

7-9-2021

## We Come from the Same Body: Reflecting on the Feasibility of Women's Participation in Liturgical Services from the Perspective of Susan A. Ross's Feminist Theology, and Reflecting on the Practice of Relevant Theories in the Diocese of Hong Kong

Wong Kwan Yau

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kwong001@csbsju.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#), [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

---

### Recommended Citation

Yau, Wong Kwan. 2021. We Come from the Same Body: Reflecting on the Feasibility of Women's Participation in Liturgical Services from the Perspective of Susan A. Ross's Feminist Theology, and Reflecting on the Practice of Relevant Theories in the Diocese of Hong Kong. *Obsculta* 14, (1) : 84-115. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol14/iss1/9>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

ABSTRACT:

In this paper, I discuss the relationship between feminism and women's liturgical service in the church from three aspects. In the first part, I will give a general description about the development of women's social status, hoping to show that how women have always struggling to survive and strive for reasonable treatment in societies dominated by men. In the second part, I will turn to the work of Susan A. Ross, a Catholic feminist theologian, and show how from a feminist perspective, women can serve the church with men with their unique circumstances and advantages, and at the same time, not to make the others in the church feel uneasy or embarrassed. Finally, I will apply these theories in the third part to the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, a congregation that is relatively willing to accept women's participation in serving the church and altar to present the righteousness and ethical values, in which the faith commonly we own.

## We Come from the Same Body

Reflecting on the Feasibility of Women's Participation in Liturgical Services from the Perspective of Susan A. Ross's Feminist Theology, and Reflecting on the Practice of Relevant Theories in the Diocese of Hong Kong.

by Wong Kwan Yau

### INTRODUCTION

Recently, the social platform Instagram (IG) has set off an upsurge of "women empowerment" challenge calls "Women Supporting Women". This activity initially appeared to be focused on empowering women via a black-and-white portrait. It is a pity that everyone is vying to show their beautiful photos taken, and some of them only deliberately show the almost exposed posture, which completely violates the concept of respecting women. The original goal of the activity is to spread awareness of the horrific human rights crisis and maunders of women in Turkey, in which feminism is a longstanding and worsening issue, which has been forgotten.<sup>1</sup> However, it is worthy of gratitude that the painful

1 C.f. What is the Women Supporting Women Challenge Celebrities are Posting about on Instagram?, Women's Health, <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/life/a33435593/what-is-women-supporting-women-challenge-instagram/>.

experiences of these women still get the attention of others, whether they are feminists or not.

Hong Kongers have always been very keen on trends, and many celebrities and female artists participated in this event. When everyone responded enthusiastically, a Women's rights advocate Denise Wan See Ho<sup>2</sup> posted an opinion online, pointing out that many people simply do not understand the nature of the activity, even some people just abused this activity to promote themselves and gain attention. Her critiques triggered some online discussions.<sup>3</sup> Her response made me reflect: As Christians, we know that God is love, but in our lives, have we put this teaching into practice? Do we turn our faith into a slogan, in which it is not in harmony with our entire being and we are disconnected with the world?

Indeed, many people still do not pay much attention to women's rights, even though they are willing to promote democratic development and social justice. Women's rights are often placed in a secondary position. In the Catholic Church, the status of women and their participation in ritual services within the church has changed from being considered taboo to allowing public discussion. It can be said that there has been a significant improvement, especially in the 1960s when western feminist thought developed. When the church held the Second Vatican Council, it clearly expressed the church's concern and response in this regard through some actions (although the church had not directly discussed this phenomenon).

In this paper, I discuss the relationship between feminism and women's liturgical service in the church from three aspects. In the first part, I will give

2 Denise Wan See Ho, born 1977 in Hong Kong, is a pop singer, an actress, a social activist, and one of the founders of Big Love Alliance, which is an organization fighting for LGBT rights in Hong Kong, and she herself has declared a lesbian publicly. She actively participates in social movements and uses her social influence as a public figure to speak for the democratic movements in many places. She has recently participated in international conferences and forums, including United Nations Human Rights Council's meeting (July 2019, Geneva), "Be Water: Hong Kong vs China" Seminar with Badiucao (September 2019, Melbourne), Oslo Freedom Forum (October 2019, New York), Geneva Summit for Human Rights and Democracy (Feb 2020, Geneva). In 2016, she was selected by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) as one of the top 100 women in the world. (c.f. Wikipedia, *Denise Ho*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denise\\_Ho](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denise_Ho).)

3 C.f. 蘋果日報, 【黑白照風波】Sammi甘比響應爭取女權挑戰 何韻詩暗嘲: 只在方便自己的時候, <https://hk.appledaily.com/entertainment/20200731/3BM76W5FZOAVPKG6QGXM64WNN/>.

a general description of the development of women's social status, hoping to show that how women have always struggling to survive and strive for reasonable treatment in societies dominated by men. In the second part, I will turn to the work of Susan A. Ross, a Catholic feminist theologian, and show how from a feminist perspective, women can serve the church with men with their unique circumstances and advantages, and at the same time, not to make the others in the church feel uneasy or embarrassed. Finally, I will apply these theories in the third part to the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, a congregation that is relatively willing to accept women's participation in serving the church and altar, how to present the righteousness and ethical values, in which the faith commonly we own. I hope that through this study, I, a priest from Hong Kong with little experience, can understand more about women's expectations of the church, and can better show appreciation for their enthusiasm when I work with them in the future.

#### **PART I: BACKGROUND: A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINISM.**

Western feminism movement probably began to appear in the 19th century. Throughout the process, women fighting for their rights could be roughly divided into four stages: 1. Have the right to vote in the election; 2. Power to own property and use property; 3. Opportunity to obtain a higher level of education and 4. Personal rights are protected by law.<sup>4</sup> For men and women in the contemporary world who enjoy these rights, such requests and bargaining may seem weird and unbelievable; however, the process of fighting, which is filled with pities, bitterness, and difficulties, is not easy for our generation to experience.

#### **ANCIENT GREEK PERIOD**

Feminism is not a bomb that suddenly goes off then the discussion begins. Rather, its historical development can be traced back to ancient Greece. Plato in his work *Republic* advocated that women and men share the same physical mind with the same nature; therefore, they have the same nature in respect to the guardianship of the state.<sup>5</sup> Even though Plato's idea was not ultimately accepted, this discussion at least indirectly indicates that women had been discriminated against and suppressed by men in Plato's context.

4 Monika Konrad Hellwig, "介紹西方女性主義" in 神學論集 (台灣: 神學論集, 107), 57-63.

5 C.f. Plato, Book V, *Republic*.

Women in ancient Greece had low social status and few rights in comparison to male citizens. Female babies were at a much higher risk of being abandoned at birth by their parents than male offspring. Girls had the right to received education in a similar manner to boys but with a greater emphasis on dancing, gymnastics, and musical accomplishment which could be shown off in musical competitions and at religious festivals and ceremonies. The ultimate goal of a girl's education was to prepare her for her role in rearing a family and not directly to stimulate intellectual development. Young women were expected to marry as a virgin around 13 to 14, and marriage was usually organized by their father or brothers if her father had passed away. They were not allowed to vote, to own their land, or to inherit. Their role was to stay at home handling domestic works, and their purpose in life was the rearing of children. Some women were allowed to work in shops as prostitutes and courtesans in which the social rules and customs applied to them are even vaguer than for the female members of citizen families. Generally speaking, women were looked at as submissive. They had fewer rights than slaves as they were never allowed their own freedoms, but the slave did when they had enough money for redemption.<sup>6</sup>

#### **MEDIEVAL AGES PERIOD**

The church controlled nearly everything in the Medieval Ages and she was the creator of social life. The image of women in this picture was even small but shiny. As Joshua Mark describes,

*"Women's place in the clergy was restricted to the nunnery. Noble women's positions were dictated by how much land they brought to marriage because land equaled power; therefore, the quality of life and opportunities for autonomy could vary significantly among the upper class. Women of the lowest class actually had more freedom of expression than the other two because life was uniformly difficult for the serfs – male or female – and women worked alongside men in the fields and in the medieval guilds as equals or near-equals."*<sup>7</sup>

6 Mark Cartwright, *Women in Ancient Greek*, <http://www.ancient.eu/user/markzcartwright/>, 23 July 2020.

7 Mark Cartwright, *Women in the Middle Ages*, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1345/women-in-the-middle-ages>, 23 July 2020.

Politically and socially, the status of women in the upper class depended on their blood line, wealth from their families, and how many children eventually became the landlords, kings, or nobles. For the women from the lower class, their meaning of life was to give birth and work. Women in the eyes of their landlords, father, brothers, or husband were just property. They had no freedom, no social status, and no rights. They were bound to the farmland, with no freedom to choose their work or spouses. They had not even the right to resist being abused and trafficked. Nobody cared whether they were illiterate or not because they did not need to have knowledge, since knowledge was only used to fight for power and build up influences in the church or conduct theological discussions.

Even though the devotion to the Virgin Mary in the Medieval Ages was flourishing, in an atmosphere that emphasizes original sin, it did not help to improve the status of women. According to the popular medieval understanding, Eve tempted man into sin, causing human beings to lose grace and bear original sin forever. Women were seen as morally weaker than men and their faults could not be socially eliminated and forgiven, even when the church emphasized forgiveness.

Though women were eager to serve the church, their enthusiasm was not taken seriously, even their abilities were no less than men's. There were many outstanding female mystics in the Middle Ages, such as Christina of Markyate (1096-1155), Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), and Julian of Norwich (1343-1416) among others; however, their contribution and value were often not discovered until centuries later. Women who chose the consecrated life were bound to an individual cell in the monastery, living a life of contemplation, prayer, and work. Even then, the activities of women religious tended to be more private than public. For example, it is impossible for us to find women who participated in the Council of Trent, to share the task of facing the challenges brought by Protestant reformers.<sup>8</sup> Even when they wrote works of spiritual reflection, they needed to get approval from their male seniors.

---

8 In the 16th century, reformers like Martin Luther (former Augustinian monk), John Calvin (former pastor of Anglian Church) challenged papal authorities on the Bible teaching, preaching, and questioned the Catholic Church's ability to define Christian practice including the Baptism, and the Eucharist.

When men slowly became more willing to record women's lives and acts, it is understandable that women in the Medieval Ages began to occupy a platform to help future generations understand how they contributed in the world dominated by men. Upper-class women by blood and marriage had opportunities to become involved in managing the affairs of nations. Brunhilda of Austrasia (reigned 567-613 CE), daughter of Athanagild, King of Hispania and Spetimania, wife of King Sigebert I of Austrasia, acted as regent for her son Childebert II, grandson Theduebert II and great-grandson Sigebert II and ruled her country as sole monarch. Her strong governance caused considerable conflicts between the royal family and the nobility. However, she tried to protect the church and respected Pope Gregory the Great. She was willing to assist the church financially and helped to establish monasteries. Theodora (497-548 CE), the wife of the emperor Justinian I (reigned 527–565), probably a woman who owned the highest power of the Byzantine Empire, shared an equal status to govern the kingdom with her husband. Æthelflaed, Lady of the Mercians, daughter of Alfred the Great, king of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Wessex (reigned 911-918 CE) who led Mercia's resistance against Viking raids and ruled her kingdom after her husband (Æthelred)'s death.<sup>9</sup>

With the large-scale development of trade activities in the Medieval Ages, women had more opportunities to express their talents through economical activities. They were no longer tied up in the house and had the opportunity to participate in sales activities in the market. In medieval London, girls aged 14 had the same opportunities as boys to be an apprentice, to receive rigorous training by an expert at a particular trade, then later becoming self-employed. Landlords and abbots released their own lands for the public to establish markets; women were allowed to assist their father, brother, husband, or even by their own to set up stalls to sell domestic products. They were even eligible to join guilds<sup>10</sup>, though not often independently.

---

9 C.f. Mark, *Women in the Middle Ages*, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1345/women-in-the-middle-ages/>; *Twelve Famous Women of the Middle Ages*, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/1350/twelve-famous-women-of-the-middle-ages>.

10 Guilds in the Medieval Ages were associations or groups of craftsmen, in which they attempted to guarantee standards among crafts. Only members of guild could see within a town when the quality of productions were kept. (c.f. Cartwright, *Medieval Guides*, [http://ancient.ed/Medieval\\_Guilds.](http://ancient.ed/Medieval_Guilds.) )

Even though the remuneration and treatment of women were not equal to what men were paid, the freedom and respect gained were significantly improved compared to previous centuries. The brilliance of the Medieval women might only be seen by the reflection of coins or revealed in the prayers they composed, but their sweat and sorrow were not spent in vain.

## RENAISSANCE AND ENLIGHTENMENT PERIOD

The Renaissance period brought a sense of renewal and rebirth; however, women in the Renaissance period gained no newfound privilege or opportunity. William Shakespeare, who was an important elite in this era, wrote plays showing how women were often suppressed and discriminated against. In *Taming of the Shrew*, the main character Katherine was named negatively the shrew as she tried to express her needs publicly. While men, who dominated the right of speech in society, were allowed to be outspoken and expressive, women like Katherine were destined to be oppressive. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the main character Juliet, a girl aged 12, had no equal rights with men, no freedom to arrange her marriage; she was only the possession of her family. Juliet's destiny reflected women's situation in this period of time: they were subservient to men. The role of women in this period was still inseparable from taking care of the family, giving birth, and becoming a tool for conveying benefits between the country and the family. They had no autonomy, and in a certain sense, their status was more marginalized than in the earlier Middle Ages. However, due to the promotion in literature, the status of women had gradually received attention, even if the development process was still quite slow.

Before the beginning of the Enlightenment, the attitude of society and the church towards women was still very rough. Since the male voice still dominated the whole society and the church of the sixteenth century, the depiction of women in domestic roles was still significant. The unstable religious, political and cultural climate during the Reformation led to expressions of social fear and violence. This led to a tragic stretch of female executions in the form of witch trials in these centuries.<sup>11</sup> Joan of Arc (1412-

---

11 C.f. Blumberg, *A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/a-brief-history-of-the-salem-witch-trials-175162489/>; Salem Witch Trials, <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/salem-witch-trials>.

1431) unfortunately also died on the stake for the crime of witchcraft. Although the Holy See has long expressed remorse for the witch hunts in the Medieval Ages, the crimes against these innocent "witches" cannot be undone.<sup>12</sup> Countless women were convicted of being witches, and their anguish, when they were burnt to death, did not earn the sympathy of the onlookers. However, their plights helped to inspire humanists to more earnestly care and sympathize with women's rights and justice.

## THE 1800s ONWARDS

After the French Revolution (1789-1799), with the rise of democratic ideas and feminist ideas, some people in Europe began to promote women's suffrage, which emphasized women had the right to share equal voting rights and were considered part of the development of feminism in the western world. Women's voting rights in the UK started a nationwide movement in 1872. Before the Reform Act of 1832<sup>13</sup> and the Municipal Council Organization Act of 1835,<sup>14</sup> the United Kingdom did not expressly prohibit women from voting, but after 1832, women's right to vote in a certain class was established.

However, as the National Society for Women's Suffrage and National Society for Women's Suffrage Societies were established after 1872, the voices of fighting for rights were getting more attention from the public. During the First World War, women participated in logistical work in the country provided supplies for the severely insufficient male productivity. Their contributions were surprising, and there were more and more responses to sympathize with their long-repressed situation caused before the War ended. 1918 was the milestone for women's suffrage in British history as the Parliament Act (Qualification of Women) was passed, women won the right to vote in the House of Commons. By 1928, the Representation of People Act

---

12 C.f. Miesel, *Who Burned the Witches?*, <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/who-burned-the-witches.html>; Foertsch, *The Great Witch Hunt and the Catholic Connection: Should Women be Worried*, <https://www.womenraisedcatholic.com/blog/the-great-witch-hunt-and-the-catholic-connection>.

13 Reform Act of 1832, also called Great Reform Act or First Reform Act was an Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom. The Act introduced the first explicit statutory bar to women voting, by defining a voter as a male person, i.e. only qualifying men were able to vote.

14 The Municipal Corporation Act 1835 was a bill that expanded the executive power and voter base of the city council in the United Kingdom. The Bill allowed the middle class form cities to gradually dominated the local councils, reflecting Britain's historical urbanization and industrialization, and was a major reform in the history of British parliament.

extended the voting franchise to allow all women aged 21 and above to share the same terms with men to vote.<sup>15</sup> While British women were fighting for the right to vote, they also worked for fairness and higher education, rights to handle their husbands' inheritance, opportunities for divorce and remarriage, and equal wages and work treatment. This set a model for women around the world.

When looking back on the entire journey of women fighting for rights, it is easy to discover their demands are actually very humble: what they thirst for is to gain respect and freedom as a person in a manner equal to men. With the opportunity to earn an education, feminists continue to move towards fighting for the freedom of expression and respect for women. They hope to be treated as full members of their societies and have more space to serve their communities and countries.

The gift of feminist theologians in this regard is to explore how women can participate in a religious group that has long been dominated by men. Some have misinterpreted this as women wanting to seize power or trying to marginalize men.<sup>16</sup> However, when we view with an open mind and faithful perspective our tradition and the teachings of Jesus, we will have a different perspective on this topic.

### PART III: FEMINIST THEOLOGY OF SUSAN A. ROSS

#### 1. Development of theology of body and gender

The Vatican's position on men's and women's authority has been fairly consistent over the past centuries, in which the Church has often maintained that the male is the head and the female is the deputy. This assumption has come into question, especially under the current generation's emphasis on equality between men and women. When we discuss the relationship between people, sacraments, and the church, the concept of the body connects all the elements.

---

15 C.f. Women's History, *The Woman Suffrage Movement: The Most Significant Achievement of Women in the Progressive Era*, <https://www.womenshistory.org/resources/general/woman-suffrage-movement>.

16 C.f. Matlary, *Commentary: Catholic Feminism vs Equality Feminism*: The Letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the World Episcopate on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World underlines the equality in human dignity and yet the fundamental difference between the sexes. Their equality is therefore fundamental as persons, but their difference is also fundamental. It is not only physical, but also ontological. In Catholic anthropology, the sexes complement each other, not only in a biological sense, but in the totality of life.

Theologians use different metaphors to describe the church and use these metaphors to bring out different theological teachings. In these metaphors, including body, bridegroom, mystery, and farmland, the body of Christ is the most widely accepted and adopted in theological discussions.<sup>17</sup> The current ecclesiological discussion is that all believers come from one body, a metaphor which has a long history, appearing as early as in Pauline Letters. "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."<sup>18</sup> Paul reminds the Romans that we each receive different graces from God,<sup>19</sup> which should be used to build up churches instead of creating divisions. As limbs come from the same body, if a limb suffers, it does not suffer alone, because its pain affects the whole body, and it must be shared by the whole body. Paul wanted to strengthen the hearts of all believers so that they understand the importance of cooperation and mutual support among group members.

Body as a metaphor is powerful; however, it can have a multitude of interpretations. Since Genesis recorded humanity's fall, the body has given the mark of sin and fall. Susan A. Ross argues that, "bodily pleasure---usually food or sex---have been seen as evil, and that women's identification with the body has led elements in the tradition to see women as evil, or at least as potentially more evil than men" and Thomas Aquinas also strengthened this concept with an ontological priority that women "naturally' had the responsibility of original sin."<sup>20</sup>

Since the 20th century, feminist critics have challenged the Vatican's position for its essentialism (its understanding that posits a male or masculine nature applicable to all men, and a corresponding female or feminine nature applicable to all women, apart from social or historical circumstances). They stress the importance of body and gender for consideration in theology. However, it is not easy to cross this threshold

---

17 C.f. 神學詞典, 教會學, <http://www.apostles.tw/bible/dictm722/T425.htm>.

18 Rom 12:4-5.

19 See Rom 12:7-8.

20 Ross, *Extravagant Affection*, 102-03.

for discussion. Ross has analyzed at least the following three reasons that hinder the theological discussion of body and gender:<sup>21</sup>

First, body and mind have been seen as dualistic and oppositional terms, where the body is in the inferior position. Women have been identified with matter and the body while men have been identified with mind, soul, or spirit. So, the perception of women has been overwhelmingly negative, as the spirit is always interpreted as superior to matter.

Second, the church has often ignored the significance of the body and emphasized the commonality and universality of male humanity. Female experiences such as menstruation, pregnancy, and lactation are seen as deviations from the norm. As a result, the characteristics of their bodies are forced to be suppressed and ignored; they could only passively follow the universality as such.

Third, essentialist understandings posit fixed masculine and feminine natures, applicable to all persons regardless of context. Feminist thinkers are far from unanimous in their thinking on body and gender.

Since the body can make people feel embarrassed and even sinful, it was firmly attached by “thick coats” from theologians of the past generations. By the image of the “thick coats”, I mean it is the male-centered concept and various ethical and moral codes of men and women as well as different boundaries that are embedded in people’s lives. This “thick coat” makes people feel cramped wasn’t torn apart until the Second Vatican Council

Ross points out “twentieth-century Catholic theology has increasingly recognized problematic elements in the tradition, and such major shifts as the affirmation of the unitive dimension of marital sexuality as equal to the procreative dimension, and the turn to the world of Vatican II, have helped to reestablish the goodness of the body as central to the tradition.”<sup>22</sup>

Although the Vatican Council did not propose new theories on doctrine and ethics, in addition to reaffirming the traditional teachings of the church she strove to promote communion among different denominations of

---

21 Ibid., 99-101.

22 Ibid., 103.

Christian faith, between atheists and theists, and between men and women as human beings. As Ross expresses, “in the documents of Vatican II, there is a concern expressed for the full equality of women --- especially in the pastoral constitution ---and there is a diversity of models for the church.”<sup>23</sup>

Compared with the other documents, *Gaudium et Spes* can be said to be the document that best responds to the current social situation in the world and provides guidance. The church in paragraph 29 demonstrates her willingness to open up to cooperate with different people who have different talents and backgrounds:

“Nevertheless, with respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent. For in truth it must still be regretted that fundamental personal rights are not being universally honored. Such is the case of a woman who is denied the right and freedom to choose a husband, to embrace a state of life, or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men.”<sup>24</sup>

When the church authorities convened the Second Vatican Council, they understood that they must accept the participation of women with an open mind. At the second session of the Council, Cardinal Leo Josef Suenens, Archbishop of Malines-Bruxelles, gave one of the most applauded speeches about women participation. He spoke about the laity and the gifts of grace and the charisms they have received, and he placed particular emphasis on the charisms that are proper to women. He called for an increase in the number of lay auditors (who at the time were 13 men), and to include women who “make up half of humanity”.<sup>25</sup> Pope Paul VI also expressed: “We have disposed of that some qualified and devout women should assist, as auditors, at many solemn rites and many general congregations at the forthcoming third session of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council; at those congregations, we say,

---

23 Ibid., 105.

24 GS 29.

25 R. Goldie. *The Women Auditors at the Second Vatican Council*, *Notiziario*. Pontifical Council for the Laity. <http://www.laici.va/content/laici/en/sezioni/donna/notizie/le-uditrici-al-concilio-vaticano-ii.html>.

that contain issues for discussion that might particularly be of interest for women's lives".<sup>26</sup>

Rosemary Goldie from Australia, one of the six single women who held leadership roles in international lay associations, along with nine religious sisters and seven laywomen, was invited to join the Council as an auditor in 1964. She had received an interview by a reporter and made the observation that the most important thing, beyond the specific contribution of individual women to the debate or the drawing up of the text, was how the female presence at the Council began as something extraordinary and new and very quickly became totally normal.<sup>27</sup> Her evaluation can suggest many women's affirmation of the Vatican Council II on women's participation in church affairs, even though many feminists still criticized that the scope and efficiency of the church's openness, saying they were insufficient.

## 2. What is sacrament and symbol of sacrament from the perspective of feminist theology

Feminist theology and the Roman Catholic sacramental tradition share a common concern for the integrity of the body and the goodness of the natural world. Yet traditional sacramental theology has used its understanding of body and nature to define women as ontologically distinct from and inferior to men.<sup>28</sup>

Ross stresses that "Sacramental theology and feminist theology have hardly been congenial conversation partners" because the "official" form of sacramental theology both perpetuates the ontological distinction between clergy and laity, which fails to address the sense of exclusion experienced by women not only regarding priesthood but also in the language and symbols used in sacramental celebrations.<sup>29</sup>

For centuries the church has linked the sign, the grace of God, and the sacraments together. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines sacraments as "are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ross, *Honor God in Your Body*, 7.

29 Ibid., 8.

which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions."<sup>30</sup> In fact, the explanation of sign (which appears as early as the Council of Trent) is that "a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace, instituted for our justification."<sup>31</sup>

All sacraments are for people, which rely on the human body to fully present the grace and sign. Unfortunately, the church has always distinguished the female body from the male one and put the female in a derogatory position. This kind of understanding is persistent. To return to the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas "bases his definition of women as "misbegotten males" on his (mistaken) analysis of empirical reality, in which the male sex is demonstrably superior because it is visibly active."<sup>32</sup> Even contemporary theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar, Louis Bouyer, and Pope John Paul II, outline a sacramental theology of the body which is no longer explicitly hierarchical but which retains an ontological distinction between male and female rooted in nature.<sup>33</sup>

The most recent generation of sacramental theologians, strongly influenced by Edward Schillebeeckx's and Karl Rahner's pioneering work on symbol and sacrament, expresses no such ontological distinction between male and female.<sup>34</sup>

Some Sacramental theologies are concerned to affirm the goodness of the body and its symbolic importance.<sup>35</sup> In the more conservative theologies, the body is understood as a sacramental symbol. However, Ross emphasizes that theological understanding about male and female bodily differences is based on a theology of the sacraments as symbols: physical reality represents transcendent reality. This can bring at least two flaws: 1. symbol and symbolized which is at odds with the delicate tension involved in symbolic representation; 2. Theological thought about symbolic meanings

30 CCC 1131.

31 Catholic Encyclopedia, *Sacraments*, <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13295a.htm>.

32 Ross, *Honor God in Your Body*, 10, cf Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q92, a.1.

33 Ibid., 11.

34 Ibid., 12.

35 C.f. Chauvet Louis-Marie, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*. A Pueblo Book. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995.



uncritically without awareness of their historical roots.<sup>36</sup> Ross mentions that the symbol itself has its advantages while it also carries disadvantages. For example, once its likeness is not balanced and unlikeness is too great, then the symbol no longer evokes important associations, and it no longer presents the sacred reality it represents. All symbols develop in historical, agricultural, familial, or linguistic contexts. All-natural symbols remain a lively debate in anthropological circles as the meaning of symbol is subjected to change.<sup>37</sup> For example Sunday school teachers like using the love of parents to represent the love of God. The example itself implies love including sacrifice, caring, acceptance, etc. It is undeniable that these are the common elements that can be compared, to a large extent, to the love of God. However, how does a child from a broken or abusive family, or a child who has been abandoned by parents, understand the love of God through the love he or she should have been received from parents and family?

Even though the body itself has often a negative image in the traditional Catholic teaching, it is undeniable that it is really valuable from an anthropological point of view to explain the relationship between sacrament and women's participation, at least when people are willing to accept both male and female bodies share the same scale of sacredness. Therefore, feminist theologians argue for a new emphasis on the holiness of the bodily. This is developed in a number of ways. In theological anthropology, this emphasis presents as an equal valuation of men and women, and of male and female bodies.<sup>38</sup>

For all supernatural knowledge, we can only rely on symbols to master the key concepts. Our body, as a mediator, can help us to acquire such knowledge through sound, vision, touch, hearing, and taste. The senses of our body, through language, symbols, and culture, will bring us to understand reality and God.<sup>39</sup> Traditional metaphysical and ontological ideas can systematically present ideas of God which provide us a solid foundation for knowing the mystery of God and sacraments. This set of discourse has its advantages; for example, for those believers who have little training in philosophy and

---

36 Ibid., 14-15.

37 Ibid., 16-17.

38 Ibid., 18.

39 Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 140.

theology, it has become a way for them to get closer to God.

The church traditionally uses theological methods to explain beliefs, but with the development of social sciences, the church also agrees that various social sciences subjects such as anthropology, psychology, and sociology, history, economics, and political science, help us understand the world, ourselves and others, and even our faith.

Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, talked about the cultivation of priests, and he emphasized it should focus on people's science as a cultivation method, so that priests can understand people and society more effectively.

*"For a deeper understanding of humanity and the phenomena and lines of development of society, in relation to a pastoral ministry which is an "incarnate" as possible, the so-called "human sciences" can be of considerable use..... Also in the precise field of the positive or descriptive sciences, these can help the future priest prolong the living "contemporaneity" of Christ. As Paul VI once said, "Christ became the contemporary of some people and spoke their language. Our faithfulness to him demands that this contemporaneity should be maintained."<sup>40</sup>*

*Because of its relationship to the believer theology is led to pay particular attention both to the fundamental and permanent question of the relationship between faith and reason and to a number of requirements more closely related to the social and cultural situation of today.....In regard to the second, we have disciplines which have been and are being developed as responses to problems strongly felt nowadays.<sup>41</sup>*

Ross points out that since Sigmund Freud suspected religion, it has seemed impossible to bring understandings of sacramental theology and feminist theory together with psychology. However, she believes this scientific method can help us "understanding human psychosexual dynamics that can prove helpful for sorting through the complexities of human desire, the

---

40 DV 52.

41 DV 54.

role of language, and the significance of parent-child relationships". Therefore, she suggests psychoanalysis can help in formulating both a critical and constructive approach to women's relationship with the sacraments through an understanding of the role of the role symbolic.<sup>42</sup>

Ross introduces the theory about sacrament and body of Louis-Marie Chauvet, who "underscores the symbolic as the inevitable consequence of our human embodiment. He believes symbolic and bodily mediation is tragically but necessarily always involved in our subjectivity, especially in our relationship to God".<sup>43</sup> Chauvet argues against the way that the Enlightenment desired to grasp the truthfully without mediation.<sup>44</sup> He emphasizes the fact that "Christian identity cannot be separated from the sacrament means that faith cannot be lived in any other way, including what is most spiritual in it, then in the mediation of the body, the body of a society, of a desire, of a tradition, of a history, of an institution, and so on".<sup>45</sup>

On the other hand, Ross maintains that object relations theories on feminist theory can be helpful for understanding the connections between family dynamics and symbolic representation.<sup>46</sup>

Object relations theory, which stresses the importance of early family interactions, primarily the mother-infant relationship, believes humans are primarily motivated by the need for contact with others, i.e. to build up relationships with others. The theory itself helps us to improve and build up healthy interpersonal relationships. In the context of object relations theory, the term "objects" refers not to inanimate entities but to significant others with whom an individual relates, usually one's mother, father, or primary caregiver.<sup>47</sup> In fact, we must pay attention to the balance of both sides when adopting such a theory.

Ross mentions that "an emphasis on women's embeddedness can become a kind of glorification of the distinctly female aspects of our anatomy. It thus can

---

42 Ibid., 142.

43 Ibid., 144.

44 Ibid., 145.

45 Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, xii.

46 Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 149.

47 Object Relations Theory, *GoodTherapy*. <https://www.goodtherapy.org/learn-about-therapy/types/object-relations>.

serve to hide the social construction of our gender relations."<sup>48</sup> She worries that when we overemphasize the importance of women's position, then the situation where both men and women should build a society together will cause more misunderstandings, imbalances, and destruction due to feminists overemphasizing the influence of women in the early stages of children's growth, whether they are boys or girls.<sup>49</sup> When women gain respect for their contribution to society and church, the role of men cannot be simply washed over.

On the issue of consecration and service at the altar, some feminists insist that women should share the same status as men, namely the opportunity to become priests. The rejection of women's ordination brings with it a kind of distrust or disrespect to women, which is discussed at length by other feminists.<sup>50</sup> Ross invites us to re-examine the value of symbols in liturgical movements. She recommends once we "enter into the realm of the symbolic, into the world where representation comes to have a greater value than what it represents, where symbolic rebirth is more significant than ordinary physical birth: this is, fundamentally, leaving the world of women, who represent the physical, the literal, the mortal."<sup>51</sup>

The motivation of Ross on discussing the relationship between the symbolic and what it represents, as well as the role of gender in relation to the symbolic and sacramental, is full of sincerity and kindness. The entire discussion is complex and full of challenges, but once we are willing to broaden our lens to see that symbol and language are not just the domain of men, (i.e. those women also are symbolic objects), then for women to serve in the position of preachers, liturgical presiders, public leader, etc. does not pose a threat. Ross has no intention to create dualistic opposition of male and female; instead, she intends to guide us to understand the role of presence and absence in both their symbolic and psychological dimension. Furthermore, she tries to help us to attend to our long-standing neglect and discrimination against women in the history of salvation.<sup>52</sup>

---

48 Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 180-81.

49 Ibid., 150-51.

50 Raab Kelly Anna on her journal "Nancy Jay and A Feminist Psychology of Sacrifice" said: "consecration of the Eucharist as a ritual enactment of Jesus' sacrifice at Calvary. Although I am in agreement with Jay of the sociological function of male blood sacrifice, I find certain aspects of her theory incomplete.

51 Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 155.

52 Ibid., 156-57.

### 3. Sacraments and ethic

Attention to the ethical dimensions of the sacraments is nothing new in Christian theology. What is distinctive about the catholic approach to making this connection is its use of eucharistic models of the moral life, in seeing everyday life, as a way of living out the eucharistic vision of sacrifice, plenitude, and community.<sup>53</sup> However, the role of women in the relationship between sacraments and ethics has been without much significant discussion in official Vatican documents. As Ross points out “Vatican documents regarding the family, while there has been a welcome concern for the issue of justice and mutuality to be operative in the family as well as in society, there is always a reservation that this concern for justice does not override the natural place that women have in the family, and the concern, still found in recent writings, that women might “lose” their essentially maternal vocation by emulating the roles of men.”<sup>54</sup> Undoubtedly, the relationship between sacraments and ethics has been re-focused in worthy appreciation.

Anglican theologian Harmon L. Smith highlights that “worship itself is a moral act which displays our deepest convictions about who we understand and intend ourselves to be.”<sup>55</sup> Sally Purvis points out that there has been little attention paid by Christian feminists toward the family, in which it shows the Christian love through the love of God and love others as oneself. She claims that the perspective of a family should not just concentrate on the biological and cultural heritage and should be extended beyond this limitation, i.e. passion, relationship, and diversity, not just within the nuclear family, but in all of one’s relationships extends to the world.<sup>56</sup> She has the intention to bring the concern of the family, including gender justice between spouses, the rights of children, the division of labor in the home, the care of the elderly, in which so-called domestic responsibilities, from private issues into a

public issue.<sup>57</sup> Susan Moller Okin<sup>58</sup> in her book *Justice, Gender and the Family*, shares the same idea that “the separation of family from public life has had a negative impact not only on women but also on society as a whole” because such separation strongly overemphasizes the contribution of men in the family especially on the economic side will also put women into a voiceless situation, they have traditionally placed in subsidiary areas of work, their voices have been mute in public and private as well, in which they are considered as no contribution in society.<sup>59</sup> Feminist theorists argue that this separation of spheres---of family and public, of the person from the political---, has harmed not only women but society as well.<sup>60</sup> When the two genders are so forcibly separated in this way, neither contributes to the mutual cooperation, mutual appreciation, and acceptance of each other, instead of causing discrimination, rejection, and mutual attack.

Ross values the discussion about family as an embodied context for sacramentality. She stresses that the connections between sacraments and ethics have been instructive. Such theories demonstrate that any discussion of the ethical dimensions of the sacraments will be fruitless unless there is an honest recognition of the way in which the divisions of natural/supernatural, laity/clergy, private/public, and female/male are being continually perpetuated at both the theoretical and practical levels.<sup>61</sup> While it is sometimes important to make a distinction between the two, divisions are seldom helpful.

#### PART IV: RETHINKING WOMEN’S SERVICES IN CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ROSS’S FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT (USING HONG KONG AS AN EXAMPLE)

The social status of women in East and Southeast Asia has long been that of marginalization or devaluation, a situation that is closely related to the

---

53 Ibid., 174-75.

54 Ibid., 187.

55 Harmon L. Smith, qtd. In Susan Ross..., 177

56 Ibid., 181-82.

57 Ibid., 182.

58 Susan Moller Okin, a liberal political feminist- points out the many ways in which gender discrimination defects women aspiration, she defends reforms designed to make women’s equality a social and political reality. Noting that differences in the ways in which girls and boys are raised served to channel women and men into different and unequal social roles, she advocates gender-neutral forms of education and child rearing. (c.f. Encyclopaedia Britannica, philosophical feminism, <http://www.britannica.com/topic/philosophical-feminism/Feminist-social-and-political-philosophy#1049916>.)

59 Ibid., 182-83.

60 Ibid., 189.

61 Ibid., 202.

local social, cultural, and historical background.<sup>62</sup> Hong Kong, in the southeast part of the Asian continent, has shared the same situation for the last two centuries. When the church faces contemporary invitation for equality between men and women, and the church also emphasizes that the faithful should be “fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebration,”<sup>63</sup> how do we respond to women’s desire to fully embody this teaching of the church?

After the Treaty of Nanjing signed between the British and Chinese government (Qing Dynasty<sup>64</sup>) in 1842, Hong Kong became one of the British colonies in the world. Even though western cultures were gradually imported to Hong Kong as a result, it had made little impact made about the concept of equality between men and women till the 1960s. The status of women in Hong Kong did not immediately match the world level when western women got the attention of the western world.

Compared with women in the Third World and Southeast Asian countries, the situation of Hong Kong women is relatively better. Since 1971, they have had the right to receive education, in which free but compulsory schooling provided from the government for all children, both boys and girls,<sup>65</sup> and are free to find work (although until 1970, women were still engaged in manual labor and had fewer opportunities to take charge of administrative and supervisor positions.) Women also access to fertility information.<sup>66</sup> All this said this does not mean that Hong Kong women have no desire for equality between men and women.

The United Nations has organized four world conferences<sup>67</sup> on women, in which the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing marked

---

62 Women in Southeast Asia, *Asia Society*. <https://asiasociety.org/education/women-southeast-asia>.

63 SC 14.

64 Qing Dynasty was the last imperial dynasty of China from 1636 to 1911. After 1911, China became a country under republican system until the Chinese Communist Party obtained governance in 1949.

65 Kao, *Status of Women in Hong Kong*, 27.

66 The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong (FPAHK), a non-profit making organization, formerly called the Eugenics League founded in 1936, the FPAHK was reorganized and renamed under its present name in 1950 to provide birth control services in Hong Kong. The mission of the organization is to advocate and promote sexual and reproductive health and rights and to provide related information, education and services for individuals, families and the community. (cf. <http://famplan.org.hk>)

67 The four conferences including 1975 in Mexico City, 1980 in Copenhagen, 1985 in Nairobi and 1995 in Beijing. (c.f. <http://unwomen.org>.)

a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality. The Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action, after the conference held, unanimously declared for women’s empowerment and considered the key global policy document on gender equality, in which strategic objectives and actions for the advancement of women and the achievement of gender equality.<sup>68</sup> Out of 12 major topics set, education and training of women were placed in the second position, which fully shows that women’s access to education and job opportunities are important contemporary issues.

Joint of Equal Opportunity for Women (平等機會婦女聯席)<sup>69</sup> has conducted a study in 2017, researching the situation of implementing gender mainstreaming which is under the supervision of Women’s Commission of Hong Kong (established in 2001). The study found that a very limited influence on government policies<sup>70</sup> and a lack of gender specialists<sup>71</sup> are the key elements that are hindering the development of women’s equity in Hong Kong.

Living in Hong Kong where Asian and Western cultural exchanges gather, how can the diocese encourage faithful to actively and consciously participate in liturgy? While accepting women to serve the altar, how does the church take care of the implicit characteristics of Asian women, so that they can express their own talents and unique personality? These challenges are definitely not easy. In what follows, I try to quote Ross’s feminist theory and the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, to analyze the response of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong to church teaching. In order to show that the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong responded to the church’s teaching that encouraging members to actively participate in parish service and the church as one body, I will use the situation of the Hong Kong Catholic Cathedral as an illustration. These data include some statistics of the parish and the interview with pastor Rev. Dominic Chi Ming Chan, an experienced priest who has been ordained for 41 years.

---

68 World Conference on Women, *United Nation Women*, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/intergovernmental-support/world-conferences-on-women>.

69 The Joint is composed of 12 groups that focus on women’s rights in different sectors, including prostitutes, newly women immigrants, female workers, female Christian and young women’s development.

70 陳效能：性別主流化在香港的實踐研究及檢討報告，頁7-18。

71 陳效能：性別主流化在香港的實踐研究及檢討報告，頁16-18, 32-34。

The Roman Catholic Church in Hong Kong was established as a mission prefecture in 1841 and became a diocese in 1946. According to the data available in the Diocesan Computer Centre, Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, the Catholic population as of 31 August 2019 was about 403,000, served by 282 priests, 68 brothers and 441 sisters in 52 parishes, comprising 40 churches, 33 Chapels, 27 Halls (100 in total) for religious services.<sup>72</sup>

The Cathedral of Hong Kong Diocese, named Cathedral of The Immaculate Conception, was first established in 1843 but was destroyed by fire in 1859 and the new Cathedral was laid in 1883, in which the first Hong Kong prefectural Bishop Raimondi who made the decision to reestablish the church and inaugural mass for the new Cathedral was held on 7 December 1888.<sup>73</sup> In order to manage and provide pastoral services effectively, the Diocese of Hong Kong divides the whole city into 14 parishes, with 3 to 4 churches in each of them. Since the transportation network is well-developed, many faithful may not attend Mass and ritual services in the same church for a long time. Until 2020, there are 4182<sup>74</sup> registered church members of the Cathedral which provides 5 masses every Sunday (including the anticipated mass on Saturday evening and one in the English language), an average of about 800 people participated each time.

Ross mentions that since the Second Vatican Council, women have become involved in the church in increasingly visible ways. Women's participation has always been active and essential, yet there has been an "invisible" quality to this participation until relatively recently.<sup>75</sup>

Pope John XXIII understood that facing the challenges of the times, the Church could no longer standstill. She had to open the windows of the church

---

72 C.f. Statistic of the Diocese of Hong Kong 2019-8-31, *Archive*, Diocese of Hong Kong; Religion and Custom, *Hong Kong Yearbook 2018*, 326-27.

73 C.f. Church Building, Dioceses of Hong Kong, [http://www.Catholicheritage.org.hk/en/catholic\\_building/cathedral/index.html](http://www.Catholicheritage.org.hk/en/catholic_building/cathedral/index.html); Cathedral of The Immaculate Conception, <https://cathedral.catholic.org.hk/wp>.

74 Data provided by Rev. Dominic Chan, the pastor of Cathedral. In year 2000, the Diocese of Hong Kong has computerized the data of all parishes in Hong Kong in order to facilitate the pastoral projects. In addition to the basic personal information, all the church members are required to provide information on baptism, confirmation, marriage, information of spouse and children. All information is only can be read by individual departments or administrative staff designated by the bishop.

75 Ross, *Extravagant Affection*, 163.

and let some fresh air in and let the Holy Spirit awake the sleeping church. Otherwise, the situation would become the world giving up the church, not the church giving up the world. Therefore, he announced to call the Council of Vatican II. Through the *aggiornamento* approach, the Church wanted to show that Catholicism was adaptable even to the modern world. The Church appreciated the value of change.<sup>76</sup>

Out of 16 documents published in the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) adopt a respectful attitude to hold an enthusiastic dialogue with the world and other cultures as well as a modest sharing of wisdom with a compassionate attitude. The church tries to invite all people with good intentions to discuss the truth, learn from the world instead of being alone, scornful, or hostile to the world.

GS is divided into 2 parts: the first part deals with the dignity of the human person, the human community, human activity, and the relationship between the Church and the world and the second part is about addressing problems that the Church face to the modern world, including marriage and family, human progress, life in economic, social and political dimensions respectively. The document covers various social issues, fully reflecting the Church's hopes of *aggiornamento*. It expresses the most profound change from being a church in conflict with the world to being a church in dialogue with the world. The Council Fathers reiterate that the church, as always, cares about human development and salvation, expresses goodwill, and hopes to face challenges with humanity.<sup>77</sup>

In the face of a pluralistic and complex contemporary world, the Church no longer only uses dogmas to understand and analyze the problems but is willing to engage and discuss them. "This council has set forth the dignity of the human person, and the work which men have been destined to undertake throughout the world both as individuals and as members of society. There are a number of particularly urgent needs characterizing the present age, needs which go to the roots of the human race."<sup>78</sup> The Church understands that she has to enter the world and understand the world with people. This is

---

76 O' Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 38-39.

77 Sullivan, *The Road to Vatican II*, 42-45.

78 GS 46.

the only way to explain how faith is related to human life. If she just continues to cover up all the questions with theories, the human world has more systematic and newly developed theories to use, there is no need to apply the dogmas of the church at all.

As the Council went on to discuss various topics, the church no longer used the dualistic sacred and secular tone of pre-Vatican II to reach the world, but instead approached the world with an open mind. Wordings such as fostering an understanding of the human culture, the nobility of marriage is used in GS, shows that the Church is willing to engage with the world, appreciate the world is "truth, goodness, and beauty",<sup>79</sup> but not criticize it.

When we re-understand the church with a new and broad perspective, we can refer to how Ross believes women contribute to the church with actions, so as to recognize the unique place of women in serving the church, especially liturgical and ritual services. These characteristics are shared by women from the East and the West, which does not be obstructed by culture, geography, and history.

Ross believes that churches are meant to be the place of beauty, to stir the mind and the heart of God, and their beauty strikes women and men alike. Particularly in Catholicism, beauty plays an important role in worship which appeals to the senses as well as to the spirit.<sup>80</sup> She agrees with Don Saliers that aesthetic experience as such is not the primary aim of the public worship of God. The praise, the glorification of God, and the transformation toward the Holy are. Yet such glorification and sanctification require human modes of communication and must touch down into the whole range of human experience... If the primary intention of liturgical celebration is participation in the mystery of God's holiness and the divine self-communication, then the beautiful is always at the service of the holy.<sup>81</sup>

Through this vision, Ross argues that we must carefully choose our symbolism, because if God is truth, goodness, and beauty, then our symbolism ought to reflect accordingly. However, when it comes to symbolism related to women,

---

79 Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 32-33.

80 Ibid.

81 C.f. Doe E. Salier, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine*, 205, 207.

the tradition seems to suggest that women cannot symbolize the beauty of God in worship.<sup>82</sup>

When we discuss women's involvement in church services, it is not difficult to find that the situation in Hong Kong is quite special. With the concept of freedom and equality having been promoted in the past two centuries, both the younger generation and the previous generations, while pursuing them, are influenced by traditional ideas which makes the situation is quite complicated. Affected by traditional Oriental culture, women in Hong Kong tend to be more reserved when participating in church services. However, they will never give in when they believe the positions they are capable of holding.

Traditional Chinese culture emphasizes that women stay at home to take care of the family<sup>83</sup> while men develop outward. In Hong Kong Catholics circle, there is almost no push for women to become priests as they all focus on church traditions and think that it is a good arrangement to let only men be a priest. Even they know that there are women in Christ's dominations as pastors, they do not ask for the same. Even in arranging the service of the altar, pastor Rev. Chan respects the tradition of the altar servers that only male parishioners were invited. While there was a relatively small number of parishioners who questioned there were why no female altar servers, Rev. Chan manages a neutral attitude and allow the Altar Server Group to make their final decision on recruiting members. From the perspective of church development, he also believes, for the long-term development of the church, it is undeniable that altar service is the cradle of nurturing priesthood vocations. He points out that even if someone asks about the recruitment of the Group, it is out of curiosity rather than a challenge.<sup>84</sup>

According to the statistic provided by Rev. Chan, the number of registered parishioners from The Hong Kong Catholic Cathedral of The Immaculate Conception is 4182, two-fifth parishioners are female (around 2500). The

---

82 Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 34.

83 Ancient Chinese society emphasized that women should live with three obediences and four virtues (三從四德). The three figures they required to obey are her father before marriage, her husband during married life and her sons in widowhood. The four virtues are fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech and efficiency in needle work.

84 C.f. the interview with Rev. Chan Chi Ming Dominic, Question 5. (See Appendix A)

Cathedral has its own Pastoral Council, which is an advisory and volunteer-based organization, with 25 members (16 female and 9 male). The chairperson is Rev. Chan and the president is an experienced female parishioner. There are a total of 42 functional and service groups under the supervision of the Council. 8 groups only allow single-gender to join, including the Extraordinary Eucharist Minister Group, Prison Ministry Group (visiting female prisoners), Mothers' Pray Group, Funeral Service ad-hock Group, and Altar Decoration Group just welcome female members, while Altar server Group, Extraordinary Eucharist Minister Group, and Traffic and Parking Arrangement Group are for male members only. It is worth noting that the even serving as extraordinary Eucharist ministers are divided into two groups of men and women even when they are mixed to serve the same altar. Another more noticeable data is that out of 48 groups, 25 are chaired by women, i.e. nearly 50%, 4 of them are from Legion of Mary, 4 are spiritual groups for different ages, and the rest are Sunday School tutors, Choir groups, publishing groups, and various service groups. In addition, there are 8 salaried staffs in the parish, all office clerical staff are women, the two responsible for cleaning are both women, and the men and women are responsible for the sacristy.<sup>85</sup>

"It is necessary to maintain a balance for a mature and developed community so that both men and women have room and opportunities for development."<sup>86</sup> This is the main consideration of Rev. Chen when he manages the parish. As he has been the Vicar General<sup>87</sup> of Hong Kong Diocese for 20 years, his principles can also reflect the attitude of the pastors of the Hong Kong Diocese when they manage their own parishes.

For a group to have a balanced development between men and women, the first priority is that all members accept this set of thinking and believe that this value can bring benefits to the church. The parishioners in the Cathedral demonstrate that they agree with the concept about we belong to one body.

---

85 Sacristy in church is a room where vestments and sacred vessels used in the services are stored, and where the clergy and sometimes the altar servers vest.

86 C.f. the interview with Rev. Chan Chi Ming Dominic, Question 2, 3, and 4. (See Appendix A)

87 According to Canon 479, by virtue of office, the vicar general has the executive power over the whole diocese which belongs to the diocesan bishop by law, namely, the power to place all administrative acts except those, however, which the bishop has reserved to himself or which require a special mandate of the bishop by law. (C.f. Beal John P., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, 632.)

Women in the Cathedral have plenty of room for development in the church especially in liturgical services, such as being lectors, Eucharist ministers, and choir members. They accept that as women, they have their place on the altar and they have no intention to strive to become priests as they enjoy and appreciate their contributions.

To be a part of the body is not for everyone to be ahead but we have to learn how to appreciate the contributions made by themselves and others. When Ross reflects on how women can participate in beautifying the church and altar, she suggests that both men and women ought to give more thought to what they can contribute even just how to dress when attending mass<sup>88</sup>, and ought not to jump to negative conclusion too quickly when they are not invited to preside at the altar to consecrate the hosts.<sup>89</sup>

To beautify the altar with the body, i.e. through the participation of parishioners with action, the cultural diversity between Eastern and Western societies are very significant and the ways of expression are also very different. Ross provides the example that once a woman preaches after the proclamation of the Gospel sometimes in her parish, somebody will likely make a complaint to the archdiocese that church rules are not being followed.<sup>90</sup> However, such a phenomenon will not happen in Hong Kong as the female faithful have no intention to preside at the mass or the altar. Also, some priests of different parishes occasionally invite female parishioners to share their reflections and experience at masses. For women who have a great passion to participate in the teaching of the faith, they are welcomed to teach Sunday school or the RCIA program. Chances and room are given to develop their talent and enthusiasm. This is the common practice that holds sway in Hong Kong.

When we complain that women do not have the opportunity to participate in administrating the church, preaching, or serving the altar bodily, education, Ross suggests us to appreciate positively from another angle that women can also make a great contribution to the church through small things that are not noticeable. She believes even "women were either barred by men from sacred

---

88 Ross, *For the Beauty of the Earth*, 41.

89 *Ibid.*, 36.

90 *Ibid.*, 43-44.

space and given menial work to do, or they had a rule imposed on them by men – both were so that women would not intrude on the sacred beauty of the church. But in both cases, women from all ends of the social and economic spectrum turned these situations into opportunities for beautifying their worship space”<sup>91</sup>.

Ross applies Beverly Wildung Harrison’s idea on how to make an ethical decision when the church and all members want to evaluate the value of women’s participation in liturgical services. Harrison defines the task of ethics as involving two things---to improve our ability to reflect on and also to choose better or worse ways of sharpening our personal or social actions. We do ethics every day by the kind of decision we make and the lives that we lead. Such decision-making is not just for academic or religious leaders, but for everyone.<sup>92</sup>

When we acknowledge that a woman is a person, that she and all Christians are called to the altar to share the Eucharist and grace of God, we are in the same body. Then we must accept them as part of the ritual and they are qualified to serve. If we accept Paul’s teachings, everyone has their different responsibilities and missions and can play their talents in different positions, it is worth considering that personal preferences are placed in an entire system. What I have to take care of is personal needs or group expectations. This is a topic in an ethic that worthy of careful consideration.

We can look at the present understanding of what an altar is with it represents, what its universal requirements are. There are two seemingly contrary concepts about the symbolic meaning of the altar. On the one hand, it is a table for the ritual meal---a re-enactment of the paschal meal shared by Jesus and his disciples. On the other hand, it is a stone of sacrifice whereon the unbloody sacrifice of Calvary. The altar is the focus of the sacramental presence of Christ. This piece of furniture is the place where the worshipping community calls for the promised presence of Christ, a high priest of the mystical body, who offers himself to the Father for the total community united for this ritual meal by the HS alive in the Bride.<sup>93</sup>

---

91 Ibid., 50-51.

92 Ibid., 81-82.

93 McNally, Altar, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* 43-45.

Although there is no need for an altar to make liturgy on some enlightened plane of objective reality, the need for a church building itself arises from more subtle human needs. For particular communities, the varieties of climate, wealth, pictorial sensitivity, national heritage, etc. all impinge on the kind of church that exists, breathes, live.<sup>94</sup> When we re-recognize the value of the altar, whether we really accept it is that Jesus prepared for us; and his self-sacrifice is for all people: all generations; different races, sinful, men and women. Jesus says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”<sup>95</sup> Jesus reminds us that he comes to call everyone, including sinners. He wants us to practice humanity and the truth. Faith is not to speak out of words, but to show God’s mercy through our actions.

When we surround the altar again to commemorate the Lord’s bloodless sacrifice for us, we all witness the dedication of all participants at the same time, i.e. we put our lives on the altar to glorify God. This dedication is not just a priest’s hands holding up offerings and chalices, but also includes women’s singing in the choir, reading the lectionary, cleaning, and decoration the church, and even teaching in Sunday school outside the church. “Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb”.<sup>96</sup> Women absolutely are called. They are eager to participate in serving the altar. The altar expresses the ethical value of God, that is, respecting everyone has to value even their abilities are different and diversified, they have opportunities and space to contribute to the church. This kind of sharing of God’s mercy is just.

## CONCLUSION

When I took an undergrad degree and a master’s degree program at university, topics related to women aroused my interest the most. Even when I had training in the seminary, one of the books I had read completely finished that related to theology was *Text of Terror: Literary-Feminist Reading of Biblical Narratives* by Phyllis Trible.<sup>97</sup> Women historically used to be a group that was silenced and not watched. How did they survive in a male-dominated society? How can we use limited historical materials, such as stories, their dressings,

---

94 Ibid.

95 Mt 9:13.

96 The prayer, Agnus Dei, before the distribution of the Eucharist.

97 Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Overtures to Biblical Theology, 13. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.



and paintings related to them to understand them more? Why did there appear prominent female monarchs in history such as Catherine the Great, Elizabeth I, Mary II, Victoria, and Wu Zetian (the first empress in China) but at the same time, women's names rarely appear in church history? ..... These topics are worthy of reflection and research.

By reading Susan Ross's work, I understand better that the fierce expressions of some feminists trigger the nerves of men and sparkle a lot of heated discussions. She advocates that to understand that women as full members of the church must include them receiving basic respect from the perspective of the body. On the other hand, how can we use the characteristics of women to serve the church, especially female temperament and their beauty, to help embody the image of God? As a feminist, she expresses to the majority of female faithful that they want to stand around the altar to serve the church, to receive the grace of God together, rather than to fight for power. There is no doubt that Vatican II has taken a big step in responding to feminism. Even though some scholars still feel that the church's response is limited, we have to appreciate and respect that this step is worthwhile when the church is dominated by men for ages. On the basis of mutual respect, whether it is feminist theology or the service of women in the church, there is still room for continued exploration.

Although Hong Kong is just a dot on the world map, the kind of mentality women hold to serve the church, and how the church members respond to their commitment are noteworthy. Women members in Hong Kong Diocese have the traits of traditional Asian women, i.e. they accept men's leading role. They do not need to master the role of leader, but they are willing to serve the lectionary, distribute the Eucharist in the altar, or participate in the work of teaching catechism and visitation of the needy outside the church. Priests who head the administrative role in the church, are willing to use a balanced approach to provide opportunities for both men and women to contribute to the church is necessary as it provides an opportunity for both parties to have a condition for cooperation.

This attitude of treating each other as one body and willing to accept each other is exactly the righteousness and respect advocated by the Catholic Church. This lofty ethical value can be displayed the solidarity at the table in liturgical services, regardless of whether the altar is in the West or the East because we all are One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic.

