

# That men and women question comes

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LONDON: A new missive on women from the Vatican followed by a strong response to it has brought new spark to an old debate.

A "letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on collaboration between men and women" published at the end of last month sought to calm the gender debate. Inevitably, it has done quite the opposite.

The view of the Vatican, the seat of the Catholic Church in Rome, was strongly challenged earlier this week by the Washington-based Catholics for a Free Choice.

The new debate is expected to surface particularly at an international conference on reproductive health due to begin in London at the end of this month. Conference organizers see reproductive health tied inextricably with women's rights.

The Vatican letter intended for both the church and the world seeks to address "certain currents of thought which are often at variance with the authentic advancement of women."

A first tendency, it says, is to "emphasize strongly conditions of subordination in order to give rise to

antagonism: women, in order to be themselves, must make themselves the adversaries of men."

The letter adds: "Faced with the abuse of power, the answer for women is to seek power. This process leads to opposition between men and women, in which the identity and role of one are emphasized to the disadvantage of the other, leading to harmful confusion regarding the human person, which has its most immediate and lethal effects in the structure of the family."

The "second tendency" is that "in order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning." The Vatican says this view calls into question "the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father", and makes "homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality."

The Vatican says that "among the fundamental values linked to women's actual lives is what has been called a "capacity for the other". Although a certain type of feminist

rhetoric makes demands "for ourselves", women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other."

The Vatican letter says that first women should be "significantly and actively present in the family" because it is here that "the features of a people take shape; it is here that its members acquire basic teachings." But it seeks to define also the position of women in the working world.

It says women should be able to "devote the totality of their time to the work of the household without being stigmatized by society or penalized financially, while those who wish also to engage in other work may be able to do so with an appropriate work-schedule, and not have to choose between relinquishing their family life or enduring continual stress, with negative consequences for one's own equilibrium and the harmony of the family."

The letter says "the proper condition of the male-female relationship cannot be a kind of mistrustful and defensive opposition. Their relation-

ship needs to be lived in peace and in the happiness of shared love."

Frances Kissling, president of Catholics for a Free Choice wrote back to say that "it is the Vatican, not feminists, that fosters antagonism between men and women and diminishes the dignity of both." The letters, she says, is "filled with stereotypes of women — good and bad —and ill-informed caricatures of feminist thought."

Even a rudimentary application of gender analysis to the Vatican's letter "would have demonstrated that feminism has resulted in great benefits for men as well as women. While the letter seeks to set human relations in the context of "active collaboration" rather than competition between men and women, it ultimately fails to do justice to both."

Kissling says men are "invisible" in the Vatican letter. "Adam's creation is cited as evidence of male pre-eminence, and then men disappear."

The Catholic Church statement does not raise "any discussion of men's role in family life or in child rearing and care or any indication that part of the active collaboration of

men and women should include men's responsibility for actually sharing in the work of child rearing and the formation of children's values. Children are still women's work."

In this area, Kissling writes, "feminism has been far more respectful of men and suggested a more collaborative model of family relations," who does the Vatican think is responsible for the enormous number of men who have become better fathers over the last two decades?"

The Vatican's statement would lead one to believe that women alone are responsible for the quality of relationships between men and women and that feminist thought created and fuelled the war between the sexes.

"There is no recognition that many of the examples of subordination of women made by feminists and others have pointed to serious problems including spousal abuse of women, rape that goes unpunished by courts worldwide, and serious inequities in the work place."

Kissling says "it is disturbing that the Vatican should only call for laws that provide economic support for women who stay home to raise chil-

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's dren and for labour policies that make it possible for women to fill the dual role of mother and worker. Feminists have made more equitable demands. Not only do we call for support for women's work at home and more flexible work rules for women, we call for the same rights for men."

Current European laws, she says, that "permit both men and women to take parental leave are the result of feminist advocacy, not Vatican support."

The supposedly positive support from the Vatican on women's role in the work place and political sphere is not so positive, Kissling says. "While the Vatican calls for the inclusion of women in political life and as decision makers in industry, this is based on an anthropology of women that ignores their identity as rights-bearing persons."

According to the Vatican, Kissling says, "women are to be welcomed in the work place because they are women, with a special "genius" that will humanize the public sphere. Certain "feminine values" are extolled. Women have "the irreplaceable role" in all aspects of family and

social life involving relationships and caring. Kissling says: "Women have come on their own as competent leaders who deserve a seat at the table."

In lifting up "feminine" values, the Vatican dismisses male characteristics. Kissling says, "The Vatican is something in between about the continuity of male and female. There is something about the quality of male nurturing, and caring, and wonderful human qualities. It is unclear as the Vatican lifts up these characteristics that they are different from our physical characteristics."

Most important, she says, are no balancing acts being presented. If feminine values that can be contrasted with not masculinity? Vatican characteristics and why women are to be faithful to the suggestion that men are being generous and called to generosity harsher than that of a feminist, however radical. *InterPress News Service*