

Council of Catholic Women
Diocesan Conventic Women
October 2, 1978
Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy

Six weeks ago this evening, I was ordained and installed as the fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Montana. In the brief intervening period of time, I have had the privilege of visiting various parts of the Diocese and meeting with various groupings of people at the parish and diocesan level. Throughout my travels, there has been one consistent reality on the part of the priests and people of the diocese. In parish after parish, priests would tell me that if I wanted to have something done, if I wanted a response from people, then get the women to do it. Over and over again, in the parishes of our diocese, I have been amazed at the generosity, the talent, the competence, the faith of the Catholic women who comprise the Diocese of Eastern Montana.

You cannot imagine how happy I was to find out that among my first responsibilities of being Bishop of this diocese would be my involvement in the Diocesan Convention of the Council of Catholic Women. My happiness is due to the fact that for three years of my life as a priest, I served full time as the Council of Catholic Women diocesan moderator in my former diocese. And in those three years, I learned a great deal from the women with whom it was my privilege to work and pray. I owe the Council of Catholic Women a tremendous debt of gratitude for contributing their gifts to me as a man, as a priest, and now as a Bishop.

I am also extremely happy to be here this evening because my own understanding and vision of the Church in our diocese demands the involvement, cooperation and help of women of our diocese, lay and religious, whose competence and leadership potential needs to be recognized, actualized and implemented. Consequently, I thought it would be important for me to share with you a brief vision of what I sense to be the call of the Church to women in society today. And in a special way, how the Council of Catholic Women could well provide the structure to offer women the opportunity to develop that leadership at the parish, deanery and diocesan level.

There is no doubt that in our society today we are conscious of the cry for equality and recognition of the role of women at all levels of civic, economic, cultural and even ecclesiastical life. But a cry for such involvement and recognition cannot be made in a vacuum. The cry must be heard! In our own Christian Catholic tradition, we know full well the important place of woman in the history of salvation. Throughout the Old Testament, women populate the pages of scripture as graced moments revealing the presence of God. But the role of women within the Christian Catholic tradition reaches its apex in the entrance of Mary into God's plan of salvation.

A woman would be asked, a woman would be challenged, a woman would be requested to become the vehicle whereby God would become incarnate among us as a people of God. The response of Mary to that challenge would become the basis for a theology of liberation on the part of women down through the ages. The response was simple and direct, but all encompassing. Mary would reply: "Let it be done to me according to your word." Mary opened herself up to the presence of God and God would become present within her.

Mary's response to the challenge is worth considering for a moment because it offers an insight into the Church's call to women today. When Mary was requested to become the vehicle for the presence of God in the Incarnation of Jesus, she did not call a committee meeting. She recognized her own individual responsibility. As a young girl from Nazareth, she did not worry about what Jerusalem would think or what Athens or Jericho or even Rome would think. She had a wider vision that went beyond her own town and family. And finally, the basis for Mary's response was not on the terms of her own agenda, but rather on God's terms - "let it be done to me according to your word."

In parish after parish of this diocese, it is obvious that few groups of people are able to match the competence and dedication of the local Altar and Rosary grouping of women or the local Council of Catholic Women affiliation. These groups are tremendous witnesses of faith to their parish and to their local community. But I have a dream! I have a dream that would challenge each of these local groupings to work together on a diocesan level to share that same competence and faith for the benefit of Eastern Montana. I have a dream that would hope that the women's groups from our diocese would open their vision to an even greater degree to be conscious of the wider Church beyond their own local community to a consciousness of our existence as a local Church united in faith, united in vision, united in effort.

How can this be done? How can my dream come alive. One structure that offers us the opportunity to make the dream a reality is the Diocesan Council of Catholic Women. The very structure of the Council incarnates the mission of the Church and continues the work of Mary by having us imitate her response and making the Lord present among us.

At the heart of the Council structure is the establishment of commissions whose concerns embody the thrust of the Church from the document on the Church in the Modern World from the Second Vatican Council. The commission structure might not be able to be implemented to its fullness in every parish but there is no reason why the concerns and objectives of the commissions might not be adapted to meet the needs of each group of women in our diocese.

The key commission in the commission structure is Organization Services. This Commission is more than the "nuts and bolts" of the local or diocesan structure. It is a commission that must have an evangelical bent to it by its very nature. It must seek ways to involve people in the local and diocesan groupings; it must find ways to involve women who have small children and women who work; it must seek creative and dynamic ways to help all the members of a parish and a diocese feel and believe and be a part of the organization; it must reach out and touch the lives of people as they are lived in the local situation.

In ever widening concentric circles, the other commissions deal with the ways in which women relate to their families, to the Church itself, to their communities, and to the world. But within each of these concentric circles which are commissions within the CCW structure, there are so many opportunities and possibilities to make my dream come alive.

I dream of the possibility that within the Family Affairs commission at the parish, deanery, and diocesan level, the CCW might be the catalyst to begin a program of "Family Nights" for the benefit of our religious faith community. The Church of the Latter Day Saints has consistently and successfully used a basic format to strengthen family life by encouraging the setting aside of one evening each week with family relationships as a priority. Could not the CCW be the means whereby similar programs might not become a part of our Christian response to the Gospel and to thereby strengthen family life which is at the heart of our society.

I dream of the possibility that within Church Affairs, the parish deanery and diocese would become conscious of the role of women within parish structures by encouraging their involvement and membership on Parish Councils and utilizing the ways that are open today to the involvement of women within our community worship. This might well demand that the Church Affairs Commission would provide educational and growth experiences for its own membership as well as for the total Christian community of the ways in which the Roman Catholic Church as an institution recognizes and calls for the involvement of women in parish life and liturgical services.

I dream of the possibility that within the works of the Community Affairs commission that an ever deeper commitment would be made to the value of life within our society - a concern

for the unborn and a concern for the elderly. But I would expand that concern to include the other dimensions of life where poverty at times is so evident. There is a need for a respect for the life of the spirit that responds to the values of culture and art and music and drama. There is a concern for facing the problem of drugs and alcohol on the part of our young people as well as for adult members of our community. There is a concern for life in the ways in which we transmit the values of our own appreciation of the gift of sexuality to the next generation. There is the value of life each of us takes into our hands when we sit behind the wheel of a car. And all these concerns could well be the concerns of the Community Affairs commission.

And finally I dream of the possibility that the International Affairs commission which recognizes the horror of prejudice and poverty within our world might also recognize these same international problems as they exist within our own communities. I dream that we might honestly face and respond to the questions of prejudice that might exist among ourselves in our attitudes toward the Native American, toward other minorities within our communities. The world has become a neighborhood and International Affairs cannot confront the international concerns of injustice without confronting these same realities as they exist among us.

And so you have heard my dream and you have heard the way in which I believe the Church is calling women today. Will the dream become a reality? Will the call be heard? The answer is a resounding NO if our vision is limited, if we only speak in terms of our own localized concerns and miss the vision the Church is calling to us. The dream will not become a reality if instead of unity, we have different groups doing their own thing. More than anything else, I would urge all of you at every level of parish and diocesan life to continue the tremendous works you are doing in the ordinary tasks of parish life. But I would ask you to listen - to listen to the invitation given to you today as the invitation was given to Mary centuries ago. You too are receiving a call, an invitation, a request. **IT IS A CALL TO GREATNESS.** This call can only be answered in a Christian Catholic way when it is responded to in the context of the Church, in union with the Bishop, in the shared response that imitates Mary's response. Let it be done to me according to your word. Jesus needs to be born again today. And you are the people who can make this possible.