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Turning Women from Criminals into Victims

Discussions on Abortion in the Catholic Church of Sweden

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ABSTRACT This article examines how one of the most striking differences between the central doctrines of the Catholic Church and the secular context of Swedish society, attitudes to abortion, is managed by the Swedish church hierarchy and commentators in the official newsletter of the Catholic Church of Sweden. Using Foucauldian concepts of power, the article concludes that in its marginal position, the Catholic Church in Sweden mixes the traditional pastoral and sovereign power of the church with the way pastoral power is exerted in modern society, in its efforts to continue asserting its influence over the possible courses of action for pregnant women. While traditionally abortion has been a woman's crime, in the Swedish Catholic context it becomes rather the crime of the secular society. This means also that the image of woman as being responsible for her decisions and in need of forgiveness gives way to an image of woman as a victim in need of understanding.

KEY WORDS abortion ♦ Catholicism ♦ discourse ♦ Foucault ♦ Sweden

BACKGROUND

The prevailing image of the Catholic Church is of a 2000-year-old institution based on masculine hierarchies and very conservative views regarding gender issues. This is also the common way of portraying the Catholic Church in the media. And this image has a solid grounding in the factual hierarchy and the official documents of the church.

But the practices of the Catholic Church are more diverse than what is implied by this picture, both locally and globally. Single Catholics do not always live according to the teachings of the church. (For example, many

Swedish Catholics use artificial contraception, even though it is condemned by the Pope, and the Catholic Church of Sweden faces many divorces which are not sanctioned by the church.) The way in which the church applies the centrally dictated doctrines varies geographically, so that it can be difficult for Catholics from one cultural context to really feel at home in their church when they meet it in another cultural context – for example, when they migrate to another country. (Examples of adaptation of the Catholic Church to different contexts are given by Bayes and Tohidi, 2001; Madsen, 2003; Mella, 1994; Menjivar, 1994.)

Thus, the Catholic Church as an institution can be described as being patriarchal and conservative, but the day-to-day functioning of this institution in different contexts shows a more nuanced picture. This article points at some variation in the view of the church on abortion. The basic principle is that the Catholic Church regards abortion as murder, because an individual human being is created at the moment of conception. The more varied picture shows, for example, how this simple message is reformulated in a Swedish context. Even if the basic principle is the same, the formulation of the message delivered by Swedish church officials to Swedish Catholics has been influenced by the knowledge that the frame of reference of Catholics who live in Swedish society is different from the traditional Catholic one.

The Roman Catholic Church is the second largest denomination in Sweden, after the Church of Sweden. There are about 165,000 Catholics in Sweden, and the overwhelming majority of them are first- or second-generation immigrants. The members of the church come from a number of different countries and cultures, and carry with them a wide range of religious traditions. This means that the Catholic Church in Sweden has to satisfy many different kinds of religious and cultural needs and is criticized for many different reasons. A decision or measure which seems all too liberal for a Catholic with a traditional upbringing can seem all too conservative for a Catholic with a more liberal background.

Still another problem for the Catholic Church in Sweden is the secularized context in which it operates. In a modern, pluralistic and secularized society citizens can find ways of examining and solving their ethical and existential problems without recourse to the one advocated by the church (Berger, 1969). An individual can adhere to other groupings in order to solve moral dilemmas (Luckmann, 2003; Repstad, 2003). In contemporary Sweden, religion only plays a very minor role as a basis for moral values and behavioural norms (Hamberg, 2003; Tomasson, 2002). Even immigrant Catholics who come from more traditionalist cultures, to the extent they become integrated in Swedish society, find themselves in a context where they are supposed to choose their courses of action on a modern and 'rational' basis rather than on a religious one. In this context, the power of the Catholic Church to condemn has weakened, because an

individual member can choose not to acknowledge this power, and find other norm systems in her or his environment.

Abortion is an issue where the norms and the laws of the Catholic Church and Swedish society are very different. Sweden has had free abortion since 1975 and there have been very few opposing voices to the abortion legislation during the last three decades. Abortion is presented as the normal solution to an unwanted pregnancy, both in youth healthcare and in general healthcare, especially if the mother already has several children. Prenatal screening is done in virtually all pregnancies, and parents are often expected to decide on an abortion if a deformity is discovered. All in all, one in four pregnancies is terminated by an abortion, and among teenagers the number is four out of five (Socialstyrelsen, 2002). Thus, there are both institutional and cultural aspects to this issue that quite explicitly bring forward attitudes towards unplanned pregnancies other than those which the current Pope advocates in his encyclical to all Catholics in the world.

ANALYSING ABORTION DOCUMENTS

During the years 1998 and 1999, abortion was an important issue in the Catholic Church of Sweden. Interestingly, the discussions on abortion in the church were not initiated by ordinary Catholics, but by church documents trying to interpret the Catholic doctrine in a situation where the Catholic stance towards abortion had caused difficulties – not only for the members of the church, but for the priests in their pastoral duties as well. This public discourse was mainly carried out by men.

In 1998, the Diocesan Council published a document titled *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct in Conversations on Abortion* (*Råd gällande pastoral hållning i samtal om abort*, 1998), which was produced in cooperation with the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden (one of the Swedish Protestant Free Churches). These two churches belong to those few organizations in Sweden with a restrictive view on abortion, and priests and pastors in both of them have faced the same problems in counselling members who consider having or have had an abortion. The document aroused interest in the mainstream media, particularly the section in which the document expresses an acceptance of Swedish abortion legislation. Several Swedish daily newspapers commented on the fact that the Catholic Church seemed to have abandoned its earlier rigid attitude to this question. The publicity in the secular media was followed by a debate in *Katolskt Magasin*, the official newsletter of the Catholic Church in Sweden.

In 1999, the bishops of the Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Finland and Iceland) jointly published a document on abortion, *To Safeguard Life* (*Att värna om livet*, 1999), which is an episcopal letter, a

doctrinal document for all Catholics in the Nordic countries. An episcopal letter is an official document written by the head of the diocese. Thus, it is expected to concur with the general teachings of the church and only make an interpretation of them in the particular context of a specific diocese. *To Safeguard Life* was also commented on in several articles in *Katolskt Magasin*, but did not get any wider publicity outside the Catholic Church.

In this article, I analyse the two documents along with what was written about abortion in *Katolskt Magasin* during the years 1998–9. I also compare the two Swedish documents with the latest encyclical written by the Pope on abortion, *Evangelium Vitae* from 1995. My aim is to show how the teachings of the Catholic Church on abortion are formulated in a context in which the Catholic Church has a position as a minority church in a secularized society with liberal legislation concerning abortion. In particular, I show what strategies the male hierarchy of the church, which formulates the doctrines, uses to preserve the privilege of the church to dictate the courses of action open to pregnant women.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

I choose to look at how the concepts of 'women', 'fathers' and 'abortion' are treated in these documents from a Foucauldian perspective. I do not provide an exhaustive analysis on the issue of abortion in the Swedish Catholic Church, but show how women are *constituted as subjects* by a *discourse*, which takes its arguments from the realm of *pastoral power* and which is initiated and conducted by men.

The Foucauldian thesis that subjects are constituted and objectivized by power has been important for feminist research (Bartky, 1995; Butler, 1990; Sawicki, 1991), in examining how the construction of 'woman' is always tied to a power relationship. A social subject, a woman is made into a woman in and through different discourses where she might or might not be one of the speaking (or writing) subjects, and these discourses always take place in certain institutional settings with certain institutional practices (Pêcheux, 1982). To a great extent the concept of women and how they are to be regarded in the Catholic Church has been created in the documents written by men in the church hierarchy, and the public and private discussions about these documents. The way the concept 'woman' is constituted in the Catholic discourse on abortion is one example of power in gender relations in the Catholic Church.

Pastoral power, according to Foucault, is a form of power that was developed initially by the Catholic Church and that has been one form of power of the church over its subjects (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1981; Hindess, 1996). Pastoral power can be described as the kind of power a shepherd

has over his sheep. This means that it is individualistic; it is concerned about the welfare of each individual subordinate for which the shepherd is responsible. It also requires of the subordinate individual that she is interested in her 'salvation' and accepts another person's authority and claims of obedience. Foucault sees the sacrament of confession as the primary instrument of pastoral power. Confession is seen as a voluntary exposition of oneself, to an authority that has the power to judge, forgive and reconcile, in search of redemption and salvation. Confession is seen by Foucault as a device for gaining power over a subject by bringing his or her inner self out into the open, and thus into the field of power (Foucault, 1980).

From the religious sphere of life, pastoral power has moved to be employed by modern society. The governance that modern society exerts on its members is partly based on the mechanisms of pastoral power (Dean, 1999). For example, much of the power of modern society over its subjects is based on confession, in that on several occasions the members of society are subjected or subject themselves to counselling services or therapies of various kinds. The new management ideologies in working life also build on pastoral power to a great extent (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998). Fairclough (1992) discusses the way in which confessional discourses permeate modern organizations and institutions. Foucault uses the term 'new' pastoral power (Foucault, 1982) for the pastoral power that is employed by increasing numbers of both public and private officials for the worldly well-being of the subjects.

The Catholic Church in itself can be regarded as a premodern institution that has used both sovereign and pastoral power throughout its history, and the Swedish Catholic Church is a part of that institution. However, in Sweden, the church is situated in a modern state in which the 'new pastoral power' predominates.

THE IMAGE OF THE WOMAN: A MOTHER

In Catholicism, motherhood is one of the two traditional life options open to women. The other is virginity, which traditionally means becoming a nun. Both emanate from a view of women as primarily bodily creatures – what women do with their bodies is the most decisive aspect of their lives. The traditional Catholic ideology of the complementarity of the sexes states that women are created to be mothers – they not only have the reproductive organs required to give birth, but their psychological composition prepares them for taking care of small children.

In *Evangelium Vitae*, the woman is, above all, the one who carries the foetus in her body. It is the foetus and not the woman who is in focus in this document. The womb is often mentioned together with the foetus,

and in this document it is this part of the woman's body that defines her overall mission in the world:

Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman's womb. . . . This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings not only towards her own child, but every human being, which profoundly marks the woman's personality. (*Evangelium Vitae*, paragraph 134)

A model for all Catholics, but in this case especially for women, is the Virgin Mary. She is seen as the womb that carried Jesus. In *Evangelium Vitae*, the most detailed description is from the moment when the pregnant Mary meets the pregnant Elisabeth, who is carrying John the Baptist in her womb. *Evangelium Vitae* states that it was the holy children in the wombs who first experienced the importance of this moment and through their existence sanctified their mothers:

The women speak of grace; the babies make it effective from within to the advantage of their mothers who, by a double miracle, prophesy under the inspiration of their children. (St Ambrosias, cited in *Evangelium Vitae*, paragraph 45)

Here, the mothers are minor characters who are exalted and sanctified by their unborn children. These words exemplify the overall text of the encyclical, where the foetus is the principal character.

As a device for assertion of pastoral power, *Evangelium Vitae* thus provides women with guidelines for self-examination, and a model, the Virgin Mary, to compare themselves with. One way of controlling women's bodies is to make women subordinate them to their unborn children – whose interests in this discourse are voiced by the church authorities.

To Safeguard Life, the document written by the Nordic bishops, changes this view of women as primarily mothers, even though it is fundamental to traditional Catholicism. It is replaced by discussions on the relationship between a man and a woman in marriage, with a starting point in quite concrete descriptions of the everyday concerns of many young parents in Sweden.

To Safeguard Life concurs explicitly with the message of *Evangelium Vitae*, as a document where the right to life for the unborn child is stated. But it does not concur with the view of women expressed in the papal document. Women are still to some extent described in bodily terms in comparison to men (women sleep worse than men because of the unequal distribution of household tasks, single mothers suffer from stress-related illnesses, men use women sexually), but they are also described in other terms. For example, the participation of women in working life and education is seen as being positive because it gives the woman a

possibility to develop her identity – that is, to develop something other than the ‘natural’ and the body.

As could be expected in a Catholic document, even *To Safeguard Life* makes a reference to the Virgin Mary. Here, in the traditional reference to Mary, the view of woman as a womb is expressed. But it is modified in the next sentence, where Mary is put forward as a model for both women and men because of her unconditional affirmation of God’s plan for her, in what is regarded as an autonomous decision. Mary as a model is somewhat different in *To Safeguard Life* from the Mary in *Evangelium Vitae*.

THE IMAGE OF THE MAN: A FATHER

Even the image of the man, the father, is different in the Swedish context than in traditional Catholic thinking.

In the Swedish media, the repeated surveys about the division of household tasks are frequently discussed. So are the recurring changes in laws on parental leave, which have gradually been used by the state in an effort to make childcare more equally distributed between mothers and fathers. The percentage of women working is almost equal to that of men, and most men take some parental leave (SCB, 2004). In public, it is definitely not politically correct to say that women in general should do more housework than men. It is in this context that the Swedish bishop, together with his Nordic colleagues, addresses Swedish Catholic men.

In the papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, the words ‘mother’ and ‘motherhood’ appear around 50 times, while the word ‘father’ is only used five times. This mirrors the traditional view on the role of the father taken in *Evangelium Vitae*: the woman is seen as being naturally connected to her children and the responsibility of men for their children is mediated through women, as stated by another document from the present Pope, *Letter to Families*:

For the civilization of love it is essential that the husband should recognize that the motherhood of his wife is a gift: This is enormously important for the entire process of raising children. Much will depend on his willingness to take his own part in this first stage of the gift of humanity, and to become willingly involved as a husband and father in the motherhood of his wife.

Both *Letter to Families* and *Evangelium Vitae* reproduce the idea of gender differences – and thus also the gender hierarchy (McNay, 1992), while *To Safeguard Life* challenges the differences and thus even the hierarchy to some extent. As to taking part in working life, *To Safeguard Life* makes no suggestion of any differences between women and men. According to the bishops it is natural that women should work, and this should also result in a different division of household tasks. The responsibility of men for

their families and children 'both economically and emotionally and also in the daily life of the family' is stressed. Even if the mother is still seen as the person who in practice takes care of the children, the responsibility of the father is not seen as being essentially different. This is true even in relation to the foetus:

We should not forget that both the woman and the man have responsibility for the child from the moment of conception. The father's rights and responsibilities towards the child are equal to those of the mother. Therefore, it is satisfying to notice that even men now have a right to parental leave from work.

Evangelium Vitae concentrates on the constellation mother-foetus, while *To Safeguard Life* is based on the idea of a nuclear family with mother, father and children. The importance of the family is stressed: 'just like the woman, even the man has the obligation to give priority to his family above everything else'. The fact that women can become pregnant without having a permanent relationship to the father of the child is not expressed clearly or considered, even though this possibility is indicated both in *Evangelium Vitae* and in *To Safeguard Life*. Rape is not mentioned.

But the shifting of focus from mother-foetus to mother-father-child also implies that a woman's position changes in other ways. In *Evangelium Vitae* it is the woman who is the agent when an abortion is done. In *To Safeguard Life*, she shares the responsibility with the man. Additionally, *To Safeguard Life* points to several societal circumstances that make it understandable why a couple is considering an abortion, and thus that society is also to some extent liable. By sharing the liability, the woman is not seen as somebody who chooses autonomously and is responsible for the consequences of her choice.

THE IMAGE OF THE WOMAN: IN NEED OF FORGIVENESS

Both *Evangelium Vitae* and *To Safeguard Life* build on the idea of pastoral power, in that they stress the importance for a woman who has had an abortion to confess her deed to a priest and get absolution from God and even her unborn child through the mediating act of the church. In Catholic thinking, a woman who chooses to discontinue her pregnancy is seen in two different roles: before the abortion she is the carrier of an unborn child and after the abortion she is a sinner. These states of being are described and emphasized in different ways in *Evangelium Vitae* and in *To Safeguard Life*, and still differently in *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct*.

According to the canon law, everybody involved in an abortion is guilty and should have the most severe punishment: excommunication. Consequently, abortion is a crime in *Evangelium Vitae*, and a woman who has an

abortion is a criminal. There are passages which include words such as 'murderess' (p. 62) and 'deliberate and direct killing' (p. 58). Thus, the document puts severe blame on women who have had an abortion. *Evangelium Vitae* defends this by stating that the church is stressing the severity of the crime to awaken a real feeling of remorse in the criminal and to make her look for reconciliation as soon as possible. After this harsh condemnation, however, the authorities of the church reach out their hand and tender God's forgiveness and forgiveness from the aborted child. This is done through the sacrament of confession, which is administered by the priest. It is regarded as being positive that a woman re-establishes a relationship with her unborn child, which is seen as residing with God, but to do this there is a need for a mediator, a man of the church. In *Evangelium Vitae*, the church asserts its pastoral power very clearly in stating that it is only the mediating activity of the church that can provide redemption from something that otherwise leads to condemnation. This pastoral power is still of the kind Foucault (1981) refers to as being the power the church usurped in the very beginning, before the Middle Ages.

In the Swedish discussion, the guilt of the woman is not stressed. The description of the daily life of parents of small children creates a framework for understanding decisions on abortion made by women. While *Evangelium Vitae* offers atonement for a grave sin, *To Safeguard Life* offers forgiveness for a wrongdoing that has often been a consequence of a troublesome situation.

The view in *Katolskt Magasin* of women who have had an abortion can be exemplified by the contributions of Björn Håkonsson. Håkonsson comments on the Swedish documents on abortion, and has written about abortion in several other articles. The fact that Håkonsson is a registered psychologist is stated in every article, and he makes reference to research. Thus, he can also be seen as being a representative of the new pastoral power (Foucault, 1982) that permeates modern society. According to Håkonsson, 'research in the USA' shows, for example, that:

... at least one fifth of all women who have an abortion will meet unexpected and strong psychological problems afterwards, with an increased risk of severe depressions, suicide, low self-esteem, sexual problems, irritation, bitterness and difficulties in finding joy in life again. (*Katolskt Magasin*, No. 11, 1998: 4)

In *Katolskt Magasin*, Håkonsson repeatedly expresses his opinion that an abortion is harmful for the woman herself, and that an important aspect in the reconciliation offered by the church is to satisfy the inherent psychological needs of the woman, rather than to simply remit a crime.

Even the document *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct* stresses the importance of pastoral care for the psychological well-being of the woman who has had an abortion. This shift from salvation in the sacral sphere to a

better everyday life is very much in line with the promises of societal officials of the new pastoral power. Thus, in contrast to the papal message, the Swedish way of using pastoral power is linked to the way pastoral power is used by modern (Swedish) society.

The way forgiveness is discussed in *Katolskt Magasin* also gives the impression that the woman who has had an abortion has been the victim of external factors. While the image of the woman as a criminal suggests an active decision followed by action, even if evil, the woman as a victim is seen as being passive. Both standpoints imply an 'othering' of women in the discourse on abortion. Women, particularly those who have experience of abortion, do not have the same access to the discourse as the men in the church hierarchy. They are not among the authors of the documents, and so they are described as 'others' who are attributed special traits (Mills, 1997; van Dijk, 1993). In this case, in describing women as victims, the implication is that they are emotional and irrational. The way in which the bishops and priests conduct the discussions on abortion on a general level, as a question of guilt and forgiveness, gives the impression of rationality and intellectuality. In contrast, the women who are seen as having been persuaded into having an abortion under pressure from their social environment, or who, in their striving for autonomy, make decisions that are regarded as destructive by the church, do not appear rational.

THE VIEW ON ABORTION IN A PROCESS OF CHANGE

Even though the dividing line between the venerable pregnant woman and the fallen woman who has had an abortion exists in both the papal and the Swedish texts, the attitude towards women who have had an abortion is more tolerant in the latter. *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct*, which was written in cooperation with the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden, is even further removed from *Evangelium Vitae* than *To Safeguard Life*. While the papal text unconditionally bans abortion, *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct* asserts that an abortion is 'not desirable'. In this document, the decision on abortion is described as sometimes having an element of choice. *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct* states that if the foetus has grave deformities, 'the empathetic support of the spiritual advisor is needed in the difficult situation of choice of the parents'. As to abortion in general, the text states that 'the task of the church and the spiritual advisor is to support the woman and the man, whatever the final decision may be'.

However, the main criticism of the document among Swedish Catholics was to do with its attitude towards the Swedish abortion laws. On that point, *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct* quite clearly contradicts *Evangelium Vitae*. *Evangelium Vitae* states that liberal abortion laws are not to be

followed, but that all Catholics have 'a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection' (*Evangelium Vitae*, p. 98; emphasis in the original). In contrast, *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct* states that:

... the experiences of a strongly restrictive legislation have been so negative that they are not worth repeating. In Sweden abortions are legal, and it is impossible to turn the clock back to an earlier legislation.

In his article in *Katolskt Magasin*, the bishop of Sweden asserts that the church has not changed its opinion. He also stresses that *Advice on the Pastoral Conduct* is not an official doctrine, but an aid for those who come into contact with the problems connected with abortion. Nevertheless, this document attracted the attention of the general media and was discussed in *Katolskt Magasin*. The document certainly gives the impression that the Catholic Church of Sweden has moved closer to the general values of society regarding abortion. The opinions of Swedish Catholics as to the acceptability of these statements were divided.

The debate in itself illustrates the difficulty experienced by the middle levels of the church hierarchy in initiating renewal. On the level below, in a Catholic population coming from different backgrounds, there will always be critics of any reform. And deviations from the official, and sometimes even unofficial standpoints of levels above, especially the Vatican, are not permissible.

CONCLUSIONS

Societal change both changes discourses and is changed by discourses. It is obvious that the change in the positions of women and men in Sweden has affected the way the Catholic Church gives out a gender-related message. The recipients of this message, the Catholics in Sweden, include both women and men and are influenced by the gender power relations and definitions of 'women', 'foetus' and 'abortion' in the society in which they live. In the Swedish situation, many Catholic women do not appreciate the traditional subject positions allocated to them by the church. To meet these Catholics, the representatives of the church modify the constructs of earlier documents by shifting focal points and by adding aspects that are not considered in other documents. In the hegemonic discourse on abortion in the Catholic Church, the Swedish Catholic documents present a contradictory view and function as a counter-hegemonic text. However, this does not automatically imply that the basic Catholic gender ideology is dissolving, or that the power relations between women and men are profoundly changing.

The constitution of the new kind of Catholic woman in the Swedish

discourse can be said to be an instance of the struggle of the Catholic Church in Sweden to maintain power over its members by assuring them that the moral stance of the church is still valid and that it is still possible to live up to in Swedish secular society. In particular, it is a way of retaining the power of men over women, since the solutions to the problem of unwanted pregnancy and possibly a completed abortion are seen to come from the male hierarchy of the church, rather than from women's own activities or solutions.

While the papal document shows traces of both disciplinary power (by its use of harsh condemnations) and what Foucault (1981) describes as the pastoral power as it originated in the early church, it seems that the Catholic Church in Sweden has adopted some of the ways in which a secular society exerts its pastoral power. For example, promises concerning the rewards of repentance and confession not only relate to the life hereafter, but to the psychological well-being of the subjects as well. Officials who employ secular pastoral power (psychologists) are used to legitimate the opinions of the church. The pastoral power in question has also widened its scope of interest from the individual woman to include her husband as well. This also means a change in the focus of the discourse, in that condemning the act of a woman who has had an abortion is turned into a more 'understanding' attitude. She is not seen as a criminal, but rather as a victim. Even if this means a less negative view of women and abortion, it also means that women's agency is not acknowledged to the same degree. Instead of learning that they are wicked, pregnant women considering abortion learn that they are weak. In both cases, their agency is flawed.

This 'new' pastoral power is still a power under which women are defined by men. Having access to a discourse is crucial in order to be able to exert power over the domain of the discourse (van Dijk, 1993), and women had no part in the 'behind-the-scenes' discussions which resulted in the Swedish church documents. There were no explicit prohibitions for them to be part of the discourse after the documents were published, and some women did take part in it. But no women with personal experience of abortion were heard. The few women who commented on the documents submitted readily to the church officials' standing on the issue.

But there are also interesting modifications that may indicate a more profound change in gender relations in the Swedish Catholic Church. One of them is the changing of abortion from an individual concern into a structural problem and from a woman's problem into a problem of society, in which men (primarily husbands, but even politicians and employers) also play a decisive role. An even more important change is probably the way in which women are redefined as bodily creatures. In the traditional Catholic way of viewing pregnant women, the body is the locus of interest; women are seen as bodies that in turn are envisioned as

containers for an unborn human being. In the Swedish Catholic documents the bodies of women are not only vessels for the unborn child, but they have other characteristics that place women in different situations in their daily lives. The traditional Catholic ideology of the basically different biological constitutions of women and men is notably weakened in the Swedish documents. As the constitution of biological differences is crucial for the maintenance of power hierarchies between the sexes (McNay, 1992), a reduction of these differences in the gender discourse might also have an effect on the power hierarchies.

It is obvious that in a societal context in which the power of the church is questioned there has been an adaptation, not of the doctrine in itself, but in the way it is formulated. On a local level at least, basic conceptions about masculinity and femininity are modified and in consequence, possibly, also the patriarchal structure that is built on these conceptions. There has been, if not a reshaping of the Catholic gender contract, at least a local renegotiation within its framework.

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