

LETTER TO WOMEN FROM THE CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF AUSTRALIA

February 2010

Dear Catholic Women of Australia,

The year 2009 marked the 10th anniversary of the report into the participation of women in the Catholic Church in Australia, *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*. This publication was an important moment in the recent history of the Catholic Church in Australia. It represented the real desire of the Bishops to *hear* your concerns, to *learn* from them and to *respond* to them. The Social Justice Statement of 2000 was the first step towards a response, outlining in a series of recommendations, practical measures towards ensuring that every person feels valued, included and respected in the life of the Church.

Ten years on, we take this opportunity to reflect prayerfully with you on the blessings and challenges that have emerged in that time in the area of women's participation in Church life. We also look forward with hope to what can be achieved together in the future.

We wish to honour you and to thank you for the precious gift that you are to the Church in Australia. Each member of the Body of Christ brings their own God-given gifts to the fundamental task in front of us all – to seek to build up God's Kingdom in our own place and our own time. As women, you bring to this holy enterprise a special gift, which Pope John Paul II famously described as “the genius of women”. We see this genius brought to vibrant life all around us, both in the Church and in the wider world. It is there in the face of a young woman setting out on the journey to explore her vocation and find her place in the world. It is there in women, married or single, whose faith inspires them to excel in their profession. It is there in wives and mothers who nurture and love their offspring and bring them to know the love of Jesus Christ. We see it in the service and devotion of women with a vocation to the religious life as well as in those very many unsung women who are carers or who serve the poor, the outcast, the lonely, the sick in the spirit of true social justice modelled by Christ. We see it too in those women who play a vital role in the new ecclesial movements emerging in the life of the Church.

This anniversary also provides us with a chance to reflect on the journey we all take in union with women of the Old and New Testaments, pioneering women of Australia, and Religious Sisters past and present, including Blessed Mary MacKillop, from whose final resting place we gather to write this letter. In the year of the Centenary of her death we joyfully await the news of her canonisation. Holiness of life is the greatest service any of us can give our Church and our world.

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We acknowledge the work of the Council for Australian Catholic Women and the Office for the Participation of Women in honouring their twofold mandate to act as a focal point for ongoing dialogue and integration of ideas pertaining to women and their participation in the Catholic Church in Australia, and to assist in the implementation of the decisions and recommendations arising from the Bishops' response to the *Woman and Man* report. Many initiatives have been undertaken, both nationally and at diocesan and local level. Among these are the Women's Interfaith Fellowship, parish kits to help us celebrate International Women's Day each year, the Women Matters e-newsletter which gives voice to the many initiatives being undertaken by you in the dioceses and parishes around Australia.

We are pleased to also note that progress is being made on one of the key recommendations of the *Woman and Man* research report – that concerted effort should be made to increase women's participation in decision making bodies of the ACBC. A 2008 update of the 2005 review of membership of advisory councils and other bodies connected with the Bishops Conference saw a welcome increase in the balance of women and men, clergy, religious and lay members on these councils. By then, 40 per cent of the non-episcopal positions were held by women. We pray that this percentage will continue to grow, not only within the ACBC, but in dioceses and parishes too.

We also pay tribute to the very many women in positions of leadership in Catholic education, health and social welfare services. We thank you for the profound contribution you make to the life and mission of the Church.

In launching the Bishops' Response to the *Woman and Man* report in September 2000, Archbishop Francis Carroll noted that the report "revealed hurts and frustrations experienced by many women in the church even as it recorded the happy fulfilment of others". Today we wish to reaffirm our commitment to nourishing the positive experience of women in the Church, while addressing the negative in real and constructive ways. We make this commitment to you in full awareness of our communion with the Universal Church, our faithfulness to its traditions and our adherence to its teachings.

As we look to the future, all of us who are part of the Body of Christ, are challenged to imagine new ways that women can participate more fully in the life of the Church. In this, we remain always open to the fresh stirrings of the Holy Spirit who dwells among us all, inspires us and leads us onward together in faith.

+ Philip Wilson .

Archbishop Philip E. Wilson
Archbishop of Adelaide
President, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference



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