

---

# *The* **MAST** *Journal*

---

## **Reading Contemporary Theologians**

**Agenda for Women in the Church of the Saints**

—*Margaret Farley, R.S.M.*

**The Development of Caribbean Theology: Implications for Mercy  
Re-imagining/Re-Configuring Process**

—*Theresa Lowe Ching, R.S.M.*

**Grace and Lived Christianity in the Theology of Karl Rahner and Leonardo  
Boff**

—*Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M.*

**The Risk of Jesus Christ: From Understanding to Living**

—*Simon Pedro Arnold, O.S.B., Translated by Mary Therese Sweeney, C.S.J.*

**Elisabeth Leseur's Spirituality of the Communion of Saints**

—*Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.*

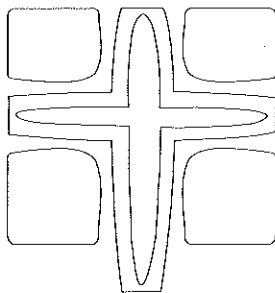
**The Theology of Ivone Gebara**

—*Pamela M. Cobey, M.Div.*

**Rights of Members in First Profession: The View of American Civil Law and  
the Perspective of Canon Law**

—*Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M.*

The Journal of the  
Mercy Association in  
Scripture and Theology



Vol. 15, No. 2  
2005

Dear Sisters, Associates, and Friends of Mercy,

The theme of this issue of *The MAST Journal* is "Reading Contemporary Theologians." In planning, the questions posed by Aline Paris, R.S.M., were several: "What theologians are having an impact on us, what themes are significant to these theologians, and how can we present their thoughts in an accessible way?"

Margaret Farley writes from an ethical-ecclesial perspective about the tension between a conception of the church as a community of faith that does not act inclusively toward women, and a vision of church that is worldwide. Choosing a broader vision of world-church will inspire women to reach out ministerially beyond their own culture to relieve the suffering of women across the other side of the globe. Her special concern is women affected by the AIDS crisis in Africa.

Marilyn Sunderman considers the theology of grace as treated by Karl Rahner, S.J., the influential German dogmatist. She offers in parallel the perspective of Leonardo Boff, a liberation theologian from South America. Why show the consistency of Boff with Rahner, especially on the theme of grace located in relationality? It is because the parallels demonstrate that liberation theology is well-grounded in traditional dogmatic categories and should not be dismissed as suspect because it arises from a non-European social location. The "orthodoxy" of liberation theology was an issue under John Paul II.

Janet Ruffing introduces MAST readership to her research on Elisabeth Leseur, a French laywoman (1866–1914), married, who lived her faith in a social climate that was often hostile to religion. Leseur's embrace of the communion of saints resonates with a post-Vatican II generation. As a woman, she was not recognized in her day as a theologian. Still, her spiritual writing in the form of her journals and letters is evidence of a mature theology and she deserves a wider reading.

Where will abidingly fruitful and new theological voices arise? Three theologians from the southern hemisphere, and "non-north" culture are represented in this volume. Theresa Lowe Ching surveys issues that ground Caribbean theology. She implies that there cannot be a European-style theology in the abstract for her region. The social problems of post-colonialism, social fragmentation, and economic vulnerability are so compelling that anything said about God must speak to people in this reality. Likewise, the Institute's relation to Mercy ministries in the Caribbean should address the unique social history of the region.

Mary Therese Sweeney, C.S.J., shared with me her translation from the Spanish of a book (*The Risk of Jesus Christ*) on religious life by Simon Pedro Arnold, O.S.B., a Benedictine living in Peru. In the chapter featured in this issue, Arnold proposes that the renewal of religious life should be judged by whether members are starting from and living as human persons, in contrast to living a role created by having professed vows.

Mary Therese also sent me a recent book by Ivone Gebara, a Brazilian ecofeminist theologian, and it was a reminder of the importance of Gebara's writing. Mary Hunt of WATER (Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics and Ritual) located in Silver Spring, Maryland, alerted me to a thesis written by Pamela M. Cobey at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Massachusetts some years ago. On reading it, I thought her personal engagement of Gebara's life and work was solid and useful. I am grateful to Pamela Cobey for hours of resurrecting text from a computer in her basement and for permitting her extensive scholarship, directed by Prof. Francine Cardman, to be edited.

ger, recently elected Secretary of the Canon Law Society of  
with MAST's editor exploring the rights of members from the  
law. "Rights" is sometimes perceived as an alien, legalistic term  
however unfamiliar, "rights" is nevertheless a positive category,  
ghts" is ecclesial language to describe the practical claims,  
assurances that all the baptized have in their interactions with  
ue concerns the rights of women in first profession.  
elcomes short comments and reflections of 400–600 words on  
o Carol Rittner at [CarolRittnerRSM@aol.com](mailto:CarolRittnerRSM@aol.com).

Yours,

*Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.*

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.  
Editor, *The MAST Journal*

---

# Agenda for Women in the Church of the Saints Mercy Life Conference\*

---

*Margaret A. Farley, R.S.M.*

“**O**ur Church is the church of the saints.” “Our Church is the church of the saints.” I heard the renowned French theologian, Yves Congar, repeat these words in a lecture that he gave in 1966 at Saint Xavier College in Chicago. He was addressing what was then and is now the almost desperate need to develop an ecclesiology (a theology of the church) that will not ignore the problems of the church as institution, but will more readily free us as disciples of Jesus Christ bonded together in a community of faith and action.

Over the years since 1966, I remembered nothing of what Congar said in his lecture except this repeated refrain: “Our Church is the church of the saints.” When I taught a course this past fall on Roman Catholic Ecclesiology and Ethics, I searched for the text of Congar’s lecture. I found it, and I discovered that the refrain did not appear throughout the lecture (as I had remembered it), but was, rather, Congar’s ending of his lecture with a quotation from the great French writer, Georges Bernanos. The fuller text goes like this: “Our Church is the church of the saints . . . To be a saint, what bishop would not give his ring, his mitre, his crozier, what cardinal his purple, what pontiff his white robe, his chamberlains, his Swiss guards and all his temporal power? Who would not wish to have the strength to run this admirable risk? For sanctity is an adventure, it is even the only adventure. [They] who have once understood this have entered into the heart of the Catholic faith; [they] who have felt trembling in their mortal flesh another terror than that of death, a super-human hope. Our Church is the church of the saints . . . All this grand apparatus of wisdom and strength, of supple discipline, of magnificence and of majesty, is nothing in itself unless charity animates it. But mediocrity seeks in it only a solid assurance against the risks of the divine. What matter! The least little [child] in catechism class knows that the

blessing of all the churchmen put together will never bring peace except to those souls already prepared to receive it . . . No rite dispenses from love. Our Church is the church of the saints.”<sup>1</sup>

I begin this afternoon with this text because our church is even more troubled today than it was in 1966 (which, right after the council, was a time of hope). I am supposed to talk on the Roman Catholic Church and the life it provides for women. I have not the heart to do a critique in the same way I have done so many times before, and besides, I think you, we, all know the important and profound feminist critiques of major Christian structures, doctrines, and practices. We know from our own experience as well as our study of history and theology what most of the problems are and perhaps even what most of the possibilities are. If you have come to the point to which I have come in the past year, it is almost unbearable to hear one more piece of bad news about the church—scandal, continuing oppression, lack of truthfulness and integrity, and last week yet one more document against gays and lesbians written by someone who has read the rule books but does not know concrete people whom the rules oppress. So, I will not rehearse these problems and critiques.

Neither can I simply wax eloquent on possibilities. Yet I believe, with Congar and Bernanos, that our church *is* the church of the saints—not “saints” in the sense of those who hold a model before them and continually measure their own sanctity, not

Our church is even more  
troubled today than it was in  
1966 (which, right after the  
council, was a time of hope).

"saints" who are preoccupied with their own salvation, but "saints" who are or are becoming, little by little, persons whose hearts grow wide and deep, whose minds are open and truthful, whose courage is strong when it absolutely needs to be. In other words, our church is a church of sinners, yes (we know this; we are focused on this every day, whether we like it or not); but it is a church of those genuine members who at least *want* to love with a love that is wise and just and true, stretching to God and to neighbors near and far.

I will not ignore my assignment for today, but I will try to meet it by doing three things. First, because we *do* need a better understanding of our church, I will address the issue of institution, the church as institution. I will try to do so against the background of feminist theologies of church. Second, I want to speak about the church as a "world church," and what this means for women across cultures, and across time as well as space. Third, I will try to say something about a women's agenda for our church, and in our church for our world. Each of these three parts of my presentation are extremely complex. I will, therefore, be able only to address the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

Faith and hope must indeed live  
deeply in each individual heart  
and soul, and love must grow  
from within. But the truth is that  
the only way you or I came to  
know about Jesus Christ was  
through the church.

### **The Church as Institution: Burden and Grace**

I am not one who thinks that religion in general, or Christianity in particular, can live and flourish in the private hearts of individuals alone. Faith and hope must indeed live deeply in each individual heart and soul, and love must grow from within. But the truth is that the only way you or I came to know about Jesus Christ was through the church—through the

sacred texts compiled and passed down through the ages, and through the beliefs and hopes and actions of others who have shared their lives within a tradition and community of faith.

I know that I might have awakened to a sense of the transcendent without a church or temple or mosque. I might have experienced genuine revelation of the sacred in our world and beyond, and tried to understand what this was to mean for my life in relation to others. The Spirit of God blows where it will. Yet, religion implies solidarity—union with God, with all of creation, with other human persons. Christianity in particular comes from a series of unique communal events: the Covenant with Abraham and Moses, the revelation of the prophets, the Passover of Jesus Christ. These historical events need corporate memory, and interpretations of their meaning and their call must be sustained through time. To say this is to acknowledge the historical (and not only transcendent) dimension of the church. As Karl Rahner puts it: God, without ceasing to be a God of infinite mystery and incomprehensibility, "nonetheless wills to be a God of ineffable closeness, and does not revoke this will."<sup>2</sup> This means that our encounter with God takes place in the concrete facticity of history, where we live and work and worship. As Congar observes, "The idea of a non-institutionalized religion is sociological nonsense."<sup>3</sup>

But if institutions are necessary, and as such can be mediators of revelation and grace, they are also burdens. Dorothy Day referred more than once to Romano Guardini's expression, that the church is the cross on which Jesus continues to be crucified. And it is impossible to separate Jesus Christ from the cross.<sup>4</sup> Out of her own experience of anguish at the tragedy of the denial of Christ in the poor, Day wrote, "I loved the Church for Christ made visible. Not for itself, because it was so often a scandal to me . . . one must live in a state of permanent dissatisfaction with the Church . . ."<sup>5</sup> In 1981, Karl Rahner, too, wrote with pain about the church: "The Church today—this may (and must, if the preacher is to be credible) be said without prejudice—is a burden; a burden which may not be thrown off, since that would be fatal in the long run to Christian faith . . ."<sup>6</sup> This burden, Rahner continued, must not be concealed; a person "ought to feel the whole weight of the often terrifying history

of the Church . . . and it is only when the scandal of the cross . . . is honestly accepted . . . that this burden can be turned into a blessing . . .”<sup>7</sup>

How shall we make sense of this? Our lives in history are limited, culturally constructed to a great extent. Every form of our knowledge is partial, subject to error as well as limitation; every human agent is capable of human and inhuman choices; every human plan is subject to good, but also to evil. Institutions tend to reflect more dramatically the darkness than the light in human individuals. However necessary institutions may be, and however graced by the Spirit of God, they remain human, subject to error as well as limitation, both helping and hurting the struggles of human persons to live together in peace and in love. It is a mistake (often made) to think that the bulwark against inevitable institutional contradictions, failed memories, abuses of power, is to retreat to authoritarianism in governance or dogmatism in teaching. The truth is that institutions as institutions are saved in the long run—kept true to their vision and call—only by humility and charity, by willingness to admit mistakes, by recognition that their structures, practices, and roles are always only means and never ends in themselves. This is as true for the church (indeed, more so) as it is for any institution.

There is as yet, in my view, not a completely adequate theology of the church as institution. There are, however, clues for the development of such an ecclesiology. Some of these clues are to be found in feminist theologies, though elsewhere as well. The most useful feminist interpretations of the church include as institutional guidelines: equality among believers (at least as a goal), unity (but unity in diversity), pluralism in interpretations of even common beliefs (such as contained in the creed), advocacy for those who are poor, hospitality to those hitherto prevented from sharing a common table, partnership with strangers as well as friends, limitation of power in order to nurture the participation of all, unending efforts to interpret the heart of the gospel as good news for people who have had so much bad news in their lives.<sup>8</sup>

For the church to live according to such guidelines, *institutional virtues* (and not only personal virtues) need to be cultivated: *institutional virtues* of humility, integrity, kindness, patience, a sense of dignity, joy, compassion, peace of heart and mind,

zeal for the reign of God’s justice and mercy, and above all and in all, a brave charity that surpasses all explanation or understanding. (You will recognize these virtues as the ones advocated by St. Paul.) These guidelines and these virtues are not utopian, though they have an eschatological goal; they need to be pursued in the present moment, though they will be realized only in the final reign of God.

All of the possibilities and cautions, guidelines and practices, that I have just described become even more important when we look to the church as a “world church.” I turn, then, to my second set of considerations: “world church” and its implications particularly for women.

Institutions as institutions are  
saved in the long run—kept true  
to their vision and call— only by  
humility and charity, by  
willingness to admit mistakes, by  
recognition that their structures,  
practices, and roles are always  
only means and never ends in  
themselves.

### The Church as World Church

It is commonplace today to advocate the enculturation of Christianity insofar as it is to exist in many historical and cultural contexts of the world. But ours is the time when the concept of “world church” finally can be given content, when we recognize that the Christian gospel is not meant to be only or even primarily a western European or North American gospel exported like the rest of western culture to other parts of the world. At last we realize that God’s self-revelation can not only be *received* in every language, but *given*; and that we stifle its possibilities when we claim nearly total control over its forms.

Karl Rahner was the first to articulate the concept of “world church” in the wake of Vatican II. He

observed the massive significance of this development for Christianity as a whole. He likened it to the leap that was taken when Christianity moved from its Jewish location in Palestine and the surrounding areas to its new contexts in Hellenistic societies and ultimately western Europe. On the other side of this leap, we tend to take it (that is, the first leap) for granted; but in fact, under the leadership of Paul, it represented a radical new period in the history of the church. Think of the "abolition of the Sabbath" as traditionally observed, the abolition of circumcision as a requirement for Gentiles, the "transference of the center of the Church from Jerusalem to Rome, far-reaching modifications in moral teaching, the emergence of new canonical Scriptures with priority over the old, etc."<sup>9</sup> Today, Rahner argued, we are for the first time living again in a period where a similarly radical transition from one historical and theological situation to another is taking place. "None of us can say exactly, with what terminology, under what new aspects, the ancient message of Christianity must be proclaimed in Asia, Africa, the Islamic regions, perhaps also in Latin America, in order to make this message really present everywhere in the world. The other peoples and cultures must slowly find this out for themselves . . ." <sup>10</sup>

**We are for the first time living  
again in a period where a  
similarly radical transition from  
one historical and theological  
situation to another is taking  
place.**

I myself have had experience of the growing reality of "world church"—ten years ago in China and more recently in Africa. I have caught glimpses of just what this reality may mean for the development of an ecclesiology of a genuinely "world" Catholic Christian church and for the experience of women in this church as it moves into the future. A decade ago, the Chinese Christian churches had just emerged from the restrictions and persecutions of the Cultural Revolution.

Christian faith endured imprisonment and torture, humiliation and exile; and it survived to appear again in public worship and testimony. Restored by new constitutional protections of religious liberty, and accepting the government's requirements of independence from foreign religious control, Christian faith (both Protestant and Catholic) was institutionally born anew.

But when I was there, I found myself wondering just what it now means to respect the cultural particularity of Chinese Christianity. The forty-year break in institutional history with the universal church took the form of, among other things, a loss of the history of Vatican II. Hence, participating in a Sunday Mass in Nanjing, for example, did not seem at all like participating in a uniquely Chinese Christian liturgy. Though there were aspects of it which could be described in that way, the overwhelming impression was rather of a pre-Vatican II Mass—a Tridentine Mass in which almost everything was in Latin, including the public reading of the epistle and gospel, most of the singing, and all of the Mass prayers. Only the sermon was in Chinese. Since that time, I know that this has changed; the vernacular is used in worship, and Chinese forms of sensibility are emerging in the liturgy generally. Although much of its communal worship still seems shaped by forces other than Chinese culture, liturgies have a "character" and a feeling, a tempo and a pattern, that may be deeply and uniquely Chinese. But only someone thoroughly familiar with Chinese culture can really say whether this is so.

Yet the question has kept pressing me: How Chinese is the Chinese church? How "Chinese" should it be? For that matter, how North American is the North American church? How Latin American is the Latin American church? How African can be the emerging adaptations in the African church? In other words, how possible is it for the Christian gospel and Christian life to be either separated from or united with any particular culture? A Chinese scholar has said to me that "For the first time there is a truly Chinese church. What it will become is up to the Chinese people. They have the Christian faith, and they will find their own forms of worship and community." But the meaning of this remains unclear to me. What does it mean to say that the Chinese (or Latin Americans or Africans) have the "faith"?

It is also still unclear to me what it means to identify a particular church in relation to a particular culture. For there are other complex questions that are unavoidable when we take seriously the issue of the enculturation of Christianity in relation to any culture. One of these questions has to do with our need for critical distance from every particular culture. Recognition of the value of different cultures and of obligations to respect the cultures of all peoples has coincided historically with appreciation of the need for critical distance. Hence, for example, just as western Christians are learning to respect the history and culture of the Chinese, they encounter a China that has been engaged in critiquing its own culture for the better part of a century. A Marxist-Leninist socialism struggled to break the back of a culture of feudalism and rigid Confucianism; but the suffering caused by the new socialism led to critical distance from its cultural and political forms; and critics continue to resist aspects of Chinese culture (old or new) that only historical romantics or political zealots still want to preserve.

Feminists have in particular been concerned with a critique of cultures. Christian feminists are concerned with the critique and reconstruction of the Christian tradition and of its place primarily in western cultures. Like other cultural critics, they interpret the classics of the tradition from a critical perspective, exposing deficiencies, searching for lost stories and symbols, raising up forgotten or marginalized prophetic voices, reconstructing key aspects of the tradition with a hope for greater truth. Whatever fidelity to the gospel means, for feminists it does not mean protecting the patriarchal cultures in which most of Christian history has taken place.

So what can it mean to be a culturally identified church? And what can it mean for Christians to relate to one another, with respect and love, as members of diverse, culturally identifiable, churches? No doubt the first answer to both of these questions is that Chinese Christians, or African Christians, or Latin American Christians themselves must be the ones to determine what "counts" as their culture and what "counts" as Christian faith. Respecting a particular Christian church within a universal church must mean trusting its faith enough to let it discern its own forms of worship, its own responsibilities in supporting or resisting the powers of its

nation, its own understanding of the message of God through the Christian tradition in which it professes to stand. This cannot mean that the Chinese church (or any other) can discern or live alone, without mutual help or accountability in relation to the larger Christian community across time and place. It does not mean that it can place no claim on other Christian churches, or that it cannot be challenged by them. It also does not mean that its religious experiences or its questions are in every way unique, entirely unshared by Christian communities around the world.

**A fuller answer to the question of what it means for Christians to relate to one another across cultures and histories must focus not only on the distinctness and autonomy of one community, but also on the shared faith.**

A fuller answer to the question of what it means for Christians to relate to one another across cultures and histories must focus not only on the distinctness and autonomy of one community, but also on the shared faith, shared hope, and shared tasks of all Christian communities. No culture is completely separate anymore; no culture is once and for all identifiable in and by itself anymore. Moreover, while the problems facing one part of the world are different from those that others face, there are few situations that do not gain from shared wisdom, especially if the wisdom is funded by a shared faith.

My most recent experience with the world church is in Africa (sub-Saharan African countries, to be more precise). I do not have time here to describe (however inadequately) the diversity of culture, tradition, religious experience, that characterizes this huge continent. The occasion of my working with African religious leaders, and with African women theologians and church workers in



particular, is—as you know—my being drawn into situations in which the AIDS pandemic rages across the land.<sup>11</sup> I have heard of and seen directly the importance of faith communities in the midst of this pandemic, and I cannot avoid the observation that religious traditions (world religions like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, Buddhism, as well as indigenous African religions) are part of the solution to this massive problem, but they are also part of the problem. They are part of the solution in that they care for the dying and for the living, and they have begun to work at prevention and even advocacy for the needs of their people. At the individual, local, regional, national, and international levels, moving examples can be given of new initiatives and already long-standing efforts. Yet, they remain a significant part of the problem as well. Why is this so?

## Women, in particular, face layer upon layer of problems in their efforts to understand this terrible disease, prevent its spread, and care for those who are infected.

In part, at least, it is because churches (and mosques and temples) have not recognized or acknowledged their own roles in shaping beliefs, attitudes, and practices that contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Teachings about sexuality and the status of women have converged with cultural beliefs and practices that lead to the stigmatization of persons with AIDS. Women, in particular, in addition to being at disproportionate risk for infection, and bearing the greatest burdens of caring for the sick and dying, are also more likely to be stigmatized. Stories abound of the exile and even stoning of married women infected by their husbands, and of unmarried women raped and infected by men who think that sex with virgins will prevent or cure their own HIV infection. The standard response of religious organizations has been to reiterate traditional moral rules regarding fidelity, chastity, and the obligations of women in relation to men. This

often serves only to heighten the shame and the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and to promote misplaced judgments on individuals and groups.

What does all of this have to do with world church, and with issues for Catholic Christian women across the globe? First, we have sisters and brothers in countless numbers in countries of the South who are threatened with grave illness, or who are already sick unto death. Their lives are disrupted; their families are disrupted; their ordinary hopes are challenged in every way. Insofar as these women and men and children share in our faith tradition, they have a special claim on us. Even if they stand outside our communities of faith, they have a claim on us; but how much more so if we share with them life in a world church.

Second, the counterproductive teachings and rules given to them in their parishes and families are teachings and rules that our church has given to them, or at least reinforced for them. Insofar as these teachings harm them, keep them from the power, they need to resist illness and death, we are importantly responsible. Third, women, in particular, face layer upon layer of problems in their efforts to understand this terrible disease, prevent its spread, and care for those who are infected. Some of the layers are profoundly cultural: cultural practices that keep women subordinate to men, disallow them serious choice regarding their own sexuality, and stigmatize them should they appear to diverge from what the culture expects of them, are so entrenched that transforming them can seem impossible. Religious teachings in the same way can raise barriers against the understandings and practical options necessary to stop the pandemic in their own villages and towns.

Here are tasks for African women, our co-believers. With all due caution not to appropriate their suffering to enhance our own stories; and to respect their cultures and their own incorporation of Christian faith; we must nonetheless stand in solidarity with them, provide resources insofar as they need them and want them for their coming together to empower one another in the face of this disease, share with them the critical questions that they and we must ask—perhaps especially questions about the role of patriarchal religions in making women invisible—until they die.

## Women's Agenda in the Roman Catholic Church

I think that all of you have more than enough insight into an agenda for Roman Catholic women in and for women (and children and men) in the church and society. I will limit my own suggestions to making explicit what I hope may already be implicit in what I have been saying about ecclesiology and about the reality of Christianity as world church. I will point to three clues for an agenda, corresponding to (1) women's stake in developing a theology of church, (2) women's responsibilities in a church as a world church; (3) women's prophetic task in the church's work for justice.

First, then, women's stake in developing a theology of church: Current ecclesiology notwithstanding, it has always been women who have had primary responsibility for passing on the faith of the church. This is why their own faith is sorely tested in a time like ours when the church appears all too often to be more burden than source of life. But this is also why women above all must ask again and again: what is the core of the gospel? We must, in this inquiry, remember what we have experienced and understood of the great treasures of the tradition: beliefs about God and God's envelopment of all of us in God's own life; sacramental views of creation and the presence of God within it everywhere; the Eucharist, whereby we encounter God in the depths of our souls and encounter one another in those same depths—meeting, loving, embracing; the communion of all the saints in which we stand joined across the ages; the promise of an unlimited future; the capacity for free choice in determining our own destiny; the call to love with our whole heart and mind and strength.

Passing on such treasures of our faith requires continual discernment of what is primary and what secondary, and of whose insights need to be incorporated in the voice of the church. Women, because they see what this gospel can mean in people's lives, must not underestimate the importance of new theological insights into the development of doctrine, the essentials and nonessentials among truths, the possibility of universal salvation, hope for this world and the next, the demands of justice that are part of every divine revelation. But this means that women must participate especially now (both through *praxis* and through reflection) in the

development of the doctrine of the church—finding ways to open the many rooms in the church's household (in the present, not only in a heavenly future), expanding its possibilities of spaciousness and freedom. Women must relentlessly resist structures that move believers to margins, that are conducive to the distortion and debasing of the gospel. The ways of doing this will appear in every concrete context in which the church must continue to live.

**Current ecclesiology  
notwithstanding, it has always  
been women who have had  
primary responsibility for passing  
on the faith of the church.**

Second, women's responsibilities in the church as world church: Women may have a special insight into the radical shift that is necessary if the gospel is to be proclaimed and lived in cultures profoundly different from traditional western Christianity. For there is a sense in which new cultures emerge over time, not only across space; and today we as women live in a new culture, one that is not yet understood by many leaders of the church. We know the difficulties of translating one worldview to another, one global perspective to another. Hence, we should be able to understand the dissonances that must be overcome when the gospel is spoken and heard throughout the world.

Women must resist the tendency on the part of many church leaders to dismiss their new insights as simply those of western white women. When voices that they recognize rise from Latin America, Africa, Asia, or anywhere else, then women from one place to another can stand in solidarity with one another. This is surely happening now. In fact, it is happening so strongly that, for example, some African women theologians are being censured (for their "feminist" views), and they stand in particular need of support from across the world.

Finally, women's prophetic task in the church's work for justice: Here I am almost tempted to be silent, since what needs to be said is tired and worn among so many of us. Let me simply say that when

secondary, nonessential, church teachings lead to sickness and death, there is something wrong with the teachings, and they must be ignored or changed. This is as true for teachings about the use of condoms in Africa as it is about tubal ligation in the United States. Just as cultural practices may have been fine until they kill the people, so some teachings regarding human sexuality may have been fine (harmless, even if unfounded) until they kill the people. I know all of the reasons for "negotiating" such teachings, and perhaps this is what needs to be done—that is, to go along with them at least in our policies and actions in order to safeguard a greater good, in order not to lose the possibility of doing all the good that is possible in the name of the church. Even so, voices must not be silenced. Whatever policies are adopted, and whatever actions taken, women must find ways to continue to speak for the people. If they do not, the compromises that are made will continue forever.

Dorothy Day is remembered for her calm acceptance of church authority when it came to obedience in action (not when it came to believing what she considered to be false teachings). At the same time, she wrote that we are obligated also to obey "the least ones—the least of my sisters and brothers." We are, in other words, to be obedient to the needs and claims of every living thing, not only of the powerful, whether in church or society.<sup>12</sup>

But let me end here. I need not say more. Women, as Dorothy Day also pointed out, must always "get on with the business of living."<sup>13</sup> "No matter what catastrophe has occurred or hangs overhead, [women] have to go on with the business of living."<sup>14</sup> We can do so, strengthened by our belief that "God is greater than our hearts,"<sup>15</sup> and greater than our minds. And "since for God a thousand years is as one day, and Christianity is but two days old, let us take heart and start now"<sup>16</sup> to do what is at hand for us to do—for the church of the saints.



## Notes

- \* Mercy Life Conference, Farmington Hills, Michigan, August 7, 2003
- 1 Georges Bernanos, *Jeanne relapse et sainte* (1954), 61–62, 64–65, as quoted in Yves Congar, "Institutionalized Religion," in *The Word in History*, ed. T. P. Burke (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966), 133–53.
- 2 Karl Rahner, "Courage for an Ecclesial Christianity," in *Theological Investigations* 20 (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981), 9.
- 3 J. O. Hertzler, "Religious Institutions," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 256 (1948), 1–13, as cited in Congar, "Institutionalized Religion," 134. Congar wants to understand "institution" in a minimalist sense as "a certain relatively permanent structure, prior to the individuals who find in it the model of their behavior and the indication of their role in the group."
- 4 Dorothy Day, *By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day*, ed. R. Ellsberg (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 300.
- 5 Day, 39.
- 6 Rahner, "On the Situation of Faith," *Theological Investigations* 20: 21.
- 7 Ibid, 21.
- 8 See, e.g., Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985); Mary E. Hines, "Community by Liberation," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 161–84; Francine Cardman, "Myth, History, and the Beginnings of the Church," in *Governance, Accountability, and the Future of the Church*, ed. Francis Oakley and Bruce Russett (New York: Continuum, 2004); Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Going Fishing: Papal Primacy and the Words of Women," in *The Exercise of the Primacy: Continuing the Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 47–56.
- 9 Rahner, "Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Investigations* 20:85.
- 10 Ibid, 87.
- 11 For a fuller account of this, see Margaret A. Farley, "Gender, Faith, and Responses to HIV/AIDS in Africa," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20 (Spring, 2004): 133–48.
- 12 Day, 171–72.
- 13 Ibid, 340.
- 14 Ibid, 341.
- 15 Rahner, 179.
- 16 Day, 336.

# The Development of Caribbean Theology

## Implications for Mercy Re-imagining/Re-Configuring Process

Theresa Lowe Ching, R.S.M.

The decade of the 1970s was undoubtedly a major historical moment in the development of the Caribbean society. In the context of a world still marked by optimism and confidence in the ability of human reason and of science and technology to deliver a better world, a plethora of liberal movements erupted in the post-Enlightenment period that focused on the victims of society. This turn is reflected in the quest for freedom from all oppressive forces, for personal autonomy, and for equality, peace and justice for all. Failure of the "development" strategies to deliver the benefits being enjoyed by already developed countries brought into consciousness the oppressive forces at work on all levels of Caribbean societal life. Hence Michael Manley of Jamaica has called for a "new economic world order" and his political vision of democratic socialism was an attempt to reverse the negative effects of the historical legacy of slavery and colonial rule that was paradoxically the common and unifying experience of Caribbean peoples, diverse as they nonetheless are in ethnicity, culture, and language.<sup>1</sup>

It is in response to this historical moment that Caribbean theology emerged, similar, in-

deed to all paradigmatic shifts that have occurred in the development of the theological enterprise.<sup>2</sup> Thus in 1973, Idris Hamid published *Troubling of the Waters*, an edited collection of papers delivered at two conferences that were held, one in Jamaica and the other in Trinidad and Tobago.<sup>3</sup> The issues discussed and the range of responses that were presented demonstrated well the interplay of local and global, the particular and the universal contexts as significant if theological interpretation of historical events is to be an incisive, meaningful and integral response of faith to God's action in human life.

In this essay, a brief overview of the development of theological reflection in the Caribbean will be presented in two phases: Firstly, the decade of the 1970s extending into the 1980s that can be considered as falling within the period of modernity and the liberal quest for freedom and justice for all. Second, the period of the 1990s to the present that has witnessed a decided shift from modernity to post-modernity. The objective is to clarify some of the issues apparent in these shifts as they have impacted Caribbean life and elicited interpretations in the light of faith from within that

specific context and in reference to the challenges posed by post-modernity. Finally, some implications will be suggested for consideration in reference to the Sisters of Mercy of the America's project of re-imagining and reconfiguring the Institute.

### Modernity and the Liberal Quest for Freedom and Justice

The liberal quest for freedom and justice for all has marked modernity's rejection of all forms of domination and dogmatism both religious and secular that have kept the human spirit in bondage. A reliance on human reason and confidence in the ability of science and technology to deliver endless progress was still very much the basis for optimism in the 1970s even after it had become obvious that the achievements of the Enlightenment were not equally attainable by all peoples of the world. In the Caribbean region, continued constraints on the development of persons and society began to be felt even more keenly. The search for underlying causes thus led Idris Hamid to capture the basic problematic of the region in his assertion:

Imperialism of the spirit is the most final and fatal subjection

any people could experience. This imperialism has done and is still doing its work among us. Yet it has not completely conquered. The human spirit in the quest for wholeness bounces back in myriad ways. In the Caribbean, the search of the human spirit for freedom, wholeness and authenticity has expressed itself in various ways.<sup>4</sup>

cused on the mostly negative consequences on Caribbean life. Emphasis was placed on the experience of slavery and its dehumanizing effects on the majority Black population of the region. The Black Power movement in the United States that triggered similar protest movements—most significant of all, the

a meaningful interpretation of the Word of God for Caribbean peoples.<sup>8</sup> However, the often-strident critique of the 1970s became subdued as the world of the 1980s experienced what some interpret as a strong conservative backlash in the resurgence of liberal free market economy and the reinstatement of conservative governments in many countries of the Western world and in the Caribbean.

Towards the end of the decade, the fall of the Berlin wall was followed by the gradual demise of several communist states. The 1983 United States-led invasion or liberation (however interpreted depending on one's political persuasion) of the island of Grenada with some regional cooperation signaled a decisive reassertion of North American hegemony and the entrenchment of neo-colonialism in the Caribbean. Thus, in what Gerald Boodoo and others deemed a "lost decade," theological reflection in the region did not make significant advances.<sup>9</sup> The publications that appeared, mostly articles and talks given at conferences, dealt with issues already identified as having relevance to Church praxis in the Caribbean.<sup>10</sup>

As the decade of the nineties approached, the need became apparent for more systematic exploration into the questions that had arisen in the seventies and were resurfacing with greater urgency at that time. Two major publications, *Emancipation Still Comin'* by Kortright Davis<sup>11</sup> and *Caribbean Theology* by Lewin Williams<sup>12</sup> delved more deeply into the African experience of slavery

## As the decade of the nineties approached, the need became apparent for more systematic exploration into the questions that had arisen in the seventies and were resurfacing with greater urgency.

Hamid faulted the Church for being oblivious to that quest for freedom and for its unwitting complicity in the subjection of the spirit of Caribbean peoples. Other Caribbean theologians at that time joined in the critique of the missionary activity of the Church that equated Christianity with civilizing and introduced a "theology of imposition," an interpretation of the faith that was imported from Europe and North America and was in many instances unrelated to Caribbean life. The consequent disregard for many aspects of Caribbean culture contributed to the denigration of the humanity of the colonized. This resulted in a lack of personal identity and low self-esteem in the general populace, especially among the underprivileged.<sup>5</sup>

Further analysis of the impact of European colonialism and the more recent North American neo-Colonialism fo-

Rastafarian movement—was perceived as bringing into clear focus the indignity imposed on the black person and the struggle for freedom and personal respect.<sup>6</sup> A re-reading of the Bible from the perspective of the oppressed therefore became an important aspect of emerging theology. The image of God as liberator became a primary symbol of God's action on behalf of the oppressed. The image of a black Christ was sought in order to give meaning to solidarity with the Crucified and to make real the experience of redemption for the black person.<sup>7</sup>

The anti-colonial mood that characterized theological writings of the 1970s continued into the 1980s. Ashley Smith's publication in 1984, *Real Roots and Potted Plants*, captures well the concerns that were voiced for theological reflection to emerge from the real life situation of the Caribbean context in order to be

and the cultural alienation that resulted from colonial oppression. A way forward was being sought and Kortright Davis in particular highlighted the potential for "emancipation" that lies in African values and the Caribbean spirit of resiliency, celebration, creativity and freedom to counter the effects of persistent poverty, cultural alienation, and dependency that he identified as the major problems that are endemic to the region.

### Shift from Modernity to Post-Modernity

Contemporary Caribbean society in the context of the present world order again reflects both the negative and positive aspects of the paradigm shift from modernity to post-modernity. Evidence of the destruction of modern society in the fragmentation, diminishment, relativity, loss of meaning, limitedness, and apocalyptic despair that are often identified as characteristic of the present age, along with the more positive values of imagination, sensitivity, emotion, warmth, tenderness, and humanity are also evident in the Caribbean region. The shift from modernity to post-modernity has been summarily described by Hans Kung as a shift from an ordered, hierarchical, dualistic and evolutionary worldview to that of an interconnected, non-hierarchical, interdependent, inclusive, relative, dynamic, and holistic world view. This shift, Kung maintains, is not necessarily a destruction of values but rather a shift in values. The values of industrial modernity identified by

Kung as "diligence . . . rationality, order, thoroughness, punctuality, sobriety, achievement, efficiency"<sup>13</sup> must still be preserved, lest as Gregory Baum warns, one becomes guilty of a post-modernist "innocent critique"<sup>14</sup> of modernity by disregarding such values.

In this changed world context, theological reflection in the Caribbean must begin to grapple more seriously with the issues that presently dominate societal life beyond those that persist from the 1970s and still remain justifiably the focus of many, for, as Boodoo puts it, ". . . a quest for identity and unjust overcoming of fragmentation and alienation as was the case of the seventies and still is now in the nineties" bears repeating the reflections of the seventies.<sup>15</sup> However, in a new historical moment, theology cannot merely repeat responses of the past. A self-critical analysis both locally and globally is necessary to uncover the advances that have been made in the quest for greater freedom and integral development of persons in the Caribbean as well as the degree to which certain problems have persisted or even worsened and now demand more adequate solutions in the light of new questions that have arisen in the context.

By way of identifying some of the key issues that significantly impact the Caribbean, perhaps even more than others at this time, and therefore need more urgent responses from the perspective of Christian faith, I would venture to suggest the following:

- *Globalization* and the increasing gap between the

wealthy and the economically deprived both within Caribbean societies and between nations.

- *Fragmentation* in geographic spread, historical backgrounds, and political agendas.
- *Pluralism* in the mainly immigrant population of various races, cultures, and religious affiliations and traditions.
- *Increased vulnerability* from global terrorism, natural disasters, and diminishment of natural resources.

### Globalization

Globalization, a dominant symbol of the post-modern era is widely recognized as having significant impact on all aspects of human existence. Typically, the view from "above" is vastly different from the view from "below" as Lee Cormie boldly puts it. From "above," infinite possibilities are seen to have been opened up by science and technology especially in the areas of medicine, food production, communication, and space exploration. The vision of the global market signals, in Cormie's observation, a "new golden era of global growth and prosperity, expanding freedom, and a future of unimaginable progress."<sup>16</sup> But as he and most Caribbean theologians are painfully aware, not all countries share equally in the opportunities being offered to reach this desired goal.

The view from "below" stresses rather the mostly negative impact of globalization on

the countries of the "south," "periphery," "third world," however one chooses to name the vast numbers of countries that for the most part are excluded from sharing the benefits of this new world and remain underdeveloped and dependent in a world economy. All the while, the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest continues to widen in a global political structure where the powerful wield unprecedented control over the powerless, both within and among the nations. In the analysis offered by anthropologists, political scientists, and economists in the region, all identify the same structure of inequity that pervades the region. The oppression is blatantly manifested in the poverty, violence, and cultural alienation that continue to stifle Caribbean life.<sup>17</sup>

The gap between the wealthiest and the poorest continues to widen in a global political structure where the powerful wield unprecedented control over the powerless, both within and among the nations.

### **Fragmentation**

The experience of fragmentation is certainly not new in the Caribbean. It has been endemic in the region from the very beginning not only in terms of the geographic spread of the islands but more significantly perhaps in terms of the history of colonial

conquest and distribution of the islands by the Spanish, British, Dutch, French, and at a later date by the United States of America. This historical heritage occasioned fragmentation in the diversity of cultures, languages, and races in the introduction of a migrant population of slaves from Africa, indentured servants from Asia (Indians and Chinese mostly), and colonizers from Europe. However, as Noel Titus observes, in that vast array of diversity, there is the paradoxical common ground of historical legacy for negotiating societal and national unity in the region.<sup>18</sup>

Over the years, the search for regional integration has been pursued with more or less success. Politically, attempts at forming a federation of the islands in the 1950s failed when Jamaica withdrew its support.

more holistic integration beyond the purely economic.<sup>19</sup>

At the present time, efforts to create a Caribbean Court of Justice to replace the Privy Council of England as a final court of appeal for the English-speaking Caribbean has stalled because Jamaica has brought to the fore procedural and constitutional issues that must be addressed for the project to continue. Public debate on the issue is focusing, on the one hand, on the question of sovereignty and the need to break the dependency syndrome and, on the other hand, on the need to ensure the constitutional and democratic right of the people to participate in this significant decision-making process.

### **Cultural and Religious Pluralism**

Another characteristic of the post-modern world that is significantly impacting the Caribbean region is cultural and religious pluralism born of the awareness of the relativity of historical existence and contexts, the perceived absence of moral absolutes and universal truths and the consequent shift to placing greater value on subjective experience and particular contexts. Within this global framework, positive recognition of the richness of diverse ethnic groups and cultures and the need for dialogue among the various religious traditions seem to go hand in hand with the increasing instances of ethnic strife, territorial wars, and terrorist violence, often politically inspired and religiously justified.

That same decade, however, witnessed the expansion of the University of the West Indies and its establishment as a regional institution with campuses on several islands. Economic cooperation brought about the establishment of CARICOM (Caribbean Community and Common Market), which is presently recognizing the need for and pursuing a

In the Caribbean region where ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity has coexisted more or less peacefully, racial tension in particular continues to be held just beneath the surface ready to erupt at moments of intense pressure, whether of a social, political or economic nature. It is Allan Kirton's opinion that with the rise of "militant Hinduism" and "fundamentalist Islam" in the region (more especially in the Eastern Caribbean) the need to confront the issue of racism and to promote interreligious dialogue have become a present and unavoidable imperatives.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, the continued debate regarding Caribbean identity as more basically and, at times exclusively, linked with the Black experience vis-à-vis an interpretation that stresses the interweaving of ethnic and cultural influences in the creolization process that has marked Caribbean life since the early colonial days has taken on even more importance.<sup>21</sup>

### Increased Vulnerability

The post-modern stress from increased vulnerability of humanity and of the entire natural world has been shockingly impressed upon the consciousness of all since the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York and since the unimaginable destruction of lives and property caused by the Asian Tsunami. In both events, what has become painfully obvious is human responsibility for the destructive and eventually uncontrollable forces that are unleashed in the attempt to

In the Caribbean region where ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity has coexisted more or less peacefully, racial tension in particular continues to be held just beneath the surface ready to erupt at moments of intense pressure.

exercise power and control over other human beings and to exploit the resources of the earth.<sup>22</sup> In the case of the former, wars to stamp out terrorism and counter attacks continue the violence and wanton destruction of persons.<sup>23</sup> In reference to the latter, global warming continues unabated with even more serious consequences for the environment and human life.

What has become evident on the world scene is even more obvious in the Caribbean region where the already limited resources are diminished. Daily acts of violence terminate the lives of persons capable of making significant contribution to the building up of society or with potential to do so. Destruction of the environment is now magnifying the effects of natural disasters to which the region is prone. Depletion of natural resources is promoted by tourism, even though tourism is a major contributor to the economy that is already under stress.<sup>24</sup>

In light of the violence suffered by the population, and exploitation of natural resources, David Kortton charges that many in the "developed" nations and the privileged few in the "under-developed" countries continue

to live like "cowboys" in a "space-ship" world. His description of these metaphors is instructive:

The cowboys of earlier frontier societies, such as the great American West, lived in a world of sparsely populated expanses blessed with seemingly inexhaustible material resources. Except for the presence of indigenous peoples who felt that they had rights to the land, everything was free for the taking, to be used and discarded at will for the earth to absorb and restless winds to scatter. The opportunities for those willing to work seemed limitless, and everyone who presumed that the gain of one must be the loss of another was rightly dismissed as short-sighted and lacking in vision. Let each compete in search of his or her fortune with the expectation that the gains of each will in the end be the gain of the community as well.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, he continues:

Astronauts live on spaceships hurtling thorough space with a human crew and a precious and limited supply of resources. Everything must be maintained in balance, recycled; nothing can be wasted. The measure of well-being is not how fast the crew is able to consume its limited stores but rather how effective the crew members are in maintaining their physical and mental



health, their shared resource stocks, and the life-support system on which they all depend. What is thrown away is forever inaccessible. What is accumulated without recycling fouls the whole. No one would think of engaging in nonessential consumption unless the basic needs of all were met and there was ample provision for the future.<sup>26</sup>

It needs no stretch of the imagination to conclude that the present global situation is untenable and holds dire consequences for all.

Post-modernism has laid bare not only the depths of the contemporary crisis but has provided as well fresh opportunities for an alternative vision and the making of a new world order.

### **The Post-Modernist Challenge**

In exposing the limits of the modern agenda to deliver unlimited progress and the construction of a better world for all, post-modernism has laid bare not only the depths of the contemporary crisis but has provided as well fresh opportunities for an alternative vision and the making of a new world order. Theological reflection on these issues could therefore play a significant role in bringing the light of faith to interpret their dynamics and to identify a path forward with the guidance of the Spirit of God.

Among the post-modernist challenges to the Enlightenment that David Bosch has identified is the "rediscovery of the teleological dimension" that is bring-

ing new meaning to the Christian message. As he puts it:

... notions of repentance and conversion, of vision, of responsibility, of revision of earlier realities and positions, long-submerged by the suffocating logic of rigid cause and effect thinking, have surfaced again and are inspiring people who have long lost all hope, at the same time giving a new relevance to Christian mission.<sup>27</sup>

In the same vein, Lee Cormie sees a revival of the spiritual

vision that is deemed more capable of creating the new world order that is so desperately needed and desired. In all its crisis areas, the Caribbean region offers possibilities for analysis and the formulation of more adequate solutions. Most important is religious faith, the experienced need for reliance on a higher power, and the spirit of hope against hope that still characterize most of the people of the region. This bedrock creates openness to pursue a spiritual quest for solutions.

### **Implications for the Re-imagining and Restructuring Process**

Already the implications of the above for the re-imagining and restructuring project of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas are obvious. To raise some questions from the perspective of the Caribbean region, I suggest the following:

- ▶ How will the vision of the whole ensure that the particularity of the specific local contexts within the United States and even more so within the countries beyond the United States, specifically in the Caribbean, be adequately recognized?
- ▶ How will the need for Mercy participation in the Caribbean regional integration process be balanced with the Institute's quest for global unity and integration?
- ▶ How will the structure of governance ensure a clear distinction between various

quest that seeks what lies beyond and offers hope for a "new beginning from below."<sup>28</sup> As mentioned above, Hans Kung identifies values that mark the shift from modernity to post-modernity in the hope that realizing a more viable alternative vision is possible. Harvey Cox has also claimed that the extraordinary growth of Pentecostalism signals a return to the primeval religious depths of humanity and the search for spiritual empowerment especially among the dispossessed.<sup>29</sup> More recently, Cox has argued that a movement "beyond the secular" is presently shattering the "myth" of twentieth century secularization.<sup>30</sup>

In the Caribbean, where the negative impact of the failed Enlightenment quest is felt most acutely, there is even greater urgency to embrace an alternative

regions of the United States and sovereign countries in the Caribbean in order to ensure a level of self-determination for the latter?

- How will the leadership model in the Caribbean communities ensure participation in decision-making in accord with the principle of subsidiarity in a fashion that takes account of Caribbean sensitivity to external control and their desire for personal freedom?
- What strategies will be employed to incorporate the diversity of ethnic/cultural groups in the thrust towards corporate unity?
- What strategies will be employed to realistically face the diminishment of Mercy communities in the region and provide for a Mercy presence that is truly Caribbean, in touch with the realities of the region and committed to the empowerment of the people?

Addressing these questions would likely involve the type of dialogue that would prove mutually enriching and challenging. It would foster that "universal respect for otherness"<sup>31</sup> that is necessary for genuine acceptance of the cultural differences that Mercy is committed to embrace into a unifying whole. It would position Mercy to contribute significantly to the healing of a divided world and equip them to join more deliberately in the "movement" that Desmond Tutu perceives in his hope for a reconciled world. As he puts it:

There is a movement, not easily discernible, at the heart of things to reverse the awful centrifugal force of alienation, brokenness, division, hostility and disharmony. God has set in motion a centripetal process, a moving toward the Centre, towards unity, harmony, goodness, peace and justice, one that removes barriers. Jesus says, "And when I am lifted up from the earth I shall draw everyone to myself," as he hangs from His cross with out-flung arms, thrown out to clasp all, everyone and everything, in cosmic embrace, so that all, everyone, everything, belongs. None is an outsider, all are insiders, all belong. There are no aliens, all belong in one family, God's family, and the human family.<sup>32</sup>

### Summary and Conclusion

In summary, theological reflection in the Caribbean, as in any specific context, demonstrates the dynamic interplay that exists between the universal and the particular, the global and the local levels. In terms of the issues that have been the point of focus as representative of contemporary post-modern worldview, the Caribbean region with its historical legacy of colonial and more recently, neo-colonial domination and the related consequences of fragmentation, globalization, cultural/religious pluralism, and diminishment, all signs of the post-modern crisis, can provide an excellent case study for deeper analysis. Such analysis is needed to find more adequate solutions on all levels of human existence, but perhaps more especially in the theological sphere where the light of

faith penetrates to the depths of human experience in its search for answers that are more in tune with the intention of God for the full flourishing of all humanity.

However, it is not only the negative aspects of post-modernity that are apparent in the Caribbean region. Many of the values that are affirmed as aspects of an alternative vision are already operative in the Caribbean. Fortuitously, the lifestyle that many Caribbean people have been forced to assume is captured well in the image of the "astronaut" described above that Kortort rightly claims is more appropriate for this postmodern era.

As Harvey Cox and others have suggested, a renewal of interest in the religious dimension of human existence is also a sign of the times. There is no better moment for the Institute of the Religious Sisters of Mercy of the Americas to renew its vision and restructure its framework to make even more visible its mission of Mercy to serve specifically those most in need—the poor, the sick, and the uneducated.

The Mercy presence in the Caribbean region, in view of its past and present situation in the global context is well positioned to provide a laboratory of rich experiences as a privileged space for examining the questions that confront contemporary society and for seeking the response of Mercy faith praxis. Perhaps the post-modern spiritual renewal will also challenge Mercy to become more securely grounded in a kenotic following of the Crucified God "for whom alone we go forward or stay back" even as we endeavor to

continue to bear prophetic witness towards the creation of a new world, a world of peace, justice, and compassionate love for all, a world imbued with the presence of God and led by the Spirit of God.



## Notes

- 1 See Michael Manley, *The Politics of Change: A Jamaican Testament* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974).
- 2 Gregory Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview* (New York: Orbis Books, 1999).
- 3 Idris Hamid, ed., *Troubling of the Waters* (Sand Fernando, Trinidad: Rahaman Printers Ltd., 1973).
- 4 Ibid., 6.
- 5 See Rex Nettleford, *Mirror, Mirror* (Jamaica: William Collins and Sangster Ltd., 1969).
- 6 Michael Miller credits Marcus Garvey with contributing the "inspirational sub-structure" of Caribbean theology in Garvey's 1937 special challenge to black people. See "Impulses in Caribbean Theology," [www.cwmnote.org/papers/miller.htm](http://www.cwmnote.org/papers/miller.htm). See also Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* (Syracuse University Press, 1995); Noel Leo Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1981).
- 7 See Lewin L. Williams, *Caribbean Theology* (New York: Washington, D.C./ San Francisco: Peter Lang, 1994).
- 8 Ashley Smith, *Real Roots and Potted Plants: Reflections of the Caribbean Church* (Mandeville, Jamaica, Mandeville Publishers, 1984).
- 9 Gerald Boodoo, "In Response to Adolfo Ham" in Howard Gregory, ed., *Caribbean Theology: Preparing for the Challenges Ahead*, (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago: Canoe Press, University of the West Indies, 1995), 9.
- 10 See *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies*, esp. Vol. 3, no. 1 and Vol. 6, no. 1.
- 11 Kortright Davis, *Emancipation Still Comin': Explorations in Caribbean Emancipatory Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1990).
- 12 Lewin L. Williams, *Caribbean Theology*.
- 13 Hans Kung, *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 21–22.
- 14 Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*.
- 15 Boodoo, "In Response to Adolfo Ham" in *Caribbean Theology*, 9.
- 16 Lee Cromie, "Globalization from Above vs. Globalization from Below" in Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, 123.
- 17 See *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 37, no. 1, esp. Barry Chevannes, "Towards an Afro-Caribbean Theology: The Principles of Indigenization of Christianity in the Caribbean", 45–55; Trevor Monroe, "The Impact of the Church on the Political Culture of the Caribbean: Jamaica," 83–97.
- 18 Noel Titus, "Our Caribbean Reality" in Gregory, *Caribbean Theology*, 58.
- 19 See papers delivered at University of the West Indies 2003 Academic Conference Celebrating the Fortieth Anniversary of CARICOM.
- 20 Allan Kirton, "Current Trends in Caribbean Theology and the Role of the Church in the Future of the Caribbean" in *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1, 105.
- 21 Willie L. Baber, "The Pluralism Controversy: Wider Theoretical Considerations" in *Caribbean Quarterly*, Vol. 33, nos. 1 and 2, 81–94; Carolyn Allen, "Ah Mi: Revisiting Caribbean (Cultural) Identity" in *Groundings*, no. 11 (July 2003), 15–32.
- 22 Juan Luis Segundo argues convincingly that the means employed must be analyzed carefully to ensure that they can deliver the desired goals since means tend to take on a life of their own and unleash forces often beyond one's control. See his *Faith and Ideology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1982).
- 23 The current war in Iraq and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict are clear examples of this.
- 24 The UWI 2004 Research Day was focused on management of natural disasters. The argument was brought forward that given the increasing instances and severity of natural disaster in the Caribbean emphasis should be placed on damage control and post-disaster management.
- 25 David C. Korton, *When Corporations Rule the World* (San Francisco, Ca: Barnett-Koehler, Inc., 1995), 25.
- 26 Ibid., 26.
- 27 David T. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 351.
- 28 Cormie, "Globalization from Above vs. Globalization from Below" in Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, 126–129.
- 29 Harvey Cox, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (London: Cassell, 1996).
- 30 Harvey Cox, "The Rise and Fall of Secularism" in Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, 135–149.
- 31 Cf. Rosemary Reuther, "The Holocaust: Theological and Ethical Reflections" in Baum, *The Twentieth Century: A Theological Overview*, 76–90.
- 32 Desmond M. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999), 213.

# Grace and Lived Christianity in the Theology of Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff

---

Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M.

In their writings, the twentieth-century neo-Thomist, Karl Rahner, and the present-day Latin American liberationist, Leonardo Boff, offer rich insights into the theology of grace. This essay provides a comparative study of grace and its implications for lived Christianity in the thought of Rahner and Boff.

Rahner and Boff developed their theologies of grace within the context of the historical periods in which they lived. Rahner articulated his understanding of grace in response to the particularistic view that characterized teaching on grace in his day. Based on the fact that whole continents of people lived outside the realm of Christianity, Rahner conceptualized the notion of grace in universalistic terms.

During Rahner's lifetime, Church teaching concerning grace was in agreement with *The Constitution on the Catholic Faith*, a First Vatican Council document that espoused a dualistic understanding of reality. According to this document, two orders exist: the natural and the supernatural, nature and grace. The document maintains that grace is extrinsic or added to human nature. In response to this teaching, Karl Rahner developed a theology that views grace as the offer of God's love that is intrinsic to existent human nature.

Leonardo Boff also developed his theology of grace within a specific historical context, that is, the situation of oppression prevalent in twentieth century Latin America. The Second Vatican Council document, *Gaudium et Spes*, served as a catalyst for Boff's theological reflections on grace. This document emphasizes the "this worldly" nature of grace by stressing the importance of humankind's working in the here and now to develop a more just world order. Likewise, Boff's theology of grace insists that all efforts to transform sinful social, economic, political, and religious structures into liberating ones manifest grace in this world.

What follows focuses on Rahner and Boff's exploration of the relational and Trinitarian, universal and gratuitous nature of grace; the primacy of experience in relationship to grace; nature and grace as inseparable realities; and the incarnate Logos as the archetype of grace. Within the context of these similarities, some variances in Boff and Rahner's theologies of grace are noted. The study concludes with a discussion of these theologians' understanding of the meaning and practice of Christianity in relationship to grace and a brief critique of their work in this area of theology.

## The Relational and Trinitarian Nature of Grace

Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff present the reality of grace in a relational and Trinitarian way. Rahner grounds his theology of grace in his notion of the "supernatural existential," by which he means that, prior to any response on the part of persons, human existence is endowed by God with the capacity to accept God's gratuitous offer of self-communication in love. According to Rahner, human beings "freely choose to ratify or to reject that orientation which is itself the free gift of a loving God, but the orientation remains structured into their being."<sup>1</sup> In essence, Rahner views the "supernatural existential" as God's gift of the abiding human possibility of the experience of encounter with God.

Since God is Trinity, God's self-communication to humankind in grace is threefold.<sup>2</sup> According to Rahner, the immanent Trinity, i.e., God in God's inner life, communicates self in the history or economy of salvation. God the Father shares self in the Incarnation of the Son and, likewise, the Father and the Son communicate themselves in the bestowal of the Spirit upon humankind.

For Rahner, it is precisely as Mystery that the Triune God draws near to persons in grace. Rahner states:

There is really only one question, whether this God wanted to be merely the eternally distant one, or whether beyond that he wanted to be the innermost center of our existence in free grace and in self-communication. But our whole existence, born by this question, calls for the affirmation of this second possibility as actually realized. It calls out to this mystery, which remains a mystery.<sup>3</sup>

Like Rahner, Boff describes grace relationally. For Boff, grace is the loving encounter between God and human beings in a relationship of mutual, ongoing revelation. Grace involves the "history of two freedoms, the meeting of two loves."<sup>4</sup> By means of grace, a person participates in the mystery of the inner life of the Trinity.<sup>5</sup> Boff and Rahner agree that grace enables a person to experience the transformative, enduring, liberating love of the Triune God who is Mystery.

## Grace provides opportunities for persons to deepen their freedom.

According to Leonardo Boff, in the intra-Trinitarian life, the Father, Son, and Spirit experience love in totally freeing and self-diffusive ways. By means of an offer of love, the Trinity chooses to share its inner life with humanity. Along with Rahner, Boff emphasizes that the Triune God is vulnerable, inasmuch as God awaits each person's response to the divine offer of love, which is grace.

Boff maintains that each person who accepts the love of the Triune God is called to love others in the free, nonviolent, open, and vulnerable way in which the Triune God loves. Boff writes:

For human beings, participation in God means being able to possess what in God is being; that is to say, it means being able to love radically, to give oneself permanently and to commune openly with all things. It means being able . . . to possess the "cortesia" of God . . . to deal kindly and lovingly with all, even the unjust and the ungrateful (Luke 6:35).<sup>6</sup>

Boff insists that, first and foremost, loving others is a labor of justice, since it entails being and acting in solidarity with those denied their basic human rights.

## Grace as Transformative

In their theologies, Boff and Rahner highlight the transformative nature of grace. Grace provides opportunities for persons to deepen their freedom. For Rahner, freedom, which lies at the heart of being human, is the "power to decide about oneself and to actualize oneself."<sup>7</sup> It is the capacity to grow by making decisions to love. As William V. Dych, a scholar on Rahner's writings, explains, "Freedom is the capacity 'to be' oneself in the most active sense of the verb 'to be,' 'doing' oneself or 'selving' . . ."<sup>8</sup>

According to Rahner, the exercise of freedom offers the possibility of deciding for or against oneself, i.e., or saying "yes" or "no" to oneself.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, one says "yes" or "no" to God. Saying "yes" to self, and, thereby, to God is an event of grace. Every such authentically free act forms eternity. In Rahner's own words: "Freedom is an event of something eternal. In our passages through the multiplicity of the temporal . . . we are forming the eternity which we ourselves are becoming."<sup>10</sup>

Rahner emphasizes the fact that God profoundly respects each person's freedom. Hence, God patiently awaits each one's response to God's self-offer of love. Rahner explains:

The free act by which God's self-communication is accepted is itself the gift of God and can only be realized as grace. Nevertheless, God gives and can give himself only by giving us the act of our freedom which accepts him. Hence, grace happens essentially and can exist only as the deliverance of freedom towards God.<sup>11</sup>

According to Rahner, a person's affirmative response to God's offer of grace divinizes him or her, since it involves the liberative act of letting self be grasped by Holy Mystery. Through grace, one shares in God's holiness.<sup>12</sup>

In the exercise of human freedom, God is present as the ground or horizon of one's being. Each time one chooses to act lovingly, one becomes freer. Growth in authentic freedom, which is growth in grace, both shapes one's destiny and is the work of a lifetime. In his theology, Boff con-

curs with Rahner that the choice to love is the exercise of genuine freedom.

In their theologies, Rahner and Boff also include a social understanding of grace. Boff treats this transforming dimension of grace from the perspective of Latin American liberation theology. Rahner does so from the lens of the Diaspora situation of Christians who live in circumstances wherein such realities as materialism and apathy toward religion offer little support for their personal commitment to following Jesus. Rahner touches on the social dimension of grace when he asserts that "love of neighbor . . . is realized in deed and action; it has a sociological dimension, and must be realized in justice and the maintenance of a sphere of freedom for the others . . ." <sup>13</sup>

Boff grounds his understanding of social grace in his Trinitarian theology. As a communion of Persons, the Triune God "lays the foundation for a society of brothers and sisters, of equals, in which dialogue and consensus are the basic constituents of living together in both the world and the Church." <sup>14</sup> Boff insists, "Only a society of sisters and brothers whose social fabric is woven out of participation and communion . . . can justifiably claim to be an image and likeness (albeit pale) of the Trinity." <sup>15</sup> For Boff, the Trinitarian community serves as a model of participation and equality diametrically opposed to the blatant disregard of human dignity and rights by societies and institutions that create and maintain oppressive structures.

For Boff, social grace entails the quest for integral liberation through the unmasking of ideologies and structures abusive of human dignity. Social grace includes "yearning to attain . . . a more just and fraternal society." <sup>16</sup> Social grace seeks to effect the liberation of people "from economic, cultural, social, political, psychological, and religious determinisms that play havoc with their freedom, enslave them and block the road to humanization." <sup>17</sup> In this regard, Boff emphatically declares that

. . . in proportion as economic and social structures foster a greater participation by all in the economy and in society and create a greater symmetry among groups of persons, in that same proportion they signify, to the eyes of faith, the presence of grace and the realization, in seed, of the Kingdom of God. <sup>18</sup>

## **The Universal and Gratuitous Nature of Grace**

According to Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff, God's offer of grace is universal, that is, for all persons everywhere at all time. Rahner's understanding of the universal nature of God's offer of grace includes his notion of the "anonymous Christian." For Rahner, the "anonymous Christian" is Christian because the grace that she or he receives is related to Christ, though the person is unaware of this fact. According to Rahner, one who says "yes" to self by accepting his or her humanity also says "yes," at least implicitly or anonymously, to God's loving offer of self-communication. Boff agrees with Rahner that anyone who affirms his or her humanity, in effect, accepts God's loving self-communication of grace.

Rahner and Boff stress the gratuity of grace. Both assert that, by means of grace, God freely shares self with those whom God has created. Rahner reflects that the Triune God's self-bestowal in love to human beings is unmerited. According to Rahner, the Trinity's deepest desire is that each person experience the ecstasy of intimate communion with Godself.

## **Grace and the Primacy of Experience**

In both Rahner and Boff's theologies of grace, experience is of primary importance. For Rahner, grace manifests itself in the day-to-day events of human life. Likewise, the operative principle in Boff's theology is that real life experiences are the locus of grace. For Boff, grace clearly manifests itself in the struggles of oppressed people to achieve religious, economic, political, and social liberation.

Boff and Rahner emphasize the fact that a person's self-transcending responses to the concerns of the neighbor are visible signs of grace. Rahner

The operative principle in Boff's  
theology is that real life  
experiences are the locus of  
grace.

stresses that, in the very act of loving another, one is reborn; one becomes a new self. Likewise, Boff notes that it is God's liberating grace that sustains a person in his or her efforts to love the neighbor who suffers from oppression of any kind.

### **Nature and Grace**

Essential to Boff's theology of grace is his insistence that nature is suffused with grace.<sup>19</sup> In a similar fashion, Rahner insists that God created the natural order to be the locus of God's presence in the world. According to Rahner, nature and grace, though existentially inseparable, are distinct realities. Regarding this, Rahner writes:

Grace is something really distinct from nature, given without obligation by God to nature, which confers, primarily upon man and through him in a secondary sense upon the world, a participation in the divine nature and divine life. Grace and nature stand thus over against each other, as in a true sense, adequately distinguishable entities.<sup>20</sup>

### **Grace as Divine Action for Good in This World**

Rahner and Boff view the historical Jesus as the paradigm of grace. According to Rahner, Jesus represents the fullest possible manifestation of grace. In the Incarnation of the Logos, God, who is primordial Mystery, drew near to human beings in utter immanence. Rahner reflects, "It has been revealed in Jesus Christ that this absolute, abiding Mystery can exist not only in the guise of distant aloofness, but also as absolute proximity to us, through the divine self-communication."<sup>21</sup>

In his person, Jesus definitively revealed the meaning of grace by rendering it incarnate in his very flesh. As Rahner explains, "Jesus is that person who, in and through . . . his obedience, his prayer and his freely accepted destiny to die . . . lived out the acceptance of the grace bestowed on him by God."<sup>22</sup>

Rahner describes the Incarnation as proto-grace, the archetype of all grace.<sup>23</sup> By means of the Incarnation, God graciously inserted the divine self into human history. In and through Jesus, human nature achieved its apogee in terms of en-gracement, since, in Jesus' very person, grace became completely actualized.

According to Rahner, "The Incarnation of God is . . . the unique, supreme case of the total actualization of human reality, which consists of the fact that man is insofar as he gives up himself."<sup>24</sup> This is so since Jesus' continual going out of self in love of others demonstrated his ecstatic way of being.

For Rahner, Jesus' ultimate kenotic act was his crucifixion, wherein he surrendered himself to the mystery of God. According to Rahner, the Crucified One, who "sank into death, into the incomprehensibility of God,"<sup>25</sup> is the irrevocable sign of the victorious activity of grace in the world. For Rahner, it is the crucified and resurrected Jesus who mediates grace to humankind.

In Boff's theology, the image of Jesus as liberator serves as the hermeneutical principle for developing a Christology from within the context of the oppression that has dominated Latin American society in recent times. Boff's concern is that his image of Jesus relates to the lived experience of present-day Latin Americans.

Boff depicts Jesus as an imaginative, original, critical thinker who grounded his words and deeds in his extraordinary good sense. Boff stresses that Jesus' life, relationships, attitudes, and actions testified to the self-donating love that is the essence of the Trinity. Regarding this, Boff asserts:

Jesus reveals . . . himself as Son by, in the name of the Father, giving a start to the Kingdom in history, a Kingdom of freedom, of communion with outcasts and full confidence in the Father. In this task, he also shows the liberating action of the Spirit.<sup>26</sup>

In his theology, Boff stresses that Jesus' attitudes and actions incarnated the radical pro-existence of the Father, the love of the Father for all. Likewise, Jesus communicated the plenitude of the love of the Spirit. In essence, for Boff, the incarnated Logos's teachings, healings, and other miracle workings manifested the love that characterizes both the inner life of the Trinity and the relationship of the Trinity to the world. Jesus' ecstatic existence included his commitment to a preferential love of poor persons. To this end, he challenged religious and social structures of his day that denied such persons their dignity and rights. In a word, Jesus' person and activities embodied what it means to live out a grace-filled praxis of love.

In their writings, Boff and Rahner emphasize that Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection experience

evidences the liberating power of grace. For Boff, through Jesus' suffering and death, he divested himself of any power against oppression except the power of love. According to Boff, by freely taking up the cross of death, Jesus realized his humanity in the most complete way, since to be fully human is to be radically free. Through his death, Jesus taught the truth that every cross human beings embrace in love is a pathway to liberation.

In Boff's Christology, the risen Jesus inaugurated a new order. By experiencing in his being the goal of humanization, openness to God to the point of being completely filled by God, Jesus revealed that true human nature and destiny is to witness to the divine milieu in one's very being. Boff reflects upon what this means in today's world when he asserts:

Wherever people see the good, justice, humanitarian love, solidarity, communion, and understanding between people, wherever they dedicate themselves to overcoming their own egoism, making this world more human and fraternal and opening themselves to the normative Transcendent in their lives, then we can say, with all certainty, that the resurrected one is present, because the cause for which he lived, suffered, was tried and executed, is being carried forward.<sup>27</sup>

More so than Rahner, Boff emphasizes that the resurrection reveals the cosmic dimension of Christ. According to Boff, by means of the resurrection, the pneumatic Christ emerged, for whom the body is no longer a limit but rather a total cosmic presence and communion with all reality.<sup>28</sup> The resurrected, cosmic Christ attained the goal toward which all the forces of evolution point, i.e., definitive liberation.

### Grace and Lived Christianity

For Rahner and Boff, the Christian life is one of responsiveness to grace. According to both theologians, the Christian life entails following Jesus rather than merely subscribing to a theory about him. Christian disciples accept Jesus as the ultimate truth of their existence by making his law of love the law of their being.<sup>29</sup> Followers of Jesus who accept the cup of suffering that life offers consequently share in his triumph of life over death.

In his writings, Rahner insists that the essential task of the Christian is to "be a human being whose

depths are divine."<sup>30</sup> The Christian realizes that "every human, historical experience . . . mediates God's presence to us and our presence to the absolute mystery."<sup>31</sup> The Christian is aware that all the adventures, absurdities, and incomprehensibilities of human life<sup>32</sup> can be apertures to the transcendent God. In and through daily experiences, one is able to know God better.

Rahner contends that Christians are called to become mystics attuned to God's graced Holy Mystery in daily life. The mysticism of everyday life includes

. . . experiences of "aloneness" . . . when everything is "called into question" . . . when the silence resounds more penetratingly than the accustomed din of everyday life . . . when one is brought face to face with one's own freedom and responsibility.<sup>33</sup>

Rahner's understanding of grace in relationship to lived Christianity includes love of God and neighbor. According to Rahner, "an ultimate transcendental of the person radicalized by grace into the mystery of God and self-renunciation in love of neighbor represent the two aspects of the one Christian life."<sup>34</sup> Neighborly love is an act in which one experiences God directly and transcendently.<sup>35</sup> It is a "response to God's love [and] is sustained by God's love itself."<sup>36</sup> The act of loving one's neighbor, which contains the whole mystery of human being,<sup>37</sup> is an experience of the grace of salvation.

For Rahner, just as loving God and neighbor is essential to lived Christianity, so, too, prayer, the fundamental act whereby a person surrenders his or her whole being and life to God who is Mystery,<sup>38</sup> is integral to human life. To be able to embrace the ineffable One in prayer, a person must let go and forget self. Regarding this, Rahner reflects:

When and where a person accepts himself in the totality of his existence and so experiences himself as one confronted with the incomprehensible mystery embracing his existence and letting him submerge himself more and more deeply in this mystery in knowledge and freedom, he is living out what prayer really is and means.<sup>39</sup>

Rahner counsels pray-ers to open their hearts to God in silence in order to hear God's word. He advises them to learn to pray the everyday by experiencing it in a recollected way.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Rahner encourages pray-ers to speak to God about their needs, life, obligations, loved ones, feelings, the world and its needs, dearly deceased, etc.<sup>41</sup>



For Boff, as for Rahner, lived Christianity entails following Christ by adhering to his person and message. Along with Rahner, Boff insists that one who lives Christianity must seek to consistently concretize the "reality that Jesus of Nazareth thematized, radicalized, and exemplified"<sup>42</sup> the centering of self in God and service to others. For Boff, true followers of Christ attempt to express in their lives qualities Jesus exemplified in his life such as "openness to God and others; love without limits; a critical spirit in confronting the current social and religious situation . . . and the primacy of persons over things."<sup>43</sup>

According to Boff, following Jesus is a serious and radical commitment wherein one proclaims the "utopia of the Kingdom as the real and complete meaning of the world"<sup>44</sup> and seeks to translate this utopia into practice by contributing to the transformation of the world on the personal, social, and cosmic level.<sup>45</sup> Boff reflects that utopic praxis is beatitudinal when he writes, "Faith demands that we look profoundly into the face of our brothers and sisters; love them; give them food, drink, and clothing; visit them in prison. For in so doing, we are being host to and serving Christ himself."<sup>46</sup>

For Boff, following Jesus necessitates entering into the "world of the other . . . especially in relation to those most punished by life and history, the most needy."<sup>47</sup> The true disciple of Christ embraces a praxis that promotes liberation from suffering, division, sin, and death, and liberation for life, love, grace, and plenitude in God.<sup>48</sup>

In their theologies, Rahner and Boff insist that anyone who aspires to embody Christian values in his or her life must nurture a spirituality of continuous conversion. For Boff, such conversion includes responding with ethical indignation to the "scandal of poverty and exploitation"<sup>49</sup> that exists in the world and working so that all human beings are able to "eat at least one meal a day, have a roof over their heads, and be helped with basic health care."<sup>50</sup>

Boff concurs with Rahner that willingness to shoulder the cross of suffering is integral to lived

Christianity. For Boff, embracing the cross of Christ today means being and acting in solidarity with the crucified in our world, i.e., with those who are violated and impoverished by denial of their human rights. In essence, to carry Christ's cross is to align oneself, in fidelity to truth and justice, with such persons' liberative cause.

### **Ecological Perspective**

One way in which Boff, more explicitly than Rahner, views lived Christianity is through the lens of ecology. Of note, however, is the fact that Rahner does underscore the fact that the global community must collaborate in building a better world. Regarding this, Rahner stresses that "The task of completing creation . . . appears as an intrinsic element in the one total redemption and divinizing will of God for a world in which his self-bestowal is achieved."<sup>51</sup> In his eco-theological writings, Boff emphasizes that all that exists is created to be a symbol of the divine presence that inhabits the universe. According to Boff, the creator, cosmic God dwells in the universe and draws it "toward ever more complex, participatory, and communing forms."<sup>52</sup>

For Boff, the spirituality of lived Christianity demands that human beings embrace an attitude of "deep reverence and kinship toward the universe and . . . compassion and affection toward all members of the cosmic and planetary community."<sup>53</sup> Such awareness of cosmic kinship will lead to human beings' collaboration as a global group in efforts to secure the common good, which is the welfare of the cosmic community.

In his writings, Boff stresses that working for the cosmic good entails affirming the mystery of the universe through engaging in efforts to protect it. This attitude of ecological affirmation grounds itself in deep sensitivity to the interconnectedness of all that exists. Thus, for Boff, lived Christianity demands cosmic solidarity, since everything exists in a grand web of relationship. Regarding this, Boff writes:

The ecological question has to do with reaching a new level of globalization, of world awareness and conscience, where there is a universal understanding of the importance of the earth as a whole, the welfare of nature and of humankind, the interdependence of all, and the apocalyptic catastrophe menacing all creation.<sup>54</sup>

**Anyone who aspires to embody  
Christian values in his or her life  
must nurture a spirituality of  
continuous conversion.**

According to Boff, inhabitants of the earth who live Christianity must discover the ecological dimensions of their responsibility for the integrity of everything that exists. Opting for planet earth entails losing oneself in its wonders by adopting an attitude of gratitude for the "grandeur, majesty, rationality, and beauty of the cosmos and everything in it."<sup>55</sup> It means exercising a healing posture toward earth whenever it is wounded through assaults on its integrity.<sup>56</sup>

In his writings, Boff declares it imperative that the global community develop an economy of sufficiency respectful both of the life of nature and humankind. Boff also underscores the need for human beings, as conservators of creation,<sup>57</sup> to explore and adopt ethical uses of ever-increasing scientific and technological advances as integral to the ongoing redemption of the earth.<sup>58</sup> Through immersion in and caring for the world, human beings encounter and honor God and, hence, find their own fulfillment.

In essence, for Boff eco-spirituality requires that humankind embrace a new order based on relationships among everything that exists in God's universe. By living in and by the grace of such consciousness, human beings will contribute to the liberation of the universe so that it might enjoy fuller forms of life and communion. Concerning this, Boff prophetically declares:

Either humankind enters on a vast process of socialization, with an open-ended and, therefore, cosmic democracy (living together with the stones, the plants, the waters, and the clouds, as brothers and sisters), and thereby preserves the sacred gift of being and life for all, or it runs the risk of a nuclear holocaust.<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

In their theologies, Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff affirm that grace is both mediated historically and operative wherever genuine love and freedom exist. What follows is a brief reflection on some of the strengths and weaknesses in Boff and Rahner's theology of grace.

A strength of both theologians is the fact that they do not reify grace. Rather, Rahner and Boff explore the essence of grace in terms of relationality. Rahner especially examines grace in terms of sur-

render to Absolute Mystery. Boff and Rahner both highlight that grace, manifested in the love of neighbor, is an expression of the love of God.

Another plus in Rahner and Boff's theology is their view of grace in universal terms. Both expand the horizon of God's self-offer beyond the boundaries of Christianity. Additionally, both theologians explore the meaning of lived Christianity as a response to grace. Boff develops an understanding of lived Christianity to include a preferential option for both poor persons and the cosmos.

A weakness in Boff's theology of grace is that he fails to develop its prayerful dimension beyond his treatment of the Our Father from a liberationist perspective in his work entitled *The Lord's Prayer: The Prayer of Integral Liberation*. Correspondingly, it is notable that Rahner's theology of grace less than adequately treats grace from a socio-political perspective.

In conclusion, both Karl Rahner and Leonardo Boff masterfully present a theology of grace that has the potential to profoundly impact those who seriously commit themselves to living out their Christianity in faith and love. The fact that both Rahner and Boff ground their theologies of grace in their understanding of the Trinity and Christology enables those who choose to follow Christ to explore more deeply and embrace more completely the implications such theologies have for gospel living in today's world.



## Notes

- 1 Kern R. Trembath, "Was the Incarnation Redundant: A Catholic and an Evangelical Response (Karl Rahner and E. J. Cornell)," *Horizons* 13 (1986):48. See also William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner* (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 36. Dych reflects that, for Rahner, grace is an existential that is "part of the very definition of the human in its historical existence." See also Robert Kress, *A Rahner Handbook* (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1982), 32-36.
- 2 See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 146, where he explains that, for Rahner, God is Trinity through three ways of subsisting.
- 3 Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 12. See also the "Introduction," xiii, to *The Trinity* by Rahner where Catherine Mowry LaCugna explains that, for Rahner, "The indwelling of the

- divine persons in grace makes the graced person as close to God as possible without erasing the ontological difference between God and creature."
- 4 Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 3.
  - 5 Ibid., 183.
  - 6 Ibid., 182.
  - 7 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 38.
  - 8 William V. Dych, "The Achievement of Karl Rahner," *Theology Digest* 31 (1984): 327.
  - 9 See Karl Rahner, "Theology of Freedom," *Theological Investigations* (hereafter *TI*) 6 (Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, 1969), 212.
  - 10 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 96.
  - 11 Karl Rahner, *Grace in Freedom* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 231.
  - 12 Karl Rahner, "Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace," *TI* 16 (Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, 1979), 40.
  - 13 Karl Rahner, "Justification and World Development from a Catholic Viewpoint," *TI* 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 270.
  - 14 Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 151.
  - 15 Ibid., 120.
  - 16 Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 82.
  - 17 S. Duffy, "Ministry, Grace and the Process of Humanization," *Review for Religious* 35 (1976):531.
  - 18 Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 19.
  - 19 See Boff, *Liberating Grace*, 28.
  - 20 Karl Rahner, *The Christian Commitment: Essays in Pastoral Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 40.
  - 21 Karl Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," *TI* 4 (Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, 1966), 72.
  - 22 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 195.
  - 23 See Charles Meyer, "The Status of Grace Today," *Chicago Studies* 7(1968):35.
  - 24 Rahner, "On the Theology of the Incarnation," *TI* 4:110.
  - 25 Rahner, *The Love of Jesus and the Love of Neighbor* (NY: Crossroad, 1983), 45. See also Harvey D. Egan, S.J., *Karl Rahner: The Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 135. Here Egan explores Rahner's understanding of Jesus' cross as the "symbol of God's irrevocable will to communicate himself to us as unconditional love."
  - 26 Boff, *Trinity and Society*, 33.
  - 27 Leonardo Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for Our Time* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 219.
  - 28 Ibid., 210.
  - 29 See William V. Dych, *Karl Rahner*, 61.
  - 30 Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 403.
  - 31 Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship* (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 87.
  - 32 See Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 402.
  - 33 Karl Rahner, "The Experience of God Today," *TI* 11 (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 157. See also Harvey Egan, S.J., "The Devout Christian of the Future will be a Mystic: Mysticism and Karl Rahner's Theology," in *Theology and Discovery: Essays in Honor of Karl Rahner*, S.J., ed. William J. Kelly, S.J. (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 148. Here, Egan stresses that mysticism is always a gift (grace) that entails submerging oneself in God who is the source of each person.
  - 34 Karl Rahner, "The Spirituality of the Priest in the Light of His Office," *TI* 19 (Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, 19779), 137.
  - 35 See Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (NY: Crossroad, 1983), 112.
  - 26 Karl Rahner, "The Commandment of Love in Relationship to the Other Commandments," *TI* 4:456.
  - 37 See Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," *TI* 6:242.
  - 38 See Rahner, *Christian at the Crossroads* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 59.
  - 39 Ibid., 52.
  - 40 See Karl Rahner, *The Need and the Blessing of Prayer* (Collegeville, MN.: the Liturgical Press, 1997), 45.
  - 41 Ibid., 43. See also Rahner, "The Apostolate of Prayer," *TI* 3 (Baltimore, Md.: Helicon Press, 1961), 21 where he characterizes the prayer of petition as the "highest, the most divinely human form of prayer."
  - 42 Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 253.
  - 43 Ibid., 97. See also Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 192. Here, Boff asserts that "loving a person . . . entails loving the mystery that he or she bears: God the Trinity."
  - 44 Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 291.
  - 45 Ibid.
  - 46 Ibid., 218.
  - 47 Leonardo Boff, *Ecology and Liberation: A New Paradigm* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995), 107.
  - 48 See Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator*, 281.
  - 49 Boff, *Salvation and Liberation*, 48.
  - 50 Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 128.
  - 51 Karl Rahner, "The Theological Problems Entailed in the Idea of the 'New Earth'," *TI* 10 (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977), 271.
  - 52 Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 148.
  - 53 Ibid., 203.
  - 54 Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 7-8.
  - 55 Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*, 200.
  - 56 Ibid., 191.
  - 57 See Boff, *Ecology and Liberation*, 32.
  - 58 Ibid., 128.
  - 59 Ibid., 114.

# The Risk of Jesus

## From Understanding to Living

Simon Pedro Arnold, O.S.B.

Translated by Mary Therese Sweeney, C.S.J.

Simon Pedro Arnold, O.S.B., is a Benedictine monk at the Monastery of the Resurrection in Chucuito, Puno, Peru. He is a theological consultant for the Conference of Latin American Religious and Conference of Religious in Peru. His doctorate is in communication sciences, and he has spoken and presented papers on refoundation, the vows and Benedictine spirituality throughout Latin America, in Italy, and in the United States. The following selection is chapter 5, taken from his book, *El Riesgo de Jesucristo* (*The Risk of Jesus Christ: a Re-Lecture on the Vows*), published by Paulinas, Bogota, Columbia, but not distributed in the United States. With permission of the author, it is translated and presented by Mary Therese Sweeney, C.S.J.

**T**he gospel is the source of our Christian vocation and I propose to revisit the art of living in the fullness of the Good News of Jesus Christ. In effect, the foremost question for us concerns our fidelity according to the gospel. If our religious option is not a convincing alternative to live happily, then we will be into an unsupportable caricature.

### Return to Evangelical Spontaneity

For the first disciples, the call was a total surprise. Nothing in their religious and social environment could allow them to anticipate that Jesus would pass through their lives and completely change their plans. I include, if we believe the evangelist Luke, Peter, Andrew, and the sons of Zebedee. They did not listen to the words of Jesus (Luke 5:1-11), who spoke to the crowds while they were fixing their nets. A simple, practical

necessity (to use their boats as a place from which to speak) gave them the opportunity to come close to the Teacher. This absolute surprise of the call is a very difficult experience today, especially in the context of Christianity, in the majority of our Latin American countries. For our fellow citizens, religious life and the life of priests are sociological models located in a global context like police or doctors. Without doubt, the surprise of the call is a condition of radical conversion, which implies an encounter with Jesus. On the other hand, religious life, with its great visibility and prestige, conjures up bias-tainted associations in the imagination and collective unconscious. For religious, a return to the experiment of Jesus

would be a surprise. It would overturn these sociological models and challenge an assumption that expects a return to forms of religious life that existed in the past.

If we consider the surprise of God as a condition of a true religious vocation, we need to return to *holy ignorance*. In the same way that the apostles were totally ignorant of this Nazarene and his way of proposing a life of commitment, we would be able to engage in imaginary forgetfulness of enculturated Christianity. Will it not be necessary, in the same manner, to deprogram our images and erase cultural associations in order to return to a desert-like receptivity to evangelization? In this sense, the tidal wave of post modernity

For religious, a return to the experiment of Jesus would be a surprise.

has reduced religious imagination to news flashes on television as the Good News. The latent paganism and profound ignorance of religious tradition in postmodern urban youth creates a state of great potential for experiencing evangelical surprise. Rather than looking in places well marked by traditional pastoral vocations, urban youth culture is a positive place for Jesus to ask to borrow a boat. Holy ignorance, the discipline of forgetfulness, and erasure of the diskette of Christian imagination, are major conditions that underlie continuity and recruitment. Without doubt, the call for the necessity of re-evangelization of the consecrated life is more and more apparent.

## How many pious infantilisms, justifications of ideology, and betrayals to simply being human, exist in our communities?

Evangelical surprise and holy ignorance are characteristic of our new experience of God. The return to these attitudes promotes a choice of faith life as a simple baptismal commitment taken seriously. Consecrated religious do not do anything other than to live simply before God as the baptized. In other words, they try to return to the art of adoring in Spirit and Truth as Jesus proposed to the Samaritan woman (John 4). Everything that impedes, obscures, or creates obstacles to this art of living the elements of our religious consecration should be questioned in the name of the same gospel.

It is precisely the art of evangelical life that we want to explore in the following paragraphs. Refoundation of religious life implies re-understanding living a fully human, fully evangelical, and fully consecrated way, all of which supposes a long process of healing, evangelization, and consecration of our customs and ways of life.

### A Life Fully Human

The principle condition of credibility of our proposal is a character fully human. If our life is not more human and happier, then it does not have a role in the world in seeking harmony before all. We need to reframe the human in all dimensions, and to

ask ourselves if we are dehumanized, and even cruel, in the name of observing the basic tenets of consecrated life.

The first aspect of this humanity of our life concerns realism. A fully human life asks me to valiantly and realistically confront myself, my surroundings, the other, and the world. The reverse is inhuman, in a sense, because reality is avoided and concealed. How many pious infantilisms, justifications of ideology, and betrayals to simply being human, exist in our communities?

In this line of realism, it is of prime importance to under-

stand the *risk of feelings* and relationships. We desire to question the function of our relationships, to ask ourselves if they assume the affective human risks, both positive and negative. To welcome, without fear or judgment, the reality of our own feelings and those between persons is a condition to humanize our communities.

Between these re-assumed feelings, there is a primordial space of learning of conflicts inherent in the experience of differences. Within these diverse aspects of class, culture, sex, character, etc., the community is a school of fraternity, which keeps our collective experience from being artificial, vulnerable to crumbling under adversity, misunderstood or unaccepted by others. This experience is especially important in matters of obedience and subordination. A conflict, far from being seen as lack of discipline, is a primary occasion for mature solidarity and assumption of reciprocal responsibility in the community.

For our consecrated life to fully recover its depth of humanity, it is also necessary to retrieve its character *to struggle*. All of human life is a permanent conflict with material needs, spiritualities, and with the metaphysics of our mysterious adventure on earth. A religious life that seeks to avoid the questions, crises, and challenges of the human struggle, simply repudiates the cross of Christ. I am worried, in this sense, about the terrible contrast between the material, intellectual, and affective conditions of the life of the poor, where the great majority of

young religious come from on our continent, and the soft ways and exquisite lives of our communities devoid of concern beyond the individual rather than relationships and matters of the spirit. A religious life that contains simple asceticism, the rigor of the reality of the struggle, is requisite to refoundation. Our experience of God must separate itself from sentimentalist accommodation and return to the austere combat of Jacob.

By the same logic, we must denounce all the subtle means we take to avoid failure and achieve success too easily. The cruel, postmodern, neo-liberal Latin American society has developed a capacity to tolerate failures that result in injustice and absence of compassion. In the same way, religious life cannot encourage the seeking of cheap success where one accepts material and academic achievement, prestige, power, and the illusion of religious sanctity without suffering. Considering all these experiences, I foresee that the double challenge is the seriousness and credibility of our proposal to return to the gospel and to improve the humanity of our religious life as we know it. This implies a long process of healing, of re-humanization of the inhuman and the infantile. It means risking the loss of the sense of security that is unknown to adults who live at a subsistence level, or of those things which have been accumulated in our communities over time. This healing includes the seriousness of our work, our relations, our spirituality, our mission, our economic management and our

**Religious life cannot encourage the seeking of cheap success where one accepts material and academic achievement, prestige, power, and the illusion of religious sanctity without suffering.**

solidarity with the church and society that surrounds us.

### **A Fully Christian Life**

Without attempting either to distinguish or strictly separate the human from the Christian, there is a specific Christian way of being human. If religious life is not human, it can't pretend to be worthy of the gospel, that is to say, Christian. But we do not only content ourselves with simple human secularism. Jesus reminded his followers to be different from the pagans who only love their friends or loan to those from whom they expect return (Matt 5: 46–48). Paul, in a letter to the Romans, affirmed that a pagan, who followed the law without knowing it, was better than a Jew who did not follow what he knew (Rom 2:12–29). Here, we can also ask ourselves about the evangelical coherence of our lives, compared with the moral and spiritual lives of other people, about the difference between the behavior of the world, which we easily criticize, and ourselves. To weigh our declarations and needs by comparing ourselves with the people to whom we minister in our pastoral work, can we completely negate the

mocking comment of, "They have the vow; I live it"?

The gospel challenges religious life in its conformity to the Beatitudes. In which ways does our search for happiness find its inspiration in the model of the gospel? I speak of this paradoxical challenge because Jesus asks us to wager our lives on the needs of our neighbors and on communion with the other. Christians are people who opt to embrace their needs as an opportunity to invite others to the banquet of life. Everything one enjoys in abundance is shared without calculation and given without a limit to his or her generosity.

The paradoxical challenge of the Beatitudes supposes that all of our lives will be focused on the permanent dynamic of conversion. As indicated in the previous chapter, monks, from their origin, profess conversion of life. The Christian life, in joining with others, is characterized by constant interchange, by entering into a perpetual process of transformation, and by evangelization. It fits to ask ourselves if religious life attempts to dedicate itself exclusively to this evangelization for permanent conversion of its own members, and not to give the image of stagnation and pretension of having at-

tained human perfection, rather than subtle accommodation to worldly values. Refoundation implies constant and open questions about all aspects of being human. In the wounded and injured world in which we live, the conversion of our lives has reconciliation as its most noble goal. But true evangelical conversion alone can initiate the change in our relations. Our communities, if they are families of the converted, have to be before all, crucibles and workshops of reconciliation. This can't be accomplished by remaining at the pious level of effortless assertions. Reconciliation is an option for life, an opening and an austere work. Our urge is to dedicate our major energies to the permanent reconstruction of damaged or broken human networks. This is a place where prejudices of class, ideology, and sensibilities paralyze the fundamental work of our communities, as much in our internal networks as in external relations.

Are we capable of asking ourselves if we are weavers of humanity, or if we are blocks to the new promise that the gospel brings to men and women? Are we being, like the clans of the primitive communities of Cor-

inth (1 Cor 1:11-13) groups that divided themselves between the parties of Paul, Apollo, or Cephas, impeding the community of Christ? Or, on the other hand, are we being the race of Sychar where Jesus offered the Samaritan woman a religion in spirit and truth in their conversation between the sacred hills of Samaria and Jerusalem? In these dramatic and sublime times, reconciliation and confrontation are simultaneously urgently needed in the church. If our communities are more committed to defend the ideologies that divide than to engage in a benevolent listening in a dialog of differences, then we are committing a grave historical sin, even if it occurs unconsciously, with the best of intentions. If the gospel is distorted once again, like so many times in history by its followers, and it becomes a cause of division and of violence at this moment on the verge of its transformation, we must give an account on judgment day.

Finally, a fully Christian life implies an intensive communitarian experience as the City of God. We can't be truly Christian if we are distanced from the Church with which we are joined,

and if we construct our religious communities as islands in fortified isolation. Religious life has the feeling of a modest, integrated, and specific role in the neighborhood. The Church, as we have described elsewhere, is central to religious life. If we justify ourselves alone and content ourselves with our charism, we are unfaithful to our vocation. The good of the neighborhood is more important and more urgent for religious life than the narrow completion of our specific works and charism. We are neither free agents nor outsiders to the church, but we are the most humble and passionate of servants. Religious life attempts to leave aside all that reflects sectarianism and partisanship in order to feel, suffer, and love with the whole Church, diocesan, lay, and universal. It is from this ecclesial sense and for our vocation "from the center and from the edge" that we have remembered so many times that religious life is ecumenical by vocation. Our faithfulness, filial and adult, to the magisterium should not limit our courage to be open to the other. Together with the whole church, we leave behind the image of the other as the stray sheep, and instead visit the centurion Cornelius and admire the Syrophonician woman.

These four dimensions complete the commentary: the conformity to the beatitudes, the road to conversion, the challenge of reconciliation, and the urgency of communitarian witness of the church in the neighborhood. It is this that causes me to think that our consecrated life needs to be re-evangelized. If, in the previous

If we justify ourselves alone and content ourselves with our charism, we are unfaithful to our vocation. The good of the neighborhood is more important and more urgent for religious life than the narrow completion of our specific works and charism.

paragraph we spoke of a healing of humanity for religious life, we also think that we need a purifying and liberating encounter with gospel fundamentals.

### A Fully Consecrated Life

Only after we have revised the human and Christian fundamentals of our religious life, can we return to speak of consecration. In the last chapter, we suggested a return to the "transitive" sense of the verb "consecrate." It is important to reject the concept of "consecration" as a passive separation or as a place apart in world and the church. Consecration is a work and a permanent process. Secondly, we will look in these times of refoundation at religious life and the different dimensions of this transitive consecration.

We give first place to contemplation as the essential character of religious life. The *reason for being* of our option for life is God and God alone. A religious life that loses its contemplative edge, or does not pray, or allows its presence to be purely institutional and routine, is destined to be a sad and absurd creature. Our choices of chastity, of sharing goods, and of obedience will seem to be monstrosities if they are not sustained in the loving and passionate search for God. It isn't a surprise that a religious who has lost the "phone number" to God suffers extreme difficulties in giving meaning to his or her life. Such a religious may simply enter into a process of a double life which accommodates, more or less seriously, the commitments of his or her life. It

is impossible to be faithful without intimacy with God.

I am concerned about the poverty and scarcity of spiritual food of many religious who are contented with the superficial and frivolous, but who are almost never truly nourished. On the other hand, I am bothered with the frantic restlessness of others who experiment with the latest novelty in spiritual approaches, which are never given time to deepen. This is a difficult and restive time in which to forge happy and solid spiritual

religious life has the primordial responsibility of *reconciliation* for the conversion of life. The personal, communitarian, and social reconciliation are for us a privileged place of consecration. We are consecrated for the sake of bringing health to relationships. The disciple of Jesus is someone who has peace within himself or herself. Encounters with others happen in the spirit of one's vocation as son or daughter, and in a desire to bring about true fraternity and community. The artisan of peace

I am concerned about the poverty and scarcity of spiritual food of many religious who are contented with the superficial and frivolous, but who are almost never truly nourished. On the other hand, I am bothered with the frantic restlessness of others who experiment with the latest novelty in spiritual approaches, which are never given time to deepen.

personalities fed with substantive food, and not the milk of infants. The world waits for men and women of God whose credibility is reflected in their following the journey of Jesus. How many times do we encounter among ourselves the more fragile and conforming personalities, but few adults of faith? We need to fundamentally rethink the thoroughly contemplative dimension of our communities.

As we raised the topic of speaking of a fully Christian life,

is someone who sets aside the attitude of slave and who assumes the filial dignity in liberty and responsibility for one's brother and sister. A religious does this dedicated entirely to peace and reconciliation, remembering that he or she has been rescued by the cross of Christ. The workshop of consecration provides direction that peace needs community life and the daily challenges of fraternal dialogue, both inside and outside the community. This responsibility of



peace-making is of great importance in the world and the church of today. Is it worth the trouble to revise our attitudes and practices? Do people wonder if our witness actually meets the need for which we have been consecrated?

St. Benedict spoke of the consecrated life as a school for divine service, not only for liturgy and prayer, but for attending to Christ in our brothers, especially those most in need. The contemplative dimension of our consecration is extended to the social setting. The liturgy of love is a daily celebration in humble service, a concrete rite of the washing of the feet. If all Christians are servants, we religious intend to dedicate ourselves to this responsibility full time. And we know about our people, this characteristic of our testimony is best understood and embraced. There is no hour to call at the door of religious. People know that it is the house of God, and therefore the house of all, day and night. This dimension of our consecration is the most gratifying and most onerous since it follows us to the last corners of our ego, even including our privacy. But this was the same with Jesus and his disciples who did not have time to eat and to whom the people reached when they intended to escape to sleep for a short while apart. In this sense, the poor are our teachers whom we have come to serve.

This consecration for service asks our presence, whatever our style of service. Here, activism can easily infiltrate our concerns about effectiveness and produce an anguish to save the

entire world. In the words of Jesus, we know that "the poor will always be with us" (John 12:8). Our consecration to them does not mean that we make ourselves "things"; rather, we accompany them and respond from our limitations to their cries and requests. In the contemplative life that we have adopted, we always understand through our consecration that service is first of all welcome and loving attention to the other, in his or her true need for God and dignity, and as those persons try to express those needs, and not as we imagine what those needs are.

Finally, in addition to contemplation, peace, and service, our religious life is dedicated to *witness*. The missionary dimension of the consecrated religious is not the teaching of faith alone, but the witness, the indubitable manifestation of the presence of the saving Christ in the world. Our use of words should follow the witness of our lives. As St. Peter said, we should always be ready to give account of our faith (1 Pet 3:15). This "give account" implies that we are willing to initiate the questions about our lives with our companions on the journey in the world. If companions do not question us because our life does not raise questions, what value do we have to bear the word? If we take the initiative to give account of our faith without previous manifestations of faith in our lives, our words are ideologies without relevance.

St. Benedict recommended that the monk speak only about those things that he had asked himself. This recommendation, it seems to me, has value to the

kerygma of the missionary and the teaching of the pastor. Your life has to speak strongly enough that others will question you just as Jesus' adversaries and friends questioned him. The mission is to present the word as a response to the questions provoked, but one's life is the real witness. It is in this sense that we intend to unite contemplation, reconciliation, and service to kerygma for which we are consecrated. In the same manner, all the dimensions of our consecration are witness. The acceptance of the word specifies it is nothing but a confirmation of the implicit kerygma of our lives.

On the other hand, the consecration for witness doesn't only imply communication of explicitly religious witness. It is presented within history, with its social, political, economic, and cultural aspects. We are citizens of the world before we are citizens of heaven, and it is within our historical commitment that we demonstrate our option for the reign of God.

In the same way that we proposed to heal and re-evangelize religious life, we think that refoundation consists of re-consecration of our lives, in a transitive sense, to the dynamic of the reign of God. This entails resisting a tendency to privatize religious life along with a subtle urge to seek out secularly-defined securities.



# Elisabeth Leseur's Spirituality of the Communion of Saints

---

*Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.*

## Introduction

The mystic, Elisabeth Leseur (1866–1914) creatively and originally responded to the spirit of her times in the way she understood and practiced her faith as a lay Christian. I believe she deserves to be better known as an important lay figure in the history of Christian Spirituality.<sup>1</sup> The specific challenges she confronted were many. First, her marriage at the age of twenty-three to Félix Leseur, an unbeliever in religiously hostile France, profoundly threatened her faith, and she struggled to regain that faith and live a robust committed dedication to God. Eventually, she adopted an apostolic strategy of unconditional loving presence to her beloved husband as well as to many in their agnostic circle. Second, her approach to spirituality from the beginning of her adult conversion was always thoroughly lay in character. She developed a rule of life that maintained a set of priorities related to her responsibilities within her marriage and family. Unable to bear a child, Elisabeth responded by maintaining deep involvement with their extended families, as well as by developing her own intellectual gifts through a disciplined program of study.

Third, she experienced many forms of suffering in her life, enduring many illnesses and dying from breast cancer in 1914. She turned this physical suffering as well as her spiritual isolation into a form of prayer and participation in redemption, making a pact with God offering her sufferings from breast cancer for the conversion of her husband. In addition to her physical and spiritual sufferings, Elisabeth constantly confronted deaths and life-threatening illnesses within her family. Her robust belief in the communion of saints gave meaning to these experiences of suffering and loss and filled her with hope for future reunion in heaven and ongoing relationship with her beloved dead.

Fourth, she had an expansive view of the world from extensive travel and reading. The Leseurs

counted among their friends, musicians, artists, writers, philosophers, politicians, doctors, and lawyers—believers and unbelievers alike. She recognized a special call to reach out to unbelievers. Fifth, she participated in the developing lay movements of her time, deeply affected by the social teachings of Leo XIII and the evangelizing efforts of the embryonic Catholic action movement. She also embraced contemporary developments in Catholic theology and spirituality—the beginnings of historical criticism and better understandings of the Scriptures, the early liturgical movement and a return to practice of frequent communion. She was deeply engaged in trying to harmonize faith and reason, faith and democracy, faith and culture. In many ways, she was clearly an exceptional prototype of a happily married lay woman, educated in her faith, immersed in society and carrying out in a secular context the specific forms of the lay apostolate that Vatican II would envision a half a century later.

## Elisabeth and the Communion of Saints

The theological theme that most informs Elisabeth Leseur's spiritual understanding and practice is a comprehensive intuition into the mystery of the communion of saints. Dom Germain Morin claims that this doctrine was "the great reality of her life,

Unable to bear a child, Elisabeth responded by maintaining deep involvement with their extended families, as well as by developing her own intellectual gifts through a disciplined program of study.

finding in it the Christian meaning of her friendships, her bereavements, her responsibilities, and her worries about those dear to her."<sup>2</sup> She describes how she pragmatically understands this doctrine in all of her major writings—in her journal, in her letters on suffering, in her first communion treatises to her niece and nephew, and even in her letter to Jeanne Alcan, published under the title, "Advice to an Unbeliever."<sup>3</sup>

**Elisabeth's writings both assume and explicitly express a belief in the reality of this relational community among the living and the dead, as well as those yet to be brought into its web of relationship. She is convinced that these relationships are not interrupted by death, but continue vibrantly in the present beyond the grave.**

For Elisabeth, the communion of saints was both a philosophical and a faith reality. Deeply influenced by a number of prominent Catholic literary and philosophical writers in France at the end of the nineteenth century, she developed a spiritual vision of the hidden supernatural life of each person, participating in a great exchange of spiritual goods with in the communion of saints. According to Georges Goyau, these writings "were dominated by the idea of the communion of saints and it was this that gave them their enthusiasm."<sup>4</sup>

The doctrine of the communion of saints has historically carried a two-fold interpretation. During any epoch, one or another of these strands became dominant. Its earliest meaning seems to have been a "communion in holy things." This meant participation in the intimate sharing of life with Jesus and the followers of Jesus through the sacraments of initiation and a life of discipleship. One shares in the sacred mysteries, the Eucharistic meal

that constitutes the community of believers. The second meaning is related to the cult of the saints: a communion among holy persons, living and dead, especially the martyrs. By Elisabeth's time, the doctrine implied an underlying social solidarity in grace that taught that an individual Christian had the ability to effect good for the whole body of the church. A contemporary of Elisabeth wrote this interpretation in 1904:

Through the sacrament of initiation the baptized become members of the body of the Church: a body whose head is Christ, whose members are all the righteous, dead, living, and to come, from the beginning of the world until its final consummation. In addition, the holy angels themselves, to whatever hierarchy they belong, form part of this society. By entering into the Catholic Church, the new Christians thus find themselves in communion with all the saints of earth and heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Elisabeth's writings both assume and explicitly express a belief in the reality of this relational community among the living and the dead, as well as those yet to be brought into its web of relationship. She is convinced that these relationships are not interrupted by death, but continue vibrantly in the present beyond the grave.<sup>6</sup> A notion of a final consummation fuels her hope that the future lies in God's hands and that she will not only be united with God in heaven, but also after her own death, she will be reunited with her beloved friends and family, especially her husband once he receives the gift of faith. This is a vision of the profound interconnection of loving persons that reaches from the past, continues in the present among saints on earth and in heaven, and leans into a future that encompasses even more satisfying relationships after death.

Elisabeth clearly expresses the temporal dimensions of this mystery. All the living participate in this Christic life. The living include those who enjoy eternal life as well as those presently on earth. Among those on earth, a supernatural, spiritual communion exists among believers independent of physical proximity through partaking of the Eucharist—effecting literally a communion in the Risen Christ among everyone anywhere in the world who shares in faith or in the sacrament. This supernatural communion extends beyond the moment of reception of communion to a union of hearts and minds in personal prayer and in action for the good of others in daily life. Thus praying for one an-

other's intentions, and uniting together in offering sacrifices or being lovingly present to another, and engaging in the spiritual or corporal works of mercy are all activities expressive of this communion.

In Thomas Aquinas's treatment of the communion of saints, the view adopted by the Council of Trent, he combines these themes of participation in the spiritual goods of the church and the interchange between the persons themselves.<sup>7</sup> Aquinas's concluding section about the church on earth stated:

We should realize that not only is the power of Christ's passion communicated to us but that the merit of this life and of all the goodness achieved by the saints is also common to all those in charity, because all are one, according to Ps 118:63. "I partake, Lord, in the good things of all who fear you." It follows that whoever is in charity partakes in all the good that is done in the entire world. But those for whom that good was especially intended have a special part in it. For one person can make satisfaction for another . . . Through this communion, therefore, we obtain two things: first, participation in all the merits of Jesus Christ; then the communication of one person's good to another.<sup>8</sup>

According to this theology, the members of the communion of saints on earth can effect the spiritual good of others through intentional practices that draw on the grace of Christ. They can obtain spiritual benefits in the future lives of those on earth for whom they pray or offer their sufferings. They can do this only through their membership in the spiritual body of Christ. Thus, they share in the power of their head. She expresses these themes succinctly in a journal entry soon after her younger sister, Juliette, died:

Elisabeth's liturgical practice and sensibilities are suffused with the sense of the intimate connection between participation in the Eucharist now as a foretaste of the life to come and her expectation of even greater joy in heaven.

I believe that there is flowing through us—those on earth, those in purgatory, and those who have reached true life—a great unending stream made up of the sufferings, merits, and love of everyone, and that our least sorrow, our slightest efforts can through grace reach others, whether near or far, and bring them light, peace, and holiness.

I believe that in eternity we shall find again our beloved ones who have known and loved the cross, and that their sufferings and our own will be lost in the infinity of divine Love and the joy of final reunion.

I believe that God is love, and that suffering, in his hands, is the means his love uses to transform and save us.

*I believe in the Communion of Saints, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.*<sup>9</sup>

It is in this theological context that Elisabeth prays and offers her sufferings for her husband's conversion. Her vision of the communion of saints and of shared heavenly life is deeply relational. From the time of her First Communion,<sup>10</sup> she had a vivid sense of heaven as participating in God's presence, and she looked forward to a reunion of those living on earth and the beloved dead with God in heaven. To Soeur Goby, she writes about her sense of continuity in loving relationships: "How good it is to love and to know that these great loving relationships come from God and will return to him, and that after having grown through sorrow, these relationships will end in joy and in the most radiant union!"<sup>11</sup> Thus, heaven meant shared life with God and reunion with all of her beloveds.

Elisabeth's liturgical practice and sensibilities are suffused with the sense of the intimate connection between participation in the Eucharist now as a foretaste of the life to come and her expectation of even greater joy in heaven. She writes to Soeur Goby shortly before All Saints Day:

We will be closely united in spirit during the next few days . . . as our thoughts focus on the heaven we so desire, on the holy souls there, some of whom are dear to us, and all of whom we shall one day know or be united with again, on our blessed Lord, the center and joy of heaven, on the Blessed Virgin for whom we both have such filial affection. Let us think of the happiness that awaits both of us at the end of the darkness and sufferings of this world, knowing that we will be forever united in the fullness of life, light and love that God is preparing for us and helping us attain. If a few hours spent closely united before the tabernacle could be so happy and

sweet, what will eternity be when, in addition to that unity, that full and lasting joy, the beatific vision will also be ours and we will know and love God forever. Occasionally at communion we receive a glint of this eternal union, in the midst of the corporal burdens and miseries that are part of the sufferings of life . . . what will it ever be like when we have truly reached our destination?

In our spiritual union, we remember the poor souls in purgatory, especially those dear to us, and for whom I hope we will be united in prayer. I love these two feasts of All Saints and All Souls. They constitute the communion of saints, one of the most consoling, beautiful and greatest joys of the spiritual life. For those who, like myself, can do so little by way of an active life, how sweet it is to know that in God's hands, pain and suffering become acts of bounty, and through the heart of Jesus are transformed into sources of grace for others.<sup>12</sup>

**In relationship to her husband, she could not bear to imagine heaven without Félix. Because he had not received the gift of faith, she suffered from the inability to share with him the spiritual reality that was so important to her.**

In relationship to her husband, she could not bear to imagine heaven without Félix. Because he had not received the gift of faith, she suffered from the inability to share with him the spiritual reality that was so important to her. She longed for a fuller communion of shared life in God than they were able to enjoy during their marriage. It was this she wanted so passionately and for which she made her secret pact with God, offering her suffering during her final illness for his conversion.<sup>13</sup>

After Elisabeth's death from breast cancer, her husband tells the remarkable story of his conversion through his wife's direct influence from beyond the grave.<sup>14</sup> During the last few years of Elisabeth's life, Felix had become more sympathetic to her spiritual inclinations when he witnessed her forbearance during many periods of ill health and

intense physical suffering. Because he saw that she drew strength from her religious practice, he would on occasion accompany her to church, go with her on a pilgrimage to Lourdes, and make the preparations in their room for her to receive communion in her last illness. As Elisabeth wrote to Soeur Goby, his attitudes were changing, but it was not yet faith. Felix had begun to glimpse something spiritual or supernatural about his wife at some of these moments, but could not let the thoughts in for very long because of his materialistic convictions. Elisabeth was convinced that only God can give the grace of faith and believed God would convert him after her death. On her deathbed, she had asked her sister to destroy her journal, but to save another document, her spiritual testament. Amelie prevailed upon Elisabeth to let her preserve the journal as well because she suggested that it might help Felix understand his wife's life better and be of some comfort to him.

### **Felix's Experience of Elisabeth after her Death**

After the funeral, Amelie gave Felix both documents. Bereft, he visited Elisabeth's grave daily and read her journal and eventually other books in her library. Although his reading had not yet displaced his philosophy, he said, "I learned to know Elisabeth and to love her truly, and I was glad that her thoughts had reached me in so direct a manner that I could preserve of her a complete and consoling memory, that nothing and no lapse of time would ever render less vivid."<sup>15</sup> Felix then recounts a series of uncanny experiences in which he felt he was influenced directly by Elisabeth after her death.

June 10, 1914, slightly more than two months after Elisabeth's death, he accepted an invitation to travel by car with a good friend who encouraged him to get out of the house and into the countryside. The next morning, appreciating the beauty of the countryside, he experienced a vivid sense of his wife next to him saying, "I am grieved." He was emotionally overwhelmed and reasoned that if Elisabeth was alive as he had just experienced her, then there is a God and the existence of the supernatural is true. This conclusion began to open his mind to the possibility of spiritual experience. Later in the day, Felix found himself compelled to

light a candle in Rocamadour, a place of pilgrimage for Elisabeth's intention. He then went to visit people closely associated with his wife—Mamie, her childhood nurse, and Soeur Goby her spiritual friend. On the way to Beaune to see Soeur Goby, Felix asked to go by way of Paray-le-Monial. He was drawn there purely by the memory of his wife's having visited there once, although he remained contemptuous of anything connected with devotion to the Sacred Heart. He was quite unmoved by the Chapel of the Visitation but went into the Cluniac Basilica, and felt Elisabeth's presence again even more clearly than before. There he knelt and prayed fervently to Jesus, present in the tabernacle, with a true interior movement of his heart, as well as begging Elisabeth to pray for him.

When he returned to Paris, he diligently tried to forget these experiences and threw himself into daily life. He tried to convince himself that he had felt nothing more than simple grief reactions, remembering his wife rather than experiencing her in a new way. He continued to read her journal daily and visit her grave, but resisted changing his beliefs in any way. Some three weeks later, he visited Christian friends in Rheims and discovered in his friend's wife the same kind of ardent faith Elisabeth had. "God was once more shining before my eyes."<sup>16</sup>

In July when he returned to Paris, he had to cope with the beginning of World War I and was commissioned by his company to transport all of their assets to Bordeaux for safe-keeping. By the time he tried to leave, the car he had hired did not materialize, and he managed to secure a seat in someone else's at the last minute. After driving south and transferring to a very crowded train, he again received direction from his wife, "Lourdes is the real object of your present journey; you ought to go to Lourdes; go to Lourdes."<sup>17</sup>

Although his thoughts alternated between this breakthrough of the supernatural into his consciousness and his former rationalism, he felt as if Elisabeth was guiding his thoughts. Before going to Lourdes, he went to visit mutual friends in the Garonne valley and began to share with them what had been going on inside of him since he began to feel Elisabeth alive and guiding him. He even read some of her journal to them. He spent a week in Lourdes, revisiting the places he had been with Elisabeth in 1912. He kept to himself, but Elisabeth

was with him everywhere. One morning, soon after his arrival, he prayed on his knees in the Grotto for the gift of faith, repeating this prayer each day. During this time at Lourdes, he felt at peace and his sorrow assumed fresh meaning.

When he returned to Paris, he felt himself a changed man. He began to practice his faith again, to meditate on the Gospels, to read some of Elisabeth's Christian books. He visited the cemetery daily, reflecting and feeling encouraged to continue in this direction. He emphasizes that this process lasted four months subject to no exterior influences, talking to no priest or religious. He then spoke to his parish priest, but was not yet ready to make his confession. A short time later, he met a friend who asked how he was doing. This friend helped him by making an appointment for him with a Dominican priest who later became his spiritual director. Felix met with him as scheduled, made some changes in his life, and returned for confession two weeks later, completing his reconciliation with the church by receiving communion.

**Felix's narrative is infused with  
his own incredulous feelings.  
How can such an unspiritual  
man experience such persistent  
connection with his dead wife if  
she is not somehow  
mysteriously living in some other  
way?**

Felix's narrative is infused with his own incredulous feelings. How can such an unspiritual man experience such persistent connection with his dead wife if she is not somehow mysteriously living in some other way? He considers himself the most unlikely subject for such irrational experiences. His conversion transforms his entire world. He realizes more than in all their married life how much his wife loved him, how much she suffered for him, how much she respected him as he was. He discovers he can only reciprocate this love by following Elisa-

beth's guidance and by embracing the source of her own love by gradually opening to the faith that is offered through God's grace. Thus, his conversion narrative justifies and embodies the spirituality of the communion of saints that so inspired Elisabeth's entire spiritual life. Elisabeth's writings testify to her belief in this interpenetrating spiritual world of life on earth and life in heaven. In this love story, Elisabeth's relationship with her husband is the means God uses to bring her beloved Felix into this same communion of love after her death.

As I began to read Elisabeth as a prototype of Vatican II laity, I realized that her treatises to her niece and nephew on the occasion of their first communions were articulations of lay vocation in distinctively gendered ways.

### A Note on Method

My work on Elisabeth Leseur is historical and hermeneutical work on a well-documented lay woman. It began, of course, with my own interests when I first read most of her corpus. I was intrigued by her intellectual life, her feminism, her friendship with a hospital Sister, and many other textual clues for which I was unable to account. My original research project was to translate her letters to Soeur Goby and write a critical introduction to her approach to suffering and her spiritual friendship with an active apostolic religious woman. When that plan expanded to become a volume in the Classics of Western Spirituality Series, it became an entirely different project.

As a classic, it required writing a critical introduction to texts from her entire corpus that I selected for this volume and placing Elisabeth Leseur in her full historical context. In this short essay, I treat one of the central themes of her writings and

try to make the case that the doctrine of the communion of saints was deeply believed and concretely appropriated in Elisabeth's life. The practices it inspired and the hope it engendered in her life had a particular historical shape that continued to develop and unfold within the church and was reflected profoundly in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, which devoted several paragraphs to this aspect of ecclesiology.<sup>18</sup> The more I learned about Elisabeth and about Parisian Catholic life in the late nineteenth century among the elite upper class, the more I realized how much lay involvement in a variety of pastoral activities had already been promoted in France more than fifty years before the council. But there was also the uncanny convergence of a shared strategy of loving presence among Elisabeth, Charles de Foucauld, and Therese of Lisieux. Something had to be going on in Catholic culture that accounted for their approaches independently of one another. This I found in local French Catholic practice and teachings.

I continued to shift my perspective as I discovered more textual evidence through archival work in Paris and in Rome. These changes in my understanding of Leseur's significance informed my selection of texts for the volume. Including her *Journal* was always part of the plan, but I chose to create a more contemporary translation rather than use those done in the first two decades of the twentieth century. As I began to read Elisabeth as a prototype of Vatican II laity, I realized that her treatises to her niece and nephew on the occasion of their first communions were articulations of lay vocation in distinctively gendered ways. The selection of letters from those published under the title of *Letters to Unbelievers*, never before available in English, required representing each of the correspondents and the distinctiveness of her approach to each one. In these, she demonstrates a model of genuine and authentic loving dialogue across differences of religious belief. All were friends; all were different kinds of unbelievers—Jeanne Alcan, a non-practicing Jewish woman; Aimee Fievet, a single woman and professional educator; and Yvonne Le Gros, a believer married to Felix Le Dantec, a philosopher who published a book on atheism. Every so often, Elisabeth wrote to Le Dantec as well as to Yvonne, this longtime friend of Leseur's family. Sources included nineteenth-century French histories in both

French and English, Elisabeth's unpublished letters in typescript, photographs, testimony from the *Transumption* introducing Elisabeth's cause for canonization, letters and notes from her nieces and nephews, news paper clippings, a catalogue of Elisabeth's library, the original hand-written letters of Soeur Goby, her correspondent in her *Letters on Suffering*, never translated into English before, judgments of theological censors related to her status as servant of God, personal prayer books and missals, her first communion journal, a file folder that identified her with a moderate strand of French feminism, and much more.

### Elisabeth as Distinct from Her Husband's View

Because Felix Leseur eventually became a Dominican priest and promoted the cause for his wife's canonization, he wrote extensive factual and interpretive accounts of his wife's life in which he figures quite prominently. For Elisabeth to be interpreted today, her life needed to be retrieved and distinguished from her husband's interpretation and promotion. All these other sources helped me establish a complementary, yet different view. Elisabeth Leseur's canonization process presents her as a long-suffering, spiritually abused wife at the hands of her unbelieving husband. Reticent about disclosing personal religious experience, the primary sources—her own writings—portray a woman who deeply loves her husband, has many interests in common with him, yet suffers from their differences around belief and religious practice. Felix's testimony about how he came to understand and appreciate his wife more deeply after her death through her continuing felt presence in his life convinced him of the reality of the spiritual world.

Here we see a demonstration of the lived experience of the communion of saints in action in both of their lives, played out differently for each because of the differences in their starting points. Elisabeth lives, suffers, prays, and hopes on the grounds of this doctrine and its relationship to the whole of Christian belief. Felix encounters its effects in his life, the most unlikely agnostic subject to be having uncanny experiences, hearing voices, and praying for the faith he had spent a great deal of his life ridiculing and rejecting. Her canoniza-

tion process could present her as a doctor of the church, or as a model of religious tolerance and loving dialogue across difference, or as a model for spouses who do not share faith, or as a model for the fruitfulness of suffering.

On a more personal note, while I was working on this volume, my mother was dying; I was experiencing the great divide between belief and unbelief within my family of origin; and I worked in French and Italian archives with back pain—my first clue that I had three herniated disks in my lower back. Elisabeth Leseur's writings continue to challenge me in terms of what I believe and how I respond to these enduring themes in human experience—coping with physical pain, facing death and dying of family and friends, and the isolation of being a woman of faith in a partially unbelieving family.

As I was finishing this paper, I received a letter from another woman expressing the effective significance of Elisabeth Leseur today. "For several years I have been interested in Elisabeth and hoping for progress in her cause for beatification. My husband is an unbeliever as Felix was, so I like to think of her as my big sister in heaven! I think she is a marvelous example of holiness and hope for those of us who have been praying for years for the conversion of loved ones."<sup>19</sup>

### Notes

- 1 For an earlier and more expansive treatment of these themes see my: "Elisabeth Leseur: A Strangely Forgotten Modern Saint" in *Lay Sanctity, Medieval and Modern: A Search for Models*, ed. Ann Astell (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 117–129.
- 2 Emilien Lamirande, *The Communion of Saints*. The Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Catholicism, Vol. 26, Trans. A. Manson (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1963), 125–6.
- 3 She wrote to Jeanne Alcan, this explanation of the communion of saints in second half of 1910 Elisabeth believed applied to non-believer and believer alike:

Christians believe that a mysterious, spiritual solidarity exists among themselves and all other children of the same God. We call this solidarity the communion of saints; the efforts, merits, and sufferings of each individual benefit the rest. A similar law exists in the natural order, and if we think about it a little we shall be convinced that our words and actions have a deeper and more far reaching effect than we often imagine. Therefore, it is an absolute





duty for everyone who understands what "absolute" and "duty" mean, to say and do nothing that is evil or even indifferent, since there is no neutrality in matters of morality. From that, arises the obligation to make a sustained effort on a daily basis to work at interior perfection, because, whether we intend it or not, the effect we have on others will be the reflection and expression of what we are within. Let us create an interior treasure of noble thoughts, energy, and strong, intense affection, and then we may be sure that sooner or later, perhaps without our being aware of it, the overflow will affect the hearts of others. *Elisabeth Leseur: Selected Writings*, Trans. Janet K. Ruffing. (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2005), 202–203.

- 4 Adrien Dansette, *Religious History of Modern France*. Vol. 2, *Under the Third Republic* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961), 320. Goyau gave this assessment as cited in Dansette, "With Huysmans and Baumann, this writing acquired an exegesis of suffering. With Léon Bloy, Claudel, and Rette a philosophy of life, and with Péguy an understanding of the life of the Church." 320. Although Dansette disagrees with Goyau and makes more distinctions among the way these writers applied Catholic doctrine to social concerns, Elisabeth was clearly influenced by these Catholic intellectual currents.
- 5 Dom Germain Morin, cited in Lamirande, 24.
- 6 She explains the influence of the saintly dead in the lives of those on earth to her niece in a first communion essay:

Your dear godmother [Juliette] eagerly looked forward to this day and hoped for a complete union of all our souls, during your first sacramental encounter with Jesus.

Who among us, if we are really Christians, can say that her hopes were mistaken, and that providence did not fulfill her intense desire? If only we knew how to withdraw for an hour into our depths, where God dwells, and how to contemplate the eternal realities, as much as our weakness allows, we should grasp how much love and how much fulfillment of our desires is really hidden in our great sorrow. It only seems to feel more painful because it happened so close to your eagerly awaited first Communion. No, dear, none of us will really be missing from our family gathering . . . From now on, we will continue to experience your godmother's influence throughout our lives. She will guide our consciences, strengthen our wills, obtain the peace and strength to accomplish our work in the world and to fulfill the particular mission given to each of us. Your godmother will do more for you than if she were still on this earth. She protects you and will continue to do so, and her love for you is greater now that she lives in God's infinite love. *Selected Writings*, 168–169.

- 7 Elisabeth had a much underlined copy of the *Catechism of the Council of Trent* which reinforced this belief.
- 8 Cited in Lamirande, 29. Aquinas, *Commentary on the Creed* (1273), concluding section.
- 9 *Selected Writings*, 155–6.
- 10 According to the notes she recorded in her *Journal D'Enfance* in preparation for her First Communion, there are more than twenty references to heavenly life. One of her own classmates died before their First Communion ceremony. In this journal, Elisabeth records an almost ecstatic experience imagining what heaven would be like and how wonderful it would be to be with God. She had a vivid sense of continuity between the present life and the next life. Her first communion prayer book is organized according to the liturgical year. It includes many prayers, canticles, and hymns. For each major feast and liturgical season, a brief catechesis about why a feast is celebrated is followed by suggestions about appropriate dispositions or attitudes one ought to cultivate in celebrating it, and resolutions one ought to make for one's own life. *Manuel des Catechismes ou Recueil, Billets, Cantiques, etc. par m. L'Abbe Dupanloup, Eveque d'Orleans* (Paris: F. Rocher, n.d.), 48–55.
- 11 Letter XXVIII, *Lettres sur la souffrance*, April 20, 1912.
- 12 *Lettres sur la souffrance*, October 28, 1911.
- 13 I strongly contest Valerie Raoul's interpretation of Elisabeth's journal writing and her offering of her sufferings for her husband's conversion as emotional blackmail. Raoul reduces Elisabeth's mystical sense of the communion of saints to purely commercial metaphors. Elisabeth does not write her journal for Félix's benefit. She agrees to save the journal in order to comfort Félix rather than coerce his conversion, a strategy that was not in harmony with her deep respect for people's individual paths. "Women's Diaries as Life-Savings: Who Decides Whose Life is Saved?" *Biography* 24.1 (2001): 140–151.
- 14 See Felix Leseur's "Introduction" to *The Spiritual Life: A Collection of Short Treatises on the Inner Life*, a volume of essays written by Elisabeth that Felix collected in this volume, Translated by A. M. Buchanan (London: Burnes, Oates, Washbourne, 1922), 6–30.
- 15 *The Spiritual Life*, 8.
- 16 *The Spiritual Life*, 16.
- 17 *The Spiritual Life*, 20.
- 18 *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 48–51. Architecturally, Our Lady Queen of the Angels Cathedral in Los Angeles embodies the pilgrim church, in the company of the communion of saints, processing toward the new Jerusalem.
- 19 Marian Ziegler, May 4, 2005.

# The Theology of Ivone Gebara<sup>1</sup>

Pamela M. Cobey, M.Div.

Among the most gifted and needed theological voices for our time is that of Brazilian ecofeminist theologian, Ivone Gebara. She bases her theology within the perspective she has gained from living among poor women in the outskirts of Brazil. At the same time, Gebara speaks as a Latin American Catholic woman who has herself experienced oppression. Among her most controversial stances has been her relentless support for the legalization and decriminalization of abortion in Brazil—an effort to regulate and humanize an illegal practice that is in fact the fifth leading cause of death of all women in Brazil. Gebara's treatment of images of God, the divinity of Jesus, and patriarchy within the Church were troublesome for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Her writings in these areas in fact led to her eventual silencing in 1995 for a period of two years at the request of Vatican officials.

## Introduction

As a child, kneeling beside my bed in my grandmother's home, I prayed aloud, night after night, giving thanks to God for making me a girl. I thought it was better to be a girl. My grandmother never attempted to alter this conception. I continue to give thanks that I am a woman and for the gift of solidarity with other women. Sometimes I can sense the power of our solidarity, especially in moments of realization of the presence of divinity within ourselves. It is as if there were a new sense of the Incarnation occurring among women.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps in relation to this, women are increasingly claiming their own voices from their own perspectives and their own inner authority.

My overriding theological concern is for women and women's voices. These eyes of mine have beheld too much pain and suffering in this world. My

analytical mind asks why there is so much suffering even as my dreams are tormented with the visions I am charged to remember. I do not believe that it is of God that we should permit such suffering to go on—suffering that could be prevented if wo/men, children, and creatures, were not treated as objects and property for the pleasure and purposes of a structure that benefits primarily a white male elite.<sup>3</sup>

Feminist to the core of my soul, I hope against hope for a world in which women do not suffer because of who we are and where we come from. I hope for a world that honors its children enough to foster a sustainable

environment. I use my creative, imaginative, and feminist voice in service of the realization of this vision and I am not alone among women. The Church needs our voices.

To hold women as a primary theological concern is significant, for theology as a discipline has emerged from and has been controlled by men from within a system of patriarchy that holds women's commitment to women taboo. Yet, in *A Passion for Friends*, Jan Raymond notes that such commitment is religious in a basic sense. The root of the word religion is the Latin, *religare*, meaning to tie or to link. Women's love for and commit-

Women are increasingly claiming their own voices from their own perspectives and their own inner authority.

ment to each other has the power to help tie women's lives together, to make connections, to unify and direct female existence in the world, to create a network of meaning that transcends past and present.<sup>4</sup>

## The connections between women and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet.

In my act of claiming women as my overriding theological concern, I place myself among women who are demonstrating a comfortability with themselves as women worthy of concern. I hope to further the concern of women for each other. I hope that my voice among the voices of other women will give witness to the historically neglected and trivialized voices/authority of women. With Adrienne Rich, I believe that "the connections between women and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet."<sup>5</sup> Choosing women as a primary concern is significant because for so long this has so often not been the case. We have been taught to be self-sacrificing, compliant, ladylike, self-deprecating, silent. We have been taught that by this route we become good and holy. We have been taught that our concerns are not as important as other concerns. Mary Daly notes that women are forever asked to place their concerns aside and to concede to the de-

mands of a male-defined "perpetual state of emergency."<sup>6</sup>

But where has this route really led us? I am a white woman. Perhaps because white women have benefited from patriarchy more than women of other races,

white women have complied with patriarchy more and perhaps as a result we have lost more of our essential selves. Don't cry for us. Cry for yourselves. White women have lost their souls! These are the words of Kwok Pui-Lan in response to a woman who spoke of the sadness she shared with her daughter when they read together an account in reference to the ancient practice of Chinese foot-binding.<sup>7</sup> In the loss of ourselves, in the loss of our identification with other women, we have lost our souls. Separation from ourselves is separation from other women and separation from other women is separation from ourselves. These separations serve the order of patriarchy.

I first met Ivone Gebara in 1993 one afternoon in the home of a friend in the South Bronx.<sup>8</sup> We talked mostly about what the reality of poverty was like for women in the United States in comparison and in relation to the reality of poverty for women in Latin America. I had worked with mothers and babies for several

years in the South Bronx as a community health nurse. Ivone had lived among poor women in Camaragibe. She spoke of the need for a global theology to address the situation among the world's poor in light of global economics. She seemed to be holding the lives of poor women gently and ever before her.

### **Ivone Gebara: A Biographical Overview**

Sr. Ivone Gebara<sup>9</sup> is a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame (Canonesses of St. Augustine), and was born in Sao Paulo. She received degrees in philosophy from the Pontifical Catholic University in Sao Paulo and in philosophy and theology from the Catholic University of Louvain. Her doctorate in philosophy is from the Pontifical Catholic University in Sao Paulo. She has authored six books of feminist theology, published by Vozes in Petropolis and Paulinas in Sao Paulo, as well as numerous articles for *Concilium*, *Orbis Books*, and various national publications in Brazil.<sup>10</sup>

Gebara is the only woman on the editorial committee of the *Latin American Theology and Liberation Series*, placing her among the ranks of Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Jon Sobrino. Though Gebara's own social location may be among the privileged, she has chosen to place herself among the poor. Invited by the people, she has been living in Camaragibe, a poor Brazilian shantytown on the outskirts of Recife since 1986. She is a woman clearly committed to the concerns of women.

Gebara taught at the Theological Institute in Recife (ITER) from 1973 until 1989, when it was closed by the Vatican. The seminary was instituted with the support of retired archbishop, Dom Helder C  mara. Its aim was to offer seminarians and lay ministers alternative seminary training grounded in experience among the poor. The Vatican closed the seminary, alleging that the open-minded curriculum was not adequate for training young men for the priesthood. The conservative archbishop, Jose Cardoso Sobrinho, who replaced C  mara in 1989, was not in favor of the seminary's leftist leanings associated with its identification with liberation theology.

Since the seminary's closing, Gebara has spent her time writing, giving talks, traveling, teaching, and working with women's groups, while maintaining a pastoral presence in Camaragibe.

Gebara's perspective has shifted over the years. She moved from a traditional expression of faith and theology toward liberation theology when she perceived the poverty of Latin American people and saw the urgent need for structural reform. Inspired by the writings of Dorothee Solle, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Mary Daly, Gebara widened her perspective as she took on a feminist lens in the early 1980s and she began to address the oppression of women within political, economic, and ecclesial structures. More recently, aware of the relationship between capitalist-driven oppression of the earth and capitalist-driven oppression of the poor of Latin

A mother has some right over the life which she carries in her womb. If she does not have the psychological condition to face pregnancy, she has the right to interrupt it . . . Abortion is not a sin. The gospel does not even speak about it.

America, she has taken on an ecofeminist lens.

At a time when Brazil's National Congress was looking at the question of legalizing abortion and just after the release of the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* by Pope John Paul II (relating to Church teaching with regard to sexual morality), the popular Brazilian magazine, *VEJA*, in its October 6, 1993 edition, printed an "interview" with Ivone Gebara entitled, "Abortion is Not a Sin." I place the word interview in quotes because, although the article was printed as if it were an interview, the material for the article was actually pieced together from the interchanges of two journalists who communicated with Ivone in a variety of ways. Ivone was not given the opportunity to edit or approve the article and some of her thoughts were distorted. Ivone is quoted as stating "A mother has some right over the life which she carries in her womb. If she does not have the psychological condition to face pregnancy, she has the right to interrupt it . . . Abortion is not a sin. The gospel does not even speak about it." In the article, she affirms her support for the legalization and decriminalization of abortion as well as for state funding of abortions for poor women.

She bases her support on her experience of poor women who are her neighbors in Camaragibe—women she describes as economically and psychologically unable to care for one or more children. In the same article, Gebara challenges the ideology behind an all-male priesthood, celibacy within the priesthood, and conceptions of a male, all-powerful and controlling God.

In response to this article, the local bishop of the diocese of Olinda and Recife, Dom Jose Cardoso Sobrinho, informally met with Gebara on one occasion, then wrote to her asking her to "rectify her thought." Gebara wrote back to him, confirming her support for the legalization and decriminalization of abortion. He wrote again to her ordering her to rectify her thought or retract it. She responded to the content of the article in *VEJA*, acknowledging that there were distortions of her thought within it, yet she again affirmed her position in favor of legalization and decriminalization of abortion.

The Presbyteral Council then sent the case to Rome for resolution. The Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life asked the president of the National Council of Brazilian

Bishops, (Jesuit) Dom Luciano Mendes de Almeida, to handle the situation. He met with Gebara and dismissed the case, convinced of "her sincere search for the truth and her concern for the pain of poor women."<sup>11</sup>

**Ivone was silenced by her congregation in 1995 at the request of the Vatican for two years. During that time, she was to go to Europe to study traditional theology. If she did not comply with the sanctions, her religious congregation was advised to "invite her to leave" her congregation.**

Other bishops, displeased with Almeida's resolution, collected a file of Ivone's writings along with course syllabi and tapes of various talks and submitted them to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. An unsigned document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith sent to Ivone's religious superiors in Belgium concludes with the judgment: "She professes to be a feminist theologian. One has to note, nevertheless that she is neither Catholic nor Christian."<sup>12</sup> In response to this judgment, Ivone was silenced by her congregation in 1995 at the request of the Vatican for two years. During that time, she was to go to Europe to study traditional theology. If she did not comply with the sanctions, her religious congregation was advised to "invite her to leave" her congregation. Gebara reluctantly and tentatively chose to comply with the sanctions.<sup>13</sup>

### **Survey of Brazilian History: Implications for Women**

The context of violence within which poor Brazilian women live and from which Ivone Gebara theologizes, can be gleaned from Margaret Guider's 1995

book, *Daughters of Rahab: Prostitution and the Church of Liberation in Brazil*. I follow her study in this review of the main points of Brazilian history as it affects women in general.<sup>14</sup>

The first Iberian explorers arrived in Brazil in 1500. Portugal's claims to the land were invoked by papal authority, and the inhabitants of the colonized territory were claimed as Christians for the Church. Between 1538–1840 more than five million Africans are estimated to have been brought to Brazil as slaves.<sup>15</sup> Marginalized Portuguese women were exiled to Brazil to curtail the abuse of indigenous women and to serve the sexual needs of their countrymen while working out their own salvation through the production of Christian offspring.<sup>16</sup> Captive indigenous women, enslaved African women, and exiled Portuguese women were "expected to supply the venereal

demands of their captors, masters, employers, and men with whom they shared their lot in life. As sex captives, sexual slaves, sexual workers, and sexual companions, they were pressed into rendering further service to the colony as the designated labor force for increasing its population."<sup>17</sup> Violence and brutality went unquestioned, as did the idea that their lives were expendable. Most women regardless of age, race, or social position were destined to be used and controlled by men for the exclusive purposes of sexual reproduction and sexual pleasure.

By 1630, women began to outnumber men in some regions. Mestiza/o and mulatta/o children were in abundance and with their mothers were commonly abandoned by the men who fathered them. Their lives were marked by disease, hunger, and poverty that were largely ignored by ecclesial and colonial authorities although lay fraternities began to emerge, which did work to alleviate some of their misery.<sup>18</sup>

In the late 1600s, when the ratio of white men to white women came into balance for the first time, norms within the Brazilian social landscape capitulated to the governing ideology of the "Christian patriarchal family." With the establishment of convents—prohibited until 1677 due to the scarcity of European women, the need to foster population growth and the disinterest of potential benefactors—the roles and functions of women were redefined. Female sexuality was placed under the control of

local authorities. As questions of "honor" took ascendancy in the patriarchal order, the contagion of dishonor differentiated women from each other by race, class, and sexual status.<sup>19</sup>

In the late colonial period from 1713–1822, socioeconomic and political upheaval and instability influenced the widespread development of houses of prostitution. Sexual trafficking of women increased as men seeking mineral fortunes in Brazil's backlands sought to prostitute them. Women suspected of prostitution were sent to isolated, unpopulated regions—by immediate design to restore moral order while by remote design to engineer population growth in these areas.<sup>20</sup>

In 1822, Brazil declared its independence from Portugal. Slavery was not abolished until 1888. Numbers of abandoned foundlings rose, especially in large cities and prostitution among children as young as seven accelerated. Single, abandoned or widowed women—victims of a slave economy—had few opportunities for gainful employment. By the end of the nineteenth century, wealthy men created a demand for "courtesans," within a subculture often embedded in the underworld of narcotics. Increased trade and tourism increased the demand for "hotel prostitutes."<sup>21</sup>

Brazil became a republic in 1889. Like the U.S. constitution, the Brazilian constitution arguably guaranteed the rights of those already privileged. Constitutional separation of church and state allowed the Vatican to have control of the Church in

Brazil for the first time. Foreign missionaries flocked to the area, often serving Brazil's privileged, but also serving the poor.

After World War I, unregulated spending after a period of economic growth led to severe economic problems. A populist dictatorship in the 1930s and 1940s unraveled the threads of democracy. By the mid 1950s, high inflation and growing foreign debt led to a worsening of the standard of living for many in Brazil in spite of thriving industrial growth and agribusiness. Following the nationalization of all industries and efforts to bring about agrarian reform, in 1964 a repressive military dictatorship emerged with conservative support.

During the "Brazilian miracle" from 1968–1975, the Brazil-

**By the mid 1950s, high inflation and growing foreign debt led to a worsening of the standard of living for many in Brazil in spite of thriving industrial growth and agribusiness.**

ian economy underwent a period of profound growth, but the national income of the bottom 50 percent of the population declined.<sup>22</sup> The military dictatorship amassed a huge foreign debt when western banks filled with Eurodollars and money from OPEC countries were happy to lend it. By the 1980s, the international market declined and hyperinflation, international debt, and political corruption contributed to the socioeconomic marginalization of millions.

Military rule ended in 1984 when Brazilians were given the right to direct elections under a new system of democracy. As a result of foreign debt, austerity programs cut spending on health and education, eliminated subsidies for essential foods and public transport, reduced the minimum wage, and focused economic resources on export production for debt payment. Still, none of these measures reduced the debt burden. More than twenty-four million small farmers have been pushed off their land due to agribusiness.<sup>23</sup> Most of the landless have migrated to the cities, settling in favelas without water, sanitation, or electricity. The numbers of children living and/or working on the streets are estimated between ten thousand and thirty million.<sup>24</sup>

With increasing urbanization, the government encouraged colonization of the rainforests but most of the deforestation of the rainforests has been done for large-scale cattle ranching, profiting a few who export beef.<sup>25</sup> Ninety native groups in this century have disappeared in the Amazon with the invasion and destruction of their land, massacres, starvation, and communicable diseases from which they had no immunity.<sup>26</sup> To pay its foreign debt,

Brazil has encouraged various *grandes projectos* such as the construction of iron ore smelters, further contributing to deforestation with the cutting of hardwood trees for charcoal fuel. The construction of the Tacuri dam, which powers factories that produce minerals like aluminum for export, displaced 25,000 people and submerged 900 square miles of rain forest.<sup>27</sup>

It was not until the late 1970s that the faces of the poor in Brazil began to be distinguished with greater specificity. Prior to then, the face of the generic poor was that of the male worker. It became apparent that women and children abandoned by men who could not provide for them were the poorest of the poor. The numbers of single and abandoned mothers exploded in direct correspondence to the development projects in Brazil's interior.<sup>28</sup> The prohibitive price of marriage licenses made common-law marriages of convenience the rule. Illegitimate children had no claim to their father's resources. With the rise of migration, fathers who otherwise would have provided for their children neglected such responsibility. In 1983, an estimated four million children and women between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five in a population of 110 million were engaged in prostitution.<sup>29</sup> Large numbers of women engaged in prostitution were Afro-Brazilian. Women who had worked as domestics, factory workers, and vendors increasingly turned to prostitution enticed by the possibility of "earning more money in one night of prostitution than in a month of so-called honest work."<sup>30</sup>

### **The Brazilian Church's Response to Women**

While it is apparent that poverty is not the only or the most significant causal factor contributing to the context of violence within which poor Brazilian women live, it took the Brazilian Catholic "church of liberation" some time to come to an understanding of the interrelationship of factors underlying women's oppression. The Church of Brazil committed itself to the poor and oppressed in the 1960s in the aftermath of Vatican II and the second gathering of the Conference of Latin American bishops at Medellin, Colombia. Guider's work, outlined in *Daughters of Rahab*, shows that the Church largely owes its conscientization with regard to women's oppression to the national movement of the Pastoral da Mulher Marginalizada (P.M.M.) which met eight times between 1974 and 1990.<sup>31</sup> These gatherings of pastoral agents concerned with the plight of women engaged in prostitution evolved over a period of time to include and then be dominated by the voices and agency of prostituted women themselves.

The point was driven home that the experience of prostitution was not a deviation from the norm, but an example of the all

too common exploitation, subordination, degradation, and expendability of Brazilian women in general. As life stories were shared, it became apparent that many women entered prostitution as children and experienced multiple forms of abuse including incest. They highlighted the interrelated dynamics of machismo and sexual discrimination within Brazilian culture bringing sexual violence, racism, and machismo to the fore as urgent issues.<sup>32</sup> These women began to recognize that their own internalized oppression was reflected in the Church's attitude toward women and sexuality and demanded that the Church promote women's rights and stop marginalizing prostituted women. They cited the plight of street children and their own situations of abuse as human rights issues.

By 1990, the eighth gathering of the P.M.M. was led by women and no bishops were present. They recognized that oppressive systems assured that women would not revolt through the perpetuation of women's self-identification as victims. They called for unified action among the marginalized. They became aware that most organizations explicitly committed to human and civil rights for

These women began to recognize that their own internalized oppression was reflected in the Church's attitude toward women and sexuality and demanded that the Church promote women's rights and stop marginalizing prostituted women.

women were not connected with the Church. Finally, the church of liberation, aware of the cost it would incur if it acknowledged the relationship of machismo to the patriarchal ethos of the Church, the Church's complicity in women's oppression, the need for the conversion of the Church, and the conflict that would surely follow any support for women's rights with regard to their bodies or the Church's teachings on human sexuality or family, was unwilling or unable to align itself with the concerns of poor women as women.

By 1990, the Church negotiated a means for securing the financial stability and ongoing viability of the P.M.M. by helping to provide resources to set in place an administrative staff and center in Sao Paulo known as *Servicoa Mulher Marginalizada*.

### **Differing Theologies of Ivone Gebara and the Vatican**

Ivone Gebara told me the following: "Sometimes people have said to me, 'Your questions are the questions of the women.' I have had to respond, 'No. My questions are reflections about the situations of women.' Let me give you an example. This happened about three years ago. I went to mass in a place not very far from where I live. We were going to have a meeting among women who were from groups in a rural area. They were all very poor women. The priest at the church where we were gathering told us that there would be a mass before our meeting. Then at the time of communion, the

priest asked "Who among you are living with a man to whom they are not married?" Some women raised their hands and said "I am." The priest said, "The women who were not married in the Church cannot receive communion." I felt sick. Then he said, "The women who have been married only by the state in a civil ceremony cannot receive communion either." I got up to speak and said "Father." He was still on the altar and I could not go up on the altar, but I said, "Father, this is not of the gospel. This exclusion is not of the gospel." He said, "I don't much like it but I have spoken what I am required to."

The Church produces a type of theology  
marked by a kind of "purity" and exercises  
an oppressive power over women—over our  
bodies . . .

I create a theology that goes  
against this current.

What is important here is that the women who had sadly walked out in response to the priest did so because they did not have another conception of theology that would allow them to go against what he said. This is the point of my work. I, as a theologian, reflect over this situation. The Church produces a type of theology marked by a kind of "purity" and exercises an oppressive power over women—over our bodies. We all feel the cost of this situation. Impoverished women accept without question this type of theology. They are

afraid and have nothing and this is why they can follow a theology like this. These women do not even have the money to marry. I create a theology that goes against this current."<sup>33</sup>

At the most intimate level, the context from which Ivone Gebara's theology arises is the stuff of everyday life among poor women in Latin America. Ivone keeps her eyes and ears and heart open. She arises every day in time to begin writing at 5:00 AM and works until 9:00 AM without interruption before she opens her windows to let in the sounds of the street, sending out a signal to the neighborhood that it is all right to knock on her

door and stop by for a visit. Her work for the rest of the day is accomplished piecemeal according to the demands of whatever the day might bring. She acknowledges that it is difficult to work under such conditions and that she does not know for how long she can keep it up, but she feels it is important to be where she is so that she does not lose sight of the difficult and sometimes violent reality of the people in her barrio and she will stay for as long as she is able. Thus far, Ivone has managed to live and work in northeast Brazil for



Ivone notes that though she is not “for abortion” . . . she insists that the church needs to listen to the cries of women who are pregnant in the midst of almost impossible circumstances and often as a result of sexual violence.

twenty-four of her twenty-nine years as a Sister while eking out her living by teaching courses and doing workshops as well as by writing.

Ivone notes that though she is not “for abortion,” since she has spoken in favor of the legalization and decriminalization of abortion, many women in her neighborhood have come to talk with her. She insists that the church needs to listen to the cries of women who are pregnant in the midst of almost impossible circumstances and often as a result of sexual violence.<sup>34</sup>

There are women in these situations who do have abortions. Let us do what we can to help these women live. The government has the responsibility to help women to live. If I am asked, “Are you are for drugs?” I say “No. But the governments need to help those who are addicted, who are in this difficult situation.” I believe that even though abortion is a different case, there are parallels. We can say that pregnant women who are having abortions need access to help from the public health system, to help from the hospitals, to psychological help. We need to know how to put our feet in another’s shoes, to know how to work with social problems without having to resort to universalizing principles of ethics.

The Church speaks of “the right to life.” But what is a particular life actually like? Who has the right to life?<sup>35</sup>

While the lives of women in Camaragibe is the immediate context for Ivone’s theology, her theology also springs from her own deep passion for learning and her conviction that women have the right to think and to question. Theology is for her a tool that women can use to raise their own questions from their own experiences and to create a more just world. Theology as a tool is the gift that she shares with women. She is inspired by the life of Mexico’s seventeenth century feminist, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz. “It is not that I identify with all of the sentiments of her baroque poetry. It is that she fought for women’s right to think. She is a very important figure for Latin American feminist theologians.”<sup>36</sup>

In spite of Ivone’s community’s cooperation in her silencing, she insists that her passion for learning and thinking has been supported by her religious congregation, the Sisters of Our Lady, Canonesses of St. Augustine.

While the starting point for Ivone’s theology differs from the Vatican, in that she speaks as a woman (who claims her right to

think) and in that she speaks from the context of her experience among poor women, Ivone’s theology differs as well in that she speaks from an ecofeminist context. Consonant with feminist principles, the starting point for her theology is experience/life. Based on this experience, her theology emanates from two underlying convictions: 1) that all of life is interconnected and related and 2) that all of life is interdependent. These convictions lead her to embrace an ethical approach that is radically egalitarian.

### Ecclesiology

It is possible to see this in examining Ivone’s ecclesiology which is revealed in her article in *Searching the Scriptures*, “The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America.”<sup>37</sup> It is apparent that Ivone has a Vatican II understanding of the Church as *communio*, mystery, and “People of God.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, Ivone speaks to the presence of the holy in all creation, not just persons. God is all in all. It seems that her concept of church enlarges to include the entire cosmos. “Everything that exists is relation and lives in relation, a vital energy in which we exist, a primary mystery that simply is.”<sup>39</sup>

The human being lives in communion with all that exists. It is to this end that we might see ourselves differently as humans in relationship with all that exists—that we may be called at this point in time to let go of our projections that create anthropomorphic and

sometimes idolatrous images of God. Then we can recognize the many ways in which the mystery of transcendence that we have called God is present in our life/experience as well as in the call to ethical action on behalf of life. Ethical action places us in solidarity with all of life.

The radical egalitarianism that undergirds Ivone's theology is consonant with the Pauline use of the word *ekklesia* as illustrated by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza.<sup>40</sup> The Greek word *ekklesia* translated as church, means "public assembly of the political community" or "democratic assembly of full citizens." *Ekklesia* understands the equality of its members in terms of siblings in a family and in terms of friendship. Though in reality only very few freeborn, propertied, educated, male heads of household actually exercised democratic government in the Greek city-state in which the notion of democracy was constructed, this meaning of church, says Elisabeth, derives from the classical institution of democracy that promised freedom and equality to all its citizens.<sup>41</sup> She supports this concept of *ekklesia* with the Pauline use of the word *soma*, indicating the body/corporation of Christ. *Soma*, Elisabeth argues, is best understood in relation to the popular political discourse of the time that understood *polis* or city state as a "body politic," in which all members were interdependent (1 Cor 12:12–13).<sup>42</sup>

Although Ivone has spoken of Elisabeth's conception of church as a "discipleship of equals" within the "Jesus movement," Ivone's theology of

church is conceptually more similar to what Mary Rose D'Angelo describes as "the reign-of-God movement." Noting that a "discipleship of equals" does not do full justice to the charismatic character of the movement itself since others in the movement also acted as prophets, proclaim-

reign-of-God movement, the movement itself is God's reign."<sup>45</sup> Just as it took a community, then, to embody God's reign, neither can we be the reign-of-God alone. Nor can we responsibly place the burden of realization for this vision on the intervention of a super-hero

Ivone Gebara notes as well that the image of the liberator God in practice "sometimes seems dangerous." Women are the *pietás* of war games, accepting on their knees the murdered bodies of their loved ones.

ing God's reign and manifesting God's spirit in cures and exorcisms, D'Angelo proposes that these women and men emerge from discipleship to appear as Jesus' "companions in the spirit."<sup>43</sup> The gospels give us reason to see the movement rather than the person of Jesus as the locus of the spirit. From the perspective of the participants, "we should probably not speak of it as the Jesus movement . . . We need to think of it in terms of its primary concerns, perhaps to speak of it as the reign-of-God movement."<sup>44</sup>

Such a vision is consonant with Ivone's egalitarian principles as well as her respect for the presence of God in all. Importantly, this vision decenters the idea of Jesus as a lone hero or Savior. In light of the interdependence of life, an adequate soteriology demands that the locus of salvation necessarily resides within community. D'Angelo notes that "for the

God or liberator Jesus.

Ivone Gebara notes as well that the image of the liberator God in practice "sometimes seems dangerous."<sup>46</sup> Women are the *pietás* of war games, accepting on their knees the murdered bodies of their loved ones; they have no decisive responses before a "masculine reason" that governs the world; they are accomplices in schemas devised for the development of weapons and the sake of profits. This image of liberation continues to require and to justify sacrifices. "It issues invitations to become prophets and martyrs, to bear witness to the victory of life by means of death."

### Ethics

Ivone Gebara's ethics should be situated within a larger context of feminist and ecofeminist ethics. I have already noted that, for Ivone, we experience God in ethical action and that ethical

action places us in solidarity with all of life. She gives us additional insight into her understanding of ethics in her essay, "The Trinity and Human Experience, An Ecofeminist Approach."<sup>47</sup> She notes that our world seems to have increasingly turned to violence and exclusion to solve its problems. We label things good or bad according to the way they affect us.

**Feminist ethics situates the individual within the context of community and decisions are based, not only on what is best for the individual person, but for the sake of the whole community and for all of creation.**

Turning to violence is the essence of evil. Evil is a relationship that we construct that destroys not only our individual lives, but the fabric of human life. Within the cosmos, we cannot speak of good and evil, but rather of creative and destructive action. For example, the birth of our solar system required the destruction of others. While our Christian tradition teaches us that evil actions arise from selfishness and the excess of our passions, ethical evil is also the result of our limited understanding of ourselves in relationship with other beings. It is our communion with everything else that assures our survival and well-being. Because of greed and perceived superiority, we create systems that function as barriers to "protect" us from one another. We fool ourselves, becoming blind to the ephemeral nature of our individual lives and projects. We

conceive an all-powerful and controlling God in the image of the powerful of this world—a God difficult to reconcile with the tragedy of this world, a God whose goodness must always be defended. We act with deference toward this God, hoping to be treated with consideration. Rather, we are invited to find God who is transcendent but present within us, who calls us to a collec-

tive ethic centered on saving all of life. Within a collective ethic, evil is the imbalance we create from our greed and desire for individual power. It is manifest as narcissism, excess that is hoarded, the idolatry of superiority that induces inferiority, the imposition of our gods on others, and exclusive claims to salvation and knowledge of God's will. Within this collective ethic, what is experienced as destructive as a result of nature can lead us to compassionate action. As well, the experience of emptiness (such as scarcity or lack) can unleash creativity.<sup>48</sup> The gospel mandate to "Love your neighbor as yourself" is our way back to balance, but *our neighbor* is inclusive not just of humans but of plants and animals and all of the creative energies of the earth.

According to Mary Hunt, ethics is core to feminist and ecofeminist theology, but it is

subordinate in importance to other disciplines, such as systematics, within traditional theology.<sup>49</sup> Classical ethics tends to prioritize theory and law over practical considerations while feminist ethics tends to prioritize the interdependent survival of all of life over law and theory. Classical ethics tends to privatize ethical actions that prevent us from seeing a situation within a larger context. An individual makes a choice: yes or no. Feminist ethics situates the individual within the context of community and decisions are based, not only on what is best for the individual person, but for the sake of the whole community and for all of creation. At the same time, it is acknowledged that "the personal is political," meaning that what is relegated to the personal domain of women's lives, such as family and sexuality, has political consequences and also that it arises from or is enforced by political choices/conditions/power.

### **Feminist Ethics Is Always Contextual**

Ivone's article, "The Abortion Debate in Brazil," shows that her ethical reflection is in itself a manifestation of feminist ethics in action.<sup>50</sup> She begins by explaining that several years ago she was invited to reflect on reproductive issues as they affect poor Brazilian women. As she became sensitive to the sexual issues of her neighbors, she was drawn into solidarity with them. She discovered that poor women usually have no choice. They do not often use the word freedom, yet readily speak of slavery.

Legalization of abortion is not for them the promotion of a new arena of freedom, but a means and a minimum condition for dignity, and a way to avoid dying from illegal abortion.

Black and indigenous women are the poorest of the poor, and their situation shows how our social and economic structures are built on racism and sexism. They are the first to die. The legalization of abortion must be placed in this social, economic, and political context—it is only a step toward making their lives a bit more secure. Criminalization of abortion in Brazil is supported by the church and state, but in reality, this law is only applied to poor women. Other issues that need to be addressed are housing, diet, employment, and health care. Moral principles such as an abstract right to life upheld by the Church are important, but lose meaning in the face of concrete reality. A fertilized egg in the womb is more protected by patriarchal laws than a living woman.<sup>51</sup>

The Church does not demonstrate a genuine sense of personhood in a collective sense that understands that individual persons are connected to other lives. We survive together. We are responsible together. "From such a perspective a woman and the life in her womb are not two autonomous beings . . . A woman is an individual and collective person with her own history, but a fetus is a 'project' of human being."<sup>52</sup> Ivone acknowledges, "We [Brazilian feminists] want life for all, but we know this is not possible and so do not struggle to uphold principles at the cost of unnecessary suffering of fully-

developed persons."<sup>53</sup> She ends the article by taking into account the effects of backlash: the hierarchical church can declare that we are not the church. She commits herself to living out the struggle while taking on the embodied consequences of her actions. Ivone, like other feminists has raised questions that go to the very heart of the Christian tradition.

### **Anthropology: Re-Interpreting Eve**

In the single most animated class I have ever experienced, Ivone Gebara deftly led her students through a discussion on the origin of good and evil in Christian myth.<sup>54</sup> Myths, Ivone began, are a tool that serve a purpose. They are in themselves neither good nor bad. They are filled with symbols that hold polyvalent meaning. Though myths come from the past, they provide in the present a foundation for the way a society is structured. The story of Adam and Eve in the garden is used to explain the origin of evil. Why? There are so many other examples in Scripture that could have been used. Why not the first murder for example? Why not war? Politically, those who wrote the Scriptures

in a time when war was supported by the monarchy, could not define war as the origin of evil. And why was this story placed first in the Bible? Placing it first bolstered its power. Woman is considered the source of evil. Eve spoke with the serpent. Eve ate the fruit. But tell me about Eve in this story. Eve decides, answered one student. She chooses. Eve has more power. She wants to know. She communicates easily with the serpent. She is curious. She questions. She does not conform. Eve chooses life in the moment. She transgresses the law. She is the first feminist. And what of Adam? asked Ivone. He is fearful. He accuses. Ivone returned to her lecture; the serpent is an ancient symbol of fertility, of nature, wisdom, and of other cultures' divinities. Perhaps this is an indication that goddesses still existed. Eve does not fear the serpent. But if the serpent is a symbol for evil in the patriarchal world, then evil was already there in the garden before Adam and Eve shared an apple.

This is not a myth about the origin of evil, but about the human condition. Adam and Eve inhabit a world where evil is already present within the system.

**Moral principles such as an abstract right to life upheld by the Church are important, but lose meaning in the face of concrete reality.**

**A fertilized egg in the womb is more protected by patriarchal laws than a living woman.**

This theory holds that Jesus intended that a church would develop following his death and foresaw the structure it would take so that the hierarchical nature of the church is divinely instituted. Vatican II did not displace this model, but it did place less emphasis on a chain-of-command approach and more emphasis on collegial responsibility.

Women did not produce patriarchy. In this story, there is a fall of women's wisdom. What is negative is the law, not the serpent. Humans did not create evil. Humans can act wrongly. In our re-interpretation, Eve has the face of a woman with power. The law is a prohibition for both Adam and Eve. Evil is the result of relationship gone wrong.

How was God portrayed in this story? Ivone again queried her students. God is untrusting. Stupid, responded one student. God did not want Adam and Eve to eat something good. He had little generosity. He was egocentric. He was a punisher and a dictator. He was a boss. An owner. Arrogant. In a different vein, one student offered, he could be considered paternalistic and paternalistic could be interpreted as good; he provided them with abundance, protected them and put limits on them for their own wellbeing. When was this story written, Ivone asked? It says it is written in the reign of Solomon. What were Solomon's interests? He would have been suspicious of women's wisdom. He had military interests. He wanted control. And finally, what is the

image of God in this story? The image of God is the image of Solomon. If the image of God is the image of Solomon then what is the essence of evil? It is to take the power of the king. It is to be disobedient to the king. This myth supports the control of men and women by the law of the king. Social control is achieved in the control of pleasure, the control of culture, and the control of bodies. This myth serves theo-political purposes. God has the face of those who have power. Thus, Ivone concluded at the end of the discussion, this myth is used to maintain and support hierarchy within society.

### Theology of Religious Life

Anthropological understandings undergird differing theologies of religious life. The differences in theology of religious life exemplified by Ivone Gebara on the one hand and by the Vatican on the other have their roots in different conceptions of authority proper to different ecclesiologies. As pointed out by Mary Aim Hinsdale in an unpublished lecture on the subject of competing

ecclesiologies as they affect Sisters, both the hierarchical model of church preferred by the Vatican currently and the church that is the "People of God" adopted by congregations of renewed Sisters in response to the mandates of the Second Vatican Council are based in Scripture.<sup>55</sup> The understanding of the church as hierarchical is supported by the pastoral epistles, especially I and II Timothy, and by Matt 16:18 as well as by a certain use of "body of Christ" imagery that emphasizes the headship of Christ rather than the mutuality of members. The Church conceived as the "People of God" fits better within a charismatic model of church as evidenced especially in the early Christian community at Corinth.

Justification for women's subordination (1 Tim 2:13-14) within the hierarchical ecclesiology of the Vatican is supported by the pastoral epistles' appeal to the creation stories (Genesis 1-3). Adam was created first, then Eve; Eve, not Adam, "was deceived and became a transgressor." As described by Thomas Rausch, within the hierarchical model, authority is exclusively identified with those who hold office, all of whom are ordained men.<sup>56</sup> The principle of apostolic succession is key to the model such that it follows a chain of command beginning with Christ who passed it to Peter then through the apostles, to the bishops, the priests and eventually to the laity (who hold no authority).

This theory holds that Jesus intended that a church would develop following his death and foresaw the structure it would take so that the hierarchical na-

ture of the church is divinely instituted.<sup>57</sup> Vatican II did not displace this model, but it did place less emphasis on a chain-of-command approach and more emphasis on collegial responsibility for the Apostolic Tradition understood to be entrusted by Christ to the apostles and then passed on through the bishops. "The idea of a communal apostolic succession (tradition, handing on) of faith is ancient—it goes back to Irenaeus who at the same time saw the actual (physical) succession of bishops/teachers as being a sign of and ensuring the continuity of faith."<sup>58</sup>

Church authorities may be necessary for good governance, but they share in the church's teaching office like all others whose charism is based on professional training and competence. Within such a model, the views expressed by those in authority would be the expression of the beliefs of the faithful as a whole. Among the mandates of the Second Vatican Council taken up by congregations of Sisters were three notable requirements: the religious institutes were to convene representative assemblies or general chapters within three years; these were to be preceded by consultative processes involving every one of their members; and prevailing practices were to be set aside by the general chapter for a period of experimentation.<sup>59</sup> Nadine Foley points out that Sisters saw the mandate for total consultation as a call to incorporate the ideas of collegiality and subsidiarity enunciated in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. They chose to embrace

these ideals out of concern for the authenticity of the church's mission in the modern world.<sup>60</sup>

If there were to be a new Church, there would be a new religious life, Foley continues. Within a few years, Sisters realized changes in lifestyle, changes in the orientation of their ministries, changes in their internal

fact, properly laity. Sisters who once saw themselves as the servants of the hierarchical church began to see themselves as the servants of the community of the baptized. Many Sisters have embraced an eco-theology that enlarges their focus of mission to include all of life. Ivone is among Sisters who have taken

**Church authorities may be necessary for good governance, but they share in the church's teaching office like all others whose charism is based on professional training and competence.**

organization and government, and changes in their leadership. Gradually, mature women endowed with their own personal and religious authority lastingly embraced a participative and collegial form of religious life marked by the element of consultation. As Sisters reflected on the charisms of their founders, they began to see them as persons consumed with gospel zeal to meet the needs of the times and were inspired to let go of ministries that no longer seemed needed or relevant.

While Sisters prior to the Second Vatican Council had derived meaning from seeing themselves as separated from the concerns of the world and as occupants of an entirely sacred realm, renewed congregations of Sisters no longer separated sacred from secular. Additionally, they took hold of the Council's assertion that Sisters were, in

the renewal of religious life seriously. She has referred to the model of community in which she lives as an "insertion model."<sup>61</sup> Within such a model, Sisters do not live in large numbers in convents but in small communities in housing generally located in poor neighborhoods. The goal for such communities is to become a part of the neighborhood in order to be, in the words of Leonardo Boff, "God's witness in the heart of the world."<sup>62</sup>

Within the hierarchical model of church undergirded by the theology of the pastoral epistles, Sisters are regarded in what seems to me to be remarkably similar ways to the treatment of the order of widows in those same passages. Sisters, like widows, are to dress modestly, be silent and give up teaching insofar as their teaching does not serve the purposes or designs of the hierarchy.

As women, Sisters are subordinate to men and as women with an ecclesial identity, they must properly submit their authority to the hierarchy of the Church.<sup>63</sup>

Because of such an understanding, Sisters can be at a high risk for silencing within the Church. For those Sisters whose lives are based on a theology of religious life that fits more within a charismatic model of church, it can be quite a contradictory experience to be treated in the fashion in which the Vatican has treated Ivone Gebara, for example. By such treatment, the Vatican actually stifles the working of the Spirit among Sisters and leaves them in a bind: Sisters are denied the possibility of using their gifts for the sake of the Church, which defeats the very purpose of their vocation. As well, those who would receive their gifts are impoverished.



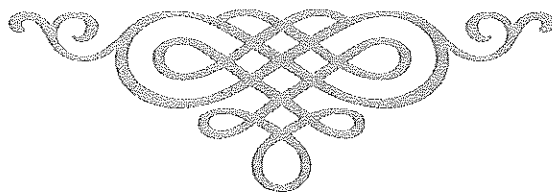
## Notes

- 1 This article is edited, with permission of the author, using material from chapters 1, 2 and 4 of the M.Div. thesis by Pamela M. Cobey, *Calling into Question the Authority of the Catholic Church: A Feminist Reflection on the Silencing of Ivone Gebara and the Lack of Representation in the Church of the World of Women's Experience*. The research was directed by Dr. Francine Cardman at Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1997. The editor acknowledges the assistance of Professor Cardman and Dr. Mary Hunt of WATER in Silver Spring, Maryland, in locating Ms. Cobey for use of her thesis.
- 2 Ivone Gebara shares this sentiment in "Women Doing Theology in Latin America," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), 125–34.
- 3 I am using Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's word, wo/men in this sentence to indicate the inclusion of men. The subordination of wo/men is compounded by the intersection of sex, race, class, and sexual orientation.
- 4 Jan Raymond, *A Passion for Friends* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 232.
- 5 Adrienne Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynophobia" (1978) in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1979), 279.
- 6 Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 378.
- 7 Kwok Pui-Lan, "Feminist Interpretation of the Scripture," Lecture, HDS/EDS, Cambridge, MA., 18 Par. 1995.
- 8 I refer to Sr. Ivone Gebara by her first name because it is common practice in South America to do so.
- 9 Presently in her late fifties (editor's note).
- 10 Since 1997, Ivone Gebara has published works translated as *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999) and *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002).
- 11 This is from a letter that Ivone received from Almeida dated June 25, 1994.
- 12 Charges against Ivone, were derived from a critique of her theology as represented in an article she wrote for a Chilean journal published by Centro Ecumenico Diego de Medellin entitled *Temas* 6 in September, 1993. Charges were that 1) her affirmations indicated distance from the Nicene Creed; 2) her theology of revelation was inadequate; 3) her theological project is illuminated in her desire to transform the notion that the initiative of good comes from above to fallen beings; 4) her reading of philosophy and anthropology is simplistic.
- 13 See David Molineaux, "Rome Moves to Silence Brazil's Gebara," NCR, 26 May 1995, 5.
- 14 Margaret Eletta Guider, *Daughters of Rahab: Prostitution and the Church of Liberation in Brazil*, Harvard Theological Studies No. 40 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).
- 15 Guider, 44.
- 16 Guider, 47.
- 17 Guider, 44–45.
- 18 These lay confraternities were called *irmandades*. For a discussion of them, see Guider, 54–55.
- 19 Guider, 59.
- 20 Guider, 61.
- 21 Guider, 65.
- 22 Luiz Beth Nunes Alonso Fernandes, "The Contribution of Basic Ecclesial Communities to and Education for Social Transformation in Brazil." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University (1985).
- 23 Judith Hurley and Kevin Danaher, "Brazil, A Paradise Lost?," Food First Action Alert, 1987, 1.
- 24 Thomas Sanders, "Brazilian Street Children, Part I. Who They Are," USFI Reports, July, 1987, 7.
- 25 If the current trend of deforestation continues, the rainforests will disappear in seventy-five years along with 40–80 percent of its plant and animal species. Cf. Hurley and Danaher report.
- 26 Hurley and Danaher, 2.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 Guider, 117.
- 29 Guider, 121.
- 30 Guider, 70.
- 31 Guider, 73–103.

- 32 In Brazil, "The incidence of violence and murder related to sexual preference is extremely high." See Reinhild Traiter-Espiritu, "Violence Against Women's Bodies," in *Women Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life*, ed. Mary John Mananzan et al. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), 66-79.
- 33 Author's interview with Ivone Gebara. February 2, 1997, Quisko, Chile.
- 34 See Ivone Gebara's letter "A Legalizacao do Aborto, Vista do Caleidoscopio Social," dated October 18, 1993.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ivone Gebara, "The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America," in *Searching the Scriptures*, ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 172-186.
- 38 See Mary Hines's essay, "Community for Liberation," in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 161-184. Regarding communio, Mary Hines notes, "This approach to ecclesiology understands the church in the first instance as a community or communion of persons united with one another and with Christ."
- 39 Gebara, "The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America," 178.
- 40 See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's essay, "A Discipleship of Equals: Ekklesial Democracy and Patriarchy in Biblical Perspective," in *A Democratic Catholic Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 17-33.
- 41 Ibid., 20.
- 42 Ibid., 19.
- 43 See Mary Rose D'Angelo's essay, "Re-membering Jesus: Women, Prophecy, and Resistance in the Memory of the Early Churches," *Horizons* Vol. 19/2 (1992), 199-218. Women and men made up this community on the move with Jesus. "The memories of such women disciples as Martha the diakonas and Mary the sister (John 11:1-12:19, Luke 10:38-42), the Samaritan woman who evangelized her townspeople (John 4:27-42), the woman prophet who anointed Jesus (Mark 14:1-11; John 12:1-12) are evidence that the Gospels conceal and reveal . . . an egalitarian movement." The woman with the hemorrhage accomplishes her own cure (Mark 5:28-30). The Samaritan woman becomes a source of life in the spirit (John 7:37-39).
- 44 D'Angelo, 209.
- 45 D'Angelo, 212.
- 46 Gebara, "The Face of Transcendence as a Challenge to the Reading of the Bible in Latin America," 174-176. Quotation at the end of this paragraph is taken from page 176.
- 47 In, *Women Healing the Earth*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 13-23. I am drawing from the section on Trinity and the problem of evil, 19-23.
- 48 Ivone notes that this emptiness is also a part of our individual selves. This conception is quite similar to Adrienne Rich's conception of "the void." The void, she says, is a part of every woman. The void was not created by patriarchy, racism, or capitalism and will remain with their leaving. But the void is not to be feared. It is only by entrance into the darkness of the void that we will discover our own voices and it is only in the living out of our deepest truths that we will realize what is salvific for ourselves and for other women. "The void is the creatrix, the matrix." Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying (1975)" in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979), 191.
- 49 The thoughts I am developing here are derived from a lecture on ethics given by Mary Hunt in Santiago, Chile on February 5, 1997 as part of a course entitled, Un Jardin Compartido: Más allá de la Violencia: Solidaridad y Ecofeminismo which was sponsored by Con-spirando (Chile), WATER (U.S.) and Colectivo Pé No Cha (Brazil).
- 50 Ivone Gebara, "The Abortion Debate in Brazil," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 11 (1995): 129-135.
- 51 See Ethicist Beverly Harrison's essay, "Theology and Morality of Procreative Choice," in *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics*, ed. Stephen E. Lammers and Allen Verhey (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmann's Publishing Company, 1987), 422-433. As Harrison notes, we have a long way to go before the sanctity of human life will include genuine regard and concern for every female already born (422 and 424).
- 52 Gebara, "The Abortion Debate in Brazil," 133. Spontaneous abortion is estimated to occur between 20 to 80 percent of the time for all fertilized ova.
- 53 Ibid., 132-134.
- 54 Classroom discussion in Santiago, Chile, on February 4, 1997.
- 55 Mary Ann Hinsdale, unpublished lecture, "Competing Ecclesiologies: Understanding Them and Dealing with Them," for the Connecticut province of the Sisters of Notre Dame in fall, 1989.
- 56 See Thomas P. Rausch, S.J., *Authority and Leadership in the Church: Past Directions and Future Possibilities* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989), 29-32.
- 57 This model of church, which can be supported by I and II Timothy and Matt 16:18, is refuted by most exegetes today. There is too much disagreement among the theologies in the Christian Testament to support any idea of universal



- harmony of teaching from the start. See Linda M. Maloney's essay, "The Pastoral Epistles," in *Searching the Scriptures Volume Two: A Feminist Commentary*, ed. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza (NY: Crossroad, 1994), 361-380.
- 58 Francine Cardman commenting on Irenaeus, "Selections from the Work Against Heresies by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons: 'The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called,'" *Early Latin Theology*, ed. S. L. Greenslade (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 371-372.
- 59 Nadine Foley, "The Leadership of Women Religious: An Expendable Resource," *New Catholic World*, Vol. 225 (Sept./Oct. 1982): 227-229.
- 60 Foley, 227-229.
- 61 Ivone Gebara, "Conflicting Models of Church and Society in Brazil," in *Trends in Mission: Toward the Third Millennium*, ed. William Jenkinson and Helene O'Sullivan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 23-32. See pages 31-32.
- 62 Leonardo Boff, *God's Witness in the Heart of the World*, Religious Life Series, Vol. 3 (Chicago: Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, 1981).
- 63 This is underscored in Francine Cardman's essay, "'Religious' and 'Lay' as Statutes in the Church," in *Authority, Community and Conflict*, ed. Madonna Kolbenschlag (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1986), 38-43 and in Mary Jo Weaver's essay, "Inside Outsiders" in her 1985 book, *New Catholic Women* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 71-108. When Gov. James Blanchard appointed Agnes Mary Mansour as director of the Michigan Department of Social Services in 1982, she took the position with the approval of her congregation and the archbishop of Detroit, Edmund Szoka. This, in spite of the fact that her job would entail the allocation of funds for Medicaid-funded abortions. She made clear her position that while she did not support abortion, she would not interfere with funding abortion for poor women. Neither did she wish for the return of pre-legal abortion days that caused women "a good deal of suffering." Mansour was not the only Catholic to have been in such a sensitive position. Joseph Califano, former secretary of the department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Mario Cuomo, governor of New York, and the Catholic layman who was Mansour's immediate predecessor in Michigan did not provoke the sanction visited on Mansour. The crux of the matter as far as Rome was concerned was the fact that she took the position she did as a nun. In fact, it was more than her ecclesial identity that was at issue. It was also the fact that she was a woman, as evidenced by the relentless attention focused on Geraldine Ferraro's position on abortion. Ferraro's position was in fact much the same as that of many male Roman Catholic senators and representatives whose positions were not targeted by the Catholic hierarchy.



# Rights of Members

## The View of American Civil Law and the Perspective of Canon Law

---

Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., J.D. and Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M., J.C.L.

(ER) When a president denies a Sister in first profession approval for renewal of vows or advancement to final profession, after a woman's many years of membership, whatever the reason, certain legal issues arise. Every member is a human being and a citizen, not only a woman baptized in the church and professing religious vows. Her rights as a human being and citizen also come into play especially because today the Sister is usually no longer in her twenties with most of life ahead of her.

(VV) Canonically, a Sister in temporary profession has few rights regarding continued membership in the Institute. For the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas in the current structure, she is admitted to first profession by the regional president with consent of her Council (*Constitutions* § 39) and admitted to renewal of vows or extended temporary profession by the regional president with advice (consent not required) of her Council (§ 43). For admission to perpetual profession, the Institute president needs to have the consent of her council and the recommendation of the regional president (§ 43). In universal law, Canon 689 requires that the competent major superior hear her council (not necessarily obtain their consent) and have "just causes" for exclusion from perpetual profession (Institute president) or from renewal of vows (regional president). Even serious illness which might prevent the woman from supporting herself which was contracted after temporary profession could be considered a just cause for not admitting the woman to perpetual profession provided the illness was not caused by negligence of the Institute (689 §2). How could we as Sisters of Mercy inflict such violence on the life of an ill member? Only if the Sister has become insane is the Institute obligated canonically to keep her and provide for her needs (689 § 3).

(ER) A religious community should have internal structures which parallel the protections of basic

rights that the state requires of employers: objective standards to which employers are held accountable in decision making to terminate workers, public norms that forbid discriminatory intent or conduct by employers, viable grievance procedures by which a worker can ask for review of decisions, and the availability of "union" protection.

(VV) Each member of the Institute has all the rights of the baptized as well as those specified for religious in Church law. Canon 227 specifies that all lay members of the Church (religious are laity according to canon law unless they are ordained clerics) "have the right to have recognized that freedom which all citizens have in the affairs of the earthly city." We do not lose our rights as citizens when we make religious profession while we may choose to limit exercise of some of those rights such as ownership of property because of a vow of poverty.

(ER) An important issue in preventing a woman from renewing vows or making final profession concerns a woman's property interests. Most temporarily professed members of religious communities today did not enter immediately after high school so they have invested their work-life providing for their sustenance, their medical needs, and care for themselves in retirement. Thus, the real issue when a superior prevents a woman from remaining vowed is not only severance from the

A religious community should have internal structures which parallel the protections of basic rights that the state requires of employers.

social and religious life of the community, but also the loss of medical and retirement benefits, and the impoverishment of having lost opportunity to acquire property or build up investments based on one's credit record and work history.

(VV) A woman religious as a member of the Church has the right (canon 231) to "decent remuneration" appropriate to the work she does. She also has a right to "social provision, social security, and health benefits to be duly provided." As Sisters of Mercy, how could we be less than just with a member who has given of herself and her time and talents with the income from her work accruing to the Institute during her time of temporary profession? Do we not owe her provision for her future including her retirement years perhaps proportionate to the years of service she has rendered in the Institute? Even if the Institute has provided her education/training for ministry, does she not still deserve means to provide for her future, particularly if she may be ill and that is part of the reason for not permitting her to make final vows?

(ER) The state regards the religious community, under its tax-exempt status as a nonprofit corporation, as the "employer" of the Sister-member from the time she becomes a candidate. The principle for dealing with a member equitably and legally is based on the position of the congregation as employer. While canon law states that a departing member cannot claim "back salary," the congregation still has a legal obligation to the member as its employee to compensate her, for example, for the equivalent of social security payments that would have been made by a secular employer for the employment positions she held.

As Sisters of Mercy, how could  
we be less than just with a  
member who has given of  
herself and her time and talents  
with the income from her work  
accruing to the Institute during  
her time of temporary  
profession?

This is all the more necessary if a congregation has paid the minimum social security payments while she was a member, while at the same time they funded a self-insured retirement program for members. A departing member should receive a financial compensation for her retirement proportional to the years she "worked for" the community as a member. The same principle of equity applies to medical insurance and an extension of coverage for a certain period of time after departure, just as employees can obtain when they find themselves between jobs.

It is usual for women entering religious life today, many years after high school, to have acquired property, in the form of real estate, personal possessions, and financial investments, together with social security quarters, job-related pensions, and medical benefits. The human and civil rights of women who enter a religious institute in midlife should be protected, not jettisoned in the name of the vow of poverty as invoked by leadership who entered after high school.

(VV) In many cases, women who come to religious life having completed high school and college are already prepared for full time work so do not even receive from the community professional education and training during their years in temporary profession. How could we consider it just not to compensate them for the years of service within the Institute by providing adequate funds for them to begin lay life again and funds to begin their retirement plans?

(ER) When a woman joins a religious congregation, she enters into covenant with the members. That is, she makes a contract to rely on the congregation for support, and to comply with the "rules" in return for security about her future. It is a violation of basic mutual contractual obligations to expect an entrant to assume the entire risk by giving up ownership or title to her property while the congregation assumes no risk and instead "holds the keys" by retaining the right to dismiss her any time prior to final vows without due process, appeal, accountability for the reasons, or independent review. This condition for joining destroys the possibility of a true covenant or contract. Joining instead becomes a form of female servitude to patriarchal (matriarchal?) authority and caprice.

(VV) One of the most basic rights that flows from natural law and is restated in Church law is the right to defend oneself and one's rights (canon 221). This right of defense is so basic that any act that violates it is null and void (example canon 1620.7), even an act of the supreme pontiff himself. Should the *Constitutions* provide ways that a temporarily professed Sister may appeal the decision of a regional president not to allow her to renew vows or the decision of the Institute president not to permit her to make perpetual vows?

(ER) A theology of the vow of poverty should be rethought and brought into accord not only with the current realities of women's lives, but with the experience of Catherine McAuley. It takes acknowledgment of our multifaceted identity as women, education in new areas, competent legal advice, and a more humane vision to devise means for protecting entrants' financial interests. This can be done through such standard means as trusts and joint-property titles. To require a midlife woman to revert to the unpropertied state she had at eighteen as the condition for first vows is not realistic. Nor is it fair and just, especially when a Sister in first vows must deal with confusion and conflict in the governance structure over who holds the power to decide whether she has a vocation or not.

(VV) Besides the right of defense, each member of the Christian faithful has the right to choose a personal state of life (canon 219). Of course, the Institute should have some say about whether a woman is suited to membership in that Institute. However, excluding someone from continuing membership should be a most grave decision, not the whim of whoever happens to be in authority. The responsible authority must respect the right of this woman to discern and choose religious life in this Institute. Only for clearly just reasons (canon 689) may a woman be excluded from continuing in vowed membership. Regarding the idea of arranging a trust for the assets a woman possesses when she comes to religious life

**To require a midlife woman to revert to the unpropertied state she had at eighteen as the condition for first vows is not realistic. Nor is it fair and just.**

which would be maintained until she might make perpetual vows when she would cede ownership because of a vow of poverty, such an arrangement could be provided by the *Constitutions* of a religious institute, which would then be respected by universal Church law.

(ER) A substantive injustice—indeed violence—is done to all members by lack of a viable review procedure by which leadership is held accountable to the congregation for processes that deny approval for renewal of vows or advancement to final profession. It would benefit leaders and members alike to have education in the federal and state laws that protect women in the workplace, and revisions made to current congregational policies about “retention” and “termination.”

(VV) The various commentaries on the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* all note that in charity and justice, concerns that would prevent a woman from continuing as a vowed member should have been pointed out to her by those responsible for her formation. The Canon Law Society of America commentary adds that, if a member in temporary profession cannot see that she is not physically or psychologically unsuited for the Institute, the competent superior should have recourse to appropriate experts in the matter to assist the superior and the member in dealing with the issues. If we as Sisters of Mercy would call our coworkers and our world to justice, we must first be just among ourselves.





## Contributors

**Pamela M. Cobey, M.Div.**, is presently a clinical nurse specialist and nurse practitioner at North Charles Mental Health Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts where she provides psychotherapy and case management for severely and persistently mentally ill patients. As a certified hospice and palliative care nurse, she is also a hospice consultant at Beacon Hospice in Boston. The primary interest in her work is the integration of spirituality and psychology. She holds an R.N., an M.S. from Boston College, and an M.Div. from Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, MA. Sections of her M.Div. thesis on the theology of Ivone Gebara appear in this issue of *The MAST Journal*. She was a member of the Sister Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan from 1988–1997. E-mail: pmcobey@comcast.net.

**Theresa Lowe Ching, R.S.M.**, (Jamaica/Cincinnati) is presently Director of St. Michael's Theological College, Kingston, Jamaica, W. I. She holds an M.A. in Theology from the University of Notre Dame and a Ph.D. in systematic theology from St. Michael's College, University of Toronto. Her published dissertation is entitled, *Efficacious Love: Its Meaning and Function in the Theology of Juan Luis Segundo*. Her current ministry also includes directing retreats and being co-director of the Mercy Associates in Kingston, Jamaica. E-mail: tlchingsm@hotmail.com.


**Margaret Farley, R.S.M.**, (Detroit) holds the chair in christian ethics at Yale Divinity School. A faculty chair in her name, The Margaret A. Farley Chair in Social Ethics and scholarship fund is being established to honor her contribution to YDS. She has served as president of the Society of Christian Ethics and the Catholic Theological Society of America. She is the author or editor of five books, including *Personal Commitments* (Harper and Row, 1986) and *Compassionate Respect: A Feminist Approach to Medical Ethics and Other Questions* (Paulist, 2002), as well as seventy-five articles and book chapters on ethical issues. E-mail: Margaret.Farley@yale.edu.

**Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M.**, (Burlingame) holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, and a J.D. from Lincoln Law School in San Jose, California. She has been a professor of biblical studies in college, university, and seminary settings, and served in higher education administration. She is published in the fields of feminist theology, scripture interpretation, and law. She is presently on the faculty of Silicon Valley Law School. She has been editor of the *The MAST Journal* since 1993. E-mail: erosen1121@cs.com.

**Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.**, (Burlingame) holds a Ph.D. from the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and is professor of spirituality and spiritual direction in the Graduate School of Religion and Religious Education at Fordham University. She has lectured extensively on spirituality and spiritual direction throughout the world and has published four books and more than sixty articles or book chapters. Most recently she wrote the critical introduction and translated the selections for *Elisabeth Leseur: Selected Writings*, Classings in Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 2005. E-mail: ruffing@fordham.edu.

**Mary Therese Sweeney, C.S.J.**, translated the chapters of Arnold's *The Risk of Jesus Christ*. She belongs to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, California, and holds a B.A. from Loyola Marymount, and M.A. degrees from the University of San Diego and Loyola University of Chicago. Her ministerial activities include education, health care administration, community mental health, and assistance in financial management and fund development for religious communities in Latin America. She presently serves on the leadership team of her congregation. E-mail: msweeney@corp.stjoe.org.

(Continued on page 62)



## Discussion Questions



**(Arnold/Sweeney)** *"If our life is not more human and happier, then it does not have a role in the world in seeking harmony before all. We need to reframe the human in all dimensions, and to ask ourselves if we are dehumanized, and even cruel, in the name of observing the basic tenets of consecrated life . . . How many pious infantilisms, justifications of ideology, and betrayals to simply being human, exist in our communities?"*

Arnold uses the criterion of "being human" as a test for the refoundation of consecrated life. What past practices in religious life were reformed because of this criterion? Are there other aspects of Mercy practice and governance that should be changed for the same reason—to promote a culture that is "more human and happier"?

**(Ching)** *"A way forward was being sought, and Kortright Davis in particular highlighted the potential for "emancipation" that lies in African values and the Caribbean spirit of resiliency, celebration, creativity, and freedom to counter the effects of persistent poverty, cultural alienation, and dependency that he identified as the major problems that are endemic to the region."*

Should Mercies concerned about social justice advocate "ending poverty" in the form of economic assistance from the first world? In what circumstances does mere "foreign aid" to the Caribbean perpetuate a form of slavery and dependency, preventing "emancipation" and interfering with the region's sense of cultural integrity? What consciousness-raising is needed? What forms of support by Mercy Sisters would promote economic development, cultural pride, and regional autonomy in the Caribbean?

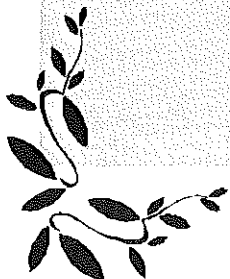
**(Cobey)** *"At the most intimate level, the context from which Ivone Gebara's theology arises is the stuff of everyday life among poor women in Latin America."*

What do you believe the Church should be saying and doing on behalf of women, besides its declarations about abortion? What are Mercy Sisters and Associates you know saying and doing on behalf of women? What difference does "everyday life among poor women" make on your personal ministerial choices?

**(Farley)** *"Dorothy Day is remembered for her calm acceptance of church authority when it came to obedience in action . . . At the same time, she wrote that we are obligated also to obey 'the least ones—the least of my sisters and brothers.' We are, in other words, to be obedient to the needs and claims of every living thing, not only of the powerful, whether in church or society."*

What needs of what persons in church and society make a claim on you that are as compelling for you as your belief in the fundamental doctrines of the church?

(Continued on page 62)







Contributors (continued from page 60)

**Marilyn Sunderman, R.S.M.**, (Cincinnati) is associate professor/chair of theology at Saint Joseph's College of Maine. Her recent publications include articles on Thomas Merton in *The Paradox of Place: Thomas Merton's Photography* published by the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, 2003 and *Groundings*, St. Michael's Theological College Publication, Jamaica, West Indies, 2004. Her article: "Jewels Upon His Forehead: Spiritual Vision in the Poetry and Photography of Thomas Merton" will appear in the forthcoming volume of the *Merton Annual*. Marilyn is also currently writing a book that treats various facets of the theology of Juan Luis Segundo, including his theology of grace and ecclesiology. E-mail: msunderm@sjcme.edu.

**Victoria Vondenberger, R.S.M.** (Cincinnati) is a canon lawyer with a J.C.L. from St. Paul University in Ottawa. She is director of the tribunal for the Archdiocese of Cincinnati as well as promoter of justice and defender of the bond since 1990. She served for twenty years in secondary education—English, theology, journalism, and administration. Her publications appear in canon law journals, *Studia Canonica* and *The Jurist*. She is an editor of *Jurisprudence* and has contributed to the Canon Law Society of America's *Advisory Opinions* and *Roman Replies*, as well as *Procedural Handbook for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*. She is the author of *Catholics, Marriage and Divorce: Real People, Real Questions* (2004). She was elected Secretary of the CLSA at its 2004 meeting. E-mail: victoriav@catholiccincinnati.org.

---

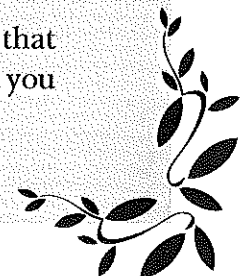
Discussion Questions (continued from page 61)

**(Ruffing)** *"She also embraced contemporary developments in Catholic theology and spirituality—the beginnings of historical criticism and better understandings of the Scriptures, the early liturgical movement and a return to practice of frequent communion. She was deeply engaged in trying to harmonize faith and reason, faith and democracy, faith and culture. In many ways, she was clearly an exceptional prototype of a happily married lay woman, educated in her faith, immersed in society and carrying out in a secular context the specific forms of the lay apostolate that Vatican II would envision a half a century later."*

What aspects of the story of Elisabeth Leseur resonate with your formative education in the faith and practice of Mercy spirituality, and translation of your faith into the kind of relationships you have with family and friends?

**(Sunderman)** *"A strength of both theologians is the fact that they do not reify grace. Rather, Rahner and Boff explore the essence of grace in terms of relationality. Rahner especially examines grace in terms of surrender to Absolute Mystery. Boff and Rahner both highlight that grace, manifested in the love of neighbor, is an expression of the love of God."*

What is your lived experience of grace? Is it a "thing" in the form of strength or help that comes to you from God? Or do you experience grace as arising out of interactions you have with other persons, that you recognize as God's presence?



## Information for New Subscribers and Current Readers

**New Subscription:** *The MAST Journal* is published three times a year by the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology. To subscribe, please fill out the coupon below or a copy of it. Make your check payable to *The MAST Journal* and send to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

**Back Issues:** If you are interested in obtaining a back issue of *The MAST Journal*, contact BIBAL Press at 888-788-2280 or sales@dfscott.com. Back issues are \$5.00 each, but are often on sale.

**Address Change:** If your address is incorrect or if you have changed your mailing address, please send that information to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

**Issue Didn't Arrive:** If your subscription is up to date and your issue of the journal did not arrive (and you know the issue has been published, the grapevine says!), then write to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: mhoward@sistersofmercy.org.

**Want to Write:** If you have an idea for an article, or you have a talk or article you would like published in *The MAST Journal*, please send the article or inquiry to Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., MAST Office, 1600 Petersen Ave. #40, San Jose, CA 95129. Please include a complete return mailing address on all correspondence or contact her by e-mail at erosen1121@cs.com.

I wish to subscribe to *The MAST Journal* for:

One year \_\_\_\_\_  
(\$15.00 U.S.; \$18.00 outside U.S.)

Two years \_\_\_\_\_  
(\$25.00 U.S.; \$30.00 outside U.S.)

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Please make payment by international money order, check drawn on U.S. bank, or U.S. currency.





## MERCY ASSOCIATION IN SCRIPTURE AND THEOLOGY

**MAST**, the Mercy Association in Scripture and Theology, met for the first time in June 1987 at Gwynedd-Mercy College in Gwynedd Valley, Pennsylvania. Called together by Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M. and Mary Ann Getty, twenty Mercy theologians and Scripture scholars from fourteen regional communities formally established the organization to provide a forum for dialogue and cooperation among Sisters of Mercy and associates. The stated purpose of the organization is to promote studies and research in Scripture, theology, and related fields; to support its members in scholarly pursuits through study, writing, teaching, and administration; and to provide a means for members to address current issues within the context of their related disciplines.

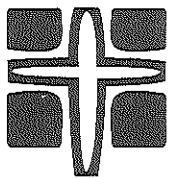
**MAST** has been meeting annually since then, usually in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the organization now numbers fifty, with members living and working in Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, Central and South America, as well as in the United States. Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M. currently serves as MAST's executive director. MAST will hold its annual meeting in Philadelphia, June 11–13, 2006.

Members work on a variety of task forces related to their scholarly discipline. Present task forces include: Scripture, healthcare ethics, and spirituality. In addition, the members seek to be of service to the Institute by providing a forum for ongoing theological education.

Membership dues are \$20 per year, payable to Marilee Howard, R.S.M., MAST treasurer, 8380 Colesville Rd, Silver Spring, MD 20910. Email: [mhoward@sistersofmercy.org](mailto:mhoward@sistersofmercy.org).

If you would like to be on the mailing list, call or write: Marie Michele Donnelly, R.S.M., Executive Director, 504 Holstein Street, Bridgeport, PA 19405, email: [mariemicheled@aol.com](mailto:mariemicheled@aol.com).

Since 1991, *The MAST Journal* has been published three times a year. Members of the organization serve on the journal's editorial board on a rotating basis, and several members have taken responsibility over the years to edit individual issues. Maryanne Stevens, R.S.M., was the founding editor of the journal, and Eloise Rosenblatt, R.S.M., currently serves in that capacity.



Institute of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas  
Auburn Regional Community  
**Mercy Center Auburn**  
535 Sacramento Street  
Auburn, CA 95603

No222n-Profit  
Organization  
U.S. POSTAGE  
**PAID**  
Auburn, CA  
PERMIT NO. 183