

Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE) Reflections on Catholic Family Life

For over thirty years, members of the Catholic Network for Women's Equality (CNWE) have shared a faithful commitment to social justice for all women. Our movement embraces a broad range of Canadian Catholic women and men for whom an inclusive church that is accountable to all of its members is important. In November 2013, the Vatican published "Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization" as a preparatory document for an Extraordinary General Assembly to be held in October 2014. This document included a survey that Catholic bishops were to distribute "as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received." Many members of CNWE provided input through the mechanisms in place in their dioceses or via surveys developed by other reform organizations. Members of CNWE's National Work Group (NWG) put together a discussion guide on family life based on the topics addressed in the Vatican's survey. We invited CNWE members to use the guide to reflect more deeply on their personal experiences of family life in order to have a greater understanding of the family in a Catholic context. Individual CNWE members and local groups took time over the last six months to use the CNWE discussion guide and record their reflections. This document conveys the substance of the reflections and conversations that CNWE members from across the country shared with the NWG.

Faith Formation

Faith formation for CNWE members happened within two settings – the parish and the family. These two places of formation largely worked together during the youth and young adult years of our members' lives. Parish life was central to faith formation for many CNWE members, and many people reflected on the impact of catechetics during Sunday school. At particular times in their lives, some CNWE members recall attending mass daily. Members shared experiences of youth retreats, camp, parish missions, children's liturgies, and the educational milieu of Catholic primary and secondary schools. For some, these parish and/or school centered experiences instilled a lifelong love of ritual and sacred music. In the home and in the context of family life, faith was passed on to children through the example of their parents. This included regular prayer, grace at meals, Christmas and Easter traditions, praying the rosary during Lent, the stations of the cross, reading and discussing the bible on Sundays, and discussions about issues related to faith and current events after mass. Parents also exemplified charity and generosity by sharing their material resources with others. "Faith was formed in community" and thus Catholic identity was strong. Sometimes however, Catholic identity was an oppositional rather than inclusive identity. Some were taught that Catholics were better than non-Catholics. It was not until some women met, dated and married Protestants that these identities and boundaries were challenged.

Although the influences of parish and family were strong, many members recalled that during their youth there was more of an emphasis on obedience rather than learning to think for oneself. For some, much of the Catholic faith was not explained – it was something they 'did' rather than something about which they were reflective. Going to mass was part of belonging to a religious group in which all of the members did the same thing – there was no choice or individual assent to the faith. For some, fear and guilt were stressed rather than faith as a positive influence in their young lives. This generated the feelings that somehow "God was watching me" and that was the primary reason for being good. For others, there were some

examples of family members who encouraged critical thought when it came to faith – parents, uncle, and grandparents.

Despite these strong experiences of faith formation, some CNWE members no longer find spiritual sustenance in the Catholic church and now participate in alternative faith communities. Some continue to attend their local church but feel that much more could be done to support families, nurture the spirituality of young people and build a stronger sense of community among contemporary Catholics. Being part of a parish community helped some parents pass on the faith to their children through their involvement in teaching catechism and youth ministry. However when parents begin to question some Catholic teachings, they do not want to pass on to their children some of the things they no longer believe in. Many felt that the language of the mass, particularly the changes introduced in the New Roman Missal, do not speak to young adults. “There is great ethical honesty in many young people,” shared one of the CNWE members. Thus the scandal of child sexual abuse by clergy and its cover-up as well as the church teachings on homosexuality and its treatment of women turn today’s youth away from Catholicism. One member shared that her children taught her and her husband “the importance of ‘walking the talk.’” Even though they raised their children in the church, now as adults, many no longer go to church. Parents of adult Catholic children who choose not to engage in the church understand that their children are good people who desire authenticity.

Today there are lots of opportunities for adult faith formation: bible study programs, reading popular books on theology, prayer and spirituality groups, involvement in the Catholic Women’s League, serving on pastoral councils and diocesan committees, attending workshops, retreats and conferences (such as the CNWE national conference or Call to Action) and using online resources. Some members pointed out that the documents of Vatican II, such as *Gaudium et Spes*, had a profound impact on them, for example because it stressed the primacy of conscience in adult faith life.

When asked about the influence of scripture on their faith formation, several members indicated that there had not been a strong emphasis on studying scripture in their youth or young adult lives. It was not until later in life that many learned to study the bible with an awareness of its historical context. Members shared both the positive and negative impacts of particular scripture passages. For some, Ephesians 5:22-24 - Paul’s injunction to wives to submit to their husbands - is a problematic text that needs to be put into context when proclaimed during mass. For others, Ephesians 6:1-3, in which Paul advises children to be obedient to their parents, was interpreted as a sacred command not to question. Again, the historical context of this letter is important for understanding its meaning. The gospel according to Mark, chapter 10: 6-9 emphasizes the life-long commitment of marriage and some recall that this was taught as a prohibition against divorce. Others indicated that Colossians 3:18-4:1 promoted patriarchy within the family and society and this was problematic for them, given their commitment to gender equality in family life. One member indicated that Matthew 22:36-40 – the great commandment - was influential as was 1 Corinthians 13:1-13. She and her husband try to live out this gift of love and they also find inspiration from Micah 6:8 – “act justly, love tenderly and walk humbly with your God.” In reflecting on hearing the proclamation of scripture during mass, some commented that the lectionary for Sundays does not present many passages in which strong women are portrayed – these are read on weekdays when the whole community does not have the opportunity to hear them. Others shared that the proclamation of scripture during mass should use inclusive language. One member insists that “the sexist language of the liturgy is a hindrance to the celebration of my faith as a woman.”

Gender and Sexuality

Just as the context of home and family played a significant role in Catholic faith formation, it also was an important place where understandings of gender and sexuality were formed. CNWE members provided examples of grandmothers, mothers, aunts, sisters and wives who were strong role models that defied traditional gender roles. These were Catholic women who balanced faith and reason – responding to the signs of the times in which the equal rights of women in Canadian society were becoming increasingly salient. Likewise, fathers and brothers took on roles and tasks in the family as mothers were increasingly engaged in public life. One member reflected on the influence of a father as a gentle role model. Another said that “It is great to see the younger generation of males being so nurturing with their children.” There were also role models outside of the family. Nuns, peers, co-workers and friends influenced understandings about gender and were models of change. “Whenever I have faced a wall, there have been creative women in my life whose wisdom has helped me develop strategies for moving forward,” shared one member. In raising their children, CNWE members have taught them about respect, responsibility and the importance of understanding members of the opposite sex.

CNWE members indicated that relationships are “a central aspect of how we live in the world.” In referring to gender roles, members insist that there is a need for interdependence in relationships. Shared leadership is a good example of how to model this. Both men and women have a responsibility for making relationships work. Feminism has been a liberating lens for some women but this “requires ongoing practice given that society . . . persists with sexism in its structures.” It is important for one CNWE member to advocate for women’s equality among widowed and aging women, especially with regard to these women being agents of their own health in a society plagued by ageism. The exclusion of women within the decision-making structures of the Catholic church has instilled a sense of injustice at institutionalized gender inequality. This kind of discrimination is what has made CNWE members advocate for women’s rights within the church. One member in her autumn years claims that, “I have found my voice as a Catholic feminist and I am empowered to voice my thoughts on being a woman of faith even though I encounter opposition.”

Many CNWE members who reflected on their understanding of gender mentioned that higher education and employment have played a positive part in mainstreaming gender equality in Canadian society over the years. One woman indicated that working in a profession not dominated by men was liberating for her. Some members indicated that the education system still has an important role to play in exposing gender inequalities which are evident through the commodification of girls’ and women’s bodies. Advertising continues to promote gender stereotypes. Likewise, gender inequality remains a huge challenge in developing countries in Latin America and Africa. One participant stated in the discussions, “Much work still needs to be done to eradicate domestic violence and gender discrimination within relationships and society in general.” Another added, “Discrimination of all kinds is at the root of violence.”

In considering their understandings of sexuality and the influences on these understandings, CNWE members shared both positive and negative influences. One woman indicated that “In my home sexuality was perceived as natural and good.” In contrast, another shared, “I interiorized a message from the pulpit that sex was only for procreation.” These quotes illustrated that there were conflicting messages about sexuality and often religious beliefs were a hindrance to a healthy understanding of sexuality. Some felt that they were naïve because

of a lack of sex education as Catholic youth. “Perhaps if I had known more about sex and love then I would have been more confident about what I wanted from a relationship,” pondered one member. She elaborated that as a young adult she figured out that physical pain was fine as it related to hard labour, sports or fasting, but physical pleasure in terms of sex was considered sinful. Still other members did want to emphasize that sex is not just the “indoor sport” portrayed in the media but “a sacred reality lived in loving relationship.” Because of these conflicting messages, CNWE members said that it was challenging teaching their own children about sex and sexuality. They did not have many healthy role models in this regard. In reflecting on how she and her husband dealt with the sex education of their children, one member said, “We moved away from offering them rules to listening to them, having dialogue, and sharing our understanding of forming one’s conscience.”

For all of those who participated in the discussions on family life, church teachings on homosexuality have been rejected. Some argued that reducing “natural law” to heterosexual unions alone is not consistent with what is observed in the natural world. Many expressed a growing understanding and acceptance of differences in sexual orientation among people over the course of their lives. For some this process began when they met someone who was homosexual or when a family member came out. For others attending Call to Action conferences has been helpful in raising awareness about the challenges that face LGBTQ people. “God’s love is unconditional – we need to accept and affirm them.”

CNWE members also considered the church’s teachings on contraception. They believe that women have the right to make decisions that impact their lives and contraception just makes sense. Natural family planning is a choice that has helped some couples to better understand their fertility cycle. Whether they use natural or artificial methods of contraception, it was generally felt to be important that Catholic couples responsibly decide on the size of their families. All of those who participated in these reflections on family life agreed that the Vatican’s promotion of increased births is horribly wrong. The earth cannot sustain an ever-increasing population and a decrease in births is needed. There is also a tremendous imperative to better care for the women and children who are already in the world. Some believe that abortion should be safe, legal and rare. This is a complex issue that rarely gets the attention it needs among Catholics and opportunities for open and frank discussions are non-existent. Abortion needs to be understood within the larger socio-economic context in which people live. Some believe that if education and contraception were readily available, it would reduce the number of abortions. Some agree with the church’s anti-abortion position but feel that it treats those who choose to have an abortion too harshly. There needs to be respect for life at all stages and compassion for people who make different choices.

Marriage and Family

In reflecting on their experiences of marriage and family life, CNWE members are adamant that marriage is a partnership of equals. Faith in the sacramental commitment of marriage has helped some in sustaining their marriages. Marriage involves ups and downs, negotiation, hard work and compromise. But remaining in a bad marriage is destructive. Said one member, “I am more accepting of divorce, having been through it, and believe firmly in remarriage after divorce.” Many indicated that judgments are harmful when a marriage fails and despite best intentions, marriages fail. There is consensus that divorced Catholics should not be excluded from the Eucharist, as reflected in these comments: “The Eucharist is meant to nourish

the faith.” “Hospitality for all is at the heart of what we learn of Jesus in the gospels.” “Those who are struggling should be the most welcome.” Members also indicated that the annulment process has many shortcomings including being demeaning, invasive and costly. Some believe that it should be terminated.

CNWE members have developed empathy and compassion for the choices that people make, even if these are choices they have not themselves made. People choose to co-habit or live common-law for many reasons. Members have children and grandchildren in “irregular” unions according to the views of the institutional church. Even those involved in marriage preparation courses at the parish level are aware that many couples in these courses have been living together. The quality of marriage preparation courses really depends on the leadership and resources used. There have been positive and negative experiences of these courses. Many believe that Catholic parishes could do much more to support couples and families. Some families need help and when the difficulties that they encounter are not severe - the parish community could be a source of wisdom and experience for these families. Parishes also need to help with more serious issues such as child abuse or domestic violence by assisting individuals in accessing professionals and resources in the community such as Catholic Family Services and crisis lines. Priests who are not trained in counseling should refer couples to professionals for help. One member stated that, “There are no instructions to parishes as to what ought to be done in the case of reported family violence/crises.”

Several CNWE members indicated their dissatisfaction with the church’s approach to many issues as they relate to Catholic family life. They believe that Catholic women have been instructed to obey the teachings of the church in regards to sexuality, marriage, birth control and homosexuality and yet women have had little to no role in the development of these teachings. The institutions of the church and of the family are patriarchal and CNWE has provided its members with opportunities to question and challenge the sexism of these institutions. The CNWE discussion guide on family life is one example of how the voices of the faithful can be heard.

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