The Female Face in Patriarchy

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Patriarchal oppression in the Catholic church is ordinarily attributed to men, and to clerics in particular. However, during interviews for a previous book (Like Bread Their Voices Rise, Global Women Challenge the Church, Ave Maria Press, 1993), women on four continents frequently identified the patriarchal behavior of other women as a major obstacle to women's equality.

These conversations raised our awareness to the fact that the problem of patriarchy is more complicated than we had originally thought. As we became aware of the complexity of women's participation and role in fostering their own oppression, we realized that the story of women's conscious and unconscious complicity in patriarchal dominance must be told.

This book is the result of a two-year study of how and why women in the Western Hemisphere, as characterized by women in Brazil and the United States, participate in their own oppression in the Catholic Church. The purpose is to show how centuries of conditioning by the patriarchal church has made women both victims and perpetrators of oppression and that their cooperation with and submission to patriarchal dominance has been both conscious and unconscious. The book's blessing will be a new awareness among women that will enable them to cooperate and support one another in their struggle for an egalitarian church.

My colleague, Becky Drury, Ph.D., and I come to this study with differing backgrounds, experiences, and viewpoints on a number of issues relative to women's oppression of women, not the least of which is the relationship of sisters and other women. The fact that we are not only still speaking after three years, but are in fact "good friends," is proof that sisters and other women can, in Susan Muto's words, "agree to disagree agreeably." We spent endless hours sharing our sometimes contradictory interpretations of what we heard in the
interviews. Our approach was to dialogue until we could hear one another's point of view. This process deeply enriched our analysis and conclusions, providing us with new insights regarding our own participation in patriarchal oppression. It also deepened our understanding of what friendship and collaboration between sisters and other women can mean. Because of our different gifts, I drafted each chapter while Becky was the chief editor. The resulting chapters frequently bore little resemblance to the original drafts.

Data was gathered through personal interviews. The sampling was selective but typical of women in parish settings and small communities in both countries. We interviewed leading Catholic feminists in each country regarding their theories as to why women are co-opted into the patriarchal system. No one claimed to have done extensive research on the question, but each gave her insights and told of her experiences. We then interviewed over two hundred women in each country with the purpose of challenging and/or corroborating the assumptions of the leading feminists by the experiences of grassroots sisters and other women.

The interviews provided a vehicle for women to gather and tell their stories. In the process many began to realize what was happening to them and, more importantly, what they were doing to other women. For some, it was very difficult to admit their own oppressive behavior; a few denied that they had ever been oppressed, nor did they acknowledge they had ever oppressed another woman. The examples cited in the following chapters provide a variety of perspectives and insights regarding women's use and misuse of power. Because so many women found the courage to articulate and reflect on their experiences, it was possible for us to gain some common understandings regarding their motives.

The book is divided into three parts: (1) How women in the United States see their participation in patriarchal oppression; (2) Brazilian women's insights into their cooperation in the double bind of machismo and patriarchy; (3) A profile of patriarchal women, indicating the similarities and differences evidenced among women in the two countries.

There is much in these pages that you, the reader, may already know, but perhaps seeing through the eyes of these women and hearing them speak of their pain, you will be inspired to reflect on your own relationships with other women with new awareness. This alone would make all of our work worthwhile.

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