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“On Being A Catholic Feminist”

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U.S. Catholic women growing up at the time of the Second Vatican Council have a different experience of Catholicism and society than that of young adults today. While Vatican II women have strong roots in a cohesive Church, they also came of age in a more repressive society and in a religious community with separate, hierarchical gender roles. While these two groups of women have different experiences of sexuality, gender, and the home-work conflict, they can share a feminism based on Catholicism’s strong traditional commitment to social justice and to a sacramental understanding of faith, reappropriated for a newly global and participatory Church.

I am a Catholic and a feminist, and a member of the generation of Catholic women that not only lived through the Second Vatican Council, but are old enough to remember it (and young enough not to have forgotten yet). Catholicism and feminism both have distinctive meanings for women like me, meanings that are closely tied to our formative experiences. What does my experience have in common (or not) with that of younger women, women of different socioeconomic or racial backgrounds, or women around the globe? Is being a Catholic feminist easier than it was in the 1960’s and 70’s—or harder?

Let us explore together both the difficulties and possibilities of Catholic feminism today. I will lay the groundwork in four phases.¹ First, I want to “set the stage” by telling you my own “story.” My story is not intrinsically all that interesting and it is certainly not unique. Yet in its very ordinariness, it may help us understand why there is a sort of “generation gap” in the Catholic feminist project today. Second, I will offer some more specific examples from today’s context, showing both the hard parts and the

strong parts of Catholic tradition in relation to roles of women. Third, I will briefly offer resources for feminist theology in some distinctively Catholic theological emphases (incarnation, sacramentality, embodiment, and social justice), though with two caveats. On the one hand, there are many more theological topics that could be fruitfully discussed in relation to feminist theology; on the other, even these touch points cannot be mentioned uncritically. Fourth and finally, I will consider some of the special challenges that globalization and a “world church” present to Catholic feminism.

One Woman’s Story

As I mentioned, I am a “relic” from before the era of Vatican II. That was a time before “globalization” was a buzzword, and before North American Catholics were all that conscious of non-Western Catholic traditions. It was also a time before women even expected to claim real equality with men. Just as I took sex stereotypes for granted, it did not even occur to me as a girl to question why the priest was always a man; why nuns inhabited a separate environment, wore long black robes, and appeared to be hairless; or why we were encouraged to choose our confirmation names from a seemingly endless list of youths who choose a gory death rather than lose their virginity.

My childhood in the 1950's and early 60's is suffused with memories of Catholic piety and practices which were at once parochial, romantic, prayerful, stifling, uplifting, fear-inducing, identity-forming, spiritual, hopeful and sexist. I can remember my Dad's love for the sisters who taught him in grade school in Michigan and by his account consistently outsmarted his shenanigans. I can remember my Dad taking us into church on All Saints' Day, so that we might offer magical prayers that would suddenly (and on that day only) release my grandparents from the torments of purgatory. I can remember

having holy water fonts full of (diluted) Lourdes water in our bedrooms. I remember being in Rome, about nine years old, pressed in throngs of people in St. Peter's who craned for a glimpse of Pius XII being carried about on a gilt chair. I can remember Mass in Latin and CYO dances. I can remember parading with the other eighth-grade girls, dressed in white, to crown the Virgin Mary.

I can remember the class being called up to sister's desk one by one after we had taken a career aptitude desk, and her strained smile as she read off the testing service's first career choice for me ("priest or minister"), and quickly moved on to the second ("volunteer or social worker"). I can remember my convert mother's stiffness in and around Catholic religious services, the baby brother who lived a few hours (my parents had been advised by doctors to use birth control), and my mother's increasing hostility toward Catholic moral teachings and trappings of just about any sort. But I also remember that she kept in her room a crucifix and a small bust of Mary handed down from her own "fallen away" mother.

All this is background to my personal experience of the Second Vatican Council. I attended the Sisters' of Mercy Holy Trinity High School in Washington, D.C., from 1962 to 1966, years roughly coinciding with the Council. One of my most vivid memories is listening with rapt attention as my senior year theology teacher conveyed to us the contents and significance of the almost daily bulletins from Rome, extensively covered by both religious and secular news media. Granting that my memory forty years later is highly selective and occasionally inventive, and that many events and details are recollected as having a significance that they could only have acquired later, I still look

back on those years as emblematic of the situation of Catholic women "then" and "now," and the changes that both connect and disconnect the past and the present.

It is often said that single-sex education is a good seedbed for the self-confidence of young women, and I believe that was generally true in my case and in that of most of my schoolmates at Holy Trinity. It was a small school; most members of our graduating class of about 25 are still in touch. My teachers reflected in microcosm many blessings, tensions and revolutions in Catholic women's experience of the time. Sisters Perpetua and Joseph taught us math and science, respectively; some of us may have had difficulties with the subject matter, but we never believed it due to a design flaw in the female brain. Sr. Mary Nivard took an interest in me as a shy freshman, and left a pastel statue of the Virgin Mary in my locker. I heard she now works in AIDS ministry. Sr. Mary Frederick, our lively English and drama teacher, later married a young priest assigned to the adjoining parish. They are both active in CORPUS, an association of former priests and activists for change in Church rules mandating clerical celibacy. A few years ago, after I had given a lecture on feminist theology in a series sponsored by the Mercy sisters and Jesuit Spring Hill College in Mobile, Sr. Rosalie, who taught Spanish and was from Alabama, wrote to me to tell me she is proud of my work. I understand she now works with the sick and dying.

Our theology instructor in senior year was Lucy Denise, a young lay woman studying for a master's degree in theology from a Catholic women's college, Dunbarton College of the Holy Cross. Although I think few of us were even aware of the term "feminism," Miss Denise provided an alternative to the reigning expectations for girls like us. Engaged to be married and a paragon of style in the eyes of her fascinated

charges, she also sought an advanced degree in an area of study considered almost exclusively a male preserve. Her enthusiasm for the Council and a message of lay empowerment fairly flowed from her coverage of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes). Miss Denise's very presence signified the seismic shifts that were taking place not far below the surface of the Catholic culture of the day.

I appreciate the paradoxical complexity that probably accompanies every paradigm shift when I recall that in my senior year I lived in an Opus Dei residence for women, recommended by my high school principal to my parents, whom an employment change took out of state. In 1965, Opus Dei piety did not seem closed, elitist or bizarre; a lot of Catholics acted as if they belonged to a secret society.²

I graduated from the University of Santa Clara in 1970. The Second Vatican Council was over but the Vietnam War was still well underway. It was a time of transformation in the Catholic Church, struggling to catch up with seismic readjustments in the mid-century social terrain. Two great evolutions in American society and the Church were, as I look back, especially important in forming the person and scholar I was to become. The first was a skeptical attitude toward authority in general, especially as embodied in representatives of church and state; the second was the emergence of women into all kinds of new roles in church and society. For Catholics, the emergence of "women's liberation" and Christian feminism was a piece of a bigger movement of the laity in general into roles of influence and authority in the Church. Unfortunately I do not remember being taught by even one female theology instructor at Santa Clara in the sixties, a situation that has been rectified magnificently in the Santa Clara of today. The

renewal of lay participation in Catholicism may have begun with Pope John XXIII's personal commitments and style, but it soon spun into amazing changes in popular piety, liturgy, theology, and religious education. A new generation was being prepared for a much more active role in Church life and a more energetic engagement with secular culture than could possibly have been imagined only a decade before.

The Catholic faith was being energized in a way that has sustained me through my own doctoral studies at the University of Chicago (in the company of many Jesuit priests, I might add—another novel situation for Catholic women), and then almost three decades of research and teaching at my permanent vocational home, Boston College—a sister Jesuit university in whose mission I am proud to share.

As a woman who grew up largely before the Council, I remain indelibly marked by the role expectations that went with the territory (wife and mother, and in a prescribed mode). This has even affected my theological vocation. My “field” of sex, gender and marriage was “assigned” to me more by opportunity more than by choice. (In grad school I had concentrated on ecumenical theology and on bioethics, but it turned out that young married women moral theologians were in demand to write about the sexual controversies occupying Catholics in the ‘seventies.) Ultimately, I benefited from and thrived in the liberation of Catholic women now praised, if within limits, by the pope himself. My vocations as wife, mother, theologian, and professor are combined and intertwined in ways that were barely even conceivable before 1962. The Catholicism of the '50's could be narrow and superstitious, but it imbued me with a sense of the transcendent and of the presence of God in everyday life that carried many of my generation through the turmoil of change and its aftermath, steeped in a tradition that has

always remained a home, even if not always a peaceful or comfortable one. I would never consider leaving the Catholic Church; it is my family. But the point of telling you all of this about myself is to illustrate that I represent a particular viewpoint; Catholic feminism will necessarily be pluralistic and dialectical. My story is the story of a white, North American, Vatican II, academic feminist who is also a wife and mother. The story of Catholic women is not complete without the contrasting stories of older women, younger women, and women of different social histories.

Catholic Women Now

So then, moving to “phase two” of my reflections—how are things today? Is it true that “the more things change, the more they stay the same”? Yes and no. Being a Catholic feminist is still difficult, but not compared to the 1950’s. And, since the ’60, Catholic feminism is increasingly widespread and encouraged. First, though, let us confront the difficulties.

Today, many young Catholic women perceive a very prominent “in your face” symbolic exclusion of women in the sacramental life of the Church, especially the celebration of the Eucharist, starring an all-male cast of major players. One of Boston College’s 2001 doctoral graduates is a young theologian who has worked for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and is active in the pro-life movement. She remarks that she questioned as a child “why I referred to myself as a man when professing my faith,” even though she had the opportunity “to present the gifts at the altar, to serve at the altar and to proclaim the Word to the community.” After entering theological studies, she became “increasingly aware of the way in which the institutional church can be an alienating force in a woman’s relationship with God and in a woman’s service of God’s

people.” She recalls a conversation with a young man who had confronted a presider after Mass, arguing that the Nicene Creed should not be used without the words “men” or “man.” The questioner simply assumed on the basis of the English usage to which he was accustomed that the original Latin was vir (“man”), instead of homo (“human”). The phrase in question, homo factus est, when used of Christ, raises, as the young woman put it, “soteriological questions,” if translated in a way that focuses on Christ’s maleness.³

Similarly, an undergraduate biology major who is in my “Feminist Theology” class this semester tells a poignant story in a class paper:

When I think about the main messages of the bible, particularly the New Testament, what comes into my mind are the ideas of compassion, forgiveness, and love exemplified by Jesus. As a young girl attending church with my family I loved listening to the readings each week. I wanted to help the poor and the sick and do all of the things that were part of being a compassionate person. Perhaps this is why by the time I was in seventh grade I became a lector at my parish’s youth mass, an activity I continued throughout high school, concluding with my final reading the Sunday I left home to attend Boston College.

Each year however there was always something that bothered me about Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. “*Wives should be subordinate to their husbands as to the Lord*” (Eph 5:22). “*Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church...*” (Eph 5:25). Every time I heard these words read or read them

myself they bothered me. After all it seemed rather unfair that as a woman I should subordinate myself to my husband when all he would have to do was love me in return. Before I knew anything at all about feminist theology and interpretation of the canonized bible I felt strangled by these words and others like them that can be found throughout the New Testament. For me as a woman of faith it is hard to disbelieve the bible, but it is harder to accept the words condemning me to a quiet and subordinate existence cleaning the home and caring for children. My solution until now was to ignore these passages. Most Sundays I would go to church and enjoy the readings and homilies and when these passages were read I would refuse to think about them.⁴

Both of these young Catholic women have taken advantage of opportunities for women in the church that were nonexistent before Vatican II. Nonetheless, they are aware of a subordination and exclusion of women that eats at the heart of their liturgical experience. This is all the more striking in a culture and educational system today in which equal goals are held up for women and men as never before.⁵

The perception of a cultural misfit between roles for women in the church and what they rightfully expect in the larger society is not limited to students. Nor is it only a perception, with no basis in fact. In a recent review of a book on women at the Vatican, the editor of the lay Catholic weekly Commonweal, Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, describes “‘a man’s world and a clerical one with an ‘ecclesiastical purple ceiling.’” Although around 400 of the 3,800 Vatican employees are women, most hold clerical or

administrative positions, such a secretary, telephone operator, accountants, and translators. Some professional women have recently joined staffs as art experts and archeologists, and one of the highest ranking women is one of five directors of Vatican Radio. “Few lay people, men or women, or women in religious orders rise above midlevel positions in Vatican government departments...governed by archbishops. Clergymen are preferred over the laity, men over women and lay members of Opus Dei and Focolare—two movements favored by the current papacy for their traditional piety and discipline—are preferred over ordinary, if better-qualified, lay employees.”⁶

Of course, traditional role expectations have not completely gone away in the culture either, even in North America, so it is even more lamentable that the church reinforces and even exploits them, rather than offering a strong, consistent critique. For example, women still carry far more than half of household and childcare responsibilities; law firms and corporations “accommodate” these inequities by installing a “Mommy track” that permits women to work fewer hours than men, at the expense of their career advancement; and sexual manipulation of women continues under the guise of sexual exploration and satisfaction. Familiar examples abound, including high abortion rates, divorce rates that leave women and children worse off financially, the campus pressures of a “hook-up” culture, and the popularity of TV shows like “Sex and the City,” the main goal of whose sexually liberated characters is still to get and keep a man. Obviously feminism is still called for as a cultural movement. But does Catholicism have any important resources to bring?

Theological Resources

In “phase three” of these reflections, I would like to draw on two resources that may at first seem to have opposite agendas: John Paul II and feminist theologians. My main point with regard to the pope is that he is a transitional figure on a relatively short but fast-moving trajectory of Catholic teaching toward the equality of women. Until the middle of the twentieth century, official Catholic documents (like Pius XI’s Casti Connubii, 1930) still taught that women should be subordinate to their husband’s authority, and should not even control their own economic affairs. It was virtually taken for granted in the Catholic world, as elsewhere, that women’s place is in the home, that motherhood or virginity defined and fully accounted for women’s social place, and that any other options would sully women’s dignity and threaten the whole social order.

While John Paul II still regards motherhood as somehow definitive of women’s personality, and women’s highest calling, he has taken important steps in demanding women’s access to public roles, equal pay for equal work, respect for women in the family, and the protection of women from violence. Many of his writings could be cited, but I will focus on the one I regard as the most unusual in this regard, his 1995 “Letter to Women,”⁷ written in preparation for the United Nations World Conference in Beijing on the status of women. The occasion of this letter is also a helpful reminder that not all women to whom this letter is addressed have the advantages of relative physical safety, basic needs met, and legal protection that most of us here enjoy.

First of all, here as elsewhere, the pope views women on the basis of a theory of the complementarity of male and female natures that is problematic from a feminist viewpoint. On the one hand, feminists can agree with the pope that it is easy to observe

actual differences in stereotypical male and female behavior, and we certainly have different roles in reproduction. But many take issue with saying that behavioral “gender” differences are due entirely to biological “sex” (and not social conditioning), or with saying that whatever differences do exist should result in clearly different social roles for women and men. To be fair to the pope, although he defines women as mothers much more strongly than men as fathers, he never says that women should not participate in other roles outside the home in society. When we get to roles in the church, it is a different story, as we shall take up later.

In general, John Paul II has a rather romantic view of women as endowed with a special “genius,” enabling them to “see persons with their hearts” (no. 12). This might seem benign if unrealistic, except for the fact that this complementarity model still plays into the assumption that women are destined for nurturing, altruistic roles, in which their natural sentimentality, emotionality, and sensitivity can be channeled and protected. Employment practices at the Vatican do not give me a great deal of confidence that the theory of the special genius of women has led to significant vocational advancement for women, or their access to positions of authority, within the church itself.

Nonetheless, on the positive side, the pope’s “Letter,” beyond giving thanks to mothers, sisters, and consecrated women, declares, “Thank you women who work!,” naming the contributions of women to culture as indispensable (no. 2). Referring to “the great process of women’s liberation,” he states that “Women’s dignity has often been unacknowledged and their prerogatives misrepresented; they have often been relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude.” Moreover, he apologizes for members of the church (though not, as he should have, the institution as a whole) who

share in the blame. He commends the “great process of women’s liberation” (no. 3). This is a process that the pope admits “has met with many obstacles,” and one that he views as “still unfinished” (no. 6). Finally, he condemns violence against women, especially sexual violence (no. 5). Overall, the John Paul II’s advocacy for women gives me hope that he is furthering a momentum within the church as well as society toward gender equality, even if accomplishments to date remain ambiguous. To further these developments, we will need to turn to the theology of Catholic women themselves.

Happily, feminist theology is a huge and flourishing field.⁸ Unhappily, my representation of it will be quite limited, focusing on incarnation, sacramentality, embodiment, and the ethical corollary of these ideas, Catholic social teaching. I hope this sample will tempt my audience to delve into Catholic feminism’s riches for themselves.

Key both to sexist traditions and to feminist theology is the person of Jesus Christ. For all Christians and not only for Catholics, of course, the figure of Jesus is key to identity and to salvation. The event of the incarnation of God in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth, is attested in a plurality of forms in the New Testament, and has been defined and refined doctrinally through the ages, especially at the early landmark Trinitarian and Christological councils, Nicaea and Chalcedon.⁹ Distinctive of the Catholic tradition is the importance of the incarnation in grounding a generally “sacramental” view of reality. The life of faith is structured around a sacramental system in which events and realities in “ordinary life” become occasions of the redemptive inbreaking of the divine. The fact that Jesus Christ unites in his person a human and a divine nature signifies that all creation is blessed, and that human experience itself can be revelatory of the divine. In Jesus Christ, human nature is lifted into unity with God. (In contrast, some Protestant

traditions place a greater emphasis on the infinite distance between God and humanity, the sinfulness of humanity and the brokenness of creation, and a greater theological and practical emphasis on the cross as defining what Christian identity is about.)

Stephen Happel's and David Tracy's concise classic, A Catholic Vision, states the importance of sacramentality for Catholics in this way: "God's action for humanity is so real and lasting that it abides as his gift in every dimension of our existence." The sacramental rituals are "signs prayed by the faithful community." They use the "natural signs of cleansing water, strengthening oil, nourishing food, the promising word, and reconciling or confirming hand" to connect the community with the events of Jesus' own life, including his baptism, anointing in the Spirit, table fellowship with sinners, loving faithfulness, words of forgiveness, and call to apostolic leadership, as well as his death and resurrection.¹⁰ Obviously, the Eucharist is the central Christian sacrament, one shared by all Christians. The sacraments may be understood within the liturgy of the church as having not only an expressive but a formative relation to belief and doctrine. What we practice together shapes what we believe about our world and ourselves. In the fifth-century maxim, lex orandi lex credendi ("the law of praying is the law of believing").¹¹ This makes it crucial that our sacramental practice reflect the realities of the divine-human relationship, and truly embody God's presence in the word through Jesus Christ, and humanity's redemption through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore it is very important to address the fact that many younger Catholics, women and men, experience the Eucharistic liturgy as a symbol of the Church's reluctance to fully include women in the mysteries of incarnation and salvation.

It is arguable that current catholic Eucharistic practice does not reflect Jesus' own practice in calling and forming a community of disciples. A key inspiration of feminist theology is New Testament texts that portray Jesus interacting with women, calling women to be his disciples, appearing as risen first to women, and sending a woman (Mary Magdalene) to announce the gospel to the other disciples (John 20: 11-18). On the other hand, the maleness of Jesus, and the post-resurrection proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, has been used historically, doctrinally, theologically, and sacramentally to make women second-class citizens in the Catholic Church, and to exclude them from roles reserved, either by official norms or by widespread practice, for men.

Authors like Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Elizabeth Johnson and Catherine LaCugna¹² have argued eloquently that Jesus called all persons to equal discipleship; that Jesus saves us through his humanity, united with God and offered on the cross, not through his maleness; and that the communion of three persons in love, as a metaphor for the divine, provides a model for human equality in the church. Nevertheless, official church teaching still maintains that women cannot represent Christ in the Eucharistic sacrifice because Jesus did not call women equally with men, and that the priest's maleness is essential to his serving as an icon of Christ.¹³ Since most Catholic feminists have decided that an unjustly hierarchical and authoritarian church does not provide a structure of ordained ministry in which they want to participate, they have "decentered" the struggle for ordination "in favor of working for systemic change." Yet, according to one feminist ecclesialogist, it is still impossible to deny that "the continued exclusion

from ordination remains a potent symbol of women's wider exclusion in the Roman Catholic church."¹⁴

A feminist sacramental vision would include the possibility of women's ordination, but it would also have much wider ramifications. Susan Ross declares that sacramental theology should be entirely reconceived on the basis of women's experience, and that for feminist theology, "the crucial question is whether human physical differences ought to carry the theological significance they have come to bear."¹⁵ She rejects oppositions between body and spirit, female and male, and instead urges that sacramental theology be reestablished on the basis of a more integrated view of nature and humanity, male and female. Ironically, partly because they have been excluded from mediating grace in the sacramental system, women have developed a more genuinely and broadly "sacramental" understanding of "the sacrality of the everyday." "At its heart," however, the Eucharist should not symbolize divisions and hierarchies within the community of Christ or the human community, but "the extravagant self-gift of Christ and the unity of the community in all its diversity and ambiguity."¹⁶

The Eucharist should unite men and women, races and classes, peoples of every nation, and even the church and the world. The Catholic sacramental vision sees redemption in Christ as inclusive of all peoples and even all faiths, not as an exclusive gift that only a few receive, and which they must protect in a church set against the world. In a Catholic sacramental vision, Christ's last supper and sacrificial death are reenacted in memory of his table fellowship with those who were social "outsiders," in honor of the mission of the early church to all peoples and nations, and in continuity with our historic Catholic social justice tradition that is committed to transforming the world.

Catholic Feminism and Globalization

This tradition offers an important point of connection between a specifically Catholic feminist theology and the challenges of globalization, and thus inspires a fourth and final phase of reflection on what it means to be a Catholic feminist. Feminism in general comes out of women's experiences of injustice, and is committed to social change, toward equality for women and men. Feminist theology uses the resources of religious traditions to argue for women's dignity and to recover or invent images that can provoke believers to imagine a more gender-equal religious community. Virtually all feminist theologians also hope to expand this movement toward the equality and full participation of women beyond the churches into society in general. With the advent (or at least acceleration) of globalization, this has become a world-wide cause. However, globalization also brings new challenges to activism for justice.

The definition of globalization, its effects, and its possibilities have been the subject of many other analyses delivered at Santa Clara recently.¹⁷ Though there is much that can be said about globalization, I will name only two issues of clear relevance for the feminist project. First of all, the expansion of worldwide economic institutions on a market model has meant ever greater control over resources by those who are already economically advantaged, and the destruction of local subsistence economies. One result is that the poor suffer most, and among the poor, woman and children. In a 2002 conference on the "option for the poor," held at the University of Notre Dame, the Mexican theologian, Maria Pilar Aquino, made a plea for the dignity of women in the context of the dehumanizing side of globalization. She stressed that, in today's world, an option for the poor means an option for women.¹⁸

Second, worldwide communications technologies have made it ever more obvious that basic cultural values and the social systems based on them vary widely around the globe. This is acutely evident whenever violence breaks out between or among competing ethnic, national and cultural groups, who war for contested resources, territory, or political control. If violence is so often the answer to cultural and political differences, then what can it possibly mean concretely to speak of an inclusive sacramental vision, the transforming unity of peoples in Christ, the celebration of women's embodiment as revealing redeemed humanity and even the divine, and so on, and so on?

Catholic feminism carries forward the insights of the papal encyclical tradition that for over a century has focused on the common good, and on the interdependence, rights, and duties of all. Though in fact, this justice tradition has exhibited the same bias toward viewing maleness as normative humanity as has theology and internal church practice, it bears within it the seeds of a more egalitarian agenda. Some movement in this direction I illustrated earlier through the pope's call for greater justice for women in all social situations and cultures. The main contribution of Catholic feminist theology to the global cause of justice for women is the idea that it makes sense to speak of the "full humanity of women"¹⁹ because there is a commonality of basic human needs that is shared cross-culturally. It is at least possible in principle for all cultures to recognize that both women and men are entitled to certain basic material and social conditions of "human flourishing." Though sin abounds, grace as well abounds throughout human societies, reaffirming the nature we have in common and elevating it to new levels of healing and reconciliation. The Catholic justice tradition is at once broadly humane,

profoundly sacramental, and persistently optimistic about the possibility of personal and social conversion.

A lesson that feminist theologians are learning, however, is that “full humanity” and “human flourishing” are complex realities that, beyond basic needs, cannot be conclusively defined in detail. They require constant renegotiation from different cultural and social locations. Just as Catholic theological tradition has tended to exclude women, Catholic women and other feminists have tended to exclude “other” women when defining just what women’s needs are and what feminist commitment requires. Originally a “first world” North American and European academic phenomenon, feminist theology can and should also learn from listening to the experiences of women of more diverse backgrounds. When I was a teenager sitting in a theology classroom at Holy Trinity High School in Washington, D.C., I lived in a de facto segregated city. We only had one black girl in our class of twenty-five. Although I at least remember her as an “integrated” member of the group, I think it was largely because she left most of the distinctively African-American parts of her culture at the classroom door. She did come to a twenty-fifth year dinner reunion of “the girls,” sharing long-term friendships with some of her classmates. However, it was only in the mid-sixties, when the civil rights movement touched our little enclave, that the white girls became really aware of the violence blacks were suffering in the South at the hands of white murderers, or of the suffering that systemic exclusion was causing to people right in our own city. Although certainly not virulent racists, I am sure my own parents used terms for black people (not the “N-word,” but “colored” at least), and adopted attitudes toward them while shopping or in the workplace, that were disparaging if not outright insulting. Today that’s what is

called “white supremacy,” but back then it was claimed as a God-given right in the South, and swum in as a fish does water by Northerners. I suppose, in D.C. and Northern Virginia, I lived somewhere in between.

In a book wonderfully titled White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus, Jacquelyn Grant identifies consequences of such limits of perspective. White women and black women are not equal partners in the struggle for women’s liberation. “It would seem to me that the language of partnership lends itself easily to White women who, for the most part, have been a part of the oppressing class....Since White women and men share the same racial identity, Black women perceive White women as being more oppressors than victims.”²⁰ Feminist theologians say “experience is the crucible for doing theology,” but what they really mean is “white women’s experience.”²¹ Therefore, their “liberation theology” is mere “empty rhetoric.”²² In fact, feminist theology is both “White and racist.”²³ Grant speaks for many non-white women when she insists that sexism, racism, and classism are all intertwined, and all three constitute part of their experience, an experience shared only partially by white academic women. This does not necessarily mean the end of the road for a more genuinely liberatory feminist theology, however. Kwok, Pui-lan, originally from Hong Kong, looks toward better communication and cooperation in the future.

Asian feminist thinking will be different from that of America because of the particular sociopolitical context and a different church history [as a Christian minority]. Situated on the boundary, we constantly challenge our American sisters for their parochial understanding of Christianity which has been so much shaped by their indigenous culture. We also hold

them accountable to develop a feminist vision which not only liberates middle-class women, but takes seriously the interconnectedness of the plight of third world women.”²⁴

For many younger Catholic women, especially those attending Catholic colleges and universities, an international dimension is already part of their faith and social commitment. Sometimes it seems that younger educated women are less interested in feminism than their older Catholic counterparts. This is to an extent true, partly because world of the former has begun to respond to the work of the latter for equality. Another reason is that, since first world women are enjoying more rights, the attention of Catholic activists has turned to other cultures. Catholic college students are increasingly aware of global injustice and poverty, of the role that wealthy nations play in contributing to oppression, and of the importance of trying to think and act in solidarity with the poor, both men and women. College women’s feminist consciousness is influenced by this development. One result is that they realize that poor women worldwide suffer double and triple oppressions—of gender, race or ethnicity, and class. One of my students wrote a short paper reflecting on a recent service trip to El Salvador, in light of the writings of Latina feminists, including Brazilian theologian, Ivone Gebara.²⁵

We met with a group called Equipo Maiz, which began as an organization concerned with general education of campesino Christian base communities, but soon began holding workshops about gender because they noticed that in their other workshops, women never participated, even when directly asked to, always deferring to their husband or father to speak for them....At another Christian base community, located in a very

poor ‘neighborhood’ of homes made out of sheet metal, I spoke to another woman. When I asked her about her experiences during the war, she matter-of-factly offered ‘it was difficult...I was forced to sell myself in order to feed my children.’...My mind is still reeling from the stories of the Salvadoran women who shared with me their stories, experiences, faith, and lives last week. I cannot help but agree with...Gebara about the connection between poverty and much of the evil associated with a machismo culture. I am at once horrified by the injustices and inspired by the hope and strength of my new friends.²⁶

For feminists in the United States, it is particularly important to incorporate the voices of Catholic women within our own borders, now writing not only in African-American “womanist” theology, but especially in Latina “mujerista” theology. Latina theologians, like Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, Maria Pilar Aquino, and Jeannette Rodriguez bring as an important corrective to “traditional” feminist theology a new emphasis on women’s relationships within the family, including motherhood. They tend to see the local community and base communities of faith as essential to their self-definition and social agenda, and therefore do not isolate women’s rights from the network of social relationships.

Jeannette Rodriguez points out that “Latina culture is a culture of storytelling.²⁷” Stories are a way of rooting identity and theology in histories and relationships, and also of drawing the listener imaginatively into the story and experience of another. Rodriguez tells stories of her mother and grandmother, stories of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and stories of her friends telling stories. Like the slave narratives recounted by many

“womanist” theologians, these stories are a way of reweaving the past into a meaningful future, and of connecting women with other women, past and present, and with their networks of family and support. The typical “feminist” theologian will note in such stories a strong dimension of love and strength in the face of immense suffering and a dire struggle to survive, experiences that are much less likely to part of the recent history of the white middle-class feminist.

These stories help us recover, first, a sense of empathy and solidarity with those whom our societies have oppressed; and second, an ability to speak more honestly and profoundly about human suffering. Both feminism and Catholicism are committed to social change, and to engaged action to bring about change. Yet it is necessary to confront the fact that suffering is an inevitable part of human existence, that a good deal of suffering is caused by human sinfulness, including our own, and that the only honest and effective way to combat suffering is to be willing to accept some part of the burden of Christ’s cross, in solidarity with “the poor.” I doubt that I can compare feminist theologians to Christ, but maybe we can at least walk part of the way with Simon of Cyrene, sharing in some partial and temporary way the injustices that oppress our sisters.

As Shawn Copeland warns, womanist theology “repels every tendency toward any ersatz spiritualization of evil and suffering, of pain and oppression.” Instead, it seeks to clarify the meaning of liberation in Jesus Christ, by “remembering and retelling, by resisting, by redeeming.”²⁸ The insight I want to stress here is that resistance and redemption are possible, but only if we tell the story honestly and commit ourselves to doing things differently, albeit with the missteps and failings that are practically unavoidable. The step between solidarity and hope is repentance.

In preparing this lecture, I struggled to find a conclusion. Every summary statement seemed superficial, every exhortation platitudinous. I finally decided that the most fitting ending would be an open ending—not an ending, but a beginning. Christ’s “incarnation” as a human being continues in the “body of Christ” that is the church, its evolving tradition, and its sacramental vision. This tradition and vision include both genders, all races and nationalities, the oppressors and the oppressed, perhaps even all religions. In the body of Christ, there is no male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free—for we are all one in Christ Jesus our Lord (Gals 3:28). In our symphony, a voice like mine should not carry the final note. My conclusion is thus an invitation—to younger women, to women of color, to less privileged women, and women of different cultures and continents. Together we can fill in the details of women’s roles in the church of the twenty-first century, and teach the church how to be a better advocate for women globally. “Invitation” is really the wrong word. These women already are shouting out in the exuberance of the poet Maya Angelou (imagine here not my voice but that of Jacquelyn Grant, who has given me the quoted verses):

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear

I rise

Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear

I rise....

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave

I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

I rise.

I rise.

I rise.²⁹

And are these lines not a modern-day rendition of Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), drawing us all into God's ongoing revelation, by celebrating a woman's revolutionary destiny?

My soul magnifies the Lord,

And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

For the Mighty One has done great things for me

And holy is His name....

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the

lowly....

¹ I am grateful to James Hanigan and Duquesne University for inviting me to deliver an earlier version of these reflections as the Duquesne Vice-Presidential Lecture (March 19, 2003). As a result of that opportunity I received several valuable suggestions for improvement.

² This account is a slightly revised version of my contribution to William Madges and Michael J. Daley, eds., Vatican II: Forty Personal Stories (Mystic Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 2003) 21-24.

³ Angela Senander, "Theological Synthesis: Interim Report," unpublished paper, January 2003.

⁴ Meredith Halpin, "Feminist Theology and Ethics: The Household Codes," weekly paper for Boston College TH 534 Feminist Theology and Ethics (January 2003).

⁵ The stories of these two women are also told in my "Feminist Theology and a Participatory Church," in Stephen J. Pope, ed., The Laity and the Governance of the Church (forthcoming).

⁶ Margaret O'Brien Steinfels, "The Purple Ceiling: a journalist examines the role of women in the Vatican bureaucracy," New York Times Book Review, February 16, 2003, 16. The book reviewed is Paul Hofmann, The Vatican's Women: Female Influence at the Holy See (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002).

⁷ Pope John Paul, "Letter to Women," Origins 25/9 (1995) 137, 139-143.

⁸ Essays by several Catholic feminist theologians are collected in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed., Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

⁹ See John P. Galvin, "Jesus Christ," in Francis Schussler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin, eds., Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives, Volume II (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991) 249-324; and Elizabeth A. Johnson, Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

¹⁰ Stephen Happel and David Tracy, A Catholic Vision (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 182.

¹¹ This formulation derives from Pius XII, and is discussed by Regis A. Duffy, "Sacraments in General," Systematic Theology II, 184.

¹² Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, In Memory of Her: Toward a Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins (New York: Crossroad, 1984); Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York: Crossroad, 1994), and Catherine Mowry LaCugna, God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991).

¹³ See the 1976 declaration Inter Insigniores (Origins 6 [Feb. 3, 1977] 517ff); and the more recent apostolic letter, Ordinatio Sacerdotalis (Origins 24 [June 9, 1994] 49ff).

¹⁴ Mary Hines, "Community for Liberation," in Freeing Theology, 170.

¹⁵ Susan A. Ross, "God's Embodiment and Women," Freeing Theology, 186. On feminist theology and the patriarchal sacramental system, see also Christine Gudorf, "The Power to Create: Sacraments and Men's Need to Birth," Horizons 14 (1987) 296-309.

¹⁶ Ross, "God's Embodiment," 204.

¹⁷ For some definitions and their complexities, see Michael Czerny, S.J., "University and Globalization: Yes, But," The Santa Clara Lectures 9/1 (Nov. 7, 2002). For a theological critique, see Thomas Beaudoin, "The Cost of Economic Discipleship," The Santa Clara Lectures 8/1 (Nov. 4, 2001).

¹⁸ See Allan Figueroa Deck, "Beyond La Pausa: Liberation Theologies Live," America (February 23, 2003) 23.

¹⁹ Rosemary Ruether is the most notable proponent of this phrase, but it or an equivalent is found widely in the works of Catholic feminists, including Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Margaret Farley, and Maria Pilar Aquino. See Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) 18-19.

²⁰ Jacquelyn Grant, White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Responses (Atlanta Georgia: Scholar's press, 1989) 191.

²¹ Ibid., 287.

²² Ibid., 191.

²³ Ibid., 195.

²⁴ Kwok, Pui-lan, "Claiming a Boundary Existence: A Parable from Hong Kong," Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 3 (1987) 124.

²⁵ Ivone Gebara, Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Suffering (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

²⁶ Mary Lou Bozza, untitled weekly paper for Boston College TH 534 Feminist Theology and Ethics (March 2003).

²⁷ Jeannette Rodriguez, Stories We Live/Cuentos Que Vivimos: Hispanic Women's Spirituality (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1996) 7.

²⁸ M. Shawn Copeland, "'Wading through Many Sorrows': Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective," in Charles A. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, Richard A. McCormick, S.J., Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition (New York/Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1996) 155.

²⁹ Maya Angelou, And Still I Rise (New York: Random House, 1978) 42, as quoted by Jacquelyn Grant, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Experience," in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume II, 1980-1992 (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books) 287-88.