

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

#### INTRODUCTION

The study seeks to know how a select group of women experience the Catholic Church in Australia and what changes they desire. An open-ended survey and in-depth interviews were seen as the most appropriate tools for gathering this information. This method draws on the 'feminist and phenomenological goals of "starting with women's experiences"' (Reinharz 1992, 21). Specifically, a survey was conducted of WATAC (NSW), comprising a mail questionnaire to all members followed by interviews of a select group of women.

A method of inquiry is adequate if it is consistent with the kind of data required by the research questions (Schatzman & Strauss, 1972, 8). As the key question addressed in this study is 'How do women experience the structural church and desire change within the church?', a phenomenological approach was adopted that enabled women's views to be expressed from their perspective. Phenomenological assumptions behind this study were detailed in Chapter 1, that knowledge is rooted in our immediate experience of the world (Fenwick, 1988, 193). The phenomenologist accordingly is concerned with understanding human behaviour, seeing the world as subjects see it, and uses qualitative methods that produce descriptive data in people's own written or spoken words (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975, 2ff).

Consequently, this study is qualitative. Both survey and interviews were open-ended. Views of the women who belonged to the target group, especially 'lay' women, were sought about their experience of the Catholic Church in Australia. The study does not measure the proportion of these women who experience 'church' in a particular way, nor does it weigh differing experiences of 'church', nor does it exhaust the range of

possible experiences. Instead, it considers insights into ‘church’ that derive from ways in which it is experienced, whether that experience is of one or many, is typical or atypical.

Outlined in this chapter are the methods used for data collection and analysis, the limitations imposed by these methods, and ethical considerations of the research. Also discussed is the impact on the present study of an inquiry launched in August 1996 by the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference (ACBC), *The Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia*

#### **THE TARGET POPULATION – WATAC (NSW)**

In identifying women for the purpose of exploring their experience, it was important that the target group be women who might be assumed to have an interest in and to have reflected on issues related to women and church. WATAC was set up to raise women's consciousness regarding their role within the Australian Catholic Church. Its goal is ‘a change in the understanding of women in their participation in the Australian Church and in society’. Its primary task is ‘consciousness raising of women on Christian feminist issues’ (see Appendix 4). It originated ten years ago under the auspices of the bishops and leaders of religious institutes, and remains under the auspices of the latter. In its origins it was a national body centred in Sydney. This is reflected in the national spread of NSW membership totalling more than eight hundred. Subsequent groups in other states each have less than a quarter of NSW membership.

Because of the above origin, auspices, and purpose of WATAC, its members could be expected to be concerned for the Catholic Church, and identify with it in some way. One WATAC woman who was interviewed has not attended Sunday Mass for eight years, but cannot yet bring herself to say that she is no longer Catholic. Her story is not unique. ‘Being Catholic’, as expressed by respondents, will be explored in data analysis.

These were reasons why WATAC (NSW) members were selected as the target group for this study. They were ‘insiders’, although not necessarily ‘Catholic’ in the tradition of regular church attendance. They were likely to have reflected on relevant issues. Eight hundred members across Australia ensured a broad cross-section of views. The fact that membership includes women who are not Catholic and men had potential for

cross-reference. However the very small number of respondents in these categories<sup>1</sup> allows no more than acknowledgment that the issues were of concern to other than Catholic women. For convenience, WATAC (NSW) has a co-ordinator who was agreeable to help with the study, which facilitated communication and liaison.

While 'church' refers to the Catholic Church in Australia, the reality is that, although respondents to the questionnaire were Australia-wide, all but two women interviewed were from NSW. Some respondents reflected on events in other states of Australia from first- and second-hand experiences. Most women interviewed had experience of the Catholic Church in Australia only, although several referred to overseas experience. Several respondents had belonged to other churches.

In relation to the research question 'How do women experience the Catholic Church?' the study sought to know, through survey and in-depth key informant interview, how a particular group of women experience the Catholic Church. Random sampling was not seen as appropriate, as the study did not seek to make statistical inferences. Each person's experience is real, and is acknowledged as such. The experience of some may be typical of many. The unique experience of others may be insightful and prophetic. The real is considered as the situated thoughts, language and particular practices of people (Popkewitz, 1990, 57), and qualitative methods provide an approach to multiple socially constructed realities recorded non-judgementally (Firestone, 1990, 110ff).

#### **INSTRUMENTS AND PROCESS ADOPTED**

Data were collected in 1996. A qualitative survey was used, with a mail questionnaire as the primary data gathering instrument (see Appendix 2). Replies to the questionnaire provided leads for key informant interviews, a method supported by Deming (1978, 375).

##### **(a) The Questionnaire**

A pre-test of questionnaire items was mailed to a small number of WATAC (Vic) members, but the nature of their responses was inadequate for the design purpose. A

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<sup>1</sup> Nine men, one of whom was not Catholic, and seven women who were not Catholic.

personal approach was made to several women who gave feedback on the structure and wording of the questionnaire, which was amended accordingly.

The questionnaire had two parts: Part 1 Biographical Data and Part 2 Church Experience (see Appendix 2). These were on separate sheets of paper so that they could be detached from each other. Mailed with the questionnaire were explanatory and introductory letters from me, my thesis supervisor, and the WATAC (NSW) coordinator (see Appendix 3), and a stamped-addressed return envelope.

The questionnaire was designed to enable respondents to refer to 'church' as broadly or as narrowly as they wished, whether local parish, diocese or universal church centred in Rome. They could consider 'church' generally or focus on aspects of the church's role and function to sanctify, teach and govern, a role that is linked in the Catholic Church to ordination and is not available to women. This gave rise to wide and sometimes contradictory uses of the word 'church' that form part of data analysis, and lend themselves to interpretative insight.

As part of the questionnaire, the biographical data sheet was constructed in such a way that most answers to questions required only to be circled (see Appendix 2). In other words, it was designed to be user-friendly, inviting response. Categories were designated with a view to potential differences in how church is experienced according to marital status, age, age of children, and education. It was a regretted oversight that no category included country of origin, given the significant proportion of post-war migrants to Australia from predominantly Catholic countries (Campion, 1987, 183). However, it appeared from responses that women from this background are not represented in WATAC membership, which is a limitation of the study.

Most sets of alternatives for items are self-evident, such as 'female' and 'male'. The most contentious line was 'Lay Single-Married-Member of religious congregation-Ordained'. Initial consideration was given to including the full range of de facto, divorced, annulled, remarried, widowed, but this was rejected as intrusive. Many respondents made their own such self-identification, with or without comment. Several women who were divorced or annulled, and others on their behalf, attacked vehemently the limitation of these categories as continuing the church's discrimination in their regard.

Age ranges were clustered around 'phases' in the lives of many women that often have a specific relationship with the church, for example as school parent, or prevented from involvement by the demands of parenting and work and caring for aging relatives. Women who are under twenty-five are likely to be single and in the work force or studies. The 25-35 age bracket is likely to include young married women with pre-school age children. The 39-45 year olds are likely to have older dependent children and be in the work force. The 50-65 year olds are likely to not have a direct parenting role and to be in full-time employment. The over 65s are typically 'retired'. While age comparison was invalidated by disparate numbers<sup>2</sup>, and especially by the negligible number of respondents who were < 25 or 25-35, the large group of respondents who were aged 50+ did allow other inferences to be drawn.

Two-thirds of respondents were tertiary educated. While this is atypical of the Catholic population in Australia generally and may be considered a limitation, the categories 'secondary' and 'tertiary' did not necessarily contribute to understanding women as 'Catholic'. However the general level of education of respondents had other implications that will be discussed later. Most women who had post-school religious or theological education circled 'yes' without comment, although it would be of interest to have further detail. Most 'lay' women circled 'no', meaning that they did not have access to post-school religious or theological education.

'Current church involvement' was mainly as lector or as Minister of the Eucharist. One woman who was interviewed wrote that everything she did was 'church involvement' because she was baptised. Several women commented on being 'unpaid' or added 'underpaid'.

Part 2 of the questionnaire adopted a phenomenological and feminist approach that recognised as authentic each respondent's personal experience, that acknowledged and gave scope to the respondent as a feeling person as well as a thinking person. The respondent was not asked a question but was invited to 'describe' and to 'suggest'. There are no right and wrong answers. They were asked to describe what *is*. They were

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<sup>2</sup> Of respondents who were Catholic women:

4 were aged <25, 10 were aged 25-35, 31 were aged 36-49, 159 were aged 50-65, 37 were aged >65.  
Two-thirds or 196 were aged 50+.

also requested to suggest what changes they would *like*, and why. At issue are what respondents' statements reveal about their feelings and perceptions, and what inferences can be drawn from them about the actual environment or events that they experienced (Dean & Whyte, 1969, 14).

Description of what is, and suggestion of what respondents see as desirable, addressed the research questions more directly. The purpose of inviting suggestions of what might limit or prevent changes was to cross-reference whether desired changes appeared likely, or whether fundamental changes were needed. It provided insight into the 'why' of desired changes.

Responses were invited on a single page, while allowing for respondents who wished more space. The purpose was to lessen the time demanded of a long response. Limited space encouraged succinct and focussed response. More than two-thirds of respondents confined themselves to the single page.

The researcher was careful to not presume on respondents. Hence the reiterated 'please' and 'thank you' within the questionnaire and the covering letter.

The 800 questionnaires to all members of WATAC (NSW) were mailed August 15, 1996. Responses were requested by September 15, 1996, and 273 responses were received by that date. A further 69 responses were received subsequently, a 43% return. Non-response was exercised by 57% of WATAC members. No reminder was sent.

Several options were made available to respondents. A few 'non-respondents' used the stamped-addressed envelope as requested to return a blank survey form or nil response. A few returned the biographical sheet only, which was an option that they were given, and most of these did so anonymously which also was an option that they were given. A few more returned Part 2 anonymously. Overwhelmingly, an unanticipated 85-90% of respondents supplied their name and address, thereby declaring that they were available and willing for interview. Each option gave to the respondent control and self-selection. Many respondents added personal notes expressing appreciation and best wishes. Those who were approached for interview were very welcoming. While 'invitation' questionnaires, such as the one used in this study, tend to show extremes in satisfaction

and vexation, they are of value in assisting in the discovery of the possible range of response (Deming, 1978, 242).

### **(b) Key Informant Interviewing**

Several steps were taken in identifying women who would be approached for interview. These women were not selected randomly. They were selected consciously because of the insights that they might offer. Consequently, they became the key informants who were interviewed in-depth. Because the purpose of the study was to gain deeper insights, the process was valid in consideration of this outcome.

Responses to the survey, which were descriptive, were used to identify a purposive sample of women who were interviewed – purposive in the selection of typical, deviant, sensitive and varied cases (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, 106f.). Thirty-two women were selected. Several other women who were approached were willing for interview but were not available within my limitations of time and place. Women were interviewed because they were seen to be typical in their love-pain or other experience or representative of a ‘category’. For example, several women were interviewed on account of their children’s ages, as women with pre-school age and school age children often consider that they are responsible to their children to give example in religious practice. Several women were interviewed because they stated that they no longer attended Mass. Others were interviewed because they were seen to be atypical but symptomatic of a ‘problem’ in the church, such as the young woman who identified herself as lesbian.

All the women interviewed comprised key informants in that they had special knowledge or perceptions that were not otherwise available to the researcher. They appeared from their questionnaire responses to have more knowledge or better communication skills or different perspectives (Borg & Gall, 1989, 398).

As questionnaire responses were received, Parts 1 and 2 were coded numerically and filed separately. From the Biographical Data, ‘Females’ who were ‘Catholic’ were identified. The selection of ‘Female’ was to allow women their voice, rather than have men speak for them. Several male respondents presumed this and returned biographical data only, with a note to this effect. The selection of ‘Catholic’ excluded women who

were Anglican or Uniting Church, a presumption acknowledged likewise by several of this small number of respondents

Responses of Catholic women to 'Church Experience' were then considered on the merits of content irrespective of other aspects of biographical data. Responses received by the date due were analysed for emerging patterns or unusual perspective.

Women who were members of religious congregations were excluded for the purposes of interview for several reasons. They comprise a minority, numerically diminishing and aging group in the church. Many individuals have had opportunity for theological study and their responses tended to be more sophisticated in theological language and concepts. Many have exercised pastoral leadership in the church, which is not the experience of most women. They are considered by some to be part of the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church, and historically to hold a privileged place within it. The few comments made at interview bore out this perception of privilege, but also conveyed regard and value for religious congregations and their members.

Potential interviewees were identified as above on the basis of 'Church Experience'. The next step was to ascertain those among this group whose provision of name and address identified them as willing for interview and as geographically accessible in and around Sydney and in country NSW. An initial list was made of women who offered a key insight or unique perspective or remarkable experience. In preparing a further list of women whose perspective reflected a general issue or concern, biographical data was taken into account in order to balance factors such as age, marital status, number and age of children, and educational level. For country interviews, several women were purposively selected to provide a rural perspective.

Interviews were conducted in 1996. Those in Sydney were in late September and early October. Those in country Victoria (one) and country NSW, and in Brisbane (one) were in late November and early December. Sydney women were phoned locally several days only ahead of interview. Countrywomen were phoned several weeks ahead to ascertain willingness and availability, and to allow the planning of route, distance and time frame. Most women were interviewed in their homes, two at their work place, and four at another venue, according to their choice.



On meeting each woman, and before entering her home, the researcher presented her driver's licence for identification. This was done out of ethical consideration because the researcher was invading private space, and because of societal regard for security. The woman had previously received with the questionnaire the letters of introduction from the university supervisor and the WATAC co-ordinator (see Appendix 3).

Each woman was reminded that the interview was voluntary, and that she might withdraw then or during the interview or later. She was advised the likely date when she might expect to receive a copy of the transcript for verification and return, and her freedom then to withdraw. Each woman was given a hand-written sheet with 3-5 extracts from either or both parts of her questionnaire response, and was invited to speak to any or all of these. One woman only had difficulty in accepting that the interview would be recorded but agreed when it was explained that the tapes were confidential. A micro-cassette recorder was used. It was unobtrusive, but it recorded poorly in some situations through my error, inexperience and inadequate 'trailing'.

Each woman received a personal covering letter and a copy of the summary transcript to verify, sign, date and return in the stamped-addressed envelope provided. She was invited, if she wished, to put limitations on the use of sensitive material when she returned the transcript. While several women returned their transcripts re-written from recorded speech to formal prose, the majority did the minimal task requested, which was to check for accuracy and clarity. Five women requested particular sensitivity in the use of material that might identify unfavorably another person or a place. Each woman subsequently received a copy of the amended transcript to retain, with a personal covering letter. The amended transcript provided the research data, giving to each woman the control and ownership of her statement (Reinharz, 1992, 37).

#### **DATA REPORTING**

To maintain confidentiality, the numerical coding of responses made on their receipt was retained. According to whether a woman was 'Lay Single', 'Married' or 'Member of religious congregation', the letter S, M or R was prefixed to each number. Several women deleted these categories and inserted respectively 'Widowed', 'Divorced', 'Divorced and Annulled' and 'Lesbian'. For these the letters W, D, DA and L were used. Direct quotations are in italics. An underlined emphasis within a quotation is the

emphasis of the respondent concerned. The date of the interview is given with interview responses. Undated quotations are from questionnaire responses. An asterisk in a footnote reference denotes an interview response.

Every effort has been made to include all related responses in the text or in footnote references. This makes it possible for the reader to 'weight' the total number of related responses and of responses by category, with S, M and R in the approximate ratio 1:3:2. Effort has also been made to use any quotation once only, and to note that a response is cited a second time on the rare occasion that this occurs.

### **ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Theoretical and ethical issues informed both the survey and the interview process. Interviews conducted as mutually constructed conversations can lessen the objectification of persons (Farrell 1992, 59). The aim of the unstructured interview is to secure a vivid, accurate and inclusive account that is based on personal experience. The interviewer must be understanding and sympathetic for the point of view of the person being interviewed. Unless persons are allowed to speak freely, their real intentions and the true meaning of their words will not be known (Burgess, 1982, 107).

Opinions expressed in interview do not necessarily bear relationship to public acts or opinions, and inform only about behaviour in the interview context (Deutscher, 1973, 149). They constitute situations in their own right, and may reflect that situation more than the referential one that the method was designed to ascertain (Schatzman & Strauss, 1972, 6). The statement of the person being interviewed represents merely the perception of that person, filtered and modified by cognitive and emotional responses and reported through personal verbal usage and non-verbal cues in the particular interview situation. In particular, there is a widespread tendency to modify a recollection of past feelings in a subjective way that fits more comfortably with one's current point of view (Dean & Whyte, 1969, 105ff.). Responses are affected by structures of interaction. They can be interpreted only at the level of sense that they have to the participants during the interview situation (Brenner, 1978, 123).

A request to conduct the survey was made in the first instance to the WATAC coordinator. Members of the WATAC Executive Committee were then presented with a

copy of the questionnaire and covering letters, which they authorised for distribution through WATAC mailing. There was a disclaimer in the covering letter that the survey did not study WATAC, and that the individual and collective responses of members did not speak for WATAC.

Another ethical consideration was the confidentiality to WATAC of the membership address list, to safeguard the privacy of members. Logistically, I was in a different city and state from the WATAC office. Ethically, there was a limit to what might be asked of the WATAC co-ordinator and her volunteer support persons. Although it necessitated double handling, ethical considerations prevailed. I prepared the envelopes for mailing and sent them to the WATAC office where address labels were affixed. This means that I have no knowledge of who received questionnaires. The stamped addressed envelopes that were enclosed with the questionnaire were returned direct to me, which means that the WATAC office does not know who replied, unless the individual chose to make this known.

Safeguarding the confidentiality of the address list and of the names of respondents meant that the survey was undertaken with no possible reminder to non-respondents. The survey did not claim to be statistically representative, and this was not problematic. Respondents were treated as free agents and in control of their story, which is an important consideration in feminist research (Reinharz 1992). The purpose of the survey was to allow free expression by as many respondents as chose to reply, and analysis of responses to identify women who would be approached for interview. The response rate of 43%, without follow-up of non-respondents, indicated strong support for the study.

Even without naming, story lines can identify individual women. This requires discretion in the use of text and context. No woman who was interviewed expressed concern that she herself might be identified, but several expressed concern that other persons and places might be identified through the account of her experience. One woman requested that a section of her transcript be deleted for this reason. It related to an issue that concerned her, but was not her own experience and may have incriminated another person.

This woman's yardstick was used in regard to inflammatory information disclosed in the course of an interview. It is a fine line to maintain research standards in respect of

relevant data, no matter how critical or damning of the institution of the Catholic Church or aspects of it, and to not suppress data by way of apologia. It is a fine line to determine that, however intrinsically interesting are the data, the research question is *'How do women experience the Catholic Church?'*. Inclusion of data related to that question. Did the situation or event affect how this woman experiences the church? Was the situation or event relevant to the research question?

Regardless of the research question, there was another ethical consideration. Use of inflammatory material that potentially might discredit a person, falls within a legal framework of proof. The onus of proof in this instance is on the researcher who uses the material, not on the person who makes the allegation. Even if accuracy is determined, the context in which the material is used might still constitute defamation.

A lesser ethical question arose out of the span of five months during which taped interviews were transcribed, and the process of transcription. Most Sydney interviews had been transcribed, and copies sent for verification or amendment to the women concerned, before interviews took place in country and regional towns. An event in the Catholic Church in another state received passing comment from some Sydney women that was not included in the transcript. It received more than passing comment from several countrywomen, because of developments in the interim. I wished ethically to use as research data only the transcript that a woman had signed and authorised. This ethical consideration outweighed the temptation to review the tapes and to extrapolate comment that was incidental to the woman concerned. This again was a judgement of relevance to the research question, however tempting it might be to develop a composite picture.

#### **POSSIBLE LIMITATIONS**

Related to ethical considerations is the question of contamination (McCall, 1969) or 'intrinsic adequacy' (Guba, 1978: 62). The potential for contamination in this study was multiple: (i) my bias directed (distorted?) the research questions and the questionnaire items; (ii) respondents to the questionnaire distorted consciously or unconsciously in what they replied or omitted; (iii) routine contamination issues were associated with the interview process in regard to the person interviewed; (iv) routine contamination issues were associated with the interview process in regard to myself; (v) specific

contamination issues related to the fact that I was a member of a religious congregation of women; (vi) the enthusiasm directed at the study imposed a burden of expectation that had the potential for contamination; and (vii) distortion resulted from project management.

The theory of feminist research maintains that the researcher is a partner in the study. This helps in viewing respondents as partners and not as objects. The theory of phenomenological research acknowledges the value of deriving the research question from the personal concern and experience of the researcher. In phenomenological theory, knowledge is contextual. In this study, I imposed the context of the research questions and influenced the setting for respondents to the survey and for persons interviewed. Notwithstanding, the research questions have intrinsic adequacy. The underlying principles of qualitative research and of feminist research allowed me to explore how a target group perceived its own experiences. Through open-ended survey, respondents in the target group had scope to determine their own definition and understanding of the situation that they experienced. For this reason, researcher bias was less likely to contaminate than in a controlled study where definition was imposed by the researcher.

Respondents to the questionnaire might distort their answers unconsciously or consciously. It was evident from interview that some women did not remember that they had answered the questionnaire in a particular way, and occasionally could not explain what they had intended at the time. Similarly, comment came back on amended transcripts. 'I do not know what I was trying to say'. The questionnaire and the interview were no more and no less than the record of a particular interaction at a particular time. There is always static in a communication. Words have a general meaning, a contextual meaning and an undercurrent of meaning for the individual. This is more so in written communication where clarification may not be possible. The intention and meaning of the speaker or writer do not necessarily flow into words chosen or their construction within a sentence. Readers and hearers bring their own meaning to words and constructions, and may differ from one another and from the writer/speaker in the meaning they derive, because of mood or personal agenda. The brevity of responses also distorted the effect of what was included or omitted. The above make for contamination by respondent and researcher.

In the interview, as the woman was viewer, recorder and reporter of events, she may have lacked the skills for one or more of these tasks. She faced the potential for distortion because these events affected her, and may have set up emotional block or exaggeration. However, this is part of how she experienced a situation or event. It was real to her, although it might not appear to be realistic to an on-looker. Nobody can take from another person the reality of that person's experience.

Both the person interviewed and the person interviewing are influenced by the interview relationship, especially when experiences shared are sensitive and confidential. Mutual trust is established, and a personal bond derived. The interview thus becomes an encounter that has its own dynamic, and its rules or ethics of interaction. This relationship will necessarily influence perceptions and interpretations. In experimental situations, the influence of an experimenter's expectations and the subject's knowledge that an experiment is underway is called the Hawthorne effect (Burns, 1997, 143). An element of the effect of the researcher on the researched and vice-versa is present in the interview situation.

The interviewer routinely contaminates through mannerisms that affect differently the persons being interviewed, and because mutual attractiveness and attraction will not be equal across all interview relationships. The interviewer, as the common factor, has more responsibility for avoiding contamination.

In the first interview, I was conscious that I took a defensive and instructional stance in regard to aspects of the Catholic Church that were criticised. While this was the only occasion when I was aware of being defensive (I might have been unconsciously defensive on other occasions), I was aware that I also 'instructed' or gave information in some early interviews. While this information was helpful to the woman concerned, it cut across the interview process. It set up a dynamic of unequal relationship, with the potential for the woman being interviewed to feel less in control, and it interrupted the flow of her story.

It was difficult for me as researcher to divest myself of the 'counselling' mode of my professional life prior to my present research. I was quickly aware of this and of my tendency to give helpful information. I became the researcher for the duration of the interview, trying to listen attentively, to interrupt only when clarification was needed, to

enter the conversation only when the woman concerned indicated that she wanted direction. Recording cue words in a note pad enabled me to make appropriate response to a woman's deeply felt emotion and to give information that the woman was seeking when the tape recorder had been turned off. This interchange was not recorded. Only rarely did I ask a question on what was not part of the woman's questionnaire response. This happened once or twice when it became evident in the course of interview that a woman's experience complemented what had been a key issue for another woman, and a question was asked in that context. Once or twice also a woman had finished her story and time allowed a question. In transcribing, I was careful to not include what was obviously a woman's echo of my question, so that the transcript reflects what was initiated by the person interviewed and not what I initiated except in a general way such as change of topic.

Expressions of enthusiasm that this study was being undertaken imposed a burden of expectation as to outcomes. There was a perception that what is considered problematic for women in the Catholic Church in Australia would be resolved and that direction would be given for a way forward. This was to misunderstand the nature of doctoral research. The present study is not action-research. However some feminist researchers believe that the act of obtaining knowledge creates the potential for change. The paucity of research about certain groups accentuates and perpetuates their powerlessness. In this sense research is political because it demystifies (Reinharz 1992, 191).

Distortion arose out of project management in regard to access to individuals, and difficulties of recording. Some women were not accessible geographically within constraints of time and distance. Others were not available at a time when interview could be conducted. One respondent touched on an issue that was not identified by others. Her non-availability for interview meant the loss of this insight.

Poor quality recording on occasion created distortion. A micro-cassette recorder was used because it was not intrusive. Because it was not powerful, and because initially I was not aggressive in placing it close to the woman being interviewed, some early recording was faint. Some women had an intonation range that meant the loss of words at the end of a sentence. Several women were very emotional to the point of tears, and their voices became muffled. Occasionally the background noise of a passing car caused the loss of a word. The decision between setting up 'perfect' conditions for recording,

and ensuring the comfort zone of the woman being interviewed, leaned to the latter. I was conscious that I was a guest to the home, and the recipient in the situation. The value to the woman who was being interviewed was the rare opportunity (expressed by several as effectively non-existent for women within the Catholic Church) to state her opinions and feel that she was listened to and heard. This applied especially to the countrywomen. It was rare that a countrywoman did not speak the full hour into the tape and still wish to continue. It was as rare that a Sydney woman spoke to the end of the tape.

The study might be challenged for lacking 'extrinsic adequacy' (Guba 1978, 62). Its target group is not representative of all Catholic women. Neither can the purposive sample claim to speak for all. It is confined to specific limited experience. It is less than perfect in its recording or technology. The study has limitations in this sense. So what can it claim?

Whether something is a shortcoming relates to the parameters that define it. WATAC membership is not representative of the membership of the Catholic Church in Australia. It does not claim to be an organisation representative of a section of the Catholic Church. It has individuals who are its members, who no doubt subscribe to membership for many reasons. The organisation has a specific purpose to raise women's consciousness regarding their role within the Australian Catholic Church. Within the hierarchical and clerical structure of the Catholic Church, it is unlikely that any view on women's role might be considered 'representative', even of women. Many respondents to the questionnaire wrote of general conservatism, and especially among some women. Several women who were interviewed spoke of negative experiences in this regard. My intention in undertaking this study was to identify a range of ways in which women experience the Catholic Church in Australia. WATAC (NSW) provided an easily accessible group of women who are likely to have reflected on their experience and be willing to articulate it.

Conducting a survey through an organisation that was willing to affix address labels was non-intrusive of the organisation and its members. Allowing members to nominate their willingness to be interviewed was also non-intrusive. Although self-selected or volunteer 'informers' might be considered to have a grievance or an exaggerated perspective, the response rate in this study, both the 43% that responded to the



questionnaire, and the 85-90% that gave their name and address as an expression of willingness to be interviewed, suggest that any grievance or an exaggerated perspective is likely to be contained by the proportionate numbers involved.

The intention of the questionnaire was to identify what issues are held in common by members of the target group, and to identify which women responded in a way that suggested that they might be able to provide insight and what might be considered the 'remarkable' experience of an individual. The purpose of the study is to identify a broad range of experience and insight, whether shared or unique. The experience and insight of an individual might be 'prophetic' and, in this study, might be more important than experiences and insights that are shared. 'Population validity' (Guba 1978, 62) in this study derives from the range and quality of the experience and the insight expressed more than from statistical representation.

Each woman's experience is her reality. The questionnaire response and the experience described in interview are a particular woman's construct of herself and of her world, in so far as she is able to describe it. However the questionnaire procedure and the interview procedure constitute situations in their own right. Therefore what the woman reports might better reflect the questionnaire/interview situation than the referential situation of her experience. The researcher is outside the referential situation, which might be filtered and converted by a respondent (Schatzman & Strauss, 1972, 6).

The reality of the survey situation exists at a given and static point of time. The women themselves acknowledged this when they said that they could not recall what they intended at the time they responded to the questionnaire or at the time that they were interviewed. Several women who were interviewed wrote when they returned the transcript that they found the transcript revealing of themselves and of directions that they might pursue. As skilled counsellors know, people carry answers within themselves but do not always have opportunity to unlock them. Many persons experience the flash of inspiration that they cannot recall later. An experience or insight is not less valid because it is expressed in a particular context and then forgotten. Because an opinion is expressed in one context does not mean that it is limited to that context.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Although computer programs exist that facilitate retrieval of coded items, I chose to code manually in order to read and situate comments repeatedly in the context of a total response. While this was laborious and extremely time consuming, I believed that it enabled me to remain close to the contextual meaning given by the respondent, especially as the study sought insight and did not aim to quantify.

Responses of males and of women who were not Catholic were set aside, as the number in each of these categories was insignificant and did not allow comparison. The responses of women who identified themselves as 'Catholic' were analysed separately according to 'lay single', 'married' or 'member of religious congregation'. This had the potential for comparative analysis. However, the disparate numbers (in the approximate ratio of 1:3:2 respectively), the ambiguity of 'single' (as above), and the remarkable similarity of responses on most issues, did not warrant detailed comparative analysis. Every effort was made in Chapters 5-9 to incorporate into analysis and comment every related response. Occasionally proportional numbers are cited. More commonly, references are given in footnotes, a glance at which will provide ready reference to the total number of related responses and the number of S, M and R responses.<sup>3</sup>

## THE BISHOPS' INQUIRY

During the course of this study, the ACBC launched a research project, *The Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia*, referred to as 'the Inquiry' or 'the Bishops' Inquiry'. The survey questionnaire for this study was designed and printed ahead of the launch of the Inquiry. Overlap in timing means that the Inquiry had some bearing on the present study.

The first part of the Inquiry invited written submissions from groups and individuals, the time-line for submissions coinciding with data collection for this study. A few respondents to the questionnaire and interviewees initiated remarks about the Inquiry, and contrasted this study's invitation to describe experience with the Inquiry's questions about ways of participating.

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<sup>3</sup> S, M and R responses should be weighted in the ratio of 1:3:2.

It is possible that overlap in timing influenced responses to the survey. Respondents who commented on the Inquiry were negative in their perception that the bishops would not listen and could not hear, which may have exaggerated the vehemence of perceptions of ‘they’ as barriers to change. Respondents commented negatively that the Inquiry asked ‘what are various ways in which women participate?’ which may have contributed to their assertion that ‘we are church’. The Inquiry did not invite expression of feelings, which may have contributed to respondents in this study describing feelings as a statement of experience. While it might have been unusual in the Inquiry for women to say that feelings were barriers to participation, this study shows that feelings can be significant in preventing respondents from participating in ‘church’.

The second part of the Bishops' Inquiry was a section relating to women in the Church Life Survey's statistical sample of parishes. Five per cent of church attendees, approximately 4,500 women and men of all ages, completed this section. Survey of dioceses and Catholic organisations provided background information on the proportion of women in various church roles. While consideration had been given in the present study to research statistical background data, this was rendered unnecessary by the Inquiry's extensive data gathering, even had it been considered desirable.

## SUMMARY

Methodology is a path to inquiry. The methods used in this study inquire into and portray the realm of intersubjective meanings constituted in the culture, language and symbols of the target group (Schwandt, 1990, 258ff.).

The repeated reading of responses during data analysis ensured that respondents were treated as persons and not ciphers. These women have faces and stories to which the constraints of this study cannot do justice.

Limitations, contamination and shortcomings are acknowledged, and ethical considerations are addressed. The instruments and processes are detailed – questionnaire and key informant interview, data collection and data analysis.

To know and to acknowledge why a particular method for data collection was chosen, what are intrinsic limitations of the method and further limitations arising out of application - these help to ensure that undue claim is not made as to what can be derived from the data. Findings derived from the data are presented in the five chapters that follow. The first of these which follows introduces how respondents used the word 'church', how they experienced liturgy and worship, teaching and policy, governance and decision-making in the Catholic Church. It introduces the 'we'- 'they' tension that is the experience of church for many women.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### PERCEPTIONS OF CHURCH

#### INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports findings from ways in which women described their experience of church. The key theme of this chapter is the 'we'-'they' dichotomy of lay-clergy and female-male. A framework for the chapter is provided by the research of Winter, Lummis & Stokes (1995) on the alienation of American women, and the collection by McManus (1991) of stories of alienation of Australian Catholic women.

A small number only of respondents described their experience of church as positive. For example one woman described the church as *more 'user friendly' now than when she was a child - more emphasis on a loving, forgiving God, than the fear and damnation, makes the laity feel included in the life of the church (W221).*

Respondents wrote positively of the church's *rich traditions (R267),<sup>1</sup> its breathtaking vision and impossible challenge to love and serve (R47), its involvement in welfare and justice issues (M262).<sup>2</sup> However these were minority views. A high proportion of respondents conveyed in negative terms that they experienced liturgy as male-oriented, excluding and alienating, teaching as not in touch with reality, and governance as authoritarian and condescending. Respondents perceived that structures and persons of hierarchy and clergy blocked the vision and values, sharing and caring. As one woman commented: *the church has dulled the flame, making it difficult to be Catholic; it's a great challenge (S78).**

It needs to be kept in mind that respondents were a significantly educated group. Most were tertiary educated and a majority had post-school religious or theological education. One study of five hundred American women found that not only were more highly educated women significantly stronger in their response, but that there

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<sup>1</sup> S174, M303.

<sup>2</sup> cf M188, M226, M273.

was a significant inverse relationship between education and the degree of satisfaction with one's participation in the church (O'Connor, 1993, 29ff.).<sup>3</sup>

More than six-tenths of married and single Catholic women, and more than eight-tenths of members of women's religious congregations, used the word 'church' at least once in their written response. One respondent shared at interview an insight that addressed the ambiguity of 'church': *For a whole year I decided I would never use the word 'church' by itself. I would always use it only as an adjective. It was a revelatory experience. You could talk about church building, the church community, church leaders. It clarifies matters considerably. I've learned from Bishop X. He uses it as a verb – 'be church' (S275, 11/10/96).*

Infrequent use of the word 'church' denoted building,<sup>4</sup> congregation or parish,<sup>5</sup> or religious service.<sup>6</sup> Although one-tenth of respondents described church as People of God, their responses indicated that few conceptualised church as 'we' or acted upon this understanding. A significantly high proportion of respondents equated 'church' as 'it' meaning structures or as 'they' meaning hierarchy and clergy. While this might have resulted from specific reference in the survey to liturgy and worship, teaching and policy, governance and decision-making, the freedom with which respondents described their experience of church suggested that a 'we'- 'they' divide is a key theme of this chapter.

This chapter explores how respondents understood and perceived 'church'. It addresses perceptions of church as 'we' and 'they', and respondents' experience of a we-they divide between laity and clergy, between women and men. It examines comments by respondents on liturgy and worship, teaching and policy, governance and decision-making, as invited in the survey. It makes reference to what attracted respondents who described why they joined the Catholic Church as adults.

#### **WE - THEY**

The one-tenth of respondents who described 'church' as People of God wrote of 'we' in several ways. Several respondents wrote that *the church is people (R66)*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> cf Greeley & Hout survey findings, *The Tablet*, 23/3/1997, 389.

<sup>4</sup> M31, M73, S195, M228.

<sup>5</sup> R19, R154.

<sup>6</sup> R15, M29, S59, S67, M125, R126, R149, M171, R236, M243, M322.

<sup>7</sup> cf R40, R143, S269.

This aspect of church, especially at parish level, enabled many women who felt alienated by church structures to tolerate an otherwise sterile experience of 'church'. This theme will be explored in Chapter 6.

Two respondents wrote: *I see now I am 'the church' (R264); if the church is about people, the areas of discrimination are being kept in place by those of us who are church (R302)*. These respondents claimed responsibility as church for the manner of church that they experienced. This theme will be explored in Chapters 8 and 9. If 'we' are responsible, the following comment might be prophetic of what church could be: *pockets of church which I find exciting - women and men exploring new ways (R217)*.<sup>8</sup>

However, the following comments about church were more representative of the we-they dichotomy: *widening gap between hierarchical church and the 'rest of us' (R250), definite line in church between the priest and congregation (S147); the church has lost touch with laity (M50)*;<sup>9</sup> *though it isn't, the church would appear to be the hierarchy (R313)*. One woman wrote of the failure of leadership of hierarchy and clergy in this regard: *the Catholic Church under their leadership has lost sight of the message of Christ and the belief that people are the church (M88)*.

Several respondents explicitly equated 'church' with 'hierarchy'. Two respondents alternated 'it' and 'they', implying that 'church' and 'hierarchy' were equated, as in the following: *I experience the Catholic Church as no longer interested in people and their lives, especially the poor and women ... they are / it is more concerned about the power structures and control and the interests of a patriarchal institution. They=pope, bishops, priests (M88)*.<sup>10</sup> Other respondents related 'church' to actions that belonged to members of the hierarchy, for example: *the church, I am convinced, must ordain women to the priesthood (M70)*.<sup>11</sup>

Between one-third and one-half of respondents made reference to: *structure of the present church (S187); the authoritarian and patriarchal nature/set-up of the church (S148); 'fixed' male hierarchy (S291); centuries of male dominance (M127)*.

'Church' was described as *patriarchal (M93); sexist in its decision-making process,*

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<sup>8</sup> cf R95.

<sup>9</sup> cf R26, S28, S41, S42, M85, M125, R177, R185, S195, M208, M210, M237, R247, R250, M259, R264, R313, M/S314, M337.

<sup>10</sup> cf M294.

<sup>11</sup> cf M194.

*pronouncements, language and imagery (S35); an outdated institution (M119); exclusive in all areas (M159); a very inhibiting conservative church (M79); a church that 'told you' (R290).*

The we-they divide between laity and hierarchy, people and structure was emphasised in a female-male divide, as in the following comments: *the church is a 'men's club' that doesn't know how to relate to women; I think they fear us and so we are put down (M295);<sup>12</sup> the Catholic Church is grounded in outdated rules and regulations that are mainly made by males for males (M98);<sup>13</sup> patriarchal church wishes to retain status quo and power (M159);<sup>14</sup> the Catholic Church fails to recognise or acknowledge the expertise of women (R162), despite general social changes (M96); I feel the church so alienating of women (R236), ready to rebuke and dismiss women who challenge or question (M80); I would like the church to listen to what women are saying and experiencing and feeling (S148);<sup>15</sup> the church sees women as necessary instruments for men to have as partners; they never consider women as women; ... surely it can be worked out so that women have their respect and their place (M256, 3/10/96).*

'Church' was clearly perceived to be *male-dominated,<sup>16</sup> patriarchal, excluding;<sup>17</sup> the powerful message is that women are irrelevant to salvation history (S214);<sup>18</sup> hollow rhetoric on women's role / issues (M124).<sup>19</sup>*

One woman who lived and worked in a rural community expressed an interesting perspective on gender:

*Gender is really important because gender so defines roles in Catholic communities because large numbers of people have been to Catholic schools - all boys' schools, all girls' schools. They've been taught by nuns and by priests, so their concept of gender is really strong. The roles that you are given in a Catholic community about being male and female are also very strong ... Gender is really important (S178, 11/11/96).*

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<sup>12</sup> cf R30, M65, M294.

<sup>13</sup> cf M188.

<sup>14</sup> cf M88, R122, R126.

<sup>15</sup> cf M65, M103.

<sup>16</sup> cf S13, M21, R33, S35, S45, R120, R162, M163, R189, S214, M237, M270, M272, R288.

<sup>17</sup> cf R91, R92, R155, R172, S187, R204, M223, R267, M268, R330.

<sup>18</sup> cf M21, R26, S28, R30, M65, M70, M99, M130, R162, M163, M198, M223, R236, M320, M325.

<sup>19</sup> cf M21, R30, S42, M124, R155.



Because ordination in the Catholic Church is gender-exclusive and carries the roles of sanctifying, teaching and governing, clerical structures dominate liturgy and worship, teaching and policy, governance and decision-making. This extends and particularises the we-they divide that women who participated in the study expressed as their experience of church. For many women these structures were oppressive, leaving them with a sense of powerlessness.

#### LITURGY AND WORSHIP

‘Church’ frequently meant parish, priest and worship. As one respondent explained: *I am constantly coming back to priests, but I see them as being the face of the institutional church at present (M188)*. Respondents qualified experience of ‘church’ according to parish or priest, as in the following comment: *it depends on the parish priest and his attitude and the atmosphere he creates and how responsive he is to people (M89)*.<sup>20</sup> This was the experience of women in the American study also (Winter, Lummis & Stokes 1995). One young married woman spoke passionately at interview:

*It shouldn't depend on the parish. This is the problem and it's exactly my point. It shouldn't depend on the parish. There ought to be policies and protocols and structures in place, that mean it doesn't depend on the parish ... It shouldn't depend on the parish. That's the whole problem. It does (M110, 5/9/96).*

The struggles of many respondents was encapsulated in the following experience:

*The community in which I celebrate the Eucharist was given the gift of a pastor with vision who allowed us to take responsibility for our faith, and enabled us to understand through action what it means to be part of God's Kingdom. The liturgies were community-oriented and empowering. However all this has changed and we, the church, have been turned into a community without vision and responsibility. The church has dulled the flame, making it difficult to be Catholic. It's a great challenge (S78).*

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<sup>20</sup> cf M87, M99, M183.

A positive parish context was described as *welcoming and committed to lay involvement (M129), open to have women participate (M52), where language is inclusive (R91), decision-making is fairly democratic (R40), teaching and policy are inclusive and challenging and very universal (R157)*. Clerical orders were perceived by respondents to be *much less bound (S214), and to move more towards involving women (M243)*. Repeated positive references were made to a parish administered by a clerical order because of its *sense of community (M240), caring (R106) and emphasis on family groups (M77)*, and because it was *open to lay participation, inclusive language and innovative liturgy (M323)*. A parish was named by respondents because *worship is shared, market-place type, social-justice oriented; Gospel reflections are challenging, uncomfortable (R19)*.<sup>21</sup>

Differentiation was made between ‘Eucharist’ and ‘liturgy’ as in the following: *I have a deep understanding of the essence of the Mass ... but I experience the surrounding liturgy as being often routine, unimaginative and unprepared (R14)*. Comments on ‘Eucharist’ were positive: *the Eucharist is central to my Catholic life, as the Pascal mystery (M306); the Mass - its rituals and symbolism, its richness and poetry ... the east/west fusion that is Catholicism (mysticism and mystery); this provides for a central focus on God and Christ which engages all physical senses, heart and soul, left and right brain (M110)*.

Perceptive comment on the nature of liturgy was expressed by one woman:

*I am deeply aware of the richness inherent in the Catholic Church’s liturgical worship, but this has come more from my liturgical studies than what I generally experience on a Sunday. I believe the general poverty of our liturgical celebrations is due to a lack of understanding and appreciation by both people and clergy of the importance of the assembly as a symbol of the church at prayer. People are there as individual spectators, and priests still seem to see themselves as the celebrant, with no accountability to the community. This is of course reflected in the total disregard of so many of the importance of using inclusive language both in the prayers and readings (R335).*

Because worship is central in the Catholic Church, negative experience of liturgy caused pain and alienation to women, as the following indicate: *I think the liturgical*

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<sup>21</sup> cf R2.

*scene is hardest for me (R84); I am finding my worship within the church increasingly more difficult because of the attitude of our priests; I find myself being critical and this does upset me as I do not want my worship to be along these lines (M163). Although, as some respondents perceived, liturgy and worship expectations are to meet God in Community, Word, and Eucharist (R154),<sup>22</sup> several women noted constant disappointment in worship (R258) because liturgy is very routine (R316) and a closed approach is taken (R274).*

Much of the pain experienced in liturgy derived from the fact that it was seen as *exclusive of women's experience - exclusive of image and experiences of God other than in masculine terms (M142); women and women's stories are exiled from the altar, excluded from the lectionary, omitted from images of God (S214); it is often the experience of being a spectator with only a little involvement (R283).*<sup>23</sup> Liturgy was described as *banal (M223),<sup>24</sup> static (M273),<sup>25</sup> empty and meaningless (R186),<sup>26</sup> 'masculine' in style and language (R298), at times alienating (R191), usually unsatisfactory at the communal level (R189), irrelevant to experiences of everyday life (R288).*<sup>27</sup> Comment on homilies was also negative.<sup>28</sup>

Negative experience of liturgy and worship was especially difficult for women who felt or were made to feel responsible as mothers and wives, as the following attested:

*It is an enormous dilemma in bringing up children, because I want to give them a Catholic upbringing, but I refuse to expose them to the soulless, boring, irrelevant, soul-destroying liturgies that we find in 98% of our parish churches (M150).*

*To start questioning it, to start to step back, I didn't really do that until the children left home ... I felt responsible to them, somehow, to continue to be a regular Mass attender, even when the hurt started. Once they left home that left me free to decide for myself, but not really, because my husband's a really strong guy, and he felt that I was letting him down by not coming with him (M254, 8/10/96).*

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<sup>22</sup> cf M72, R144, R154, M174, M188.

<sup>23</sup> cf R16, M273, R313.

<sup>24</sup> cf M210.

<sup>25</sup> cf M62, R33.

<sup>26</sup> cf R26, M80, R136, R280, R300.

<sup>27</sup> cf R162.

<sup>28</sup> S25, R126, R136, R204, R267, R281.

*I said: 'I'm leaving the church' ... It caused great trouble in the family. My husband thought I should still be going. The children stopped going. I think this is why they did. When women start leaving, others start leaving (M289, 10/10/96).*

Although these were particular instances, they illustrate the sense of entrapment that women can experience. As with victims in abusive marriage relationships, women's sense of responsibility for their children or their husband, and the commitment they made, may prevent their acting independently in their own felt interests.

Two women expressed the pain and dilemma they felt as mothers of daughters:

*'Do I want them to be part of the church in the future?' I suppose I do. If I do, I have to stay with it and at least try to be positive and make a suggestion that someone might listen to, or support an initiative that's been taken that maybe will put in place better things for the future (M132, 26/11/96).*

*I feel particularly angry that, after bringing up my daughters as Catholic, the only church that they now encounter ignores them as people. I just can't continue supporting the oppression of so many people, and feel sad about it (M325).*

A mother of sons wanted them to be open to women's inclusion:

*What's important to me, as someone who is married and who has two boys and a girl, is that I'm not anti-male. There's no way that I want to destroy all the male images of God, or male clergy. What I am looking for is that broad inclusive view where both aspects of the male and female are represented ... So in my worship at church ... I'll say 'God' instead of 'he'. My eldest, who is ten, is constantly nudging me. 'It says "he". It says "man"'. That's my opportunity to discuss that with him. 'Who's to say that God is a man? Surely there are aspects to God other than a man. Why aren't I envisaged and included in those images?' He's thinking about it. But at this stage I suppose, being ten and conforming ... is very important (M142, 13/12/96).*

The following mothers took different approaches to their children's attending Mass, related to age and family factors:

*Why subject [pre-school] children to Mass, unless they're the calm, reflective, meditative types who will look at the candles and listen to the music, as the boy has done for a while, but won't always. The average child isn't like that. The language of the Mass is so sophisticated and so adult ... and even if it's made lively, it's still in adult language. It's an adult form. It isn't for children. No matter how it's done, it's not for children. So unless they're switching off from the content and meditating on the form, which is ok, it's of no value to them. They will come at their own pace (M110, 5/10/96).*

*The fifteen-year-old boy was going to be an Anglican like his dad so he didn't have to go to Mass. But last Saturday 'Take me to Mass. I'm going to do this tomorrow' ... I guess I give them that flexibility as they've got to the teenage years. 'You're going to Mass, but you can choose which Mass you're going to' ... Once they get to eighteen, which my eldest daughter's just about at, if she chooses not to go to Mass, that's ok (M170, 27/11/96).*

*The seventeen-year-old actually asked us if he could stop going to Mass. He complains every Sunday about having to go to Mass. But we asked him to keep going, because we wanted the younger boy to have the experience of formalised religion ... We're lucky in that he'll go. He'll whinge, but he won't whinge about going to Mass in front of his brother. He is very spiritual, but he is not religious ... He just doesn't see the relevance of formalised religion (M69, 11/10/96).*

Women who lived in rural parishes that did not have a resident priest viewed the church service as an important focus for the community. They perceived that the loss of church services had a community dimension, as the following comments suggest:

*The priest lives in B [48'cm] and commutes down - nothing to do with our parish at all ... Servicing the rural people is very much an add-on. Basically he doesn't have much of an impact on our lives. He says Mass, but that's it. The church impact on my life is the community of the church. The priest is*

*absolutely irrelevant to it. They come and they go. They're good and they're bad. They're just there. But the people, the community around the people, is the interesting thing (S178, 11/11/96).*

*I'd like to be involved more, but you can't do it in the bush. Without a priest, like last year at Easter, things are not there ... I honestly think parishes without priests are going to die in country areas. They're gradually going to fade away. There's nobody to keep them going into the future ... If that happened in X you'd really come to a dead-end; it's 120km to Y, and it's nearly 200 to Z, so you're a long way from anything. The people west of X only get Mass when the priest goes out, perhaps every three months ... I suppose it's the same everywhere, but in these far-flung places, it's further to go (M85, 27/11/96).*

*I see around here lots of grieving in little places. There are little community churches out in little community districts – they've all been boarded up. They kept a little community alive. Now the priest says 'You've got to come into here because we're so short of priests'. If the priest would go out thirty or forty miles, on a Wednesday night, and they had a little Mass out there instead of three big Masses here half attended - that could be their Sunday, and that little community would look after one another like they used to ... It would keep those little communities alive, and I think people would love and care for each other. But they all broke up (M273, 7/12/96).*

*I think in small communities, when once the priest goes, for a lot of those people there's no figure. There's no bank manager, there's no policeman, there's no railway station manager ... there's not a central major figure unless the churches together can provide it - it can be a non-denominational person for some of those communities ... I think the church has had a really vital role to play in those areas (M141, 28/11/96).*

## TEACHING AND POLICY

Many respondents used emotive language to express the view that the church's teaching and decision-making did not include a woman's perspective, did not touch into a woman's experience, did not allow discussion of issues that were significant to women. The following comments are illustrative: *church documents ... so often*

*... speak for women instead of allowing women to speak for themselves (R100); I strongly resent the absence of women's voices in the decisions which emanate from Rome (M72); recent 'infallible' teachings from Rome leave me frustrated and disillusioned, but not inferior, although that is what is suggested (M93); the audacity of anyone in this day and age to tell people they can or cannot discuss any matter is injustice and discrimination, and totally unchristian (M198).*<sup>29</sup>

It was noted that, irrespective of theological training or pastoral role, those who were not ordained were ineligible for the formal teaching role of the Catholic Church. This included the homily: *although women (and lay men) are educated in theology and other relevant disciplines and capable of being church leaders and teachers we are still in a situation where bishops and priests are seen to be 'the holders of the faith and teachings' (R274).*

Comment tended to be critical that church teaching was not grounded in experience and so not relevant, as the following expressions indicate: *decision-making usually comes from those who have very little reason to question the values of the church, mainly, I suppose, because they are the ones who stay fully involved and committed to the church as it is; we for whom things have not gone so well tend to have little credibility (M279); I believe the policies and teachings are returning to the 'good old days' which relied upon a passive response from the laity and which ensured the power base by emphasising authority and tradition (M333); bishops need ... to be a little less interested in 'keeping the rules'; people and their needs count for so little in the Catholic Church (M268);<sup>30</sup> not enough felt compassion for people who live with today's difficult situations (R288);<sup>31</sup> there is no room for the movement of the Spirit (M226); the God-giveness of all this (R75). For some respondents this was a source of anger and frustration: *the church angers and frustrates when it refuses to learn from people's lives (R47);<sup>32</sup> I get angry with the way decisions are made and where emphasis is given, e.g. 'infallibility' - what does it mean? or matter? (R20).**

Problematic, for married women especially, was church teaching on sexuality, divorce and birth control, in part because *the church has always given members a 'guilt conscience' (M171).*<sup>33</sup> A social worker spoke at length:

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<sup>29</sup> cf R135.

<sup>30</sup> cf R106, R126, R143, M151, R204.

<sup>31</sup> cf M325.

<sup>32</sup> cf R217, R230.

<sup>33</sup> cf S174, M195, M205.

*[Guilt] is one legacy, sometimes I think the only legacy, that some people have got from their Catholic upbringing ... A couple of us Catholic women in counselling roles were saying 'If ever you find someone who's being counselled, and they say they're feeling really guilty about something, please question where it comes from. Because you can almost guarantee that it will come from their Catholic upbringing'. Even if they're not practising, it's so real to them ... They'll say ... 'I'm Catholic. I couldn't take the pill or anything, because it's against the rules of the church' ... I feel really sad that the church has done this to some people ... That's a real moral dilemma to me ... It's the same with domestic violence situations. A few really prominent workers in departments in the town who I know were Catholic can't practise any more after seeing child sexual abuse or domestic violence, and the effect the Catholic Church had on those issues. In domestic violence, women think they can't leave because the church says. 'I have to stay here for better or worse' ... These kinds of things I see from the welfare perspective, and that gross abuse of power and social injustice caused by the church. It makes me very sad. Why do I go to church to put up with all of that? It all still comes back to spirituality ... It's part of my feeling closer to God (M215, 7/12/96).*

Although 'guilt' is stated here so strongly as a Catholic legacy, in fact only one respondent stated guilt as her reason for staying in the church. 'Guilt' appears to be a factor of education. The high level of education of respondents appeared to enable a responsible exercise of conscience, as evidenced in the comments below. Those referred to above who were less informed appear to be left with 'rules' and to feel guilty when they do not comply.

Knowledge of the church's teaching did not equate with compliance. This is illustrated by comments of respondents: *the contraception stuff - I just ignore it - I'm not into papal dictatorship (M110); [there is] disregard of pope's teaching on sex by most I know (M273); I accept most teaching and policy, have difficulty with notions of innate male superiority, closed minds and lack of accountability (M72); I disagree in some areas but continue to work within the system and live with the situation without guilt (R324); many aspects of church teaching are questionable and I act on my conscience informed by my experience and understanding of Godde (S305); I don't really care what they teach any more - it doesn't bother me to disregard it and go straight to the gospel (M150); as I have a background in moral*



*and biblical and 'theological' studies this does not affect my own personal faith or spiritual experience to any greater degree than irritation or causing me to be sceptical (M199); in many instances I worry that negative messages will be absorbed and I need to protect myself from them (M59); being a white male ... should not make one an expert ... I make my own decisions every day, in every way, in co-operation with God alone now (S60); much I choose to ignore (M141).*

Women stated clearly their pain about the following areas of church teaching: *in the areas of sexuality and contraception particularly, women should have more say in decision-making (M208); teaching on sexual matters [is] inadequate and ineffective until women's experiences are heard (R172); the laws on marriage are formulated as theory; no one who lives marriage is allowed a voice (M42); how can a bunch of celibate males have any idea of the difficulties of family life? (M72); why does the church think they can tell married people how to operate their contraceptive/sex life? (M248); I feel angry when I hear from the pulpit such things as 'marriage is forever' ... I work with DV victims (M215); I still suffer to this day the trauma I faced in an impossible marriage - violence etc - when I was told by church I could not use my own conscience with regard to avoiding further children (M118).*

One woman's experience was of *the lack of compassion for those who are divorced (M65)*. Another woman stated her view of church discipline in regard to divorce and remarriage: *I want the church to ... admit our humanity, giving people the chance to start again knowing they are accepted because God is their only judge; the church needs to recognise that it is the way - it needs to support, direct, redirect us on our journey - it should never bring us into dead ends (M176).*

A young woman expressed from personal experience how she viewed church attitudes to and teaching on homosexuality. She spoke freely of the hurt that she experienced from the narrowness of official church teaching that does not take into account contemporary understanding, from the distorted views and homo phobia of individual members of the clergy, and from the absence of a church forum. Her experience included positive support from a priest and from a member of a religious congregation, not cited in what follows:

*I find Catholic Church teaching on sexuality, especially homosexuality (in my case) very narrow and limited ... I had a terribly difficult time dealing with my sexuality, and really, the stronger source of isolation and hurt has*

*been the Catholic Church. The saddest thing is that many of my gay and lesbian friends are looking for a 'saviour' in their lives, a spirituality, fulfilling love. The church provides the antithesis for these people ... Why believe in God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit when the church which claims to represent the Trinity on earth rejects you? ... It seems to me homophobia, a real anger and fear of homosexuality.*

*There is also a profound lack of contact with or understanding of homosexual people. I've had a lot of sermons where homosexuality was described as being an 'evil' ... described as 'that was the choice that they made, and that was their fault', which is a strange and worrying attitude. My frustration was I felt that I couldn't respond to such comments within the church setting ... I can't think of many public places where a person can stand up and make anti-homosexual statements without getting some flak for it. But not in the church. They're almost within their rights to say it ... Because the official church line is 'these people are wrong and leading a morally corrupt lifestyle', homosexual people are leaving the church, not sharing their gift of the Holy Spirit with the church, and not having the opportunity to express a dissenting voice and enter into dialogue with religious and lay people*

*In terms of my personal experience with the church, I was growing up getting these messages that homosexuality is wrong, is bad, and is a choice. Yet within my own psychology I know there is really no choice ... I actually went through a stage of entering a relationship with this guy that I didn't really like, and wasn't attracted to ... It wasn't an authentic relationship ... I definitely think views such as those projected by the Catholic Church pressure people to enter heterosexual relationships they otherwise wouldn't. It is damaging to you, damaging to the other person ...*

*I have often thought if Jesus came on earth, this would be the place to go. To be accepted and loved when many institutions and people within society reject you would be so powerful. However Jesus could not be linked with an official church. They have a really bad reputation and are treated with cynicism. 'You've been rejecting us for so long. Why should we trust you?' I've been asked 'Why are you Christian?' I've tried to explain that Christian living is not really the viewpoint of rejection, that's not my faith. And I've*

*just received dumbfounded looks for defending my Christianity. The perception of church is people who hold prayer meetings and protests during Mardi Gras, and papal statements condemning homosexuality. I don't actually like Mardi Gras ... I don't know what's worse. To be rejected by church or to be seen as part of that image ...*

*To me the Catholic Church is a cultural institution. Beyond the culture there's faith, and the culture may express or compound faith ... The fundamental core is still the truth and way of Jesus. In this context I feel quite comfortable as a lesbian, because I know deep down in faith that I am leading an honest lifestyle ... The thing that helped me retain my faith and realise, yes, I can be lesbian and still believe in God was my conscience ... I think church theology generally doesn't understand or allow for the contribution of conscience and intuition (L153, 3/10/96).*

Background to *Humanae Vitae* (1968) is presented in Chapter 2. An older respondent was a social worker in a church organisation for marriage and family at the time when *Humanae Vitae* was promulgated from Rome. She spoke at interview of how she reacted:

*I had heard all the tragedies about women who couldn't handle four, five, six children, and husbands walking out saying 'She's got no time for me'. The inadequacies and lack of facilities for these people was very poor ... I thought 'Isn't it wonderful, at last the church is beginning to look at contraception'. That night, when the Bishop read *Humanae Vitae* out in the cathedral and on the radio, I thought 'That's the finish of me'. I never wanted to leave the church, ever ... I said to the Lord 'I'm sorry, but I'm in the church. I'll keep the rules as far as I'm able, but I cannot accept *Humanae Vitae*' ... So I broke with the institution of the church. The individuals in the church I've no argument with. But I lost credibility as far as the hierarchy and the bishops' statements are concerned - I didn't care. They could talk their heads off but I wouldn't take it in. 'If that's the best you can do, ok, you just sit up there on your throne. I'll get on with my life. But I know I'm part of the church and I'm inside it and I'm not going out'. Someone said 'Why did you stay in the church?' I said 'But I've got nothing else, there's nothing outside my church that I want. I'm staying in to bring about change if I can' (L256, 3/10/96).*

A small number of respondents viewed negatively the focus they perceived of the church's teaching, and commented as follows: *the church ... is concerned with 'sex'; it is not concerned with the great social issues of the day - unemployment etc ... it doesn't speak out on injustice as it should (M338); I find the Catholic Church fairly reticent to go even to the outside boundary in its teaching (R131); there is very often total silence on topics of urgent importance to society and endless babble on things like birth control / ordination of women / anything to do with sexual morality (M445); I see ... an absolute disregard for the environment and future life on earth (M198); justice and environmental issues are ignored (M225); I find the lack of real focus on matters of justice ... difficult to live with (R300); it would be wonderful if the church spoke up on Third World, environment, poverty, injustice (M225);<sup>34</sup> the church distorts who this God is we are supposed to be following (M226).*

#### GOVERNANCE AND DECISION – MAKING

The structure and mode of 'governance' typically attracted comment such as 'clerical', 'male-dominated', 'exclusive of women', 'hierarchical'. There was a fine line between 'clerical' and 'male-dominated'. A respondent wrote: *male-dominated because all ordained clergy are male (R213)*. The following statements give evidence of clericalism: *authority, governance and leadership are all tied to ordination (R283); there is almost no consultation of non-clerics, male or female (R14);<sup>35</sup> clericalism is still too much embedded in the church (S140); at local level the male priest has final say (R'5); at diocesan level the bishop is the authoritative centre of power (R46).<sup>36</sup>*

Governance was stated to be *undemocratic, authoritarian, sexist and unjust towards women (M198); dictatorial, inflexible (M190); powerful, manipulative, sense of the elite, exclusive (S195); arbitrary, arrogant (R192); very controlled (R144); patriarchal, over-bearing, law-enforcing (R106); legalistic (DA241); cumbersome (S25); over-reliance on papal approval (R95); no evidence of due process in dealing with people outside the inner circle (S45).*

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<sup>34</sup> cf R111, R143, S259, R284.

<sup>35</sup> cf M50.

<sup>36</sup> cf S3, R126, M161, M210, M272.

Some respondents treated church authority abstractly as in: *laws of the church* (S78)<sup>37</sup>; *positions in the church* (R149).<sup>38</sup> Several respondents used the expression 'official church' or 'public face of the church'.<sup>39</sup> Other respondents contrasted *values that Christ stood for* with *institutional church* (R113).<sup>40</sup> At issue was *ministering in name of just, loving, compassionate God or institutionalised aged clerics strapped to status, structures, human traditions* (R143).<sup>41</sup>

'Hierarchical structure' was described in negative terms: *Catholic Church knows no other way but pyramidal; participative models and collegiality have disappeared* (R258); *therefore it cannot be a caring church and one that offers a rich spiritual experience* (M151); *decisions are handed down* (S45); *people have no voice* (R247) and *are talked down to* (S270); *it is usually from top down and out of touch with people's feelings; it is heavy and lifeless* (R177), *increasingly repressive/right-wing* (S94) and *violates its own principle of subsidiarity* (R11);<sup>42</sup> *the church talks freedom but certainly does not allow it when it comes to its own concerns* (S201); *it has not been pastoral, compassionate, all-embracing* (M130);<sup>43</sup> *the church is so big that it is self-referential* (M119). Structure was stated to be *oppressive* (S78), *legalistic* (DA241), *arbitrary* (R192).

Power was emphasised in comments about the persons of the hierarchy: *hierarchy appear afraid of losing the power to control; most of us no longer respond to 'domination by fear' tactics* (S259); *[they are] totally autocratic ... few people will stand for that today so they become irrelevant* (R230); *[they] lack humility to their own inadequacies - after all no one has all the answers* (M224).<sup>44</sup> Several respondents cited *fear of losing power*.<sup>45</sup> Others wrote: *abuse of power ... no consultation and becomes authoritarian when questioned* (S117); *power over ... contradicting much of what Jesus' praxis was all about* (R75). One woman commented: *the church as an institution works from a paradigm of power; its authority is more used to judge and control than to give testimony and witness to our relationship with Creator-Word-Spirit* (M103). The corollary of 'pursuit of

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<sup>37</sup> cf S42.

<sup>38</sup>cf R264.

<sup>39</sup> cf M150, R186, M253, R217, S304, R317.

<sup>40</sup> cf S60, R142.

<sup>41</sup> cf M110, M142, R207, R244, M260 R284, R311.

<sup>42</sup> cf R9, R131, R189.

<sup>43</sup> cf R5, M93, R106, M133, M151, M 80, M190, R211, M244, R273, R287.

<sup>44</sup> cf S45, M130, R284.

<sup>45</sup> cf M80, M119, R122, M183, R197, M232, R280, S307.

power' was the submission of parishioners (M188),<sup>46</sup> the passive carrying out of decisions made by others (M314), the paradigm of power being accepted by the laity and by religious orders (M103). and that the majority of women in church seem to be satisfied with the situation (M194).

The above was amplified by two stories told at interview. The first woman, who worked in a national church agency under the auspices of the ACBC, expressed that:

*You certainly get along in the interests of the organisation if you understand what happens and the dynamics of the Bishops' Committee. There is an enormous power play at that level ... That's where the real clash is and the real territoriality. It doesn't really matter what we do as an organisation out in the field. Those bishops will make decisions that determine our future direction, and they do it without any negotiation ... The director can only talk to our chairman bishop, who then relates what he thinks, and of course he relays or he doesn't, but with his own intentions and categories. So, in fact, an organisation like ours ... doesn't really touch the bishops but they determine our direction ... I also believe that there is very much a tokening of women, in as much as they will employ lots of women but always as secretarial and support division people, quite proficient and efficient and highly educated, but never as management. If you look through all the people associated with ACBC, it tends to be much the same. I just feel there's a voicelessness. I don't quite know how you address that (M80, 4/10/96).*

The second woman worked at diocesan level in Australia. Her husband had worked at the Vatican when she was newly married. She commented on her experience of the politicisation of the church at that level:

*It was illuminating to see the church at the centre ... It was a terrible experience for me because I discovered a structure that was as political as any political party. It had no sense of people. It was a legalised, hierarchical system that I railed against and I loathed. I loathed the hypocrisy, the deceit, the facade that was presented ... A lot of things happened in those three years which made me see church as just another political structure, a power structure. And it was a power struggle between factions. I loathed every minute of the time I was there, loathed it ... It was a male chauvinist and*

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<sup>46</sup> cf M281.

*hierarchical world. I suppose it's coloured my understanding of church. I saw a lot of clerics and bureaucrats who had no concept of pastoral ministry. It was not possible even to talk to them about those things. It was a very painful experience.*

She described her experience of the ACBC as a closed structure that was beholden to the Vatican:

*I have very much felt that the decisions were made behind closed doors by a small coterie of men, who gather together and never consult. They go into that room without any idea what the people think, and make decisions across the board. Sometimes we don't even hear what the decisions are. Other times when we do hear it is left for the 'simple faithful' to obey. I reject that model of church. It is not the concept of Vatican II which defines church as 'People of God' ... The hierarchy get into a huddle, like the bishops' conference do twice a year. The lay people don't even know what's on the agenda. Not even the agenda is made public to the laity. After the meeting, very little of what is discussed is made known. ... They will only release what has been worked through, and worked through, and worked through so much that the whole thing is stripped by the time it gets to the Catholic papers ... We have no way of having any input into those decisions, even though our experience might be quite valid and important ...*

*We realise that the basic problem in the church at the moment is not the people but the structure. The structure is not life-giving. It does not allow the church community to move with the times. It's controlled. It's got the wrong concept of power ... I think it's so obvious to anyone who's interested in church that the present leadership is not leadership. It's repression. It doesn't lead. Which I think is a shame. The greater shame is that we do not allow natural leaders to lead. Where there is talent and somebody with an authentic voice, the bishops would much prefer to kill that than allow it freedom to express itself on behalf of the people. I think it's all been said for years now - the present church structures and leadership are a scandal. I don't altogether blame our Australian bishops. I think the core problem is in the Vatican, with that power-hungry group that's over there, that will not allow any sort of freedom, even to the Australian bishops. They will not acknowledge the Bishops' Conference as a legitimate body. They will only*

*deal with individual bishops. Therefore they keep that tight control. It's not a canonical body - the Bishops' Conferences, anywhere in the world. It doesn't fit into the canonical hierarchical structure. So if the Bishops' Conference of Australia makes a decision about women priests, they can say 'You're not a valid body of the church'. So in a sense the leadership crisis stems from the Vatican, but I do wish that our own bishops had enough backbone and freedom to go with their own people, and say 'These are legitimate issues that need to be discussed' (M314, 28/11/96).*

One respondent qualified this view of church: *structures and institution are just a small element of what the church is really called to be and about in our world today - women working as equals with men could produce together a new and creative way that is non-patriarchal, feminine and inclusive and provides a meaning for all peoples (R200).*

#### **WHY JOIN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ?**

Contrary to the Gospel message that was implied as their reason for joining, two women stated negative experience since joining the Catholic Church:

*I have only been involved with the Catholic Church for six months and find it sexist in its decision-making, pronouncements, language and imagery. This all seems to be totally opposed to how the Jesus I am learning about would have operated (S35); I have experienced the church as a bleak image of the gospel message (M316).*

Three women who were interviewed were able to enlarge on their journey into the Catholic Church. For the first, an issue was family cohesion:

*I became a Catholic primarily because at the time I wanted my children to grow up in the security of their family in one faith. My husband was Catholic ... I've never been comfortable with some aspects of the church, from the beginning. But I was told by the priest that married us and converted me, that it didn't matter. For example, when we took our vows and had to sign, do you agree to have children, I said 'Yes, of course. Well, what does it really say'. He said 'And agree with the pope's encyclical on birth control'. I said 'I will never agree to that'. He said 'That's why I didn't ask you'. And*



*this was in the early seventies ... I also found it difficult, in the early years of being a Catholic, to accept the patriarchal system. However, when I converted, the parish we were in was a religious order of priests, far more progressive. I felt like a breath of fresh air had come, and I thought, I'll just go with this breath of fresh air (M68, 9/10/96).*

The commitment and stance for social justice of Catholic friends influenced the second woman:

*I went away to the city to start nursing. There were a lot of Catholic girls at that time in my class. It was through their involvement, and I could see their commitment, that I started going to Mass ... It started off more as a social situation. The Catholics went to Mass, and I went along because there was one car and we went to a Chinese meal later. I actually got something out of it as well. From there I went to a Catholic hospital to do my obstetrics with two other girls. Wherever I went, I kept encountering Catholics. In 1972, I was back in my hometown. I'd travelled socially, emotionally, spiritually a long way from when I left it as a sixteen year old to go nursing. Ten years later I was back there, and I was looking at where I'd come from ... I thought 'I don't fit in this mould any more. There's something more for me'. I was still single. I was about twenty-five. I met people involved in Action for World Development, and it was a social justice thing. I actually decided through the social justice group. I met wonderful Catholic families. They were very friendly and they reached out to me. Through that I thought 'They've got something that I want. This is where I belong. This is home. I've got to make a decision'. So I decided I would become a Catholic ... There were so many issues of social justice, and that is what brought me in, in the first place (M170, 27/11/96).*

The spiritual journey of the third woman came out of family tragedy and trauma, which included the death of her daughter aged nine after a two-year illness, and the break-up of her marriage:

*Although at the time I had a faith of sorts, it didn't sustain me ... I started to go to various churches, including the Catholic Church ... I started spending more and more time sitting in the Catholic Church. Then I left my marriage and I moved into a unit almost opposite the church, so I became very much*

*part of it as a comfort place for me. It wasn't for religion, it wasn't the Mass, it was just a comfort place ... I started talking to the priest. He didn't know a lot about me but he accepted me as I was. My faith had come in solitude in a way. I started to find a reason and comfort and support. It helped me. I wasn't as alone once I found that sort of thing. So that was how I actually started to think about it, and then I gradually sat into Mass all the time, again solitary, and I thought 'I might stay here'. So that was my journey. My faith was a searching over two or three years, a real spiritual searching for me. That has only gone from strength to strength. I don't have any problems with my spirituality.*

*As far as the Catholic Church goes ... I question so many things. As far as me and Catholicism go, I feel slightly guilty I suppose, in that I accept it where it means something to me, where it supports me, and I return to that place of peace, when I'm in church with God and with other people. It is spiritual Catholicism, I think, rather than structural Catholicism, but still it is very important to me ... If I decided not to go to church now, if the structural part got on top of me, and weighed me down more than the spiritual part, I would feel terribly guilty if I left, because I made this momentous decision for myself, rather than having grown up with it. I'm not saying things are not hard, but just that it's different. I can't see it happening. I feel that I'm here for good, because this is where my heart is, this is where I feel I need to be in a spiritual sense ... I find it especially hard to explain/justify my embrace of Catholicism to non-Catholic friends and family, now especially with the current negative media publicity concerning sexual abuse and a celibate priesthood ... It's my faith. Nothing else really matters (D179, 10/10/96).*

## **SUMMARY**

The key theme of this chapter is the 'we-they' dichotomy between laity and clergy and between female and male that was the experience of church for many women. Respondents perceived 'church' in negative terms as 'they', hierarchy and clergy, and as a power structure that was male-dominated and excluding, with women powerless within church structures.

This 'we'-'they' theme will continue to surface in other chapters. 'We' underpins many changes that respondents would like. 'They' underpins what respondents

perceived as limiting or preventing change. Respondents appeared to conceptualise 'church' as 'they', rarely as 'we'. The implications of this will be explored in Chapter 10. Very few respondents claimed responsibility as church for how 'church' projected itself. An exception was the woman who wrote: *if the church is about people, the areas of discrimination are being kept in place by those of us who are church (R302)*.

The background to 'church' detailed in Chapter 2 explains the kind of authoritarianism experienced by these women. Because of their education and theological education, many respondents understood that the origin and evolution of anachronistic practices lie in church discipline and are not theological in their derivation. This will be developed in Chapter 7. Education appeared to be a factor in whether women feel free to follow their conscience in matters of church teaching and discipline, or whether they feel constrained by guilt.

Liturgy and worship were significant for most respondents. Sunday Mass attendance is required of Catholics, the Eucharist is central to the sacramental theology and world view of the Catholic Church, and the assembly is *a symbol of the church at prayer (R335)* cited above. Respondents differentiated Eucharist and the structure of liturgy surrounding it. Many experienced the latter as exclusionary and non-participative. This was especially problematic for women who felt responsibility for the Catholic upbringing of their children in a church that they experienced as alienating and irrelevant. Yet church services were seen to bind community, especially in rural areas where their lack was seen to contribute to community breakdown.

Although a 'good' parish was considered to be welcoming, community and family oriented and social justice oriented, whether this was so was seen to depend on the parish priest. Community members were not perceived to be responsible for forming and maintaining community, other than by one rural respondent.

Alienation, central to the we-they dichotomy, was experienced in teaching and policy, especially in regard to marriage, family and sexuality areas that did not include a woman's perspective, did not touch into a woman's experience, did not allow discussion of issues that were significant to women. Discussion in Chapters 2 and 3 of the background to *Humanae Vitae* describes abortive attempts at input. It is a clear example of the church being seen to value authority more highly than

pastoral needs and response, a criticism that respondents directed at church teaching. The teaching role of the Catholic Church is gender-exclusive because is confined to those who are ordained, irrespective of theological training or pastoral role. Respondents commented on the perceived absence of the church's voice on social and environmental issues, a concern expressed also by the women in the American study (Winter, Lummis & Stokes, 1995) cited in Chapter 3.

Governance was considered by respondents to be excluding at the levels of both structure and persons. The structures and mode of governance and decision-making were perceived to be clerical and male in a model of power that is the antithesis for many women of the Gospel message and vision of Jesus. Examples were given of politicised power and of secrecy and practices within the church that belied church teaching on social justice and its practice at grass-roots level. Many women expressed that they experienced powerlessness in relation to governance that they perceived in terms of we-they dichotomy.

For those who told their story of joining the church, 'church' meant pursuit of Gospel, faith and justice. This reflects the contrast that was noted in Chapter 3 (Winter, Lummis & Stokes, 1995; McManus, 1991) between spirituality and religion, and that many women are supported by feminist spirituality groups outside the church to remain active members of church.

The next chapter will consider 'why stay?'. It augments the present chapter in reporting findings from ways in which women described their experience of church. The key theme of the next chapter is women's feelings of love-pain in relation to church.

## CHAPTER SIX

### LOVE - PAIN EXPERIENCE OF CHURCH

#### INTRODUCTION

While Chapter 5 examined ways in which respondents perceived church as 'it', 'they' or 'we', this chapter examines the feelings of love and pain that respondents described as their experience of church. A framework for the chapter is provided by Hirschman (1970) who posits that in the church, as in family or tribe, belonging can generate a deep sense of loyalty, and that the cost of leaving is internalised and borne by the loyal member who exits. Hirschman argues that full exit is rare where loyalty exists, and the member who exits formally may continue to feel a member's concern; for the loyal member, the alternative to exit is to exercise voice in the expectation of change; voice is then an expression of loyalty. While Hirschman's focus is on institutional response to decline, his concepts of loyalty and voice relate to members.

Hirschman (1970) acknowledges that loyalty-promoting institutions often repress voice, and endeavour to convert conscious into unconscious or conforming loyalist behaviour. He argues that this might stimulate self-deception of members whose investment in the institution refuses to acknowledge its defects. In this perspective, which is that of the oppressed (Friere, 1974) or of the victim (Hoff, 1990), to stay reflects reluctance to leave a controlling environment with its power structures and rules, in order to move into uncertainty and absence of assurances. Hence, to stay and to leave can reflect weakness or strength.

This chapter addresses the love-pain tension that is the experience of church for many respondents, the sources of pain that they identified, and how they attempted to resolve this tension. Themes addressed in the chapter are powerlessness, belonging, and the ambivalent place of 'church' in the lives of

many women. 'Why stay?' is a key theme of the chapter. Reference is also made to different experiences of individual women.

#### LOVE-PAIN TENSION

The number of respondents who expressed love-pain relationship with 'church', and the level of the love-pain tension that they expressed, were significant. These were evidence that many respondents felt *sad, hurt, anguished, ashamed, embarrassed, depressed* as members of the church. Women wrote: *although I have a great love for the church I spend a lot of energy being angry with it (R158)*;<sup>1</sup> *despite the pain of belonging I still do belong (R222)*; *I remain steadfastly loyal to the Catholic Church, though often disenchanted, frustrated and angry due to dominance and power of male hierarchy (M224)*. This tension suggested the analogy of 'victim' in an abusive relationship.

There was a felt powerlessness within church structures, perceived as a power model, which exemplified the we-they dichotomy that was raised in Chapter 5. Respondents explained why they felt 'alienated' and angry: *structures alienate both women and men (R16)*;<sup>2</sup> *the feeling of frustration and powerlessness when there are serious matters to decide and then it is men only (R252)*.<sup>3</sup> They stated their feelings: *disappointed (M272)*; *strongly resent absence of women's voices (M73)*; *feel strongly inequality (M73)*; *totally amazed at the amount of power exercised by some parish priests (M188)*; *I find the model disturbing (R324)*; *the amazing power imbalance is something that has caused a great deal of pain to me (R300)*; *I pray often that the hierarchy of the church would learn to open their hearts in compassion and love; it hurts me when the church is so bloody minded on some issues (R191)*; *from the pope down still seem to think women are second class citizens within the church; however I know the Lord does not, which makes me happy to serve in what way I can (M85)*; *I carry my sadness and the sadness of other women who speak with me on these issues (R250)*.

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<sup>1</sup> cf R20, R107, R234.

<sup>2</sup> cf R66, S184, M132, R236, M244, M268, S329.

<sup>3</sup> cf M65, R234.

The American study (Winter, Lunmis & Stokes, 1995) found that women experience negative feelings as further alienating. This reflects a spiral in abusive relationships that perpetuates the 'victim' situation.

Respondents conveyed that a sense of belonging, 'regardless', was important to them. *I experience the church as my home (R38); freedom to be me in my church ... see my church's full potential (S60); it is still my church and I love its traditions etc. so I hang in (S148);<sup>4</sup> I feel alienated and deserted by the church - what I've always thought of as my church (M325). Two women used the metaphor of 'dysfunctional family' that conjures association with 'victim': *the church is like a dysfunctional family; some people leave their dysfunctional families, others choose to stay if they find that within them they can love and be loved at some level; that's where I am for now (M110); a dysfunctional family - you always belong even when you want to shake the dust!! (R251).**

Women wrote or spoke from the depth of their feeling. Most of these women were or had been lectors and ministers of the Eucharist, active in parish and diocesan programs and committees, and members of women's prayer groups. Their statements that follow illustrate their love-pain tension. These statements illustrate also that their pain derived from patriarchal, hierarchical, clerical church structures. They loved the church for worship, Eucharist and community. They noted the disjunction between church and spirituality, while acknowledging that one is source of the other, as in the following statements: *I have a great freedom in having a Catholic/Christian background as it has given me the gift of developing my own type of spiritual life and religious ideas (M128); the community context in which my spiritual life has found nourishment and meaning (R97).*

The first three statements that follow contrasted the institutional church that repelled with aspects of church that attracted:

*I have a deep love for the church, and value the daily Eucharist as the core of my being. I experience the institutional church as very human, ruled by persons who are often insecure, and who are threatened by the laity's intellectual and emotional growth towards fully integrated personhood (M256).*

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<sup>4</sup>cf M176.

*I experience church in contradictory ways. On the one hand I find the institutional aspect oppressive, restricting, narrow, with worship that lacks vitality and is exclusively male. On the other hand, the church as people are open, hope-filled, committed, loving, giving, desiring to grow. There are remarkable people in the history of the church, as well as current people. Their lives inspire me, companion me, and draw me to keep on going, to not leave (M70).*

*I experience the Catholic Church in a constant state of conflict between regret and longing, disdain and love. It tears at me constantly. I totally abhor the institutional church of the present and of history. This is not only for its patriarchal one-eyed outlook, but also because, like all institutions it seeks to maintain itself even at the expense of the faithful. I abhor the pope's beliefs about ordination of women. Every fibre in me is repelled by the institutional church which excludes my gender in function and administration, while rationalising that women serve a wonderful purpose as mothers ... I can't tell you how much it hurts me to witness. I can't forgive it, and this too tears me apart. On the other hand ... I see incredible beauty and hope ... Christian faith is so important to my being. I've tried to find other faiths as satisfying but I cannot. So I return 'in default' to worship in a local church community which I love, and inadvertently prop up an institution that I do not respect. I cannot find anything other than this unsatisfactory situation (M68).*

The next four statements contrasted male domination, structure and exclusion with personal spirituality and worship:

*I experience the church with a degree of anger and disillusionment. I praise and worship God personally and within the framework of my church, as this is part of my spirituality. However I am at the stage of really questioning what purpose this male dominated church really has to do with my spirituality. A church that does not acknowledge the worth of women is difficult for me to accept. I have, in the past, been involved in the liturgy and all aspects of parish life. I find now that this involvement has completely waned. I feel hopeless with church attitudes. I have difficulty in accepting or having any respect for local*



*church leaders. Being a welfare worker, I feel sad and ashamed, most of the time, to admit that I am part of our local church. I see the lack of acknowledgment, of acceptance, of respect exhibited by our local priest towards all disadvantaged groups. I believe our church is an elitist church (M215).*

*As my own spirituality has developed, I have come to value many aspects of Catholic culture while I reject other aspects. Other components I recognise that I do not value, but they come with the 'Catholic package'. I value being part of a worshipping community, although I would love to see many changes in liturgical practice and in the sense of community. I recognise that the church has taught me a lot, and will continue to do so, even though I do not accept all church teachings. I have great difficulty with the male hierarchical structure, but I recognise the contribution and changes that I can facilitate at grassroots level. I both love and hate the Catholic Church. I am both highly committed to it and to the Good News, while also ready to leave and give it all away (M260).*

*The church and Eucharist are very important to me. It is a conscious decision to go to Mass, and not just a habit or obligation. However I no longer take an active part in my local parish, mostly because I am frustrated living in a 'dead' parish, and because of the attitude of the church hierarchy. I feel a little sad about this, because I was actively involved for thirty years in the parishes where I lived. I know that I am not on my own. A lot of women feel the same way that I do, completely alienated from any decision-making. Their needs and wants are regarded as unimportant (M268).*

*As I have a background in moral and biblical and 'theology' studies, the institutional church does not affect my personal faith or spiritual experience to any greater degree than irritation or causing me to be sceptical ... so a case of 'in spite of' not 'because of' (S199).*

The final statements were about growth:

*I remain steadfastly loyal to the Catholic Church, although often disenchanted, frustrated and angry. My disappointments about lack of*

*support have not lessened my faith but deepened it, giving me an awareness of the suffering and needs of others, with a desire and ability to reach out to them. After all, it is our duty. We, too, are the church, not just the clergy and religious. We, the laity, have our responsibilities too (M224, 25/11/96).*

*I feel I no longer want to be part in a liturgical sense because each encounter with church just increases my feeling that as a woman I am suppressed; this has enabled me to look with a new perspective at what God-Church means for me, and realise that structures and institution are just a small element of what the church is really called to be in our world today; ... I see that women working as equals with men could produce together a new and creative way that is non-patriarchal, feminine and inclusive, and provides meaning for all peoples (R200).*

We-they dichotomy and love-pain tension are found in the distinction made between spirituality and religion. One respondent expressed well the deepening of personal faith despite disillusionment with the institutional church. The emphasis is the respondent's: *the institutional church fails to meet the needs of its people; the people themselves often have a deep faith despite this lack (R5).*<sup>5</sup>

#### **THE AMBIVALENT PLACE OF CHURCH IN WOMEN'S LIVES**

Those respondents who described church experience and who had little or no formal association with church identified themselves as Catholic except one woman who wrote: *I think I am ex-Catholic. Still working that out! (M254).* Women spoke with pain or regret of 'leaving the church', reflecting the internalised cost of exit that Hirschman (1970) identified with loyalty. This is exemplified in the following comments: *sorry for being so slow - took me so long to make myself think about the church again (M325); it gave me some pain to open a door I had firmly shut (M289).* One woman wrote of her strong desire for church: *I don't really think the church will change in the next fifty years, and the saddest thing is I desperately want a church (M338).*

Relationship with church was described in various ways: 'cultural Catholic', 'critical onlooker', 'excluded' or out-sider, 'alienated' or fringe-dweller.

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<sup>5</sup> Respondent's emphasis; cf. next paragraph and elsewhere.

These relationships will be explored as described by respondents. No respondent who described church experience placed herself fully outside 'church'.

One woman who had 'left the church' commented: *I'm not sure if I'd ever go back ... I'm not sure if I'd call myself a Catholic or not; that's a really big thing to do; ... if you think of it culturally, you can't not be Catholic culturally (M254, 8/9/96)*. 'Cultural Catholic' conveyed that attitudes and beliefs had permeated one's perspective and world view, even if there was no longer a formal association with 'church'. Women wrote: *the Catholic Church is a part of who I am; it is my cultural inheritance, not only ingrained directly in my own psyche through my own experience but also through countless generations before me (M232)*; *I feel a very strong attachment to the church (which from a logical point of view at times, really escapes me!) - it is an integral part of my culture; to denounce it (even the institutional church) would be like denouncing my country (188)*; *I regard myself as a 'cultural Catholic' - I cannot deny the influence of the Roman Catholic Church on my development and, in particular, how I make meaning/sense of my existence; however, I have left the church behind in many areas (M119)*.

Various reasons for disaffection were given. Many 'outsider' women had considered themselves previously to be 'very involved'. Now: *I am disgusted with the church ... I feel it doesn't follow Jesus principles (M338)*; *after a lifetime of involvement I now experience the church as irrelevant and exclusive of half the population (M325)*; *I have become uncomfortable and alienated in recent years through the 'ignoring' of women's calls to participate fully - and through the revealing of many priests' sexual problems; I feel for them but find it difficult to listen to too much from them or to pray through and with them (M285)*; *at the moment I feel divorced from the church ... I feel I am on such a different level and therefore I'd rather not be involved at all (M281)*; *I believe that the exclusive language, preoccupation with bigger and better buildings, women as second rate members, nothing to draw our youth, where justice and environmental issues are ignored, is not the church that Jesus died for (M225)*; *institutionalised church is simply another male-dominated 'out of touch' domain; I feel alienated from 'Father Church' and cannot cope with local church community values; I don't see organised church as relevant/ helpful for me (M123)*; *I experience the Catholic Church as no longer interested in people and their lives, especially the poor and*

women (M88); *I very rarely participate in structural liturgy and worship because of language, exclusiveness of who can participate and because of the power given to the clerics within the church structure (S137).*

Although there was self-identification as Catholic, respondents distanced themselves from 'church' in varying ways. Liturgy and worship was an area specified by the following women: *I no longer attend church as the experience became too painful for me: a difficult decision and one which took a long time to make ... much of the liturgy was so mechanical as to be irrelevant and meaningless (M254); sporadic Mass attendance, not in my parish ... I do not trust our priest; I feel cheated; this was my group-parish-support for many years (S315); I am still very ambivalent about 'church' and its place in my life; I attend Mass when it is important for me to do so (S245); I experience the worship and most liturgies in the Catholic Church as very structured and impersonal, and have discovered that my best way for relating to God is outside this 'male' model of worship in my own space and environment (R33); I've become more alienated, less involved, higher degree of frustration, in particular at liturgical level (R311); I don't participate in the institutional church to any significant level now (R2); I 'use' the church less and less (M285); I go to Mass on Sunday and I leave the church so angry I wonder why I went (M50).*

'Fringe-dwellers' expressed in feeling words the following causes of alienation: *I experience the church as delusional/hypocritical in its authoritarian and exclusive practices, while expounding collaboration and social justice ... I am genuinely depressed - sad at the insensitive teachings and structures, angry at the inability to be heard, lonely in my isolation (S209); I used to be more actively involved in the social justice side of the church, and attended liturgies regularly; however my experience of the church has been that the Roman hierarchy are becoming increasingly repressive/right wing, and I have more or less dropped out of all church activities (S94); I often wonder who, among those in authority, know or even care what we, the laity, think or experience (S148);<sup>6</sup> I feel less and less valued in the church (S195); I have had a long experience of the Catholic Church until the last few years of my seventy-three ... I now find it difficult to feel included (S139); I am feeling great alienation from the church which causes me pain; I feel the church is so alienating of women (R236); I feel unwelcome in the Catholicism*

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<sup>6</sup>cf M218.

*of paternalism; I feel alone, betrayed and ostracised for the fact that I want and need to contribute my own form of the feminine in my own way (S60); I feel excluded because of the male dominated priesthood (R26); for a woman still seen as not up to scratch ... I feel let down and hurt (R212); I often feel alienated within church structures, simply because I am a woman and the church cannot seem to acknowledge my presence nor my contribution in the same way as it does for males (R156);<sup>7</sup> I am certainly struggling with the current climate of the church that is becoming more and more removed from the needs of its people and the world (R197);<sup>8</sup> a profound call to priesthood with no way to test this has not helped my feeling of distance from every day church life (R319).*

The present stage of their journey for some respondents was that of 'critical onlooker': *I have now left the church in frustration and my journey is solitary (M289); I still think of myself as a member of but only a critical onlooker to the life of the institutional church; I am at a stage in my personal journey ... where I'm saying 'I can live without that' (R246); gradual withdrawal from any significant contribution or participation in the church ... because of my consistent failure to contribute to change, or to offer much more than frustrated attempts to influence power structures within the church (R317).*

Women named frustrated efforts to be involved: *I would like to participate/use some of my skills, but neither is there invitation nor would I want to in that set-up (R186); for years I've wanted, as an intelligent, committed and versatile adult, to be involved in something other than tea and cakes ... I don't know that I can be bothered any more; unfortunately I have two daughters and want to provide role models and examples for them - and a church which may fulfil a need in their lives in the future (M132, 26/11/96); I'm fed up, frustrated, beyond anger ... I feel drained of any desire to do anything, any more to ask for, struggle for meaningful change (R173).*

The statements of the following women summarised many reasons why women withdraw from 'church': *I have, in the past, been involved in the liturgy and in all aspects of parish life; I find now that this involvement has completely waned due to (i) lack of interest, (ii) hopelessness with church attitudes, (iii) difficulty in accepting or having any respect for church leaders;*

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<sup>7</sup>cf R30.

<sup>8</sup>cf R287.

*... coupled with these reasons, I, like many women, have extra demands placed upon me, and due to lack of commitment and time restraints, church involvement is not one of my priorities! (M215); the current leadership seems determined to prevent structural change, and rulings coming out of Rome are becoming more and more rigid and repressive; ... as women meet this wall of opposition, many turn away and give their energy to something more life-giving; ... there has been a deterioration in the quality of lay female involvement in the church - thinking women leave in droves (M314); so many people are searching for something deeper in their lives and leaving the church in the process (M250). One woman commented: until [unless] those of us who wish new church where women have equality and value - inclusive church - start to form it ourselves outside church - then change might be possible (M312).*

Two women revealed at interview their personal journey of leaving the church. The first commented on her spiritual search, her struggle and her freedom:

*I was really involved in the church ... The church has great beauty in what it can be ... I have a hunger for God. So much is garbage. The undoing is actually harder than the search ... Leaving church I expected to feel guilt. And I got such freedom, something I'd never had before ... I had the chance to go back into the church but I just found it takes energy. I'm trying to give up my anger. I got blood pressure out of it. I don't want to be out there trying to fight ... The church wanted me back in, but fighting the guidelines all the time is not easy. And they're not prepared to let you do your own thing and be there. All these right-wingers in the church. I couldn't do it because there was so much anger and it took so much energy. I left the church for a year and I went back, hoping ... In a way it is easier to go alone (M289, 8/10/96).*

The second interviewee spoke of the lengthy process of leaving, and referred also to her spirituality and her freedom:

*It took me to leave, maybe even eight years, from the time of starting to feel that it didn't fit, it was wrong, it wasn't nourishing ... Religion has always been part of my life. To leave that was as big as leaving a*

*marriage, I guess ... I felt very excluded, invisible, ignored ... I did still keep going along in our community because I wanted that sense of community, but I had more and more gaps, and in time I couldn't. I felt very free when I stopped going. I've always kept up spiritual nourishment ... Those things have helped to make up a bit for the lack of church community. It's a cultural thing too. I miss that very much. The pain was so real. It takes a long time ... but I can't take the exclusion of our experience any more ... 'Excluded' would be the most powerful hurt, being condescended to ... I guess you're fairly used to that, but the exclusion within the church, especially when I thought I had something valuable to offer ... When we stopped going to Mass nobody asked why, are you ok ... This year a friend actually resigned. He wrote a letter of resignation. That didn't evoke anything. After a month, he was so hurt at not being part of the community that he went back. He was back for four weeks and the hurt got so bad during those four weeks that he resigned again and he wrote another letter. I thought 'You poor guy' ... To think of not being buried in the Catholic Church, that's really strange. It's becoming less strange, I suppose, as other things become more important (M254, 8/10/96).*

We-they dichotomy of people and structures, and love-pain tension of spirituality and religion, are reflected in the ambivalent place of church in women's lives. As a result, many respondents viewed themselves as outsiders, fringe-dwellers or 'cultural Catholics'.

#### **WHY STAY?**

The level of frustration and alienation that many women stated would give cause to leave the 'church'. Yet, as noted above, only one respondent who described church experience queried tentatively whether she was *ex-Catholic* and commented: *still working that out (M254)*. Two questions remain to be addressed: 'why stay?' and 'what supports?'.

Some women stated that they stay to work for change: *I do not think that leaving the church does any good' - we need to work from within (R91); many women leave the church; I'm trying to 'hang in' and continue the dance for change/reform! (S307); i) people ignored institutional barriers as far as possible, and opted in instead of opting out, then eventually a broad range of*

*ministers would emerge in the life of the church, operating successfully and in such numbers that the institution would be impacted on (S43).*

The converse also was reason to stay, as concern was expressed that to leave would increase the influence of conservative forces. This is illustrated in the following comments: *the changes may come slowly because of the mass 'walk out' of members; those left are most likely to be conservative ... and disinterested in the process (M69); the continuing on-going male hierarchy, the laity opting in and out [give] the pastors the excuse to 'go it alone' (M132); conservative forces shore up the system that protects them, just as progressive forces leave a system that oppresses them; personally I want to change the system (R11).*

However the alternatives were unclear: *do we stay and try to bring about change from within, or do we leave, let it crumble and a new 'church' take root? (M260); with all the ambivalence I feel, the church is still my church, central and important in my life; at times I feel as if I am hanging in by my fingers and toes, but I can't let go; I do not want to 'leave home' to change things; I want to hang in there and, in whatever way I am able, work for change from within; I could not leave then snipe from the bushes like an assassin; at times it is a very painful dichotomy; I have come to the conclusion that I must be content to be discontent about many things (M223).*

'Love-pain' tension for the following respondents was tension between people and structures: *I love and work with individual church members; I cannot tolerate 'the church' at all, so ignore it mostly (R211); I love my local ... community so I try and ignore all the 'yuk' stuff (S178); my present experience of church is rather aptly described by Miriam Therese Winter's phrase 'defecting in place'<sup>9</sup> ... I want to be selective about where I put my energy in terms of promoting the reign of God, and would sooner support people, groups and activities that focus on the mission of Jesus in a way that engages people in the reality of their every-day lives ... I want to continue to be church and to be with people who want to live the Gospel and carry on the mission of Jesus (R229);<sup>10</sup> I have a basic loyalty /commitment to church as the 'People of God' (R149); my experience of church is a relationship, with Christ, primarily, and through him with those who make up church; so it is not an 'it'*

<sup>9</sup> See: Chapter 3, Winter, Lunnis & Stokes (1995).

<sup>10</sup>cf R317.



*to me but a communion, a sharing of people; because of this, I sometimes feel a sense of anguish ... when faced with the exclusion of women, especially in liturgical language (R302)*

As in the American study (Winter, Lummis & Stokes, 1995), a number of women stated that they found support through church community or small groups, sometimes in ‘school community’,<sup>11</sup> through family and friends,<sup>12</sup> or simply with ‘people’.<sup>13</sup> This is demonstrated by the following comments: *the church constitutes the community context in which my spiritual life has found nourishment and meaning (R97)*;<sup>14</sup> *I share my faith with a few people, and that is an experience of renewal of life and love for me (S245)*.<sup>15</sup> Membership of ‘open’ groups like WATAC was mentioned as supportive.<sup>16</sup> As the following woman noted: *I am thankful for those in WATAC and for a close circle of friends who have helped me through the tough times; without them I would be another disillusioned person who would have chosen to leave the church (S140)*. One woman wrote of *good* experience of the feminine church because of which she *hung on stubbornly in a not very rewarding situation (S48)*. Chapter 5 made reference to ‘people’ within the church – ‘church is people’ – as a support for women who were alienated to tolerate an otherwise sterile experience.

Worship was stated by the following group of women as reason to stay: *I am the sort of person who has to worship and worship in a community; worship to me is like having fresh air to breathe (S43)*; *I reject the Catholic Church as institution and have little interest in its governance and decision-making; my interest is in the Mass, the sacraments and church as community (S304)*; *I love the Eucharist; I could feel excluded but Jesus was not on about that ... I have a great sense of belonging to all this and hence the energy for change (S138)*; *I am an ‘old’ Catholic; as a child there was much about the liturgy and worship in the church which forever marked my soul and spirit (D223)*. ‘Liturgy’ served a ‘political’ purpose for the following respondent: *I attend local Masses on Sundays to be visible so that I can continue to have a voice in the future (R211)*.

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<sup>11</sup> cf M152, M262.

<sup>12</sup> M133, M260.

<sup>13</sup> R20, R66, M150, M232, R317, M322.

<sup>14</sup> cf R38, M53, M58, M96, S187, W221, S304..

<sup>15</sup> cf R9, M105, S187, M224, M248, S291, M314, S315.

<sup>16</sup> S67, M90, M93, M244, M257, M316.

Hope for change, hope in lived Gospel values, were stated by the following women: *my focus of church, and what I hold onto, is really the church's involvement in welfare and justice issues; I try to focus on the positive that is happening, and to live a life of caring (M262); if I could, I would 'run away': 'leave' the institutional church; however my love of the values Christ stood for are the 'skin' I wear; ... in that sense I can't run away (R113); I find the church exclusive of women ... yet somehow I stick to it in hope (R84); still trying to live in hope of change (R47); it's a slow process, but I've decided to stick around for now and, when I get the freedom, to explore the possibilities that I now know exist; I have plenty of hope (M110).*

'Faith' was another stated reason to stay: *fortunately my faith is strong and I am glad to have made the decision to enter the church ... but I find it difficult to support the decision with friends/family who raise criticisms with which I agree (D179); few opportunities for 'quality control' except to leave the church - not a positive option for those who really believe (L153); my faith is more important to me than the church (M218); mostly the church provides me with a focus for expressing my faith in God; without this there is nothing that sufficiently would engage me (M110); it has been important in my life to have an openness to where God is in my life (M146).*

'Guilt' was expressed by one woman only as a reason for staying: *my Catholic guilt keeps me involved in the 'institutional church' (S195).* Other women countered this: *for me the Catholic Church has a two-pronged approach - (i) the teaching, policy-making arm with which I am constantly in conflict because it dumps its guilt on innocent laity, and (ii) a life-long love experience of a Catholic tradition that has nourished my spiritual life and in which I choose to worship; this I do with a like-minded group of people who envisage and love a God of compassion (S174); in teaching and policy I disagree in some areas but continue to live within the system and live with the situation without guilt (R234).*

We-they dichotomy of people and structures, and love-pain tension of spirituality and religion, were again evident. The collective and personal faith of participants in this study were equally evident.

## FEELING DIFFERENT

Although the following descriptions are of individual and personal experiences within the church, they touch into modes of being in the church that experience discrimination, oversight or neglect. A single woman described her experience of feeling a non-category in the Catholic Church:

*I think that people who are single are very much neglected. While I applaud the emphasis on family, there are lots of people whose family isn't there in the faith community ... Yet I know there are lots of people like myself. I don't feel I'm strange or peculiar, but I'm invisible. I'm more invisible as a single female in the church than as a female in the church ... It's not just a feature of what happens in the faith community. It happens in commercial life ... I find that insulting, and it's even more hurtful when one experiences it in a place like church ... The other extreme I have experienced - there is an assumption ... that you're hanging up behind the door waiting for somebody to issue the dog's-body-type jobs. There is no understanding that you might have other commitments ... In relation to the single life, and again related to the church, there are not many opportunities for like-on-like. Those that I've taken part in have been engaged in the grieving process. The gathering together of single people was to allow them to grieve for whatever partner they'd lost. The notion that you might actually celebrate that hardly ever arises. If I want to celebrate that particular vocation, I have to make it myself. I have to find the people who want to do it and do it together, and say 'Let's have a weekend and talk about this and how we're managing'. It's just another example of how blank is other people's consciousness, even though there's more and more people and they're single for all sorts of reasons (S175, 11/10/96).*

One woman's experience of being 'divorced and annulled' made her feel different from others. She felt deeply the ambivalence of this status and that of her children:

*I'm talking about a situation that happened about twenty years ago. I've been divorced a very long time. In those days it was a taboo subject within the church. If you were a divorced Catholic you were*

*frowned upon. I from the very beginning reacted against that ... but I was very aware this stigma was attached to people ... My experience of the church going back into that time, the 1960s, is that there was no support. I had to struggle through all those things on my own ... At the time I was in no fit state to be going through an annulment, facing up to a group of people to be asked very personal questions ... I didn't find it a good experience. It was very life-denying to me ... I think there should have been more support ... One of my dilemmas was I had two children, only twenty-two months and a new-born baby. To be divorced you're still a parent, but when you get annulled you've got to work through 'Who am I? Who are my children?'. I'm now considered to be a single person. That's why I fought against it. I say I'm a divorced-annulled person, rather than say I'm single ... I had two young children, I had them legitimately, but now I'm considered to be a single person. I didn't have anyone to talk to about it. That was a real problem, it was an identity crisis, I didn't know who I was. To categorise myself as single denies the fact that I have had the lived experiences of being married, divorced and going through the annulment process ... I don't know what they're like now. They could be a lot more compassionate, and have a different system (DA241, 11/10/96).*

Another woman expressed her experience of discrimination as a divorced person in the Catholic Church:

*I left after twenty-three years of marriage ... I found my life totally different within the church and within the school community. It was quite lonely. It was an unthinking kind of attitude - perhaps lots of single women find it anyway inside and outside the church - the fact that you are not partnered and that you are alone means that all sorts of things would happen from parish picnics to St. Patrick's Night Dances or something at the Catholic Club, where nobody would ask you to join a table. I felt even - now this could have been my problem - I didn't think I ought to be a reader in church or I ought to be anything that brought me to anybody's attention, because I was a divorced person and nobody would be quite sure what sort of a life I was living. I didn't want to be under scrutiny, not because I was doing anything wrong, because I wasn't, but just because it was very raw to feel. I*

*could say it was just a total and unthinking exclusion by a lot of people from the ordinary kind of activities that, had I been married with children, would have been my lot ... That's a very unwelcoming sort of experience (D223, 8/12/96).*

Another divorcee commented on the need for pastoral response to marriage break-down:

*I worked in Family Court. Some of the Catholic couples there were really struggling .. I can understand because I was like that, 'How can I leave this marriage, I made a vow', so it is a struggle. They need support, understanding and acceptance from the church which is important to them (D179, 10/10/96).*

'Feeling different' was experienced by a woman who was married to a man who was not Catholic. She wrote: *I am married to a non-Catholic, for thirty-three years, and have never found the church supportive in any way.* She expanded at interview on the need and scope for pastoral response:

*I think the church doesn't support mixed marriages. Over the years I've heard several talks on marriage, and read several articles written for study, and they talk only about the marriage between two Catholics. That's the ideal. Anything I've ever read made me feel second rate, as if I haven't made the grade not marrying a Catholic, that my marriage wasn't as good as it should be, as good as if I had a Catholic marriage. I know ideally a Catholic marriage, i.e. a marriage between two Catholics, is best. We don't live in an ideal world though. It doesn't make me a second rate Catholic or a second rate person because I'm in a mixed marriage. Many 'Catholic marriages' are far from ideal. And this attitude is not good. You shouldn't be made to feel like that ... That's an area that should have attention. There are parish functions, and people will say 'Are you coming', and I say 'Not by myself'. I think this is an important area for support as well. I can come on my own, but there are lots of people who can't ... The parish council/ priests/pastoral workers should make an effort to welcome the spouses in mixed marriages. They should make an effort to involve the Catholic partner in social functions and parish activities (M218, 10/10/96).*

Being married and childless was experienced as cause for discrimination - for the first woman who worked in a Catholic agency of the Bishops' Conference more than for the second woman who taught in Catholic schools, and had been mobile in her career:

*I feel discrimination as a married woman with no children in a number of ways ... I feel it in the work place. It came up at interview, and it shouldn't have. I answered the question because I felt no problems, but I thought to myself this should not have been asked. But then in comments that the bishop has made, and in other comments that have come back to me, certainly the previous director's comments, there is a real slur on me that I seem to pursue a career, that they perceive in the Catholic sector I've failed. So I feel very much singled out as having failed the church, being too clever for my own good, being selfish. I think the bottom line is that they think I am being selfish. They lock into that. You can't do that if you've got kids. Well you can, but you don't. She's just basically promoting herself, creating a career, getting more credentials. It's a no win situation (M80, 4/10/96).*

The second woman commented:

*We did go along the IVF road for a bit. We decided that was very demeaning. I think it really needs a lot of attention, not from the religious point of view. I just think it's not the correct way to go ... I have a sister also without children, and she's very alienated because of that. She feels less of a woman. I think that's a real tragedy. I think that's the way society makes it. I think within and without the church, if you don't have children you are seen to be different or unusual (M141, 28/11/96).*

Women's experiences of the need and scope for pastoral response reflect we-they dichotomy and add to love-pain tension. Patriarchal, hierarchical and clerical structures appear to value authority and discipline more highly than people and their needs.

## SUMMARY

The key themes of this chapter are love-pain tension and the question 'why stay?' Related themes are powerlessness, belonging, and the ambivalent place of church in women's lives. Categories of felt exclusion were illustrated by specific stories of women who were interviewed. Hirschman's (1970) loyalty-voice provided a framework for the chapter, with reference also to 'victim' (Hoff, 1990).

Respondents stated that they stayed in the church in hope of change and to work for change. They stayed because of their faith and their attraction to church as a worshipping, eucharistic community, although they were repelled by exclusionary structures and practices.

A significant proportion of Catholic women who participated in the present study typically described their experience of 'church' in the feeling words of hurt, anger and frustration. Deep pain was most often expressed by those whose active membership of church suggested loyal adherence. Although some of these women would be regarded by church authorities as no longer full members because they were not regular in Mass attendance or because they did not adhere to aspects of church teaching, the women regarded themselves as Catholic. As one woman wrote: *the church is deeply part of me; from outside appearances I would probably not be seen as part of the church; I would attend 'Mass' every month or two, be part of a 'Eucharist' group each month ... I refuse to 'leave the church' because it belongs to me as much as to any bishop (R207)*. Respondents used the term 'cultural Catholic' to describe their continuing informal identification through inculturated outlook and world-view. They re-defined for themselves the nature and meaning of 'church' and church membership.

Many similarities exist between the women of this study and those of the American study discussed in Chapter 3. Particular similarities were the level of anger of Catholic women, their self-identification as Catholic, and the nurturing of spirituality in women's groups that enabled them to remain in active church membership. Like the American women, the women of this study distinguished between religion and spirituality, struggled for spiritual survival and claimed responsibility for their religious lives. Their dilemma

was the same – whether to withdraw and allow ‘church’ to crumble, or stay to foster systemic change.

Many respondents who participated actively in parish worship and committees stated that they felt pain, anger and alienation because they experienced that the Catholic Church excluded them as women, was not relevant, and did not follow Jesus principles. Being Catholic and involved in church activities did not guarantee satisfaction with church structures, attitudes and practices. Although these respondents were bound to the church by faith, the Gospel, Eucharist, worship and the community of people, they noted the disjunction between church and spirituality, between religion and personal faith. Their sense of belonging was often ‘in spite of’, and reflected *need to be content to be discontent (M223)*. ‘Dysfunctional family’ was an apt image that raised the analogy of ‘victim’.

Respondents stated that they stayed in the church to work for change, and because to leave would increase the influence of conservative forces. Given that respondents saw the Catholic Church as attracting those who wanted certainty and were unlikely to opt for change, and that conservative forces currently held power in the church, prospects for change seemed low. Yet respondents saw reason for hope in the church’s commitment to welfare and justice. This hope was reason to stay, as were worship and faith. Guilt was a stated factor for one respondent only.

There is a paradox in respondents’ valuing the commitment to welfare and justice of a church that is unjust and exclusionary in their regard. ‘Victim’ as an analogy places the problem outside the person and blames the system. This divests the person of responsibility while perpetuating the system. To blame the system allows the person to cover-up and to excuse. Similarly, a we-they dichotomy allows women to forget that they are part of the system.

From these findings, a question is posed: did respondents have a blind spot that did not allow them to see positives from hierarchy and clergy, from structures and practices, or did the survey merely give voice to frustration and anger for which structures provided no outlet? It was significant in this regard that survey and interviews coincided with the launch of the Bishops’ Inquiry and critique of the wording of its questions.



Moving from this experience of church, the next chapter will explore the changes that respondents wished to see in the Catholic Church.