

**Some Aspects of
Church Authority and the Women's Struggle for Justice
in Latin America**

by

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To explore the struggle of Latin American women in their pursuit of justice and equality within the context of their Christian experience, and to examine the response of church authorities to that struggle, is an exciting and risk-filled enterprise. Here the researcher is on the cutting edge of extremely sensitive major issues of power and domination based on gender, prejudice, tradition and doctrine (Franco, "The Church"). This presentation is meant to be a respectful invitation to concern and reflection regarding certain fundamental issues of human rights and development in an area of the world long characterized by manipulation and exploitation of women in a culture plagued by social injustice and permeated by strutting male assertiveness called machismo (May, 10-14).

Women in Latin America, a part of the world politically unstable and economically oppressed, live by and large in a society marked by grinding poverty and aggressive behavior in which men have traditionally assumed dominance in private and public life, believing that role to be theirs by the natural right of male supremacy (Goldsmid and Sweeney). The idea of a male dominated world in which women play merely a passive role of breeding and obeying is not a Hispanic invention. It forms part of the nearly universal pattern of gender relations. The special Latin American mode, however, stems from Mesopotamian and Judeo-Mediterranean patriarchal societies in which all sociopolitical power resided in the male. Those societies, with few exceptions, also fostered an exclusively masculine image of God, the supreme power and arbiter of all things (Boff, 145-60; Lerner). This tradition in Western civilization was transmitted to Latin America through the Ibero-Arabic culture of its conquerors and reinforced by the Catholic Church.

Sexism and a Male Hierarchy

Sexism, discrimination against women on the basis of gender, abounds in self-justifying rationalizations, often veiled in patronizing condescension toward "the weaker sex." Supposedly inferior to men, women as a class have only recently begun to break out of the secondary role to which they had been relegated (Safilios-Rothschild, 135-73). Despite the lack of moral or scientific justification for asserting female inferiority, that is the notion of women's status generally held in capitalist and socialist countries alike. Male control of women is found in all historical stages and every form of government (Aquino, "El Culto," 41-46). The problem of sex discrimination in Latin America, however, is especially acute. There, women struggling for equality and justice are challenged on two fronts: by secular society and by the Church. They have had to deal with a Church that many believe promotes certain basic attitudes and practices which unfairly limit their freedom and impede full human development. In recent years, confronted by Latin American realities, certain sectors of the Catholic Church have changed significantly and raised their voices in favor of the poor and oppressed, those who lack material goods, political power, and control over their lives. Despite their oppressed and marginalized condition, women of the poor figured prominently in this struggle for liberation through the

formation of Christian Base Communities (CEBs) in which, through reflection on the Bible message of liberation, they discovered a strength that, with the support of faith, drove them to fight for a fairer, freer and more egalitarian society. Although highly romanticized in contemporary literature, this movement shows the cultural continuity and resourcefulness of communities in search of justice, dignity and progress promoted by faith in God and in themselves (Hewitt).

Machismo strongly influences the culture and social life of Latin Americans at all levels of interpersonal relations (R. González). By and large, men are far more free, willful, and powerful, while women are subject to limitations of all kinds, ranging from male control over their private lives to injustice regarding their value in the labor market. Furthermore, women's deficient level of education contributes to keeping them in a secondary position (Lozano and M. González). Submission, subservience and motherhood define the role of women in circumscribed lives of self-sacrifice. (Castro, 41-42). Thus, cut off from liberating ideas and outside influences, women are often kept from exploring views and values beyond the family circle which might awaken concerns for their own situation in particular and for the problems of women in general.

Discussion of the role of women in Latin America is, like so many other major issues there, fraught with ambiguities and contradictions. Every general assertion, it seems, must be hedged with many qualifications and nuanced to the point of pointlessness. Despite this, there are many worthwhile things to say about the struggle for justice women have waged there throughout their history, a struggle intensifying in many ways in this present age. The feminist movement, begun in the United States and Europe in the 1960s, ignited the fires of freedom in the hearts of women throughout Latin America. That movement joined to the impact of Liberation Theology starting in the 1970s is transforming the role of women everywhere. Despite the passion and intensity of the cause for those alive to the issues of justice, dignity, power and equality, the struggle remains a slow process, full of conflicts and confrontations in the home and in the work place, in public life and in the churches, centers both of worship and of social life. The long tradition of women's resistance to oppression has always come at the price of enormous efforts to rise in an intolerant and abusive machista society. Notable progress has been made, thanks in part to the social changes in the middle decades of this century which gave remarkable impetus to labor unions, political parties and community organizations attuned to the aspirations of women. The feminist movement in Latin America after the 1960s can claim for itself much merit in the promotion of women's welfare.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the Church's teachings on socio-economic problems since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the CELAM Conference in Medellin (1968), women in ever greater numbers have awakened to the issues of human rights and social justice which could transform their lives for the betterment of their lot and that of all society. Nonetheless, the institutional Church, which has been promoting human rights at least in some countries, has done little specifically for women as such in their struggle for equality and justice beyond reaffirming the traditionally pious and bland generalities in praising motherhood and feminine virtues.

Women came to understand that they themselves must struggle for their fundamental rights if they are to secure equal opportunities with men in the world of work, worship, power and prestige. Acceptance of women as equals at all levels of private and public life requires well organized and informed efforts. Never before had the women of Latin America been so keenly aware of the issue of social justice as central to their lives. An ever-widening circle of women has awakened to their human plight. For many, this awakening is as yet only a larval, an embryonic consciousness, but it is real and stirring. In a competitive world it will soon be neither prudent nor possible to ignore or silence the new challenge of militant women committed to the cause of their own liberation. Traditional panaceas such as religious devotions and prayers of petition alone to solve family problems and empty praise of distaff virtues will no longer dissipate the growing frustration and determination of liberation-minded women bent on change.

Social justice presupposes and requires an order in which human beings can achieve their personal fulfillment, where their dignity is respected, legitimate expectations met, right of access to education recognized and promoted, and personal freedoms assured. A just order is one in which human beings are not objects to be exploited for pleasure or profit but one in which they may fashion their own destinies through talent and personal effort. Latin American women realize that to achieve full and just integration into society they have to unite forces and become increasingly aware and intolerant of the oppression and subjugation that have traditionally forced them to accept a condition of inferiority. They are ever more ready to combat tyranny from every quarter, whether it comes from their families, their employers, the state, or any other source.

One of the most enduring and pressing problems for women is to determine whether and to what degree their religious traditions may tolerate or even foster their situation as secondary members in a male-dominated society. Furthermore, it is necessary to ask whether the official position of the Vatican developed in the Council and Medellin, which gave rise to the Theology of Liberation with its "preferential option for the poor," has in any substantive way been translated into effective action in defense of the rights of women, the poorest of the poor. It is difficult to determine whether, on balance, the Church has helped more than hindered their struggle for equality and justice. If it has not, then out of loyalty to the Church, they should strive to have the bark of Peter change course on these issues. The religious celebration of the fifth centenary of the European discovery of the New World culminated with a Papal visit to Santo Domingo in 1992 where, in the CELAM Conference being held there, His Holiness called for a new evangelization of the Americas. Will this new evangelization promote equal respect, dignity and power for both men and women? If not, why not?

For many people, it has been painful to note the apparent indifference with which the institutional Catholic Church has viewed women's participation in the struggle for their claims to full human rights. The Church needs and honors women, but historically it has used them as a powerless, disenfranchised yet effective vehicle for the transmission of the faith and for support of the clerical establishment (Monteil, 163). For five centuries Latin America has been nurtured and ruled according to the Judeo-Christian values and morality of its conquerors. Christianity, though founded on a liberating and egalitarian message, has nonetheless historically reflected

many of the same structures of exclusion and prejudice of the civil society in which it was inserted, and it followed a sexist pattern of power and authority. Christian preaching assumes equality, regardless of ethnic origin, nationality, social position, age, or gender. What then is the explanation for the contradiction between the message and the antifeminist practices? It is ironic that, in view of the Church's often self-congratulatory stance on human rights, Fidel Castro could with pride ask: "What country in Latin America has fought and advanced more than Cuba against discrimination toward women?" (Betto, 381). The Catholic Church in Cuba has been the least free of all Latin America. It certainly cannot claim any significant contribution to the notable social advancement of women in that country.

It has been argued that the patriarchal nature of Judeo-Christian society, so clearly evident in St Paul and Greco-Roman philosophy, gave shape to a theology with two different spheres: the ideal or abstract, in which there is no distinction among human beings, and the real or practical, in which biological differences were used as an argument to impose women's submission to men (Safilios-Rothschild, 137). These two spheres historically merged into one single outcome in terms of sociopolitical realities: reducing the role of women, whether in religious or lay life, to one of service and self-sacrifice. Both in secular society and in the Church, all feminine competition was eliminated. A woman's options were limited to biological or spiritual motherhood. As mothers or nuns, they were subject to male authority, concretely represented by husbands or priests. Machismo is still a dominant force in Latin American life. The Church, despite the ever-increasing shortage of priests in Latin America and the fact that there are approximately three times as many nuns as priests, still excludes women from most forms of ministry (Vargas, 13-16). Women in the Church have no access to real power or decision-making positions; they are canonically excluded from the hierarchy (Ferro). This situation is not about to change, even though women are more frequently consulted on "female issues" than before. Not surprisingly, their opinions are often ignored or discarded.

The vast majority of churchgoers are women, but they often experience ridicule and intolerance when they seek a more active role in Church life. Even though women are the main support of the parishes and are the principal agents in keeping religious practices alive in the family and society, they have little or no voice determining policy and formulation of Church doctrine and discipline. When they teach catechism, ironically, women themselves inculcate in the young notions of the primary role of men in society and the acceptance of the secondary or ancillary position imposed on them by institutions controlled exclusively by men. Thus, paradoxically, women themselves are an obstacle of change because of the religious and social conditioning that makes them accept as their moral obligation the defense of the established order, whether political, religious, or social. In defending the status quo, they transmit to the next generation a tradition that allows only a limited and defined role for women, one that demands submission and service (Monteil, 172).

After the Second Vatican Council, the Latin American Church began to depart from its more conservative positions, making it possible for the faithful to pursue their aspirations in a way more attuned to the times. The Church now tolerates a variety of minor trends that were formerly

unacceptable to the hierarchy (Beeman). The defenders of traditional structures must now share the stage with those who sincerely favor identification with the struggle for justice and the inclusion of women's issues in the liberation process. However hesitatingly, the Church began to take a greater interest in concrete feminist concerns. Women have been allowed to participate in marginal and auxiliary ministerial service such as those of altar servers, lectors, ministers of Communion, and visitation of the sick. Nonetheless, a woman's role as fundamentally that of mother and homemaker continued to be strongly stressed, clearly echoing the "Mensaje a las Mujeres" of Vatican II and the documents on women from Puebla in 1979 (#195). Some of the Church's traditional views on sexuality, however, gradually began to change; for example, the primary end of marriage came to be seen not exclusively as procreation but also as the manifestation of mutual love that should be expressed in marital intimacy (Episcopado Mexicano, 266).

While sexuality obviously ties into major social issues such as population control and family planning, even the most liberal groups in the Catholic Church have tended to be extremely guarded in their statements regarding the admissible means for control of the growth of the human family. Nonetheless, the Catholic bishops in some countries, for example in Mexico, responded to government birth control campaigns not with protest but silence in the face of a population explosion which would guarantee ever increasing poverty for the masses. Much has been said about population explosion at regional and world conferences, but in general statements issued by church officials have been couched in unrealistic, utopian, and idealistic terms, and therefore they do not reach the masses in their daily grind for survival and a minimum of human dignity. In the real world, abstinence and rhythm simply are not viable solutions to the problem. Although uncurbed population growth is not the only cause of Latin America's social and economic difficulties, the Church itself admits that it makes them more acute (Episcopado Mexicano, 249-55; Franco, 8-9). Underdevelopment and poverty in Latin America are perpetuated by a population explosion that results in the lack of adequate food and chronic undernourishment. Millions survive at a subsistence level in frightful conditions of health and housing, where decent education and employment are only dreams never to be realized.

The Church has yet fully to face up to this situation. Women must in justice be given a greater voice in discussing sexual morality because it is they who must bear the primary burden of church policies. Until recently they have been granted only marginal representation as consultants to church commissions on evangelization, the role of women in the modern world, and human rights issues. For example, the Pastoral Commission of the Sacred Congregation for Evangelization (Comisión Pastoral) consulted women in 1976 in formulating its policy on their role in evangelization. Today women are being consulted on a more regular basis than in the past and generally on specifically feminist concerns. There is, however, scant evidence of their voices having made a real difference in policy and practice, much less in doctrine and discipline, as is witnessed in the 1992 debacle of "One in Christ Jesus" (National Conference).

The Long View of History: 500 Years

Enrique Dussel edited a remarkable hybrid collection of essays by theologians, sociologists, political scientists, historians and poets called The Church in Latin America, 1492-1992 which contains razor-edged jeremiads bemoaning indigenous Utopias lost and excoriating the Church for its betrayal of the exploited masses. Only two of the twenty-three contributors to the volume are women. While emphasizing the experience of oppression among the native peoples, African slaves, and mestizos, this hefty tome, with its sweeping range of topics and depth of insight, strangely keeps silence on women's issues. That Dussel, the president of the Commission for the Study of Church History in Latin America (CEHILA), should miss the opportunity to open up new horizons in the study of "the invisible half" of Hispanic history demonstrates how secondary women's issues remain even among writers of established academic competence joined to a passionate concern for Christianity in the New World. There is no real sense in the book of gender concerns and conflicts. The focus of the essays is fixed on the terrible trials and suffering of the people of God subjected to the folly, avarice, stupidity and brutality of the conquerors and their progeny. There is here too much tirade, although much that is worth saying is said well. The authors' orgies of criticism and protest prove unfairly lacerating of the often splendid enterprise of evangelization in large measure carried out with great heroism by veritable armies of women, religious and lay, dedicated to healing and helping, to educating and protecting the native peoples as well as the Creole dispossessed, abandoned and oppressed. The essay on Mexico is particularly penetrating and offers a message of hope in the struggle for justice in a nation cursed by endless strife, endemic corruption and political fraud. The story of Hispanics in the United States offers a penetrating analysis of an uprooted people both perplexed by alienation in the land of promise and challenged to respond to new opportunities unheard of in their country of origin. But where are the women here? The concise, factual and insightful account of the hellishly complex events of the Church's role in revolutionary Central America offers an analysis which goes to the heart of the struggle for liberation in a Church torn by internal conflicts and ideological divisions. And so it goes, country by country, with tides of contentious, irascible criticism but no highlighting of the condition or contribution of women.

Jose Comblin, writing in this volume, deals with the Church and human rights. Somewhat intemperately and illtemperedly he concludes: "The hierarchical Church is silent, not knowing what to say. We are in a period in which the Church is active only at the base, in the invisible cells in which the poor construct the forms of the presence of the Kingdom of God in a world without meaning. All the evidence is that the Church of the clergy and the clerical powers will become less and less capable of saying anything which is not a repetition of the empty formulas of the past which no one listens to in a new culture" (453). Some feminists might well find in these words an accurate expression of their own convictions. It seems clear that the official Church is losing ground in Latin America, especially among women who are turning to pentecostalism and other expressions of Christian faith which answer more fully to their needs and aspirations.

Dussel's volume jolts one's conscience into a disturbing awareness of how much remains undone

in carrying out the Church's mission of peace and progress through service and the promotion of justice. Of special note in Dussel's work is the bibliographical essay and listing of sources sufficient to satisfy the feeding frenzy of most graduate students. Still, in light of current interest in gender studies, a field now twenty years and more on center stage of academic concerns, there is surprisingly little that can be found in the bibliography that is of direct relevance to the study of women's role in the history of the Church. This very absence of material is a strong statement where women stand in the record of times past and present in Latin America. Thanks, however, to the effort and commitment of contemporary writers and scholars, that lacuna in history is fast being filled.

Liberation Theology, which is now seen as a force in contemporary feminist issues, was originally strangely neuter in such matters. Its focus was social justice and the political reformation of society in favor of the poor. Although this movement arose from the CELAM Conference of Medellin in 1968 as an attempt to apply the progressive teaching of Vatican II, it failed to attract strong support from the hierarchy, except in some notable cases such as Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns and Archbishop Helder Camara of Brazil and Bishop Sergio Mendez Arceo of Mexico, all of whom were tarred as Marxist socialists by conservative opponents of their demands for reform and renewal. Out of that movement, however, rose the phenomenon of Base Christian Communities (CEBs), which promoted grassroots activities often led by women. Using the Bible as their inspiration, CEBs aimed at awakening consciousness of the nature and causes of oppression and of the means of combating it. Meanwhile, bishops in general wedded to their traditional conservative postures carefully negotiated the Scylla of capitulation to military dictatorships on the one hand and the Charybdis of Marxism on the other. Perhaps too much energy was dedicated to maintaining their own power and position in society and not enough to common sense evangelization and the promotion of Catholic social thought (Lynch, xi). Accepting the modern principle of separation of church and state came very slowly and grudgingly. For example in Argentina, only in the 1990s under President Carlos Saul Menem, a Muslim convert to Catholicism, did the Church finally reconcile itself to a de facto separation of church and state. The Church will continue to be the principal moral and social critic of the nation, but its role as an arbiter of political power has come to an end. Michael Burdick writes: "For many observers of Argentine Catholicism, this is all the better as the church returns to its sacramental and evangelical mission" (260).

The Church may not need political power, but it does need women working to transmit the faith. When the Mexican Reform of 1854 and the Revolution of 1910 drove the Church from its position of power in civil government, with time it found new means to survive and prosper. That in part is why Mexico is so strong a Catholic country today, and that is why the migrant women of Mexico have been able to transplant the legacy of faith to huge Chicano communities and parishes in the United States in the twentieth century. Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church, 1900-1965 claims: "The transmission of the faith in Mexican/Mexican-American households was left to the family, primarily to the mother and grandmother. Virgil Elizondo refers to the practice as 'religión casera,' while Gilbert Cadena has dubbed it 'abuelita theology'" (Dolan and Hinojosa, 177-178). These titillating put-down names invented by males to describe

grassroots evangelization do scant honor to the facts, but they do highlight the essential role of women in building the Church.

To the generations of mothers and grandmothers keeping the faith throughout Latin America should be added the legions of nuns giving their lives in service of the Church. Vatican II at first seemed to open a new era for them as instruments of faith and justice in a freer and more progressive society. Penny Lernoux, however, in her People of God shows how the situation of liberationist nuns has been even more difficult than that of male religious since the Roman “crackdown” and re-centralization starting in the 1980s. She believed that “Rome tends to treat the nuns in an offhand manner, reflecting the Curia’s attitude that their job is to keep house. Many nuns have accepted that role, particularly the older women from Eastern Europe, Italy, Spain, and parts of Latin America, who cannot understand their sisters’ concern for justice and peace” (358). Lernoux goes on to state that the Vatican’s direct intervention rejecting a proposed reform-minded constitution approved by 80% of the 11,000 Carmelite nuns throughout the world and mandating them to write a new conservative constitution, including minute details of daily order, “shocked the religious world” and outraged many nuns who “have refused to bow to Rome’s dictates” (359-360). Whatever the degree of hyperbole here, the fact is that there exists a general impression that the Roman Curia twenty years after the Council began to smother innovation and diversity in religious and clerical life in favor of greater conformity with its neo-conservative policies even at the expense of the letter and spirit of Vatican II. A feminist agenda in such an atmosphere would have little chance of moving forward.

Lay scholars, however, were indeed blazing new trails in reflection on and promotion of that agenda. One of the first major seminal studies of women’s issues in Latin America came from Luis Vitale, La mitad invisible de la historia: El protagonismo social de la mujer latinoamericana. This work, published in Buenos Aires in 1987, concisely and convincingly covers the indigenous and European origins of the oppression of women in Latin America, the patriarchates of the Inca and Aztec empires, and the place of women in the colonial period. It then moves on to study women in the wars of independence and the role of class, race and sex in nineteenth century capitalist and patriarchal societies. He then examines the twentieth century incorporation of women into the world of work in a machista society with the eventual rebellion of women as part of the European and North American feminist crusades in which the right to the vote and civil divorce were crux issues. In none of these areas did women receive the blessing and support of the Church.

After an almost universal lull of feminist activism during the Second World War and the highly romanticized post-war era, the movement experienced a renaissance in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, especially in Cuba and Nicaragua and in several military dictatorships where women fearlessly demanded respect for human rights. Feminist organizations multiplied with astonishing rapidity throughout the region, and soon their agenda broadened into issues of reproduction, domestic and salaried work, the family, political and social issues. Vitale’s fifteen page specialized bibliography would have satisfied the appetite of the most voracious gourmands of these topics at the time of its publication. The phrase “the invisible half of history” used by

Vitale in the title of his book has become one of the most frequently used phrases in referring to women of Latin America, and indeed of the world. His aim was not only to rescue some notable women from historical oblivion for the sake of the integrity of the record itself but also to present their struggles for justice and freedom as models for commitment and action now. This study ties these issues to very concrete problems, especially to the impact of international debt on the region in general and on Argentina in particular, and it links feminist concerns to the future of democracy and social justice throughout Latin America. While Vitale and others were broadening the scope of inquiry and analysis, Catholic concerns concentrated on the narrower issues of popular religion, politics, CEBs, the New Evangelization of Latin America, and the theology of women. Of course these concerns were enriched and energized by the words and works of the international feminist movement which swept as a strong new wind of thought, aspiration and conviction not only through the Western World but also through the Third World as well. There was nothing, it seemed, that could stop women in their determination to achieve equal rights and rewards for labor and talent as men. The record everywhere, however, shows that such struggles are long and painful, achieving their goals only piecemeal, step by step, and with frequent reversals. Typically, fracturing in liberation movements due to sectarian interests along lines of ideology and class interests work against the thrust forward promised in the initial stages of enthusiasm, energy and fresh vision. There are, nonetheless, always constants which survive from stage to stage and age to age in major social changes and revolutions, one of which in the story of Latin America's struggle for justice is popular religion, a phenomenon rooted in devotional practices sustained and strengthened mostly by women.

Women's Power in and through Popular Religion

Despite sweeping changes in the Church brought about by Vatican II and Liberation Theology in response to contemporary interests and demands of the Catholic community and the modern world, traditional piety remains imbedded in the religious life of the broad base of Latin American society. (Sweeney, "The Nature and Power"). This form of religious expression is called popular religion, a major aspect of the religious culture which helps shape the character of approximately 400 million people of Latin America, eighty five percent of whom are Roman Catholics (Barrett, 14; 783). That culture is a complex and elusive phenomenon which defies easy definition and analysis. Popular religion in Latin America as expressed through devotional piety is a rich and multifaceted theme about which much has been written, especially in recent years, and it is closely related to the great issues of peace and justice. Popular religion, which embraces a pedagogy of faith and suffering, is full of ambiguities. One aspect of its religious culture is the tendency to unquestioning acceptance of suffering and oppression here on earth as the will of God, who is testing us in this vale of tears to see if we are worthy of passing on to the promised land of eternity in heaven. This passive side of popular religion led many Latin American writers to deplore devotional piety, and for almost twenty years it became fashionable to attack and debunk the beliefs and practices associated with it, branding it as fanatical, deviant, primitive and atavistic. Only recently have Catholic theologians and their allies rediscovered the strength and power of popular religion as a force for liberation of the masses.

Popular religion blends the secular and religious in a complex and flexible dimension of faith which can promote not only the pursuit of salvation and holiness but also belief and confidence in the availability of God's power to meet the challenges of daily life. Here piety ties into politics. The religious festive culture fostered public rituals which at times dances on the edge of rebellion. Indeed, popular religion has long borne the potential for revolution. As David Cahill in his study on eighteenth-century Andean popular religion writes: "While rulers and other elites sought to control popular religion for their own ends (to draw its venom, one might say), still others recognized that a throng assembled ostensibly for religious ends provided an ideal setting for subverting, even overturning the colonial order itself. Such subversive instincts existed among all strata of colonial society, a circumstance that at once calls into question the distinction between 'elite' and 'popular' in the study of colonial religious life" (Cahill, 73). The early liberation theologians preoccupation with separating superstition from orthodox religious practices proved neither valid nor fruitful in searching for the meaning and impact of popular religion on society because such a focus destroys the unity of their religious experience and cultural authenticity. The spiritual dynamics of the people do not spring from complicated theological speculation but from the deep-rooted personal conviction that God is present to his people in concrete ways and specific places. Devotion to saints and sanctuaries and to religious myths and symbols proclaim a unique cultural covenant with God that is alien to a strictly juridically prescribed mode of living one's faith. Devotions to the Virgin Mary and the saints are acts of personal faith reaching out to God through the intercession of his special friends for guidance and protection. A social parallel, of enormous importance in Latin American society, is the seeking of favors from one's superior, boss, or patrón through the influence of the master's friends or family. It is as it were, requesting letters of recommendation for a potential employer or for a grant giving foundation. In these devotions, through which the masses give voice to their sorrows, joy, hopes and dreams, a sincere attitude of trust and respect forms the basis for an interpersonal relationship with the saints. With their help a community or an individual hopes the better to cope with a problem-filled world and to resolve specific problems such as resolving family conflicts, finding lost objects, curing diseases, providing good weather for farming or a good catch from the sea.

Millions of people make pilgrimages to sanctuaries and shrines where the sacred images of the saints are housed and where propitiatory promises are made or kept in exchange for favors from the saints. Sacred images of all kinds and sizes are found everywhere--in imposing churches and in parish shrines, on pedestals at the entrance to towns and villages, in private homes and public buildings, on carts and in cars, over doorways, and hung from chains and scapulars around the neck. Jesus Christ, in a variety of images and under a battery of different titles such as "Lord of Miracles" and "The Crucified Lord", is enormously popular because he is perceived to be one of us in suffering and in labor. Ordinary people respond to Christ in a profoundly human way because his humanity is the same as ours. He was a carpenter's son. He walked among the poor and oppressed. He went about doing good. His friends were simple folk: poor fishermen, caring women, repentant sinners, people of good and generous heart. He conquered even death on the cross, and so he is a symbol of deliverance for the masses.

The most popular of all devotions, however, is that to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the most famous of her shrines is in Mexico, where she is venerated as Our Lady of Guadalupe (Sweeney, "The Nature", 152). There, the Blessed Virgin is portrayed in a reputedly miraculous painting on the blue-green poncho (tilma) of Juan Diego, a humble Indian who claimed to have seen the Immaculate Virgin on a knoll a few miles from the center of Mexico City on December 12, 1531 (Poole; Smith). The Virgin, popularly called "La Morena" because of her dark complexion, to whom wondrous miracles are attributed, appeared as a mestiza maiden in sharp contrast to the light skinned Madonnas of the conquerors. In 1945, Pope Pius XII declared Our Lady of Guadalupe "Patroness of the Americas." The glorious old baroque basilica built to house the painting in 1709 was replaced in 1976 by a modernistic structure across the plaza from the older building now closed because of structural weaknesses from earthquakes and crumbling volcanic soil on which it stands. The new structure has a capacity of 10,000. Throughout the year delegations from all over Mexico come to pay Our Lady homage and to keep or make promises for favors requested of La Morena. Millions cherish the dream of one day visiting the shrine before they die. The Villa of Guadalupe has a special Latin American exuberance and flavor. There, piety is embellished with a fiesta fervor of Masses, pilgrim processions, songs and dances, drums and bells, flags and banners, and vendors of candles, santos, and spicy foods of all kinds. The shrine's power and popularity, however, rest not on spectacle and entertainment to attract the tourist, but on the simple and sincere conviction that, in a mysterious and loving way, the Mother of God watches over her people.

Sanctuaries and shrines in honor of the Blessed Virgin can be found in every country of Latin America. Each country has its own Virgin as an expression of faith and of national identity. For example, in Argentina the monumental Gothic church of Our Lady of Luján near Buenos Aires is not only the country's principal devotional center but also the chief symbol of Argentine Catholic cultural character, much like the basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe for Mexico. The social and political importance of these shrines is seen in the fact that the Pope in his visits to Latin America invariably seeks them out as the staging ground for contact with the masses. The guardians and keepers of the Virgin's santos by and large are women who clean and polish, prepare and robe them for processions and special holy day celebrations. They see in Our Lady the expression of women's special status of exalted virtue and of their special merit in accepting their vocation of doing God's will through love and service. In their devotions they accompany Mary in her unspeakable pain and suffering at the foot of her son's cross. They find consolation for their own suffering in the hope that they too one day may triumph over their crosses as Christ did over his in the Resurrection. Every Hispanic mother shares in this exalted status of Mary as "Madre," a revered, a sacred title cherished and respected by all.

Despite their shockingly low rate of sacramental observance, most Latin Americans feel religiously and culturally affiliated with the Catholic Church. The great moments of their lives are given religious meaning in baptism, first Holy Communion, marriage, and Christian burial. Furthermore, the Catholic Church remains the great ethical guide in Latin America. Bishops and priests proclaim the norms of conduct, but women are the ones who inculcate the values and beliefs on which those norms must rest. As a result of this grounding of beliefs into practice, all find in the Church a

community which respects every human being's dignity and offers to every individual, however lowly the person's station in life may be, a sense of the ultimate and noble meaning of what otherwise might be judged a drab and miserable existence. On a wider plane, the Church is a most important factor in the creation of a feeling of social cohesion, identity and unity in lands where millions are passing through the jolting changes characteristic of a still largely agrarian society in the process of urbanization, industrialization and neo-liberal capitalism.

The sacraments, which are reserved to the ministry of priests, are part of official religious practice and are tightly controlled by the hierarchy. Devotions to the saints, however, are generally autonomous rituals which escape clerical control. A priest is not needed here to approach God and the saints in an immediate and personal way. Although the rites of sacraments are minutely prescribed by clerical norms, the rituals of devotion are largely spontaneous and free. Whereas the clergy serve as a sort of supernatural elite in parishes, the major organizing units for sacramental religion directly under the control of bishops, the laity living in remote or clerically unattended communities deprived of the sacraments have worked out strategies for salvation which are open to deviations from canonical norms. Apparent aberrations derived from the survival and blending of ancient myths and rituals with orthodox practices are not unknown in Latin America. There is at times but a fine line between faith and superstition. The yearning and search for security in a threatening world, the age old cry for redemption and justice, and the impulse to merge the sacred and profane find form and expression in popular religion.

Devotional rituals of a syncretic nature are found primarily among the working class and among the poor and dispossessed of society, often people with limited or no access to priests and sacraments. Motivated by a sincere belief in God's care through the mediation of the saints, they present themselves to their patron saints in intensely personal prayer. Emotional outpourings of praise and petition are accompanied by the lighting of candles, the donation of *ex voto* plaques, pictures, and alms, the touching of statues and the kissing of relics. The humble masses send up a plea to heaven for help and survival when medicine, food, work, or other necessities of life are denied them by the world. This personal approach to God through recourse to his saints is a culturally rich and dramatic expression of faith. As the people see it, the saints were human just as they themselves; they overcame every challenge and suffering, and now they live triumphantly forever; they are the models and protectors of those who revere them. Thus the dispossessed and wretched of this earth humanize the harsh and brutalizing realities of poverty through their trust in providence and the power of networking with the Master's mother and friends. This process of dealing with the concrete conditions of one's existence does not normally lead to solipsistic self-pity but rather to the sharing of faith in community through the celebrations and fiestas handed down as part of their cultural tradition, a gratuitous legacy all receive regardless of race or economic status in the community. Women and men in such a setting are free and equal members of the community in their traditional rituals and celebration of faith.

Not everything, however, depends on tradition. There are innovations made constantly to meet new challenges and new circumstances that test their beliefs and try their understanding of the meaning of their lives. This is especially true in the case of the millions of rural folk who migrate to the burgeoning cities and take up residence in the slums, shanty towns and poverty stricken

barrios where no official church services have as yet been established. These urban ghettos, often sprawling zones of misery and oppression, are left, with some exceptions, to their own fate and to the initiative of the residents themselves to organize and maintain community religious life. It is here then that CEBs had their start and women had an extraordinary opportunity to exercise leadership in local church affairs.

Women and Leadership in the Popular Church Movement

CEBs (Comunidades Eclesiales de Base) are community groups dedicated to reflection on and the implementation of the liberating message of the Bible. Characteristically made up of dedicated lay persons in working and middle class neighborhoods, they became the special forte of charismatic women leaders whose aim was the promotion of social justice on the local level and where possible on a broader political stage. Much has been said of the surprising sophistication, creative innovation, and political activism of these groups. Much of what has been claimed for them turned out to be exaggerations if not sheer fantasy. Most of the CEB members were just ordinary folk seeking a community expression of faith where the institutional Church failed to provide it. The Bible, not Marx nor Mao, was the focus of their reading which they used as a springboard for prayer and action. In these communities, the members enrich their daily lives with a firm conviction of God's love for them, and thus they help to transform poverty, fear, and frustration from intolerable burdens into redemptive sufferings which challenge them to action. They believe that if they work and pray together in a spirit of hope and trust, they can overcome oppression and human iniquities. For the most part they do not seek academic explanations, through reflection on political structures and economic systems, of the causes of poverty and oppression. There is as yet only an embryonic awareness of the power of scientific analysis and structural change to transform the socio-economic order of society for the good of all. They rely on common sense and the universal convictions of what is just and proper in dealing with human beings and their inalienable rights as such. They refuse to be a passive, submissive, resigned flock of sheep stuck in underdevelopment and oppression. Despite the problems and pains they encounter, they are dynamic, generous, and full of faith in the future. Their spirituality and their practice of their faith are intensely personalized and interiorized, creatively adapted to the circumstances of their lives. Manifest faith in the Christ of history as their savior and liberator gives them the courage to go forward and to care for each other generously and lovingly.

Although women in general, just as the men, may be quite ignorant of theological subtleties, political ideologies, and economic dependency theories, the rank and file are far from naive regarding the role of concrete goods and services which constitute the basis for a decent human life. They are also quite aware of the means necessary to achieve them. Here, religion and justice go hand in hand. Religion neither suffocates nor opiates the spirit of justice in Latin America, rather it nourishes and strengthens it. All people yearn to exercise control over their lives and over the decisions which determine the vital aspects of their being such as agrarian reform, just wages, personal freedom, political equality and social justice for all. The masses correctly perceive that they lack sophisticated professional and technical skills in an industrial

world, and therefore it is practically impossible for them alone to launch a frontal attack on the institutionalized injustice of authoritarian corporate and state institutions. They realize, however, that they are not alone. Constantly reminded by the Church of their human dignity as the image of God on earth, they see in their faith and in the Church a motive, a means, and a legitimation for social change. Despite the fact that national and regional conferences of bishops have not adequately endorsed or supported the initiatives of women in building Christian communities, the teaching of the Church does not contradict but rather complements their religious and social concerns for personal and communal faith that does justice, a faith which can be and often has been a force for reform and the promotion of human rights. With the imposition of military dictatorships in the 1960s and 1970s throughout Latin America, the Church became “the voice of those who have no voice” until the return of democracy in the 1980s and 1990s (Sweeney, “The Nature” 162-163). The neo-liberal capitalist programs implemented by the military’s development models proved economically disastrous for the laboring and middle classes and enormously enriching for the elite managerial and investment sectors of society. During that period CEBs flourished under women’s leadership, especially in Brazil where women’s movements mobilized to advocate social transformation with a specifically feminist agenda of family concerns and with demands for a return to democracy. (Alvarez, Engendering).

In these CEBs women began fashioning a new and liberating vision of Christianity based on egalitarian human relations within their grass-roots communities which came to be called “the Popular Church” seen as part of the new “Progressive Church” born of Medellín and Liberation Theology. The CEBs did not attempt to confront the traditional hierarchical Church; rather, they tried to generate from within themselves new forms of spiritual life and commitment in order to cope with and overcome the underdevelopment, marginalization, dependency, and poverty in which their communities lived (Azevedo; Hewitt). The CEBs opened up new prospects for women in decision-making and leadership as they decided to address social problems and to take part in the struggle for a better world. Women shared leadership and authority equally with men, just as they shared the tasks and responsibilities assumed by the community. As a result of this participation in authority as well as in labor, women in the barrios for the first time became active agents of social change instead of remaining merely passive instruments in an historic process. They discovered themselves and were discovered more fully as persons. They reached that point thanks to the feminist movement, liberation theology and their own active faith. The momentum, however, could not be sustained.

With the restoration of democracy and the re-centralization of the Vatican in the 1980s and 1990s, the feminist thrust in the CEBs retreated from social justice issues and took refuge in more personal and purely local affairs. It seems that the Popular Church’s wave had spent its energy just as it came crashing on the shore of the promised land of equality and justice for all. Recent evaluations of the progressive Catholic Church in Latin America confirm this view. John Burdick in his 1994 review essay of seven key works on this and related topics stated: “Over the last ten years, expansion and utopian hope have been replaced by retrenchment and, in many places, decline. It has become increasingly difficult to ignore the political fragility of the Christian base communities (CEBs) and the slowdown and even stagnation in their growth” (185). In reviewing W. E. Hewitt’s

Base Christian Communities and Social Change in Brazil, Burdick writes: “Finally, the vast majority of CEB participants are women, and an increasing number of them are gaining access to positions of leadership. This trend does not imply, however, that CEBs are progressive on women’s issues. Hewitt argues that most women participate as a simple extension of their traditional role as the backbone of institutional Catholicism” (190). Such an outcome might be welcomed by conservative clerics, but it is sad tidings for feminists once fired with faith in the CEB pristine zeal for their cause of social justice and human rights.

Feminist Polarities and Paradoxes in the “New Evangelization of Latin America”

Fresh opportunities for leadership and service presented themselves for women in the push for a new wave of evangelization and spiritual renovation sponsored by the Catholic hierarchy in connection with the 1992 quincentennial celebration of the European discovery of the New World (Sweeney, “La Iglesia”). Neither the name nor the nature of this new evangelization were of current coinage at that time; they were spoken of ever since Vatican II. Pope Paul VI addressed his apostolic exhortation “*Evangelii Nuntiandi*” to the bishops, clergy and all the faithful urging them to promote evangelization in the modern world with renewed zeal, love and joy. This theme was taken up by CELAM in Medellín in 1968 and again in Puebla in 1979. In 1983, John Paul II proposed to celebrate the quincentennial with “a new evangelization.”

It is both interesting and instructive to follow the course of that new campaign in Argentina, a country noted for its rigidly authoritarian tradition of church leadership. The Argentine Episcopal Conference met in San Miguel, just outside of the city of Buenos Aires in November of 1985 and approved the document “*Bases para una labor pastoral en orden a una nueva evangelización.*” In April 1987 John Paul II made his second visit to Argentina and reinforced the project of a new evangelization. In their May 1987 conference, the Argentine bishops decided upon the fundamental principles of action in promoting their plan, and they invited the entire People of God to join the movement. They then carried out a survey of active lay persons on a variety of issues. 77,034 responses were received. The results provided a profile of the Argentine Church which clearly traced out some important attitudes, beliefs and aspirations of lay people. At the center of their concerns was the nurturing of the faith through the sacraments and the Bible. The family was seen as the principal agent in fostering the faith and a major pillar in evangelization and the transmission of religious beliefs. The survey showed the intense desire of lay folk to see the Church become more missionary, more evangelical, more open to others not only in its pastoral style but also in its content and methodology in the propagation of the faith. They believed that to sustain the new dynamism apparent in the Church, the active participation of the laity was necessary. They recommended that the Church pay more attention to promoting its social teaching as well as its doctrine on family and sexual matters, and to implementing its preferential option for the poor.

Finally in April of 1990, the bishops approved the general outlines of action and promised to implement the mission of evangelization more vigorously. Much effort, money and time were

spent in projects and planning, but with hardly any tangible results. On reviewing this movement from the perspective of several years later, it seems that by and large the entire affair was left to hang in the wind of noble aspirations and unfulfilled promises. In the meantime, Pentecostal sects and charismatic churches, often led by women, were booming. Many working class persons, especially women, have been turning from their vertical, authoritarian Catholic parishes and are going to evangelical groups where they do not encounter the haughty attitude of some parish priests who humiliate and manipulate the faithful instead of providing them with a welcoming, joyful and participatory community where they would feel comfortable and respected.

The rapid advance of aggressive evangelical sects throughout Latin America has alarmed the Church in Argentina. The bishops will have to work hard to promote and consolidate the faith of their people in a world caught up in whirlwind change in the age of cybernetics and mass communications. Otherwise they are going to preside over an ever greater erosion in the number of Catholics now only nominally associated with the institutional church. The electronic proselytism of Evangelicals and Pentecostals, experts in radio and television preaching and masters of personal affirmation and psychological persuasion, has had no significant response or competition from the Catholics who depend on Sunday sermons at Masses imposed “under pain of mortal sin” and attended by perhaps 5% of the people. The Pentecostal preachers have been reaping abundant harvests of converts by reaching right through radio and television right into their homes many hours each day, bombarding them with the gospel message according to each preacher’s personal views and values. They spread their message with a fundamentalist zeal that leaves no room to doubt their sincerity, except in the few cases of money grubbing hucksters caught in fraud and high living. Now and then there have been cases of so-called “New Age” cults practicing aberrations and the sexual exploitation of children and young girls, but they are the exceptions. Sensationalizing such phenomena has never proven to be a lasting check on the growth of these alternative religious groups and evangelical churches.

The new Code of Canon Law and the Catechism of the Catholic Church have not provoked the renewal of fervor and church growth hoped for from them. Even relatively minor issues of liturgical reform, long accepted and implemented in other countries, have generally been resisted in Argentina, and when accepted it is often grudgingly. For example, Communion in the hand was finally allowed as of August 15, 1996, but “altar girls” were still proscribed. It seems that perhaps even unconsciously the traditionally conservative bishops employ a war of attrition on change by spending the energies of the reform-minded on minor skirmishes, while the battle for souls is being won by others. The dearth of priests is reaching alarming proportions, as it is throughout Latin America, the United States and Europe. Unless they plan to cover the deficits with the excess of vocations in India and certain other third world countries, the bishops will have to look to the laity for solutions. The hierarchy has called upon the faithful for collaboration in carrying out Pope John Paul’s “New Evangelization,” but it has provided few concrete means to help in meeting the implementation of that mission. Most calls to action remain suspended in a surrealistic void of pious exhortation devoid of operative alternatives such as sharing not only responsibility but also power necessary to achieve the noble ends proposed to men and women in service of the Church.

Women are the pillars of the Catholic primary and secondary schools. They hold great power in the public school system as well. They are daily more important in maintaining the health care system throughout the country. They have moved into positions of power and responsibility in industry, management, political parties and labor unions. They are advancing everywhere except in the Church, which is considered to be especially conservative regarding the position of women within it. The debates and demands of the Catholic feminist movement in the United States have had little resonance in the Southern Cone except in small groups of religious women. Complaints are heard now and then about the all male hierarchy because of its absolute monopoly of power, but there has been no evidence of widespread discontent. After Vatican II there were a few instances of a new consciousness of the secondary role of women. A small number of nuns and lay women promoted the idea of developing a theology of women. They wanted to clarify and strengthen the position of women through Liberation Theology methodologies fostering full personal and sacramental maturity. In the 1970s they organized groups inspired by the lay feminist movement pushing for equal rights in civil law. Among their goals were: access to theological studies, teaching positions in universities, the creation of institutes for the study of women's issues, the elimination of discrimination against women in canon law, and the possibility of ordained ministry. They had a broad agenda aimed at the transformation of oppressive clerical structures that trap many women in psychological and institutional underdevelopment because of male domination (Arce, 14-15). This liberationist movement never was able to consolidate its forces and achieve its goals to any significant degree, but the ideas and spirit expressed by it will live on. It is likely that the feminist agenda will continue to be a compelling force among the well-informed and determined women dedicated to justice and equality. The ideas and aspirations nourishing international feminism will certainly continue to penetrate the frontiers of even the most reactionary hierarchies of Latin America. In the end, however, the outcome will not depend on national bishops conferences but on Rome (Quinn; Reese).

Inclusive Language and the Gender of God

One of the flash points in Catholic feminism is that of inclusive language and the naming of God. Many feminists insist very strongly that the sacred texts from the Bible used in the liturgy of the word at Mass and all prayers be sensitive to their concerns for equality and full inclusion as members of the People of God. Phrases such as "Christ gave his life for all men," must now be rendered by deleting the "men". "Laymen" has been changed to "laypersons", and so on. This issue came late to the Church for it was born of the secular feminism that had changed "chairman" to "chairperson" along with a whole host of other words. These changes reflect a now widely accepted recognition of legitimate demands which give women a sense of empowerment and belonging. The initial resistance to changing male words, which from context were easily and commonly understood to be inclusive of both genders, has been pretty much universally overcome in the United States and to a lesser degree in Latin America. Tampering with the sacred texts of revelation, however, proved to be quite another matter. Common sense won out in the English speaking world. People adapted according to the tone and circumstances of their congregations. The very nature of Spanish and Portuguese with either masculine or feminine endings linked to a strong macho tradition made things more difficult in Latin America.

Tinkering with traditional usage and the wording of texts remained deeply problematic. What has not been accepted nor tolerated, however, is the use of female designations in the naming of God the Father. To call him God the Mother at Sunday Mass would raise the ire and consternation of the congregation. Period. Why this is so has provoked endless debate on the subject. The naming of God the Father became one of those limit issues that separate mainstream Catholics from radical feminists.

Paul Vitz, writing in Homiletic & Pastoral Review in February 1997, comments: “It is a widely recognized today that the Christian concept of God as Father is under attack. Specifically, various religious writers, primarily feminist, have proposed that God should be called Mother, or possibly the androgynous Father/Mother or Mother/Father. In some instances God as Parent has been proposed” (7). After underscoring the religious importance of this matter, Vitz continues: “.. ., to reject God the Father as a name is to deny the basic Christian creeds. It is to deny the language of baptism, and of course to deny the entire theology of the Trinity upon which Christianity and its theology have been constructed.” A few Jesuitical distinctions here might solve the problem and sidestep such thunderous, apocalyptic conclusions. The point, however, is not to dwell on the theology of the gender of God in revelation but to illustrate the deep passions this issue ignites. Vitz blasts away: “Modern feminism was very about equality between men and women and was opposed to any emphasis on differences between the sexes. But in the last 15 years or so a new kind of feminism has arisen which might be called ‘post-modern’ feminism. These feminists very much emphasize sexual difference--indeed some of these radical feminists argue not only that women are different from men but are psychologically and morally superior to them. This kind of emphasis on difference rather quickly led, in theology, to goddess-worship and to explicit rejection of Christianity” (8).

An androgynous or unisex First Person of the Blessed Trinity has little chance in Latin America of taking over from the chairperson God the Father. Furthermore, no goddess would be allowed to compete with Mary, the Mother of God. The feminist yearning for equality, encouragement and empowerment will certainly find creative expression in the naming of God who is beyond all gender, real or symbolic. There is a growing number of Latina theologians quite capable of addressing, from the perspective of their professional competence, feminist concerns in an innovative and respectful way. María Pilar Aquino, for example, is one of them. When, however, matters are pushed to offensive extremes, such as publicly displaying a carving of a naked female figure on a cross and calling it *Crista*, well-meaning but aggressively intrusive feminists lacking horse sense bring down opprobrium on a good cause. In the contemporary clash of cultures between feminists and non-feminists, tolerance must go both ways with respect for the values, needs and mores of all concerned. To turn gender differences into a battle of the sexes is hardly the way to promote the greater glory of God.

Some Recent Latin American Feminist Literature

A review of the literature shows how only recently writers in large numbers focused on Latin American women and their concerns. Of course there have been books on and by women for

generations now, but that corpus of writing tended to trot out the same old figures: La Malinche, Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz, the Empress Leopoldina, Evita Perón, Frieda Kahlo and half a dozen more. Essays on La Mujer, a 1977 UCLA Chicano Studies Center publication, offered “Chicana History: A Review of the Literature” by Judith Sweeney. She wrote: Although the current interest in social history potentially favors the development of Chicana history, to date relatively little has been done and the obstacles to future research are serious. First, there is a lack of trained Chicana historians, the result of both underrepresentation of Chicanos in academic life and low priority given to graduate-level training for women” (Sánchez, 99). The listings, nonetheless, are ample for the interested reader! The volume of Chicana writers mushroomed soon after the publication of that essay. As for Latin America strictly so called, feminist publications and organizations boomed in the wake of the United States feminist movement and the explosion of interest in their issues. The Latin American Research Review soon began to pay more notice to women writers and for over a decade now has been publishing many articles and reviews of literature by or about women. For example, Judith Adler Hellman’s 1992 “Making Women Visible: New Works on Latin American and Caribbean Women” explores the lives of working women as told in seven ground breaking books illuminating the impact of women on the economy, and the impact of the economy on women. Her review notes: “Although these six books differ in many respects, their authors share a common concern. Each expresses a determination to bring to readers’ attention those who have so long been invisible and thus to give women’s activities and attitudes the significance previously denied” (Hellman, 182-183). This and other constant themes of feminism resonate in her words on “... what June Nash has called the paradox of gender relations in a society that gives power and authority to men while assigning the major responsibility for child care and the family’s economic survival to women” (185). These works are an invitation to contextualize religion and clerical authority in the real world, hauling them out of the sanctuary where only men are allowed to preside into the humble homes and fevered factories of the women of the laboring poor.

The HARR 1993 review “Women of Vice, Virtue, and Rebellion: New Studies of Representation of the Female in Latin America” explores gender-based power relations in Jean Franco’s Plotting Women. The reviewer summarizes: “Mastics’ descriptions of their psychic voyages included sensual contacts with Christ that subverted sexual symbolism. Eroticizing wounds and blood and denying phallogocentrism, these women could simultaneously claim religious authority and express forbidden fantasies and sexual desire.... Confined within Catholic dogma, mystical experience ultimately legitimized the authority of the Catholic Church and reinforced the opposition between female emotion and male intellect” (Caulfield, 164-165). In all four books subjected to the reviewer’s sharp but appreciative eye, women always come out the victorious victims, they have the stuff to stand up to the male’s abusive authority and exploitation. This is feminism in full bloom. Finally, Kathleen Logan’s 1997 review “Personal Testimony: Latin American Women Telling Their Lives” evaluates ten books on women’s resistance and activism in the family and local community, and also in state and national politics. Renny Golden’s The Hour of the Poor, The Hour of Women, an attempt to portray the spiritual dimension in the lives of the women of El Salvador discusses the role of the Church in their lives. The review says: “Religion, especially revitalizing interpretations of faith such as liberation theology, is key to the

political activism of many Latin American women. Women's religious faith is a significant aspect of their lives that is granted too little importance by some scholars, who tend to view religious faith as an anti-transformative false consciousness (Logan, 2007).

This brief but representative overview of contemporary Latin American literature by women points to the fact that religion as a theme in feminist concerns, while not quite disappearing from the platform, is moving off center stage pushed by women's current interest in more earthly subjects in an increasingly urban and industrial culture. One gets the impression that this is so perhaps in part because of the conviction that for the moment at least tightly centralized church authority is not about to slip from the monopolistic grasp of males. Power, not piety, is at the core of the feminist agenda. If Latin American women had real authority and leadership roles in the Catholic Church, the literature would be filled with studies of their spiritual ministries and clerical activities in a part of the world profoundly imbued with faith and religious traditions.

Shelving the Issue: The Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns

1992 was a banner year for studies of religion in Latin America in celebration of the quincentennial of the first evangelization of the New World. Rivers of computer ink flowed as both scholars and publicity hungry hacks rushed in to praise or trash the work of the missionaries. Five centuries of sacrifice and labor were seen by some as a glorious witness to salvation history. Others deplored the whole enterprise as the bitter fruit of misguided zeal and even as a devastating evil which robbed the native peoples of their land, their riches, and their labor, along with their human dignity and cultural identity. More smoke than light poured out until the year was over, and people breathed a sigh of relief to be free of the bickering, blame seeking and bombast churned up by the whole affair. The focus of the quincentennial literature was on the friars and their allies. Relatively speaking, women did not count for much. There were, however, some memorable works by and about them. One of the brightest lights in the sparse ranks of writers on faith aspects in the lives of Latin American women was María Pilar Aquino, a young Mexican-born nun with a doctorate in theology from the Pontifical University of Salamanca. Aquino, in her Nuestro clamor por la vida: Teología latinoamericana desde la perspectiva de la mujer, gathered the main currents of the previous twenty years of religious feminism in Latin America. Her brilliant synthesis is complemented by her analysis of major themes in the theology of women and enriched by an ample bibliography. A central and sensitive point of her work is that much remains to be done to vindicate women's role in the Church and to accord them their proper place in the direction and decision making power of the institution.

Meanwhile, a team of women theologians and laypeople in collaboration with some bishops were at work on the study of women's issues in the Church in the United States. This group formed the Ad Hoc Committee for a Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and it was charged with preparing a position paper which might serve as the bishops' statement on women in the Church. The fate of their work would certainly impact the feminist movement South of the border as well as that in the United States. The Ad

Hoc Committee had been created twenty years before the quincennial celebration, and work on a draft for a pastoral letter started in 1983. Nine years of long arduous research, broad consultation and skilled writing went into producing the document, a respectful and measured expression of their views and aspirations. An international episcopal committee met in Rome in 1991 to review the third draft of their proposed pastoral letter “Called to Be One in Christ Jesus.” Further discussion at the June 1992 bishops assembly led to the final draft of the pastoral presented to the assembly in November 1992. The document addressed concerns for equality in dignity with men, the right to be treated as persons, the need to combat sexism, and a call to denunciation of discrimination. The pastoral called for equality and responsibility in relationships in family and society. It then addressed the sensitive issues of birth control, abortion, divorce, premarital chastity and homosexuality. This chapter closed with an exhortation for promoting Christian values in society.

In the third and final chapter, the document explored the role of women in the Church, the ministerial priesthood and collaborative ministry, along with other related issues. The draft pastoral held to the traditional teaching on exclusively male ordination to the priesthood. This disappointed many radical feminists and appears to be the decisive issue bringing about the defeat of the document. Liberal bishops objected to the draft because they believed it closed the door on further discussion of priestly ordination for women. As a result, some thought the document went too far and others that it did not go far enough on women’s concerns. After intense debate the document fell short of the necessary two-thirds vote, and so instead of being confirmed by the bishops, it was received merely as a Committee Report and given the status of a working paper to encourage further prayer and reflection on women’s concerns. The introduction to the published version of the document tried to soften the blow of rejection: “This response is a step forward in a journey. It is not meant to bring our own or the Christian community’s process of reflection, study, discussion, dialogue, catechesis, and action to an end but to a new beginning. We have become aware, since we began this work in 1983, that the process itself has produced much that is good. We hope the task begun here will carry us into the third millennium of Christianity (2).” Indeed it will.

The assembly pulled back from simply repudiating the draft pastoral thanks to the intervention of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago. He mediated a compromise by which the document was given the status of a study paper. That is pretty much the same as being shelved, despite the fact that the majority of bishops voted for the report to be accepted as a pastoral of the NCCB. The disappointment of feminists was great, but conservative bishops both of North and South America rejoiced that this particular campaign for women’s liberation had been defeated. And so it was, at least for the moment.

To be continued.

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