

dullish *James* into quick parallel with the *Aeneid*.

Well, warned by their sense of the eschatological prevention of anything in the way of complete theological expression, and encouraged by their increasingly appreciative estimate of narratives that are confessedly partial, theologians may yet be kept busy with the discernment of spirits. They may explore the possibilities of their culture's literature for future announcements of Christ. If the first two criteria reflect the necessary theological awareness of the transcendence of God and the demand within the revelation made in Christ for a story-telling response, narrative theology must also be conducted in accord with the further criterion of acknowledging the generosity of the Spirit. The accounts F.D. Maurice gives of 'inspiration' may suggest the workings of this third criterion. Maurice is still the old-fashioned classicist, but a reading of what he has to say about Lucretius might enable a modern english-reading theologian to divine what is being declared in Shakespeare's dramatic exchange of 'nature' and 'charity', in Henry James' anselmian celebration of that honour which is only to be preserved in suffering, in Leslie Stephen's 'bad five minutes in the Alps'. At any rate, I cannot suppose that a theological programme which, setting out from a reading of Jesus' parables, was aimed at a christian appreciation of such writings alongside those of Justin, Aquinas, Liguori, and Fr Hugo Rahner's brother, say, would be a waste of redeeming time.

## **U.S. Women Religious and the Feminisation of Poverty**

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### **Introduction**

One of the most important social realities today, one which holds theological importance is the well documented and yet chilling fact of the feminisation of poverty. With the increasing global and national polarisation of poor and rich, the majority of the newly poor continue to be women and children. Overwhelmingly, women with children spend the major portion of their lives in a downward spiral, struggling for economic survival for themselves and their children. Politically, these

same women hold little or no social power.

This social reality of the feminisation of poverty in the USA finds its counterpart in the Catholic Church in the economic relationship between the institutional church and women, particularly women religious. In this article I will first describe the social process of the feminisation of poverty. Second I will briefly demonstrate how and why U.S. congregations of women religious partake in this social process through their relationship with the institutional Church. Finally I will discuss what implications this has for the theology of religious life, for women and for the Church.

## The Feminisation of Poverty—Empirical Data

In 1985, at the end of the Decade for Women (1975–85) a UN task force documented staggering figures on the world-wide pauperisation of women. This data finally gave credibility to feminists who had asserted for some time that the economic and social oppression of women was a universal problem. While allowing for cultural, legal, economic and political variations the UN report states:

*Women suffer dual oppression of sex and class within and outside the family. The effects are strikingly apparent in the present world profile of women. While women represent 50% of the world's population, they perform nearly two thirds of all working hours, receive only 1/10th of the world income and own less than 1% of world property.<sup>1</sup>*

The latest UN report concludes that when women do the same work as men, they typically receive less pay than men, 30 to 40 per cent less on the average.

In the U.S. the feminisation of poverty means women are still heavily concentrated in low paying jobs. The average woman earns 68.8 cents for every dollar earned by the average man. Even when women work in male-dominated occupations, they are relegated to the lower echelons. In 1988 women maintained 53 per cent of all poor families; 76 per cent of poor black families, 48 per cent of poor Hispanic families and 44 per cent of poor white families. Two out of three poor adults are women. Only twenty per cent (20%) of older women in U.S. society have adequate pensions. These factors, along with inadequate social security and pensions, account for the fact that women over 65 make up more than 70% of the elderly poor people.<sup>2</sup>

## **Interpretation of Empirical Data**

There are several reasons for the feminisation of poverty. Feminist historians show that the private-public split in human activities has placed women's housework among non-valued labour. Work in the home has little economic significance, whereas in the public sphere of civic and political life men's labour is remunerated. Traditional female occupations (teaching, nursing) are considered less than men's and this is reflected in the pay differential. Women still face sexism and discrimination in the economic sector, which then plays itself out in equal work for less pay.

German feminist Hannelore Schroeder in her article on women, work and poverty contends:

The starting point of all theory has to be the fact that the male sex has nine times the income and consequently almost the entire property in the world. This is as a privilege and only to a very limited extent on the basis of work done. The female sex as such is the criterion of the most extreme economic discrimination.<sup>3</sup>

Despite employment advances by white women in the past decade the more valued and prestigious work performed in society is done by men. Positions of power such as those of physicians, lawyers, politicians and academicians are overwhelmingly controlled by men. On the other hand, eighty per cent (80%) of working women are clustered in secretarial, sales and retail jobs paying low level wages.<sup>4</sup>

Every woman belongs to the half of humanity which is two-thirds more likely than men to become or remain poor. Being born female initiates each woman into a class and social location of economic dependence and vulnerability. This class and social location occurs regardless of the individual woman's personal experience or status.

Poverty is not a mystery nor an abstract state of being but a realistic social and economic process of vulnerability. The initial step of poverty is being born a woman in a society with economic and social arrangements which place women dependent and subordinate to men. For Black or Hispanic women race heightens the possibility of poverty as a permanent way of life.

Women who are victims in the process of poverty are not only the homeless and unemployed but also those hidden in the full time work force of the US. The institutional Church also has a work force of women who are victims of the feminisation of poverty; these are the Catholic nuns who taught in the Catholic school system and nursed in Catholic hospitals for over a century.

## The Feminisation of Poverty and U.S. Women Religious

As a group U.S. women religious experience and partake in the social reality and process of the feminisation of poverty. My interest is to show that the theological status of women religious has not protected them from an unjust employment relationship with the institutional Church, and to explain that despite attempts by the institutional Church to rectify this historical economic injustice, women religious like most women workers in society and lay women employees in the Church, are economically vulnerable and held hostage to a theologically and economically androcentric institution.

The most salient feature of the feminisation of poverty for women religious is the financial burden these women religious experience in the care of their elderly. Despite years of service to the U.S. Church only recently were the retirement needs of religious adequately taken into consideration by the institutional Church. To fill the economic void of the past the financial drive entitled the Retirement Fund for Religious was organised to address the 'financial problem [which] has been hidden in hundreds of convents, motherhouses, and monasteries all over the United States. For years religious congregations have been using their resources to subsidise the ministries they performed, and now they do not have the money to take care of their elderly and infirm.'<sup>5</sup> Although this fund drive is intended for both men and women, overwhelmingly, women religious are in a greater financial crisis than religious orders of brothers or men's clerical orders.<sup>6</sup> The institutional Church must be given credit but not lauded for initiating this retirement fund drive.<sup>7</sup> It is, after all, the practical application of the social teaching of the Church and the economic principles delineated in their pastoral *Economic Justice for All*.<sup>8</sup>

Like the full time working-poor woman in the larger society, what remains unclear for women religious, and all women workers of the Church, is the future. Unlike priests there is no guaranteed employment for women religious in the Church.<sup>9</sup> Despite the call for Church reforms from Vatican II no Church policy exists which requires a diocese or an individual pastor to employ women religious for a school, a religious education director, liturgical director, pastoral assistant, or RCIA leader, positions predominantly held by women. In fact, when the parish monies dry up these paid positions are the first to be replaced by volunteers, amalgamated with another ministry or eliminated.

I realise that policies vary from diocese to diocese. However, despite the best attempt of the U.S. Church and dioceses to amend the economic injustice of the past, on the whole, the structural economic

arrangements between the institutional Church and women religious (and all women workers for the Church for that matter) remain unfair and dependent on the good will of individual authorities, not a policy intrinsically just. Standing alongside other women in the wider U.S. capitalistic society, women religious are placed in the most vulnerable and economically insecure position vis-à-vis their employer, the institutional Church.

Women religious also carry another burden: the economic cost of preparation for Church ministry with no guaranteed job. Throughout history and even to the present day, most women's congregations educate and prepare their members for Church ministry at no cost to the institutional Church. Generally lay women who devote themselves to Church ministry pay for their own pastoral or theological education. However, since new ministries have developed in the Church a counter-trend can be observed. Women religious seeking Church employment find themselves in a bind; the higher their qualifications the less likely they will gain full-time, paid employment in the service of the Church.<sup>10</sup>

The Church has held religious life, particularly the vowed life of a sister, in great esteem. Yet this status has not protected her from being treated as the over-worked and under-paid woman of the Church. This treatment finds its roots in the historical and economic relationship of women religious to the institutional Church.

## **Historical Roots of the Feminisation of Poverty in Congregations of Women Religious**

There are four main historical reasons for this feminisation of poverty of women religious. First, women religious gave their service and work to the Church either with little or no compensation. Any surplus from family donations, or frugal living went to the education of young members or to subsidise ministries operated by the order. This fiscal arrangement over the decades prohibited congregations from setting aside funds for retirement. Second, prior to the Second Vatican Council many congregations experienced a healthy ratio of active members outnumbering retired members, thus giving rise to a false confidence that the financial future was secure and the younger religious would take care of the elderly. Third, in the last twenty years most congregations experienced a great exodus of wage earning members which threatened the already fragile fiscal life of the order. Finally, women religious never had the surplus income which comes with ordination. Religious

orders of men which have priests do not have the same financial crisis as women religious. Throughout history orders of priests have had an economic advantage through the policy of stipends for sacramental services and retreats. In addition to the historical causes of the feminisation of poverty in congregations of women it is important to consider the theological underpinnings of this phenomenon.

### **Theology of Service: Theoretical Foundation for the Feminisation of Poverty in Congregations of Women Religious**

In Catholic theology the distinguishing characteristics of religious life are the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The Church teaches that the very essence of religious life is apostolic service and charitable activity.<sup>11</sup> (Here I refer to active orders only). *Perfectae Caritatis* states religious 'can live and think with the Church to an ever increasing degree, and spend themselves completely on her mission.'<sup>12</sup> A singular glance at each of the vows reveals how this theology of service is enforced. Poverty is the individual renunciation of personal economic control over material wealth. Chastity is the total dedication of one's body and one's relationships to the works of charity. Obedience requires submission of the will to the work of the Church through the charism of the individual religious order. There is no question that the theology of service as described here has been of immeasurable benefit to the Church. The infrastructure of the U.S. Catholic Church is in place today because religious orders understood their vocation as intrinsically attached to advancement of the institutional Church.

However, this notion of religious life as derived from a theology of service was based on a pre-industrial, semi-monastic social structure. Physical and intellectual work was defined as service for God, through the institutional Church done with little or minimal care for the self. There was no sense of the religious as being employed by the Church or engagement of the Church, in the process of hiring or firing. All assignments, whatever the circumstances, were viewed as the will of God. Women religious rarely if ever described their vocation or ministry as work, rather it was the annual obedience or mission assignment. It is of critical importance that the sisters' service was a vocation of servanthood, spiritually motivated by the vow of poverty.

I would suggest that the interpretation of religious life from a theology of service, as described above, and in particularly the vow of poverty as renunciation of economic control over one's life is an

inadequate theology for contemporary women religious and it does not reflect accurately their experience.

Women religious embraced readily the Vatican II spirit of renewal. The introduction and application of the social and behavioural sciences to religious life and the massive educational effort by women's congregations to prepare for the future Church opened more than windows for women religious. Through their reflection on Scriptures, a new understanding of the struggle for justice as a constitutive element of the Gospel re-shaped the identity of women religious.<sup>13</sup> Women religious began to see themselves as professional Church workers. Many of them have a better theological education than the average parish priest.<sup>14</sup> The influence of the women's movement and major internal changes within the religious order around the notion of ministry have profoundly altered the institutional relationship with the Church. Along with the dramatic decrease of vocations and women leaving their orders, many congregations see a shift in the sisters' occupations away from education and health care. This took a significant number of sisters out of service to the Church and into secular employment, especially in the social service sector and the political realm.

However, the singular most important change for women religious is the legal contract. Here the religious orders and the institutional Church have developed a system whereby the individual in conjunction with the congregation agrees to work for the Church. No longer is ministry seen as solely service under blind obedience but rather as an agreement to render particular tasks and perform specific functions. The contract was initiated by religious orders and the institutional Church to *define and protect each party. Increasingly, women religious experience themselves as employees rather than simply sisters or ministers of the Church. This reality highlights the need for a theological foundation for the professional employment of women religious and all women in the Church. This new experience for women religious as employees of the Church raises theological and practical implications for women religious and the wider Church.*

## **Conclusion: Implications for the Church and Women Religious**

Feminist theology commits itself to the experience of women as its starting point. As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza claims, in order to create more adequate interpretative theoretical models which confront specific forms of oppression, theological understandings must include more of



women's concrete and practical experience, not less. Only as we become very particular can we hope to construct more universal formulations which reflect the truth and bring us closer to a more just Church and to a transformed society.<sup>15</sup>

I want to raise three implications the feminisation of poverty and the experience of work for women religious has for the development of a theology of religious life for women.

First, the older understanding of the vow of poverty is challenged. Traditionally the vow is understood as the total surrender by the individual over economic control of her life. The individual relinquished authority over material goods and her economic potential to the congregation in order to serve the poor. This interpretation is no longer adequate. Women religious need to shift the emphasis of the vow from an individualistic interpretation to a more expansive notion and collective understanding. This would include the social analysis of systems which create the oppression of women. This understanding would enable women religious to recognise that, as a group, they are poor not only because they choose to live a simple life-style but are poor in concrete and socio-economic terms. Poverty is both a social process and a religious ideal. As a social process it places women in a social location of vulnerability based on gender. This alters their religious ideal of poverty. As a religious ideal it needs to be informed by the particular experience of women religious. The new ideal of the vow of poverty would have as its beginning point an identification with other women, whether destitute women or full-time working women, in the struggle for economic justice. Making just demands to one's employer, the Church or any other institution, is a virtuous act, not simply for oneself or one's religious order but for all women.<sup>16</sup>

Second, historically women religious have ministered primarily to poor women and children. Prior to liberation theology or the recent pastoral on the economy which makes the option for the poor the fundamental moral criterion for all economic decisions,<sup>17</sup> women religious have served the poor. Traditionally, serving the poor meant labouring within the Church or the particular religious Order's institutions. Today, this ministry to poor women and children is threatened because of the need for adequately paid work. There is a tension between the commitment of a woman religious to ministry and the corporate need of the congregation to expect adequate remuneration for the basic care of its members. When women religious create new structures, policies and procedures which retain this priority of commitment to women and children this must include their own economic empowerment.



Finally, religious congregations of women need to use their corporate voice within the institutional Church to press it towards accountability for its own Church policies which affect not only women religious but all workers in the Church.

- 1 Quoted from *United Nations Programme of Action 1980* in Schaffer, *The Feminisation of Poverty: Prospects for an International Feminist Agenda*. unpublished manuscript. These statistics are also cited in Hannelore Schroder's 'The Economic Impoverishment of the Mothers is the Economic Enrichment of the Fathers' in *Women Work and Poverty Concilium*, 1987, 194:10.
- 2 WIN Women's International Network (Mass: Summer, '91)
- 3 Hannelore Schroeder, 'The Economic Impoverishment of Mothers is the the Enrichment of Fathers.' in *Concilium* 1987, 194:12
- 4 Elinor Lenz and Barbara Myerhoff, *The Feminisation of America: How Women's Values are Changing Our Public and Private Lives*, (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., 1985)
- 5 1988 Annual Report — *Retirement Fund for Religious* Tri-Conference Retirement Office (Washington, D.C.:1988) p. 1 The Tri-Conference comprises representatives from the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.
- 6 A few statistics will detail the ratio. In 1990, 608 congregations received financial grants, 483 of these were women's congregations, 125 were men's; in 1991 624 congregations received grants 486 were given to women's congregations, 138 to men's congregations. A grant is awarded for the number of religious over age 50 X \$221. For more specific details consult the Annual Tri-Conference Report for the years 1988, 89, 90.
- 7 'The remedial efforts are providing results. For those looking at the present facts, the cash and investment pool for retirement has gone up. . . . On the surface, more money to attend to a smaller population is a positive sign. However, behind the numbers is a less optimistic story. The increase in retirement monies is not likely to continue more than five to ten years into the future. When it reverses, the decline in retirement funds will be swift.' Auditor's report in the *Retirement Needs Survey of U.S. Religious-III* (USCC: Wash. D.C., 1990). p. 5
- 8 *Economic Justice for All* National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, D.C.:1986) no. 347.
- 9 A comparison could be made here that religious brothers are similar to women religious, they also do not have guaranteed Church work for spirit-led vocations. However, most brothers belong to orders that include priests therefore they directly benefit from the stipends of the ordained (guaranteed work) ministry. The common denominator is being male.
- 10 Ephrem Else Lau, 'Women Religious and Lay Women as Workers in the Church' in *Women, Work and Poverty* (Concilium: Edinburgh, 1987) 194:82
- 11 Art. 8 in Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of the Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*) in *The Documents of Vatican II* ed. E.M. Abbott, (London and Dublin: 1966).
- 12 Ibid Art. 6
- 13 'Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.' *Justice in the World*, Synod of Bishops, Rome, 1971.

- 14 Today, 65 percent of American nuns have master's degrees and 25 percent have doctoral degrees. Only 24 percent of American bishops have master's degrees, and only 10 per cent have doctorates.' B. Ferraro and P. Hussey *No Turning Back* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990) p 62.
- 15 Elizabeth S. Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984). p xv.
- 16 Yvone Gebara, Option of the Poor as option for the Poor Women in *Concilium* 194:110 'Poor, even though it refers primarily to a social group deprived of material goods, can be expanded to include an impoverished culture, voiceless minorities without rights, groups seeking elementary recognition in society. Women are included in this expansion of the term poor.'
- 17 *Economic Justice for All* (Wash, D.C.: USCC) No. 24.

## Columbus was not Eichmann

John Navone SJ

Christopher Columbus has been a target of revisionist debunking as the New World prepares for the 500th anniversary of the European discovery. Once praised as a superb seaman by Samuel Eliot Morison, Columbus has shrunk to an incompetent bumbler in Kirkpatrick Sale's book, *The Discovery of Paradise*—a paradise, the author argues, that Europeans despoiled. Going further, other protesters hand up the equivalent of a Nuremberg indictment. What happened after 1492, thunders the National Council of Churches, was 'an invasion and colonisation with legalised occupation, genocide, economic exploitation and a deep level of institutional racism and moral decadence.' This is partly true, but by the same selective reckoning Jefferson was a Virginia elitist and a slave-owning plutocrat. In his *New York Times* editorial (June 26, 1991), 'Columbus Was Not Eichmann,' Karl E. Meyer affirms that, despite their cruelties, Spanish colonisers were not simply war criminals; and, whatever his faults, Columbus was not Eichmann. That anyone would suggest otherwise tells more about our own self-righteous age than that of Columbus.

Nobody can deny that the conquistadores thirsted for gold and glory, slaughtered Indians and imported African slaves. What needs to be added is that their excesses were searingly indicted by Spanish churchmen, notably by the Dominican friar Bartolomé de Las Casas. His *Very Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, published in Seville in 1552, remains the prime source for the worst horror stories of the Spanish conquest. His searing narrative, Meyer affirms, was seized upon by English Protestants to justify their own conquests. This grew