

# DECREE FOURTEEN

## Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society

### Introduction

**361** 1. General Congregation 33 made a brief mention of the "unjust treatment and exploitation of women."<sup>1</sup> It was part of a list of injustices in a context of new needs and situations which Jesuits were called to address in the implementation of our mission. We wish to consider this question more specifically and substantially on this occasion. This is principally because, assisted by the general rise in consciousness concerning this issue, we are more aware than previously that it is indeed a central concern of any contemporary mission which seeks to integrate faith and justice. It has a universal dimension in that it involves men and women everywhere. To an increasing extent it cuts across barriers of class and culture. It is of personal concern to those who work with us in our mission, especially lay and religious women.

### The Situation

**362** 2. The dominance of men in their relationship with women has found expression in many ways. It has included discrimination against women in educational opportunities, the disproportionate burden they are called upon to bear in family life, paying them a lesser wage for the same work, limiting their access to positions of influence when admitted to public life, and, sadly but only too frequently, outright violence against women themselves. In some parts of the world, this violence still includes female circumcision, dowry deaths, and the murder of unwanted infant girls. Women are commonly treated as objects in advertising and in the media. In extreme cases, for example, in promoting international sex tourism, they are regarded as commodities to be trafficked in.

**363** 3. This situation, however, has begun to change, chiefly because of the critical awakening and courageous protest of women themselves. But many men, too, have joined women in rejecting attitudes which offend against the dignity of men and women alike. Nonetheless, we still have with us the legacy of systematic discrimination against women. It is embedded within the economic, social, political, religious, and even linguistic structures of our societies. It is often part of an even deeper cultural prejudice and stereotype. Many women, indeed, feel that men have been slow to recognize the full humanity of women. They often experience a defensive reaction from men when they draw attention to this blindness.

**364** 4. The prejudice against women, to be sure, assumes different forms in different cultures. Sensitivity is needed to avoid using any one simple measurement of what counts as discrimination. But it is nonetheless a universal reality. Further, in many parts of the world, women already cruelly disadvantaged because of war, poverty, migration, or race, often suffer a double disadvantage precisely because they are women. There is a "feminization of poverty" and a distinctive "feminine face of oppression."

## **The Church Addresses the Situation**

**365** 5. Church social teaching, especially within the last ten years, has reacted strongly against this continuing discrimination and prejudice. Pope John Paul II in particular has called upon all men and women of goodwill, especially Catholics, to make the essential equality of women a lived reality. This is a genuine "sign of the times."<sup>2</sup> We need to join with interchurch and interreligious groups in order to advance this social transformation.

**366** 6. Church teaching certainly promotes the role of women within the family, but it also stresses the need for their contribution in the Church and in public life. It draws upon the text of Genesis which speaks of men and women created in the image of God (1:27) and the prophetic praxis of Jesus in his relationship with women. These sources call us to change our attitudes and work for a change of structures. The original plan of God was for a loving relationship of respect, mutuality, and equality between men and women, and we are called to fulfill this plan. The tone of this ecclesial reflection on Scripture makes it clear that there is an urgency in the challenge to translate theory into practice not only outside but also within the Church itself.

## **The Role and Responsibility of Jesuits**

**367** 7. The Society of Jesus accepts this challenge and our responsibility for doing what we can as men and as a male religious order. We do not pretend or claim to speak for women. However, we do speak out of what we have learned from women about ourselves and our relationship with them.

**368** 8. In making this response we are being faithful, in the changed consciousness of our times, to our mission: the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement. We respond, too, out of the acknowledgement of our own limited but significant influence as Jesuits and as male religious within the Church. We are conscious of the damage to the People of God brought about in some cultures by the alienation of women who no longer feel at home in the Church and who are not able with integrity to transmit Catholic values to their families, friends, and colleagues.

## **Conversion**

**369** 9. In response, we Jesuits first ask God for the grace of conversion. We have been part of a civil and ecclesial tradition that has offended against women. And, like many men, we have a tendency to convince ourselves that there is no problem. However unwittingly, we have often contributed to a form of clericalism which has reinforced male domination with an ostensibly divine sanction. By making this declaration we wish to react personally and collectively, and do what we can to change this regrettable situation.

## **Appreciation**

**370** 10. We know that the nurturing of our own faith and much of our own ministry would be greatly diminished without the dedication, generosity, and joy that women bring to the schools, parishes, and other fields in which we labor together. This is particularly true of the work of lay and religious women among the urban and rural poor, often in extremely difficult and challenging situations. In addition, many religious congregations of women have adopted the Spiritual Exercises and our Jesuit Constitutions as the basis for their own spirituality and governance, becoming an extended Ignatian family. Religious and lay women have in recent years become expert in giving the Spiritual Exercises. As retreat directors, especially of the Exercises in daily life, they have enriched the Ignatian tradition and our own understanding of ourselves and of our ministry. Many women have helped to reshape our theological tradition in a way that has liberated both men and women. We wish to express our appreciation for this generous contribution of women, and hope that this mutuality in ministry might continue and flourish.

## **Ways Forward**

**371** 11. We wish to specify more concretely at least some ways in which Jesuits may better respond to this challenge to our lives and mission. We do not presume that there is any one model of male-female relationship to be recommended, much less imposed, throughout the world or even within a given culture. Rather we note the need for a real delicacy in our response. We must be careful not to interfere in a way that alienates the culture; rather we must endeavor to facilitate a more organic process of change. We should be particularly sensitive to adopt a pedagogy that does not drive a further wedge between men and women who in certain circumstances are already under great pressure from other divisive cultural or socioeconomic forces.

**372** 12. In the first place, we invite all Jesuits to listen carefully and courageously to the experience of women. Many women feel that men simply do not listen to them. There is no substitute for such listening. More than anything else it will bring about change. Unless we listen, any action we may take in this area, no matter how well intentioned, is likely to bypass the real concerns of women and

to confirm male condescension and reinforce male dominance. Listening, in a spirit of partnership and equality, is the most practical response we can make and is the foundation for our mutual partnership to reform unjust structures.

**373** 13. Second, we invite all Jesuits, as individuals and through their institutions, to align themselves in solidarity with women. The practical ways of doing this will vary from place to place and from culture to culture, but many examples come readily to mind:

**374** 13, 1. explicit teaching of the essential equality of women and men in Jesuit ministries, especially in schools, colleges and universities

**375** 13, 2. support for liberation movements which oppose the exploitation of women and encourage their entry into political and social life

**376** 13, 3. specific attention to the phenomenon of violence against women

**377** 13, 4. appropriate presence of women in Jesuit ministries and institutions, not excluding the ministry of formation

**378** 13, 5. genuine involvement of women in consultation and decision making in our Jesuit ministries

**379** 13, 6. respectful cooperation with our female colleagues in shared projects

**380** 13, 7. use of appropriately inclusive language in speech and official documents

**381** 13, 8. promotion of the education of women and, in particular, the elimination of all forms of illegitimate discrimination between boys and girls in the educational process

Many of these, we are happy to say, are already being practiced in different parts of the world. We confirm their value, and recommend a more universal implementation as appropriate.

**382** 14. It would be idle to pretend that all the answers to the issues surrounding a new, more just relationship between women and men have been found or are satisfactory to all. In particular, it may be anticipated that some other questions about the role of women in civil and ecclesial society will undoubtedly mature over time. Through committed and persevering research, through exposure to different cultures, and through reflection on experience, Jesuits hope to participate in clarifying these questions and in advancing the underlying issues of justice. The change of sensibilities which this involves will inevitably have implications for Church teaching and practice. In this context we ask Jesuits to

live, as always, with the tension involved in being faithful to the teachings of the Church while at the same time trying to read accurately the signs of the times.

## Conclusion

**383** 15. The Society gives thanks for all that has already been achieved through the often costly struggle for a more just relationship between women and men. We thank women for the lead they have given and continue to give. In particular, we thank women religious, with whom we feel a special bond, and who have been pioneers in so many ways in their unique contribution to the mission of faith and justice. We are grateful, too, for what the Society and individual Jesuits have contributed to this new relationship, which is a source of great enrichment for both men and women.

**384** 16. Above all we want to commit the Society in a more formal and explicit way to regard this solidarity with women as integral to our mission. In this way we hope that the whole Society will regard this work for reconciliation between women and men in all its forms as integral to its interpretation of Decree 4 of GC 32 for our times. We know that a reflective and sustained commitment to bring about this respectful reconciliation can flow only from our God of love and justice, who reconciles all and promises a world in which "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

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1. GC 33, D 1, n. 48. [Return to text](#)
  2. John Paul II, Apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* and apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*; Message for the World Day of Peace, 1 January 1995. [Return to text](#)