



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Theological Studies Faculty Works

Theological Studies

Spring 2001

Women and Their Mothers: Rejecting and Reclaiming the Tradition of the Saints

Marie Anne Mayeski

Loyola Marymount University, MarieAnne.Mayeski@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac

Digital Commons @ LMU & LLS Citation

Mayeski, Marie Anne, "Women and Their Mothers: Rejecting and Reclaiming the Tradition of the Saints" (2001). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 24.

https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/24

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theological Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theological Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

Women and Their Mothers: Rejecting and Reclaiming the Tradition of the Saints

MARIE ANNE MAYESKI*

Many women, both young and middle-aged, seem to live their lives as if their mothers were looking over their shoulders. "My mother would die," they say, "if she could see the way I keep my house." Or with rueful mock despair, they ask themselves how their mothers always managed to keep the house in order, put fresh cookies in the cookie jar, sort and fold the laundry, get a variety of children to an even wider variety of lessons and still get a hot balanced supper on the table promptly at 6:00 p.m. Even when they have chosen significantly different goals for themselves, women are often still haunted by a sense that they have failed to become the full women they perceive their mothers to have been.

Does this same sense of inadequacy haunt women as they pursue their inner and spiritual lives? Do the models of earlier Christian women, the saints and writers who were so prominent a part of religious education in an earlier time, haunt rather than inspire women? Perhaps our earthly mothers, in their desire to protect and nurture their daughters, did not sufficiently share their struggles and anxieties; in the midst of our own struggles, we find it difficult to identify with them. Most certainly, the hagiographical tradition did not usually provide stories of women who struggled and made compromises; the lives of the saints revealed only the great holiness that was finally achieved. And the holiness that they imaged was often narrow in its conception, seemingly more appropriate to an earlier age than ours, and so stereotyped as to leave no room for individual personality, gifts and challenges. Is that tradition beyond retrieval?

Without doubt, many women have experienced great difficulty when attempting to reclaim the stories of their spiritual mothers, the saints. Feminist writers have documented the ways in which the

* Marie Anne Mayeski is Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.

Christian tradition has inhibited authentic maturation and, therefore, genuine holiness in women. Joann Wolski Conn, for example, speaks of Christian teaching as “legitimizing and even promoting restrictive heteronomy rather than mature autonomy for women,”¹ though her own work successfully retrieves the insights and texts of women mystics. But many women have had the stories of their mothers in the faith interpreted *for* them; they have not always been encouraged to enter imaginatively into these stories from the perspective of their own experience. If this interpretation by others is allowed to stand, then the stories of the saints will, for the most part, be lost to women today. But I believe that the reclaiming of the stories of our female ancestors is both possible and necessary, and I find in the work of recent feminist scholars suggestions and methods that can prove helpful in the spiritual journey.

Perhaps the most important step in that retrieval is an understanding of the lives of women saints within a revised historical framework. A lack of such understanding has been one of the primary ways in which the lives of earlier Christian women have been distorted. The preponderance of women religious among the saints, for instance, has been used to support the teaching that religious life was objectively a superior vocation to that of marriage or of the single life. It was not generally understood that, in the limited range of options open to women throughout most of Christian history, religious life was the only choice that gave a measure of social as well as spiritual freedom. In convents, women had access to education, were somewhat free from day-to-day control by men, were not threatened by the physical dangers of childbearing, and could express their gifts for administration and ministry. Added to the religious and spiritual benefits of religious life, these human possibilities made the choice of consecrated virginity extremely attractive to women whose only other option was an arranged marriage.

Similarly, those aspects of a woman saint’s life that made her an individual with a very particular set of challenges to overcome were often suppressed in order to highlight the way in which she fit the general pattern of holiness. Every founder of a religious congregation was

¹ “Women’s Spirituality: Restriction and Reconstruction” in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. by Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 12.

praised for her love of God and neighbor, her service to the Church, and, especially, her obedience. It was rarely brought to the attention of young women that the first Daughters of Charity had willingly given up the legal status of religious life in order to engage in social tasks that had previously been outside the scope of women's activity. Nor was it common knowledge that Teresa of Avila had to do battle with the superiors of the Carmelite order so that she could enact the reform that was dear to her heart. In the retelling of her story, Clare of Assisi became a passive follower of Francis, just another nun committed to the cloister; her battle to live in the same absolute poverty as her friend and to serve the neighbor as freely as he did was overlooked.

Certain virtues considered appropriate to women were culled from the narratives of women saints, even if their historical lives had to be stretched to illustrate these virtues. Humility, silence and obedience were highlighted as the virtues pertinent to women; furthermore, these virtues were almost always explained in passive terms. Humility was distorted to mean "thinking little of oneself." Silence was praised over speaking out for the truth. Obedience almost always meant the noncritical acceptance of all authority; women were not often schooled in a prudent discrimination between levels of authority and were not reminded of the Christian moral principle that obedience to God must take precedence over obedience to human authority. Those who read the life of Catherine Benincasa were encouraged to imitate her extreme acts of self-denial; they were not exhorted to take their prophetic vision directly to the pope as she did. The life of Teresa of Avila was taught in a way that emphasized her cloistered silence and contemplative prayer; her sense of humor, her love of dancing, her forthright and confrontational manner with those who opposed her were not given much emphasis. Thérèse of Lisieux is remembered as the originator of "the little way," the quiet nun who let dirty water be splashed in her face without complaint; forgotten (or never understood) was her intellectual independence in asserting the tenderness and mercy of God in a Catholic world preoccupied with rigid religious rules.²

² See Joann Wolski Conn, "Thérèse of Lisieux from a Feminist Perspective," in Conn (ed.), *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, pp. 317-325.

Rediscovering the Stories

Such a narrow interpretation of “feminine” virtues does not survive a genuine dialogue with the real stories and the actual texts of the women who have gone before us in the Christian tradition. One of the most powerful suggestions for the reclamation of such stories came to me from Elizabeth Stone, an associate professor of media studies at Fordham, The College at Lincoln Center. Writing in the *alumnae/i* magazine in Fall, 1990, Stone describes the way in which family stories are often reimagined, or actually reinvented, for present needs.³ Acknowledging that such stories exist primarily to shape in us those values held dear by our parents and grandparents, Stone asserts that they can be used in other ways, that they “allow us a special sort of creativity. They’re like a secret locket with a hidden key that we can use in service of our own freedom” (p. 17). Stone has collected the stories that people reinvent for themselves and concludes from her study of them that the more distant the ancestor, the more pliable the stories are to the processes of the imagination. At the moment when a person needs to imagine a new future for herself, to break new ground and, perhaps, to break a few of the family’s restrictions, an ancestor’s story can provide a pattern for newness that still keeps one anchored in the family. As Stone puts it, “An ancestor who can be fashioned as a precursor to oneself is useful, because issues about family loyalty or betrayal can then be sidestepped” (p. 18).

Stone’s work suggests that if ancestral stories are to prove helpful and liberating, it is the imagination that is necessary to unlock them. Often, it is not the story of the woman saint, but the way in which it has been interpreted that has burdened the woman who reads it with the weight of unrealistic and patriarchal expectations. The imagination is a potent force for breaking through those expectations to find what is surprising and yet perennially true. Various teachers of the spiritual life have explored its power. The teaching of Ignatius of Loyola is generally well known. An earlier teacher, the twelfth-century Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx, also believed that through the use of the imagination Scripture itself could yield a wide variety of possible meanings for both life and theology.⁴ In a treatise he wrote for his sister who had be-

³ Elizabeth Stone, “Family Stories: Why they Matter” in *Fordham* 23, 2 (Fall, 1990), pp. 17–19.

⁴ See Marie Anne Mayeski, “A Twelfth-Century View of the Imagination: Aelred of Rievaulx,” in *Noble Piety and Reformed Monasticism*, Cistercian Studies Series: 65,

come a recluse, he suggested that she enter into the various scenes of the gospel story and become an actor in the drama taking place before the mind's eye. Such an imaginative exercise would allow her to expand the limitations of her own life and explore her capabilities for living in intimacy with Christ. If Aelred believed that such freedom could be taken with the biblical text, he would have understood the necessity of reimagining the stories of our ancestors, biological and spiritual. He would have agreed with Stone that "We can never know our ancestors after all—not well, anyway. Of necessity, they are our own homely inventions. Yet though we have largely imagined them [Aelred would have said, *because* we have largely imagined them], their magic is that they shed light on much that was previously unknown, dark and dangerous."⁵

The first step for women in reclaiming the stories of the saints and traditional models is, then, the way of the imagination. Sometimes this involves a kind of "deconstruction" of the story that removes the embroidery some devout narrator has added to emphasize the pattern of sanctity sanctioned by the Church or by social conventions. Then we must fill in the bare bones that remain; we must get into the skin, as it were, of the saint and reconstruct the tensions, the issues, the conflicts and achievements of those who have preceded us in the journey of faith. To do this, we need to be as close as possible to the real story.

Unlike the stories of our biological ancestors, which generally come to us through the oral tradition, the lives of the saints have been bequeathed to us through written texts. In the early centuries of the Church, Perpetua the martyr kept a prison journal that has endured, and the travel journal of Egeria the pilgrim is also extant. Throughout the Middle Ages, the lives of women saints were committed to parchment, most often by men and women who knew them personally or lived within the first century after them. Some few letters the saints wrote themselves have also survived. From the twelfth century onward, there are many autobiographies, contemporary biographies, letters and treatises to which we have access. No matter how laden the texts may be with patriarchal assumptions and the burden of earlier interpretations, they still provide a remarkable entrée to the stories of the ancestors. To unlock those texts requires, first, the use of what

ed. by E. Rozanne Elder (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1981), pp. 123–129.

⁵ Stone, p. 19.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza calls “a hermeneutics of suspicion.”⁶ The texts must be read with the assumption that they have been distorted by patriarchal attitudes and the broadest possible ranges of sources and information must be used for reconstructing them. If such a critical reading is successful, it may give access to the woman’s authentic story and then the imagination can provide empathetic contact with that story, allowing it to be read, in Stone’s words, “in the service of our freedom.” A specific example can illuminate how the dialogue between imagination and historical context bears fruit for contemporary lives.

In the very first text written by a woman in the Christian tradition we meet the martyr Perpetua and gain remarkable access to her inner life.⁷ Perpetua was a Carthaginian martyr of the very early third century and, along with her maid Felicity, was long remembered in the Tridentine canon of the Roman Catholic Mass. In her description of her days in prison, she explores her ordeal. Perpetua records her struggle between the desire to please her father and the conviction that she must live up to her own conscience. Intertwined with this dilemma is Perpetua’s sense of responsibility for her child and the guilt engendered when she realizes that her public witness to Christian truth will deprive her infant son of his mother. Finally, there is evidence of real fear, less of the physical pain to come than of her weakness in confronting it. It is the manner in which Perpetua deals with these tensions and the candor with which she narrates the stages of her growing autonomy that engage the interest of women today and create a sense of empathy with her. An understanding of historical context enables the reader to grasp the force of patriarchal obligations and how thoroughly Perpetua’s defiance of civil law would affect her family, who stood to lose their estates and their standing in the community. It also illuminates other aspects of Perpetua’s risk. The new faith was as yet marginal; Perpetua’s adherence to it (the adherence of a catechumen) was not an obvious choice nor yet one that received social approbation. Her gender excluded her from serious consideration in her society and she lacked the cachet of virginity that would have increased her standing in the Christian community. All that we know

⁶ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), pp. 56 ff.

⁷ See Marie Anne Mayeski, *Women: Models of Liberation* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1988), pp. 1–30.

about her historical context, therefore, sharpens the tensions that she faced.

Before Perpetua can be free to give herself in martyrdom, her emotional conflicts must be resolved. This happens primarily through a sequence of dreams or visions.⁸ In these, the choices that lie before her take flesh, as it were, through the power of the imagination, as do the Christian doctrines in which she is to find consolation. She envisions the ways in which the saving power of God will sustain her family; she imagines herself succeeding at the tremendous challenge of the arena. There is even some suggestion that she “sees” a kind of reconciliation with her father. After each of these visions, she “wakes up” refreshed and strengthened for the next stage of the ordeal, having been healed of anxieties that debilitated, even paralyzed, her. According to the women’s history scholar Elizabeth Petroff, Perpetua uses her “visionary imagination to work through, comprehend, and transcend the grief and violence of the outer world. . . .”⁹ Through her imagination and its power to mediate the transcendent to her, she also touches the depths of her selfhood and finds the strength and desire to make a full and autonomous choice. Perpetua’s maternal voice, as it comes to us through her text, does not speak words of warning but bids us imagine a new future while we reach out for God in the darkness, the struggle and even the violence of daily life. Her voice is demanding as mothers’ voices usually are, but she demands only what she asks of herself: to be herself and thereby to be authentically another Christ. Perpetua is just one example of a woman saint waiting to be reclaimed by women who struggle toward human and spiritual maturity.

Perpetua’s story occurs very early in the Christian tradition and there is a great deal to be said in favor of reclaiming these early stories. In the first place, they are generally less well known to us than the stories of, say, Teresa of Avila, Thérèse of Lisieux, or Margaret Mary Alacoque. We can read their stories with fresh eyes and without the layers of earlier interpretations. More importantly, perhaps, the earliest centuries of the Church, though they were thoroughly patriarchal and even misogynist, were still somewhat fluid in social structure and doc-

⁸ The Latin text reads in each case “*ostensum est mihi hoc*,” though the words “*visio*” or “*visiones*” are used elsewhere in the text. See Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, n.d.), pp. 106–131. English translators have variously used “dream” or “vision” to translate the phrase.

⁹ *Medieval Women’s Visionary Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Alvilda Petroff (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 63.

trine, so that women who were persistent could assert themselves. As a general principle, the more chaotic the historical context, the more opportunity there is for people on the fringe to move toward the center and, from the fourth to the twelfth centuries, there was, if not precisely chaos, much instability in the world in which Christianity was being shaped. Then, too, following the principle laid down by Stone that the more distant the ancestors, the more open their stories are to reinvention, these early women saints' lives, often spare and suggestive, are very pliable to the workings of contemporary imagination.

Here, again, recent scholarship is helpful to spirituality. Good English translations, often with careful historical and critical introductions, are making these stories available. *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*,¹⁰ for instance, offers the stories of eighteen women from the sixth to the seventh centuries in Gaul. These are the women who, in the words of the editor Jo Ann McNamara, "participated in Gaul's violent transformation" (p. 1) from pagan tribal domains to Christian kingdoms. Their struggle to control their own destinies, their efforts to shape political forces and ensure the rights of their families, their precarious survival in a violent world, all this finds familiar echoes in the lives of those who read with critical judgment, with empathy and with imagination.

Benedicta Ward has also reclaimed a group of unusual "mothers" in her book *Harlots of the Desert*,¹¹ a collection of translations and interpretations of the lives of converted prostitutes in early Christian times. These are stories of struggle and tension, of light that flickers against a real darkness. Like the story of the Magdalene on which they are modeled, they dramatize the way in which great sin is often the starting point of a life of holiness. The power of these women's stories is enhanced by the fact that they were originally told by the desert monks and were preserved in monastic sources. The harlots become vivid examples of what monks needed to remember: "the reality and force of sexual desire in human experience" and the "clear realization that such desire has a true and central role in human life as desire for God. . . ." (p. 102). The women in Ward's stories all teach the pious but often complacent monks to understand divine mercy, the fundamen-

¹⁰ Edited and translated by Jo Ann McNamara and John E. Halberg, with E. Gordon Whatley (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992).

¹¹ (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications Inc., 1987).

tal truth of all spirituality. The stories of the harlots vividly demonstrate that wisdom, not innocence, is the essence of Christian holiness and, though innocence may lead to wisdom, it is not the only path. Their stories reclaimed, the harlots of the desert are mothers indeed, whose words can powerfully echo in the minds of their daughters today.

Many of the women whom we meet in ancient stories struggled to take responsibility for their lives, spoke out in defense of the faith within them, rejected false claims of civil and domestic authority, and suffered the inner turmoil that besets all who would be faithful to God's personal call. These holy women often transformed traditional feminine vocations into opportunities for ministerial action. In the late fifth century, Clotilde, an orphaned Catholic princess at a pagan court, was given in marriage to Clovis, the pagan king of the Franks. She used her arranged marriage as an opportunity to convert Clovis and, with him, his entire tribe; her example was followed by a line of Christian princesses who eventually brought the faith to the Visigoths and the Anglo-Saxon tribes of England.¹² Not for these women a passive acceptance of their disposability in the political world. Denied the possibility of participating in the official ministry of the Church, they reinvented the early ministry of "wandering" preacher; they turned their obligation to marry in a foreign land into an opportunity for evangelizing pagan Europe.

A critical and imaginative reading of women's texts greatly expands the understanding of Christian virtues. In this context, the work of Julian of Norwich, an English anchoress of the fourteenth century, is a particularly refreshing discovery. Throughout a long life of prayer and the spiritual direction of others, Julian came to understand salvation quite differently from the way in which it was being presented to ordinary Christians in her day. The fourteenth century reeked of morbidity; people were obsessed with death and a frenetic attempt to escape it. She rejected the prevailing model of salvation that too often produced scrupulosity and extreme forms of passion piety (often in-

¹² Jo Ann McNamara, "Living Sermons: Consecrated Women and the Conversion of Gaul," in *Peaceweavers*, Cistercian Studies Series, 72, Lillian Thomas Shank and John A. Nichols, eds. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications Inc, 1987), pp. 19–37. See also Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica* I, 25 and Richard E. Sullivan, "The Papacy and Missionary Activity in the Early Middle Ages," *Medieval Studies* 17 (1955), pp. 46–106.

volving self-mutilation). In her work, entitled *Shewings*,¹³ she proposed an alternative understanding of how the immense love of God, at work in Christ, overcomes sin and death to redeem all of material creation, which itself originated in love. Her expositions of God's work and the proper human response (culled from her visions but also from her work as spiritual director) are filled with metaphor and parable. Although we do not know whether she knew Aelred's text, she followed his prescriptions for fruitful meditation, entering into the biblical mysteries through the power of her imagination and conveying her wisdom in language that provokes the imaginative and affective response of later readers.

Julian struggled, in loyalty, to reconcile her own experience with the prevailing orthodoxy, but she refused to deny the experience and insight that were hers. In spite of the atmosphere of suspicion created by the Inquisition, she trusted in her own understanding of how God's love triumphs even over sin; she trusted in her own interpretation of scripture and of the doctrinal tradition. Concerned for the spiritual distress of others, she published her work, giving herself a public face when such publicity, especially for a woman who dared to do theology, represented a real threat.¹⁴ Her example expands our understanding of humility; far from diminishing herself, Julian affirms her experience and insight. She is a witness for women today who struggle to trust their own religious experience and to believe that they are called to share their wisdom with the whole Church. As an anchorite, she had chosen a life of silence and yet she teaches her daughters to speak out with honesty and courage.

As Julian significantly enlarges the ascetical notion of humility, so many saints can revise our understanding of obedience, helping us to reclaim the full and energetic meaning of its New Testament roots. If one reads the letters of Teresa of Avila,¹⁵ for instance, one encounters a vigorous and cunning administrator who had to negotiate moments of extreme crisis in the reform of Carmel. Her letters reveal that, though she acted always through the channels that religious authori-

¹³ There are several editions of Julian's work available. The most helpful is that translated and edited by Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and James Walsh, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

¹⁴ See Joan M. Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) and Mayeski, *Women: Models of Liberation*, pp. 82–108.

¹⁵ *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus* (3 vols.), trans. and ed. by E. Allison Peers (Westminster, Md.: The Newman Press, 1950).

ties set up and observed all the legalities imposed, she took every avenue open to her to press for the full autonomy of Reformed Carmelite women. She was a daughter of her age and of chivalric Spain; her letters are filled with the flowery courtesies and elevated rhetoric that mark the style of the period. But a courteous style cannot hide her persistence and determination. The Reform had been unpopular with the majority of Carmelites from the beginning. They understood that the austerities and idealism of the Reformers were an implicit condemnation of their own accommodations with the Rule and had accused Teresa of "innovations"—a serious charge in the atmosphere created by the Protestant Reformation. Teresa had managed to keep her reform alive through the support of influential friends, but in 1577 she lost her strongest protector when the papal nuncio Odmaneto died. He was replaced by an unsympathetic Cardinal Sega who called Teresa "a restless gadabout," declared her disobedient and contumacious, and accused her of inventing evil doctrines. He condemned her for defying the prohibition of the Council of Trent by leaving her cloister and for disobeying the explicit command of St. Paul by teaching.

Frustrated by the restrictions imposed upon her, Teresa continues to act behind the scenes, writing endless letters of advice to the men who were friendly to her cause but who did not always act in ways she found appropriate or sufficiently effective. She agonizes that she is not free to do what she has told other people to do; she suggests that one of her advocates go directly to the King of Spain on her behalf. She berates her agents for not following her advice. When finally she achieves the desired separation of her Reformed Carmelites from the larger body, she is dismayed at the Rule that the male Carmelites draft for her nuns. Again she writes: the Rule they have given does not allow the nuns the necessary spiritual freedom to choose their own preachers and confessors. Details have been included about the kind of fabric to be used in nuns' habits and what kinds of food are forbidden on their table; additional prayer obligations have been imposed. Teresa resists all such patriarchal interference and is not above a subtle threat when she writes asking that her complaints be conveyed to the man designated as her superior:

If he were not to leave us free in this respect, we should have to see about getting sanction from Rome, for I realize the great importance of such freedom to the sisters' happiness, as well as

the dreadful unhappiness that arises in other convents where there are too many restrictions in spiritual things. A soul restricted in such a way cannot render effective service to God. . . (Letter 351, February 21, 1581, to Jeronimo Gracian).

This is the obedience of one who will not accept anything less from her earthly superiors than acquiescence to the will of God as she has come to understand it through prayer and practical experience. To that will she is herself tirelessly committed and, although she was ever respectful in manner, she was fierce in protecting the spiritual freedom of women.

Reclaiming Mary as Mother

If we speak of all the women saints as our “mothers” in the faith, certainly Mary has functioned most obviously and most consistently as the Christian maternal image *par excellence*. To reclaim her story is both more important and more difficult because her story has been subject to extensive manipulation by the tradition at all its stages. Without much historical or scriptural foundation, Christian imagination has been free to turn Mary into a variety of images and models. Although devotion to Mary began with restrained affirmations of her unique relationship to Christ, it was not long before the figure of Mary was turned into the model of particular virtues and of particular states of life, often at variance with even the little historical information known. Aelred of Rievaulx, for example, in his homilies for Marian feasts, shows her as the perfect model of the monk. But most often she became the image of perfect womanhood, on a pedestal and beyond the tensions and violence of daily life, the quintessential feminine: virginal yet generative, silent and humble. This is the image of Mary that has most come under attack by contemporary feminists. Marina Warner in *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*,¹⁶ though she misreads some of the historical evidence, speaks for those who reject this interpretation of Mary, and the popularity of her book testifies to the extent of distaste for it.

Yet, Mary will not go away. Something about her story continues to provoke Catholic attention and to invite reinvention. Never was this more publicly evident than on December 30, 1991, when Mary made the cover of *Time* magazine. The accompanying story (pp. 62–65) was

¹⁶ New York: Vintage Books, 1983.

entitled "Handmaid or Feminist?" and explored the wide range of interpretations of Mary given by today's Christians. Noting that "a grass-roots revival of faith in the Virgin is taking place worldwide," the author, Richard N. Ostling, explored the increased number of "claimed sightings of the Virgin," the papal praise of Mary for "her submissiveness" and the revisionist views of Mary as "an active heroine" and "a crusader for social justice." The wide range of interpretations explored by *Time* gives further support to Elizabeth Stone's principle that the more distant from us our ancestors are, the greater the freedom and variety with which we reinvent them!

This diversity and freedom mark the work of scholars as well. Even while Vatican Council II was debating the position of Mary in official Catholic theology, two of the major conciliar theologians published careful analyses of orthodox Marian teaching. In "Mary and the Apostolate,"¹⁷ Karl Rahner culled the patristic sources to explore the theme of Mary as a model for apostolic Christians and for pastoral practice. Committed to a sacramental understanding of salvation, Edward Schillebeeckx saw Mary as the "universal partner" of all those engaged in appropriating the salvific work of Christ.¹⁸ Recent theologians, especially those who write from a liberationist perspective, have reflected on the actual experience of Christians. For Gustavo Gutiérrez in *The God of Life*,¹⁹ for example, there are two starting points of Marian theology: the devotion to Mary as among the Latin American poor and the existential situation of women as the "doubly oppressed." Gutiérrez believes that Mary discloses the true historical situation of women as well as the New Testament's prophetic subversion of patriarchal manipulation. An even more trenchant critique of Mariology as the exaltation of the "eternal feminine" is to be found in the writings of Rosemary Radford Ruether. In *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*,²⁰ Ruether indicts the tradition of Marian teaching which "functions . . . primarily to reflect and express the ideology of the patriarchal feminine" (p. 149). In contrast, Ruether promotes Mary as the instrument of God's liberating revolution in history, with

¹⁷ In *The Christian Commitment*, Cecily Hastings, trans. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), pp. 114–135. Rahner also published a full-length study entitled *Mary, Mother of the Lord*, W. J. O'Hara, trans. (Friburg: Herder, 1962).

¹⁸ *Mary, Mother of the Redemption*. Published in Holland in 1954, it was translated by N. D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964).

¹⁹ Matthew J. O'Connell, trans. (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), esp. pp. 164–186.

²⁰ Boston: Beacon Press, 1983, pp. 139–158.

political and economic implications for the division of society into rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, male and female. Ruether sees the task of liberating women as the test case of the Church's fidelity to its own identity. These contemporary interpretations of the person and theology of Mary demonstrate clearly both the rejection and the reclamation of the mother-image that is the focus of this essay.

While the work of these theologians is helpful to spirituality, there is another, more direct, way in which the reality of Mary as mother is being reclaimed by women today—the way of action. How many times have women realized that, although they may have rejected their mother's advice and made very different choices, they nonetheless find themselves acting out their mothers' values, sometimes even the concrete patterns of their mothers' lives? Often enough it is in times of crisis that they discover strengths and commitments deep within themselves that they later recognize as having been planted by the maternal influence; often, such experiences lead the daughter to appreciate anew the real character of the mother she had not previously understood fully. Something similar is, I believe, going on around us in the lives of mothers today who, like Mary at the foot of the cross, face the sudden and malicious murders of their children. In the Gospel of John, we read of Mary's remarkable response to her son's execution, accepting another in the place of her dying son. In obedience to the explicit command of the Lord, Mary takes into her maternal care one who is outside the bonds of blood but her child in the faith. This is the pattern that I find recurring in the lives of courageous Christian women who discover, in the midst of death, a strength and commitment to life possible only through grace.

One of my colleagues, Professor Graciela Limon, has written a novel based on her experience with Hispanic women in East Los Angeles, about a mother of El Salvador. In the novel, entitled *In Search of Bernabe*,²¹ the heroine is Luz Delcano, the mother of two sons; one son has become a soldier in the hated National Guard, the other son "disappears." Hearing rumors that her second son may have escaped to Los Angeles, the mother makes the difficult trek to the north and, losing herself in the large community of the undocumented, searches for her son, Bernabe. After a series of adventures, she is discovered by the immigration service and deported to Tijuana where she links up with a young woman *coyote*, Petra Traslavina, who is struggling to help

²¹ Houston: University of Houston Press, 1993.

others get to California. Together they minister to each other and to others until, having heard yet another rumor, the mother returns to El Salvador. There she finds her son at last, slaughtered and abandoned on the trash heap of the disappeared called Mt. El Playon. As Limon narrates the scene of the reunion, the mother picks up the broken body of her son and mourns over it with great pathos. Limon, a Catholic, acknowledges that the image of Mary as *Pieta* informed her description of the mourning scene, but, more powerfully to me at least, it is subsequent events that make Luz Delcano's story a reclamation of the image of Mary. Having buried her son right there on Mt. El Playon, Luz returns to the young *coyote*, taking another child as her own and continuing her maternal role in the life of someone joined to her by faith and commitment rather than by blood. In Limon's novel, the biblical story of Rachel weeping for her children is explicitly recalled, but there are echoes, too, of the Johannine crucifixion scene; Mary is given a new "son" by the one she loses and, as John tells us, from that day they took each other as their own.

Admittedly, this is fiction, but the story Limon narrates is culled from her experience with real Hispanic women in East Los Angeles and the pattern she describes of the mother of a slaughtered son is repeated endlessly. In *Laws of Heaven*²² the journalist Michael Gallagher tells the story of Marietta Jaeger whose daughter Susie had been kidnapped and brutally killed. During the year that her daughter is missing, Jaeger discovers that the way out of her pain is through forgiveness. Having been able, through an extraordinary chain of events, to face her daughter's murderer and forgive him, she becomes active against capital punishment. Through the death of her child, she finds a way to work for the life of other people's children. Having stood, like Mary, at the foot of a horrific cross, she has accepted other children into her care. Mothers in South Central Los Angeles, who have lost their sons and daughters to gang violence and random shootings, have organized themselves, in a variety of ways, to stop the violence and save other children. Some have formed a group called Mothers Against Gang Violence to begin reclaiming their streets and neighborhoods. One has opened a storefront cultural center where African-American children can learn the riches of their culture and receive tutoring and support in their efforts to stay alive and to live well. All of these women, consciously or not, have reclaimed by their actions the

²² New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992, pp. 226-243.

image of Mary, the sorrowful mother of God, the woman of faith committed to the lives of the vulnerable.

The task of reclaiming the tradition of our mothers in the faith is at once a joyful and a painful task. It is painful insofar as it requires us to put aside or grow beyond our vaunted independence and autonomy and to understand anew how much of our lives are indeed given. As we reread the stories of our maternal ancestors with new eyes and with empathic imaginations, we will discover their sufferings and sometimes be forced to acknowledge that their lives were irremediably narrowed and truncated. We will find in them, whatever their successes, some real failures; we will suffer anew as we face the possibility that our own deepest goals and desires may elude us in the end, through no fault of our own. But ultimately it is a joyful task. As we discover, reinvent and reclaim our mothers' stories, through imagination, historical study, or in action, we will tap into new resources for our own spiritual growth. In these stories, we will learn new ways of courage, cunning and commitment; we will find women not so different from us, whatever their social or historical context. The spiritual journey is a personal one, to be sure, but it need not be taken in isolation. Most women have found companions on that journey and have been pleasantly surprised to find that those who join them in the search for the transforming experience of God's saving presence come from every denomination, undeterred from companionship by doctrinal differences. By reclaiming the tradition of the saintly mothers, these women can also discover a companionship that reaches far back in time. They will be given access to new roads to God by the pathfinders who followed their own lights and their own experience. At the very least, they will be given the comfort of little lights, flickering ahead of them, on what is often a journey through darkness.



Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.