment. See Srilatha Batliwala, *Empowerment of Women in South Asia: Concepts and Practices*, New Delhi: FFHC/AD, 1993.
8. Women's political voice is beginning to be heard not just in governmental and administrative levels. Women are questioning the imperialism of globalisation and inquiring into policymaking at the national and international levels. See Maithreyi Krishna *Challenges before Women's Movement in a Changing context*, Economic and Political Weekly, October (2003), pp 36-46 and Sharmila Rege, *Feminist Contributions to Globalisation Discourses*, Ibid pp 55-63.
9. See Maria Mies, Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism: Reconnecting a Divided World*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993; Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998. The Chipko movement in the Himalayas where women took a lead in protecting the trees have acclaimed the fame for global consciousness raising. See Haripriya Rangan, *Chipko into Himalayan History*, Barnes and Noble, 2001.
10. Since the declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year, the United Nations has raised its prophetic voice in defending women's rights and promoting their dignity as human persons. Decade for Women (1975-1985), and the major World Conferences, testifies to the commitment of United Nations to this noble task. Visit <http://www.un.org/womenwatch>.
11. Feminist theologians have consistently questioned the traditional Christian doctrine of sin and grace as cast exclusively in terms of male experience. See Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*, San Francisco: Harper 1990,8. Elizabeth Johnson speaks of re-interpreting the Christian doctrine in *She who is*, New York: Crossroads, 1994; Mary Grey has also contributed along the same lines of thought. See her *Redeeming the Dream*, Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2003.

12. In the many workshops organised for women religious in India as part of the programme initiated by Streevani for the empowerment of women religious, the reality of the 'bent woman' today is brought out. Women continue to be bent in Indian society due to their secondary status and lack of access to resources in life. Many women religious have observed that in the church too women continue to be 'bent' due to their subordination, and exclusion from leadership and decision-making.
13. Feminist theologians like Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Letty Russel, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Philis Trible have done commendable work on this question.
14. Amelia Vasquez quotes a woman in the FABC Paper 72, 'Women and Church Services to Life in Asia'.
15. A national Consultation held recently in Pune to deliberate on the question of 'Female-Male Partnership in the Mission of the Church' called for greater collaboration between women and men at all levels in the church's mission. This Consultation organised by Streevani (Pune) as part of its commitment to the empowerment of women religious in India, was held at Ishvani Kendra, Pune from 8-10 December 2003.
16. Organisations like Asian Women's Research Centre (AWRC), All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) are effective at the Asian level. For information at the international level, visit <http://www.unifem.undep.org>; [www.un.org/womenwatch](http://www.un.org/womenwatch); [www.twinside.org](http://www.twinside.org).

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