

A Priest for Equality Expanding View Al Fritsch, SJ

Much has changed since the *Priest for Equality Charter* was written. These decades have brought new problems and challenges to priests who see a terrible inequality practiced against women and children in the world around us. I see this when women come to the door of my Appalachian rectory begging for food for their children. We now see that the Charter's theoretical vision of equality reaches far beyond Church institutions and includes an entire global social and economic order. The UN Standing Committee on Nutrition recently stated: "Women are usually the last to benefit from increasing income [but] they are usually the first to make sacrifices when the financial situation deteriorates." (*The Economist*, June 20, 2009, p 64; <unscn.org>.)

In our Eucharistic celebration, priests and people extend Calvary in space and time; suffering women stand at the foot of the cross. Over today's Calvary hangs a terrorism experienced by fifty million anemic expectant mothers and one billion malnourished and destitute women and children, thousands of whom die each day from hunger and lack of proper health care. As priests, we are awakening to a major "weapon of mass destruction," namely a pervasive economic system that allows billionaires, tax havens and a growing disparity between rich and poor to exist unchallenged; this system coopts the resources that belong to all. Priests for Equality must act, for equality is intertwined with social justice.

Today's solutions must include a cooperative effort on the part of everyone, each recognizing the special gifts of everyone. An equality of all ethnic groups within America does not demand a bland melting pot of all cultures, but rather an enrichment resulting from recognizing differences. Likewise women and men have different gifts and charismata, and women do not have to become men to gain equality. Some of these differences are inherent in gender.

Empirically, I have performed two hundred environmental resource assessments in all parts of the United States, all for non-profit institutions, forty percent of which were women's religious communities. It has gradually become evident that women have a certain way of seeing the emerging environmental crisis, and a great sense of the need to take responsible action at a time when male groups are hesitant to act. We may be uncertain what these womanly differences are, since their nature has not been defined -- and women are the ones to present them in a liturgy of healing. It is becoming apparent that this feminine approach to our Earth is more intuitive and nurturing with respect to the resources at hand than the male approach. Women must enlighten the process.

Our traditional male way of addressing inequality is to

bestow male roles on women. However, maybe this anticipated equality is not to be **bestowed** by males on females, but rather **acknowledged** to exist already at least in theory. What if the feminine gifts are necessary for saving our people and planet, and the great hindrance is that we males do not encourage women nor acknowledge their specific role? It is unfair that males seek to set conditions on how women are to explain their differences. Does the womanly gift involve healing in a womanly manner? Is this role as utterly necessary for attacking our environmental and social problems, as the male role in the Church is for presiding over Divine Liturgies? The saving of our people and Earth is part of the soteriological mission of the Body of Christ, and women must be the early bearers of what the males must proclaim -- though spreading the Good News is the duty of all believers.

A chauvinistic approach to equality in the Church is to regard males as presently superior to females (at least in privileges), and thus a magnanimous bestowal of power, now possessed by males, will elevate the females to equality with males in the clerical ranks. On closer inspection, we find that this could be terribly misleading. Instead of seeing genuine priestly work as service to the people, an antiquated approach is to see priestly ministry as a secular power position from which women are excluded, with no compensating spiritual privileges. In such a view, the equality of male and female, Jew and gentile, and black and white does not come through birth and is not proclaimed through baptism, but by the largesse of dominant male potentates through a secular process. The notion of Christ's messianic power was generally misunderstood; the last question asked by disciples at the ascension mount was, "Are you going to restore the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

In contrast, authentic **spiritual empowerment** stems from the power of Christ's resurrection. All of us possess unique God-given gifts. Through the Holy Spirit we are empowered, but not as the world conceives of power. For long periods of Church history down to the present a certain confusion about empowerment involved tiaras, thrones, palaces, Papal States, domains, and anointing rulers with Holy Chrism. That confusion often complicated church history. Administrative power was often confused with the service of dispensing sacraments -- spiritually powerful actions. The hard knocks of recent years on the priesthood have deflated this confusion of clerical privilege, but vestiges remain. Most of the clergy concede that women have many charismata, and some women are similar to males in a whole variety of ministries. However, the friction over church-related roles is as much a de-emphasis on female roles, as an overemphasis on male ones? As cooperating members of the Body of Christ, should not the genders have **essential** roles? St. Paul says we all have different gifts but must manifest a oneness in belief and spirit.

Is the all-male priesthood a cultural phenomenon? Jesus was counter-cultural when addressing pharisees, cleansing the temple

and speaking with the Samaritan woman. If he had chosen to be, he could have been counter-cultural at the Last Supper, but he wasn't. On the other hand, our mark of oneness binds us to help bring the churches together. However, an argument for retaining a solely male priesthood as an essential component for East/West church unity is not convincing. Today a broad segment of the larger Christian community has women ministers -- and the all-male clerical Orthodox Churches, while currently undergoing a post-USSR renaissance, are becoming an ever smaller component (about 12%) of the total body of Christians; this is due to lower birth rates and lack of foreign missionary efforts. Cultural arguments are not sufficient; deeper theological arguments must be presented.

Divine motherhood is a unique womanly role. Perhaps within Mary's "fiat" is found the complementary gender role that exists down through the ages in the Church. Rather than regarding gifts as being bestowed by human largesse, we all must humbly acknowledge that motherhood, and specifically Mary's motherhood, is a divine gift given to females. Mary, Theotokos, gives birth to the Jesus. All women, especially mothers, enter into this nurturing act, and the child-bearing role of birth of each Christian, is when this is more clearly manifested. Truly, not all women are mothers, nor all men priests, but all women must help give birth to a new world order, and all men must cooperate -- and some preside in a Liturgy that expresses this solemnly. This acknowledgment and respect of gender roles bring greater, not less, equality to the human family.

The challenge for Priests for Equality in this "year of the priest" is to celebrate unique gifts, and to thank God for them. Only Christians honor Mary with the title, "Mother of God." As potential mothers of Christians, all women share in a special manner with Mary in bearing Christ. Priests and people celebrate in liturgical worship this unique role of Mary -- and all women. Thus, according to our current understanding, the Catholic Church continues with a male priesthood. Our striving for equality includes acceptance of the unique womanly role needed in saving our planet -- and priests are called to acknowledge this: motherhood of Christ was bestowed on Mary; all women, and most especially mothers, have a physical role in bringing Christ to the world; and all woman have an essential initial role in healing our wounded Earth.

A mission as monumental as saving our planet and changing our social order demands a spiritual food that is more than just a symbolic gesture, a communal act. This food must be Divine. Yes, this nourishment leads to a spiritual power trip, a journey into healing and renovating. The Holy Spirit inspires all men and women of good will. Priests can generally perceive inequalities in our faltering social/political/economic system. However, we hesitate to acknowledge the unique roles that individuals, groups or genders must play in re-establishing a new order. All of us must join to address the major issues confronting our world. Our

priestly mission is to help preside over the work of the people,
and counter the concerted attack on inequalities in all forms,
including the overlooked role of women in the Church.

#