

The following parts of Gertrud Heinzelmans petition addressed to the Preparatory Commission of Vatican Council II have been compiled by Barbara Kopp.

„Woman and the Council – Hopes and Expectations

A petition addressed to the Preparatory Commission of Vatican Council II concerning the place of woman in the Roman Catholic Church*

(...) I write as a woman of our time. Long years of participation in the feminist movement enable me to speak of the needs and problems of women. I am turning to you in the hope that my petition will receive the attention I think it deserves. In giving expression to my thoughts I feel that I am the sister of all women. I want this petition to point an accusing finger as it were, for half of mankind, the feminine half which has been oppressed for thousands of years. By its wrong concept of women the Church has aided and abetted in this oppression, it still does, in a way that grievously offends the Christian conscience.“¹

„There can be no doubt that St. Thomas on the basis of pseudoscientific premises, of ‚probabilities‘ which bespoke the development of the time, evolved a theory of woman which, because of the formal acts cited above, must still be regarded as the implicit official doctrine of the Church concerning woman and which even today represents the decisive thought-heritage concerning the legal and liturgical position of woman in the Church. In the present state of research these ‚probabilities‘ turn out to be scientifically wrong, but they led Thomas to conclusions which are most damaging to woman in her spiritual nature and in her human dignity.“

„This doctrine applied to woman by the Thomistic method leads to the conclusion, evident in countless passages, that in comparison to man woman is imperfect, base, defective, and weak. Nothing is ever said about her possible advantages over the man or their complementary functions. A woman, according to Thomas, has her function in the work of generation. She is in the first instance a being with sex and in generation she represents the principle of ‚matter‘, of passive reception. She is also bound to her husband as the keeper of the house. All other views on woman are lacking. As a result he interprets the position of woman as one of complete subjection to man.“²

„It is obvious enough that woman’s participation in public life, political, social and vocational, will hardly find support in the Thomistic doctrine of the unconditional subjection of woman to man, in the doctrine of her low status, her defectiveness and her general inferiority to man.“³(...)

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If the Church clings to Thomism as her official teaching despite contradicting modern scientific insights, she should at least draw the logical conclusions about women from the statements of St. Thomas Aquinas concerning the ‚rational soul‘, the intellectual principle, the rational principle of action, reason understanding, form, etc. For this ‚rational soul‘ with all its aspects lives in the woman in the same way as in the man.⁴⁴

„The personal qualifications which St. Thomas lays down, namely, that a candidate must know enough to perform the duties of the priesthood fittingly, can be fulfilled by a woman as well as by a man. This is adequately demonstrated by the female scholars who are earning academic degrees in all faculties of modern universities.“⁴⁵

„The exclusion of women from the priesthood and the prohibition for them to speak which has burdened them for nearly two thousand years cannot be rationalized in Thomism from any reasons flowing from the rational human soul or from the nature of the ‚sacramental character‘. It is based simply on the subjugation of women, which in St. Thomas's time was based on:

1. The misunderstanding of the generative process already discussed.
2. The legal dependence by which every woman throughout the course of her life was placed under the tutelage of her father, her husband, or some other male guardian.
3. The Book of Genesis.“⁴⁶

„The UN, every civilized nation, and innumerable organizations of progressive men have made it their purpose to eliminate the ancient discrimination based on sex. When the Church in the Encyclical Aeterni Patris, in the liturgical prayer on the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, and in Canon 1366 § 2, implicitly clings to the above-mentioned doctrine on women as official, then she stands opposed to the best and most human endeavors of our time. She is closing her eyes to the fact that without her and often in opposition to her and her official teaching mankind has made great progress in recent centuries in the most varied areas of life. (...)

By their fidelity, their profound religious aspirations, and their service in the education of children, women are an essential support to the Church. Whether they could continue to show such devotion of the official teaching of the Church on women were known to them is a question. With the modern specialization of knowledge and all the vocational demands made on her it is a rare woman who can acquire a knowledge of the official teaching of the Church on women. But we may easily suppose that a better and more widespread knowledge of this official teaching would have a disenchanting effect on modern women in their attitude toward the Church.“⁴⁷

„Any modestly gifted man who is able to assimilate the prescribed theological knowledge is ordained and permitted to speak in the Church. All women, even the most intellectual, whose writings may be widely known and respected, are excluded from the priesthood and from the word in Church. In the earliest days of young Christian Church there were beginnings for an altogether different development, but they were suppressed. The writing and therefore the public activity of the great mystic women should be reason enough for the Church to allow women to speak. (...)

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I conclude this petition in the hope that I have succeeded in pointing out what is offensive and debasing in the evaluation of the status of women, of half the human race, in the official teaching of the Church, and how very much that half of humanity is now hampered in its development, activity, and expression. I write without a mandate but, as mentioned in the beginning, as a sister of all women in the urgent desire to do what the hour demands.

To the Holy Father and the 2nd Vatican Council I wish the blessings of Christ, and I greet them with the expression of Christian love.

Zurich, May 23, 1962

Gertud Heinzelmänn⁴⁸

* The following excerpts of the petition of Gertrud Heinzelmänn were chosen by Barbara Kopp.

The excerpts of the petition are published in:

Gertrud Heinzelmänn (1964): *Wir schweigen nicht länger! We Won't Keep Silence Any Longer! Frauen äussern sich zum II. Vatikanischen Konzil. Women Speak Out to Vatican Council II*, Interfeminas-Verlag, Zürich, p. 79–99.

First print of the petition in: *Die Staatsbürgerin*, Juli/ August 1962, 18. Jg., Nr. 7/8.

1 Heinzelmänn: *Wir schweigen nicht länger! We Won't Keep Silence Any Longer!*, p. 79.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 80f.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 82f.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 88f.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 92f.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 94f.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 97.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 99.