

Church must develop career path for laity

Natasha Lavattia

In Coventry

A SENIOR English diocesan official has called for a clear career structure to be put in place to encourage lay people who want to serve the Church.

Nicky Stevens, Head of the Department for Pastoral Formation at the Diocese of Portsmouth, told delegates at a two-day conference exploring the theology of vocation, church authority and women, and the Church's management and mission, that there were currently obstacles in the pathway of laity pursuing a position in the Church.

She spoke personally of her struggle to find a role that could make use of her skills, which include a theology degree from Heythrop College, London, a postgraduate degree in adult education and a master's in theology, and told delegates meeting on Saturday at Coventry's Britannia Hotel that she herself had had to rely on informal contacts for advice about openings in the Church. When she left Heythrop,

she said she undertook voluntary work for church organisations and later worked for a parish in Southwark.

At the end of her speech to the conference, organised by the Joint Dialogue Group drawn from the National Board of Catholic Women and the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, Ms Stevens had an uncompromising message for the Church: "Make room for our brothers and sisters. We forget that we are in this together."

While the over-arching theme of the conference was the Universal Call to Holiness, it also sought to highlight the place of women in the Church, which, despite Pope Benedict's appeal for women to "look for their right place in the Church", came under fire from another of the speakers.

Sr Helen Costigane, member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, who teaches canon law and Christian ethics at Heythrop College, said the Church appeared reluctant to acknowledge its responsibility to encourage women to use their gifts. "There's an elephant

in the room that needs to be acknowledged and discussed. It's something we are all aware of but no one wants to mention it," she said.

Referring to the new importance of the laity, Sr Helen explained that the Second Vatican Council changed the position of lay people. Prior to the Council she said that lay people had been considered secondary to clergy but subsequently it was made clear that they were equal and together made up Christ's faithful.

Canon law also made it clear that the laity could be given positions of authority and Sr Helen quoted Canon 129, which states: "Those who are in sacred orders are, in accordance with the provisions of law, capable of the power of governance... this is also called the power of jurisdiction. Lay members of Christ's faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power in accordance with the law."

However, Sr Helen claimed that in the parishes there were still priests who resisted the laity encroaching on what they saw as their territory or "garden".



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