THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S NETWORK

by

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Abstract

The Catholic Women's Network was formed in 1984 and continues to be an active and thriving group. Since its founding in 1984, however, it has gone through two generations of women who are quite different from each other and consequently have different expectations of the group. Initially the Network was formed to be a local support group for Catholic women who were feeling alienated from the Catholic Church and were finding it increasingly hard to continue to participate in it. Since 1987, the group has changed its membership and its function. Rather than functioning as a support group for women who attend Church, it is now one part of a network of alternative forms of Catholic life available in the diocese.

This thesis describes the two generations of the Catholic Women's Network and accounts for the group's evolution by examining broader historical trends within Roman Catholicism and Catholic feminism: a shift in understanding of what it means to be the Church, inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965); and a move away from liberal feminism and its demand for the inclusion of women in the Church's clerical hierarchy toward a Marxian analysis of Church structures and the concomitant development of Womenchurch, a network of small feminist Catholic groups devoted to transforming the Church into a community of co-equal participation.
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Introduction

This thesis describes and analyzes the Catholic Women's Network, a small group of Catholic women which over the five years of its life has numbered around thirty people altogether. The women who form the group at any given time - presently around twelve of them - share a common sense of alienation from the Roman Catholic Church and a common commitment to feminism. They gather together once a month from various parts of the city and outlying suburbs in the basement of a small Anglican church rectory in the east side of town (they are not allowed to meet on Roman Catholic Church property) in order to share in one another's personal and spiritual growth.

More specifically, this thesis begins, in the first chapter, by sketching the historical and ecclesiological context within the Roman Catholic Church which made possible the emergence of Womenchurch, a Catholic feminist network of which this group is a part. In chapters two and three, it analyzes and describes the origins and development of the Catholic Women's Network from its formation in July 1984 to the present day. It describes how CWN began as a support group for Roman Catholic women who were struggling to remain good and faithful Catholics in an increasingly conservative diocese but grew to become an alternative Catholic feminist community in its own right.
Before we turn to the body of the thesis itself, however, a discussion of the theory, methodology and methods used in researching and writing up this thesis are in order. This introductory chapter provides such a discussion. The bulk of the chapter sketches in a schematic fashion the philosophical and political roots of feminist theory, its consequent adaptation for social science research and its general methodological implications. The final portion discusses some issues of feminist methodology with particular reference to the researching and writing of this thesis.

**Methods and Methodology: a Distinction**

In her introduction to *Feminism and Methodology* (1987), Harding distinguishes between epistemology, methodology and method in feminist social science research and argues that while feminists use many of the same methods of gathering evidence as traditional social science researchers, these methods are used in the context of new methodologies and new epistemologies:

One could reasonably argue that all evidence-gathering techniques fall into one of the following three categories: listening to (or interrogating) informants, observing behaviour, or examining historical traces and records. ...feminist researchers use just about any and all of the methods, in this concrete sense of the term, that traditional androcentric researchers use. ...There is both more and less going on in these cases than new methods of research. ...the "more" is that it is new methodologies and epistemologies that are requiring these new uses of familiar research techniques. (Harding 1987:2)
Harding's conclusions concerning research methods are self-evident: those used in this study like those used by other feminists in general do not, in themselves, differ from traditional anthropological fieldwork approaches. Harding's second point, however, that feminist research is set apart by the "new" epistemological perspectives and methodological approaches within which traditional fieldwork methods are employed, deserves further examination.

To my mind, Harding is both correct and incorrect in her assessment of what is new or different about feminist research. The epistemological perspectives used by feminist research are not new in themselves. However, in combination with the political legacy of feminism, they do produce two uniquely feminist methodological approaches. The following sections of this portion of the chapter describe the epistemological traditions in which feminism grounds itself; briefly review the history of feminism as a political movement; describe and discuss the two resulting methodological choices open to feminist researchers; and explain why the second of these methodologies has been chosen for this study.

The Philosophical Roots of Feminist Theory

Feminism has sought epistemological justification in each of the two philosophical traditions that have emerged since the Enlightenment: liberal humanism and Marxism.
In the broadest terms, the philosophical task confronting the Enlightenment thinkers was to rebuild an understanding of human being in the aftermath of the Copernican revolution. Philosophers such as Descartes, Kant and Hegel were left to struggle with a displaced God and a man who had replaced Him at the centre of the known universe.

The Enlightenment philosophers modelled their new understanding of man on the theological understanding of God which they sought to overthrow. They collapsed ontology into epistemology and defined being as the capacity for knowing. The knowing subject, or consciousness, was modelled on an omniscient God and was regarded as a transcendent and unconditioned being, an Absolute Subject, pure reason or cogito. Accordingly, epistemology idealized and abstracted not only the knowing subject, but also the object to be known and the activity of pursuing knowledge. The object of knowledge was the object in its formal or pure form, historically invariant and immutable, while the activity of knowing was an unmediated encounter between transcendent subject (consciousness) and transcendent object (the object in its pure form). Thus, the pursuit of knowledge was an activity in which "an Absolute subject aims to know an Absolute object in an Absolute manner" (Parekh 1982:187).

The alternative to this Enlightenment epistemology, which is the foundation for liberal humanism, is the historical materialism of Marx who viewed his epistemology
as a fundamental critique of the de-historicized epistemologies that he classed as ideologies. (1)

Marx used the term ideology in two senses. First, he used it to mean "idealism" and to characterize the Enlightenment philosophers who assumed that human consciousness is reification in the human realm of a metaphysical a priori (either Kant's pure reason, Hegel's spirit or Descartes' cogito). These epistemologies he described as variations of a common idealism because they abstracted and de-historicized the knowing subject from the material conditions of existence and gave priority to the metaphysical (or ideal) realm.

Adapting Hegel's concept of alienation, Marx argued that these Enlightenment philosophers did not go far enough in displacing God and replacing Him with man. Further, and for reasons we will not go into here, Marx also argued that the pursuit of human well-being in the material world is ontologically prior to and materially underpins the pursuit of truth and, accordingly, he subscribed to a "materialist" or socially-grounded epistemology and insisted on the inherently social and historical nature of the knowing subject.

Secondly, he used ideology to characterize the attitude of the idealists who assumed their consciousness of social reality to be objective in the absolute sense described above. Arguing from his social ontology, Marx maintained that human society is a not a collection of individuals able
to perceive the absolute or eternal truth of things. Rather society is a system of social positions (such as classes) of which each has common conditions of existence, interests and represent a distinct point of view.

Each social position has the understandable tendency to examine society only from the standpoint of itself and to generalize its point of view to the whole of society. Such a point of view, however, rests on unexamined assumptions and is constituted and limited by those unexamined assumptions, as the term "point of view" suggests. To Marx, it is "ideological" and has certain characteristic features.

First, it is systematically biased. The bias "is not accidental but inherent,...not detachable, but structurally embedded" (Parekh 1982:30). Secondly, since it is biased, its view of society is distorted. It tends to conceal or mystify social reality. Thirdly, lacking full self-consciousness, an ideology is unaware of its limits and tends to claim universal or absolute validity for itself, thereby inevitably justifying and legitimating the way of life of its particular social group and canonising the existing world. It is this unawareness of its own inherent limits and its own inevitable bias that defines "ideology" for Marx. Ideologies claim universal validity when in fact their validity is only partial.

In criticizing ideology Marx is not primarily commenting on a psychological tendency of human nature, but is analyzing a social condition. His critique of ideology
is not merely that it has the tendency to assume universal validity, but more crucially, that it has the power to enforce near universal acceptance of its partial point of view. Society is not a system of positions in which each has its own point of view competing with every other position's point of view for the intellectual allegiance of the society's members. In actuality, according to Marx, societies may be characterized as having only two types of points of view only one of which can properly be called an ideology. This is the dominant ideology which articulates and generalizes the point of view of the dominant class to all other classes and to which all other classes subscribe. There are also the subordinate quasi-ideologies, minority points of view which exist on the margins of society and are subsumed by the totalizing framework of the dominant ideology.

Neither the Enlightenment nor the Marxian view of the nature of knowing has been adopted into current feminist theory in anything like the pure and simple form described here. They have evolved significantly over time, in part through the work of other thinkers, but to a far greater extent through the influence of more than a century of feminist political activity.
Political Feminism: The Development of Liberal and Marxian Feminism

Among the feminists of the Enlightenment tradition, it was Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792, which set forth in paradigmatic fashion the liberal humanist belief in the natural equality of women and men, and argued from that belief for the equal rights of women as well as men. For liberal feminists, such as Wollstonecraft, this belief was founded on the primacy of reason. Wollstonecraft believed that women and men shared an essential humanity due to their common possession of reason, a quality which they also shared with God and nature, and whose development and application would alone lead to the perfection of humanity in relation to nature and society. This essential humanity, she maintained, was distorted in women by law, custom and prejudice. The process of human perfection, she argued, was being held back by those who maintained customs and laws prejudicial to women and thus prevented them from exercising their capacity for reason. She claimed equal rights for women in order to remedy women's situation and promote the perfection of humanity. The same doctrines and claims were repeated in the other classic liberal feminist texts of the day, such as John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869), where he writes that not only is "the legal subordination of one sex
to another...wrong in itself," but it is "now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement."

When the first attempt at the large scale political mobilization of women began at the Seneca Falls convention of 1848, it was centered on the doctrine of natural rights and a claim of suffrage for women. By the beginning of the "second wave" in the 1960's, the level of the argument had substantially changed: although it remained firmly within the liberal humanist traditions, the logical presumption was now for equality in the terms argued for by Wollstonecraft and Mill, and liberal feminism took the form of the "women's rights" movement and the formation of such organizations as NOW (National Organization for Women) in 1966 in the United States to lobby for changes in legislation affecting women.

Like Marxian theory in general, Marxian feminism is not grounded on the hypothesis of natural human equality based on reason. The Marxian feminist view is grounded in the social experience of domination and subordination and it posits that the relations between men and women are analogous to those between the dominant class and the subordinate one or, in Marx's terms, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. This perception is given its embryonic formulation in Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private
**Property and the State (1884):**

The first class opposition that appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between men and women in the monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male...he is the bourgeoisie and the wife is the proletariat. (Engels 1972: 58,66)

While Marx himself did not write about the relations between women and men, Engels and those who came after him viewed the relationship between women and men in the light of Marx's broader social programme and tied the emancipation of women to the eventual abolition of class society. In general, this remained the position of the first wave Marxist theorists and socialist policy makers until well into the first decades of the twentieth century, at which time interest in the women's question began to fade. By 1937 George Orwell could include feminists among the "sandal wearers, nudists and vegetarians" and other "unwanted cranks haunting socialist conferences" (Connell 1987:29). The woman question came to the fore again among socialist thinkers only in the late sixties and early seventies, in the general resurgence of the second wave of the women's movement.

During this period women in the New Left in the United States and France, increasingly distressed by their treatment by men in the New Left,(2) began to re-examine the issue of women's subordination. Their treatment led some to reverse the orthodox Marxist solution to women's oppression and to develop the radical wing of the feminist movement. While retaining an essentially Marxian analysis of the relations between women and men, they also drew on
existentialism through the work of Simone de Beauvoir and 
psychoanalysis through Lacan, and concluded that Engels and 
the other early Marxists had been wrong to assume that class 
emancipation would lead in turn to women's emancipation. On 
the contrary, they claimed, the solution to class oppression 
was the emancipation of women: "the oppression of women 
is...the beginning of the class system and women were the 
first exploited class. Every culture or institution or 
value developed since that time contains that oppression as 
a major foundational ingredient" (Atkinson 1974:30).

Liberal and Marxian Feminism in Social Science Research

Most of the political analysis and action that created 
this new radical feminism during the second wave of the 
women's movement came about as a result of the number of 
feminists who gained teaching and research positions and 
began to reflect systematically on the feminist political 
agenda from an academic perspective. By the early seventies 
the social sciences were generating a substantial body of 
feminist literature which continued to reflect the 
epistemological and political diversity out of which it had 
grown.

Consequently, there is no such thing as "feminism" in 
the social sciences. The spectrum of political positions 
along which feminists range and the two epistemological 
traditions feminists adopt have guaranteed that there is no
one feminist school of thought, no systematically developed theoretical perspective to which all feminists adhere, no canon of feminist texts. Rather, there are feminists in different university departments and academic specialties who, in various ways, are concerned with illuminating — and changing — the ways in which power articulates with sex/gender. In other words, there is no one feminism, but there is one essential feminist question that can be posed either in the liberal terms of equality/inequality or the Marxian terms of domination/subordination.

The task of operationalizing the feminist question — bringing it to bear in a relevant way on a specific body of data — may be designated the methodological component of feminist research. By definition, methodology is a "theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed" (Harding 1987:3). It includes a consideration of how a particular theory is to be applied in particular research areas. In feminist research, methodology is this and more besides. It involves not only the application of a particular theory to a research area, but also the reconciliation of that theory with the political and epistemological assumptions that permit one to ask the feminist question in the first place.

In addressing the problem of methodology, feminists vary from the complete acceptance of traditional social science theory to a critical use of it. Not surprisingly, however, these variances tend to cluster around two
methodological positions. At one end of the spectrum are those who take the "add women" approach and integrate their study of women into traditional theory either by examining women's roles and activities in areas that already have a place within the existing theoretical framework or by examining women's particular activities, which may themselves lie outside the existing framework, in light of those theories. These "add women" efforts are directed at correcting for the effects of "male bias" in traditional research.

In this "add women" view, theories are not thought of as biased per se. The "male bias" that it seeks to correct for is the result of prejudices, negative attitudes or false beliefs about women that belonged to the pre-theoretical social world of the researcher. These biases enter theory because researchers, due to these prejudices, fail to take account of women as equal objects of research and thus, when generalizing the results of the research, produce inaccurate and distorted accounts of social reality.

Since the goal of research according to this perspective is to "expand objectivity" and provide "a less distorted and [more] scientific analysis" (Scheper-Hughes 1983:109) of social reality, research that generates partial and inaccurate accounts is obviously open to question and potential invalidation. Accordingly, adding women as objects of equal empirical weight in research is seen as the necessary prescription to produce a less distorted and more
complete view of the social world and to purge the theory of its bias.

The "add women" approach suffers from an internal contradiction. On one hand, it wants to sustain the ideal of theoretical neutrality while, on the other hand, criticizing the real biases in it. It attempts to bypass this contradiction by claiming that personal biases have corrupted theory and may be purged from it. Adding women serves this purpose: adding women as comparative data will show which parts of the theory have been affected by bias and which parts have not and the result will be a neutral theory.

This solution, of course, does not work. It is known that it does not work because, in fact, theories are constantly changing and the theories we use today are not the theories we will use tomorrow. The issue at stake in this methodological approach, then, is not so much whether a particular theory is biased, but whether theory in general is biased.

These researchers want to say "no" for the very profound reason that it is, in their view, the only guarantor of the objectivity of research. The connection between the "add women" approach to theory and the epistemological tradition of the Enlightenment can hardly go unmentioned. The idea of theory as a guarantor of objectivity only makes sense within an epistemological tradition that idealizes theory as the absolutely objective
conceptual product of an encounter between knowers (untainted by the opinions, attitudes or ignorance of their own society) and their data.

Theory, then, is the lens which over time is rubbed free of any impurities (biases) so that eventually a clear (unbiased) view of the data is achieved. The contradiction that lies within this view, however, is that, in actuality, the work of correcting for bias is an endless task. Adding women is an example. This view assumes that there are absolute objects to be known, such as "women" and "men". Yet, there are no women or men as such. As Schlegel (1977) points out, the partial view of society that "male-biased" social scientists have achieved is not the partial view of men as such, but of certain men only:

One gets the impression from many ethnographers that culture is created by and for men between the ages of puberty and late middle age (Schlegel 1977:2)

Thus, even the effects of men's biases that feminists of the "add women" school call "male bias" are not truly "male": they are the effects of the biases of certain men. Consequently, there can be no general category of "women" added in to correct for such a bias. One may conceivably correct for this specific bias by adding women between the ages of puberty and late middle age, but this addition would not produce a neutral theory. Like Sisyphus, the researcher faces a task that is never done. Theory will continue to be biased in more ways than can ever be corrected for and the pursuit of objectivity remains an
eternal and impossible task. Certainly then the problem with male bias can not only be that it is biased.

This conclusion leads back to Marx and his original critique of ideology in which he stated that the problem with a point of view is not that it is a point of view but that it pretends to be otherwise.(5) Not surprisingly, on the other end of the methodological continuum from the "add women" school are researchers whose argument is exactly that. The most articulate feminist application of Marx's critique to social science theory is that of Dorothy Smith (1987).

Following Marx she argues that social science theory is far from pure. Neither self-sufficient nor ontogenic, the social sciences are part of the dominant ideology of our society. As such, social science theory shares the characteristic features of ideology Marx described. First, social science theory is systematically biased; and the bias is not accidental but inherent, not detachable but structurally embedded. Its bias is the bias of the dominant group and it functions like any other dominant group ideology. Drawing on the traditional Marxian analogy that women are to men as the proletariat are to the bourgeoisie, Smith states that the bias in social science theory is inherently and systematically male. Secondly, since it is male biased, it tends to conceal or mystify the social reality of women's lives and of society as a whole. Thirdly, although partial and distorted, it claims absolute
validity. Fourthly, it not only claims absolute validity, but as part of the ideology of the dominant class, or in Smith's terms, part of "the larger relations of ruling in society, the relations that put it together, ...and regulate it and control it" (Smith 1987:19), social theory has the power to have itself accepted as absolutely valid.

Women, like all subordinate groups, are unable to articulate their own point of view in a coherent and autonomous fashion, and so remain intellectually overwhelmed and determined by the dominant male ideology.

...The making and dissemination of the forms of thought we make use of to think about ourselves and our society are part of the relations of ruling and hence originate in positions of power. These positions of power are occupied by men almost exclusively, which means that ...the means women have had available to them to think, image, and make actionable their experience have been made for us and not by us. ...It means that the concerns, interest, and experiences forming "our" culture are those of men in positions of dominance whose perspectives are built on the silence of women...

Let us be clear that we are not talking about a prejudice or sexism as a particular bias against women or a negative stereotype of women. We are talking about the consequences of women's exclusion from a full share in the making of what becomes treated as our culture. What is there - spoken, sung, written, made emblematic in art - and treated as general, universal, unrelated to a particular position or a particular sex as its source and standpoint, is in fact partial, limited, located in a particular position, and permeated by special interests and concerns. (Smith 1987:19-20)

Consequently, the methodological programme Smith and other researchers propose is to use existing theories judiciously by means of a strategic move "outside the frame" of their theoretical perspective. This move involves three
concomitant methodological strategies. First, traditional social science theory begins its analysis from the point of view of men's experience. The feminist approach involves starting research from "the point of view of women" or from "women's experiences;" and, appropriately, this approach has been characterized as the "feminist standpoint" approach (Harding 1987: 184).

Secondly, traditional social theory provides information relevant to men's interests and asks questions about social life from men's point of view. The goal of the feminist standpoint inquiry is to provide for women the analyses they need to understand social reality and it therefore asks questions about social life from women's point of view.

Thirdly, it locates the researcher "on the same critical plane as" the researched (Harding 1987: 8). While moving outside the frame of traditional theory, the researcher moves inside the frame of the feminist standpoint.

The feminist standpoint approach developed by Smith and others is the one adopted by most feminist social sciences researchers. It is not without conceptual difficulties of its own, however.

First, the feminist standpoint approach limits the theoretical and analytical goals of feminist research. The phrase, "women's point of view" is misleading. Obviously, this phrase does not mean "any and all women's point of
view." It specifically refers to the subordinate point of view of women relative to the dominant point of view of men.

The strength of the approach is that it avoids the problem of assuming a general class of women as such dominated by a general class of men. The phrase isolates a structural relationship replicated throughout society between different groups of women and different groups of men. It describes and analyzes the dimensions of the subordination of specific women relative to specific men and the ways these women perceive it and respond to it. Its weakness is that it presents only half the picture: it ignores other relations in women's lives, particularly those in which groups of women subordinate other groups of women.(8)

Secondly, with respect to its stated aim as a tool of research for women, it is clear that the goal of this type of research is not to make women objects of equal empirical value with men (or to make women researchers of equal stature with men for that matter). Instead, these researchers hope to generate a self-determined and autonomous perspective on women's lives and on society in general (Pateman and Gross 1986) in order to help women understand and change the dimensions of subordination in their lives. Traditional theory is useful only to the degree that it aids this goal. Phenomenology and ethnomethodology are preferred theories (although their relativist epistemological assumptions are usually ignored)
(Stanley and Wise 1979, 1983). Psychoanalysis and structuralism become "feminist theories manque" to the extent that they provide invaluable information about the rationalizations used to perpetuate the alienation and subordination of women (Ruben 1975: 193).

Autonomy, however, is something of a legal fiction, an impossible ideal; and as long as feminist researchers continue to remain as part of (and not as separatists within) the academic community, they have responsibility not to shirk the hard question. If their theories and analysis are autonomous, are they not also relative? If not relative, against what standard does one judge the truth-claims of "feminist standpoint" research versus non-feminist research? Since each perspective stands on different epistemological ground, it is difficult to imagine where a standard can be found.

This question is not merely a philosophical one. As in the case of Enlightenment philosophers assuming an absolute knower, an absolute object to be known and unmediated knowledge, feminists presenting "women's point of view," asking "women's questions" and placing the researcher on the same critical plane as the researched, are ideals to be striven for but never to be realized. In this respect, this approach to feminist research also struggles with certain methodological inconsistencies and contradictions.

To return to Marx for a moment to make the point more concrete, it is clear that Marx could not have written his
critique of ideology from the point of view of the proletariat for the simple reason that the proletariat was, to some extent, a creation of his own theory. The same may be said for feminist research. It is research for women in both senses of the term: to some extent feminist research creates the "women's point of view", asks questions women do not know how to ask, and displays the lives of women for them in ways they can not do. But to claim moral purity in the role of advocacy is no more a guarantor of truth than to claim theoretical purity in the name of objectivity.

Fortunately, feminist researchers are aware of this dilemma in their research. Feminist researchers refer to it as the problem of "double consciousness" (Dubois 1961; Smith 1987). As women studying women, they are trained in the consciousness of the dominant ideology yet personally experience the consciousness of women's subordination. As a consequence of this, incorporating the researcher on the same critical plane as the researched is as much a necessary and frank admission of the analytic dilemmas posed by double consciousness as it is a moral choice by feminists to retain solidarity with their research subjects.

The Limits of Marxian Theory

In my own research I have adopted the methodological approach described in the first portion of this paper. Like the feminist researchers described by Harding, I have not
sought to invent new feminist methods *per se*, though I have tried to apply different feminist methodologies. The methods of gathering data that I used in the fieldwork for this research were utterly traditional: participant observation, audio-taping of the Catholic Women's Network's monthly meetings and formal interviewing.

Participant observation was both formal and informal since the world described in this thesis is a part of my own. While I had a conservative Christian childhood and became a more liberal though more committed Catholic once I went to university, I discovered and was deeply influenced by the radical Catholicism practised by some of the friends I made at university and the education I received as an undergraduate studying the history of Christianity. In my first year of graduate school I discovered feminist theory in a course on the history of anthropology, and the Catholic Women's Network through a feminist Catholic friend.

I attended the monthly meetings of CWN during the Fall and Winter of 1987-88. The first meeting I attended was in the staffroom of an elementary school. Since then meetings have been held in the basement of a small east-side Anglican Church whose minister is a member of a similar group for Anglican women. I was to learn only later that the first meeting had been held in the staffroom because the Network had been asked to leave its original meeting place in a local convent due to pressure from the bishop's office. I was not surprised to find at the first meeting I attended
that a number of the women who went to the Network were members of my local church. Most I knew by face if not by name and I quickly became at home there and attended meetings sporadically throughout the winter and spring.

That summer, in 1988, I attended the annual conference of the national group, the Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE), an organization formed to educate and lobby the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops on issues concerning women in the Roman Catholic Church. I was elected to its five-member executive and throughout the following year have maintained regular correspondence and occasional personal contact with these members and the members of the new executive elected in 1989. Upon returning from that initial conference, I went on retreat with the women of CWN and in September 1988 I began fieldwork in the group. This thesis is based on that field research conducted between September 1988 and June 1989.

While proceeding with formal fieldwork on the Catholic Women's Network in the fall of 1988, I also began to participate in two other local communities connected to the group, a Catholic housechurch and a social justice coalition called Alternative Catholic Voices. I continued to work as an executive of the Catholic Network for Women's Equality and as a regional contact for it. For a number of months throughout the winter I sat on the provincial steering committee of the World Council of Churches' "Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women in Church and
Society" and I continue to be involved in its liturgy committee planning for a Fall 1989 worship service on the theme of women and violence. I also appeared on the United Church television show "Pressure Point" to discuss issues related to women and the Roman Catholic Church, wrote articles for the CWN newsletter, helped to prepare a kit for women working as regional contacts for Catholic Network for Women's Equality and joined the planning committee for its 1990 annual conference.

This informal fieldwork has added an invaluable dimension to the formal methods of gathering data, that is audio-taping monthly meetings and interviewing past and present members of the Network. The audio-taping of monthly meetings was, on the whole, not successful. I attempted to audiotape the monthly meetings of CWN from September 1988 to June 1989 and two retreats held by CWN on October 14-16, 1988 and March 31-April 2, 1989. In the process, I discovered that there are almost as many things that can go wrong with a tape recorder, a battery-operated microphone, an adaptor and jack as there are times that one might want to use this equipment. Fieldnotes succeed where technology failed.

By contrast, I found interviews to be a much simpler technological challenge, since they required merely the tape recorder alone. I interviewed twenty women who are or were members of the Catholic Women's Network. These interviews ranged from one and a half to six hours in length and
focused on the following topics: life history from a spiritual perspective; participation in and opinions about the Catholic Women's Network; participation in the Roman Catholic Church and opinions of it; participation in feminist organizations and opinions about them; sense of self as a Roman Catholic woman; experiences of God and spirituality. These topics developed as I interviewed different women. Consequently not all women were asked the same questions and women who were interviewed early on in the research I interviewed again. These interviews resulted in over 350 pages of single-spaced transcriptions. Along with fieldnotes, typed summaries of the successfully audio-taped meetings of the Network and my informal participation in other organizations and groups I gained an extensive understanding of the Catholic Women's Network and its life.

These topics around which I organized my data collecting grew out of the methodology of the feminist standpoint, and, more particularly, my application of Marxian feminist theory. I felt at the time of my research that this theoretical perspective accurately reflected the issues and questions of the women of the Catholic Women's Network. Only when I began to sort through my data and organize the writing of the thesis did it slowly dawn on me that I had made a crucial mistake in my theoretical assumptions during the fieldwork, and that I would have to adopt a different analysis during the writing process.
To explain this mistake and the theoretical shift I made to compensate for it, it is necessary to make a few comments about anthropological knowledge in general and the knowledge generated by the feminist standpoint in particular. Anthropological knowledge derives its authority from one of two sources. First, as a social science and an academic discipline it acquires automatic authority from the distinction between expert and everyday or common knowledge. The anthropologist interprets common knowledge in the light of current theory and produces expert knowledge, which is judged to be superior.

Occasionally conflicts develop when the superiority of the anthropologist's expertise is questioned, as is the case when natives and anthropologist contest the relative value of each others' knowledge. When thus challenged, anthropologist sometimes appeal to a second source of authority for their knowledge: rather than claiming to be experts relative to natives but by claiming to be translators of their knowledge into a western form. Here they are mediators between two cultures.

The authority of the feminist standpoint is based on appeal to both these claims. The anthropologist who works from the feminist standpoint, by virtue of her double status as both expert theorist and native, is able to produce expert knowledge when only common knowledge existed, and to act as a mediator and educator. She is able to apply a particular social theory to other women's social reality and
produce for them a vision of their reality that they are unable to generate by themselves.

An interesting turn of events may occur, when, as in the case of my own fieldwork, I attempted to apply Marxian feminist theory to women's social reality in the Roman Catholic Church in order to produce for them an understanding of their role and status in it. Such a use of Marxian feminist theory can be applied only to groups of women who do not already share the researcher's expertise, that is who do not have a Marxian feminist understanding of their own reality. Women in the Catholic Women's Network, however, are already deeply influenced by Marxian, feminist and sociological theory through their reading of Roman Catholic feminist theology and other forms of liberation theology, all of which are primarily Marxian and sociological in their theological orientation. Moreover, an integral if not central part of the activity of the Catholic Women's Network is the critique of self and society from a Marxian feminist perspective. In short, these women had already applied a Marxian feminist analysis to their situation long before I arrived to do my fieldwork and, thus, I was thus carrying out my research according to a theoretical approach which was set up to generate a body of knowledge which they already took for granted.

I must confess that what now appears glaringly obvious only slowly and painfully seeped into my awareness when I began to write this thesis. In hindsight I realize that my
failure to see the limited usefulness of my theoretical perspective at the time of the fieldwork was caused by the different concerns of feminist social scientists and the women in the Catholic Women's Network. Feminist social theorists are still, on the whole, working to define and analyze the nature of women's oppression, and I was deeply influenced by that effort. Throughout my field research I saw the problem of being a feminist in the Roman Catholic Church to be basically a question of understanding the status of women in the Roman Catholic Church from a Marxian feminist perspective. By contrast, due to the unapologetically hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic Church, those in the Catholic Women's Network were able to understand their status in the Church in a rather short period of time. Their concern, as shall be shown, invariably centered not on defining or understanding their status in the Church, but around coping with it.

At the same time as I began to realize the limited usefulness of a strictly Marxian feminist analysis in my research, I began to become aware of certain key historical developments even within the group's brief existence. The Catholic Women's Network is not a static organization whose membership has remained the same through time. On the contrary, women constantly have come and gone and within that fluidity of group membership there was a prominent and oft-commented upon division into two generations of members. The first generation, which I call the founders, made up the
group in the years 1984 to 1986/1987 and the second
generation began around 1987/1988 and continues into the
present.

Concomitantly, the group's character, its function and
status in women's lives as a means of coping with their
status in the Roman Catholic Church, are quite different in
each of the generations. In the first generation, the
Catholic Women's Network is primarily a support group for
women trying to remain faithful members of the church. In
the second generation it becomes an autonomous and virtually
self-sustaining spiritual community for women who have
ceased to go to church in any regular way, and it becomes
part of a broader network of similar groups in association
with a social justice coalition called Alternative Catholic
Voices and with the housechurch movement.

As I began to describe and analyze CWN as two different
generations of women, I searched for the reasons for its
evolution from one kind of group to another. It became
apparent to me that the reasons for the group's changing
character and function derived from the recent history of
the Roman Catholic Church, namely the Second Vatican
Council, and the inherently contradictory or ambivalent
understanding of what it means to be a faithful member of
the Roman Catholic Church that the Council generated. On
one hand the Council advocated a communitarian understanding
of Catholic life, but on the other, it retained its
hierarchical ecclesial structure. The Catholic Women's
Network may be seen as an effort by Catholic feminist women to work out that contradiction and I have sought to describe and analyze CWN within this general analytic or interpretive framework.

Notes

1. The following discussion of Marx's theory of ideology is based on Parekh (1982).

2. That treatment was exemplified at the 1969 anti-inauguration campaign in Washington, D.C. When feminists attempted to present their position at the rally, "men in the audience booed, laughed, catcalled and yelled enlightened remarks like, 'Take her off the stage and fuck her.'" (Willis 1970:56).


4. While we may assume that the views these men hold may be more generalized, it is necessary to point out that the bias in social science research is generated by certain men, usually white middle class men who have the opportunity to go to university and get PhD.'s and by their counterparts in other societies.

5. A caveat is in order. I have given the impression that Marx advocates an epistemological relativity. In fact, he does not. Marx does have a theory of truth and objectivity, but it is not founded on the dissociation of knower and known, on the one hand, from the material circumstances of existence and the particularities of human interest on the other.
6. The methodological programme Smith proposes is actually much more detailed than presented here. The methodological moves presented here are the three all feminist researchers of this approach adopt. See Bowles and Duelli-Klein (1980); Roberts (1981); Harding (1987); Harding and Hintikka (1983); Kelly (1978); McRobbie (1982); Pateman and Gross (1986); Roberts and Bell (1983); Stanley and Wise (1979, 1983).

7. See note above.

8. There has always been a parallel body of literature criticizing the ways in which the feminist standpoint ignores or conceals the structural domination of black women, lesbian women, Third World and immigrant women by white western middle class heterosexual women. See Rich (1980); Hooks (1984) as examples.
Chapter One

Society and Community: The Historical and Ecclesiological Background to The Catholic Women's Network

As was suggested at the end of the introductory chapter, the Catholic Women's Network was formed by women struggling with the consequences of the Second Vatican Council's ambivalent ecclesiology. The Council's teaching that the Church is both an institution created by Jesus to bring salvation and a community formed by Jesus' disciples was not an innovation.(1) It was proclaimed by the Council, however, at a time when the notion of the community of believers had been downplayed for so long that it was readily considered to be a major innovation indeed. It seemed to many as if the hierarchically structured instrument of salvation was to be replaced by an egalitarian community of believers. The hope and subsequent disillusionment occasioned by what the Council said about the Church are central to the genesis of the Catholic Women's Network. It is essential, therefore, before we begin to discuss the Network itself, that we have some sense of how the Church came to be defined for so long as a purely sacred structure, of why it became important to assert once again that it is also a community of fellow believers, and of how feminists reacted to that assertion when the Second Vatican Council made it.
The development of a formal theory of the Church as a sacred structure began at the time of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) when theologians responded to attacks on the papacy and hierarchy by accenting precisely those features that the Protestant reformers were denouncing and by adopting a view of the Church drawn by analogy from the secular society of the day. This view is the view that the Church is a *societas perfecta*, a "perfect society", subordinate to no other and complete unto itself. Such an understanding of the Church as society necessarily emphasizes its clerical hierarchy (that is, the organized priesthood which teaches, sanctifies and governs the Church's laity) as the formal element in it. In fact, in this model the Church is almost completely identified with its ecclesial structure, and to define it is, essentially, to describe the rights and powers of its various classes of ministers (Dulles 1974:31).

The Church thus defined is a hierarchical society in which the fullness of power is concentrated in the hands of a male clerical class that perpetuates itself by co-option, that is by choosing and ordaining new generations of men to take their place in the hierarchy. This concentration of power is perpetuated both by the co-option process itself and by the doctrine of hierarchy that underlies it. That doctrine systematically links the exercise of authority to the holding of sacred office, that is the office of priest or bishop (the pope being a bishop with special powers); and
one is admitted to sacred office by receiving the sacrament of ordination, which can be administered only by a bishop. At every level, therefore - the parish, the diocese or the Church universal - the right to exercise authority is bonded to ordination. Since, by tradition, only men be ordained, only men, and specifically only men chosen by those already in power, can govern the Church.

The nature of the power held by those in sacred office in the Catholic Church is absolute to a degree not found even in other hierarchically structured churches. Many other churches are governed by ordained ministers, but invariably power is conferred on the minister from both directions: an evangelical minister, for instance, receives ordination from the church, but the call to minister must come from a congregation. Bishops in other churches are consecrated by fellow bishops, but they are elected by the diocesan clergy or a synod made up of clergy and laity; and once in office they have a two-fold responsibility: to those in authority over them and to those whom they serve and govern.

By contrast, in the Roman Catholic Church, authority and power come from above and responsibility is owed only to those above. A parish priest has complete authority over his own parish, under the authority of the diocesan bishop. The constraints on a bishop's power in his diocese come to a slight degree from his fellow bishops, but primarily from the pope, since the process of co-option works within the
hierarchy as well. Just as the diocesan bishops decide which priest will have charge of each parish, so, in North America, as in all but a few other places, the pope decides who will be the bishop of every diocese.

At the summit of the hierarchy, the pope's power in the church universal is unlimited. Canon 333 of the New Code of Canon Law (1983) states that "There is neither appeal nor recourse against a judgment or a decree from the Roman Pontiff." While a synod of bishops is held from time to time, canon 343 notes that "it is not its function to settle matters or to draw up decrees, unless the Roman Pontiff has given it deliberative power in certain cases; in this event, it rests with the Roman Pontiff to ratify the decisions of the synod." On very rare occasions, the college of bishops may assemble in an Ecumenical Council with a deliberative vote, but, as canon 341 explains, "The decrees of an Ecumenical Council do not oblige unless they are approved by the Roman Pontiff as well as by the Fathers of the Council, confirmed by the Roman Pontiff and promulgated by his direction."

Even more significantly, the doctrine of hierarchy gives to the Church's ministers an immunity from challenge not shared by even the most authoritarian secular governments. The hierarchy is not deemed to exist by the will of the Church for the purpose of governing it. It claims rather to have been established by the will of God to preserve and hand on divine revelation and to administer the
sacraments by which human beings share in the life of God; and it exercises authority to make this ministry of word or sacrament effective. Consequently, where meddling with the constitution of a state might at worst threaten social stability, anything that weakens the power of the Catholic hierarchy could be said to pose a threat to humanity's links to God and its prospects for eternal life. For those who believe in revelation, the sacramental system and sacred orders, there is an almost irresistible argument against tampering with the hierarchical structure and its powers.

...the Church is not a community of equals in which all of the faithful have the same rights. It is a society of unequals, not only because among the faithful some are clerics and some are laymen, but particularly because there is in the Church the power from God whereby to some it is given to sanctify, teach and govern, and to others not. (Schema of the First Vatican Council, quoted by Dulles 1974:35)

This vision of the Church as a hierarchical society was the keystone of the "fortress mentality" adopted in the mid 1800's when the Church, which had been losing its influence over the western world since the Reformation, denounced secular society and retreated from its interaction with the influences and powers of the world. This outlook continued through the period of the pope's voluntary imprisonment in the Vatican in protest over the loss of the papal states to the King of Italy, and it was characteristic of the Vatican position in the modernist controversy. Secular powers were a threat to the Church's well-being, and secular ideas were a threat to its truth, for whose defence it depended on the
infallibility of the pope as defined by the first Vatican Council in 1870.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the defensive strategy of the Church was successful in restoring its power and influence and in preserving its traditional doctrine: the modernist movement was crushed and a concordat with the Italian government eventually recreated at least a symbolic papal state. But for many Catholics, faithful to their Church yet living and working in the world, such an isolated, defensive position could only create constant inner conflict and a divided, even fragmented, sense of life.

The problem of creating a coherent, integrated way of life centered on the Catholic faith but not forsaking secular society became a growing concern for lay Catholic thinkers and for theologians throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In theological circles, a possible solution was sought in the distinction between the Church as society and the Church as community. Reacting strongly against the inward-turning defensiveness that had created the problem in the first place, these theologians drew extensively on contemporary work in the social sciences. Toennies' ground-breaking *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, published in 1887, played a key role in the analysis of this problem.

So too did further development of the notion of community in the early twentieth century by Charles H.
Cooley in his description of primary groups. Cooley believes the primary effect of community to be the creation of a common life which he characterizes as a sense of "we:"

The result of intimate association, psychologically, is a certain fusion of individualities in a common whole, so that one's very self, for many purposes at least, is the common life and purpose of the group. Perhaps the simplest way of describing the wholeness is by saying that it is a "we"; it involves the sort of sympathy and mutual identification for which "we" is the natural expression. One lives in the feeling of the whole and finds the chief aims of his will in that feeling. (Cooley, Angell and Carr 1933: 55-56)

In Roman Catholic ecclesiology the Church was studied in terms of Toennies' categories by Arnold Rademacher in his *Die Kirche als Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, published in 1931. For Rademacher, the Church's outer core is society which manifests, promotes and maintains its inner core, which is community and which coincides with the Kingdom of God (Dulles 1974:44-45). The French Dominican Yves Congar, who exercised a major influence on the Second Vatican Council, made community central to his ecclesiology. In *Lay People in the Church* (1959) he presents a brief historical overview by which he attempts to show that the Church is both an institution having its origin in Christ and offering the means of salvation to individuals, and the community formed by individuals with one another and in Christ. For him, the reduction of ecclesiology to a theology of the Church's structure without reference to its communal life may have been a necessary reaction to Protestant attacks in the Middle Ages, but it is now essential to reassert the
traditional belief that the Church is a community of persons.

These formal ecclesiological treatises did not integrate the Church with secular society. The Church as one perfect society is still contrasted to the state, which is the other. But the Church as community, as the fellowship of persons who, while also forming the secular state and living its life, form the church, acts as a kind of bridge between the two societies.

More radical and more practical approaches to the problem were explored in alternative forms of Catholic life that centered on integrating the secular and sacred societies in small-scale community. These early small-scale experiments in the integration of secular and Church life were diverse and scattered, and to reconstruct their history would be a major task in itself. The best known example of these, and one which was to have a significant impact on the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, was the particular branch of the liturgical movement that flourished in the United States in the early years before the Council.

The American liturgical movement, sustained for many years after its beginnings in the 1930's by Dom Virgil Michel and a small number of associates, was superficially concerned with changing the way in which Catholics worshipped in their churches. At a time when most Catholics assisted individually and silently at a Mass offered by a priest in Latin, the liturgists proposed that they pray out
loud, sing and interact with one another, that the order of the mass itself be changed in certain respects and that at least parts of it be translated into vernacular languages.

Beneath this specifically ritual agenda, however, lay a communitarian goal. Michel and others saw the isolated passivity of the Catholic worshipper as symptomatic of the fragmentation of a life drawn in different directions by conflicting secular and sacred values. Creating a form of worship in which Catholics could join corporately in celebrating a life that they shared was a necessary first step in the more complex process of creating solidarity in the whole of human life, secular and sacred (Marx 1957: 288; Michel 1934, 1935).

The philosophy and vision of the American liturgical movement and the newer, lay-oriented ecclesiologies were to meet in the middle of the century at the Second Vatican Council. The Council was specifically convoked by Pope John XXIII - whose favourite words were convivienza ("living together") and aggiornamento ("bringing up to date") - in order to end the fortress mentality epitomized by the First Vatican Council and to bridge the ever-widening gulf between the Church and the modern, secular world. It adopted a new vision of Catholic life which owed much to the work of such theologians as Congar and to the specific example of the liturgical movement which it adopted virtually intact.

The extent to which the Second Vatican Council modelled its vision of Catholic life on the principle of integrating
the specifically religious with the secular can be illustrated by a brief examination of its two major decrees on the Church. These are Lumen Gentium, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, and Gaudium et Spes, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The very fact that the Council produced a document dealing with "the Church in the Modern World" is evidence in itself of the kind of model of Catholic life that it chose to promote, and certain principles reiterated throughout the document leave no doubt that an integration of Church life and the life of the world is being proposed.

Section 1 affirms that the message of Christ is for all and that the community of believers is therefore truly linked with human history and humankind. The Council proposes in Section 3 to engage in conversation with the entire human family out of respect and love for it. The document further commands Catholics to acknowledge the solidarity between Church and society and to participate actively in the conversation: the obligations of justice and love are fulfilled only if each believer contributes to, promotes and assists the public and private institutions dedicated to bettering the conditions of human life (Section 30). In Section 43 the document rejects the option of a
purely spiritual life, divorced from social concerns:

They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. (Abbot 1966:243)

Section 43 of the Pastoral Constitution both invites and exhorts Catholics concerned with some social question to take it up as a central element in the living of their faith and to work gladly and creatively with others seeking the same goals. Endowed with the force of their faith, they are to devise new enterprises and put them into action. In such enterprises, they are to play their own distinctive role and seek to enlighten their fellow believers who do not agree with them.

Such exhortation, moreover, is not limited to telling Catholics that it is a virtuous and praiseworthy activity to bring about the betterment of society. The Pastoral Constitution declares that to do so is their specifically religious duty:

Nor...are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists of acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine that they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the more serious errors of our age. (Abbott 1966: 243).

The principle at work here is the complement of the one that insists in Section 36 of Lumen Gentium that the faithful must be guided even in temporal affairs by a Christian conscience, and that even in secular affairs there is no
human activity that can be withdrawn from God's dominion (Abbott 1966:63).

The Second Vatican Council's proclamation of a new Catholic way of life was not confined to a vision of the Church integrated with the modern, secular world. There was an attempt to emphasize the idea of the Church as community primarily through reforms of the parish mass. There both the basic ideas and many of the specific reforms espoused by the liturgical movement were put into effect and the attempt was thereby made to transform the ritual of the mass into an experience of community.

The sacrifice offered in Latin - and largely inaudibly - by a priest who stood with his back to the silent congregation on whose behalf the sacrifice was offered, was replaced in the space of a very few years by a public celebration in the local vernacular in which the priest faced the congregation from behind an altar which had been brought forward. The priest was no longer to be seen as mediator between the congregation and God or as an instrument through which divine grace was channelled. Rather, he became like Christ in the midst of his people who (according to Matthew 18:20) gathered in his name. The liturgy became an expression of the gathered community who would find God in the sharing of their humanity with each other. Practically, this sharing of humanity found expression in the time reserved for requests for communal prayer for the intentions of individuals, in the exchange of
handshakes and hugs known as the Kiss of Peace and in after-mass coffee hours.

The Council documents *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* as well as the liturgical changes initiated by Vatican II reveal the two dominant but interrelated aspects of the new model of Church life being proposed. First, individual Catholic lives were to be integrated with the secular world. Secondly, and concomitantly, corporate Catholic life—concretely, the parish mass—was to be an experience of community where people were to share their personal needs, aspirations, sorrows and joys.

These separate but related developments altered radically the place of the laity in the life of the Church. There had always been a certain active role reserved for the laity: in addition to the passive reception of the indispensable spiritual benefits conferred by the sacraments, they had been called to participate in the apostolate of the hierarchy in a variety of ways that earlier twentieth century ecclesiology had grouped under the rubric of Catholic Action.(2) But this was a role assigned and defined by the hierarchy to which the laity were to bring nothing of their own. Under the new model, on the contrary, the forms that lay Catholic life would take would depend on what lay individuals and groups would bring into the Church with them.

This growing conviction that the living Church was a community to be built up out of everything that believers
brought to it came to be summed up in the oft-repeated phrase "we are the Church." The place of women among the "we" did not expand as rapidly as did that of lay men, and even years after the Council it found no more practical expression in many parishes than the presence of a few women among the readers of Scripture lessons at Sunday mass. But a few modest steps toward the active involvement of women in Church life were taken even during the early stages of the Council itself.

In May 1962, Dr. Gertrude Heinzelman, a lawyer from Zurich, presented a scholarly petition to the Conciliar Preperatory Commission before the opening session asking for women representatives at the Council. At the second session of the Council itself, Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens suggested to the Council Fathers that the nature of the Church itself was misunderstood if its charismatic gifts were not seen to exist in all its members. His motion for the introduction of women, at least to hear the debates, was seconded by Bishop Hakim of Galilee and was warmly applauded (Cunneen 1968:11). Certain women religious and leaders of Catholic women's organizations were admitted as 'auditors' of debates of the third session "on matters of interest to them." They attended all the sessions and even submitted resolutions and petitions to it on such issues as the desirability of women's ordination and on the revision of Canon Law.

The admission of women into the sessions of the Council along with the new vision of Church life propagated in the
Council documents and liturgical reform appeared to call laity - and thus women - to a new level of participation in the life of the Church. This apparent call of the Second Vatican Council gave rise to an atmosphere of excitement, enthusiasm and ebullient hope. Mary Daly attributes the writing of her now classic treatise *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) to the atmosphere of "endless... possibilities" generated by the Second Vatican Council.

*The Church and the Second Sex* might never have happened had there not been one great carnival of an event, the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church, and if I had not managed to go to that carnival in the fall of 1965....It seemed to everyone, except to the strangely foreseeing "conservatives," prophets of doom who in some perverse way knew what was really going on, that the greatest breakthrough of nearly two thousand years was happening....There was an ebullient sense of hope. Most of us thought this meant there was hope for the Church...it appeared that a door had opened within patriarchy which could admit an endless variety of human possibilities (Daly 1975a:9)

Yet, for all their commitment to promoting conversation and interaction between the Church and the secular world, and to developing a community-oriented parish life, there were very real limits to the changes in the ecclesial structure that the Council Fathers were willing to admit. The Vatican documents on the Church did not substantially alter the clerical hierarchy that had sustained the *societas perfecta* model of the Church since its adoption by the Council of Trent.

By reaffirming the ecclesial structure that the Church had known for centuries, the Council Fathers drastically limited the influence that the laity - and therefore women -
could exercise. They could clearly join in the shaping of Catholic culture and life; their impact on how their parishes operated could be considerable. But for all the hope engendered by the slogan "we are the Church," they would have no role in shaping or defining the ecclesial structure or in the exercise of power within it.

The full significance of the Council's conservatism on the question of the Church's structure would become apparent only gradually over the next twenty years. In the two decades between the closing of the Council in 1965 and the creation of the Catholic Women's Network in 1984, the strictly limited role and status that the Church would concede to women gradually became apparent to all feminists. Only in hindsight is it possible to see how the Council Fathers' admission of women into the Council sessions epitomized the equivocal nature of the changes in Church life that Lumen Gentium and Gaudium et Spes would initiate. None of this, as Daly observed, was apparent then to any but the most perverse prophets of doom and at the time of the Council even the very limited admission of women to its sessions was viewed primarily as progress and only secondarily as limited.

To be fair, it was hardly possible for responses to have been otherwise. Relative to the Church's defensive response to modernity and its firm ecclesiological vision of itself as a hierarchical society, both of which were epitomized by the promulgation of the doctrine of the
infallibility of the pope at the First Vatican Council in 1870, the Second Vatican Council was an unprecedented breakthrough. Moreover, the second wave of feminism was barely underway and Marxian theory was yet to become an acceptable starting point for any theological reflection, feminist or otherwise. Liberalism was in the air and few were either willing or able to consider seriously that the Church's hierarchy was itself in any way antithetical to the integrated and communitarian spirit ushered in by Vatican II.

Consequently Vatican II was seen as an invitation, or at least an encouragement, to Catholic feminists to apply a liberal feminist critique to the Church. Even before the Council ended, women were writing and reviewing feminist books and articles from a Catholic perspective, primarily with a liberal emphasis on the analysis and condemnation of unequal opportunities for women in the Church and on the desirability of including women in the Church's power structure. For over a decade after the Council, the hope engendered by the spirit of Vatican II continued to nourish the conviction that the inclusion of women in the offices reserved for men was a desirable and feasible goal.

At the time of the Second Vatican Council, Mary Daly, who quickly took the lead in developing a Catholic feminism, was working within the liberal feminist tradition; and her *The Church and the Second Sex* was the first sustained liberal feminist critique of the Roman Catholic
Church. It was written in order to provide the theoretical rationale for "the modest proposal" of giving women equal opportunity and status in the ministerial and decision-making bodies of the Church. The publication of the book, however, gave rise to lengthy controversy. In the course of this controversy Daly was fired from her position at Boston College, then reinstated, given tenure and promoted.

The events at Boston College, and Mary Daly's response to them, were an early warning of things to come for liberal feminists. Her experience at Boston College convinced Mary Daly of "the interconnections among the structures of oppression in a patriarchal society and the destructive dynamics which these structures generate in their victims..." (Daly 1975a:13) and moved her away from her initial liberal feminism. In 1971, preaching to a full congregation at the chapel of the Harvard Divinity School on the Exodus as a metaphor for the women's liberation movement, Daly led a significant portion of the congregation out of the building and out of the Church (Daly 1972). At the time, however, her action was something of a radical anomaly and, despite her prophetic rejection of the liberal feminist programme, the campaign for the inclusion of women in all aspects of the life of the Church dominated the Catholic feminist agenda throughout the 1970's.

Inclusive language in theology and liturgy were the main themes in the 1972 and 1973 theological conferences at the feminist Grailville retreat center.(5) It was also in
1973 that ordination became a key issue. The first scholarly work on the ordination of women, *Women Priests in the Catholic Church* by Haye van der Meer, was translated into English. Its effect was immediate. In 1974 the annual meeting of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) passed two resolutions, one supporting the principle that all ministries in the Church should be open to women and men, and one affirming women's right to active participation in all decision-making bodies of the Church. At the end of that year, a group of women in Washington decided that the ordination question ought to be raised during the International Women's Year. These events led to scheduling of the first women's ordination conference for November, 1975 in Detroit. Twelve hundred delegates attended and 500 others were turned away at the door, and in January 1976 the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) was formed. The decade of liberal, inclusivist campaigning culminated with Theresa Kane, president of the LCWR, "greeting" the Pope in Washington and urging him to "to hear the call of women...[to be] included in all ministries of our church" (Carpenter 1980:149-50).

But the campaign for the ordination of women was over almost before it had begun. One month before the first Women's Ordination Conference in Detroit, Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin, then president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, issued a statement affirming the traditional ban against women's ordination. Then on October
15, 1976 Pope John Paul II approved the Vatican Doctrinal Congregation's "Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," which also reiterated the traditional ban.

Perhaps more important for feminists than the Vatican's stance on ordination, however, was the stand taken by Rosemary Ruether at that first ordination conference, where she challenged women to consider whether they really wanted to be ordained, since

> the present clerical and institutional structure of [the] Church so constituted is so demonic and itself so opposed to the Gospel that to try to join it is contrary to our very commitments. (Ruether 1976:34)

Ruether's attack on "the clerical and institutional structure of the Church" marked a decisive shift in Catholic feminist thinking away from inclusiveness toward a Marxian analysis of the relations of power within the ecclesial structure. Her analysis was shared by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, and together these theologians were to guide the feminist strategy for the coming decade.

Both Ruether and Fiorenza received their Marxian feminism from liberation theology. (7) Ruether, (8) a professor of applied theology, is undoubtedly the most prolific and the most politically active writer in the Roman Catholic feminist movement. Believing that there is no such thing as an apolitical theology, Ruether situates hers within the broad concern for human oppression that is fundamental to liberation theology. According to liberation theology, God has shown a preferential option for the
oppressed and calls on the Christian community to respond to their cries for liberation:

Reconciliation with God means the revolutionizing of human social, political relations, overthrowing unjust oppressive relationships. The sociopolitical dimension is never lost…but always remains the central expression of what it means to obey God. (Ruether 1981:11).

Since human reconciliation with God means the overthrow of oppressive relationships, feminist theology's task of freeing the Church from patriarchy is but one part of the general mission of reconciliation.

Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (9) is an even more ambitious advocate than Ruether of recreating the whole Church. Her goal is to liberate the Church and theology from its imprisonment in a white, middle-class, academic and sexist system in order to re-establish the community of co-equal discipleship founded by Jesus (Fiorenza 1975:615). To that end she wrote her most important work, In Memory of Her (1983), in which she establishes a parallel between the painful memory of the failed struggle of women for liberation in New Testament times and the renewed struggle against the same forces of oppression that is being waged in our own day.

On the basis of their theological insights, Fiorenza and Ruether developed the idea of the "ecclesia of women," later to be called Womenchurch, a network of small groups of feminist women organized outside the structure of the mainstream Church, but committed to remaining in dialogue with it, challenging it to recognize its oppressive
structure and provoking it to transform itself. Under the persuasive voices of Ruether and Florenza, the anticipated WOC national conference of 1981 gave way to a series of smaller local conferences meant to support the idea of a growing "ecclesia of women." The idea was further aided by the already existing Women of the Church Coalition, which had been formed in 1977 and which, in 1983, put on a major conference in Chicago. This succeeded the earlier Women's Ordination Conferences of 1975 and 1979. Called "Woman Church Speaks", the conference drew in 1,500 women and officially inaugurated the Womenchurch movement.

Conclusion

The dominant form of Roman Catholic feminism in the 1980's grew out of the ebullient hope of new lay opportunities engendered by the Second Vatican Council and out of that hope's disappointment. Feminism rose to prominence in the Church in response to the Second Vatican Council's proclamation of a new Catholic way of life integrated with the modern, secular world and to its specific call to the laity to play a leading role in establishing this new way of life, summed up in the oft-repeated slogan, "We are the Church."

This proclamation that "We are the Church" marked an important change in the Church's attitude not only toward
the world, but also, ostensibly, toward its own laity. It appeared that the Council was offering a new more active status and role for laity in the life of the Church. Yet, the ecclesial structure was not changed and therefore no significant place was made in it for laity, and thus for women.

For various reasons, this contradiction between Conciliar proclamation and ecclesial reality was neither noticed nor analyzed in the first decade after the Council. Like many other Catholics, feminists focussed on the numerous ways in which the life of the Church was becoming the life of a community of fellow-believers, and they did not appreciate how drastically the reaffirmation of the clerical hierarchy would limit their influence on the forms the community's life could take. The feminism of the post-Vatican II era in the Roman Catholic Church was liberal. It focussed on equality and inclusiveness and, accordingly, sought the ordination of women.

By the mid 1970's, however, feminist thinking had changed its analysis. Concern with equality and inclusion were traded in for an analysis of the Church's hierarchical structure and a demand for its change based on Marxian theory and liberation theology. Rosemary Ruether and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza both hoped for an eventual transformation of the Church's clerical hierarchy, and therefore encouraged women to create an ecclesial alternative to the mainstream Church structure rather than
to lobby for inclusion in the mainstream statuses as liberal feminists had done. By the end of the 1970's the dominant strategy in the Catholic feminist movement became the development of Womenchurch.

It is possible to see in the development of feminism from the years immediately following Vatican II to the first Womenchurch conference a radical change in the understanding of what it means to be the Church. In the 1960's and 1970's feminists took the Second Vatican Council's pronouncement that "We are the Church" at face value. By the mid 1970's, however, critical theory and liberation theology had given feminists the tools with which to analyze Roman Catholic ecclesial structures, to appreciate how those structures prevented them from being the Church, and to develop a new ecclesiology. These feminists retained the slogan "We are the Church," but it no longer meant what it had in the previous decade. The Second Vatican Council's contradictory vision of the Church as a combined clerical hierarchy and egalitarian community it rejected. The only Church is the community, "the authentic community...that has been heralded by the traditions of religious and social liberation but, until now, corrupted by...the ecclesia of patriarchy" (Ruether 1985:61). This Church would not be created by a constitutional reform of the Church universal. Rather, it would survive for an indeterminate period in Womenchurch communities capable both of offering an alternative
ecclesial model to the mainstream and of surviving independently of it.

Notes

1. The theologian Yves Congar, for example, summarizes its long history in the second chapter of his Lay People in the Church (1959).

2. The Catholic Action strategy was inaugurated by Pope Pius XI after the First World War. Defined as the "participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy," the Catholic Action strategy was an effort to combat secularism and the increasing alienation of lay Catholics from the Church, and to preserve and enhance the interests and teachings of the Church in an increasingly secular world through its lay membership.

3. In 1964, for example Ave Maria published a 10-part series on "The New Catholic Women". In 1965 Sidney Callahan published The Illusion of Eve; in 1966 Janet Golden published The Quite Possible She; and in 1968 Sally Cunneen published Sex: Female Religion: Catholic, a sociological survey of the Catholic readers of the ecumenical journal Cross Currents.

4. Born in the United States, and with an M.A. from Catholic University, Mary Daly was a doctoral student in theology at Fribourg at the time of the Second Vatican Council whose last session she managed to attend and by which she was deeply moved and inspired. The Council's effect on her was reinforced by the example of the philosopher Rosemary Lauer, who had written the first Roman Catholic feminist article for the December, 1963 issue of Commonweal. A letter and follow-up article on Lauer's themes that Daly wrote for Commonweal led ultimately to her principal liberal feminist work, The Church and the Second Sex (1968).

    In Beyond God the Father (1973) Daly moves to a radical feminist perspective. In contrast to the method of patriarchy, which has been "to wipe out women's questions so totally" that "women have not been free to use our power to name ourselves, the world, or God" (Daly 1973:8), the feminist method of liberation involves first, "methodocide,"
a castrating of language and images that reflect and perpetuate the structures of a sexist world. It castrates in the sense of cutting away the phallocentric value system imposed by patriarchy, in its subtle as well as its more manifest expressions. As aliens in a man's world who are now rising up to name - that is create - our own world, women are beginning to recognize that the value system that has been thrust upon us by the various cultural institutions of patriarchy has amounted to a kind of gang rape of minds as well as bodies. (Daly 1973:9)

Secondly, it involves the creation of a new feminist language through which women are called to a new consciousness and a new world. Daly's own naming begins with rejecting the myth of God the Father in order to be empowered by God the Verb who draws us into be-ing. In creating these new names, "in hearing and naming ourselves out of the depths," "women are naming toward God, which is what theology should always be about" (Daly 1973:33) and they will "indicate the future course of human spiritual evolution" (Daly 1973:11).

5. The Grail is an organization of Catholic lay women started in 1921. It became openly feminist in the 1960's and its American headquarters in Grailville has become a hub of Catholic feminist theological education.

6. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious is the national coordinating body for American congregations of religious women, representing 90% of active religious congregations in the United States. It became feminist in the early 1970's. During the 1970's LCWR endorsed and supported Network, a Washington-based lobby group of sisters interested in social justice and feminist issues; they supported the Center of Concern, another Washington-based social justice team; and they initiated "Sisters Uniting", a forum for nine smaller associations of sisters. Members of LCWR also attended meetings of the American bishops as observers, sent representatives to the International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City in 1975, endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment, organized workshops on feminism and international social justice issues and developed a five-year plan to promote study, prayer and action on women's issues in church and society.

7. Liberation theology has its antecedents in Lutheran theologian Juergen Moltmann's "theology of hope". Inspired by Ernst Bloch and later by critical theory, Moltmann argued for a political theology of the cross: Christ's suffering on the cross is a real expression of God's suffering with the oppressed for the sake of justice. The Catholic counterpart to the theology of Moltmann was formulated by Johannes Metz.
In the fifties and sixties these theologies formed the intellectual base for the theological analysis of political situations in Latin America. The result was the liberation theology of such men as Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutierrez.

The central tenets of liberation theology are those central to Marxian theory, and liberation theology is especially indebted to the Marxian concept of the "proletarian standpoint" for its theological starting point. Like Marxians who read society from the point of view of the proletariat, liberation theologians read scripture from the point of view of the oppressed, which is the point of view that God intended. From this perspective liberationists claim to have "hermeneutical privilege," that is, they read scripture rightly because they read it from the same perspective from which scripture itself is written.

Since the sixties liberation theology and the organization of basic Christian communities have spread to other countries and other social contexts, most notably to Africa, Holland, Italy and the United States. It was in the United States that the feminist base community developed.

8. Ruether has written articles on civil rights, the Vietnam war, ecology, Zionism, Islam and Christian-Jewish dialogue as well as on feminism and women's issues. Her most important feminist works are her early summary of the problems of women in the Roman Catholic Church and theology in "Male Chauvinist Theology and the Anger of Women" (1971), and her later Religion and Sexism (1974), an analysis of the images of women presented in the Jewish and Christian traditions, and Sexism and God-Talk (1983), her systematic treatment of feminist theology. In an interview commenting on Sexism and God-Talk Ruether states that the primary task of feminist theology is to free the Roman Catholic Church from patriarchy and the sin of sexism. Feminism exposes the sexist structures of the church and challenges it to recognize them as patriarchal distortions of the prophetic and liberating Christian message (1984:17).

In Sexism and God-Talk, Ruether, starting with the liberation tenet that human experience is the ground of theology, narrows her view to women's experience and begins her systematic effort to free the Church from patriarchal distortions. The critical principle of her feminist liberation theology is straightforward:

whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is...appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, nor to reflect the authentic nature of things, nor to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption. (1983:18)
The positive corollary to that principle is that whatever promotes the full humanity of women is "of the Holy." Thus feminist theology, as Ruether points out, is not unique in claiming this principle: "feminism is not a new principle, but rather an extension of the fundamental principle that the word of God comes in judgment upon all structures of injustice" (1984:17); but it is revolutionary for the Roman Catholic Church when Roman Catholic women claim it for themselves.

9. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza was born and received her theological training in Germany. The first woman in her diocese to study theology and needing the bishop's permission to do so, she completed her licentiate, in the early years of Vatican II, on a model of inclusive ministry of both clergy and laity. In the process of writing her thesis, she became aware of and adopted the feminist critique. In 1972 she participated in the Women Doing Theology workshop in Grailville and soon after published her programmatic "Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation" (1975). The approach to the Roman Catholic Church and to theology she sets forth in this article culminates in her most important work, _In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins_ (1983).

The role of this work in New Testament studies is intimately linked to the Womenchurch movement of which she is a principal founder. Since, in her vision, the ecclesia of women is the cutting edge of the radical transformation of the Church, it is essential to provide both theological and biblical justification for it. She provides the necessary justification by applying the hermeneutic insights of such continental thinkers as Ricoeur and Gadamer, the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and liberation theology to the study of the New Testament and Christian origins. On this theoretical basis she attempts to save the writings of the New Testament from rejection as irredeemably patriarchal, as Daly had rejected them, without denying their inherent androcentrism. Her solution is to reclaim "such androcentric human and biblical history as women's own history" (Fiorenza 1983:28). The purpose of reclaiming "the dangerous memory of former suffering" is liberationist: by reclaiming the stories of women in the New Testament as the sacred record of the struggle against oppression she can canonize present-day feminism as a parallel movement, an essential expression of the authentic Christian tradition, and proclaim the ecclesia of women to comprise those in the present day who are re-establishing the "equalitarian" community founded by Jesus.
Chapter Two

The Catholic Women's Network - The First Generation

The Catholic Women's Network, although indirectly influenced by the Womenchurch movement, did not grow out of it. In part, this is because Womenchurch, by its very philosophy, depends on grass-roots organization rather than missionary activity. Womenchurches are started where and when women decide to gather together in small groups and claim to be Womenchurch. There has been no swelling grass-roots movement in Canada to create Womenchurches and the Catholic Women's Network is the only group of its kind in English-speaking Canada. The only other formally organized English-speaking Catholic feminist group in the country is the national organization called the Catholic Network for Women's Equality. Originally called Canadian Catholics for Women's Ordination, it is a liberal feminist organization that continues, with varying degrees of internal dissent, to work for the inclusion of women in all aspects of the life of the Church rather than to create an alternative to it.

In any case, the Womenchurch movement could not have influenced the nascent Catholic Women's Network directly since Womenchurch was not yet an organized movement when the Network came together. The Catholic Women's Network began in July 1984. This was only a year after the "Woman Church Speaks" conference had launched the concept of an ecclesia of women and more than a year before the group's final name
was to evolve from Ruether's hyphenated Women-church. It was only by the second Womenchurch conference in 1987 that the movement had fully identified itself. By that time the Catholic Women's Network had already been active for three years.

The Catholic Women's Network was, however, deeply influenced from its inception by the kind of feminism that created Womenchurch, largely due to the influence of its founder. Moreover, when the notion of Womenchurch was popularized, the women of CWN readily saw themselves reflected in it and took on the term to express who and what they were. Thus, the Catholic Women's Network is very much an indigenous example of Womenchurch and one which has developed largely according to the needs and understanding of its members.

As an indigenous and autonomous group CWN has gone through its own course of development, which does not correspond in every particular to the Womenchurch ideal expounded by Fiorenza and Ruether. Nor for that matter has it remained the same organization throughout its existence. The Catholic Women's Network is made up of two generations of women, who could almost be said to form two organizations. The first generation roughly corresponds to the period 1984-1987, the second to the years 1987 to the present. It is only in the second generation, to be discussed in chapter three, that the Womenchurch ecclesiology of church as community is finally articulated.
In that generation, CWN, along with two other locally developed groups, forms a network of alternative spiritual communities in which the women belonging to it live out their faith together.

Among the first generation members of the Catholic Women's Network described in this chapter, however, community was a significant experience but not anyone's ultimate goal. Intense personal sharing took place, and informants regularly referred to it in expressing who they were and what they were about at that period. But their goal was not to live as a community; it was to cease suffering in the Church. And their prime need - and principal reason for coming together - was to find support in order to cope with their suffering. When the women had given one another enough strength to escape out of the Church and find alternatives to it elsewhere, their suffering was overcome and the Catholic Women's Network ceased to serve any further purpose in their lives; and so they left.

The Origins of the Catholic Women's Network

Although the Catholic Women's Network, at its inception, was not directly influenced by the Womenchurch movement, it nonetheless developed within the same tradition of feminist thought that gave birth to Womenchurch, largely because this was the personal tradition of thought of its
principal founder. In such small groups as CWN, goals and principles transfer readily to the organization out of the lives of individuals, especially of the one or two who take the lead in forming the group initially. At its foundation, CWN was a small enough organization to be influenced decisively by a single individual, Claire, a Catholic convert with a lifetime of experience in the labour movement and in feminism, the first women in her diocese to earn a theological degree, and the woman who called the group together.

Claire first began to think of creating an alternative form of church life for Catholic women in the late 1970's after she completed her theological training. The first alternatives she considered were hardly radical. I thought of starting a lay order, that's how conventional I still was. It really would be entirely our own idea, the order, you know...but I had no idea. I just thought there's a need for something for just women where there's no hierarchy and therefore no control by anybody in the Church. And I began to sketch out different possibilities in my mind.

Her plans gradually took more radical shape as she became better acquainted with existing women's groups both Catholic and ecumenical:

I thought we needed to get together and we needed to support each other and we needed to explore what our own experience was as women and as Christians. [...] And my hopes were that the group would find a way to be a women's religious experience, spiritual experience that hadn't yet happened; I didn't have any models in mind. This was before the Womenchurch movement; now that the Womenchurch movement has come along, I think that we were among the first.
In 1984, after the second national meeting of what was then Canadian Catholics for Women's Ordination, Claire felt the time was ready to call local Catholic women together. I felt that I must go back home and do something. And right away, coming back from CCWO, I got out my list. At one point I wrote down how many people I called. I called about thirty people and there were nineteen at the first meeting. That was in July 1984.

Claire's longstanding search for some alternative to the existing Church structures that would still be a church experience and her commitment to liberationist feminism became the foundation of the organization that grew out of that initial meeting. As she hoped, the Catholic Women's Network has become a group of feminist Catholic women operating outside the constraints of official Church authority and organization. To operate in such a manner is both the continuing goal and fundamental principle of the group, although in some ways this happened initially by accident rather than due to ideological preference.

The first meeting of the Catholic Women's Network was on a warm evening in July in the meeting room of Claire's church. Two nuns attended that meeting and for the next two years the group met in the common room of their convent until, in 1986, the women of the Network were asked by the nuns to leave in order to avoid further conflicts with the diocesan office. The group moved from place to place for the next year or so until finally, in the Fall of 1987, it found permanent shelter in the basement of a small Anglican
rectory on the east side of town, which remains the group's present home.

Despite the changing location of the group, it has retained to this day its focal position in an intricate network of feminist activity and organization. It meets on the last Wednesday of every month for approximately three hours, usually breaking in July and August because of Summer holidays. These monthly meetings are supplemented by weekend retreats, once in the Spring and once in Fall, by liturgies during Lent and Advent, and by the occasional workshop sponsored by the group on its own or in association with other feminist groups in the city. In a more regular way, the women of the group keep in contact with each other outside of meetings by telephone and by visits.

Thus, the group may be seen as having two sides to it, an inside and an outside: formal meetings and retreats, and informal networking over the phone and through occasional visits. Because of this double-sided nature of the group, some women who no longer attend meetings still consider themselves to be members: on more than one occasion women I interviewed resented my assumption that since they were no longer regularly attending meetings they were no longer members of the Network.

Members, active and not so active, and women who are not members remain connected through the CWN newsletter, presently printed and distributed three times a year. This newsletter goes to women as far away as France, Belgium,
Australia and New Zealand and is also part of an exchange of newsletters with other Catholic feminist groups, such as Chicago Catholic Women and the Catholic Network for Women's Equality.

Another stable feature of the Network is its format, which has remained the same since it was adopted in the early months of the group's existence. CWN meets on the last Wednesday of every month. Leadership, or the responsibility for keeping the proceedings on track and on time, and for preparing part of the content of the meeting, rotates every month.

Typically, meetings are organized according to the following routine. The women arrive more or less punctually around 6:00 p.m. for conversation over a potluck supper, usually of bread, salad, cheese, fruit and tea. At 7:00 the formal meeting starts with a few minutes devoted to business: the announcement of upcoming lectures, workshops, liturgies or other events; the need to collect money to pay for the use of the room.

This brief time is followed by an hour or so of "check-in" when women take turns talking about their lives. On the whole this talk is therapeutic in its form, but the content concerns spiritual and feminist rather than personal matters. The speaker expresses her thoughts and feelings about her spiritual experiences or her encounters with sexism and its associated problems. Rarely does a speaker mention another person and never are they identified by
name. Family and relationship matters are only in the rarest instances discussed. In fact, the only time I have ever heard a family matter discussed in the group was when one woman reported that her daughter had had an accident and was in critical condition in the hospital and needed the group's prayer.

Around 8:00 there is a short break and the women then re-gather to discuss a topic that has been prepared by that meeting's facilitator, or to celebrate or worship. On the whole the topics presented in this portion of the meeting reflect some intersection of feminism and spirituality, but some facilitators have drawn on a wider range of interests. Francesca once gave a workshop on the theme of discussion as dialogue rather than debate. One particularly moving session was co-facilitated by Melanie and Judy who talked about hope and hopelessness and then gave each woman a helium balloon to which she was to tie her hopes and fears. Then all the women went outside and let the balloons sail up into the sky. In another session Catharine taught the group the technique of peer counselling, a technique whereby both partners are alternately the counselled and the counsellor.

This year the attempt has been made every third meeting to have a liturgy in celebration of some aspect of women's experience. Generally, the pattern has been to include eucharist, that is the sharing of bread and wine, as the culminating ritual act of the liturgy. When the sharing of bread and wine was first done, within the initial six months
of the group's life, according to Claire's recollection, it was done to symbolize women's body and blood, shed in menstruation, gestation, and childbirth.

On one level, the very fact of doing eucharist was a sign of appropriating the power of the Church's clerical hierarchy. On another level, however, it was an appropriation of the symbols themselves, to invest them with female characteristics and thus signify the sacredness of the feminine. Recently milk has been used as the sacred element replacing wine. It can bear a symbolic meaning analogous to that of the eucharistic wine, but only in the context of a woman's life: like women's bodies and blood, it is given, in lactation, for the nourishment of life. There is also a certain domesticity associated with milk - dairying often being women's work - and, thus, the use of milk sacralizes the domestic sphere. This divinizing of the domestic is also apparent in the ritual sharing of the potluck meal, which, like milk, does not form part of the ordinary Church ritual, but is an integral element in the life of most women.

Some women have expressed a desire to move entirely away even from such radical adaptations of eucharist. They argue that despite the efforts to reclaim and appropriate the ritual act and its symbols, the eucharist in particular remains tainted with an indelible mark of Christ, the male saviour and God. In a broader context they also question the very idea of refashioning old symbols rather than
finding new ones. They prefer to replace Christian symbols with such symbols as the sun and moon, darkness and light, the four seasons, the four elements, the four directions, all of which reinforce the cyclical pattern of nature and of women's own bodies. Again, the tendency to revere the natural is part of the attempt to reclaim and appropriate the life giving power of women inherent in their identification with nature.

At 9:00, following the liturgy or discussion, the meeting is brought to a close. Often the close is signalled by a prayer, a blessing, a chant or a song usually done standing up in a circle with arms around each other's shoulders. After the formal end of the meeting, dishes are done, people make last minute arrangements about who will facilitate the next meeting, rides home are arranged, money is collected, newsletters are distributed and the women gradually hug good-bye and leave, calling to each other and laughing as they walk to their cars.

This monthly routine of the Network's life is clearly guided by an operational principle, namely, sharing: in the eucharist and in a common meal, the sharing of food; in check-in and in discussion time, the sharing of life experience; and in the rotation of group facilitation, the sharing of power. And as the group moved through very rapid changes in other ways during the course of this first generation, this principle, and the ways it was practised, remained the same.
Consciousness-raising

In the first year of its life, the Catholic Women's Network went through a formative period of consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising is the task of showing how what appear to be personal problems are, in fact, social issues, and that what appear as isolated or idiosyncratic events are collectively shared experiences of a common socio-political reality that can be analyzed and transformed.\(^1\) There are two different forms of consciousness-raising that are similar in most respects, but different in one essential way. Since the Network employed both forms of consciousness-raising, the difference between them is significant for understanding this early formative period.

One form of consciousness-raising, employed in the early feminist circles of the New Left, is the rap-session format, where women simply gathered together in a group to talk about their feelings, experiences and ideas about the relationship between their personal lives and social organization. For ideological, as well as practical purposes, feminist consciousness-raising took place among peers.

Another form of consciousness-raising is epitomized by the education for critical consciousness campaigns of Paulo Freire in the fifties and sixties in Brazil. There the
social consciousness of illiterate peasants was transformed by the same outsiders who taught them to read. The process, to a significant degree, took place from the top down, and was dependent on the outside experts.

The process of consciousness-raising which took place in the first six months or so of the life of the Catholic Women's Network was of both forms. The women called together were peers. None was prepared to play the educated teacher of the unlettered. Yet feminist ideology existed before the Network came into existence, and members could readily call down from above an extensive literature that would explain to them how their individual predicaments were examples of their common oppression. Thus both processes of consciousness-raising remained important to CWN's early life. They found expression respectively in the sharing of personal life experiences and in the sharing of reading.

Initially, consciousness-raising followed the feminist pattern, as suffering individuals unexpectedly found their experiences echoed in the stories told by others. At the first meeting of CWN Claire began with a brief speech about why she called the meeting and what she hoped would happen. She concluded by asking women to talk about their experiences in relationship with the Church. In the ensuing discussion she was surprised to discover how many of the women shared the same feelings of anger and hopelessness
concerning their place in the Roman Catholic Church:

I said I'd like each one to tell something about your life, who you are as a person, human being, starting with your name and locale but don't finish there; anything that you think that will help us to know you. Secondly, something about your current experience or relationship with the Church. And thirdly, what you hope for from this gathering. Well, that was just a revelation to me. I just could not believe it. They did not talk a lot about themselves. They didn't talk a lot about their hopes. They lit in on the second one. It was awful. There were two who were a little more moderate, but it wasn't positive either; it was all negative. And four of them said, "If this group doesn't do something, we're leaving the Catholic Church. We're finished."

The speed with which the sense of common suffering emerged was especially surprising because none of the women at that initial gathering, even the most dissatisfied, frustrated and alienated, had a developed group consciousness when they arrived. They did not share Claire's sense of starting something new for women in the Church; neither were they, for the most part, aware of or committed to the feminist critique of the Church. Moreover, they came from very different backgrounds and brought with them a wide range of hopes and expectations.

Suzanne remembered how initially she had not even wanted to become involved with CWN. She had tried to join the local Anglican women's group, but the priest had told her to try a Catholic group first. Then she hesitated for a time because she feared that CWN would be a traditional Catholic women's organization, without sympathy for what she assumed to be her own utterly unique and even crazy way of
being religious.

I'd found God a long time ago my own way and was still able to practice within the Church my own way, but nobody knew that. I never had a sounding board. I was doing my own thing within the structure of the Catholic Church. And with a sense of guilt and "maybe I am crazy, but this is the way I feel and I know that there's nobody out there that feels like I do, so I'll go along this way." And God and I knew so that was good enough for me.

Her external religious practice had remained conventionally dutiful, however. Her personal convictions were expressed only rarely, and then very tentatively, in conversation with her own children.

I was going to mass on Sundays. I had children at home that I felt obligated to, but even then I used to say to them, "You're going to grow up one day and get me for taking you off to Church on Sunday." But they wanted to go. And they knew how I felt. Not about a lot of issues, but we would discuss sometimes the priest's sermon and how it wasn't necessarily that way, that that was his interpretation and that there were others. So, I was going, but mainly out of a sense of duty.

Although not expecting to find others sharing her inner experience, she did seek out a parish in which she could worship comfortably.

I spent many years looking for a Catholic Church, but I never did find it until St. Luke's and some wonderful things happened to me up there.

But ultimately, even that parish remained far from her personal sense of God and of her own place in the Church:

It's hard to put into words. I wasn't feeling anything. Nothing. It was almost like a habit. I didn't get anything out of church.

Kathleen did not suffer from the same sense of holding inner convictions that no one else shared. She had strong feminist ideals and knew that other feminists shared them. But she did not expect to find them held anywhere in the
Church or in CWN, which she first went to out of curiosity and at the invitation of a friend.

I didn't know what to expect. I didn't know if it was going to be a version of the Catholic Women's League. [...] I didn't have any vision for starting something for women in the Church. I had done nothing about reconciling or allying what would be my feminist views with the Church.

Like Suzanne, she suffered from an absence of any nurturing in the Church; and she carried on out of nostalgia for the Catholicism that she had known as an undergraduate.

Most of what I remembered was the radical Catholicism of the sixties when I was at the University of Toronto and I still longed for something like that. I had lived out of the country for a number of years and had lost touch with the Church in Canada. [...] I came back expecting it still to be here and needless to say, I was very disappointed. It was sort of hard to give up on it and to settle for no spiritual nurturing.

Doreen was an exception in that she was both a feminist and relatively comfortable in her parish church, largely because of her very active involvement in its liturgical life.

Everything was still cosy in a way because I had the community of St. John's. We had great liturgies. I was on the liturgy committee and we could do what we wanted. [...] I was really involved and loving it, loving St. John's.

Like Suzanne, however, she had inner convictions and feelings that she knew would not win acceptance even in her very happy parish.

I was beginning to be aware of things in the Church [...] the hierarchy and the pope. I guess I was starting to be really bugged by things the pope was saying. [...] Then, I was aware of those things but I was afraid.

While she continued to find the Church a positive experience and to view things that made her feel different as her own problems, she did hope that CWN would offer a
Catholic forum in which she could express her feelings openly.

I guess I just wanted to get on a band wagon or get involved with people that were feminists because I was feeling then that I was a feminist and I felt different, I felt marginalized being a lesbian, too, you see. And I thought, "This is really neat and I want to be able to express how I feel."

In stark contrast to Doreen's tentative and inner sense of alienation, Sara and Dorothy had faced overt rejection. Indeed, both had been told outright by church authorities to go away. Sara had recently been asked by her parish priest to leave the parish because of her outspoken attitude on parish council and because of her social justice concerns. Dorothy, who had some years earlier left an abusive marriage without her priest's permission (which he had refused to give) and later remarried without having received an annulment (which she was told she could not get) had been advised to move to another city "so as not to cause scandal to other people in the diocese." She had also recently left her position as organist in a Catholic Church and taken a position in a United Church because the priest in the Catholic church had refused to allow her to have any choice or input in the music she was playing every Sunday.

The parish experiences of Sara and Dorothy are classic examples of a type of experience common enough in the Catholic Church not to be out of place in a piece of unimaginative polemic against it. Yet neither woman saw it as representing anything larger than her own life. Far from expressing any sense of solidarity with an oppressed group,
Dorothy and Sara emphasized their feelings of solitude and isolation. Sara, in fact, was conscious primarily of the solidarity among her adversaries.

Now I laugh about it, but at the time it really hurt me [...] But I left. I was ready to leave. By this time I was beginning to feel very marginal in parish life because I was finding out that I didn't get along with the priests very well. I knew there were lots more like the one in the parish I had just left [...] I had perceived that I was genuinely out of step with the majority of church-going Catholics. Whenever I was in a women's group at church, the kinds of things I enjoyed talking about were not even understood by the other women, so I felt pretty marginalized and was beginning to wonder whether or not it was right for me to call myself a Catholic because I thought, "If all those other people are Catholics and I'm so different from them, maybe I'm not."

Dorothy felt many of the same things:

Well, I had felt alienated since the time of the second marriage, the talk with the priest about the music and the move to a different city. [...] During that time I always felt like I was living in hiding, that I wasn't really accepted. [...] I was still wanting acceptance out of the Church and still feeling badly that I didn't get it.

Rose, too, although she belonged to a group of like-minded people and felt some support within it, felt equally isolated in her parish church.

We had started a peace group on the island, an anti-nuclear group, and after being involved in that for a while, I noticed how the Church was reacting or not reacting to the questions and, of course, this is a poor area to see any support for that sort of thing. And I was questioning that, too. I found that odd. Another example of the peace thing. We were standing outside the church one day handing out something and this one woman bumps along and she says, "I come to church to worship God." And a few years before that, I guess it was a few years after we'd started our group, I had set up this information thing in the church and I was put out by one of the priests. He put me out.
She had been left with the same sense that there was far more solidarity among those on the other side of the fence.

And I would look around at mass on Sunday and I would be surrounded by people who on every other issue on the island - and we're constantly and always having issues, so many connected with the environment - and just about every single person in the church was on the other side of the fence.

A virtual mirror image of Sara, Dorothy and Rose's feelings emerged from the recollections of several members who came to CWN with an already-formed awareness of the oppression of women in the Church, but with a sense that it somehow did not touch them. This was true, although in very different ways, of both Irene and Susan.

At the time that CWN started, Irene was a part of a "conservative community of Catholics" for whom she and her husband had built a small chapel on their own property, had received permission from their Bishop to keep the Blessed Sacrament in the chapel and had an "ultra-conservative" priest come over to say the mass.

She had come to university to finish her degree, had met Claire at St. Luke's faith and justice centre and had taken a course on the history of the Church. From these two sources Irene began to learn "all these terrible ideas that would be subverting everything in my life." The issue of women in the Church became one of a series of issues that forced her to consider whether "it was right for me to be a member of this Church which was doing all these things...how
committed could I be to a Church that is oppressing people like this?"

I went out of interest because I was interested in what Claire had told me about so many women. And because I knew that women didn't have much say in the Church, that it was all male. But still, I hadn't questioned any deeper, really. [...] I was interested in the fact that there were women who were being oppressed and how was this. Even though I hadn't identified the fact that I was oppressed, I was interested.

Susan went with many of the same thoughts as Irene, though with a very different background. Susan was intensely involved in social justice concerns at St. Luke's and was working with such organizations as Oxfam and the Canadian Catholic Office for Development and Peace, and had recently been to Central America.

All of a sudden I was coming across the injustices perpetrated in our own Church. [...] It wasn't really contributing as much positive energy as it was negative energy in the circles I was moving in and I really became more and more aware of that. [...] I started to see how the Church could be quite mean and quite cruel and exert its power to get back at you. [...] So at that point it was very much a question of justice. I had seen from a justice point of view that women had been oppressed, denied, subjugated, whatever you want to call it. [...] [But] it was still not my issue. I still had not made the connection, you know, "Oh, I am a woman. I have been denied in this Church for thirty odd years."

Sheila, too, came to CWN with a growing awareness of patterns of oppression from which she was personally sheltered, largely because her long-standing ministry at a
men's hostel kept her apart from parish life and Sunday worship.

And I wasn't so much critical myself. I realized that there were some things happening in the Church that I knew little about. I was anxious to learn more. I was only starting to understand what was meant by such terms as "exclusive language" and "patriarchal" and things like that. So, it was just starting to be talked about and I was just starting to realize what was happening at that time. [...] Mostly from Claire and my daughter and from any associations I had at St. Luke's who were thinking along those lines. I was only at St. Luke's infrequently because I have been for years in the downtown eastside on Sunday mornings. [...] as soon as I started encountering the kind of resistance I got to any of my ideas in parish life, I switched to the downtown eastside. I solved my problem by running away from parish life. And so I didn't have to cope with the types of things people were dealing with in parishes.

The similar experiences underlying the wide variety of background and circumstances were immediately apparent to everyone, and were the starting point for a period of intense consciousness-raising of the shared, grass-roots, rap-session type. Having come to the meeting feeling marginalized, frustrated and alone in the Church, women were enthused to discover that they all felt the same way. The same reactions recurred constantly in their recollections.

On the one had there were the expressions of isolation:

I never had a sounding board. I was doing my own thing within the structure of the Catholic Church.

I was looking for a community of support in my thinking. About just being a Catholic. Women's issues, too, but that wasn't the only thing. I had no feeling of community in my parish. I didn't fit in anywhere.

Yeah, my feelings were getting less warm. Or certainly seeing that it wasn't part of what I wanted or I wasn't really a part of it.
By this time I was beginning to feel very marginal in parish life [...] and was beginning to wonder whether or not it was right for me to call myself a Catholic because I thought, "If all those other people are Catholics and I'm so different from them, maybe I'm not."

I always felt like I was living in hiding.

And then, once people started talking, came the realization of a common experience, expressed in similar terms by informant after informant:

I never said a word. I just sat there and laughed and was completely astounded. Because these women were like me. They were saying the things that I was thinking.

And we realized that there were other people who had been through the same things, that we were not alone.

Being just able to talk about my spiritual life and be completely accepted [...] because we all felt the same thing - everybody.

It just gave me such a spine-tingling feeling. I thought, "Here I am in a room full of other women who feel the same way I do!"

No longer able to see themselves as substantially different from the other Catholic women in the group but rather discovering themselves to be essentially the same as each other, they found their feelings of being "crazy" or "out of step" transformed from a personal problem of individual women who could not conform into a collective sense of outrage and indignation at a Church that demanded an unreasonable conformity. Some described their reaction in more detail, others in less, but all expressed the same anger and outrage.

A number of women were particularly shocked to find the same sense of alienation and isolation even among those
most deeply involved in Church life:

And I saw that all these women were just like I was, were women who were really committed to living their spirituality. They were not just Sunday church-going people, they were people who were really involved in parish or Catholic school and they were people who were carrying responsibility in those places. They were teaching CCD programmes or they were Catholic school teachers or they were doing music ministry. They were carrying responsibility in the life of their parishes, yet none of them felt that they were being treated fairly.

Another evoked the contrast between the reaction of sympathy and support that she now felt and the earlier reaction to her efforts to voice her pain:

In previous times when I had shared my frustrations, for example with my mother, she said, "Oh, dear, you're not going to change the Church. It's bigger than you and it's been going for two thousand years. Just either be quiet and get along or you might as well leave. You're not going to change anything." And that was the only response that I had heard up until the time of CWN getting together. Now the CWN response was totally different. As soon as somebody told their story of woe, the discussion centered around, "Isn't it awful! Who do they think they are?" and "How can they do this?" and "Yes, let's experience this pain together" and "We understand your pain." Everybody totally understood my perception that this was injustice at its worst. And this was how we all perceived it; that this was simply injustice.

A third focussed on the intensity of the shared feeling:

And women were pounding their fists on the table and saying things like, "Who do they think they are?" and "We're not leaving this Church, this is our Church!"

At this initial stage, consciousness-raising was a shared activity among peers without anything at all comparable to the expert influence from above that characterized Freire's educational model. Very soon, however, the women decided that they wanted to learn some theology in order to understand why they were in their
position. As Sara explained:

Through this initial telling of stories the women began to ask why? Why do priests think women are this way or that way? Why does the Church teach this or that about women?

This desire for theological education did not produce a straightforward version of the Freire model of consciousness-raising, since Claire was the only obvious candidate for the role of educator, and she categorically refused to play it. As she recalled:

It gradually came out that they felt that the Church had never taught them anything. That they wanted to learn. They did want to be a support network for each other, but they also wanted to learn some theology. They all seemed to fasten on that and they turned to me and they said, "And you have a degree in theology and you can teach us!" And that's where I said, "Oh!" And it was kind of a turning point for us and I said, "No, I won't do that." Angry looks. "I can't do that. We can only teach each other. We can only share and then we can learn together. But I can not teach you theology because that's not the way women do theology. Our way is not that way."

Thus, no one individual took the formal role of the expert, but the group indirectly came under the expert influence of feminist theology and general feminist theory. This theoretical input began to guide their self-understanding as an outside expert might have done, but with a significant difference in method and procedure. Claire, who had access to the library of the Women's Ecumenical Centre, provided most of the books that became the source of this theoretical input, but the work of reading and study was divided up.

So we read and we shared. People read a paragraph in their book that impressed them and what they thought about it and what did we think about it? It was a complete sharing.
Feminist theory and theology thus came into the group via the understanding and reflection of various individuals who shared their reading in the same way that they had shared their life experiences.

And one main thing that helped me. Claire would always bring a raft of books from the Ecumenical Centre. And they were on women's issues in the Church. I had never seen books like this before. Never seen them. And one caught my eye. It was called Woman Survivor in the Church. So I borrowed that and I couldn't put it down because when I was reading that book, I cried and cried and I thought, "This is me! This is my story! I wrote this book." It was me, guilt and everything. So I came back and talked about this book and for the next few meetings we talked about the books we were reading.

The range of readings varied according to individual interest and taste, and was not confined to feminist theory and systematic theology.

And Claire would come with arm loads of books from the Women's Centre and so we began taking books home with us after each month's meeting and reading them. And so I began to read Church history, and I began to read books by women about their own experiences and I began to read books which are called academically feminist theology and I started to read...Oh! An interesting thing was it was my turn to facilitate at Hallowe'en one year so I decided to look into the history of witchcraft and the inquisition, so I read a lot of books about that and sat in bed at night and cried at the treatment of women.

Both the material read and the sharing process altered women's consciousness significantly:

We started at square one. None of us were like we are today. None of us. We were green and pinned-down and guilt-ridden and none of us had seen books like this.

The most striking change that most of the women recalled from this initial six month period was a loss of a sense of helplessness and a growing awareness of their own
power. Sara summarized the consciousness-raising process:

So, what happened during this period was we went through this kind of transition phase of expressing our anger and our pain and being supported, being told that our feelings of injustice were valid. And then educating ourselves about why this had happened and through that process of educating ourselves, through the process of being educated and being supported in our views, we became empowered.

Susan explained it by drawing parallels with the same process that occurs in other marginalized groups which discover their collective power:

I mean, to me it's just like disabled people figuring something out and other disabled people coming on board, or people of colour figuring something out and then other people of colour coming on board. I think there's a heady sense of collective power, of wow! we are sharing this and nothing can stop us now. and I think that's probably the first time you get a sense of your own power. [...] A sense of your power to change things, a sense of your power to affirm each other even if you don't change a bloody thing.

Or, as Suzanne put it very simply:

We didn't realize that we were all growing until it happened. When I look around today it's hard to imagine all of us are like we are because we sure weren't like that.

Not surprisingly, the experience of consciousness-raising stands out for a few women as the defining feature of CWN. Sheila, for example, defined CWN as a consciousness-raising group.

So, through being associated with CWN, information has been brought to my attention, through books and written material and discussions with the women, what these terms mean, what is it like to be in a Church in which exclusive language is used and what impact does that have on us and what has it done over the years and why should it be changed, etc. And all the women's issues have been brought to my attention and I have been able to access information about them, reading and spoken information, and therefore my consciousness has been raised or my knowledge has been made much, much clearer. I have a real feeling now about the injustices in the Church and have a real feeling of anger and frustration. I can know now what people like Rosemary Ruether have been talking about for so many years.
For all the importance it took on in the Network's formative period, consciousness-raising was not the goal whose pursuit had drawn the women together in the first place. Nor could it become the bonding force holding them together in the future, since the admittedly strong bond it created was based on the painful realization of the depth and extent of women's subordinate position in the Church's clerical hierarchy - and it was precisely this subordinate position that the Network's members wanted to escape.

Creating A Feminist Reality

The women that Claire called together in July of 1984 had not expressly assembled to raise one another's consciousness or to experience community. They had been looking for a solution to the pain and the frustration they felt in the Church, and ultimately they would pursue that initial goal to the end through decisions that would take them out of the Church and out of CWN. In the interim, however, they did acquire a shared consciousness, they bonded to one another in a community of past experience and present feeling; and, for a time at least, they let their new consciousness and community form the basis for the creation of a small feminist reality within the Network.

Susan vividly describes how and why the process of consciousness-raising led women to build a feminist Catholic reality amongst themselves. She begins by explaining how her
belief in the Church's hierarchy as a sane and rational institution was transformed into a conviction that it was, in fact, ludicrous:

It's like you're sharing how invisible you feel when they're talking about brothers, you're sharing how invisible you feel when you see there's only men up front and there ever will be only men, and you don't image Christ because you don't have something between your legs, but you can't use it even if you have it so what's the point of having it? And the whole thing becomes increasingly more ludicrous. It's absolutely ludicrous.

The realization that almost 700 million people, by her estimation, subscribe to the hierarchy's ludicrous views seemed almost beyond belief:

So how do you deal with becoming acutely aware of something absolutely ludicrous, that is truly insane, but that well over six to seven hundred million people subscribe to? Do I really want to live in this world? I mean, it's based on insanity. And that's really painful to accept. It's like, I'm ready to jump off. I've got to live for the rest of my life with this realization and understanding? And I think that's really a tough thing to accept.

The process of consciousness-raising, in effect, shattered her sense of reality and left her feeling vulnerable and afraid.

The confidence I had walking day to day, the sense of normalcy, the sense of assuredness that had been stripped away because of these realizations, i.e. that my Church is very dysfunctional, leave you feeling extremely naked and really vulnerable and open to being blown over by your own fears if nothing else.

In order to continue living in a meaningful way, she had to build a new reality, a new world to live in, even if this
world was only as big as the Catholic Women's Network.

It's like, Oh God, strip it all away and what do you have? Well, nothing initially. So where do you get something from? By rebuilding. But with whom, you know? Well, this group was a good start. It's like if I don't have that rock, what do I have to throw my rope around? Well, none, initially, but all of a sudden I've got this group of women. And that was a new rock.

Why rebuild with the women in the Network? Her reason is that they already shared the same disenchantment and the same perspective:

Because there were other people saying the same thing. The emperor without clothes on, other people are seeing him too.

For many, the loss of an old way of seeing and being was amply replaced by the possibility of creating an alternative reality based on a more relevant set of assumptions, experiences and values. The women of CWN began creating their own liturgies, eucharists, songs, prayers and poetry, re-writing biblical passages to reflect a woman's perspective, finding stories about women in the bible and reflecting on them, reinventing old symbols and generating new ones - all supported by a large and continually growing body of theological literature and resources for feminist worship and spirituality produced by the mainline Christian churches and made available through Claire and the Women's Ecumenical Centre.

The first generation building of an alternative feminist reality was, on the whole, focussed within CWN itself and many saw the Network as a haven to which women could return from the Church for nourishment and support. Members were acutely aware of the importance of such an
alternative to the Church as a place to feel validated and affirmed.

Mostly, it provides a place where we don't have to be alone. Its most important aspect has been, for me, knowing that I'm not alone, that there are other women out there who feel some of what I'm feeling and are trying to deal with that.

CWN gives women a sense that it's O.K. not to agree with the Church, that they are not alone, that their anger is legitimate. I think that sense of not being alone is primarily what CWN is trying to accomplish.

What does CWN do for women? Support you, give you a feeling that you're not alone, that you're not wrong, that you're not bad, that your feelings and who you are are valid.

But it was not all the women's intention to confine their efforts to creating a haven from the Church within the four walls of CWN. Some of the them had great hope in their ability to change the Church. Doreen and Susan, for instance, came to the group with the express hope of making their presence felt in the institutional Church:

I guess I thought we would be some little group that would express ourselves or write about it or do something or make ourselves known.

I came to the group with "Let's strategize", this is true, I came to the group with "Let's strategize concretely on how to show we have another vision for the Church." And I was very willing to pull some fairly radical moves. "Let's chain ourselves to the diocese, let's get big banners and let's go on hunger strikes and let's go to jail. I'm willing to do civil disobedience. When?" I wanted desperately to do it, get out of the closet, to say "We exist and we're strong and we're celebrating with our sisters."

With this goal in mind, Susan, Doreen and others hoped the Network would act as a support group while they engaged in the process of renewing the Church. Sara explicitly cited Ruether's understanding of Womenchurch groups as
capturing her initial vision of her role and the role of CWN in the life of the larger Church:

I'm going to answer from the perspective of what CWN meant to me in those first couple of years. I see it as a community which is on the periphery of the Church. I think Rosemary Ruether describes this dynamic of the Church being so big and so cumbersome with all its rules, regulations, doctrine and dogma that it is incapable of moving forward and that its only hope of rebirth, regeneration, its only hope of renewing itself comes from communities which are on the peripheries such as CWN. So I would see the main body of the institutional Church as necessary to continue through the ages, but I think a small community, perhaps a focussed, one-issue community, a feminist community in this case, is necessary to the renewal of the main part of the Church. So I see them as both necessary to be going on at the same time. And at any given period of time in any woman's life, active participation in the mainstream may be too painful and she may have to withdraw herself from that and only to interact with a smaller community such as CWN as her only source of spiritual nourishment. Hopefully then she would be empowered to take her voice and her ideas and her enthusiasm back into the mainstream Church in order to help be part of the renewal process.

So, along with their meetings, liturgies and books, some of the women at this stage began spreading the gospel of feminism to the wider Church. Sara moved to a new parish. She began leading workshops from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops' Green Kit (2) on women in the Church and then led the fight against the efforts of other more conservative Catholic women to ban it. She also found her way into the press and onto the radio, speaking about the role of women in the Roman Catholic Church. Two other women, Dorothy and Francesca, founded a local chapter of Canadian Separated and Divorced Catholics (CSDC), a liberal support group approved by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, but specifically disallowed in their diocese. While Francesca left the group in order to do a
degree in theology, Dorothy eventually went on to become its national Vice-President. Susan, in order to pursue her vision, joined a progressive lay missionaries' programme and went back to Central America.

Like Sara, these women were also confronted with opposition and, after a couple of years, they found their energy and hope for transforming the Church eroding. Dorothy first found herself opposed by the bishop in her diocese and then unsupported by the national Conference of Bishops. Finally, she even found opposition within her own group and in the end decided to leave the organization.

Susan also felt similar frustrations and isolation within the traditional culture of Latin America and in her missionaries' programme, despite its reputation as one of the most progressive orders in the Roman Catholic Church. She left the order and came back to Canada in the summer of 1988. But the Network had changed by the time she got back.

But then I got back here and realized CWN was in a turbulence, too. Nothing's perfect. [...] Some members began expressing dissatisfaction with what the group was giving them or what was happening in the group. I felt that some people were looking at other ways of meeting their spiritual needs and there was a sense from some of those members that they weren't being accepted in the group. And many of the people who had originally started the group had moved on to other venues of meeting their spiritual needs.

In fact, everyone in the group had stopped attending the Roman Catholic Church on a regular basis and most had left the Church altogether, an event significant enough for
several members to comment on.

And at first we were all there to see how we could cope as women within our parishes. And it got so that at the beginning, it bothered me and finally one time I remember saying, "I think I'm the only one person here who's not involved in a parish." They would all talk about their parishes. Now not too many of them are in parishes, but they were. It empowered a lot of us to break away from that. I'm not the only one. This is what it has done for a lot of women. So, that's the way we've all gone.

In '83-'84 when we came together, the majority of us were still attending church. The majority of us are now no longer even attending a church.

When the group first came together, practically everyone without exception was attending church services, was affiliated with a congregation. No one is now. That's a major shift in emphasis. It really changed, it really changed.

Margaret eventually joined a small, active Anglican parish whose priest is a feminist. Francesca formally joined the United Church and Dorothy has become a United Church "adherent", an active participant but not a formal Church member. Doreen, too, usually attends the United Church, although for different reasons. She attends a church that has an official ministry to lesbian women and gay men. Six other women have gone on to pursue various forms of New Age/New Thought spirituality.

Leaving The Church

It is impossible to isolate one reason why some women of CWN ceased attending church in any regular way and why many others left the Church completely. In more than one case, CWN gave women the rationale and the courage to do
something they had wanted to do for a long time, but felt unable to do.

CWN enabled me to separate myself. It's partly to do with empowerment. It empowered me to do what I wanted to do for a long time, but I didn't.

And, considering how many women felt at the first CWN meeting, it is probable that their participation in CWN actually prolonged their time in the Church. (3) In other cases, however, the decision to stop attending church may have had less to do with events connected with their life in CWN itself than with those which took place at St. Luke's, the local parish where a number of the members of CWN went to mass.

St. Luke's would be difficult to place on the ideological spectrum. Like many Roman Catholic institutions it has shifted left and right according to the views of the priests appointed to it, and some of them over the years have been quite far to the right. During the early years of CWN, however, it was something of a refuge for liberals in an otherwise very conservative diocese, thanks to the presence on its staff of a liberally-oriented priest with a strong interest in social justice and the Third World. He was probably responsible for the continued church membership of parishioners who could not have persevered in any other parish. His reassignment in 1986, after several years of conflict with diocesan authorities, severed the last link to mainstream Roman Catholicism for a number of women from CWN.
Claire makes this clear in her comments on the changes at St. Luke's,

It means that none of us now have any hope for the institutional Church, really, as it is. That was our last hope and now it isn't there.

But not only did most of the women give up on the Church. Many of them also stopped attending CWN. The change that Susan noted when she came back to the group in the summer of 1988 had begun in earnest about a year before. While I was not doing fieldwork at the time, I can illustrate the change in the group by contrasting the first CWN meeting I attended in September 1987 and the September meeting of 1988: the 1987 meeting had nineteen participants; the 1988 meeting had six, only three of whom had been with the group since the beginning.

Those who moved on to other forms of spirituality or other Christian denominations came to view the Network as a kind of transition house, providing the necessary support as they moved from one stage of their spiritual growth to another. Sara, speaking about her reasons for going to CWN now that she has moved onto a different spiritual path than her former Catholicism, put it this way:

I think CWN is a safe haven for people in a particular phase of their spiritual path called an appreciation of themselves as female children of God. [...] I see that as a very valid struggle to work through and it was one of the struggles that I had to work through to get where I am now. [...] My reason for going to CWN would be to help other people, not to gain anything for myself and maybe for the pleasure, strictly social, just to see people and talk to people. I don't see it as an opportunity for growth anymore.
Suzanne emphasized that she was going to CWN when she was struggling with being a woman in the Catholic Church, but now that she is no longer struggling with that issue, she is also finding her spiritual growth comes from elsewhere:

Well, when I was going to CWN, that was when I was going to Church. [...] At the beginning I couldn't miss a meeting because I was getting so much out of it. I was like a sponge. Now I've reached a peace, a spiritual peace with myself because I've straightened out everything in my life concerning myself as a woman in the Catholic Church. There's no problem there. And I know where I'm going and I feel good about it. [...] I don't think I get the answers anymore, for me, from CWN.

Conclusion

That the Catholic Women's Network was not able to sustain its members in the Roman Catholic Church is hardly surprising. It is doubtful that supporting the struggle to change the Church was even the Network's primary goal: only a few of the women came into the group committed to fight; and most were already prepared to leave. In hindsight it is not even that surprising that not only did all of the women cease attending Church in a regular way but that most also left CWN. After all, as their reasoning went, since they were no longer struggling to either live within the Church or transform it, they no longer needed the group's support. In empowering them to leave the Church, it had fulfilled its function in their lives.
Yet, despite the group's function in these women's lives, the established format for running the meetings, the alternative feminist reality it tried to create in its liturgies, songs, prayers and in the network of connections it created between women that extended out into the wider world, all formed the basis for the self-sustaining alternative feminist community which would develop in the group's next generation.

Notes

1. Consciousness-raising has many roots. For present purposes we are concerned with its origins in liberation theology and feminism. In liberation theology they go back to Paulo Freire's pedagogy of concientizacion in Brazil in the late 1950's and early 1960's where adult literacy campaigns were organized to teach Brazilian peasants using Marxist social theory and a Socratic educational technique. The purpose was, in part, to enable peasants to see the conditions of their lives (their poverty) as a result of the power arrangements in their society (Freire 1983, 1984).

The exact origin of the use of consciousness-raising in the feminist movement in the United States is unknown. In her history of the early years of the women's movement Maren Lockwood Carden (1974) says that consciousness-raising groups began perhaps in 1966 or 1967 and certainly by 1968. Many of the women who had been involved with various radical groups organized under the name New York Radical Women and started to hold 'rap sessions' regularly to talk not only about racial problems in the United States and about Vietnam, but gradually to discuss their own problems as women. Members of the group recalled that Mao Tse-Tung had promoted 'Speak Bitterness' meetings to raise women's political consciousness in North China during the late 1940's (Dreifus 1973:2,5)

2. The Green Kit, so called because of its colour, is a publication of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops properly title "Women in the Church." Designed and written in collaboration with Canadian Catholic feminist theologians, the kit advocates such things as inclusive
language in liturgy and the co-responsibility of women and men in the Church and advocates the admission of women to the exercise of the secondary, unordained ministries. The kit was surrounded by much controversy before and after its publication. Some dioceses refused to distribute it in their parishes.

3. Statistics from the United States suggest that women are leaving the Church at a higher rate than men (Traxler 1983/84:2); and the American Catholic Bishops recognize that "the alienation of women from the Church is a serious pastoral problem that has many ecclesiological implications" (Origins [25 June, 1982], p. 90)
Chapter Three

The Catholic Women's Network - The Second Generation

The previous chapter discussed the first generation of women to form the Catholic Women's Network and described how the group served as a support group and transition house for many women on their way out of the Roman Catholic Church. By the fall of 1988, the group was made up of only three of its founding members, Sheila, Claire and Susan. Over the course of the Winter, however, the group began to rebuild itself and by January 1989 a steady, stable group had been established.

The women who have joined the Network during this last year differ from the group's founders in three significant ways: they had an already formed Marxian feminist critique of the Church before they came to CWN; they expected CWN not to be a support group but to be an alternative spiritual community for them; and, most importantly, they had a developed ecclesiology to articulate their understanding of the function of CWN in their lives and in relation to the wider Church. As one woman said, repeating something Claire had said to her once, "You know...We are the Church. We are making the Church here, now."
The Critique of the Clerical Hierarchy

Unlike their first generation sisters, the new members of CWN came to the group with their feminist consciousness fully formed. Only in a very few cases do second generation members express a reaction to the Church based on painful individual experiences in the same very personal, very anguished way that was so common among the founders in the early stages of consciousness-raising. Here is one such story. Atypically, its principal victim is a man and it has a happy ending, but in other ways it is of a type with the stories that so many women brought to the first meeting. It is one woman's account of the official treatment received by her husband, who left the priesthood in order to marry her.

My husband wanted to get dispensation which we now have. But initially when he wanted to get it he had a questionnaire which he had to fill in. [...] And finally, they phoned him up, the monsignor and the bishop himself read over the phone in Latin the letter that came back from Rome refusing his dispensation. So we were in a difficult way. We still felt then that we needed the blessing of the institutional Church. And we thought, what will we do? And then we had the opportunity to move to another diocese and we went to see the bishop there [...] and the bishop said, "Come and you participate." After we were there three or four months the bishop called my husband in [and asked for permission to look into his dispensation]. About maybe three to four months after that the bishop asked to see him and he was literally trembling with anger. My husband's dispensation had never even been sent to Rome. So, here they outright lied. When they read the letter to him over the phone, it had never even been sent.

At the same time, this man's name and history were erased
from the diocesan records.

As of a year ago, if you were to phone the diocesan office and ask for Father X. [...] they would tell you that he's had a nervous breakdown, that he is in Southbounds in Ontario. When they had something in the local Catholic newspaper a year or two ago about his former church and all the former pastors, his name was not there, although he built the big church hall. If you go to the seminary - and he was an honours student - if you go to the seminary, there are no pictures of him, any awards that he won. They've just wiped him out.

This story, which would have played a major role in the shared consciousness-raising of the early month of CWN, was an anomaly in the second generation. More commonly, women of this generation related little of their personal experiences and spoke rarely of individual priests, bishops or dioceses. Rather, they spoke of the Church's clerical hierarchy, variously called the "structure," "system," or "institution," "hierarchy" or "patriarchy."

The identification of the Church's governing structure as the object of criticism and lament signals an important difference between these women and those who were in the Network before them. They have known for a long time that other women share their experience. They also know that whatever difficulties or abuses they have suffered at the hands of priests or bishops are not crimes or abuses of position or power by individuals. On the contrary, they view their difficulties as specific expressions of a pattern of systematic oppression of women in the Church by its clerical hierarchy, and they know that power relations in the Church are so ordered that it would oppress women
whatever the attitude or conduct of the individual men who held office in it.

That the clerical hierarchy inevitably oppresses women is still disputed by many who reject the feminist critique. That the Roman Catholic Church is, in fact, governed by a clerical hierarchy and that all women are subject to it is acknowledged even by its apologists. All power in the Church comes through the clergy, deriving ultimately from the pope; all Catholics owe allegiance and obedience to the clergy, ultimately the pope. By the unbroken tradition of the Church, only men may be ordained to clerical office; it is therefore the inescapable lot of women in the ordinary life of the Church to be governed by men.

Not surprisingly, the clerical hierarchy is the subject of much criticism and attack by second generation members: it is a "dynasty or a dictatorship." It is "a diseased entity" that "promotes...death in a spiritual, emotional sense." It is an "inherently evil," "demonic," "authoritarian structure that dwarfs the human spirit."

I don't want to go along with a system that dehumanizes people and I think that's what is happening in the Catholic Church. [...] The whole thing about dehumanizing. We're not killing Jews, but we're taking something away from people that allows them to be free, that keeps them from being fully who they are, that takes their power away.

The essential difference between the second generation members and the founders was not, therefore, that the second generation had more personal experience of abuse and had a better sense of its extent. Rather, the second generation members had a clear outline in their minds of the character
of the Church's governing structure and they understood the relationship between that structure and what they and other women had experienced under it. Consequently, they did not bring with them to CWN the founders' initial sense of inescapable isolation and of insurmountable personal problems. To them it is self-evident that they are collectively caught up in an inherently oppressive clerical hierarchy requiring structural change.

Considering the nature of their critique of the Church, it is not surprising to discover that all of the women of this generation had stopped attending church before they came to CWN. Their decision to leave the Church was mentioned repeatedly by informants of this second generation, sometimes as a recent development still on their minds and still charged with intense emotion, sometimes as a part of the remote background to their joining CWN.

One woman feels incapable of going to Church, but is still deeply pained by her decision to leave:

I will always carry the pain of feeling that schism. And it is a pain. It's just a pain that you learn to live with. And it's a pain that at times makes me much more vulnerable and at times that literally can depress me.

A few women have stopped going to Church, but are still very unsure of their decision. They still feel the kind of ambiguity that many of the founding members had experienced when they first found themselves at odds with the Church. What can I do? I really miss it and it's not something that is resolvable.
I still want to be Catholic, but I don't think it's going to work. I haven't been able to let go of it, but I really don't see any way of resolving that. And it's really too bad. And I'll obviously come to the point of having to make some decision about whether to identify myself as Catholic anymore and I expect that the answer will be no, that I will not identify myself as Catholic and I know that a tremendous sense of loss will follow. Death. [...] I want it so badly. I really want the Church to be good. Why do I need it? I don't really have a clear cut answer for that, but when I go into a Catholic Church that's empty and I sit there I feel there's just a really strong bonding. But when you fill it up with everything else....

Others, though firm in their decision to dissociate themselves from the Church, are unsure how far from the Church that decision will take them.

The obvious Church and I have a kind of fringe relationship with each other. I do not feel anything beyond a nominal commitment to it. I do not feel governed by it. I have disassociated myself to some extent from it, how far I do not know. I know that I have embarked upon a path on which there is no turning back. I will never be able to return to the institutional Church the way it is right now.

We've tried to go to mass here a few times, we really have. One of the Sundays, the priest was giving a homily and talking about how we have to be ready for change, ready to be open for change. And we thought, "Oh, great!" And he said, "If you want to know if it is authentic to change about something, find out if it's been approved by the Magisterium in the last 2,000 years." And I thought, "Well, at one stage they approved of slavery, for example." So, it's this type of thing. And the language is so sexist. My husband says he can no longer read with that kind of language. So that's kind of where we are now. Do we start a housechurch? Do we find individual people here? We don't want to be elitist. We don't want that to happen. Should we go and attach ourselves to a different faith community and still struggle for justice in the Catholic Church? These are our questions now.

For another new member the decision to withdraw has
been made, but she still remains open to returning.

So, my decision [...] to not attend Church [is] because I can't feel like I'm really belonging and I can't feel that I can be myself, which is sort of key. It's not come out of "I hate the Catholic Church; I'm going to leave forever," or, "I'm turning my back." I mean, I'd go back tomorrow and I might, even if nothing changes. If I felt O.K., it would be alright. The minute I felt O.K., I'd go back. If I felt accepted, if I felt that there was a niche for me somewhere where I could actually be myself, hold my opinions, have some integrity.

For others, however, withdrawal from the Church is a resolved question from which they are ready to move on.

Me and the Church are nix. [...] I don't have a desire to have a relationship with the Church now.

I don't miss the Church.

The church isn't important to me.

And for still others it really is ancient history.

I stopped going to Church maybe twelve years ago. Sometimes at Christmas I wanted to go to midnight mass, but the priest here cured me of that. So I didn't even like doing that anymore. I have no romantic visions. I was cured of that. And I have no intentions of doing that again.

For the most part these different attitudes to the Church and to the possibility of returning to it vary in proportion to the various members' hopes for change in the Church itself or in their own relationship to it. Where the hope for structural change or even for the chance to feel accepted in the Church is weak, then participation becomes
impossible.

I don't know. Maybe, maybe if they were trying...then maybe I could justify it that they were trying and need some leaven there. I do believe they need us and if there's any hope for the Church then some of us should be there. But I can't be there. I tried that route and it doesn't work for me. Certainly from what I hear from others it doesn't work for them either. There're still a few martyrs in there and that's good for the time being. But maybe there is no hope for the Church. Why, why are we to save this Church anyway? I don't know, I don't know, I don't think it does work.

Some see their decision to leave as a statement to the Church that there is a kind of church experience that they want that is more important than the institution, and that they will seek it elsewhere if the institution does not provide it:

It's not like I've got to do something to stop this evil. I've got to do something against this evil. Because I don't really know if I can, but I think at least we can not go along with it and then see from there. It's not waiting, I wouldn't say that. I'd say it's a statement. It's not necessarily that we're going to do anything else, but it's a statement that says, "I still want to be in the Church, but I can't find my place in the Church the way it is and I think that's wrong. Wrong. Not God's way."

It's a sign, a symbol, a sign that things are not good, that lay people are not going to be docile sheep. If you will not give them what they want they will find it themselves. There are messages there. I don't think they are going to be heard well or widely, but it is a sign, a symbol.

For another, to have the kind of experience she wants requires the actual replacement of the institution with
something more human.

I see the Church really allied with the system in every way and really oppressive to the things that I want, you know. And I don't believe you can work in the system. So I would never go back to reform anyone or have illusions that I could go back to, say, change the Church. That would be a waste of time, some kind of weird martyr-thing for me. [...] The same way as the capitalist system should fall. A friend of mine had a saying that she put on her kitchen wall. It said, "Minute by minute and day by day, humans are replacing the capitalist system." And it's just like that's what I want. That's my vision. And that would be the same with the Church, needing to replace the Church day by day.

A group of women for whom a critical analysis of their experience in the Church seems self-evident and who see virtually no hope of changing its structure would clearly expect from CWN very different things than the founding members. Without any reason to engage in consciousness-raising or to provide support for each other in their efforts to transform the Church, these women see in the Catholic Women's Network an opportunity to establish an alternative feminist spiritual community capable of sustaining itself independently from the clerical hierarchy and able to meet their spiritual needs both as Catholics and as feminists.

The desire to join a community able to meet their needs as both Catholics and as feminists recurs in various women's recollections of what they expected when they came to join the already established CWN. Naomi came to the group upon returning to Canada after five years abroad. She had encountered feminism in a women's support group at theological college during that time away. She came back
feeling a need for "that odd combination of feminism and Christianity" she felt in her women's group.

I wasn't expecting anything in particular from the group, like the group was going to develop a new feminist theology or the group was going to change the Catholic Church. [...] I needed to feel that there was a place for me, other people like me, a place where I could meet up with that kind of remnant of people, a place where I could meet women, a place where I could meet other women who would understand me and that odd combination of feminism and Christianity, where I could be both. Because I don't think there are a lot of places where I can be both.

Miriam, like Naomi, had encountered feminism in the seminary, both in a feminist theology course she had taken there and as a member of a women's support group.

I left seminary after a year and a half and a very close community of women down there and came up here and started living with a friend. It was quite difficult to let go of my community down there. It left a very big hole. [...] And I think that's initially what got me going to CWN. Because I needed a community of women.

Melanie, a long-time feminist, had been away from the Catholic Church for ten years. Initially she went to CWN to discover the effects that being raised Catholic had had on her life. Once there, however, she, too, began to see the Network as a spiritual community.

I think of myself as quite a spiritual person and more and more in the group the possibility of a spiritual community is there, somewhere where I can get in touch with my own spirituality.

**Creating a New Ecclesiology**

These second generation members clearly wanted CWN to provide an alternative to the traditional Catholic life, to be for them a spiritual community. But their expectations
were not limited to what CWN would be for them personally. They were equally concerned with defining CWN's relationship to the wider Church.

Like CWN's founders, virtually all of the second generation began as members of the Roman Catholic Church. Like the founders, too, all of them had broken with that Church: none would any longer subscribe to its creed, submit to its discipline, or give allegiance to its authorities. Unlike many of the founders, however, most of the second generation feel a strong sense of continuity between what they were trying to do within the institutional confines of the Church and what they are now striving to do in the Catholic Women's Network. This mixture of desire to break away and desire to continue emerges repeatedly in informants' replies to the invitation to define such words as "Church." There is rarely, in any answer, a clear-cut definition and fully worked-out theory of what is to be rejected and what is to be retained, but certain revealing patterns emerge out of the answers taken together.

There is abundant evidence of a determination to escape from the formally structured religious body; this has been seen already in the context of the critique of the Church and in the fact that most women have left it. There is equal evidence, however, that for virtually all the women, "Church" in some form remains a central religious value. The development of a new ecclesiology, one which can encompass the Catholic Women's Network and explain its
relationship to the Church is therefore one of their most important tasks.

As we have seen, the women's rejection of the formally structured Church is centered on the character of its clerical hierarchy. Consequently, the ecclesiology that most of the women in the Catholic Women's Network have adopted is one which distinguishes Church, written with a capital "C" from "church" written with a small "c". The clerical hierarchy and those who submit to its government is identified with the Church and described according to the *societas perfecta* model outlined at the beginning of chapter one. Claire provides the most systematic description of the Church in this description of Roman Catholicism:

My understanding of Roman Catholicism, first of all technically, is that you are as a church following the Roman rite. And that means you follow all sorts of prescriptions about what is sacramental and what is not sacramental and who decides that and that includes Canon Law also, rules for who can get married and when they can get married and what you can be excommunicated for and what you can't be excommunicated for - that's Roman Catholicism.

This Church, with its tendency to equate obedience and loyalty to the dictates of priest, bishop and pope with the true measure of faith, and with its tendency to "ostracize...or crucify," as Naomi put it, those who measure their faith by other standards - is rejected.

Which part of the Church do I disagree with, which part of the Church don't I like? The stuff that comes, well...I have this vision in my mind of the pope on down and of this kind of hierarchical structure in which certain people are missed. And everyone who fits into the hierarchical structure I don't like. [...] The bits that come straight down the line, straight down the line from God, to the pope, to us, I see that as very restrictive.
I have two very distinct definitions of Church, though. I have a definition of Church that involves the hierarchy which to me is not involved in my understanding of real church, or active, everyday church. They're just sort of a necessary evil, part of the establishment as it were.

I don't have a desire to have a relationship with the Church now. [...] Church with a capital "C". No desire to be involved with the hierarchical institution, the patriarchy. To me it's just inherently evil.

Small "c" church, by contrast, is made up of all the groups of people, such as the Catholic Women's Network, who refuse to be governed by the clerical hierarchy and who express and live out their faith in community.

Well, really God's people is community. But I just wanted to distinguish that from when I said I had a need to be part of the people of God and a community. I wanted to distinguish that from the fact that I had a need to belong to the Roman Catholic Church, with the hierarchy in place.

Small "c" church, then, is almost completely identified with community and, thus, these women have used the standard terms of Catholic ecclesiology employed by theologians like Congar and the Second Vatican Council. But unlike the Council, these women reject the former and reserve "community" as expressing the true nature of "Church."

Sometimes also called spiritual community or faith community, church is primarily the experience of personal intimacy and relationship that being in a community brings.

What's important, process, building community...I guess it's different from other meetings I go to where the task is much more important and if we get to know each other along the way, great. If not, c'est la vie. Building community is the process, it's much more important than the task. It used to be much more frustrating for me than it is now. Now I'm not looking to find out more about the Bible at CWN, I'm not looking to find out more about feminism at CWN. If it happens, great. If it doesn't, I won't walk away thinking what a waste of my time.
Consequently, church, in this sense, is not something to belong to but something to be. Often the women of the Network talk of communion, of "being human together:"

I think there's something about being human and about experiencing spirituality that hasn't really got a whole lot to do with what exactly you do believe or how you define your beliefs or how you express your experiences, how you define that experience, the language you put it in, the ritual you associate with it, the dogmas and the creeds you use to flesh it out because I believe the experience is the same. And I know I've experienced it, that sense of communion, of being human together.

Hannah characterizes community as being eucharist for one another. The eucharist metaphor uses the Church's central ritual act to express the central mystery of being church: an incorporation of the self into the other and of the other into self:

I think that for me, of central importance in my life is eucharist. But eucharist just doesn't mean, now I'm not denigrating it, it just doesn't mean a piece of bread that is the consecrated body of Christ. For me you, you sitting here in my room, you are eucharist for me today. I am called to be eucharist. When I examine my conscience, for example, one of the things I ask is, "Am I willing to be eucharist for those whom I don't like as well as those whom I like?" Because when Jesus asked us to do this in memory of him, that's what he was saying, for us to give who we are so that others might become more liberated. That's what the good news is all about.

The conviction that to be eucharist in community is the essence of Jesus' teaching is not confined to Hannah. It has prompted a number of CWN members who have undertaken to create community more broadly based than the Catholic Women's Network by forming a housechurch. This housechurch was started in the same period during which the founding members of CWN were gradually withdrawing from regular parish worship and has taken its place for many of them. It
gathers weekly in the home of two of its members for meetings similar to those of CWN: weekly leadership is shared; and the meeting is divided into two parts, an hour-long check-in period followed by scripture and other readings, prayer and eucharist. Unlike CWN, it is not an exclusively female organization, though the majority of its members are women and about half are also members of CWN. Through housechurch the women of CWN have gradually extended the principle of being church into broader areas of their lives and into more diverse circles of contacts. Joan states that to her joining the housechurch was a real homecoming, because to her it expresses the essence of the gospel:

In my trying to grapple with what church was about I had come to the conclusion that community was what it was about and how we lived with each other was the essence of what the gospel meant. [...] I feel like I've come full circle. I'm feeling like in my late teens and in my early adult years that community was really, really important. Now I see that it's actually the essence of the Christian gospel. But I understand community living in a whole different perspective. It's much broader than we all live together in one house. It's how we relate to one another.

The identification of church with "how we relate to one another," also tends to produce the opposite equation as well: if church is relating to one another then any experience of mutual relationship can be an experience of church. Sheila, for example, included the friendships and conversation that went along with hiking with a local hiking group as part of her church. Dorothy also listed having dinner with close friends or having a talk as an experience of church.
Moreover, since the diversity of who may find themselves in mutual relationship is virtually unlimited, those who qualify as being church are quite diverse, making this kind of church thoroughly ecumenical. Claire lists people in all world religions as well as in other Christian denominations as part of her church.

For me, church is my housechurch on Thursday night, it's CWN once a month, it's the Catholic Network for Women's Equality, it's the Ecumenical Women's Centre and the whole campus theological community, it's all Womenchurches everywhere. And it's all the friends I have out there in the United Church and the Anglican Church trying to do the same thing. And it's a lot of people who are struggling also in Judaism, Buddhism to do the same thing.

Hannah goes even further and gives the example of Starhawk, a prominent New Age witch, as someone who is church:

Starhawk is the most beautiful person. She has gone to prison for her cause in Nicaragua. And for her Wicca is a religion going back to the Mother Goddess. And it is not a religion that would appeal to me as a religion, but is Starhawk church? Yes, she is church.

Consequently, the women of CWN need no longer be Catholic to be church and some members have given up not only Church attendance but also any strong identification with their prior Catholic faith. Miriam is presently an atheist, Catharine an avowed pagan, Ann a tentative Buddhist. Melanie practises witchcraft and Kathleen is associated with the Hassidim. But all continue to share a common spiritual life together in community and to be church together.

By this criterion, a woman need not necessarily even be feminist to be church and one might, conceivably, even be a
member of the Church hierarchy. At least Evelyn imagines this possibility. For her, both housechurch and CWN are based too much on a shared ideology and not enough on relationship. She characterizes them "too safe...too comfortable...too homogeneous:"

It's very good of me to build, to have this sense of "church" with people who all think the same as me, who in many ways are professed liberation-oriented people, feminists and whatever. It's too insular. So although it meets needs, it's not enough. It's not real in terms of the greater world out there. And why is it that we can't worship and share our lives with people that don't think the same as us? Why is it that we don't have the ability - we as in all of the Church - to be able to sit and to listen to people when they don't have the same views as us, when they don't have the same vision that we do, why can't we be together in the same room? That really bothers me. Like I know housechurch will never be enough for me because I don't want to be just with people who think the same way as I do.

Naomi enunciates even more succinctly this same principle that to be church by living in community necessarily means allowing relationship to triumph over opinion and ideology.

Ultimately Church has got to be based on relationships and not on ideas. [...] I think Church has got to welcome people no matter what they think. It's got to be a community based on relationship and on a common faith in nothing more necessarily than in the love of God and a belief that the love of God can change our lives and be the basis for what we do.

Being church is not, however, undertaken strictly for the personal benefits of being in communion with another. People share in each other's lives in order to transform them. Hannah explains that the goal of being eucharist is
to liberate each other:

Because when Jesus asked us to do this in memory of Him, that's what he was saying. For us to give who we are that others might be liberated. That's what the good news is all about.

Others believe that the liberation of each other will eventually lead to the transformation of society as a whole.

That's the great thing that communities do. CWN as an intentional Christian community can help people to share their deepest selves and therefore to know what their deepest selves are and then liberate them. And that is therapy but we don't undertake it for the same reasons as therapy. We undertake it for a combined individual/social aim. We think by changing we'll also change society. [...] We think those people who inherited or carried on Jesus's work, the Jesus movement, the work of that movement, I think that's what they were trying to do too.

It should not be surprising to find, therefore, that a majority of the women involved in the Catholic Women's Network are equally involved in social justice activities. Eileen and Tracy recently returned to Canada from ten years of social justice work among the urban poor of Central America. Melanie works in a non-profit organization whose goal is to end legislated poverty. Naomi belongs to an ecumenical religious community whose members include the severely handicapped. Susan, having recently returned from Central America, presently works in public health with street youth.

On a collective basis the women of CWN have joined with other Roman Catholics in the city to form a social action coalition called Alternative Catholic Voices. Alternative Catholic Voices, having a membership of approximately 100 people, is a diocesan-wide network devoted to preserving and
enhancing alternative Catholic perspectives in an otherwise conservative diocese and to promoting social justice concerns. ACV began in 1987 through the efforts of a CWN member who was concerned about the growing silence of the liberal minority within the diocese. She initiated a day-long workshop in which people representing various Catholic special-interest groups in the diocese could meet and discuss their concerns. While the day concluded with the decision that the various interest groups were neither prepared nor philosophically able to speak with one voice, they decided to continue working together collectively to build community among their members and to promote social justice concerns within the diocese, as well as to continue to hold their annual workshop.

 Alternative Catholic Voices organizes monthly liturgies and involves itself in social justice activities both on its own and ecumenically within the city. It is to Alternative Catholic Voices that ecumenical organizers go for Catholic representation at the annual ecumenical memorial for the martyred Archbishop Romero held every Easter. Similarly, Alternative Catholic Voices acts as the official Catholic presence at the ecumenical worship service preceding the annual Peace March in the city. And on the provincial steering committee of the World Council of Churches' Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women, the Roman Catholic Church is represented by two women from Alternative Catholic Voices, both of whom are also members of CWN.
Already heterogeneous in its interests and concerns, ACV has reached out to join in a number of cooperative ventures, some of which also involve women from CWN who are not regular ACV participants. Members of ACV are involved in the purchase of residential property in the downtown eastside in order to create a cooperative community of families, single people and religious who want to work in that area. Others are organizing a cooperative land purchase in the interior of the province. A number of women initiated a support group for women who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse.

Conclusion

The ecclesiology employed by the second generation of the Catholic Women's Network places at its theoretical centre that which is experientially at the centre of their lives: community. In doing so it has obviously displaced from its definition of being church the hierarchical institution that is the Roman Catholic Church. But, interestingly, by the same process of bringing human relationship to the fore, it has displaced feminism as well.

The model of church as community is based on a fundamental principle: the primacy of relationship over ideology. Community exists where there is a mutual sharing of self. It creates dialogue within heterogeneity and attempts to transcend ideological barriers. By that
principle, Catholicism, as an ideology, can assume no privileged status within it. The presence of a heterogeneity of ideological groups is essential to actualize the dialogical nature of church, and so as a church, community should certainly include Catholics, but only as one group among others. Thus, although the Catholic Women's Network itself, Alternative Catholic Voices and the housechurch are composed primarily of Catholics, their membership is not limited to them. Not only Catholics or even Christians, but also atheists, witches and Buddhists may be church.

But being church does something else as well. Along with Roman Catholicism, it also, in a different but equally important way, displaces feminism. It is worth noting that in the third chapter women rarely speak specifically about the situation of women in the Roman Catholic Church in their analysis of its hierarchical structure. On one hand, this may be because the awareness of the oppression of women is such a commonplace in their lives now that it is barely worth mentioning any longer:

I don't know if I'm a feminist or a post-feminist. By post feminist I mean I don't know if I haven't given up. A feminist to me is someone whose still willing to argue the points. I don't even know if I am anymore. I think I've almost reached a point where when it becomes clear to me that someone is not aware of my full humanity on the basis that I'm a woman, I just walk away. I find it so incredibly degrading to stand there and have to argue for my equality, just my right to speak, to think, to be.

On the other hand, the kind of feminism that has been adopted by these women and Womenchurches generally is Marxian and, as such, is a specific application of a general
analysis of structural relations of power that may be applied to any social situation. In the general analysis of power arrangements, those that oppress women have no privileged status: they are grouped in with other oppressors. And in the liberation from oppressive power relations women have no special priority: their place is among other victims. This means women have the same right to release themselves from oppression as any other social group: no more and no less.

As one woman commented, many of the women of CWN are not even bothering to call themselves feminists anymore because to be a feminist "just means we're doing what every human being has the right to do:"

We're not calling ourselves feminists anymore, we're defined as feminists by what we're doing, by the fact that we're women who are meeting together and who are refusing to be told what to do, to be put in a place where we don't want to be, taking control. And that makes us feminist because we're taking control. But it doesn't really. It just means we're doing what every human being has the right to do.

For some, being a good feminist means recognizing that women have no more right than anyone else:

Well, my definition of feminism is trying to make everybody more human, giving us that possibility for us all to develop our own human potential in ways that our society doesn't let us. [...] And to be a good feminist I want to liberate that in everybody. And I think women are the ones who are going to do it right now, that we have that kind of crucial role to play right now, of saying, "You are God. You've just got to let yourself know that and treat everybody else like God, too."

This attitude had led many beyond a concern for the status and rights of women to general critical reflection on
the values that dominate Church and society and on our responsibility for them:

Feminism has just opened a whole door of being self critical and critical of the values our society proposes and of the values our Church proposes. And so it not only has forced me to reevaluate whether women should be altar servers, but it has also caused me to reevaluate how am I contributing to the destruction of our planet by using disposable diapers and by buying into purchasing all kinds of things because materialism is the way to go. It's caused me to stop and reevaluate. It's given me critical skills that I did not previously have. It's given me the ability to step back from society and from Church and be critical about those things. I've been able to change a lot of facets of my life and have been able to be a lot more sensitive to the repercussions of my actions and the actions of others.

That feminism has led many women away from a sole concern with the oppression of women and towards the wider concern for human liberation is also amply illustrated by the central place that social justice activity not specifically focussed on women holds for them.

In sum, being church by living in community has removed from the centre of these women's lives the Roman Catholic hierarchical structure and, consequently their preoccupation with women's status and role in it. Their concern with being in the Church has been displaced by a concern to be church; their concern with the status and role of women in the Church has been displaced by a concern for human liberation. The problem of somehow being a Catholic feminist has given way to the broader question of how to live in community with other human beings and to seek justice in the wider world.
Notes

1. An analogy to the distinction between abuse and oppression of women in the Church is the distinction between a litigant who is denied justice in a legal proceeding because the judge has taken a bribe from the other party to the case and one who is denied justice because the judicial system is so set up that litigants of a given type or class are systematically denied justice, irrespective of the particular judge's attitude or behaviour. The first case involves a criminal abuse of power. The second is an instance of systematic oppression. The immediate consequence for the litigant is identical in both cases, but the means of identifying oppression and seeking redress are very different from the means of resisting and correcting an individual's abuse of power.
Conclusion

The Catholic Women's Network was founded by a group of women who felt frustrated by and disaffected from the ambivalent ecclesiology adopted by the Second Vatican Council.

After a period of four centuries in which the Church defined itself, in reaction to reformation attacks, as a hierarchical society offering the means of salvation to the human race, the twentieth century saw a serious attempt by Catholics to create a new understanding of the Church that would make of its lay members something more than the passive recipients of those means of salvation. Drawing on concepts prevalent in social sciences, theologians worked out a theory of a Church that would be both community and society. At the same time, various Catholic groups tried to establish small-scale models of what a Church living in community might be. The Second Vatican Council, drawing on the theology of such men as Congar and the small-scale experimentation of the liturgical movement, proclaimed the Church to be a community of believers to which its members brought the sacred and the secular, the experienced and the revealed. But the Council also reaffirmed the Church's ecclesial structure and its role.

In the Council's wake, feminist women, like so many other Catholics, focussed on what was new in the Council's
teaching. They adopted a liberal feminism and lobbied for the ordination of women into the clerical hierarchy. Within less than two decades, however, many women, frustrated by an apparently intransigent hierarchy and motivated by Marxian feminist theory, began to participate in Womenchurch, an alternative network of feminist communities which would perhaps be able to influence the ecclesial structure, but, in any case, exist independently of it.

The Catholic Women's Network can be fitted into the Womenchurch movement. It was not the direct creation of Womenchurch, however, and only in the second of the two distinct phases of its history did it become an alternative community for those within it. Despite the changes in membership and function, its format has remained stable. Throughout its life time it has met each month for an evening built around a three fold pattern of sharing - of food, of life experiences and of power. The members of each generation have also tried both in meetings and in liturgical celebrations, to appropriate to themselves the common symbols and rituals of the Church and to develop new ones of their own through which to celebrate their lives and experiences.

Beneath the ongoing pattern of the Network's life, more than just the membership changed. The forms and concerns of the group's activity also changed over time. In the first six month or so after the initial meeting in July 1984, the form and concern was consciousness-raising. Arriving as
isolated individuals with what they believed to be unique, personal problems, the first members began to share their experiences and soon discovered that they shared a common life based on common problems and a common adversary.

The discovery of a shared but unacceptable reality, their common lot as women oppressed in the Church, inspired the first generation to build, at least in community with each other, a new reality according to their feminist vision and common experience. For all, the community experience at the Network's meetings every month were a refuge and a haven from the mainstream Church. For some, however, it was the source strength necessary to proselytize the Church and struggle for its transformation. But they encountered opposition and eventually joined the Network's other members in a gradual exodus from church life and from the Network as well.

The Network that had been a support group for its first generation members became an alternative spiritual community for those who came after them. Their starting point was a critique of the Church that focussed on structures rather than individuals, on oppression rather than abuse. This critique had already led all these women to give up church-going, although in some cases and in varying degrees the return to church attendance remained a possibility.

Whatever their hopes for the Church itself, all the new members wanted a certain kind of experience of church to be found in community with each other. In making community the
exemplar of church life, the second generation rejected the two-fold model of Church as both participatory community and clerical hierarchy proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council by reserving only the former.

Church, as community, is found in human beings in relationship with each other. The experience of being in relationship with each other can be understood through the metaphor of the eucharist. In orthodox Catholic teaching, the eucharist is an incorporation of Christ into the believer as well as the symbol of the incorporation of the believer into the mystical body of Christ, which is the Church. For the women of the Network, however, it is an experience of the incorporation of the other into self and the self into the other.

If to be church is to be human together in relationship, then, by corollary the opposite is also true: being human together, in whatever form and with whomever, is being church. This radical rethinking of ecclesiology had significant, practical consequences for the second generation of the Network. If every human relationship enriches the experience of being church, then a limited number of relationships in a homogeneous context is an impoverishment of it. Being church thus moves beyond the bounds of both Catholicism and feminism; and both feminists and Catholics find their place in the heterogeneous mix of human relations that create church.
Furthermore, if the purpose of human relationship is the liberation of self and others from oppression and if true human relationship is equated with that liberation, which it is, then being church takes on proportions much larger than the mere transformation of the Roman Catholic Church. Being church becomes both a utopian vision of and the means by which to create a new society and a new humanity.


