

**TRANSFORMING THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY
FROM A FEMININE PERSPECTIVE**

Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer

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INTRODUCTION

The issue of women and the notion of the feminine has again come to the fore, both in the secular world as well as in the ecclesial sphere. Could this be why women are taking on leading roles in a turbulent, violent and changing world? Could this be why Pope Francis has brought up the issue time and time again? Could this be why there has been a recently created working group on the female diaconate? Whatever the reason, at this point in time, when the world as a whole finds itself immersed in violence, and facing so many economic, political and social problems, there is a widespread sense that women can play an important role in the process of change.

In relation to the Church, something similar is happening. The Pope has repeatedly brought up the importance of women in the Church. In his Vatican statements, on his journeys, it is now easy to notice how much the Pope values the role of women in the life of the Church, in theology and in the pastoral setting.

This is why we will begin our reflection by presenting some points which seem important to us in relation to the path of feminism, which already has several decades of history behind

it, and the situation in which it finds itself today, both within and outside of the Church. On that subject, we will try and look at the work of two feminists: one American scholar, Camile Paglia; the other, a Bulgarian-French philosopher, Julia Kristeva.

The second part of our reflection will focus more specifically on women in the Church. There we will be looking at a form of secular discrimination against women, which is ontological in nature, and from which all other discrimination arises: the discrimination

against the female body. We will see that it is a difficult issue to overcome, because a woman cannot detach herself from her own body. Yet we will also see that, in that same body, women can find resources and opportunities to overcome the macho culture that discriminates against her. We will be referring to the Bible, and the words it uses to talk about the female body, and at the same time, we will be comparing our own views with those of Julia Kristeva, in order to see how feminism challenges theology today. Finally, we

will be reflecting on the attributes of the female body which places the woman at the centre of the Christian mystery. There, we will make our contribution to the current debate which, more than being a mere theme to explore, becomes a vitally important question.

In the conclusion, we will try to present a form of theology not so much based on texts, but rather on the testimony of two contemporary mystics who, from their experiences, point towards a woman's potential to transform reality and create the future.

1. FEMINISM, ITS CONTRIBUTIONS AND ITS LIMITS

It is undeniable that feminism has been a positive revolution for women. Highlighting the subordination of women in a patriarchal society, questioning the roles that have been assigned to women for centuries and inspiring them to struggle for their rights has been and still is undoubtedly of great value. And while we could weave together criticism today of the oppositional nature of this “first wave” of feminism—with its somewhat radical claims, its anti-masculine language and its anti-family policies, committed almost exclusively to issues of work and salaries—what is certain is that we would not be here today, reflecting on the contribution of feminism to society and to the Church, if it were not for the feminist revolution.¹

In spite of all the good it has brought, including the formation of a school of thought in today’s society² and the formation of a theological school of thought within the Church,³ this same feminism, upon evaluation, has led to some points worthy of criticism in the system of thought it created, and even in the impact it has had on society. For example, we could quote the reflection of Camile Paglia, a well-known American feminist who, in an interview conducted in Brazil, stated: “Many feminists of my generation fervently opposed this tendency of women

dedicating themselves exclusively to the role of motherhood, but I disagree with them. Since the end of the sixties, women who choose to be wives and mothers have become devalued. For me, feminism is the struggle to obtain equal opportunities for women. Whether that be removing obstacles which prevent their progress into higher education or obstacles to equality in the workplace. Feminism should offer choices and be open to individuals’ decisions. Feminists are wrong to suggest that the career woman is more important than the role of wife and

mother. A whole generation of professional American women have delayed their maternity, and when they finally decided to become pregnant, they have been unable to find a partner or have had fertility issues”.

She continues: “Feminism has not been honest about the biological reality that women need to face up to if they want to unite both motherhood and professional ambitions. In this instance, nature enters into conflict with the modern idealism of sexual equality. Feminists assured women that there would be enough time to have children later, at age 40 or 50, after having achieved professional success. What scientific ignorance! We have known for a long time that the risks to both mother and child are much greater when she is over 35 years old. According to medical science, women are most fertile and have less problems when they have children in their twenties. Being a mother or father at this age is incredibly different to being a mother in her forties”.

She concludes: “The sadness that many women feel today comes in part from the uncertainty about who they are and about what they want in this materialist society, so geared towards social status, that it expects women to behave like men, and yet still be capable of loving like a woman”.

Camille Paglia adds that women take out their frustrations on men, blaming them for everything, demanding that they change, that they think and act like women, and thus reducing their protagonism. That—according to Paglia—“drives women backwards and weakens them, emotionally and psychologically”. The philosopher

seems to imply that there is a dimension of feminism which is extremely narcissistic, and which is revealing itself today with even more intensity.

1.1. A symphony of singularities

These observations are also supported by another feminist, this time a European lady, Julia Kristeva, a Bulgarian psychoanalyst living in France. Her reflection on women springs from her own experience, and brings her to develop themes in a very different way to the usual approach of feminism. Furthermore, her words and her vision for women in the present and the future is particularly focused on the singularity of the individual in permanent and occasionally opposing interaction with otherness.

In other words, Kristeva’s feminism is not so much focused on women as a universal collective, and neither does she focus on examples of militant women, the few who are famous, instead she goes further in order to meet them in their singularity and subjectivity, which prevents them from being individuals with voices. On this subject she expresses a painful truth: “the *woman* effect in our societies supposes a certain relationship between power and language, or rather, with the power of language; not possessing them, but instead being the dumb support that doesn’t need them”.

Kristeva is convinced that “women have nothing to lose but their chains”, but at the same time, she believes it impossible to “summarise” the “second sex”, as Simone de Beauvoir does, who speaks in the name of “all wom-

en". According to the psychoanalyst, this same mistake is made when people believe they can speak and act on behalf of "all men", "all the proletariat" or whichever community is being referred to. She prefers to speak of her sex as "a piece of music made up of singularities, dissonance, and counterpoints, irrespective of the basic underlying chords".

On reading these two contemporary feminists, we can see that feminism responded to issues that women faced who had no right to vote, nor any right to participate in the workplace or the public sphere. It therefore provided more opportunities for women. Nevertheless, a critical reading of this whole journey which has been advancing for several decades now does not appear to be wholly positive.

Many women rose up and left the domestic sphere in order to participate in the public sphere, shoulder to shoulder with men, wanting to claim ownership of their own lives. However, the macho and patriarchal vision, which desires to dominate and control women, continually intervenes in this liberation movement. The changes resulting from this feminist movement have been difficult to accept, and in many societies they have translated into an increase in violence against women.

1.2. Violence against women

An analysis of the situation of women on a global level leads us to see that there exists so-called "gender-based violence", a cultural and social fact that understands women as being inferior to men. The introjection of the

superiority of the masculine model, the mimicry of the constant action in relation to generations that came before ours, brings out the mechanism of violence as the result of a familiar pattern of subordination and not questioning masculine dictates.

The first great violence of which women are victims begins in education. This is summarised in the so-called "feminisation of poverty", as happens in the impoverished countries of Latin America, where this phenomenon is an ever-present reality. A poor person, who is also a woman, is doubly poor:⁴ poor because of the fact of being a woman, which adds to her marginalised condition, making her life even more complex and difficult. Thus "out of every 10 poor people in the world, 7 of these are women. More than 60 million girls don't go to school and more than 500 million women don't know how to read or write".⁵ Faced with this reality, thousands of girls who want to learn to read, write and who desire to get an education face a struggle in order to go to school and change their destiny.

Violence against women is one of the most systematic and widespread violations of human rights that exists. It is rooted in social structures that are built on the domination of one gender over another, more than on individual actions; it transcends age, socio-economic, educational and geographical factors affecting all levels of society, and it is a major obstacle to eliminating gender inequality and discrimination on a global level.

Faced with such a bleak panorama, one could be tempted to lose heart: so many years of struggle, so many

advances on various fronts, so many women who have stood out in the context of an enormous struggle to get their voices heard, and to make themselves visible in the public sphere... Yet, the statistics continue to be overwhelming because they reveal a level of discrimination which shows no sign of ending, or even decreasing.

1.3. And in spite of everything...

However, I believe that the capacity for resistance and creativity which women have demonstrated in order to counteract those issues in which they have been made victims, has not been sufficiently valued. There are countless examples. It seems that women have learned that solidarity among women can become a powerful element of liberation, and there are many examples that demonstrate this. So much so that there are examples of collectives of women who made their presence felt by stepping forward in a society fraught with all kinds of injustices and violence, thus representing a seed that is both transforming and life-bearing.

I will summarise women's countless positive contributions in these three points:

First: It should be pointed out that some women occupy the public sphere under very private banners, for example on the issue of their motherhood, in which all their family ties are also included. Motherhood gives them strength to hang on to life even when it seems impossible, and to challenge the powers that be. They knock on closed doors, they cry out against a guilty silence, without allowing death

to have the last word. For example, here we should mention the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in Argentina; the group Women of Calama, in Chile; the mothers of victims of drug trafficking in Mexico and Brazil.

Second: The strength of women who unite in order to achieve justice and restore the memory of those who have passed away, or of those still living and victims of authoritarianism, repression and organised crime attracts other people, who unite with their movements, and thus brings about a sense of communion. For example, other men and women joined the Argentine mothers, who were called the "Mad Mothers" and took up their cause—including nuns who, along with the group of women were imprisoned, tortured and murdered.⁶

Third: Art and literature are powerful allies of such women since it can help them to bring their drama and pain into the public sphere. On the subject of Argentina, there are several publications, scientific and factual, as well as various films, among which is the outstanding *The Official Story* by Luis Puenzo, with Norma Aleandro in the main role, which captured an entire era.⁷ In the instance of the women of Calama, in Chile, there is an incredibly beautiful documentary by the Chilean producer Patricio Guzmán, in which he interviews some women and shows the beauty of the desert in contrast to the profound pain and courage of these women. On the women of Brazil, there are writings such as those by the journalist Eliane Brum, who interviewed several mothers of drug trafficking victims. Without forgetting the fictional films like *Elite Squad* by José Padilha.

Transforming pain into fruitful suffering, violence into a gift, and terror into poetic and artistic beauty is something that these groups of women have been able to do in our world that is so battered and impacted by violence. They show that the path of transforming reality is reached by gaining life from death, beauty from violence; this path feeds others, and nourishes people

whose bodies and hearts are wounded. It also shows that from the private sphere, to which the presence of women has been limited to for many centuries and even millennia, it is possible to move into the public sphere and have an educative and transformative impact. It is at this point that we are going to move our reflection to the transformative power of women in the Church.

2. THE APPEARANCE OF FEMINISM IN THE CHURCH

The fresh air of female emancipation in the Christian West in general and particularly in Latin America, did not initially begin in the Church. It actually emerged from the process of secularisation and from within the heart of many concrete, non-religious struggles (voting, salary, working hours, sexuality, rights over one's body). This was when women began to "escape" from the private, domestic sphere in which they found themselves confined, in order to set out upon the path to the public sphere, taking action within social structures, politics and cultural and economic activity.

The emergence and acknowledgement of women in the Christian world is no more than five decades old. After the great event that was the Second Vatican Council, the female voice began to make itself heard more, reclaiming its space within the Church and making that space effective. Whether it was by coordinating groups at different levels to question the impossibility of women having access to the priesthood, or whether it was through producing theoretical studies on religious experience

and doctrinal issues of the Christian faith from a women's perspective, the fact is that today it is not possible to think about God, revelation and faith—in other words, study theology—without taking into account the contribution that women have made. Authors such as Elizabeth Johnson and Lisa Cahill, among others in the United States; or Nuria Martínez-Gayol and Cettina Militello in Europe; or Virginia Azcuy and Ivone Gebara in Latin America, are all relevant figures when it comes

to thinking about and demonstrating the intelligence of the faith.

2.1. Beyond God the Father

In the United States, feminist theology put forward questions on the patriarchal language used in relation to God, along the lines of the anti-authoritarian and anti-paternalistic reproaches of the feminist movement in the sixties and seventies. This theological movement denounced the patriarchal understanding of God and the language that sprang from that. Feminist theological reflection thus offered a “farewell to the patriarchy”, and the mystical understanding that had given universal value to the notion of masculinity, forgetting the importance of the fact that half of humanity are women, as well as the importance of each individual in their uniqueness. In the historical and hermeneutical tradition, this practical and cognitive approach gave both weight and space to the idea that the masculine role was the better model for the human being. Thus a new feminine hermeneutical tradition came on to the theological scene, which denounced the forced notion that: “God is male, therefore the male is God”.

Beyond God the Father is the meaningful title of the work in which, at the start of the seventies, Mary Daly asserted the impossibility of reconciling Christianity with anti-patriarchalism and proclaimed the installation of a new and different religious symbolism. The father “killed” by feminism is the patriarchal model of behaviour that man identified himself with in the name of God.

Kari Elizabeth Borresen, for her part, criticised the theological anthropology of the Doctors of the Church, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, for maintaining the understanding that Western, Christian civilisation is markedly androcentric. In other words, by linking the two Biblical accounts of the Creation of humanity, the Jahwist (Gn 2:18-24) and the Priestly, a later composition (Gn 1:26-27), as if they were one and the same, creation is interpreted in the sense of a hierarchical relationship between the two sexes. The woman is created after the man, from him and for him. This implies woman’s ontological, biological and sociological dependence on man, and—worse still—the understanding that only men are theomorphic (made in the image and likeness of God). This typology, and its development in all subsequent theology, established what Borresen called “theological sexology”.

Elizabeth A. Johnson acknowledges that discussion about God shapes and directs the life not only of faith communities, but also of the entire social community. The way we talk about God is not neutral, and can have positive or negative effects on society. Patriarchal and androcentric discourse about God has led to a pervasive exclusion of women from the public sphere and a subordination of women to suit the perspective and needs of a world that is principally designed for men. Elizabeth A. Johnson maintains that in the Church, this exclusion manifests itself at every level: Church creeds, doctrines, prayers, theological and liturgical systems, spiritual directors, ideas about mission and also in the structure, leadership and practice of the Church.

2.2. Feminist theology and choices for the poor

However, even though European theologians built a system of thought that followed some American principles while differing on others, in Latin America, feminist theology had other characteristics altogether. It originated around 1968, when the Medellín Conference reinterpreted the unexpected breath of spring in the Second Vatican Council in terms of the inseparability between the Good News and the struggle for justice.

The three main conclusions drawn from Medellín were—an awareness that evangelising in Latin America must incorporate the oppression and injustice present on the continent; theological study of the faith should then be inseparable from the analysis of a reality fraught with injustice; the joining together of community groups that would understand unrest in the light of Scripture, in order to bring about a new transformative approach—new paths and doors were opened so that the development of theological discourse would begin with a new subject as the starting point: the poor and marginalised on the continent.

In the seventies then, Latin American women began to venture into new paths of theological endeavours beginning with a strong lobbying for the poor and the place for them that was opening up in the Latin American Church. In part, their eyes were fixed on their sisters in North America, who had just opened a discussion on the possibility of thinking and speaking about going “beyond God the Father” and the patriarchy that dominated theology. They saw rolling

out a theology that would include them as participants and not just as consumers, as a difficult and beautiful challenge. Nevertheless, Latin American theology from a female perspective was always inseparable from consideration for the poor, and this became an integral part of its configuration. This was how a new type of solidarity began to emerge in Latin America: with women theologians alongside poor women as its starting point. These first theologians understood themselves as being spokespeople for the poor, as well as being charged with the restoration of their rights.

As a fruit of this initiative there arose a new desire to re-examine all the great theological issues from the perspective of women. They were seeking theology with a face, a soul, from a woman’s background, and with a feminine perspective on theology, in which the importance of rediscovering female ways to express God could be rediscovered. Here began a fruitful and poignant moment with publications appearing by female theologians, whose objective was to revisit and re-examine the great treatises on dogmatic theology, even the Bible, from the point of view of their experience and feelings.

On the one hand, the theology of Latin American women saw itself as following on from North American feminist theology, without which it would not have found a path to tread to begin its journey. Nevertheless, it also had an important difference in both its form and content: it was not primarily set in motion by the struggle for equality and the antithetical battle against the patriarchy. On the contrary, it was a struggle to build an inclusive

discourse, in which the difference in being a woman formed an integral part of the theology from the outset.

The way in which this stage of the process was named avoided the word “feminism” or “feminist”, since it desired to distance itself from the protesting and antagonistic tone of the theology begun in the other continent. Preference was given to expressions such as “theology from a woman’s perspective”, “theology by women” or “theology that starts with women”.

Doctoral theses and academic works of every type also followed along the same lines. In the area of systematic theology, the relationship of Jesus with women was looked at, the maternal face of God the Father, the understanding of an inclusive Church that would view women as productive individuals offering symbolic goods and not simply as a passive consumers. A joyful and participatory Church.

This method of studying theology has continued up to today. Neither is this something that is isolated from other global theological endeavours by women. Similarities are found in terms of the background of some European theologians from the same generation, examining key concepts like reciprocity and relationality, always seeking to dialogue with their male counterparts and with the theological community as a whole. This type of theology did not align itself with this first wave of feminism, whose principal struggle was for equality, but rather with a strand of feminism that struggled to achieve another right: the right to difference and the affirmation of women as being different, and desiring to be different. This is how this form of theology—which also

discussed works by women from other areas of expertise—emphasised the identity of women as being “other”, and “distinct” from men, and that this is how women want to continue being, including in the way they think and feel about God, thus producing another form of feminist theology which understood itself as being dependent on the theological studies that had put forward a model for equality.

With the passing of time, and after the crisis that Liberation Theology went through during the pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005), it became clear to new generations of female theologians that a patchwork theology which recycled the old, without giving way to the new, which was eager to come into the light, was no longer possible. Therefore, in Feminist Theology—which no longer fears to give itself this name—it intends to formulate fundamental questions around the very structure of theological thought that has developed up to the present day. It no longer saw itself as a form of theology from the viewpoint and perspective of women, seen as an addendum to the main body of theology, or as a chapter set apart from what would be considered official theology, which male theologians had considered it to be up to this point, but rather a form of theology that questioned the dominant, patriarchal and masculine-centred body of theology as a whole.

2.3. Broadening Liberation Theology

In this way, female Latin American theologians were ready to dialogue with

other female authors who had dedicated themselves to finding new ways of working with the Bible, Revelation and dogma. Above all, they followed in the steps of what had been their primary allegiance—Liberation Theology (TdL).⁸ As much as TdL had spread its focus of interests into other themes which were more than just social, economic and political, and began to work on issues such as ecology, culture, the crisis of modernity, gender, race and ethnicity, feminist Latin American theology finds in the gender perspective, an angle that is more than adequate from which to construct their reflection and discourse. In other words, it did not lose sight of the importance of including those who are at the margins of society and progress at all. On the contrary, the issue continues, perhaps more than ever, to challenge and question theology. The poor, who had been the theological subjects par excellence in Latin American theology during the seventies and eighties, are now joined by those people identified as the “excluded”. Yet this latter group, “excluded” from all the benefits that progress has brought to people’s wellbeing, are now more diverse than ever, and form a mosaic of much greater richness and complexity which, for its part, challenges theology on a number of levels.

Ivone Gebara, one of the great trailblazers responsible for many developments in theology during this new stage, asserts that “Liberation Theology, offering a collective vision of God and emphasising the social nature of sin, did not change the patriarchal anthropology and cosmology on which Christianity is based”. By this, we understand that the author wants

the struggle for social, economic and political liberation to encompass other groups of excluded people who were equally in need of liberation, which TdL had claimed to be working with, but which were however not included or reached, such as for example, oppressed women, those excluded due to their gender, as well as others excluded due to their race or ethnicity.

Therefore, a new step was necessary, a leap in a new direction, in order to achieve this liberation that half of humanity was waiting for. This is how Ivone Gebara defined the leap that feminist theology needed to make: “to speak of God and of the gender issue is to make a double claim: first it is to say that what we say about God is connected to our historical experience, our life experience; then, that our same idea of God, and our relationship with him/her or his/her mystery, is marked by what we call... social and cultural construction of gender”.

This is how other feminist struggles, so present in Western theology and Latin America in the field of social and human sciences, became equally interesting to female theologians. Issues such as corporeality, sexuality, morality, with all its sensitive and delicate questions on reproductive rights and all that concerns Christian morality in relation to the mystery of the human body, (its function, its vocation, its mystery created by God), went on to make up the agenda of Latin American feminist theology. In this area, we must acknowledge that Protestant theologians made greater steps than Catholic ones, mainly due to the different ecclesiastical structure which frames theological study in both these Churches.

2.4. Ecofeminist theology

We should also point out the work in the area of ecofeminist theology, which spread through the entire continent.⁹ The openness and attention given to this new interdisciplinary area of reflection allowed feminist Latin American theology to dialogue with areas of environmental reflection; that would include, philosophy, social sciences, environmental law, etc. This is an area which will undoubtedly grow significantly in the future.

Any reflection on ecology in relation to land rights and nature, goes

hand in hand with reflection on the rights of women as a form of oppression that is still current in society and in the Church. In as far as ecofeminism aims to see the end of all forms of domination, theology cannot be left out of this aim either. Least of all, feminist theology, which continues to be the key to freedom from all forms of oppression and the struggle for rights of those who are not accorded respect. Among the questions raised in this new moment of theological thought about women, the issue of the body is a central one.

3. CHRISTIANITY AND THE FEMALE BODY

In the field of theology, theological reflection on a woman's body will always be an important theme for feminist theology and gender studies. In a universe in which the body is so visible and overwhelmingly represented by males, women enter as a disturbing element. This "disturbance" mainly occurs, through their corporeality, on being "other" than man, and this expresses their experience of God, since women think and talk about God in a different and unique way. The feminine body represents the possible path by which women can make important contributions in the realm of spirituality, mysticism and theology. This body has also many times been a source of discrimination by which women have suffered and continue to suffer in the Church.

Theological reflection on this issue highlights that one of the biggest sources of discrimination against women within the Church is linked to something more profound and much more serious than simply physical strength, intellectual formation or the ability to work. The Church is still very patriarchal, and patriarchalism underlines the superiority of man, not only by an intellectual or physical bias, but also by what we will call "an ontological bias". In other words, women are oppressed by their own physical constitution, something that is not exclusive

to Christianity, but also seen in many other religions.

3.1. A body under suspicion

A major aspect of this corporeal discrimination is seen in the fact that there is a very strong association—at a theological level—with the fact that woman is considered as being responsible for the entrance of sin in the world, and subsequently death which was a consequence of that sin. This issue, which was officially denounced by Pope John

Paul II in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, remains largely at the basis of the situation of women in the Church. This is why the mystical experiences of several women were many times viewed with mistrust and suspicion, under the punishing and strict vigilance of men who were responsible for controlling them and even exorcising them. Several rich mystical experiences of women who were genuinely chosen by God for private spiritual communications were ignored against a background in which the responsibility was in the hands of a few, and where cases like that of St. Teresa of Avila, are merely exceptions that confirm the rule.

Throughout the history of the Church, women were kept at a safe distance from the sacred and everything that surrounded it, such as the liturgy and objects and places associated with ritual, and from direct mediation with God. All of this would clearly require a “pure” body, and the mistrust surrounding whether women really possess that is enormous. In spite of all the advances and progress in relation to the participation of women at several levels of ecclesial life, the stigma of the fear-inspiring seductress, the source of sin against the chastity of men and the celibacy of the clergy, remains. As for women and the mystery within the Church, it is difficult and rare to find and authenticate a symphony in terms of the “high” mysticism of the deepest experiences of God, leaving women relegated to the area of lesser devotions.

This realisation is quite terrible and demands serious study within the heart of the Church. If it is possible to struggle against intellectual discrimination

(by accessing study and education), against professional injustice (by trying to show one’s ability and specialist knowledge), what can be done about our own body? Do we have to deny it? Escape it? Ignore our beautiful difference?

3.2. Fertility, sexuality, openness...

Julia Kristeva, who is not a theologian, and not much of a Christian or believer either, offers us a route where the fertility which characterises a woman is valued and seen as inseparable from her sexuality. Furthermore, she does not look at this solely from a philosophical, sociological or psychoanalytical point of view, which is her area of speciality, but rather from the point of view of the arts and mystical literature. She asserts that women have a beauty and a power which comes from her fertility: “Women have always had an intimate and cyclical understanding of beauty, renewed by every living thing, since they carry life through their fertility”. In this sense, female corporeality accompanies nature and its cycles, its vitality, its explosion of life and otherness.

Kristeva also reflects upon something which characterises the female body: its openness to life, which also represents its openness to infinity. This meaning is also understood in the Hebrew word *nekeva* which means ‘receptacle’, ‘open space’, ‘interior’. Feminine corporeality which is open, receptive, open to fertility and to the loving welcome of the other is something which profoundly intrigued the

Bulgarian French thinker and drew her to reflect upon women and the feminine. From a theological perspective, her writings challenge us then to look at what Scripture says on the subject, the very source of Revelation.

The term *neqēbāh* (*nekeva*) must be used with sensitivity to refer to women, although the official word in the singular is *'iššāh* (*ischa*).¹⁰ The big difference is that the first term is used more to refer to females of the animal species, though it can also be used with humans, in the same way as male and female are used. In the Pentateuch, particularly the priestly tradition, this term is preferred in order to emphasise the reproductive aspect of the difference between genders. Biblical glossaries, in general, identify *nekeva* in order to explain how the female is “open” to life. In short then, *nekeva* refers to the female of the species in both humans and animals.

From this point, Kristeva challenges, and from our perspective, inspires theology to defend the importance of the openness to fertility of the female body, as well as maternal love being a source of discourse that should not be lost, yet which finds itself somewhat ignored in Western culture. It is this maternal love which moulds and makes up the human person. This is why the image of the pregnant woman is so fascinating in the West, and more specifically, the image of the “Anunziata” who hears the words of the archangel Gabriel and feels within her body the growth of the as yet “unborn”, that already inspires a flush of love within her. The *nekeva*, open to life, now has her womb filled with another, by the other life, by the life of another, who now forms a bond of unity with her.

From this observation, theology can examine the repercussions which go as far as evoking a transcendent experience and religious feeling.

In the current period of civilisation in which we live, the maternal love of the *Genitrix* becomes the prototype for this bond of love. Maternity is not the fate or the only biological destiny of women. Neither is it an inconvenient burden that gets in the way of personal development. Yet the fertility and “perforation” of the female body becomes a perpetual opportunity to live in love and keep oneself open to the other.

Kristeva has much criticism for how modern society and the culture of our times offers little attention to motherhood in terms of its potential worldview. If only the biological and social aspects are valued, along with sexual equality and freedom, we will be “the first civilisation to show a complete lack of awareness of the complexity of the vocation of motherhood”.

This awareness should not be lost because it has the capacity to provide people with a maturity that is capable of facing up to any situation, because it is based on a love that is greater than any other power. A love that welcomes, receives, hosts, and is not narcissistic or male-dominated, but instead marked by the notion of gift and sublimation, which makes another life possible, and brings creativity into a world of plural singularities.

3.3. Another perspective on Mary

This is why one of the elements of the Christian faith which deeply troubles a woman like Kristeva—and which

should never be swept under the rug when thinking about feminism in a Christian light—is Mariology, or the mystery of Mary, the mother of Jesus. According to Kristeva, in Marian dogma, there are deep-seated reasons as to why the Church should look at Mary in a different light—one of reflection and depth—and not just in the light of devotions and popular piety. She clearly demonstrates the symbolic force of the mother of Jesus. The numerous Marian sanctuaries which exist throughout the world, attract millions of devotees, more than any other sites of interest.

Kristeva goes further: she states that, in the last instance, Christianity was founded on the feminine. Jesus, the Incarnate Son of God, is “born of a woman”. Furthermore, Kristeva, somewhere between being a critic and an admirer, while remembering her birthplace of Bulgaria and the Catholic and orthodox faith of her beloved father, states: “Christ, the Son of Man, is only made human by being born of a mother”. However, once she arrives at this point, her emphasis clashes with the intention of the dogma, which is to separate Mary from the human race by sparing her from sin. Here, Kristeva shares one of the greatest difficulties of women—even Catholic women and perhaps above all, the most educated and intellectual women—without being afraid to include it in her reflection.

She goes on to highlight the fact that Mary does not possess two constitutive elements of humanity: sexuality, since she remains a virgin, and death, given that the Christian tradition states that she did not die but “fell asleep”. Marian piety, particularly in the Eastern tradition, proclaims the *dormitio*

Maria. The Catholic faith understands that she was “assumed” into Heaven body and soul, where death held no dominion over her.

Death being connected to sin has been the bane and source of discrimination for generations of women who carry it like a burden, since they are descended from Eve, who introduced sin into the world. Mary is Immaculate, without sin and therefore, death has no power over her. This belongs more to the Christian spiritual tradition than to the Gospels, who were very subdued in this respect and very discreet when it came to references to episodes in the Infancy of Jesus and His public life in which the Mother of Jesus is present. Other contemporary theologians have thought very deeply on the mystery of Mary, identifying her as our sister in the communion of saints.

However, for Kristeva, major importance lies in the relationship of Mary with her son Jesus, since she comes before Him in her humanity, but after Him in her divinity, being simultaneously a virgin and mother. This is how she becomes the mediator through a network of other rich and complex relationships: between God and humanity, man and woman, and son and mother, etc.

In this Mariological reading, there are undoubtedly many dangers in reflecting on feminine and maternal corporeality, which throughout history, has submitted women—who are perhaps not immaculate, or virgins or mothers, or who have very human sons, who when they precede their mothers in death, cause a pain that is worse than any other—to terrible manipulation and discrimination. Never-

theless, we can agree with Kristeva in that, after the Virgin, with the sweeping effects of secularisation in Western thought, the issue of motherhood is still missing from topical discourse. This is necessary, given that one of the trans-

formative elements which women can bring to the world and to the Church today is that of motherhood—not necessarily biological—which is brought about through feminine corporeality, and its eucharistic symbolism.

4. THE FEMININE BODY: EUCHARISTIC BODY

With the emergence of women in public and ecclesial spheres, we can see that they have introduced a new way of living the experience of God and reflecting upon it, developing new aspects of Christian spirituality, which enrich the entire faith community.

As women, we experience and talk about our spiritual lives in a way that is inseparable from our bodies. We make our own corporeality visible when we speak about the mystery of God, introducing something new into the understanding of the spiritual life and the action of the Holy Spirit in the world. Furthermore, this same mystery of God, which affects and makes up the sexual corporeality of women, reveals other aspects of their identity that brings an inestimable contribution to the People of God.

One of the most important contributions is—it seems to us—the eucharistic dimension of the female body. Through their own body, women can

evoke and communicate spiritual experiences which are often more difficult for men to express. For example, we could refer to the understanding of being the Bride of Christ, of living a spiritual matrimony, or of the central experience of bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and giving new life to the Word made flesh, and thus renewing the mystery of the Incarnation in the world.

It is clear that, in the history of Christianity, many men have also lived this experience in a profound and beautiful way. Men often appear on the scene who have liberated their so-called feminine side, or their “spirit”, in relation to God. Many of these mys-

tics and spiritual directors have used a variety of linguistic and metaphorical resources in order to describe the human being as the interlocutor with God, for example the word “soul”, which is a rather feminine word; or the description of suckling at the breast of God, etc.

However, in spite of the fact that the experience of God in all its beauty and radicality offers itself to every human creature, there are some elements of the female body which evoke this even moreso, alongside other particularly powerful symbolical analogies. For example, there is an aspect of Christian life in which women emerge as privileged subjects: the identification of their corporeality with the sacrament of the Eucharist. There are specific expressions which are used in a sacramental context, terms such as “transubstantiation” and “real presence”, which refer to the Body and Blood of Christ, under the species of bread and wine, and are given to the people as real food and real drink. It seems that this becomes constitutively possible in the female body.

4.1. Bread broken and shared

Feeding others with one’s own body is the supreme way in which God Himself has chosen in order to be really and truly present among His people. The bread that we break and share, that we confess as the Body and Blood of Christ, refers us to the great mystery of His Incarnation, death and Resurrection. It is His body given in food; His corporeal life becomes the source of life for Christians.

On an anthropological level, women are those in whose corporeality there exists the physical possibility of understanding and carrying out the divine eucharistic action. During the whole process of pregnancy, childbirth, protecting and nourishing the new life, we have the sacrament of the Eucharist, the quintessential divine act, which is offered time and again.

Some could see here a clear call to continue with a discussion on the future of ordination for women, but this is not our intention at this time. What we are trying to say is that, perhaps due to their eucharistic vocation expressed through their bodies, women are called to reinvent and recreate, within the People of God, new ways of living out service and viewing the ordained, traditional ministry that has existed up to this point.

4.2. A God that nourishes like a mother

The feminine body, a source of so much suspicion and prejudice throughout history, is a powerfully illuminating and inspiring path for sacramental theology to take in these changing and shifting times, given that new models are now put forward that go beyond the ever present questions of gender. For example, for some time now, the image of God as a mother that nourishes and feeds her children with the milk from her breast is latent within the spiritual and mystical tradition of the Church.

This symbolical and theological aspect of women’s bodies is not just relevant at a personal level, but also

has community-wide and political implications too. The very fact of having a body that possesses eucharistic symbolism gives meaning to the actions of women, and on many occasions, their effective public influence. Even when their most private capabilities are exposed in the public sphere, such as the capacity to give birth, and all related aspects of motherhood, the female body can make an ethical and political impact of great importance. This was particularly clear in the cases we mentioned earlier of the mothers in Argentina, Chile, Brazil...

4.3. Craftswomen of the future

The Body and Blood of Jesus Christ are the food for the people, but the ultimate source of this food is the Father who delivers His Son so that the people will have no more hunger or sorrow, but will be nourished and full of life. Therefore, if children symbolise humanity, who with a burning desire, turn to their Creator begging for the bread of life, human beings, and particularly women who nurse children are bearing the great—and undoubtedly painful—responsibility of bringing into existence new human generations. They are the artisans of the future and responsible for the continuity of life in the most profound sense. That is why the real significance of the physical capability of women to nurse with their breast is an issue of extreme vulnerability and at the same time, one of profound beauty. On the other hand, it is something which points to their potential for compassion and to methods of political and ethical action which

are not merely private. We believe that this is true not just biologically for those women who are biological mothers and who have lived the experience of pregnancy, childbirth and breast-feeding, but also for those women who experience this symbolically.

The whole drama of salvation is present in the words and actions of Jesus: “Take and eat. This is my body... This is my blood... Given up for you”, (Mt 26,26). These words remain present and active in the corporeality of women. The female body, which brings forth other lives and affects the lives of others, which offers itself as nourishment with its body and blood given to the lives it has borne, is the same body which is exhausted and dies while ploughing the earth, working in factories and homes, making casseroles and cleaning floors, spinning, knitting, sewing and washing clothes, organising meetings, leading struggles and chants. This is the woman’s body, eucharistically given for the lives of others, really and physically distributed, food and drink for those who—like the men and women of tomorrow—will continue the same struggle of patience and resistance, pain and courage, happiness and joy, life and death.

4.4. Act of surrender and love

Breaking the bread and sharing it, being in communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord until He comes again, means for the women of today, even in the midst of the most negative and miserable situations, to act as symbols in society and in the community of believers of the divine act of surrender

and love, in such a way that the people can grow, and the fullness of life can be celebrated in the true and final act of liberation.

Women all around the world share this same sacramental vocation with all

their sisters, the same eucharistic destiny, called to open up new pathways, a potential future, in such a way that this sacramental act can gradually become a real presence, acknowledged, believed, valued and lived.

5. THE TRANSFORMING POWER OF FEMALE MYSTICISM

The transformation of the world and of the Church by women will happen then, through the inbuilt capacity of women to want to give themselves, surrender themselves and bring life to others. This desire was part of the vocation of many women mystics who lived and died eucharistically, and who reflected on this and wrote about it. Reading the works of Teresa of Ávila, Catherine of Siena, and little Thérèse of the Child Jesus... we can find several examples of what we have asserted here.

There are so many other anonymous women who did not leave us their reflections on their experiences in writing, but what these women wrote—that is, the mystics—can help to illuminate and strengthen what these other women live and experience. I will therefore look at two mystics of the twentieth century, not Latin American ones, rather European women who were Jewish, and who had an encounter with God outside of Christianity.

5.1. Simone Weil

A philosopher and a mystic, this woman never experienced motherhood in

the biological sense. At the end of her short life of 34 years, exiled in London, she burned with desire to give her body eucharistically to nourish others, entering into occupied France in order to fulfil a dangerous mission. She believed that true sanctity brings with it a desire to surrender one's own body and life in order to provide for all the hungry and needy in the world: "This is a spiritual death, which also has a corporeal sense. Man gives himself in order to nourish God's creatures". If God is the only true and real food desired in the world by humanity, then those who are full of God need to feed others by offering their body and their very life.

In spite of never having received Communion—because she did not agree to be baptised until the moment of her death—Simone Weil was deeply in love with the Eucharist and developed a coherent eucharistic mysticism with an impressive radicalism that affected her whole life. Today, one of the greatest experts on her work, the French philosopher Emmanuel Gabelieri, said that this Weilian eucharistic mysticism is unparalleled in the history of Christianity, inspired by Catherine of Siena, whose writings she read in Marseille together with the French Dominican priest Joseph Marie Perrin.

Weil always sought to offer this radical gift of self through real life. Besides this, she did not believe it was enough to offer just her intellectual capacity and energy. She needed to feel in her body the mark of pain and sacrifice. During the year in which she worked on a factory floor, she offered her body up to the hardship and the pain of the heavy workload associated with the metallurgical ovens to the point of feeling branded with the mark of slavery. This experience consumed her youth and left her permanently marked by the sign of the cross. Furthermore, this experience was created out of a desire to be near other factory workers, to share their lives, their anxieties, their fatigue, their hopes, in order to, from that point onwards, look at her own situation and find ways that could transform the oppressive conditions of the workforce of her day.

The same thing happened with her work in the field, where she felt an intense spiritual consolation along with her physical tiredness, which she felt during her placement spent harvesting on the

farm of the Catholic writer Gustave Thibon, near Marseille. She explains these feelings in clearly eucharistic terms: “The tiredness of my body and soul is transformed into food for a people that are hungry”. She continues: “We should seek to be transported into Christ, and Christ into us. We ask that God transform our flesh into the flesh of Christ in such a way that we may become food for all those who are afflicted”. And even after that: “If the work of cultivating the land makes me lose weight, my body will really become a seed. If that grain then becomes a communion host, then my body will become the Body of Christ. Whoever works the land with this intention will become a saint”.

During this time, Simone Weil often spoke with the Dominican priest Fr. Perrin and he often welcomed her to the church on Sundays in Marseille, where she would spend hours contemplating the Blessed Sacrament. It is interesting to note that, working in the fields, she experienced the same mystery that she adored on the altar. This is what she wrote to Perrin: “My heart is transported forever, to the Blessed Sacrament exposed on the altar”. Here there is not simply adoration or spiritual love for the Eucharist, but rather a real identification that was built into her person and her life with this Sacrament and everything it implied.

This clearly explains the strong desire that Weil had to give her life, to offer it in the war, a desire which invaded her and tormented her up until her final moments. She felt called to this and the fact that she couldn't fulfil her wish—General de Gaulle, head of the French Resistance, did not allow her to enter into occupied France—brought

her to the edge of desperation. She felt that her life, which was slipping away, would only have meaning within this ideal gift, if she offered her life for the victims of war. Among her final writings, there is one example that represents the culmination of her eucharistic mysticism, the so-called “crazy prayer” [“La folle prière”], whose radical nature has very few precedents in the history of Christian mysticism. It is worth quoting, despite its length, because of the importance of the message it contains:

Father, in the name of Christ, grant me this.

That this body will move or not move, with perfect flexibility or rigidity, in uninterrupted accordance with your will. That this hearing, this sight, this taste, this sense of smell, this touch, may perfectly receive the exact imprint of your creation. That this intelligence, in the fullness of its sanity, will foster ideas in perfect conformity with your will. Let this sensibility feel in their greatest possible intensity and in all their purity all the shades of pain and joy. Let this love be a completely devouring flame of God’s love for God. Let all this be uprooted from me, devoured by God, transformed into the substance of Christ and given to eat to sufferers who lack all forms of nourishment in soul and body.

Father, let this transformation happen now, in the name of Christ. And although I ask it with imperfect faith, answer this request as if it were pronounced with perfect faith.

Father, since you are the Good and I am only mediocre, rend this

body and soul from me to make them yours, and let nothing remain of me, forever, except this rending itself, or else nothingness.

5.2. Etty Hillesum

A young Jewish lady of 27, trained in law and psychology, at the start of the forties and in the middle of the rise of the Nazis, lived a free life in Amsterdam working as a housekeeper and partner of a 62 year old man. One day she met Julius Spier, a disciple of Jung, and she became his intellectual comrade and lover. Spier, Jewish and a man of faith, showed her the path of prayer. On opening herself up to prayer, Etty began to have strong and powerful mystical experiences, which she wrote about in the diaries and letters she left behind. She wrote less than Simone Weil and her writings have not been discussed as much as those of Weil, given that Etty did not consider herself to be an intellectual. Although she was initially an agnostic, she encountered the God of Israel with a great depth and her life became marked by her interior experiences. The richness of these experiences allowed her to feel relative peace and happiness in the midst of the horrors of Nazism.

This interior life led her to make the decision not to escape from the concentration camp or from deportation, so much so that she voluntarily presented herself at the camp of Westerbork, in order to “help God and save His people”. In Westerbork—a selection camp, the antechamber before the final solution of Auschwitz—she became “the thinking heart of the barracks... The thinking

heart of the whole concentration camp”. Her old soul, heir of a long and precious spiritual tradition, found its maximum expression there. Surrendering wholeheartedly to the service of her people, her desire to give of herself grew incessantly and she expressed it in terms that remind us of little St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus.¹¹ Westerbork, a microcosm from which her compassionate heart and her desire to give reached the limits of the universe, was hardly enough for her. On October 2nd 1942 she writes: “...I would have liked to be in every camp of Europe [...] I don’t care for my own security, I want, in each place, to be a small parcel of fraternity with those we call our enemies. I want to understand all that happens, and I would like to pass on to everyone I can reach—and I know they are numerous—my way of seeing the world”.

Spiritually free as she had always been, she did not hesitate to use more Christian terminology—eucharistic phrases, in fact—in order to express

her desires at the end of her last diary, dated October 12th 1942: “I broke my body like bread and shared it [...] And why not?, they were hungry and had gone without for so long...”. And she finishes her diary with the following words: “ I wanted to be a balm for all wounds”. From that point onwards, she would only write a few letters to the friends she left behind, and she dedicated herself to pouring out that love that filled her breast upon all of those who were suffering in the camp and later, in the move to Auschwitz and the extermination camp.

The testimony of Etty Hillesum resonates today with great eloquence among our contemporaries. Educated under the freedom of the Spirit who breathes where He will, it teaches us to focus on the God discovered in our interior self in order to be able to face the adversities of reality and compassionately take care of the pain of the most vulnerable, in order to make it ours and “help God” in His plan of redemption.

CONCLUSION

These two women alone demonstrate through their experience what we have been reflecting on over the course of these pages. Their spiritual experience did not paralyse or alienate them, on the contrary: it drove them to respond to the pressing issues and challenges of their time with a creativity that only the Spirit can offer.

They were free and fully conscious women in whose lives can be seen the beginnings of the feminist movement *avant la lettre*. However, they also allowed themselves to be moved by the will of God and compassion for their fellow human beings. This is how they moved beyond feminism and whatever other current of thought or ideology, since the transformation they experienced came about through the Spirit of God that breathes where He will.

Paradoxically, their surrender and reflection bear testimony to the future, since they open up pathways beyond humanity, towards which humanity

can move to obtain its complete and absolute humanisation. The mothers of Calama were also symbols of life, as were the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and those in the slums of Río, walking together along the Way of the Cross towards the joy of Easter. This is the vocation of every woman and points to the great contribution that women can bring through their openness to life: believing more in life than in death, and not being afraid to give their life for this to happen; inhabiting their perforated and wounded bodies, so there can be life for all in this violent world, threatened with destruction and full of challenges.

1. There are controversies over what is understood by the *First wave of feminism*. According to the chronology of European studies, feminism originated during the Enlightenment, considering that it was during the Enlightenment when the polemic on the nature of women and the hierarchy of the sexes, also known as the *feminist polemic*, first emerged in different terminology to previous centuries. Feminism appeared as a new critical discourse which specifically used the themes of philosophy of the time, from authors like Rousseau, among others. According to some American studies, the first wave refers to the feminist movement that developed in the U.K. and the U.S. during the nineteenth century and the start of the twentieth century. European chronology refers instead to a second wave, also known as *liberal suffragette feminism*, centred on the right of suffrage and education. In this text, we follow the American naming conventions, considering them to be the most direct influence on the emergence of women in the modern world. Cf. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First-wave_feminism. Accessed: 16th January 2020.
2. Feminist theory is an extension of the feminist movement—which has emerged alongside the practical demands which have been championed to obtain equal rights for men and women—in theoretical, social and philosophical discourse. This school of thought is focused on understanding the nature of gender inequality, its roots and development. It is studied in a variety of fields, thus becoming a multidisciplinary school of thought. Cf. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feminism>. Accessed: 16th January 2020.
3. Feminist theology is a theological school of thought that seeks firstly, more space for women in religion and in the Church. On the other hand, it re-examines the macho worldview and language used in relation to God and the concepts of theological thought, as well as the moral and doctrinal body of institutionalised religions.
4. The American thinker, Diane Pearce, introduces this concept in her article published in 1978. For her, the feminisation of poverty is a process which develops when women who lack the support of their husband or partner must take on the responsibility to provide for the health and wellbeing of their children.
5. Atlas of Literacy of the UIS of UNESCO.
6. TEMPORELLI, Clara Maria (2016). *Friends of God, prophets of the people*. Barcelona: Cristianisme i Justícia, Booklet no. 163.
7. *The Official Story* (1985) is an Argentinian historico-dramatical film directed by Luis Puenzo starring Norma Aleandro, Héctor Alterio, Chunchuna Villafañe and Hugo Arana. The script is by Puenzo and Aída Bortnik. The film won several national and international awards, among them in 1986, the Oscar for best foreign language film—for the first time in the history of the country, while the second was *The secret in their eyes*—and the Golden Globe for the best foreign language film for Argentina, the second ever, after it was previously won by *La mujer de las camelias*. It is the only Argentinian film to have won both awards.
8. We risk leaving this interpretation here, making it clear that this is our reading of the facts. It does not necessarily imply there is a broad consensus among the theological community on the process of feminist theology.
9. *Ecofeminism* is a term that was originally “created” in 1974 by Françoise d’Eaubonne, a French feminist, and it symbolises the synthesis of environmentalism (or ecology) and feminism. Later it was applied to the roots of the

Chipko Movement in India and to the Women's Pentagon Action in the U.S. This school of thought seeks the end of all kinds of oppression, including racial, gender, and social discrimination, whether it be against women, children, youth, other races. Different strands of ecofeminism can be identified according to the emphasis they put on the reasons for different types of domination, whether they be historical, symbolic, incidental, literary, political, religious, ethnic..., and they also seek to achieve a coexistence that does not involve a dominator or dominated people, in which there is complementarity without exploitation.

10. The term *zākār* (*zakar*) means 'macho' and the phrase *neqēbāh* (*nekevah*) means 'female'.
11. "I would like to travel over the whole earth to preach Your Name and to plant Your glorious Cross on infidel soil. But O my Beloved, one mission alone would not be sufficient for me. I would want to preach the Gospel on all five continents simultaneously and even to the most remote isles. I would be a missionary, not for a few years only but from the beginning of creation until the consummation of the ages...". DE LISIEUX, Thérèse (2017). "Manuscrito autobiográfico" in the *Obras completas*, Madrid: BAC, p. 228.

Cristianisme i Justícia (Lluís Espinal Foundation) is a study center that was created in Barcelona in 1981. It brings together a team of volunteer scholars and activists who desire to promote social and theological reflection that will contribute to the transformation of social and ecclesial structures. It is part of the network of Faith-Culture-Justice centers of Spain and also of the European Social Centers of the Society of Jesus.

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