

The Mysticism of Resistance: The Global Suffering of Women as an Ethical Imperative for the Church

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Abstract

The Catholic Church's evangelizing and healing presence throughout the world also entails the unintended reinforcement of cultural forces of misogyny that contribute to the suffering of women. This presents an urgent ethical imperative for the church to examine and reform its patriarchal structures of decision-making, ministry, and worship. Ecofeminist epistemologies and Schillebeeckx's theory of the proportional norm are employed in a movement through the steps of a theological reflection process that the author learned in collaboration with women theologians from Latin America. The symbolic paradigm guiding the movement is the Lukan Gospel's *bent-over woman, standing up straight and glorifying God*.

Keywords

Catholic Church, epistemology, ecofeminism, patriarchy, resistance, Edward Schillebeeckx, sexism, suffering, women

Edward Schillebeeckx writes that “for the most part people live by stories,”¹ and I believe that to be true. However, Rebecca Solnit is even more forceful: “People live and die by stories.”² Solnit was writing about the devastating impact of

1. Edward Schillebeeckx, “Appendix: Dominican Spirituality,” in Erik Borgman, *Dominican Spirituality* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 92.
2. Rebecca Solnit, “Falling Together,” interview with Krista Tippett on NPR's *On Being*, speaking of her analysis of Katrina in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2010), <https://onbeing.org/programs/rebecca-solnit-falling-together/>, May 26, 2016.

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negative journalism in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, showing how some public narratives functioned to imprison people, mainly poor black people, in the city of New Orleans. People do indeed live and die by stories. Depending upon its perspective, a story can open up a future full of hope, or it can effectively shut down hope and cut people off from the promise of life. Stories arise from our functioning epistemologies, and they structure reality, for good or for ill.

Schillebeeckx maintains that throughout our Christian tradition, there have always been people whose lives have constituted a “cross-threaded” story going against the grain of the dominant tradition in order to remain faithful to the tradition’s Gospel depths.³ Often, these have been people who en flesh what Schillebeeckx calls the “proportional norm.” That is, there is a “proportional equality” between, on the one hand, the relation of Jesus’ original message to his historical-cultural situation and, on the other hand, the Christian community’s relation to the contemporary historical-cultural situation.⁴ Erik Borgman observes that Schillebeeckx’s notion of a “proportional identity” between Jesus and contemporary believers is revolutionary because “it introduces the current social-historical context into the very core of revelation itself.”⁵ It is revolutionary because it challenges the common ecclesial assumption that Christian identity lies in homogeneous continuity. In contrast, Schillebeeckx locates authentic Christian identity precisely “*in* cultural ruptures or shifts.”⁶ In a passage that implicitly equates orthodoxy with the arrival of God as future and hope en fleshed in present praxis, Schillebeeckx emphasizes that the criterion for orthodoxy “always reveals itself in something other than itself.”⁷ It reveals itself as “a change to be realized.”⁸

Individuals and communities who transpose the substance of Jesus’ ministry into the praxis demanded by their own time and cultural context may find that their stories become cross-threads in the ecclesial fabric that surrounds them. Woven through this cross-threaded fabric we find the narrative thread of women’s stories of suffering and

3. Schillebeeckx develops this image alternately as “cross-threaded” and “cross-grained” with reference to how the Dominican story takes up the story of Jesus, noting that a “golden thread” runs through the Dominican family story. “As may become evident, this golden thread sometimes runs across the fabric of Christianity.” He then switches to a musical metaphor, stating that Dominican spirituality in practice must be “a completely new rendering of an old Dominican melody.” Of the older melody, the “constantly recurring theme,” the “basic story,” he says, “I would say it is a cross-grained story!” See his “Appendix,” in Borgman, *Dominican Spirituality*, 96.

4. Edward Schillebeeckx, “The Role of History is What is Called the New Paradigm,” in Robert Schreiter, ed., *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology and the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 237–47; 242.

5. Erik Borgman, “Edward Schillebeeckx’s Reflections on the Sacraments and the Future of Catholic Theology,” in Erik Borgman, Paul D. Murray, and Andres Torres Queiruga, eds., *Sacramentalizing Human History: In Honour of Edward Schillebeeckx* (London: Concilium/SCM, 2012), 21.

6. Schillebeeckx, “The Role of History in What is Called the New Paradigm,” 242.

7. Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 66.

8. Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith*, 66.

loss giving rise to a cross-grained praxis of mysticism that constitutes a *locus liberationis*. These narratives are unfolding globally on the peripheries to which Pope Francis summoned us during the Year of Mercy to an encounter with the “other.”⁹ Indeed, encounter is the condition for the possibility of mercy; rightly approached and contemplatively embraced, it can be the occasion of God’s inbreaking into our lives and communities. In the encounter with those who suffer, who are oppressed, or who are visibly or invisibly alienated, Christ is waiting to be made known. To enter into that saving revelation, we need to attend to our functioning epistemology: *How* do we know what we “know”? What experiences condition our perceptions? How might we be imposing our own unconscious presuppositions and values on the “other,” thus strengthening rather than dismantling the walls that divide us from one another?

An Encounter among Women in Lima

Allow me to begin with a personal example of encounter. It began with an invitation to enter into a shared process of theological reflection with Dominican women theologians in Latin America. Layers of preparation preceded an Inter-American Encuentro in Lima slated for late September into early October 2001. When I set out for it, it was just two weeks after 9/11.

Now this once eagerly anticipated adventure, and the airplane travel to get there, was bathed in a new consciousness—of those other planes, of the people on them and in the Towers, and the dark forces of hatred that planned the tragedy of that day.

For over a year we had been engaged in regional processes of theological reflection, contemplating the effects of globalization on women, especially the poor. Never could we North American Dominican women have imagined this darkest face of globalized terror. But when we gathered with our sisters from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, we were met with looks and embraces of sober, compassionate knowing. The violence and terror that stunned us by its visit to our shores was simply part of the fabric of life in so many of their home countries.

The topic of that first First Inter-American Encuentro was “The Mysticism of Women and the Peoples in the Face of Globalization.” Our process was structured around the Lukan Gospel figure of the *bent-over woman standing up straight* (Luke 13:10–17). She had accompanied us in reflecting upon the experiences of women in each of our home regions. Now we were bringing the fruits of that reflection to one another across many different borders, and engaging the process yet again, one day at a time. Our Latin American sisters taught us patience, the patience that is theirs by virtue of all they have endured in the accompaniment of their own oppressed peoples.

9. On March 13, 2015 Pope Francis announced that the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy would take place from December 8, 2015 to November 30, 2016 in St. Peter’s Basilica; see Francis, Apostolic Letter *Misericordiae Vultus*, April 11, 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco_bolla_20150411_misericordiae-vultus.html.

They showed us, very concretely, how to sift the complex layers of life's suffering for living fragments of salvation.

We were concluding our conference with a festive luncheon replete with joyous indigenous song and dance performed by novices in native garb. At a certain interval, I passed by a small room off our gathering space, and noticed a group somberly huddled in front of a TV, which I found odd. I moved into the little huddle to discover that the USA had just commenced bombing Afghanistan. A few of us North Americans found ourselves embraced in a circle by several of our weeping Latina sisters. Indeed, we wept with them, but for such different reasons. We were bent over by grief into the physically shared center of our circle. Yet that embrace in solidarity was freighted with this glaring, poignant contradiction, a contradiction that had been present in veiled and ambiguous ways during the entire process of our week-long Encuentro: We North Americans are privileged beneficiaries of the values and actions of the world's dominant power; we represent that power. Our sisters of the Global South and the people among whom they labor are victims, in many and varied ways, of the machinations of that power and dominance. They can embrace us and forgive us and believe in our compassion, but the contradiction remains. What we learn about the "other" in genuine encounter not only requires vulnerability; it renders us still more vulnerable in what we learn about ourselves and our unwitting complicity.

We may nobly long for the salvation of the suffering "other," but encounter reveals to us our own need for salvation and the summons to conversion that it entails. That conversion requires a shift in our personal functioning epistemologies, to be sure. However, I argue here that just such a transformative shift in epistemology with regard to the reality of women's suffering is nowhere more urgently needed than in our most public ecclesial structures. The Catholic Church constitutes the most effective and unified global voice on behalf of the marginalized. Yet, not only what the church says and does on behalf of justice and inclusion, but what it models in its sacred symbols and official representation powerfully impacts the consciousness, perceptions, and practices of the peoples and cultures it seeks to evangelize. That is why I propose that, amidst the complex suffering of all marginalized peoples, the global suffering of women constitutes an ethical imperative for the church.

A focus on the distinct suffering of women does not exclude the real suffering of men. However, wherever human beings suffer oppression, poverty, violence, or discrimination, and wherever there are refugees, exiles, or displaced persons, the women among them typically bear the brunt of that suffering as they struggle to sustain life in death-dealing circumstances.¹⁰ Moreover, countless women are victimized in their

10. For a small sampling of an enormous reservoir of recent and ongoing studies, see Lorraine Charles and Kate Denman, "Syrian and Palestinian Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: The Plight of Women and Children," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 14 (2013): 96–111, <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol14/iss5/7>; Mahlet Atakilt Woldetsadik, "The Precarious State of Syrian Refugee Women, Children in Lebanon," *TheRANDblog* (Sept. 13, 2016), <https://www.rand.org/blog/2016/09/>; Laurie Penny, "For Refugee Women in Germany, Solidarity is Non-Negotiable," *New Statesman* (April 1, 2016),

bodies by distinctly sexual violence and violation, simply because they are women. I would like here to enter into an exercise that might help us uncover the hidden epistemologies at work in us, in the communities and institutions we inhabit, in society, and particularly, in our church.

In this essay, I argue that bent-over women of our time present an ethical imperative to the Catholic Church, an imperative that demands institutional self-examination of how patriarchal structures, language, symbols, epistemology, and modes of relating, decision-making, and communication contribute to the suffering of women in multiple ways and in diverse contexts. In global contexts of poverty and oppression, the masculine face and voice of the church's authoritative presence in worship and ministry serves to reinforce cultural patriarchies and misogynistic practices that cause women to suffer. In "first world" contexts, it functions to silence the voices and render invisible the gifts and faces of women in ministry, causing direct spiritual suffering while tacitly giving divine sanction to the increasingly misogynistic overtones of public politics and culture. I will demonstrate the argument for the church's ethical imperative in the following steps: (1) stating the problem by seeing the reality; (2) analyzing the causes of oppression against women, in particular by contrasting patriarchal epistemology with ecofeminist epistemology; (3) describing the mystical praxis of resistance; and (4) naming signs of resurrection hope.

The unifying method will be an ongoing encounter with the Lukan Gospel pericope of the bent-over woman, standing up straight. This Gospel narrative will function in interaction with the lives of contemporary women who are bent-over, yet who live in hope of standing up straight. The Gospel text and the four steps of theological reflection together form a mutually illuminating template in which the narratives of women's experiences articulate future resurrection hope in and through the unveiling and rejection of the patriarchal sources of their suffering. My own experience of this process in Lima with religious women from throughout Latin America, together with the experiences and insights of ecofeminist theologians from across the globe engaged in similar processes, ground and inform my argument.¹¹

newstatesman.com; United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and Women's Refugee Council (WRC), *Initial Assessment Report: Protection Risks for Women and Girls in the European Refugee and Migrant Crisis (Greece and the former Republic of Macedonia)*, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/operations/569f8f419/initial-assessment-report-protection-risks-women-girls-european-refugee.html>; Preethi Nallu, "Women's Refugee Commission: Refugee Protection Must be Gender Specific," *News Deeply: Women's Advancement Deeply* (September 20, 2016), <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/community/2016/09/20/womens-refugee-commission-protecting-female-refugees-is-essential>.

11. This method of critically engaging Scripture in relation to life on behalf of liberative praxis has a long history. Its most familiar manifestation lies in the Christian Base Communities of Latin America (*Comunidades Eclesiales de Base*, or CEBs), which grew in influence especially after Medellín in 1968. Such communities have arisen in Africa and Asia, as well. More recently, groups of women in diverse cultures and economic classes have been

Seeing the Reality, Describing the Situation of Oppression

I begin with Luke's image of the *bent-over woman, standing up straight*. She embodies the periphery to which Pope Francis calls us, and she reveals that the journey to that periphery is not necessarily geographical; the periphery is in our midst, often hidden in plain sight:

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?"¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. (Luke 13:10–17, NRSV)

Luke tells us that Jesus "saw" this woman. Looking through the eyes of Jesus, we might ask, what do we see? We see women in their varied, tragic plights in so many corners of the world, the myriad ways that women uniquely experience suffering in their bodies, and how inextricably entwined are physical, emotional, and spiritual affliction. Consider the plight of women and girl children in the poorest regions of the globe who are chained to the task of procuring water for their families, at the expense of education, personal growth, and development.¹² Or women who are trafficked and enslaved as laborers and sex-workers.¹³

In parts of India, girl children are considered such a liability that women who find themselves pregnant with them are trapped and tortured by husbands and in-laws

gathering to engage in reflection upon Scripture through the lens of their own experience. All of these movements were preceded by the Critical Communities which emerged among the laity in the Netherlands before Vatican II was visible on the horizon, and which are reflected in the writings of Edward Schillebeeckx from that period. William Portier discusses the Dutch Catholic experience in "Interpretation and Method," in *The Praxis of the Reign of God: An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Robert Schreier and Mary Catherine Hilkert (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 19–36. See also Mark Schoof, "Dutch Catholic Theology: A New Approach to Christology," *Cross Currents* 22 (1973): 415–27.

12. See, for example, Christiana Z. Peppard, *Just Water: Theology, Ethics, and the Global Water Crisis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014).
13. See Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), especially

seeking to induce miscarriage, or they are forced by cultural pressure to abort or to kill their girl children after birth. In such forced abortions and culturally coerced infanticides in India, China, and elsewhere, millions of female babies are lost to the world only and precisely because they are female.¹⁴ Millions more girls and women across the globe are “disappeared” through domestic violence, murder, forced prostitution, or trafficking. Writing in 2009, Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn reported that between 60 and 101 million women were currently missing worldwide (according to one study, the number is 107 million), and at least another 2 million girls worldwide disappear every year because of gender discrimination. “It appears that more girls have been killed in the last fifty years, precisely because they were girls, than men were killed in all the battles of the twentieth century.”¹⁵

The phenomenon called “femicide” is the violent killing of women by men simply because they are women, and occurs in cultural contexts of power and gender inequality that both enable and protect the perpetrators.¹⁶ While it is a phenomenon that exists throughout the world, Nancy Pineda-Madrid documents its very particular manifestation in the disappearance, sexual torture, and murder of girls and women that has been taking place in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico since 1993.¹⁷

In all of these scenarios, our first step in knowing is *seeing* what is really there, which requires a “crossing over” to see and imagine the embodied experience of the “other”—from inside her context. We will attend further to this dynamic of “crossing over” in the development of our next step, which is to examine that context.

Analysis: Causes of Oppression

This step calls for an analysis of the immediate cultural causes of women’s oppression in relation to the global context. It takes into account the local, family, community, religious, and socioeconomic factors that shape women’s daily lives, and it raises the question of how global forces might function to reinforce particular cultural

“Introduction: The Girl Effect” (xi–xxii) and “Emancipating Twenty-first Century Slaves” (3–16). See also #16Days16Stories—Campaign against Human Trafficking, at <http://www.16days16stories.online>.

14. See, for instance, Namrata Poddar, “Female Infanticide—India’s Unspoken Evil,” *Huffington Post UK*, April 26, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/namrata-poddar/female-infanticide-indias-unspoken-evil_b_2740032.html; see also Evan Gray Davis, dir., *It’s A Girl* (Shadowline Films, 2012), film, 64 min.
15. Kristoff and WuDunn, *Half the Sky*, xv, xvii.
16. Nancy Pineda-Madrid highlights the distinction made by other scholars between femicide (murder of females because they are female) and femicide: *femicide* builds on femicide in that “it includes impunity for the perpetrators because the state is implicated and . . . it is widespread and rooted in the structural inequalities that render some women and girls acutely vulnerable.” To this she adds the further descriptor that “the killings are exceptionally vicious and brutal.” See Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 12.
17. Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*, 12.

causes of oppression. Religion is certainly a pervasive global force, and the Catholic Church is the most ubiquitous religious institution in the world, unique in the centralization of its power and its consequent capacity to speak with a unified, authoritative voice, literally in its words and symbolically in its presence. The global force of the Catholic Church and its ethical imperative is the primary focus of this article, narrowing the question in this second step to: How do patriarchal theologies, doctrines, symbols, and practices function to reinforce cultural causes of women's oppression?¹⁸

For some insight we can turn to the bent-over woman. We do not know the physical cause of the condition of the woman in Luke's Gospel, but we can recognize some cultural and religious factors that reinforce her social, spiritual, and emotional suffering. Jesus was teaching, and *just then she appeared*. Perhaps she was always there, always coming to the synagogue, but invisible. Jesus *sees* her, summons her, draws attention to her. The attention she receives, however, from the religious authority, the synagogue official, is more than a corrective; it is witheringly dismissive, and it is coupled with criticism of the One who dared to raise her up, to restore her to dignity. In fact, the leader of the synagogue does not address the woman herself. He is indignant at what he perceives as Jesus' transgressive action, and he addresses the crowd. "*He kept saying to the crowd . . .*," Luke reports, implying that keeping the community in line with the letter of the law was the first priority. The synagogue official exemplifies "the extreme fixation on specific conceptions, rituals, and forms of conduct" that Dorothee Soelle, among others, tells us is the definition of fundamentalism in any religion.¹⁹

An analysis of the causes of the "bent-over state" of women today in scenarios such as those described earlier must consider complex political, cultural, and economic realities, exploring the roots of inequality not only regarding gender, but regarding race, class, and ethnicity. With regard to the church and its ethical imperative, I will attend specifically to the question of how patriarchal theologies function to *reinforce* the oppression, the bent-over state, i.e., the global suffering of women resulting from diverse social causes. It all comes back to "knowing our knowing," our functioning epistemologies.

To say that our church is embedded in a patriarchal epistemology, a patriarchal way of knowing, seeing, and ordering reality, is to state the obvious. It is the result

18. Lisa Sowle Cahill notes, "The cultural practices that subordinate women are too often reflected in rather than challenged by Catholic ecclesial structures and practices, including an all-male priesthood." Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Catholic Feminist Traditions: Renewal, Reinvention, Replacement," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 34 (2014): 27–51 at 39. Cahill lays out four post-Vatican II models of theology as a map for understanding the varieties of Catholic feminism: Augustinian, neo-Thomist (both of which were evident in the course of the council), neo-Franciscan, and Junian. (The latter two are more recent, and are evident in the work of younger theologians and intercultural theologians.) Cahill notes that the models are not exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive.

19. Dorothee Soelle, "Definitions, Methods, Delimitations," in *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 45–54.

of centuries of conditioning in which women have also been complicit. Let us look at some of the characteristics of a patriarchal epistemology and how it functions theologically.²⁰

First, patriarchal epistemology is characterized by a hierarchical, anthropocentric, and androcentric bias. And here we see that the epistemological issue is not hierarchy as a structural ordering principle, but rather, its exclusively human-centric and male-centric quality, leading to a hierarchy of knowing born out in processes of domination and exclusion. “Where hierarchy simply means *order*,” Sarah Coakley notes, “it is not at all clear that feminism should oppose it [Rather] it is worldly *sexed* subordination that feminism opposes.”²¹ Where epistemology is concerned, the question is, who chooses what gets brought to light and what remains invisible? This is a question that can obviously only be asked by those who have traditionally and characteristically been relegated to margins beyond the range of light or seeing. In the Catholic tradition, it is asked first and foremost by women, LGBTQ people, and people of color who cannot “see” themselves in the church’s doctrinal proclamations and institutional symbolizations, or worse, who experience these doctrines as intrinsically wounding and dignity-denying. This suffering of negation is the result of the exclusion of women and minorities from what feminist theologians call “the production of knowledge.” A host of interacting factors leading to this exclusion include philosophical theories and anthropologies that have placed in doubt or actually denied women’s capacity to reason; the perennial question of power; relations of injustice and unequal economic distribution; and sociocultural patterns of domination imposed by the powerful and internalized by the marginalized.²²

Excluded sources of knowing, and therefore of revelation, include oral traditions in all of their rich cultural diversity; the body, that incarnational site of revelation; women’s experience; and personal narrative biographies.²³ Here the life-and-death power of story with which this essay began is again on display. I have noted that stories arise from our functioning epistemologies. Here it is evident that, in reciprocal fashion, stories also shape epistemologies. Moreover, today we are critically aware that all of

20. For expanded analysis of the leading points in what follows, see Ivone Gebara, “Knowing Our Knowing,” in *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 19–65.

21. Drawing on Gregory of Nyssa, Coakley notes that “‘ordering’ oneself to God . . . may precisely be the means of undermining and dissolving such sexed subordination.” She continues with a critique of the irrational reduction of the meaning of the term to “power hierarchy,” further noting that “classic feminist theology has often implicitly and mistakenly *identified* divine ‘hierarchical power’ with worldly male power—thus ironically replicating the very ontological fallacy that it rightly critiques in its masculinist opponents.” See Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay “On the Trinity”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 319–21.

22. See, for example, Geraldina Céspedes, “Sources and Processes of the Production of Wisdom,” in Maria Pilar Aquino and Maria José Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology: Latina Explorations for a Just World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 29–48.

23. Céspedes, “Sources and Processes of the Production of Wisdom,” 36–38.

these human stories must be grounded in the cosmic and evolutionary story of creation, which recontextualizes, and therefore reconfigures, the balance of power in a network of interdependent relationships finally dependent upon the Creator God.

One of the most troubling features of patriarchal epistemology is that it posits an ideal essence of human beings, thus tending to deny the actual phenomena of contextualized human experiences in history. This essentialism is perhaps most damagingly played out in the dualistic anthropology that plagues so many teaching documents of the church. Examples include *Inter Insigniores* (1976 Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Priesthood) and *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988 Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women).²⁴ Each of these documents, for quite distinct purposes, builds its theological argument upon the essentialist assumption of gender binaries presented as supernaturally revealed. On this basis, the church decides what in the tradition can change and what must remain immutable, regardless of any consideration of the *sensus fidelium*.²⁵

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24. Sarah Coakley analyzes Mary Douglas' position to reveal a provocative twist on the nuptial metaphor as argument for the prohibition of women's ordination in *Inter Insigniores*. While Douglas supports the Vatican's conclusion, Coakley points out that her anthropological arguments actually undermine that conclusion. See Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender, and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 64–65, referring to Mary Douglas, "The Gender of the Beloved," *The Heythrop Journal* 36 (1995): 397–408.
25. There has been a recent resurgence of scholarship on the *sensus fidelium*, much of it prompted by the writings, statements, and actions of Pope Francis. Referencing the "people of God's intuition in the contexts of today regarding faith and morals," Norm Rush maintains that "the *sensus fidelium*, and listening to the *sensus fidelium*, lie at the heart of Francis's dynamic notion of a synodal church." He further clarifies that "listening to the *sensus fidelium* is not just about effective pedagogy and credible communication. Second, and more fundamentally, the *sensus fidelium* must be listened to because it is a *locus theologicus*, a place where the revealing God can be heard speaking to the church today." See Norm Rush, "Inverting the Pyramid: The *Sensus Fidelium* in a Synodal Church," *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 299–325 at 312 and 321, respectively. Anthony Epko notes that Vatican II located the *sensus fidelium* too narrowly in the church's teaching or prophetic office, and advocates an expansion of its development within the kingly and priestly offices. See Anthony Epko, "The *Sensus Fidelium* and the Threefold Office of Christ: A Reinterpretation of *Lumen Gentium* No. 12," *Theological Studies* 76 (2015): 330–46. James Keenan locates *sensus fidelium* in the collective conscience of believers, highlighting the need for the USA to repent over its racist history. Lamenting the lack of attention to conscience in the final report of the extraordinary synod of 2014, Keenan adds to his own argument descriptions of an extensive array of recent works on conscience by theological ethicists throughout the globe, all of which emphasize mutuality and relationality. See James Keenan, "Redeeming Conscience," *Theological Studies* 76 (2015): 129–47. In a volume of *New Blackfriars* dedicated to the *sensus fidelium*, Martin Poulson lifts up the theology of Edward Schillebeeckx as a resource for drawing the voices of the Magisterium and theologians into a relational dialectic on the way to implementing Pope Francis' inclusive vision. See Martin Poulson, "Schillebeeckx and the *Sensus Fidelium*,"

The tendency to deny the revelatory character of contextualized human experiences in history demonstrates the second characteristic of patriarchal epistemology: It positions truths of revelation propositionally on a supernatural plane not to be questioned.²⁶ This example also demonstrates the power of male perception, or, more accurately, Western male perception, in the construction of the dominant “story” of the Catholic tradition. Feminist and ecofeminist theologians are keenly aware of the “politics of epistemology” at work in “the production of knowledge” informing magisterial documents such as *Inter Insigniores* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Brazilian theologian Ivone Gebara insists that “in every act of knowing there is a vision and an understanding of the world and human beings . . . that can be observed in the act itself, as well as in its consequences. To know is to take a stand.”²⁷ That is to say, ethical judgments are already implicit in epistemologies. We turn now to survey key characteristics of ecofeminist epistemology. As will become evident, the sources of knowing excluded from patriarchal epistemology play a prominent role.

Ecofeminist Epistemology

As a contrast with patriarchal epistemology, I turn to ecofeminist epistemology, and discuss three aspects: its rootedness in women’s embodied experiences, the relationality of knowing, and a critically creative engagement with tradition.

Ecofeminist epistemology²⁸ maintains that knowing takes place in experience, and experience begins in our embodied selves in a very particular context. It might seem self-evident that the centrality of the body in experiencing and knowing should be honored in our profoundly incarnationalist tradition. God’s assumption of human flesh in Jesus renders all of our bodies sites of divine presence, and therefore loci of revelation. Indeed, the sanctity of the body is at the heart of so much Catholic teaching about

New Blackfriars 98 (2017): 203–17. Dorian Llywelyn looks to the reemergence of popular devotions occasioned by demographic changes as expressions of the *sensus fidelium* that theologians should mine for insight. Dorian Llywelyn, SJ, “Devotion, Theology, and the Sensus Fidelium,” *New Blackfriars* 98 (2017): 171–87.

26. Mary Catherine Hilbert culls developments from Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) in relation to feminism, with specific reference to *Inter Insigniores*, noting the major shift away from Vatican I’s propositional view (in *Dei Filius*) of revelation to one based in historical consciousness, experience, and relationality. See M. Catherine Hilbert, “Experience and Tradition—Can the Center Hold?—Revelation,” in Catherine Mowry LaCugna, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 62ff.
27. Ivone Gebara, “Knowing Our Knowing,” 24.
28. This condensed analysis is indebted to Gebara, “Knowing Our Knowing.” See also Geraldina Céspedes, “Sources and Processes of the Production of Wisdom,” 29–48; Dorothee Soelle, “Definitions, Methods, Delimitations,” in *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, 45–54; Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), especially “Searching for Wisdom: Sources of Postcolonial Feminist Theologies,” 52–76.

life, love, and sexuality. Yet, the understanding of sanctity at the heart of that teaching has been corrupted by a pervasively dualistic anthropology, an essentialism elevated to the level of supernatural truth and wielded as authoritative doctrine. Moreover, this dualism has expressed itself in the dominant tradition in ways that consistently bifurcate the bodies of women from the bodies of men, systematically distancing them as dangerous sites of temptation and threats to the rational control which has been deemed preeminently the domain of men. The bodies of women, far from being channels of wisdom and knowing, much less divine revelation, have traditionally been regarded with utmost suspicion.²⁹ Besides the direct damage it does to women within the church, this dominant ecclesial attitude has a warping effect on men, creating a “gender gestalt” within the church that is truly “disordered.”³⁰ Moreover, it has potently reinforced the misogyny that fuels the suffering of women at the hands of men in cultures throughout the globe. Thus, ecofeminist epistemology posits the body as a central theme of theologizing “inasmuch as it is a source, a mediator, and a channel of all of our vital experiences and all our processes of knowledge.”³¹

In many and varied ways, ecofeminist theologians of diverse cultures, races, and sexual orientations are recognizing the implications of both gendered embodiment and environment in constituting reality as well as in mediating our knowing. To wit, the body we bring to the perception of any reality or any text not only influences but becomes a part of how and what we “know”—through the body in all its specificity. As Shawn Copeland has eloquently testified in her searing study *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being*, “bodies are marked—made individual, particular, different, and vivid—through race, sex and gender, sexuality, and culture.”³² According hermeneutical privilege to black embodied being in the world, and using slave narratives as a guide, Copeland analyzes the entanglement of slavery and Christianity in her project of rethinking theological anthropology from the experience of black women.³³ “The black woman had to cope with body memories of vulnerability, psychic and physical pain, in

29. Peter Brown explores the roots and evolution of patterns of male dominance and attitudes toward the body and sexuality in the church, emphasizing that the ideal of continence held a variety of meanings in early Christianity. The constant, however, was the “scientific” presumption of the hierarchy of male superiority and female inferiority, such that women were perceived as “failed males.” Brown’s highly nuanced study reveals, among other things, the tensions between married clerics seeking to elevate and “Christianize” classical culture’s approach to marriage and family life, and those who sought separation and contrast via sexual renunciation. By the early Middle Ages, the ideal of virginity prevailed. In a continuing context of male dominance, the consolidation of celibate clerical power, Brown implies, played a role that rivalled the pursuit of greater holiness or deeper union with God. *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

30. I am indebted to a male colleague for this critically evocative phrasing.

31. Geraldina Céspedes, “Sources and Processes of the Production of Wisdom,” 37.

32. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 56.

33. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 25–28.

order to come to grips with internalized repercussions of violence and abuse. The damage done to the enslaved people's capacity for human flourishing can never be ignored."³⁴ Such damage indicts all of us who reap the benefits of dominance in church and society; it is a painful clarion call to conversion on a path of mutual healing.³⁵

Copeland and others reveal the critical role of racial as well as gender ontologies and epistemologies in living into the truth that makes us free.³⁶ Moreover, while theologians have long been conscious that our freedom is situated, and that social location conditions our experiencing and knowing, ecofeminist theologians now maintain that, in addition to gender, ecology itself, in all of the connotations of that word, also plays a role both in constituting reality and mediating knowing.³⁷

While ecology is a common commitment of ecofeminist theologians, it is pointedly present in the first of Schillebeeckx's well-known anthropological constants.³⁸ The first coordinate in his fluid system concerns precisely the human person's relationship to his or her own corporeality as embedded in relationship with nature and the ecological environment. With respect to this, he noted in 1978 that "these are standards which we ourselves have to derive from the concrete situation in which we now live."³⁹ He further notes that, while we can indeed influence our own ecological situation within nature, we remain dependent on it, and this is nowhere more manifest than in those situations where humans disturb the conditions of life.⁴⁰ How much more critical is the concrete situation in which we live in the twenty-first century? How much higher the stakes for our planet and its most vulnerable inhabitants? How much more complex our experience and understanding of gendered corporeality? Schillebeeckx notes that

34. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 50.

35. Christopher Pramuk offers an in-depth exploration of such a path as he "asks what it would mean for White Christians to place themselves under the judgment and mercy of the Black 'cloud of witnesses'." See his "'Strange Fruit': Black Suffering/White Revelation," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 345–77; see also his *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters across the Color Line* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2013).

36. Lee Mienna Skye adds the tribal theologies arising from the particular experience of indigenous populations as further fruits of such epistemological expansion. See her "Australian Aboriginal Women's Christologies," in Elizabeth Johnson, ed., *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016), 162–72.

37. See, for example, Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 57–58.

38. In a number of his works, Schillebeeckx elaborates seven coordinates that create the conditions for human flourishing: (1) relation to human corporeality, nature, and the ecological environment; (2) human existence as coexistence; (3) human relation to social and institutional structures; (4) space-time structure of human person and culture; (5) the relation between theory and praxis; (6) human religious and "para-religious" consciousness; (7) the irreducible synthesis of these six dimensions. See, for example, "Questions on Christian Salvation of and for Man," in Robert Schreier, ed., *The Language of Faith: Essays on Jesus, Theology and the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 109–26, especially 113–22; and *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 731–43.

39. Schillebeeckx, "Questions on Christian Salvation," 114.

40. Schillebeeckx, "Questions on Christian Salvation," 115.

this first anthropological constant reveals multiple subconstants pointing to the integral constitution of human beings as constellations of not only reason and freedom, but also heart, imagination, instinct, and love. His thesis is that Christian salvation itself, if it is *of and for humanity*, must speak to this anthropological constant.⁴¹ Our gendered and ecologically embedded embodiment is integral to our spiritual salvation.

Moving deeply into the realm of spiritual theology, Beverly Lanzetta brings a lens of mysticism to the body, cautioning that mysticism is always embedded in a concrete historical context. While honoring all bodies, she singles out women's bodies as "mystical text." In a passage that upholds women's bodies as revelatory while undoing essentialism, and at the same time hinting at how women can be complicit in patriarchal expressions and their own undermining, she elaborates:

Each body defies universalization; each body in its uniqueness and particularity is the presence of the sacred. Due to the history of crimes against females, however, women are frequently trapped in cultural matrices that encourage and perpetuate contempt for female bodies. It is thus crucial to women's *full presence* on earth that they understand, in order not to undermine, how divine revelation expresses itself through women's bodies in the world.⁴²

Indeed, on this view, it becomes evident that much more is at stake than the full flourishing of women and marginalized peoples, though their flourishing is God's will and should be a human and ecclesial goal of paramount importance. There is an expression here of mutual reciprocity between, on the one hand, entrapping cultural matrices and the danger of women succumbing to these, and, on the other, women's freed understanding of their worth as mediators of divine revelation and their *full presence* on earth. Herein lies the heart of the ethical imperative facing the Catholic Church. What is at stake is not merely the diminishment of women, but the impoverishment of the world in being deprived of the divine revelation as it is expressed uniquely and unrepeatably through their bodies. The goal is a twofold healing: the healing of women unto embracing the sacredness of their bodies in revealing the divine and thereby experiencing their *full presence* on earth, and the healing of the world through that full presence.

Presence is intrinsically relational, which is the second characteristic of ecofeminist epistemology. Knowing is relational because it necessitates going beyond the limits of what our own situated experience and rational intellectual pursuits can teach us; knowing requires crossing-over into the context of the "other." Such a crossing-over requires courage and the capacity to risk leaving behind one's own secure certainties; it requires trust that it is God who summons us in the difference of the other, especially when that difference is borne as pain. Integral, holistic knowing entails vulnerability and openness to a change of consciousness, openness to genuine conversion, even mutual

41. Schillebeeckx, "Questions on Christian Salvation," 115.

42. Beverly J. Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 156–57. Luke-Timothy Johnson unpacks the multiple ways that the human body functions as revelatory text; see his *The Revelatory Body: Theology as Inductive Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015).

conversion. It is a dynamic, ongoing, loving process requiring contemplative praying and being in the world, and an ever-deepening attunement to the Holy Spirit.⁴³

Finally, it is crucial to emphasize that Christian ecofeminist epistemology does not jettison all previous forms of knowing; rather, it judiciously builds upon what has gone before. In its best and most holistic instantiations, it draws upon the densely rich treasures of the Christian tradition with a critical eye to patriarchal distortions that need correcting, and a generous willingness to amplify and re-render doctrinal expressions that have been constricted by a narrow patriarchal lens. As Ivone Gebara affirms, “We are one body in process, a living body that is growing.”⁴⁴ Or, as Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner have demonstrated, like the evolutionary cosmos itself, every new stage takes up into itself what went before, even as it transforms and transcends what went before.⁴⁵

Tradition is not left behind, but rather continues to evolve in and through the living body of Christ in history. Far from a static revelation of propositional truths, as Mary Catherine Hilker has noted, our tradition is encompassed in the whole life of the Christian community handed down through liturgy and a potent system of symbols: we are an embodied, incarnated community, the living Body of Christ that is constantly growing and evolving. Therefore, we have to interrogate our system of symbols that so shapes our being and our consciousness and forms our imaginations; we have to interrogate the silences and the absences. Hilker asks, “When we gather as a community amidst our sacred symbols and ask the now classic question, ‘Whose Experience Counts?’—What answer reverberates?”⁴⁶

As we move from a patriarchal to an inclusive, embodied, experiential and relational epistemology, we are moving into the third stage of our theological reflection on the *bent-over-woman, standing up straight*. We turn now to “The Mysticism of Resistance.”

The Mysticism of Resistance

How do women express an instinctive “no” to the reality of oppression? How is this resistance manifest in patterns of relationship or particular actions undertaken? What are the sacred sources and ritual expressions of resistance? Again, we turn to the bent-over woman.

We do not know anything about her, really, except what we see. She does not speak, she does not *ask* Jesus to heal her. How might she be resisting the reality of her bent-over state and its social, spiritual, and psychological effects in her life? First, she is

43. Sarah Coakley reflects on the asceticism of contemplative practice as essential not only for personal transformation and conversion, but for the kind of theological insight that bears fruit in the world. See, for instance, her “‘Deepening Practices’: Perspectives from Ascetical Theology on Belief and Practice, Desire and Gender,” in Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 109–27.

44. Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 48.

45. See, for example, Pierre Teilhard De Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960), and Karl Rahner, “Christology within an Evolutionary View of the World,” in *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 178–203.

46. Hilker, “Experience and Tradition—Can the Center Hold?—Revelation.”

present in the assembly in the synagogue. We can only imagine the pain and effort involved in getting herself there, not to mention the pain of being invisible, of likely being unwanted in the public space. Yet she is there. And we might surmise that she has been coming regularly. She is resisting the social, cultural, and physical impediments to her spiritual life. She is coming to exercise her right to worship God and to draw strength from the well of her tradition. She has always been invisible. This time, though, someone sees her: Jesus sees her, and invites her into his space, the sanctuary space from which he is teaching. He lays hands on her, acknowledging that she has already been set free by God. And in response to the synagogue official's protestations, Jesus affirms her rightful status as daughter of Abraham.⁴⁷

In this particular instance, we see that the "instinctual no" to oppression is a relational, communal reality: The woman shows up; Jesus recognizes her and affirms that she is "set free"; his recognition and affirmation release the divine healing and elevating power of God within her;⁴⁸ the community is uplifted and rejoices. Only Jesus' opponents are unhappy. Nevertheless, the final word is that of the community's rejoicing.

In light of this story, we can now ask, where and how do today's bent-over women exercise a mysticism of resistance in the midst of suffering? We have indicated some of the many forces of diminishment affecting women in our world. Global women theologians who are sifting the layers of suffering of the women in their communities identify a positive prior ground out of which the "instinctive no" to suffering arises. This positive, life-giving ground of being is a locus of God's presence and action. In the midst of death-dealing forces, the impulse for life characterizing the concrete existence of so many women is a medium of God's revelation. This is a living illustration of what Schillebeeckx calls *negative contrast experience*.⁴⁹ In situations of injustice, oppression, and suffering which give rise to protest and the ethical imperative toward transformation, God is found in and through the positive impulse toward resistance and change based on eschatological hope.

Recognizing and confronting exterior and interior forces of diminishment requires a firm existential grasp of this ground of life and being which is, paradoxically, only inchoately known. Our Dominican sisters in Latin America speak of *la mística* as the constellation of life forces and creativity out of which they organize against structures

47. Barbara Reid notes that this is the only instance in the Bible in which this phrase is used, affirming the equality and inclusion of women in Israel's heritage. See Barbara E. Reid, "Bent No More and Glorifying God!" in *Choosing the Better Part? Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996), 167–68.

48. My female students have often pointed out the problematic nature of the woman "needing" a man to heal her. Feminist Scripture scholars note the danger of using this text to (1) reinforce the paradigm of men's dominance in Christian identity through association with the male Jesus, while perpetuating the image of woman as victim, and (2) conveying to women that they need men to lift their burdens rather than encouraging them to actualize their own agency. See Barbara E. Reid, "Bent No More and Glorifying God," 167, and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 199–200.

49. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *God the Future of Man* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 153–54; *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 621–22; *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 5–6.

of oppression. Silvia Regina de Lima Silva describes this as “life opening up spaces within pain, within the patriarchal world’s scheme of death.”⁵⁰ Women who suffer throughout our world have been endlessly creative in opening up such spaces. Here are merely a few examples:

The Dominican Sisters of Iraq

We recall here the trajectory of violence and displacement that has unfolded since that day the United States commenced bombing Afghanistan and subsequently invaded Iraq. As many fled, native Iraqi Dominican sisters remained to minister to their people, even as they watched the decimation of their land by the American military and began to experience violence at the hands of the Muslims who had always been beneficiaries of their education and healthcare ministries along with the Christian minority. Prior to the American invasion, they lived in harmony with the Muslim majority; after, they and all Christians were perceived as aligned with America and the West. In 2014, when ISIS overtook Mosul, the sisters fled on foot by night along with their people. At this writing, Mosul is supposedly liberated from ISIS, but there is nothing left to return to. Displaced along with their people, the sisters continue their ministry among them in refugee camps in Erbil. Sr. Luma Kudher has described their existential experience of powerlessness over the future.⁵¹ Yet, unable even to imagine what that future might be, these Iraqi sisters have sought resources to establish schools so that children might resume their educations, to provide healthcare, and always, to provide pastoral accompaniment, creating spaces for worship and insuring that their people are fed with the Eucharist. Unable to imagine life in the future, they seize it in the present, tangibly embodying “life opening up spaces amidst the pain.”⁵²

50. Silvia Regina de Lima Silva, “Dialogue of Memories: Ways toward a Black Feminist Christology from Latin America,” in Aquino, and Rosado-Nunes, eds., *Feminist Intercultural Theology*, 171.

51. In a recent interview with Springfield Dominican Sister Beth Murphy, Sr. Luma stated, “It is so hard to think of tomorrow in Iraq.” See Dominican Sisters of Springfield, Illinois, “Sister Luma Q & A,” July 14, 2017, <http://springfieldop.org/news/qa-with-sister-luma-of-dominican-sisters-of-st-catherine-of-sienna-iraq>. Sr. Luma, who holds a PhD in biblical studies from the University of Notre Dame, teaches Scripture to women and men preparing for ministry in the church in Iraq. See also “Dominican Nuns Keep Hope Alive in Northern Iraq,” *Crux*, April 20, 2016, <https://cruxnow.com/church/2016/04/20/dominican-nuns-keep-hope-alive-in-northern-iraq>.

52. In a letter to the worldwide Order of Preachers on August 6, 2017, the third anniversary of their exile, the Dominican Sisters of Catherine of Siena of Iraq, now living in Erbil, reported that people are returning to some Christian villages and towns that were slowly being rebuilt, but that Mosul remained dangerous. See “Dominican Sisters in Erbil-Iraq: Three Years in Exile,” August 6, 2017, <http://www.op.org/en/content/dominican-sisters-erbil-iraq-three-years-exile>. The Motherhouse of the sisters is in Mosul, and it has been desecrated and destroyed. For a summary of the Sisters’ ministry in exile, see Catholic News Agency, “After Years of Exile, Dominican Sisters Return to Iraq’s Nineveh Plain,” August 9, 2017, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/after-years-of-exile-dominican-sisters-return-to-iraqs-nineveh-plain-81415>.

The Women of Ciudad Juárez

Mexican-American theologian Nancy Pineda-Madrid has done an exhaustive study of the phenomenon of the “missing women” of Ciudad Juárez. Her work addresses the suffering of feminicide in order to articulate a theology of salvation, insisting that “a theology of salvation needs to anticipate resurrection.”⁵³ She shows how the women of Ciudad Juárez have risen up in solidarity in the face of corrupt political leaders, narco-traffickers, and law enforcement to make known the previously invisible plight of these tortured, raped, and murdered women, and to demand justice. They draw upon the sacred symbols and sources of their Catholic faith as they both claim ontological space and process their pain. One of these ritual actions entails erecting pink crosses where bodies are found to claim back women’s space.

African Women Afflicted by Christian Patriarchy and Colonial Expansionism

Teresia Hinga demonstrates how African women have managed to reach back behind colonial images of “Christ the Conqueror” to perceive and retrieve the emancipating biblical impulses within Christianity. In their embrace of “Christ the Liberator,” they understand “Jesus as embodiment of the Spirit, the power of God, and the dispenser of the same to those who follow him.” In this pneumatic Christology, Christ is the voice of the voiceless, the power of the powerless; he is iconoclastic prophet and critic of the status quo.⁵⁴

Women Picturing Paradise in a Peruvian Shantytown

Sr. Thoma Swanson is an artist who created artistic panels depicting the *bent-over woman standing up straight* for the Encuentro in Lima in 2001. She worked for years in Peru calling forth the artistic creativity of struggling peasant women, and assisting them in developing a co-op through which they could sell their works. Not only are these women exercising economic agency in their families and communities; they also visually express their resistance by creating symbols of the justice they long for. Recently, theologian and artist Rebecca Berru-Davis undertook an art project with women living in shantytowns on the edges of Lima in communities of politically displaced people—the “forgotten poor . . . who get lost in this universe.”⁵⁵ She invited

53. Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*, 93.

54. Teresia Hinga, “Jesus Christ and the Liberation of Women in Africa,” in Elizabeth Johnson, ed., *The Strength of Her Witness, Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2016).

55. Rebecca Berru-Davis, “Picturing Paradise: Imagination, Beauty, and Women’s Lives in a Peruvian Shantytown,” in Laurie Cassidy and Maureen H. O’Connell, eds., *She Who Imagines: Feminist Theological Aesthetics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012), 145–60 at 145.

them to “picture paradise,” that is, express their hopes and dreams by stitching “cuadros.” The results are not only stunningly beautiful, but the women’s descriptions of what they were picturing are an inspiration to those of us who are privileged. Beyond the expected expressions of longing for a permanent house with a roof on it, or clean water, or the healthy birth of an expected child, there were expressions of longing for a world at peace, for the protection of sea life and the earth. Having nothing, one woman expressed a dream in which she and her husband could travel to help people in need.⁵⁶

Oppressed Asian Women Reconfiguring Jesus

Chung Hyun Kyung brings together the voices of women theologians from diverse Asian contexts who have struggled with the many ways patriarchal Christologies have functioned to reinforce the oppression and subjugation of women. She notes that the prevailing image of Jesus for women of many Asian countries is that of Suffering Servant, because they need to meet Jesus through the experience that is most familiar to them. While this image harbors the potential to reinforce women’s passivity in the face of suffering, it can also be a source of liberation, giving Asian women “the wisdom to differentiate between the suffering imposed by an oppressor and the suffering that is the consequence of one’s stand for justice and human dignity.”⁵⁷ In a striking image of negative contrast, Korean theologian Choi Man Ja asserts that “suffering exposes patriarchal evil.” As her countrywoman, Park Soon Kyung observes, “Jesus’ servanthood changed the meaning of being a slave among oppressed people. The yoke of slaves is proof of the world’s injustice and witness to the desire for God’s righteousness.”⁵⁸ Referencing Filipina theologian Virginia Fabella, Chung notes that Jesus “‘stood for all that he taught and did’ and took responsibility for the consequences of his choice at the price of his life.”⁵⁹ Indeed, many Filipino women have sought to embody this Jesus in their organized action for political liberation and the self-determination of their people, action that has often resulted in torture, persecution, and martyrdom. “Filipino women find Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection in the suffering, death, and resurrection of Filipino women themselves”⁶⁰—a genuine mysticism of resistance.

In these and so many other instances, the power of women’s resistance is never separated from the power of life and celebration, nor from the wellsprings of joy found even amidst suffering. The mysticism of resistance is the merging of spirituality and praxis wherein praxis functions as critique and becomes a living proclamation of the Gospel in our world. Thus, the boundary between this stage of our theological

56. Berru-Davis, “Picturing Paradise,” 153–54.

57. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 57.

58. Choi Man Ja and Park Soon Kyung, respectively, quoted in Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun Again*, 58.

59. Virginia Fabella in Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun*, 57.

60. Chung Hyun Kyung, *Struggle to be the Sun*, 63.

reflection paradigm and the final one is very fluid. The power of life at work in resistance is the power of resurrection coming through the cross.

Signs of Resurrection

What would women's full flourishing (standing up straight) entail in the Global South and in our contemporary ecclesial context? When we ask this question, we are really asking about the anticipated wholeness of those fragments of new life already evident in the struggle against forces of oppression and diminishment. What might the wholeness and flourishing of women in our world look like? What might it look like in our church in its most public and formative ritual self-expression? Schillebeeckx maintains that the conviction that suffering must be overcome is

experienced symbolically and playfully in the Christian liturgy. For the sacraments are anticipatory, mediating signs of salvation, that is, healed and reconciled life. And, given our historical situation, at the same time they are symbols of protest serving to unmask the life that is not yet reconciled in the specific dimension of our history. In light of its prophetic vision of universal *salôm*, accusation also has a part in the liturgy.

As long as there is still a real history of suffering among us, we cannot do without a sacramental liturgy . . . Here the cross is the symbol of resistance . . .⁶¹

He notes that liturgy is the place where we become grievously aware of the gulf between the prophetic vision of a healed, reconciled world and the world as it is.

However, the present reality is that, for many women and other marginalized people, the grievous gulf is manifest precisely within the celebration of eucharistic liturgy, our most essentially formative ritual. Schillebeeckx explains: "if it is rightly performed, there is in Christian sacramental symbolic action a powerful historical potential which can integrate mysticism and politics."⁶² Therein lies the church's ethical imperative. How we "perform" church in our worship space, as well as in our decision-making structures, functions in shaping the stories of women and of all who live on the margins, thereby shaping the world according to the Reign of God. I have argued that the bent-over women of our time exercising a mysticism of resistance to the causes of their suffering present an ethical imperative to the Catholic Church, an imperative that summons institutional conversion of the patriarchal structures, language, symbols, and epistemology that reinforce the suffering of women in diverse global contexts, including our own North American context. And, while the ethical imperative concerns much more than a question of women's ordination, this matter remains for many a central signifying necessity.

In closing, I return to the bent-over woman in Luke's Gospel, standing up straight in her sacred space of worship, a space that itself was fraught with forces of diminishment rendering her invisible, forces that Jesus dispelled as he called her forth and laid hands on her: We know that it was the power of divine life in her that sustained her

61. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 836.

62. Schillebeeckx, *Christ*, 836.

throughout her steadfast resistance; we know it because the first thing she does when she stands up straight is to praise and glorify God: *She is exalted, and the community rejoices*. Recognized daughter, liberated from her bonds *precisely* on the Sabbath, the day of new creation, she embodies in her being the glory of God. What impact might her upright presence as feminine image of God presiding in the gathered assembly have on her bent-over sisters, and on the forces that bend them over, today?

Author Biography

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