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Dharmaram Moral Theology Series, No. 3



GENDER JUSTICE IN THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Papers of the Second DVK National Seminar
on Moral Theology

Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI
Editor

GENDER JUSTICE IN THE CHURCH

AND SOCIETY: PAPERS OF THE SECOND DVK NATIONAL SEMINAR ON MORAL THEOLOGY

Edited by Shaji George Kochuthara, CMI

Published by Dharmaram Publications, 476 pages, \$25

In a new collection of papers published by an Indian pontifical college, a diverse range of bishops, theologians and lay professionals challenges the global Catholic church to break down ecclesial structures that place women on an unequal or subservient standing.

As Bishop Joshua Mar Ignathios, one of the contributors to *Gender Justice in the Church and Society: Papers of the Second DVK National Seminar on Moral Theology* (Dharmaram Publications, 476 pages, \$25), puts it: The women who prayed with men in the Gospel accounts were there ?not to cook for them but to pray along with them.?

?The ideal shines, but the actual at times shames,? writes Ignathios.

The bishop, head of the Syro-Malankara Eparchy of Mavelikara in the southern Indian state of Kerala, critiques the church?s patriarchal system and says ?there is absolutely no doubt whatsoever? that men and

women had equal roles in the Scriptures.

‘Patriarchy by its very nature is exploitative,’ he writes. ‘It does not facilitate change in the subordinate situation of women in any significant way.’

Ignathios is one of 36 contributors to the collection, published by the Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, a pontifical athenaeum of theology, philosophy and canon law based in Bangalore.

The collection follows a 2014 conference hosted by the athenaeum on the theme and features bold calls for better inclusion of women in church structures; it also focuses on injustice toward women in family life, health care and police policy.

Carmelite Fr. Shaji George Kochuthara, a theologian at the Dharmaram who convened the conference and is the editor of the volume, says in his introduction that organizers chose the theme for their reflections following the brutal gang rape of a woman traveling on a bus in Delhi in 2012.

The incident attracted worldwide media attention and brought focus to the violence Indian women experience every day. Kochuthara cites national statistics that nearly 133,000 sexual attacks against Indian women were recorded in 2014. He suggests many others likely go unreported in the country of some 1.25 billion people.

Bishop Felix Toppo, another contributor to the volume, suggests that the very structure of the Catholic Church, with men in all decision-making roles, leads to wider acceptance of discrimination and violence against women.

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‘One of the main reasons for inequality and discrimination against women is universal Patriarchal Culture,’ writes Toppo, head of the Jamshedpur Diocese in the northeast Indian state of Jharkhand.

‘In the Church men traditionally are given the authoritative and leadership positions and women, religious or lay, are assigned generally to subservient roles rather than to decision making positions,’ he continues.

Carmelite Sr. Vimala Chenginimattam, a theologian at the athenaeum, draws special attention to the status of women religious in the church. She says they are ‘marginalized miserably’ by a hierarchical structure that ‘does not ensure women religious’ participation in strategic planning or in leading the Church.’

‘The glaring injustice of downgrading women to mere co-operators is not done by nature but by the society and patriarchal tradition,’ writes Chenginimattam.

‘The female religious voice is often silenced in the Church: factually in their lives and theoretically through liturgy and literature,’ she continues. ‘Sisters too are often treated as inexpensive laborers’ [and] their voices are drowned under the ocean of clericalism.’

Astrid Lobo Gajiwala, a member of the drafting committee for the Indian bishops’ document ‘Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India,’ offers a measure of hope for those looking for better treatment of women in the church.

The gender policy, drafted by a team of women and approved by the Indian bishops in 2008, is the first of its kind in the global church. It calls for better inclusion of women at all levels, based on Christian

understandings of gender equality.

“With this document the bishops are in effect saying, “this is what the Church is committed to doing for women; this is what we are willing to make resources available for,” writes Gajiwala, a doctor who heads the tissue bank at Tata Memorial Hospital in Mumbai.

“The bishops have made themselves accountable,” she continues. “What remains is for us, people and priests, to ensure they keep their word.”

“More spaces must be created for women’s voices to be heard in decision-making bodies, governance, pulpits and ministries and resources must be made available for the necessary capacity building and theological training to enable them to assume leadership roles in the Church.”

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent.]

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