

## The Cuban Woman in Church and in Theology

We had thought to start by thanking the organizers of this event for the space given to women in this very successful Martin Luther King workshop. However, do you think it necessary that we be *grateful* for this? Gratitude? I don't think it would be honest to be grateful for what is given. But we believe that our voice, the voice of Christian and revolutionary woman, is nothing more than our inalienable right which we use with fervor and full consciousness of the responsibility it entails.

We believe it just that the voice of the Cuban Christian women be heard here — their feelings, concerns, frustrations, achievements and future hopes — because during these days in Cuba, beneath the sky and sun of this island of liberty and love, women and men, whites and blacks, Cubans and North Americans have met to remember Dr. King who, pushing aside all the myths and legends which for years had been woven about inequality based on the color of skin, set forth on a passive but firm war against all that minimized men and women, that made them inferior. His struggle was one against all types of discrimination.

### Women in the Church

What does it mean to be female or male in the Church? Is there a fundamental difference? What does it mean to be female in the Church? We'd like to offer you a positive image of the actual role of Cuban women in the church and theology, but honesty demands that we admit that there is obvious oppression of both religious and lay women in the Church. And there is also an absence of women in theology, both as subject and object.

The committed Christian woman of necessity enters into conflict with Church structures because such structures are essentially masculine and oppressive. In the present situation women feel highly limited. They cannot develop their abilities in the different ministries because it appears

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that there is no room for their full contribution. The fact that in some denominations the ordination of women is "permitted" does not take away from the fact that these denominations continue to be highly sexist.

One must understand that this struggle has always been difficult for women because theologically the Church inverted its true values and, consciously or not, made women occupy a secondary place in its life. We should say that her place has been secondary in one sense, but primary in another. Certainly it has been primary with respect to her service to the institution: (1) with respect to the need to have women filling the pews (remember that 70% of our congregations are female) and (2) filling the pockets of the male ministers in order to maintain them as chiefs, princes, judges of an institution primarily sustained by the monetary contributions of women.

The significant thing is that (with few exceptions) there is no consciousness among women that our role could be different. For years we have been satisfied to accept public, verbal appreciation of our daily effort — the candy-making, crafts, child caring. This picture is repeated time and again, in different denominations and different countries. The greater the contribution in this area, the greater shall be the differences between men and women in the Church. Our role will always be to serve table and work in the kitchen while the men get involved in broad, deep theological matters.

We must say *NO! AGAIN AND AGAIN, NO!* We cannot accept this arbitrary burden imposed by the history of our ecclesiastical life. When will the time come when *men* will wipe the tables and season the food that we *women* will eat? When will we women direct the assembly sessions, assume the presidency of institutions, and conduct our own theological discussions? In a paper presented on the occasion of the celebration of International Women's Day in 1984, we said:

We would never like for the ecumenical movement to pass an accord that said that half of the Executive staff should be female. Half of the Executive Board should be female. Half of those who represent us in international events within and outside of the country should be female. NO. We want to arrive at this, but not by means of a quota, but through a change of consciousness, through deep study, etc.

### No Longer Dreamers

We said this more than two years ago. Today we are less the dreamers and more realistic about what we want. What we suggested is still not a reality, so today we are saying, YES, whether by quotas, by laws, or by decrees, what Cuban Christian women want must become a reality! We must be allowed to occupy the place we are entitled, allowed to develop our capacities to the full in the ecumenical movement and in the differ-

ent denominations.

Bringing this about is not solely for women, it is a duty of all. If the men aren't made aware of their structural superiority and domination we will fail. We must all have the consciousness that a masculinized structure governs, directs, administers, and oppresses Christian women.

On the other hand, I suspect that this male domination has been so long and painful that women, who theologically know their value, in practice are psychologically mutilated. We've almost been convinced that we haven't the directoral, administrative and pastoral capacities, and before men can respond, we women find ourselves saying, "I can't."

We must risk making mistakes. We must start with the inevitable limitations of the mutilated. I myself have started to consider what we are, and really, there is so much that we must do for ourselves; especially must we acquire consciousness. We are not so helpless or limited as we have been made to believe throughout the years. Our first challenge must be to denounce the myth of our helplessness.

But we don't want to wage our women's struggle alone. It is a joint struggle. Men shall unite with us, shall help us to express our own feminine identity within the Church. We will work as new men and women so that our fruits will be felt in the entire Church. The fruits of these working, useful women shall be the best voice against future discriminations. We believe the work of creating consciencousness is worthwhile. The Cuban Revolution itself has been a source of learning for the Church and the expressed equality of our country's laws is a challenge to the Church. May this be a challenge to contextualize our posture and action within the contemporary world, in all that is just, good, and honest.

### Searching for a New Church

We're not about to enter into war against the Church and its hierarchy. On the contrary, our efforts are directed at permeating it and evangelizing it in an attempt to bring about equality. We have no desire to speak of a women's theology. We don't want yet another theological division. Instead, we are asking for a theological discussion from the women's perspective, so that the entire Church can live its faith and project itself to the world as God's people, testifying to our common faith and serving through the inspiration of that faith.

We must speak of a *new* Church. We must help in the construction of that new Church that lives a liberating faith, full of hope, without discrimination, without legitimation of class or race, and without sexual oppression. We are not asking for a new denomination, but for the struggle for a total renovation of the Church.

Our congregations, the Council of Churches, and the ecumenical

movement must change their structures, otherwise they will lose their credibility and their proselytizing strength. We cannot announce a Kingdom of Justice when we are unjust to the most numerous segment of its membership: women. Of course, we must look upon the Church with love, or better yet, with hope, because we form part of it and must struggle for its constant renovation instead of looking for new groups that ridicule and disdain its traditional structures. We seek a process of conversion that allows our churches to recognize in women a comrade, not only for the tasks which up to now she has been assigned, but also as an equal participant in decision-making.

Until now we have been the objects of the structure, of the teaching, the theology and the masculinized historical tradition. The effect has been such that few women are willing to struggle, to take risks and to commit themselves to this new conversion.

From our Women's Department of the Ecumenical Council of Cuba, we denounce this exclusionary situation and demand that the CEC, the member churches, and the ecumenical movement as a whole, take responsibility and decisive steps that indicate real and authentic change, the goal being to give women full participation in leadership. We want to lead not for leadership's sake, or to dictate arbitrarily, but to exercise a greater commitment to service, greater responsibilities, talents and virtues. This is our job as women. Like racism and classism, sexism is foremost among the several discriminations suffered by humanity and we must accept the task of wiping it out in the churches.

### Theology and Women's Issues

Liberation theology must be questioned for its lack of sensitivity to the absence of women in theological work. This is true even as we agree about the urgency of other priorities, such as hunger, unemployment, and human misery. These critical issues, however, do not excuse male theologians for the lack of sensitivity to the exclusion of women from the theological enterprise. Theology has been carried out from seminaries and in pulpits dominated almost exclusively by men because such places have been assumed to be the loci of masculine excellence. As such, male theological interpretations and religious values clearly exhibit their exclusionary conditioning. We must make the effort today to create more space in Cuban theology. Each day we are more optimistic because the consciousness of many of us women has been awakened, and we are now taking flight. It has been painful, like childbirth, but hopeful. Already Cuban women are beginning to theologize together with men, studying different aspects of the hermeneutic language, and theological perspectives of male and female roles in the Church.

In the ecumenical world we have achieved advancement through na-

tional meetings, seminars and workshops in which women learn to become conscious of their real value and of the possibilities that, up to now, have been absent precisely because of our marginalization and discrimination. We need to prepare cadres and theological leaders. We need to send our women to special training courses. We need to receive theological literature that will help us and give us a base for our feminist thinking. The exchange of ideas and experiences by women in struggle is urgent.

That is why from our position in the Women's Department of the Ecumenical Council we have made it our continuing concern to:

- 1) promote the leadership and participation of women in the ecumenical movement within the different churches;
- 2) promote the development of theology that seriously takes into account women's experience;
- 3) sensitize women to justice and peace issues in the world, so that no racial, social, or sexual injustice can prevail unchallenged.

It is necessary that we women rid ourselves of this inferiority feeling which traditional culture and the inherited socio-historical situation have imposed upon us. Spontaneity cannot be one of our characteristics. We cannot permit things to happen spontaneously. We must struggle to attain what we really want. It is necessary to force decisions, agreements and resolutions that reach out toward the goals that Christian women have, and to which we have a right. We cannot accept being told that we must be patient, that we must wait until ideas ripen and give fruit. Martin Luther King was told to be patient in his struggle against racism, but for women in theology the hour is not for patience. The time is for risk and challenge, made possible by the acquisition of women's consciousness — a consciousness which says: "enough," and goes forth in search of identity and equality.

Sometimes I think that women should not argue so much for equality. I think that what we need is to demonstrate that we really are not equal, but rather superior, because we have been able to rise up and send forth our shout so that it may be heard, against all the historically established and oppressive structures, saying *NO* to the old retrograde conceptions and swimming against the currents of tradition.

*Our struggle is to demand more space for women's participation in ecclesiastic life and the ecumenical movements.* It is fitting now to ask the organizers of this event: How many women were invited to participate? How many men? What is the numerical difference here? Is it just? Is there or isn't there discrimination in this conference with the Black Theology Project in the U.S.A.?