

CHURCH: A DISCIPLESHIP OF EQUALS

Ecclesiology from the Feminist Perspective

Dr. S. Devaraj
St. Paul's Seminary, Trichy

1. Introduction

A few years ago a woman from a village parish, in a seminar on Lay Ministries organized at TNBCLC, Tindivanam, remarked, to the surprise of all, that most of the Churches would become empty and the priests would become unemployed if the number of women participating in the liturgical services drastically declined. Other women participants, having subscribed to her view, came out strongly and reiterated how they, even many years after Vatican II, had been discriminated and pushed to the periphery of the Church dominated by men who are still unwilling to honour their legitimate rights. Despite the fact that women participate in the liturgical services in great numbers and actively involve in various programmes of the parish communities, they are still treated as second-class citizens and denied the opportunity to exercise their leadership. In some parishes they are made use of mostly for less valued jobs such as cleaning the Church, decorating the altar, collecting funds, preparing dinner for guest priests who come for the parochial feast, etc. It is deplorable that they are still forced to cover their heads, remain silent spectators and accept all the decisions taken by men as the will of God. To be silent is considered to be a mark of women's decorum. As far as the Church is concerned, they are expected neither to participate in the administrative bodies nor to become critical in their reflection and sharing, notwithstanding the fact that they could play a significant

role in almost all the areas of civil society on a par with men. As Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza rightly observes, "the women are not only the silent majority but we are also the silenced majority in the Roman Catholic Church."¹

This unjust and oppressive practice of keeping women on the margin and blocking them to exercise their legitimate roles is generated by the patriarchal structures of the Church and maintained by the androcentric attitude inherited from the early period. The Church, understood as the community of disciples of Jesus united in love and fellowship and commissioned to build up the Kingdom of God, cannot be an oppressive body legitimizing theologically the discriminate practices on the basis of sex. The Church, called as 'mother' and referred to by the pronoun 'she', should put an end to patriarchal domination in any form and emerge as a community of equals committed to the Kingdom of God. In order to become an authentic community in accordance with the vision of Jesus, the Church is called upon to receive a new baptism and undergo the *kenotic* experience of the paschal event by dying to its age old oppressive practices and rising to a new way of Christian life marked by equality, fraternity and mutuality. The purpose of this article is to delve deep into the radical changes which are slowly emerging at various levels since Vatican II with the view to renew the face of the Church, deformed by the patriarchal structure, androcentric theology and male dominated ministry.

2. Emergence of Women's Movements: A Powerful Sign of the Times

Till Vatican II, the Church was understood as a powerful and unshakable institution established by Jesus Christ, to carry on the mission of saving souls from eternal damnation. It remained a supernatural castle perched on the rock of eternity ignoring the innermost longings of the people and turning a blind eye to the tumultuous and ever-changing ebb and flow of human history. But

¹ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence - Becoming Visible," *Concilium* 182 (1985), 4.

the Church, as envisioned by the Council, should become a community of disciples committed to the mission of the Kingdom of God by participating in the hopes and anxieties of the people, particularly the poor and the marginalized, and struggling with them towards the dawn of a new humanity. In order to carry out such a task, the Church, as clearly articulated by *Gaudium et Spes*, "has always the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel."² Underscoring the fact that signs of the times are the signs of God's continuing revelation in human history, the Council observed that the Church must make a genuine effort "to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which the People of God has a part along with other people of our age."³ Carefully discerning the will of God for humanity revealed through the signs of the times and courageously fulfilling it is the mission of the Church.

Obvious as it may be, one of the powerful signs that we are witnessing all over the world is the emergence of women's movements, which are determined to fight against every form of oppression, exploitation and dehumanization directed against women and uncompromisingly uphold their dignity and legitimate rights in the male dominated society. The wave of women's movements erupted strongly during the 1960s in the Western countries and spread in the middle of the 1970s to the countries of the third world.⁴ Even though the feminist movements in the West and the East are different in many respects based on the crucial issues and concrete problems faced by women in their respective socio-economic and political contexts, they are basically imbuing one and the same concern of combating the evils of the society that is governed by the powerful and well-organized patriarchal system. In such a society, the traditional cultures, institutions, customs and myths, created and perpetrated by men,

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 4.

³ *Gaudium et Spes*, 11.

⁴ Gabriele Dietrich, *Women's Movement in India* (Bangalore: Breakthrough Publications, 1988), 1.

rigorously maintain the male supremacy, reinforce the stereotyped images and inferior roles of women and legitimize the unjust treatment meted out to them.⁵ The women who have been subjugated for several centuries internalize the dominant patriarchal ideology and follow uncritically those very customs and traditions that oppress them.⁶ Taking serious note of this fact, the women's movements, instead of claiming equality within the patriarchal structure, go beyond and make a thorough critique of the very structure itself, which is at the root of social, economic and political system of graded subjugation and oppression. They demand a restructuring of societal institutions and a redefinition of cultural images and roles of women and men. In other words, the creation of a new social pattern and structure in which all people – both male and female – could live together in love, dignity and harmony is their principal concern.

Not only in the civil society, but also in the Christian Churches similar feminist movements have sprung up since the 1960s with the view to renew and remodel the ecclesiastical structure which perpetuates women's subordination and inferiority through biblical and theological justifications. These movements, which originated in the Western countries and spread to other continents, have now become a worldwide phenomenon and have assumed an ecumenical character. The Christian feminists are deeply convinced that the image of the Church, founded by Jesus Christ as the community of equals united in love and fellowship, was completely distorted in the course of history and became a community of unequals by adopting the patriarchal system. Tracing the root of the patriarchal image of the Church in the Bible written by men, they are engaged in liberating the Word of God from the clutches of sexist language by reinterpreting it in the light of feminism. Being aware of the fact that the androcentric cultural outlook determined, to a large extent, the Christian

⁵ Mary Riley, *Women, Carriers of a New Vision* (Washington: Centre for Concern, 1984), 3.

⁶ Aruna Gnanadason, "Women's Oppression: A Sinful Situation," in *With Passion and Compassion* ed., Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 72.

theology, "they attempt to reconceptualise and to transform Christian theology from a feminist perspective."⁷ Having realized that, "the Christian history and experience, specially the experience and contribution of women, has either been overlooked or silenced in the course of the development of the tradition,"⁸ they feel the necessity of rewriting it in such way that it becomes, "not only history, but as well her-story recorded, analyzed from a feminist point of view."⁹ In their perspective the ministry also needs a thorough revision so that women could be enabled to participate in the ministry of the Church without sexual bias. What the Christian feminists ultimately aim at through such reinterpretations is liberating the Church from the shackles of patriarchal system and androcentric traditions and building it up as a community of equals in accordance with the original vision of Jesus. Elisabeth Moltmann Wendel articulates the bold venture of the feminist movement as follows:

The feminist movement in the Western world has given many women courage to discover themselves, to express again their own religious experiences, to read the Bible with fresh eyes and to rediscover their original and distinctive role in the gospel. For these women feminism is not a white, Western, bourgeois movement but one deeply rooted in the gospel.¹⁰

The new awakening, spreading fast among women both in society and the Church to combat the patriarchal domination and establish a fuller human life, is a significant breakthrough in the history of humanity. Their courageous struggle for a new life,

⁷ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," in *Women: New Dimensions*, ed., Walter Burkhardt (New York: Paulist Press, 1975), 35.

⁸ Kathleen Coyle, "Feminist Theology in Conversation," *East Asian Pastoral Review* 36 (1999), 286.

⁹ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," 35.

¹⁰ Elisabeth Moltmann Wendel, "Becoming Human in New Community," in *The Community of Women and Men in the Church*, ed., Constance Parvey (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1983), 29.

therefore, should not be sidelined or ignored, as it is one of the most powerful signs of the times through which God reveals His will and invites the Church to make an option for them and thereby emerge as a community of the equals. A Church that is faithful to the call of Jesus and the stirrings of the Holy Spirit will be able to discern, in the feminist movements, the transforming power of God and the blossoming of His Kingdom in the Christian communities and the world. Hence failing to listen to the voice of women full of anguish and pain or ignoring their struggle for liberation means failure of the Church to heed the call of God and collaborate with Him for a new humanity. As feminist theologian Maria Riley pertinently observes,

The rise of women's consciousness of their own dignity is a sign of our times. As such it demands the attention of the Church. The Church cannot simply reach back into its tradition to address this reality because it lacks a strong tradition regarding the equality and basic dignity and worth of women. Furthermore, the current reflection and articulation of women's experiences is raising new issues both in society and in the Church.¹¹

3. Church: A Community of Equals

The growing consciousness among women to claim for dignity and equality, as indicated above, calls for a reinterpretation of the Church from a feminist perspective. It is to be noted, at the outset, that the feminist theologians do not want to do any patch up work in the Church which is deeply tied up to the patriarchal system and governance. What they aim at, on the contrary, is a radical restructuring and complete remodelling of the Church and its structures in accordance with the original vision of Jesus. The critical investigation of the New Testament, theology and tradition done in the recent past has made it clear that the Church was not founded immediately by Jesus in its present and highly structured form. It gradually assumed structures and traditions in the course of its long history. More significantly, the gospels candidly portray that Jesus founded a wholly unstructured community of disciples

¹¹ Maria Riley, *Transforming Feminism* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1989), 36.

during his Galilean ministry in order to carry on the mission of the Kingdom of God.¹² Therefore, the feminist theologians, in their effort to construct a new ecclesiology, go back to the time of Jesus and trace out the community of disciples he founded, which they affirm should be the paradigm for the Church today.

As portrayed in the gospels, Jesus was an itinerant prophet who moved from place to place and proclaimed the imminent dawn of the Kingdom of God to all people, especially to the poor, the crippled and the outcastes who were on the periphery of the Jewish society. Fascinated by his message of love and fellowship, people from all walks of life followed him in large numbers. Jesus gathered his followers and formed them into a community of disciples. The Jesus community was composed of those who had experienced the newness of life, who were freed from a condition of marginalisation, bound together in fellowship and committed to mission.¹³ It was basically a charismatic, egalitarian and non-hierarchical community. It was radically inclusive because it came into being from "the new and radically liberative religious experience of Jesus."¹⁴ He experienced God, "as an all-inclusive love, letting the sun shine and the rain fall equally on the righteous and on sinners (Mt 5:45)".¹⁵ To be more specific, his God was, "a God of graciousness and goodness who accepts everyone and brings about justice and well-being for everyone without exception."¹⁶ Precisely because of this reason Jesus modelled his community in such a way that it was completely immune to patriarchal structure and culture of domination. Unlike the Pharisees, he admitted the marginalised people like the poor, tax collectors, sinners and outcastes into his band of disciples. More significantly, he courageously broke down the taboos which kept

¹² George Soares Prabhu, "Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church," *Jeevadhra*, 15 (1985), 307.

¹³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 19.

¹⁴ George Soares Prabhu, "Radical Beginnings: The Jesus Community as the Archetype of the Church," 318.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 130.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 130.

women at the bottom of the Jewish society by including them in the circle of disciples and making them active collaborators in his mission for the Kingdom of God. The stories of Mary Magdalene, Martha, and Mary illustrate that women played a significant role in his life and mission. As Luke has clearly mentioned, the three Galilean women, who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities by Jesus, travelled with him along with the twelve apostles preaching the good news of the reign of God and serving them using their own financial resources (Lk 8:1-3). Moreover, women were the only ones who did not flee at the arrest of Jesus and stood under his cross participating in his untold suffering and violent death (Mk 15: 40-41). They were the first witnesses of his resurrection (Lk 24: 1-12). Taking note of these biblical facts, Elisabeth Moltmann Wendel argues that women were the real followers of Jesus, even though the twelve are traditionally regarded as the real disciples, successors and bearers of the tradition.¹⁷ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, based on the same evidences, stresses again and again in her writings that the Jesus community was a "discipleship of equals."¹⁸

The community of disciples, nurtured and formed by Jesus for the mission of the Kingdom of God, became an *ekklesia* in the post Easter period. In spite of the male-oriented and androcentric bias of the New Testament writers, we can still unearth from the Scripture evidences to ascertain that women were part of the discipleship of equals that existed for a period in early Christianity. They were full-fledged disciples, and equally missionaries, prophets, Church leaders and apostles in the broad sense of the term.¹⁹ For instance, Junia was an influential missionary who was acknowledged as an apostle even before Paul (Rom 16:7). Lydia, a

¹⁷ Elisabeth Moltmann Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 82.

¹⁸ See especially Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).

¹⁹ For a detailed study on the involvement of women in the ministry of the Church, refer to Judith Lang, *Ministers of Grace* (Slough: St. Paul's Publications, 1989); Elisabeth Tetlow, *Women and Ministry in the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Ute E. Eisen, *Women Officeholders in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2000).

Gentile convert, offered her home as a house Church in Philippi (Acts 16:14-15). Phoebe was Paul's co-worker, most likely an official minister and teacher in the Church of Cenchreae, whose authority was respected even by Paul himself (Rom 16:1-3). Nympha was a foundress and leader of a house Church in Laodicea (Col 4:15). Priscilla along with her husband was a co-worker with Paul. These examples provide enough evidence that women had roles of leadership in the early Church.

But in course of time the egalitarian and non-hierarchical Church fell a victim to the patriarchalisation and institutionalisation of the Church as it assumed the patriarchal and institutional structures of the Greco-Roman society. At this juncture, the important question to be raised for our reflection is this: What is essential in the Church today? Safeguarding still the structures and traditions in spite of knowing that they push women to the periphery or remaining true to the spirit of the Jesus community from which it originates? Needless to say, the original vision of Jesus is always normative. The Church can remain true to what it is, only by remaining faithful to its origin. Therefore, stripping of the oppressive patriarchal systems inherited from the Greco-Roman civilisation, the Church, true to the intention of its founder, must become a community of equals. Concerted efforts must be taken, "to recapture the egalitarian model of *ecclesia*, which was based on the equality of the Christians, male and female alike."²⁰ The New Testament term for Church, *ekklesia*, meaning 'assembly' or 'gathered', signifies the discipleship of equals.²¹ It is basically a community of disciples of Jesus Christ bound together in love and fellowship. The *koinonia* is its fundamental character. In a general etymological sense, *koinonia* refers to a common sharing, participating, and possessing something.²² It is a participation or sharing in the divine life of God through Jesus Christ in the Holy

²⁰ Virginia Fabella, "Mission of Women in the Church of Asia: Roles and Positions," in *New Eyes for Reading* ed., John Phobee and Barbel Von Wartenbeeg – Potter (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1987).

²¹ Anne Clifford, *Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 135.

²² Etymologically the word *koinonia* is derived from *koinos*, which means pool together or put together.

Spirit by virtue of baptism and through the celebration of Eucharist.²³ Sharing in the divine life creates among the faithful solidarity and fellowship, forms them into an *ekklesia* of God gathered in the name of His Son Jesus and makes them all brothers and sisters to one another. All the members of the Church are basically equal both in dignity and responsibility. It means that any form of discrimination or subordination on the basis of sex vitiates the very purpose of Jesus Christ and shakes the very foundation of the Church.

4. Radical and Inevitable Steps

In the light of what has been observed so far, it may be pointed out that the Church, in order to become a community of equals, must take serious steps to widen its horizon and broaden its understanding and vision. An egalitarian, mutually respectful, cosmopolitan and collaborative consciousness must flow into every nerve and blood vessel of the Church and make it a new creation. For this the radical measures to be initiated in the Church would be a reinterpretation of Scripture, reshaping of theology and restructuring of ministry from a feminist perspective. Such measures are inevitable in the context of growing awareness among women to claim equality and mutuality in the Church. Let us briefly elaborate them.

1. Rereading of Scripture

The Bible is revered by Christians as a sacred book containing the inspired word of God. It is not only the basis of Christian revelation and faith, but also the source of inspiration and strength for Christian life in society. At the same time, a fact to be acknowledged, is that the Bible was authored by men who lived in the patriarchal society, imbibed the spirit of male-domination and employed androcentric language. There are several passages in the Scripture which degrade women and depict them as submissive and subordinate, rather than independent and assertive. Many women characters remain faceless and are pushed into oblivion.

²³ *Lumen Gentium*, 7, 11.

Therefore, the feminist theologians are strongly convinced that the Bible is, "one of the insidious instruments, and for certain persons even the principal instrument, used in the operation of discrimination and exploitation. Rather than offering or dispensing a liberative message for both women and men, it is now perceived as a text that strengthens solidly entrenched patriarchal and hierarchical system, maintains the status quo, and so continues, under the banner of the Word of God, to perpetrate the oppression of women."²⁴ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, while describing how the Bible is used to perpetrate the subordination of women, observes that, "throughout the centuries and today the authority of the apostle Paul has been invoked against women's preaching and teaching in the Church (1 Cor 14: 34; 1 Tim 2: 11-14)."²⁵

Taking serious stock of the biblical world and its social and cultural background and taking their cue from liberation theology, the feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, are engaged in developing feminist hermeneutics which would enable women to reinterpret the Bible from the standpoint of their own experiences, especially the experience of their struggle against dehumanisation and oppression. Obviously, the God of the Bible is not someone who sides with the powerful, but who comes to liberate the oppressed and the marginalised. Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, therefore, affirms that notwithstanding the Bible originated in a patriarchal culture, it has elements that are potentially liberating not only for women but also for any person experiencing oppression in patriarchal systems today.²⁶ This way of critically interpreting the Bible is called a, 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and a 'hermeneutics of remembrance.' It always begins with a hermeneutics of suspicion. Taking as its starting point, "the assumption that biblical texts and

²⁴ Gerald Caron, "Authority of the Bible Challenged by Feminist Hermeneutics," in *Women Also Journeyed with Him* ed., Gerald Caron (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000), 156.

²⁵ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence - Becoming Visible," 4.

²⁶ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Alone: The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), xiv.

their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions," it goes further examining critically, "the underlying presuppositions, androcentric models and unarticulated interests of contemporary biblical interpretations."²⁷ A hermeneutics of remembrance reclaims the past sufferings of women subjugated through enslavement, exile and persecution and treats it as a 'dangerous memory', which invites us today to be in solidarity with all persons, both past and present, who struggle for human dignity.²⁸

It is quite interesting, for instance, to note that the feminist scholars have retrieved the original image of Mary Magdalene who is traditionally known as a prostitute and sinner. The New Testament and other early Christian literature consistently portray her as a prominent disciple of Jesus. She was healed of an epileptic illness and followed Jesus (Lk 8: 1-3). She was present at the crucifixion (Mk 15: 40-41; Jn 19: 25), and a witness to the resurrection of our Lord (Mk 16: 1-8; Mt 28: 1-7; Lk 24: 1-10; Jn 20: 1, 11-13). Contrary to the biblical data, it was Pope Gregory the Great who mistakenly identified Mary of Magdala (Lk 8: 1-3) with the sinner in Lk 7: 36-50 and with Mary of Bethany in Jn 12: 1-8). He said in one of his homilies, "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary, we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark. And what did these seven devils signify, if not all the vices?"²⁹ As a result, Mary Magdalene lost all semblance of the devoted disciple and visionary and became a model for a repentant sinner. Fortunately, the feminist scholarship freed her image from all distortions, recovered her role as apostle and made her a model for courageous and committed discipleship. Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, commenting on Mary Magdalene, observed that the distorted

²⁷ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Alone: The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation*, 15-16.

²⁸ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Alone: The Challenge of Biblical Interpretation*, 19.

²⁹ Homily 33; quoted by Karen King, "Canonisation and Marginalisation: Mary of Magdala," *Concilium* (3/1998), 30.

image of women in the Church mirrored in her distorted image.³⁰ The recovery of correct image of biblical women tarnished by the patriarchal tradition is, therefore, absolutely necessary to renew the face of the Church and make it a discipleship of equals.

2. Reshaping of Theology

Another area that needs radical change for building up the Church into a community of equals is theology. Not only in the past, but also today theology has been dominated by male theologians who are mostly celibate priests and religious. The feminist theologians, challenging male domination in the field of theology and also the theology constructed by them to safeguard the patriarchal system and androcentric thought patterns, demand a paradigm shift in theology. Accordingly, theology, instead of being understood as a study of Christian dogmas from an intellectual perspective, must become a critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word of God. It must begin with praxis, that is with the life situation of the people, especially the poor and the oppressed. Obvious as it may be, women are the most oppressed groups both in society and in the Church. Therefore, they should become the subject matter of theology and active agents of theologising. A theology emerging from the perspective of women basically implies looking at the whole spectrum of Christian faith, tradition and praxis through the eyes of women and their struggle for a new life. It calls for a critical evaluation of the traditional theology that was responsible for dehumanisation and subordination of women in the Church and building up of a new theology of liberation from the standpoint of women, especially their hopes, anxieties, longings and struggles. Articulating the principal concern of the feminist theologians, Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza succinctly puts that the feminist theology underscores that, "women must be recognised as theological subjects and the practices and institutions of theology must be changed. They want to engender a paradigm shift, to use the

³⁰ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation," 50.

expression of Thomas Kuhn, from malestream scholarship produced by Kyriarchal academic institutions, to a feminist comprehension of the world, human life and Christian faith. Such a paradigm shift would not only produce different emancipatory knowledge but also a different kind of theology."³¹ In the words of Rosemary Radford Reuther, "feminist theology, along with other liberation theologies, stripped off the ideological mystifications that have developed in the traditions of biblical interpretation and that have concealed the liberating content... (however) feminism goes beyond the letter of the prophetic message to apply to the prophetic - liberation principle to women. Feminist theology makes explicit what was overlooked in male advocacy of the poor and oppressed: that liberation must start with the oppressed of the oppressed, namely, women of the oppressed."³²

In continuation of what we have stated above, let us illustrate briefly how the feminist theologians are trying to build up a new image of women in the Church by critically evaluating the theological images and concepts developed in the patriarchal culture and traditions. For want of space, let us take up for our consideration two theological concepts, namely, the male image of God and Christian dualism:

Among various theological concepts, it is the image of God in purely masculine terms that faces heavy and scathing criticism due to the reason that it has been legitimising the subordination of women in the life and ministry of the Church for several centuries. Mary Daly powerfully captured the oppressive results of exclusively male symbols for God in her often quoted statement: "If God is male, then the male becomes God."³³ In this context of perpetrating the marginalisation of women by androcentric language and symbols, envisioning the image of God from the perspective of women's struggle for equality and mutuality

³¹ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, "Introduction: Feminist Liberation Theology as Critical Sophiology," in *The Power of Naming* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), xxix. (emphasis added).

³² Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 32.

³³ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 38.

assumes greater importance. It is important to note that God is a reality beyond human conception. God is a mystery, not an object of knowledge, but an object of faith. The human language, in spite of its indispensability for expressing thoughts, is a limited and imperfect tool to speak and write about God. Most of the religious language is figurative, analogical and metaphorical. Considering these factors, God cannot be claimed exclusively for the male sex and is not identical with man.³⁴ Furthermore, the Christian image of God as Father, though it emerged from the patriarchal culture in which Jesus was brought up, should in no case be used as a justification for a patriarchal Church. For Jesus called God *abba* not as an expression of domination or subjugation, but more as a language of love, affection and intimacy. This symbol of intimacy has to be further enriched and complemented by another biblical symbol of intimacy, namely mother. A careful reading of the Bible reveals that feminine images are also employed in talking about God's love, mercy and affection for the people (Deut 32: 18; Is 42: 14; 49: 15; 66:13; Hos 11:3-4; Rom 8:22). Since God is transhuman and transsexual and the creator of both male and female, a holistic view of God, including both feminine and masculine traits, needs to be emphasised in the Church, as it is a community of men and women united in love and fellowship. It is very legitimate that both feminine and masculine symbols of God find equal importance in the community of equals.

Another theological tendency that has been acrimoniously challenged by feminist theologians is the dualistic thinking and practice, which is responsible, to a larger extent, for the subordination of women in the society and Church. The dualism is fundamentally a radical splitting apart of things that essentially belong together. Divisions and differences are more important than similarity and relationship. Accordingly, it divides human person between body and soul and the entire reality in terms of spirit and matter, male and female. These divisions, understood as polarities or opposites, reinforce a new form of domination and subjugation. The body is subjected to the soul and the matter to the spirit. Since woman is identified with body or matter and man with spirit, she

³⁴ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 180.

must be always subordinate to man. The hierarchical understanding of the relationship between body and soul, matter and spirit, male and female is fundamental to the Western theological thinking, as is evidenced from the writings of the Fathers of the Church and the scholastic theologians. For instance, John Chrysostom said: "There are plenty of harmful and dangerous animals in the world but none of them is as dangerous and harmful as women."³⁵ Thomas Aquinas, influenced by Aristotelian view, asserted that the male was endowed with intellectual knowledge and ordered to carry out the more noble activity, whereas the female was created mainly for procreation of children.³⁶ This kind of dualistic tendency and practice is still found in the Church even today and, as a result, women are relegated to an inferior and lower place. Women are expected to be meek, humble and obedient, whereas men are concerned with power and domination. Women are forced to confine themselves to the lower grade of activities in the Christian communities, whereas authority, leadership and decision-making are reserved for men. At this juncture, women's cause calls for a holistic vision of integration of the male and female in accordance with the vision of Jesus Community, as pointed out earlier. The Church, transcending the dualism which unfortunately became its characteristic feature in the later centuries, must become a community of equality and mutuality in which men and women, united in love and fellowship, share the responsibilities equally and contribute mutually to the Kingdom of God.

3. Restructuring of Ministry

The new vision of the Church as the discipleship of equals called to build up the Church into a community of love and fellowship committed to the Kingdom of God demands a radical

³⁵ As quoted in Stella Baltazar, "Women and the Church: A Search for an Identity," in *The Church in India in Search for a New Identity* ed., Kurien Kunnenpuram, Errol D'Lima and Jacob Parappally (Bangalore: NBCLC, 1997), 215.

³⁶ Eleanor Commo Mclaughlin, "Equality of Souls, Inequality of Sexes: Women in Mediaeval Theology," in *Religion and Sexism* ed., Rosemary Radford Reuther (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 217.

restructuring of ministry from the feminist perspective. It is well known that women, for several centuries, were excluded from official ministry due to clerical domination and dualistic attitude of the Church. Dismantling the myth of identifying ministry with the sacramental form of ministry and considering priests as the only ministers of the Church, the Vatican II widened the horizon of ministry in accordance with the vision of the New Testament and unequivocally declared that it should be the concern of the entire people of God. It goes without saying that all the baptised members are equal, co-responsible and interdependent in the Church characterised by communion – communion with Triune God and fellow human persons. (As *Lumen Gentium* points out, "all share a true equality with regard to the dignity and activity common to all the faithful for the building up of the Body of Christ."³⁷ All the faithful, endowed with gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit by virtue of baptism, are called to engage in ministry with the view to proclaim, serve and realise the Kingdom of God in the Christian communities and in the society at large. Understood in this way, women, true to their baptismal call and charism of the Holy Spirit, are bound to participate in the formal ministry and life of the Church.

Notwithstanding the reforms of the Vatican II and the subsequent initiatives of the various local Churches to promote the equal participation and co-responsibility of women in the building up of the Christian communities, there are still some priests and lay men who are determined to exclude them from formal ministry. Imbibing traditional and outmoded theological views, they keep them at the lower rungs of the parish community and make use of them mainly for carrying out some menial and less valued jobs. In some parishes women continue their ministries without official recognition and sufficient support or encouragement. Many a time they exercise their ministry only to the extent of the interest, involvement and planning of priests. Thus women are forced to remain as faceless and voiceless ministers of God. A fact to be underscored, at this juncture, is that

³⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, 32.

women are neither servants nor auxiliaries of priests. Their legitimate right of exercising ministry, flowing from baptismal vocation and consecration, must be respected, acknowledged and supported. They must be accepted as, "working with others for the promotion of the Kingdom, not working for men."³⁸ There is also a tendency in some parishes to set apart certain forms of ministry exclusively for women, taking into consideration their special qualities and charisms for certain functions. But fixing up some ministries only for them would go against the very spirit of the Church as the community of equals. Both men and women, accepting one another as equal partners in the divine enterprise of promoting the Kingdom of God and respecting one another's charisms and gifts given by the Holy Spirit, must jointly work together.

In the light of what has been stated above, we note that there is an urgent need to reshape the understanding and exercise of ministry in the Christian communities in order to enhance and promote the active involvement of women. It is significant that the Basic Christian Communities, which originated in Latin American countries, is gaining momentum and popularity in several parts of the world and has been accepted as the pastoral programme in many dioceses in India. The ministry of women should be envisaged and modelled from the spectrum of the BCCs. These communities provide a new understanding of the Church, one based on love, fellowship and mutuality. Since there are no sex-determined roles in any of the BCCs, they would certainly facilitate the discovery, development and recognition of the different charisms of women so that they blossom into ministries. The participation in the ministerial life would definitely offer them scope for leadership. It is really heartening to note that in most of the BCCs in the diocese of Kottar women are holding the important responsibilities and offices.³⁹ In this connection it is important that

³⁸ Rosemary Edet, "Women and Ministry in Africa," *Voices From the Third World* 12 (1989), 94.

³⁹ John Damascene, "Challenges to the Basic Christian Communities," *Vaiharai* 7 (2002), 57.

women must be positively encouraged and provided with ample opportunities to become members of the participatory structures such as Parish Council, Parish Finance Committee, Diocesan Pastoral Council. Electing them as the office bearers of these Councils and Committees would undoubtedly enhance their image and also that of the Church. As Astrid Lobo Gajiwala pertinently remarks,

There is a need for a quota for women to be set up on such Councils. Further, the needs of women members must be met, whether it is for a baby-sitter to look after young children, or a convenient timing for meetings, or even a word to the men at home to hold the fort while their women attend a meeting. It is time too that we gave women responsibilities other than recording minutes. Propose them as Presidents and Vice-Presidents of committees/ Councils. Encourage them to speak out, and allow them to grow through their mistakes.⁴⁰

In the context of growing awareness among women in participating in the ministry and assuming leadership roles in the Christian communities, a crucial question that comes to the forefront very often in the theological discussion is the possibility of admitting them to the ministerial priesthood. For a person with a feminist consciousness, as Anne Carr points out, "the question of ordination to the priestly ministry represents an important symbol of the lack of presence of women in the official life of the Church."⁴¹ In their efforts to construct the Church into a community of equals, the feminist theologians together with the progressive male theologians have been challenging *Inter Insigniores*, the declaration of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, issued in 1977, which prohibits the ordination of women to the sacramental priesthood on three grounds: long standing tradition of the Church, the witness of Scripture and the symbolic significance of priests acting in *persona Christi*. For

⁴⁰ Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, "Who Touched Me," *Vidyajyoti* 59 (1995), 807.

⁴¹ Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

instance, Anne Carr, responding to the argument that priests must be male because Jesus and the twelve apostles were male, argues that the Jesus community was an inclusive community admitting women in the ministry for the Kingdom of God. Moreover, what is more important is not the sex of the apostles, but their symbolic character representing the twelve tribes of Israel.⁴² Responding to the Roman document, Raymond Brown, a renowned biblical scholar, points out that if someone argues that there were no women priests in New Testament times, the claim is misleading, due to the reason that the term 'priest' was understood only in the broad sense of the priesthood of the people of God (1 Pet 2:5; Rom 5:10). To an argument that women did not celebrate the Eucharist in the early Church, he further observes that "there is simply no way of proving that, even if one may well doubt that they did."⁴³

It is obvious that the arguments postulated by the curial document against women's ordination do not stand on a solid biblical and theological foundation. Being based on the medieval theology and outmoded biblical scholarship, they are weak, superfluous and unconvincing. Moreover, the feminist theologians are not very much surprised by the negative stand taken by the Vatican. But what really disturbs them and makes them sad is the curbing of their freedom to continue their theological exploration on this issue. The rejection of the female ordination, as remarked by William Burrow, not only for the time being, but for all time is unwarranted. At the same time, the feminist theologians like Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza are of the opinion that the ordination of women to priesthood alone would not resolve the problems associated with patriarchy in the Church. She reiterates that adding a few female priests would not change significantly the male-defined ministerial structure. A discipleship of equals that calls for women's ordination would not become a reality unless there is a substantial change in theology, tradition and ministerial structure. She writes,

⁴² Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women's Experience*, 25.

⁴³ Raymond Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 184-185.

Roman Catholic women daily experience anger and pain because our Church is deformed by structural and personal sin of patriarchal sexism. Yet the ordination of some women to the lower ranks of the patriarchal hierarchy would not eliminate the evil of patriarchal sexism but conceal its destructive powers. We come to understand that the 'women question' facing the Church is not just a question of ordination but that it requires *an intellectual paradigm shift from an androcentric world view and theology to a feminist conceptualisation of the world, human life, and Christian life*.⁴⁴

Conclusion

From this study it becomes clear that for a long time the Church has discredited and defamed women both in theory and practice. Not only in the past, but also today they have been forced to remain voiceless and faceless disciples of Christ in most of the Christian communities. At this moment of human history when there is so much of awakening among women to claim for equality and mutuality in the civil society in its several spheres, it is really unfortunate that the Church is still imbibing patriarchal spirit and androcentric attitude and keep women on the periphery. Called upon to discern the will of God through the reading of the signs of the times, as underscored by Vatican II, it has an immediate duty and obligation of responding to the dehumanised experiences and legitimate struggles of women for a new life of dignity and equality. The Church can no longer close its door and tell them to remain silent. The *kairos* is at hand for the Church to get liberated from the oppressive structures of patriarchy and emerge, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as a community of equals – a community of men and women working together as equal partners for the realization of the reign of God. Renewing the Church on the model of Jesus community and biblical vision of ministry and leadership is the call of the Holy Spirit and the demand of the time.

⁴⁴ Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence – Becoming Invisible," 8-9.