

VATICAN II AND FEMINISM

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THIS YEAR THE the focus has been on the fruits of the Vatican II Council in the life of the Church as a whole and indeed the world. Like all such events it had a pre-history which tends to be overlooked and therefore lessens the depth of general understanding of this pivotal event. Also men and women's histories converge on such occasions as in all human activities but women's history tends to be disregarded.

Introduction

The comment could be made that a more accurate title for this essay would be 'Stirrings of Feminism in the Church and Vatican II' since at the time of the Council women in the Church were not actively promoting their wider and fuller participation in the Church. Alas, such a suggestion is a fruit of the loss of women's history to all and most tragically to women themselves. We have forgotten about the women who insisted on being part of the flight to the desert in Egypt in the very early times in the Church; and those who worked as deacons with women and children; and insisted on being part of the monastic movement that followed, as well as being involved in all subsequent developments in religious life. We rarely hear how women led the way in the development of the simple vowed orders following the Reformation and industrial revolution. In the early 19th century 'feminism' was termed 'The Woman Question' and only a few have been introduced to Margaret Cusack, a Catholic writer and founder of a religious congregation, who specifically addressed this important question.

It also needs to be recognised that 'feminism' may be considered a 'Humpty Dumpty' word which means whatever the person using it wants it to mean. On the other hand, it needs to be recognised that 'feminism' is a pithy

word which is rich in meaning and, in the last analysis, concerns the vital relationship between men and women. There has always been 'a woman question' or a 'feminist movement'; it is intrinsic to human nature. It needs to be pointed out, too, that across the centuries there have always been men who supported women in their endeavours to attain an education and use their talents beyond the home in the Church and the wider community. Their history is also generally neglected. All of the above are important aspects of the history which the Vatican II Council inherited as it emerged within the wider context of the 1960s.

'Divine Discontent'

The 1960s was a period of prosperity following post-war reconstruction in Europe and the Pacific area in the late 1940s and into the 50s. It brought with it a consumer culture generated by technological advances in industry. The factories churned out goods and the burgeoning advertising industry, through newspaper, radio and television, influenced the buying habits and life-style of the public. The atheistic variety of the influential philosophy of existentialism encouraged an ever-increasing challenging of authority

Many women, who had willingly been confined to the domestic sphere following the Second World War, were experiencing 'divine discontent' with their position. At the same time leaders in various areas within the Church were hoping for overdue reforms. The time was ripe for action in the areas of the Church and Feminism.

Key players in these reforms were: in the Church, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who succeeded Pius XII as Pope John XXIII and called the Second Vatican Council in 1962; and in Feminism, Betty Friedan, married and a journalist with a strong background in psychol-

ogy and sociology, who published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1960. Born in 1921 into a Jewish family in Illinois, in Midwestern America, Betty Friedan was educated at Smith College and won a scholarship for postgraduate study in psychology to Berkeley University. Later she declined another scholarship for doctoral study to marry Carl Friedan. She worked as a journalist until the birth of the first of her three children.¹

After ordination and subsequent doctoral studies, which had a strong historical emphasis, Roncalli was appointed secretary to Radini-Tedeschi, the social-justice minded Bishop of Bergamo. This socially-aware bishop was among the first in the Church to recognise the 'feminist question' as an ecclesiastical question and, as his secretary, Roncalli had assisted the Bishop in various pro-woman activities, including the establishment in his dioceses of the League of Women Workers. It was from these early days that Pope John XXIII became a lifelong friend of the distinguished Italian feminist Adelaide Coari.²

There followed for the young Roncalli, among other things, a stint as a war chaplain during World War I, a diplomatic mission to Turkey and Greece which lasted ten years followed by an appointment to France including the position of being Permanent Observer for the Holy See in UNESCO. In 1953 he was created a cardinal and appointed Patriarch of Venice. Always Roncalli sought to promote friendly understanding among rival groups in every area in which he worked.³

Being well advanced in years at seventy-six when elected, Roncalli was popularly perceived as a stopgap pope. Nevertheless, he assumed the responsibility of this crucial office with extensive pastoral, diplomatic and administrative experience. In addition, it is evident from the journal, which he kept from his adolescence to old age, that he had a well-developed feminine dimension to his personality. He was tender-hearted and in his relation with Jesus, which seemed to have become increasingly mystical during his life, he as-



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sumed a spousal stance. As he reflected upon his ministry as a bishop he did not hesitate to urge himself, among other things, to be 'a mother to all'.⁴

By 1961, when Betty Friedan was working on *The Feminine Mystique*, John XXIII had initiated preparations for an ecumenical Church Council.

Concerning her life during the 1950s Betty Friedan recorded: 'I was experiencing a profound discontent, becoming increasingly conscious of the limitations of my narrow domestic world. Finally I revolted. As a wife and mother of three small children, half-guiltily I took up again my profession of journalism.' Through her research she discovered that many women shared her experience and she named the false image to which they were unhappily trying to conform themselves, 'the feminine mystique'. After a long period of in-depth research, in 1963 Betty Friedan published a book by that name which became a world-wide best seller. Among many other pivotal things she declared: 'The early feminists knew that marriage and motherhood are an essential part of life but not the whole of it'.⁵

She also drew attention to the fact that: 'Generally psychologists gave their professional approval to this current 'permissive' attitude to sex, seeing it as a healthier state of affairs than the previous hypocritical denial of sex.' But, as she pointed out, 'even the professionals at times express concern at the growing trend and wonder what the next step in salaciousness will be.' With genuine concern, Betty Friedan declared: 'The image of woman

in another era required increasing prudishness to keep denying sex. This new image seems to require increasing mindlessness, increasing emphasis on things: two cars, two TVs...⁶

Seeking to understand the pre-1960s situation, which was the context for Vatican II, Betty Friedan declared:

Women went home again just as men shrugged off the bomb, forgot the concentration camps, condoned corruption and fell into helpless conformity, just as thinkers avoided the complex larger problems of the post-war world. It was easier and safer to think about love and sex than about communism, McCarthy and the uncontrolled bomb. It was easier to look for Freudian sexual roots in man's behaviour than to look too critically at his society and act constructively to right its wrongs.⁷

Betty Friedan's work was underpinned by wide scholarly reading. Pope John XXIII had always had strong scholarly tendencies and followed with interest the significant social thinkers of his time. Such a one was Pietro Parvan, who had been influenced by the democratically-inclined scholars around Jacques Maritain and the early Christian Democrats. Indeed Parvan had had a major hand in drafting John's social writings, especially *Pacem in Terris*, the encyclical on peace.⁸

In this encyclical John XXIII supported much of the feminist agenda beginning with the fundamental declaration:

The Creator of the world has imprinted in man's heart an order which his conscience reveals to him and enjoins him to obey.... This natural law is the law for interpersonal and inter-state relations. This is the law which is being urgently demanded today by the requirements of the universal common good.⁹

Like Betty Friedan he appreciated the enormity of the task: 'There is an immense task incumbent on all men of good will—the task of restoring the relations of the human family in truth, in justice, in love and in freedom.'¹⁰

John XXIII further strengthened the case for women to develop their latent talents to contribute in the wider community in a variety of fields:

The natural law gives every person the right to share in the benefits of culture and therefore the right to a basic education and to technical and professional training in keeping with the stage of educational development in the country to which he or she belongs... Every effort should be made to ensure that persons be enabled, on the basis of merit, to go on to higher studies, so that, as far as possible, they may occupy posts and take on responsibilities in human society with their natural gifts and the skills they have acquired.¹¹

Most significantly in this ground-breaking encyclical leading up to the Vatican II Council, John XXIII implicitly endorsed Betty Friedan's central thesis in *The Feminine Mystique*:

Our age has three distinctive characteristics. First of all, the working classes have gradually gained ground in economic and public affairs. Secondly it is obvious to everyone that women are now taking a part in public life. This is happening more rapidly perhaps in nations of Christian civilisation and more slowly but broadly among peoples who have inherited other traditions or cultures.... Since women are becoming ever 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.¹²

In one of his meetings with a group of the Italian Catholic Women's Movement John XXIII acknowledged that one result of the dynamic rhythm of technological and social progress in the last fifty years had been 'to take women outside the four walls of their homes and to place them in direct contact with public life.'¹³ He also acknowledged that modern social structures did not allow woman, in the exercise of her profession to achieve the fulfilment of her potential and that there was a pressing need to find new solutions. Indeed, he stated categorically that 'woman is as necessary as men to the progress of society, especially in all those fields which require tact, delicacy and maternal intuition.'¹⁴

He was conscious, however, of the many stresses that women faced when endeavouring to balance the demands of family life, especially their relationships with their husband

and children when they worked in the wider community. He feared that ‘the harsh realities of outside work’ would ‘dry up the richness of their inner life, the resources of their sensitivity’. He wanted them to go to ‘the fountains of prayer and sacramental life to maintain themselves on a level with their matchless mission.’

John pointed out: ‘Today’s work has need of maternal sensibilities to dispel the atmosphere of violence and grossness in which men are struggling.’ He was opposed to married women being forced to work arguing that ‘a man’s salary should be sufficient to support his wife and family so that his wife is not forced to work outside the home by economic necessity.’¹⁵ Alas, this empathy with women did not translate into his including them as participants in the Vatican II Council.

John XXIII died in 1963 soon after his great reform project had been launched. His wide popularity was encapsulated in a cartoon in a newspaper which featured a world globe draped in mourning robes and inscribed with ‘A death in the family’! However, he did not die before creating a new secretariat for promoting Christian unity and appointing in 1961 the first Catholic representative to the Assembly of the World Council of Churches. His interest in the worldwide extension of the faith and its continued growth among non-Western peoples was seen in his elevation to the cardinalate of an African, a Filipino and a Japanese as well as the consecration of fourteen bishops for Asia, Africa and Oceania.¹⁶ These initiatives were to be picked up and developed at the Council.

Both John XXIII and Betty Friedan had experienced ‘divine discontent’. Hers was with the situation of women and his with the situation in the Church. Both had responded to these stirrings within them with decisive action: she through the researching and publishing *The Feminine Mystique* and he through calling the ecumenical Council of Vatican II. Neither realised what repercussions their initiatives would have on society.

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Pope Paul VI and Feminism

It was left to John XXIII’s successor Pope Paul VI to address the problem of the absence of women from the Council. Alas, this was done grossly inadequately under the heavy weight of the bureaucracy of the Vatican secretariat and did little to promote the aspirations expressed by John XXIII in *Pacem In Terris*. This has been well documented by Carmel McEnroy in her thoroughly researched publication *Guests in Their Own House—The Women Of Vatican II*.¹⁷ However, when Paul VI met with Betty Friedan in 1974, when she sought an audience with him, he presented her with a medal for her service to women.

It was Pope Paul VI along with his successor Pope John Paul II, who was to be in the position to evaluate the mixed fruits of the Council. Betty Friedan lived on to be able to critique the effects of the publication of *The Feminist Mystique* and the various feminist activities flowing from it. This she did and produced an insightful, humble, honest assessment in her second book, *The Second Stage*, in 1982 when she confessed: ‘I became aware that something was off, out of focus, going wrong ...’ and she made the seminal observation: ‘I believe it’s over, that first stage: the women’s movement. And yet the larger revolution, evolution, liberation that the women’s movement set off, has barely begun.’¹⁸

Insights into Post-Vatican II Feminism

Challengingly Betty Friedan declared: ‘The second stage cannot be seen in terms of women alone, our separate personhood or equality with men. The second stage involves coming to new terms with the family—new terms with love and with work....’ She went on to ask:

How can we transcend the polarization between women and women and between women and men to achieve the new human wholeness that is the promise of feminism and get on with solving the concrete practical everyday problems of living, working and loving as equal persons? This is the personal and political business of

the second stage.¹⁹

She was concerned about the backlash against feminism and at the time thought that 'the Vatican was part of the backlash.'²⁰ But Pope John Paul II expressed the humility that she was seeking in the relationship between men and women when he stated in his *Letter to Women* in 1995:

Unfortunately we are heirs to a history which has conditioned us to a remarkable extent. In every time and place, this conditioning has been an obstacle to the progress of women. And if objective blame, especially in particular historical contexts, has belonged to not just a few members of the Church, for this I am truly sorry. May this regret be transformed on the part of the Church, into a renewed commitment to fidelity to the Gospel vision.²¹

Also in his encyclical *Familiaris Consortio* on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World John Paul II declared:

The sharing of parenthood by men and women is one of the significant goals of the feminist movement and every effort must be made to restore socially the conviction that the place and task of the father in and for the family is of unique and irreplaceable importance.²²

Surprisingly Betty Friedan expressed some hope of joining forces with the pro-life lobby explaining:

An evolution is taking place here. Younger feminists, now aware of the possible consequences of the Pill and IUD to women's future health and future ability to bear children, are promoting the diaphragm and even the natural method, based on the mucous and temperature changes that indicate the ovulation period.²³

Concerning the vexed question of abortion, Betty Friedan in the light of her post-*Feminist Mystique* experience expressed the opinion: 'In the second stage, feminists would not consider abortion preferable to the Catholic new method of precise 'natural' birth control—for men and women mature enough to take responsibility for it.'²⁴

In Conclusion

Since the relationship between men and women is arguably the most important relationship in human society there is no doubt that the principal focus of the Church in the period following the present 'Fifty Years On Evaluation of Vatican II' must include feminism. It is clear that in this area of human concern there is a positive historical tradition to draw upon for inspiration and to develop for the common good.

NOTES

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3. A Hatch, *His Name Was John*, (London, George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1963), 46.
4. P. Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII, Pope of the Council* (London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 345; Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, translated by Dorothy White, (London, The New English Library Limited in association with Geoffrey Chapman Ltd, 1965), 78, 112, 177, 276, 195.
5. Friedan, *The Feminine*, 10, 54, 59, 330.
6. Friedan, *The Feminine*, 68.
7. Friedan, *The Feminine*, 164.
8. Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII*, 470.
9. Pope John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris*, Encyclical, (London, Catholic Truth Society, 1963), 8.
10. Pope John, *Pacem*, 59-60..
11. Pope John, *Pacem*, 10.
12. Pope John, *Pacem*, 18-19.
13. O.M. Liebard (ed), *Love and Sexuality: Official Catholic Teachings*, (Wilmington, N. Carolina, McGrath Publishing Co., 1978), 264-5.
14. Liebard (ed), *Love*, 266-7.
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16. K.S. Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age* Vol.4, (New York, Harper and Row, 1961) 63-4.
17. C. McEnroy, *Guests In Their Own House—The Women of Vatican II*, (New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996).
18. B. Friedan *The Second Stage*, (London, Michael Joseph Ltd. 1982), 20.
19. Friedan, *Second*, 47.
20. Friedan, *Second*, 43.
21. Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, (Sydney, St Paul Publications, 1995), 5,6.
22. Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio, Encyclical on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World*, (Sydney, St Paul Publications, 1981), 48.
23. Friedan, *Second*, 215.
24. Friedan, *Second*, 264-5.