

A Preferential Option for God: A Catholic Feminist Argument for Not Throwing the
Baby Out with the Bathwater

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Abstract

In this paper I explore what Catholic feminist Ignatian spirituality can contribute to the conversation between faith and culture, conversation that is too often muddied by vague and superficial argument and by an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ attitude driven by extremes to which the majority do not belong. The secular and the religious spring from a common past, though they exist now within the nova effect of spiritualities available today in our modern Western or North Atlantic, “secular 3” world. The 500-year-old Ignatian Exercises can be a coherent voice speaking in the cacophony of the contemporary context *especially* when a feminist lens is used to expand them in a more comprehensive way by applying classic feminist thought on anthropology, names of God, embodiment, and the ontological centrality of relationship to human existence. This application of a feminist hermeneutic helps us explore human reality more fully – a reality that is “irreducibly plural and not merely hierarchically dualistic.” This, in turn, helps us communicate the Exercises and a truer, deeper Christianity, than contemporary conversation typically allows. I map out the basic structure and purpose of the Exercises and offer examples of a feminist retrieval of a variety of meditations and contemplations from the “weeks” of the Exercises to illustrate how this retrieval does not negate traditional interpretation of scripture but expands it for the benefit of all – Christian and non-Christian alike. The Ignatian Exercises address questions we all ask – they help one to “play the game of the truth of existence” and to reach both inward and then outward toward neighbor and world. The bridge I am attempting to build between faith and culture is made up of the Exercises as a grounded answer to the yearning in this unbelieving world that is, nevertheless, still haunted by belief. The feminist lens is the car that drives us over that bridge.

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Introduction

Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief.¹

The quote above might surprise us. It seems very much that we, as a culture, have settled into a comfortable unbelief.² Indeed, belief's stubborn persistence in an age defined by immanent secular humanism or a post-modern Nietzschean anti-humanism or a non-exclusive, non-religious humanism is, well, irritating.³ Marilynne Robinson writes, "the characterization of religion by those who dismiss it tends to reduce it to a matter of bones and feathers and wishful thinking, a matter of rituals and social bonding and false etiologies and the fear of death, and this makes its persistence very annoying to them."⁴ Robinson's analysis is accurate and amusing. But it does not touch on the pain caused in human hearts by the isolating divisions we insist on making between *us* and *them*. So, I will use below the analogy of a Thanksgiving dinner, a noisy family affair, in describing our current context. At this Thanksgiving dinner, no matter how much our Uncle Bill annoys us or how much our grandfather mystifies us as he pours an entire shaker of salt on his turkey, there is, in the end, only *us*.

There is a common way this conversation between believers in the transcendent (religious) and unbelievers in the transcendent (atheist/immanent humanist) is framed: it is a battle between faith and culture. Faith includes anyone who presumably has a rock-solid belief and culture includes the majority in the modern or post-modern age who presumably have a rock-solid unbelief and therefore, as majority, can claim exclusive ownership of *culture*.⁵ But our

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007 (Paperback Edition, 2018): 727.

² For "we" please read "we in the North American/Euro Western world. We are not all alike, but we do share a context.

³ I draw these three alternatives to religion in the modern secular age from Taylor, *Secular Age*, 19.

⁴ Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010, 15.

⁵ I write only of the modern West (North Atlantic) with its "earlier incarnation [in] Latin Christendom." (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 15) In this context, the term *religion* can roughly stand for the transcendent. Charles Taylor

culture, of course, includes the pluralistic all of us. And that pluralistic all of us includes many (perhaps most) who do not feel rock-solid at all. There are many who situate themselves somewhere between a purely immanent (materialist atheism) and a fideistic perspective.⁶ But the field itself is defined by the extremes:

[People] define themselves in relation to the polar opposites, whereas people in polar opposition don't return the favour, but usually define themselves in relation to each other, ignoring the middle (or abusively assimilating it to the other side). It is in this sense that the two extreme perspectives define the field.⁷

Nevertheless, in framing my question for this paper, I will provisionally accept the terms *faith and culture*, if only because the picture painted by these words seems accurate to the believers and unbelievers at our Thanksgiving table. At this dinner, where we are all speaking at once, or perhaps feeling silenced by a majority, the distinction between *faith and culture* feels right.

Three strands of theological study draw my attention again and again. They are this conversation between faith and culture, Catholic spirituality, and feminism.⁸ These three, when braided together, raise the question: *Can a Catholic feminist spirituality serve as a bridge in the conversation between faith and culture?* My claim is that, yes, it can. This is, perhaps, more of a hope than a settled claim. It is a groping, certainly, in that direction.⁹ By culture, I mean our modern Western or "North Atlantic world"¹⁰ with its background in Latin Christendom.¹¹ By

makes this distinction, understanding it does not cover every iteration of religion worldwide and even calls his move possibly "cowardly." But it does make conversation in this context possible. "Defining religion in terms of the distinction immanent/transcendent is a move tailor-made for our culture." (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 16.)

⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 598. Taylor describes the extremes as between (ultra?) orthodox transcendental religion and reductive atheist materialism. Though he doesn't use the term, I take him to mean "fideistic" for "orthodox."

⁷ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 431.

⁸ Christian spirituality is, in fact, a discipline of its own within the academy, closely related to, but separate from theology.

⁹ Imagine my relief when I read that Charles Taylor, in 800+ pages, feels he gropes too. (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 5.)

¹⁰ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 1. Also, 514: "our societies in the West will forever remain historically informed by Christianity," and 509: "History is hard to deny."

¹¹ I am aware that there is so much left out in this account, including a post-colonial view, but there is only so much room in this paper and already its contours risk being over broad.

faith, in the narrow context of this paper, I mean Catholic Christian faith and, even more specifically, I mean the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola as interpreted through a feminist lens. By feminist lens, I mean *feminist* more as a hermeneutical tool than as a “*classificatory* frame-work”¹² because there is no one universal approach that can be defined as *feminist spirituality*. Let’s say I am inviting Ignatius to our Thanksgiving dinner and urging him to speak in a quest for real conversation between faith and culture, conversation that offers clarity where there is now often only muddied argument and shallow secular bandwagonism. And while he speaks, I will point out where his Exercises might be expanded in a more comprehensive way by employing a feminist lens.

So that is my question. But why bother asking it? Who cares, really? Why not just let the extremes have at it on either side of the abyss while the rest of us sway somewhere in the middle, trying to figure it all out by ourselves without falling in? I have two reasons for proceeding. First, I don’t believe that the majority of us are rock-solid at either extreme. If we are believers, we are believers in an unbelieving world. If we are unbelievers, we yearn for something more in those ineffable moments in our lives when a purely immanent view just doesn’t sustain us. Expanding on the quote that opened this introduction Charles Taylor writes:

The sense that there is something more presses in. Great numbers of people feel it: in moments of reflection about their life; in moments of relaxation in nature; in moments of bereavement and loss; and quite wildly and unpredictably. Our age is very far from settling in to a comfortable unbelief. Although many individuals do so, and more still seem to on the outside, the unrest continues to surface... The secular age is schizophrenic, or better, deeply cross-pressured. People seem at a safe distance from religion; and yet they are very moved to know that there are dedicated believers, like Mother Teresa... It’s as though many people who don’t want to follow want nevertheless to hear the message of Christ, want it to be proclaimed out there... Such are the strange and complex conditions of belief in our age.¹³

¹² Lisa E. Dahill, “The Genre of Gender,” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*, ed. by Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 106.

¹³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 727. Also, 521: “It appears that the religious or spiritual identity of masses of people still remains defined by religious forms from which they normally keep themselves at a good distance” and, 522: “a kind of reserve fund of spiritual force or consolation,” and, 548: “There always have been a great many people who have been cross-pressured between the two basic orientations; who want to respect as much as they can the ‘scientific’ shape of the immanent order, as they have been led to see it; or who fear the effect of religious ‘fanaticism’; but who still cannot help believing that there is something more than the merely immanent.”

In other words: at some point, we sense the transcendent, or something like it. And we want, perhaps inexplicably to many, to “hear the message of Christ.” The Ignatian Exercises might be a means by which more clarity can be communicated to those “who don’t want to follow [but who] want nevertheless to hear the message of Christ.” And for those who do follow, or who stumble along behind, what making the Exercises can mean for a believer will become more apparent below in Chapter 3. A bridge of understanding can be built here, even if few choose to cross it.

Second, and related to the first reason for proceeding, true conversation is impossible in an atmosphere where unthought prevails. Knee-jerk negative responses to religion are often simply not well thought out. I would suggest that believers understand the unbelieving world they live in more than unbelievers understand or care to understand the experience of the believer – it simply isn’t important to them. Objections to religion often arise from a sort of going-with-the-flow of post-modern society. And this will make our Thanksgiving dinner difficult. So, in this paper, I also hope to clear the air of false assumptions so that, whether-or-not we agree, we at least know better what we are agreeing or not agreeing to. As family, we owe each other at least that.

To the contemporary person who insists, “I’m spiritual, not religious,” the Spiritual Exercises offer a way to set divisions aside for a moment and simply enter into the story of Jesus (whether or not we identify as Christian), the story of the knight turned saint Ignatius Loyola, and the story of our own life in conversation with the life and work of Jesus and the paschal mystery. All in the interest of experiencing a base line truth – not of this church or that, not of this group or that, but of Being itself. A truth that transcends denominational and cultural

division.¹⁴ It is not easy. And not everyone will choose to engage. But bridges of understanding between faith and culture are perhaps possible through looking at these Exercises. Adding a feminist lens serves to make the invitation more comprehensive. I attempt this not in order to convert. I attempt this in order to have a conversation. This is an offer of accompaniment. An appeal of sorts. What happens after conversation is not in my power and nor should it be.

Methodology and Organization of Argument

I am taking a hermeneutical and conversational approach: hermeneutical insofar as I interpret the experience of the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola; conversational insofar as I seek what Hans Georg Gadamer, and David Tracy in reference to Gadamer, would call an *event of understanding* through conversation, between believers and unbelievers in an unbelieving world.¹⁵ Theology as conversation.¹⁶ Interdisciplinarity itself could be considered my method, interdisciplinarity being “the central methodological principle” of the discipline of Christian spirituality in the academy.¹⁷ Sandra Schneiders writes, “method no longer dictates what can be studied or how. Rather, methods are tools in service of research that is increasingly dictated by the interests of the researchers and the needs of society rather than by the agendas of the

¹⁴ Even Hollywood actors needing to understand characters they will play have “fallen in love with Jesus” while making the 19th Annotation of the Exercises and while never identifying as Christian. (Andrew Garfield interview on *Silence*, <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/01/10/andrew-garfield-played-jesuit-silence-he-didnt-expect-fall-love-jesus>.)

¹⁵ Any number of citations could point to Hans Georg Gadamer’s idea of the *event* of understanding. I use David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 117.

¹⁶ Stephen Okey summarizes David Tracy’s approach to theology well in *A Theology of Conversation: An Introduction to David Tracy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press Academic, 2016). I don’t have space to go off into David Tracy, but this metaphor of conversation is central to my thesis as well. Conversation can be seen as Tracy’s “basic model for hermeneutics.” (Okey, *Theology of Conversation*, 54.) It is the “linchpin to Tracy’s theological method.” (Okey, *Theology of Conversation*), 74.)

¹⁷ Philip Sheldrake, “Spirituality and Its Critical Methodology,” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*, ed. by Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 20.

academic guilds.”¹⁸ In other words, I will use whatever interdisciplinary tools in the arsenal of a theologian working in the area of Christian spirituality can use to help her make her case. The event of understanding through dialogue – or at least a *kind* of dialogue, which is writing – is what I seek. I am aware that, in doing this, I risk trespass. Indeed, according to Michele Saracino, I do trespass:

Beyond the commonsense meaning of dialogue as talking with one another, I offer an interpretation of dialogue as a type of trespass, a process where we are called to cross affectively charged boundaries in order to maintain and even build relationships with those who are different from us...dialogue as trespass reveals our “sacred vulnerability.” Insofar as we are aware of this sacred vulnerability in the act of conversing, human relationships can become the site of God’s presence. Not all trespass ends well...dialogue has the potential to turn into an oppressive monologue in which one party’s needs are squelched violently by another’s or even those of a third party who is attempting to negotiate between the two.¹⁹

I will attempt to negotiate this dialogical minefield with the goal in mind of building *relationship*, relationship being a focus of feminist scholarship that will enter into my approach to the Exercises. But this understanding of the importance of relationship long precedes a feminist approach. In a footnote explicating Aquinas (*Summa, I-II, 28, 2*: “the lover is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but strives to gain an intimate knowledge of everything pertaining to the beloved, so as to penetrate into his very soul”), Peter Kreeft writes: “If we say we love someone, we are interested in knowing everything we can about him or her. The same is true of our love for God. The negative corollary must also be true: disinterest in intellectual intimacy indicates lack of love.”²⁰ My aim, then, is to have an intellectually intimate conversation in the mandorla shaped space created when circles of faith

¹⁸ Sandra M. Schneiders quoted in Judith A. Berling, “Christian Spirituality: Intrinsically Interdisciplinary,” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*, ed. by Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 44.

¹⁹ Michele Saracino, “Feeling through the Limits of Conversation,” in *Prophetic Witness: Catholic Women’s Strategies for Reform*, edited by Colleen M. Griffith, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009: 103-104.

²⁰ Peter Kreeft, *A Summa of the Summa: The Essential Philosophical Passages of St. Thomas Aquinas’ Summa Theologica Edited and Explained for Beginners*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 440.

and secular culture cross. The mandorla is, traditionally, a sacred space depicting the cross-section of the immanent and the transcendent, the human and the divine. It is a good space in which to envision a start.

The paper will proceed as follows. Chapter One, titled *Where Are We? Our Contemporary Context*, will help locate where we are now by understanding where we have been using much of Charles Taylor's scholarship in *A Secular Age*. It will touch upon the *nova effect* of spiritualities in our contemporary context and find it's warrant for a feminist approach to Christian spirituality. Chapter Two, titled *Where Can We Go? A Catholic Feminist Spirituality*, will address a feminist approach specifically and what that means for the study of spirituality. Chapter Three, titled *How Shall We Get There? Ignatian Spirituality*, lays the groundwork for a basic understanding of the Exercises and employs a feminist lens to expand them for a more comprehensive view. It is this chapter that addresses the "schizophrenic" secular age where "many people who don't want to follow want nevertheless to hear the message of Christ." Chapter Four, titled *Why Should We Go There? The Haunted World Yearns*, returns to Charles Taylor's *nova effect* in society today and delves deeper into why a feminist lens is so crucial in helping us see more clearly. The bridge I am attempting to build between faith and culture is itself made up of the Exercises as a grounded answer to the yearning in this unbelieving world that is, nevertheless, still haunted by belief. The feminist lens is the car that drives us over that bridge.

Context is paramount. It places us on the margins of the story of our time or at the center of its main narrative. It directs what we see and how we see it. It dictates the contour of our struggle. We are in a place today that is *cross pressured* and *fragilized* in Charles Taylor's

words.²¹ But conversation is not impossible.²² This paper is being written, frankly, because we need to talk.

²¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 598: “The cross pressure defines the whole culture.” Note that Taylor considers “culture” to include believer and unbeliever alike, as do I.

²² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 428: “I am not arguing some “post-modern” thesis that we are each imprisoned in our own outlook, and can do nothing to rationally convince each other. On the contrary, I think we can marshal arguments to induce others to modify their judgements and (what is closely connected) to widen their sympathies. But this task is very difficult, and what is more important, it is never complete. We don’t just decide once and for all when we enter sociology class to leave our “values” at the door. They don’t just enter as conscious premises which we can discount. They continue to shape our thought at a much deeper level, and it is only a continuing open exchange with those of different standpoints which will help us to correct some of the distortions they engender. For this reason we have to be aware of the ways in which an “unthought” of secularization, as well as various modes of religious belief, can bedevil the debate.”

Chapter One: Where Are We? Our Contemporary Context

*We are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane.*²³

Our Secular 3 Age and the nova effect

In his 800-page tome *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor gives beleaguered Christians a warrant to speak. We are at an extended Thanksgiving family dinner, a cacophony of voices drowning each other out in an intense squabble that has gone on for centuries. Each participant needs to, *has* to, be *right*. Insults are exchanged. Participants are dismissed with a flip of an all-knowing hand attached to the all-knowing, superior head of one extreme side or the other while those caught in the middle (most of us) swivel their heads back and forth, some in great confusion.²⁴ The stakes are high. Why? I suggest the stakes are high not only because we are often overrun with unexamined thought and pride (pride and self-examination are not common bedfellows) or we need people to believe what we believe in order to justify our belief (as in “misery loves company,” or the antonym of that). I suggest the stakes are high because we simply need to be known. Humans are ontologically beings in relationship. And, in relationship, they need to be known or it isn’t a relationship.²⁵

So let us first figure out where we are and a little bit about how we got here because “the story of how we got here is inextricably bound up with our account of where we are.”²⁶ It is Taylor’s story of how we got here that, I suggest, gives Christians their warrant to speak and, in doing so, clear the air of egregious (if sometimes understandable) assumptions and

²³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 300.

²⁴ Some, of course, aren’t torn. They just want to eat their pie.

²⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock writes: “we are intimately connected, constituted by our relationships ontologically, that is, as a basic unavoidable principle of existence.” (Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 7.)

²⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 772.

misunderstanding.²⁷ Let's say Charles Taylor shakes up the secular background enough to open a space where speech is possible.

In trying to explicate what it means to say we live in a secular age, Taylor distinguishes between three related modes of secularity and the place of religion within each, the first being in reference to public spaces (secularity 1), the second being in reference to levels of belief and practice as measured by things like church attendance (secularity 2), and the third, the one he spends his time exploring in *A Secular Age*, being in reference to the underlying *conditions* of belief in this age (secularity 3). He writes, “the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.”²⁸ This is why our Thanksgiving dinner is so noisy – the possibilities for belief or unbelief today seem endless. Taylor traces the history of belief and unbelief from 1500-2000 - roughly the space of time, incidentally, between the writing of the *Spiritual Exercises* and today – and though there isn't space in this paper to cover that intricate history in detail, there is space for a broad sweep that might get us through dinner.

When Taylor writes about secularity 3, he is exploring something beyond the fact that a sense of God has virtually disappeared in public spaces and in the political, economic, educational, professional, cultural, and recreational spheres within which we each live (secularity

²⁷ Gregory Boyle writes: “Our culture is hostile only to the inauthentic living of the gospel. It sniffs out hypocrisy everywhere and knows when Christians aren't taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. It is, by and large, hostile to the right things. It actually longs to embrace the gospel of inclusion and nonviolence, of compassionate love and acceptance. Even atheists cherish such a prospect.” (Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 2.) And Marilynne Robinson writes, “There is [a] large segment of the population who know nothing about religion at all, except what they hear from its very loudest voices, and who are therefore, understandably, secularists.” (Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here? Essays* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018), 54.)

²⁸ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3. On the same page, he writes, “belief is an option, and in some sense an embattled option in the Christian (or “post-Christian”) society” as opposed to belief not (or not yet) being an embattled option in, say, a Muslim society.

1), and something beyond the study of the number of people declaring their belief or unbelief in Christian creeds and attending church, as in ‘belief in God is declining’ (secularity 2).²⁹ He is exploring the water in which we all swim, how the nature of that water has changed in the past 500 years especially, and why.³⁰ We are swimming in this water whether-or-not we are aware it.³¹ And this water we swim in, whether-or-not church attendance in the United States is high compared to other Western nations, is water that is not generally conducive to faith – faith is hard to sustain in many milieux today, or it is just simply never seriously considered a true option.³² Secularity 3 is about the “new context in which all search and questioning about the moral and spiritual must proceed.”³³ What Taylor is getting at in exploring these conditions of belief, as opposed to levels of church attendance and practice or specific beliefs themselves, is that subtraction theories cannot ultimately account for the shift in our water. People do not simply one day read a book, or “grow up,” and switch alliances to the “more mature” view (unbelief) - even if that is the way they would explain themselves at our Thanksgiving dinner. It isn’t that simple:

²⁹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 2.

³⁰ This brings to mind the story made popular in a commencement speech at Kenyon College given by David Foster Wallace in 2005: “There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes ‘What the hell is water?’” <https://www.1843magazine.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words>.

³¹ Taylor contradicts himself somewhat in regard to naïveté and whether-or-not, as I put it, we are consciously aware of the water in which we swim. On page 21 of his introduction, he states, “Naïveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or unbeliever alike.” In other words, we all know now that there are options out there. We do, of course. But naïveté, like with the fish, is still in force in many milieux, if in an opposite way from 500 years ago. And Taylor seems to support this view as well. On page 13 he points to “the differential position of different construals [belief/unbelief]; how they can be lived ‘naïvely’ or ‘reflectively,’” and that – my point exactly in this paper – a “breach of naïveté is often the path to fuller understanding.” On page 14 he points to the need to “avoid the naïvetés on all sides.” On page 30 he writes, “my target is our contemporary lived understanding; that is, the way we naïvely take things to be.” I would suggest, and Taylor agrees, that the question of belief today has been as foreclosed in many arenas as the question of unbelief was foreclosed in the past. Today, a naïve, unquestioned belief in the transcendent is no longer axiomatic, but I disagree (and so does he, with himself?) that a naïve *unbelief* (or, indeed, a naïve belief, in some milieux) is now not possible. We live in a “reflective” framework today – in which very many, on either side, fail to reflect at all.

³² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.

³³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 20.

The “secular” is not just the neutral, rational, areligious world that is left over once we throw off superstition, ritual, and belief in the gods. This is because the secular is not just *unbelief*, or lack of specifically religious belief...the emergence of the secular is also bound up with the production of a new option...it wasn’t enough for us to stop believing in the gods; we also had to be able to imagine significance within an immanent frame...this is why “subtraction stories” of the sort offered by secularization theory will always fall short. The secular is not simply a remainder; it is a sum, created by addition, a product of intellectual multiplication.³⁴

There has to be a condition in which the areligious, secular option slowly becomes available where it was not available before. And there has to be an understanding of why other roads were not taken.³⁵

The “CliffsNotes” version of Taylor’s history might go like this: secularity began *in* the Church. Reform played a central role. It was a reformist *intensification* of religious belief, not a turning away from it, that fueled secularization.³⁶ This eventually took us from an enchanted world, in which everything in the cosmos is connected to God and where we are “porous” selves, vulnerable to all sorts of forces without, good and bad, with God being the triumphant and ultimate good - to a “disenchanted” world of “buffered” selves that can disengage.³⁷ We were no longer *embedded* in society or the cosmos.³⁸ For “buffered” selves, everything arises in one’s own mind, separate from the outer world.³⁹ There is a sense of power in this – we alone are now capable of “[ordering] our world and ourselves” and are no longer vulnerable to “spirits and forces which cross the boundary of the mind.”⁴⁰ (Ah - but if we are now not vulnerable to demons

³⁴ James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co.), 26.

³⁵ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 4.

³⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 143.

³⁷ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 25: Taylor is contrasting what he calls the “enchanted” world with Weber’s “disenchanted” modern world. Also, 239: “the ‘buffered identity,’ the self-understanding that arises out of disenchantment...builds for the buffered identity a buffered world.”

³⁸ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 150.

³⁹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 539.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 300. Also, 84: “The declarations that we are helpless sinners become more and more pro forma,” and, 222: there is an anthropomorphic shift *within the church, by believers*, “reducing the role and place of the transcendent.” Through reason, we understand God’s plan and we can take it from there, by ourselves. (Providential Deism). 230: Mystery, too, goes out the window. Also 300: “What did (does) this buffered, anthropocentric identity have going for it?...A sense of power, of capacity, in being able to order our world and ourselves...[and] a sense of invulnerability...to a world of spirits and forces which cross the boundary of the mind.”

and spirits, we are still vulnerable to suffering and evil.⁴¹ So perhaps not so buffered really.) We have a “disengaged, disciplined [and disenchanting] stance to self and society.”⁴² The goal is human flourishing which we can pursue on our own. Reference to God gets “lopped off.”⁴³ Exclusive humanism becomes possible so that now we can reach for a fullness of life that is unconnected to a higher goal/God. Reform, which sought to demystify the Church and to make worship more “pure” for being released from the superstitions of an enchanted world,⁴⁴ heralded “the beginning of a certain evacuation of the sacred as a *presence* in the world”⁴⁵ and, in an ironic way, eventually separated us from cosmos and God and led us into a purely immanent, individualistic outlook that in turn led us to a time where faith is just one option.⁴⁶ The possibilities for belief and unbelief that sprang from this are endless. This is the nova effect – a super-nova actually.⁴⁷

What this “CliffsNotes” version aims to demonstrate is how intertwined the religious and the secular are, even while they understand themselves as opposites, or, in some cases, even enemies. For in this story I’m borrowing from Taylor, we have all “[emerged] from the same long process of Reform in Latin Christendom. We are brothers under the skin.”⁴⁸ James K. A.

⁴¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 681.

⁴² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 136.

⁴³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 84. And 376: “A race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent. In some respects, we may judge this achievement as a victory for darkness, but it is a remarkable achievement nonetheless.”

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 233.

⁴⁵ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 39.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 146: “Disenchantment, Reform, and personal religion went together.” Also, re: Enlightenment or exclusive humanism: “the much wider range of unbelieving positions available today is still somehow marked by this origin point in the ethic of beneficent order.” (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 259.) And he summarizes the march toward the myriad possibilities today when he writes of “the anthropocentric turn in modern Christianity, followed by the unbelief which emerges from it.” (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 648.)

⁴⁷ The *nova effect* is Taylor’s way of describing the “explosion of options for finding (or creating) ‘significance’” or meaning, fullness. (Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 62.) This plethora of options “almost metastasize because of the multiple ‘cross-pressures of this pluralized situation.’” (Smith, *How (Not) to Be*, 63.)

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 675. And, it is suggested, “all” also includes non-Christians who live/d in this Western Christianized world context.

Smith calls this a *haunting* – the haunting that happens between the extreme poles of new atheism and religious fideism/fundamentalism – a haunting where unbelievers are tempted by belief (or at least a sense of something more) while:

Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe *while* doubting...Most of us live in this cross-pressured space, where both our agnosticism and our devotion are mutually haunted and haunting.⁴⁹

There are just so many possibilities open to us today. And as mentioned in the “Cliff’s Notes” story, there has been a nova effect of responses to the question of how to frame one’s moral/ethical/best life in the aftermath of exclusive humanism becoming a thinkable option. Each path exists in a haunted position somewhere between an enclosed immanent framework that is in danger of creating a stultifying malaise – the buffered self has made itself safe from spirits but perhaps also safe from any sense of greater significance too - and a religious path that to many today seems impossible to tread.⁵⁰ The paths we take are more like a spider web of strands emanating out from a common center and, though now feeling very distant from each other, they are still somewhat related. What would atheism be, after all, if there was no religion against which to push? Where did we come up with our “Modern Moral Order” if not originally in reference to God’s design?⁵¹

⁴⁹ Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 4. Smith gets this image of a “haunting” not directly from Taylor, but from the novelist Julian Barnes and from the writings of Flannery O’Connor. He applies the image of mutual haunting to Taylor’s work.

⁵⁰ My paper addresses, then, the middle ground. But I also ask for a *détente* between the extremes who fling names and think they know the “other” side. David Dark writes: “When I label people, I no longer have to deal with them thoughtfully. I no longer have to feel overwhelmed by their complexity, the lives they live, the dreams they have. I know exactly where they are inside – or forever outside – my field of care, because they’ve been *taken care of*. The mystery of their existence has been solved and filed away before I’ve had a chance to be moved by them or even begun to catch a glimpse of who they might be. They’ve been neutralized. There’s hardly any action quite so undemanding, so utterly unimaginative, as the affixing of a label. It’s the costliest of mental shortcuts.” (David Dark, *Life’s Too Short to Pretend You’re Not Religious* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 13.) Dark is referring to that all too common way we attach ill-considered labels to the “other” – and then, having never known them, dismiss them.

⁵¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 447. Richard Bernstein writes: “We become fools of history if we think that by an act of will we can escape the prejudgments, practices, and traditions that are constitutive of what we are.” (Richard

I am throwing my feminist Ignatian spirituality hat into this conversation from my corner of the web with the claim that it can build a bridge of understanding. But first, let's dial back to a basic question. I've mentioned the Ignatian Exercises, I've mentioned a feminist lens, and I've promised in the next chapters to extrapolate on those themes. But what is spirituality? At this table where not a few are claiming they are "spiritual but not religious," this is something that needs to be addressed.

What is Spirituality Anyway?

"'Spirituality' is a word that defines our era."⁵² It is a word that has a Christian, and more specifically a Catholic history, but the term is now used in a broader, and often emphatically *not* religious context.⁵³ Phillip Sheldrake describes it as generally referring to life-as-a-whole. It is not one element of life but is the factor that integrates all of life. He writes that "the basis for this lies in the fact that historically the concept of 'the spiritual' relates to another concept, 'the holy,' or *hālig*, whole."⁵⁴ Spirituality is concerned with "a quest for the 'sacred,'" with quests for meaning, purpose, life-direction, and ultimate values.⁵⁵

Sheldrake goes on to ask these questions: is spirituality just a personal matter? Is it just another form of therapy? Does it have a social context? If it is just there to comfort us, can it address "the destructive side of human existence?"⁵⁶ Is contemporary spirituality just another version of consumerism? One stroll down the aisle at the grocery store might convince one that

J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 167.)

⁵² Phillip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2013), 3.

⁵³ Sandra M. Schneiders, "Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" *Horizons* 13 no. 2 (1986): 254-255.

⁵⁴ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 3.

⁵⁵ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 3-4.

⁵⁶ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 4.

this is so. Magazines call out from check-out racks to a world yearning for something. And they tell you where you can buy it.⁵⁷

But Sheldrake continues, suggesting ways in which spirituality in the contemporary context “is expanding beyond an individualistic quest for self-realization.”⁵⁸ A concern for the spiritual is finding its way into conversations ranging from medicine, education, politics, art and business to discussions on how to transform our social structures and the way we design our urban environments. It has also started to show up in the academy in disciplines outside of theological or religious studies.⁵⁹

Sandra Schneiders’s inclusive and oft-cited definition of spirituality aligns with Sheldrake’s: “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”⁶⁰ It is not self-absorption or isolation.⁶¹ Nor is it any longer considered the living out of principles derived from theology or as a quest for perfection by a select few. It is growth, beyond oneself, that is available to all.⁶² Like Sheldrake, she recognizes that spirituality moves beyond the personal and into social and political life in areas such as concern for the environment, social justice, and “the building of a

⁵⁷ The July/August 2018 issue of *Spirituality and Health* focuses on the *Quest for the Sacred*. It includes advertisements and articles on shamanism, zen, Christianity, yoga, mindfulness, mindful movement, meditation, cleansing, the wisdom of spirit animals, goddesses, taking a break from the word “God,” gurus who can tell you in one session “what the root of your problem is,” hero quests, wisdom workshops at a place called Wisdom House, “Zoloff and the Sacred,” guides who will transform you in one, three, or ninety days, crystals and a mystery school, a piece titled “Say No Like a Boss!,” and books titled *Are We There Yet?: Enlightenment for Busy People* and *Your Life After Death*, a book that “delivers arguably the most comprehensive, no-nonsense account ever written of what lies ahead upon leaving this world behind.”

⁵⁸ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 4.

⁵⁹ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 4-5.

⁶⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, eds. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2005), 5-6.

⁶¹ Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality,” 266.

⁶² John R. Donahue, SJ, “The Quest for Biblical Spirituality,” in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM*, ed. by Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert, SNJM (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 75.

better world.”⁶³ And, like Sheldrake, she writes that spirituality embraces “all aspects of human life and experience” – body, social, political, secular.⁶⁴

But not everyone takes this positive view of “spirituality” as a contemporary blanket term for depth or meaning. In *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King argue that “religion is rebranded as ‘spirituality’ in order to support the ideology of capitalism.”⁶⁵ Carrette and King do not agree with the writers above that spirituality today has necessarily moved from an individual pursuit into one focused on “the building of a better world.” They argue that spirituality today often just serves the purposes of a corporatized consumer society even while it declares its commitment to human welfare. They go so far as to claim that spirituality today makes good worker bees for the corporate world and, though giving lip service to traditional religious concerns such as “charity, compassion and caring for others” it “[ignores] the ways in which the corporate capitalist system maintains structural oppression, social injustice and world poverty.”⁶⁶ Carrette and King claim that the “plundering of the cultural resources of humanity for the sake of corporate profit...necessitates a critical perspective upon the modern phenomenon of ‘spirituality.’”⁶⁷ So “spiritual but not religious” can be a slippery thing.

Sheldrake outlines the way we come to judge the adequacy of spiritual traditions in general and the claims of spiritualities claiming to be Christian in particular. Citing David Tracy, he writes that, first, we must confirm that a certain religious or spiritual tradition meets the demands of what we now consider a healthy human life. This means that we take into account

⁶³ Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality,” 254.

⁶⁴ Schneiders, “Theology and Spirituality,” 265.

⁶⁵ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 17.

⁶⁶ Carrette and King, *Selling*, 129-131.

⁶⁷ Carrette and King, *Selling*, 140.

“developments in human knowledge” (psychology, sociology, political science, evolutionary and quantum theory) and also the painful events of recent history.⁶⁸ This basic approach, which does not demand a collapse of Christian spirituality into purely secular terms, Tracy calls a “criteria of adequacy.” For adequacy, interpretations of religious experience must be “humanely meaningful,” “intellectually coherent,” and must address whether our “human confidence in life is worthwhile.”⁶⁹ It must “relate us to a God worthy of our commitment.”⁷⁰ Second, for spirituality to be Christian, a faithfulness to the “specifically Christian understanding of reality and human existence” must be honored.⁷¹ This he calls a “criteria of appropriateness.” To determine appropriateness, a Christian spirituality must relate to classic Christian beliefs such as God-as-Trinity and the Incarnation. It must not be narcissistically self-absorbed. It must reflect the whole gospel and not just certain parts. It cannot ignore Tradition. It includes prayer, and action and “a sense of ultimate human purpose and destiny...a balance between ‘the now’ and ‘the not yet.’”⁷²

Sheldrake adds that Christian spirituality has a positive view of material reality as “the gift and reflection of a loving, [creator] God” but it is “not naïvely optimistic.”⁷³ It understands that the world is a dark place. But it also sees God’s relationship to humanity, in Jesus Christ, as ultimately redemptive. We are called to repentance, to conversion, and to following in the way of Jesus. Christian spiritual formation and transformation is both individual *and communal* – God

⁶⁸ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 19.

⁶⁹ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 19.

⁷⁰ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 19.

⁷¹ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 19.

⁷² Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 20.

⁷³ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 43-44.

dwells in each of us “as Spirit, empowering, guiding, and inspiring the journey of the community and of each person towards an ultimate union with the divine eternal life.”⁷⁴

In the face of the contemporary array of claims to spiritual wisdom, clear criteria for evaluating such claims are needed. Douglas Christie writes, “the eclectic and non-religious meanings attached to spirituality require an effort to scrutinize and evaluate the assumptions that govern its usage. The investigation of such questions has become an important part of the work of contemporary scholars of spirituality.”⁷⁵ With its 2000-year history, Christian spirituality can lend a coherent voice to the contemporary conversation while it also listens to the myriad voices of spiritual experience surrounding us.⁷⁶ And this coherent voice can reach out from Spiritual Exercises that were written five hundred years ago.

A Warrant for a Feminist Approach

My intention to use a “feminist hermeneutic” in my approach to the Ignatian Exercises gives me pause, because the study of spirituality, as the study of *experience*, is both so vast and so particular an area of study that it does not easily conform to the general category “feminist.” Sandra Schneiders, upon whom I (and everyone else) have depended for much of my understanding of what it is to work in the field of Christian spirituality, and herself a feminist, writes words of warning. In defending the hermeneutical approach as most adequate to the study of spirituality, she also writes that she most “emphatically [does] not mean the application of some particular hermeneutical theory...[or] the prosecution of some particular hermeneutical

⁷⁴ Sheldrake, *Spirituality*, 44.

⁷⁵ Douglas Christie, Introduction to *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Dreyer & Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2005), XXII.

⁷⁶ Schneiders, “Contours and Dynamics,” 17.

agenda, e.g. feminist or deconstructionist hermeneutics, in regard to the subject matter.”⁷⁷ She seems to be concerned that the three-tiered approach to understanding Christian spiritual life – the first step being “thick” description of an experience, the second critical analysis, and the third a constructive interpretation – would be aborted by applying a specific theory or what she calls here an “agenda” of feminism. If I have understood her objection correctly, then I must disagree with her on this point. Elsewhere, she herself writes, “like the feminist scholar who sees everything as a feminist but does not restrict her research to expressly feminist topics, the scholar of Christian spirituality...might be studying some aspect of non-Christian spirituality in and of itself simply to enrich the environment with which he or she studies Christian spirituality.”⁷⁸ (In my case, the Ignatian Exercises.) She acknowledges here an overall feminist approach, or lens, that is valid and not constraining. Why she implies in the first quote that such a lens prosecutes “some particular hermeneutical agenda” is curious, written, as it is, by a well-known feminist theologian who “sees everything as a feminist” but whose feminism does not constrict her. One can interpret – indeed, we all do – from a certain position and through a certain lens, and thereby contribute to the conversation, without having an “agenda” that seeks to bulldoze other voices. Indeed, in an essay titled “Emerging Issues and New Trajectories in the Study of Christian Spirituality,” I find a warrant for further study of Christian spirituality through a feminist lens:

A wave of liberationist, feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, and *minjung* scholars working since the early 1970s have challenged assumptions about the univocity with which the term “experience” has been used. These critical voices, recognizing in diverse ways what Michael Lerner has identified as “the politics of meaning,” have prodded academics who still interpret historical sources and traditions as if they were identity-neutral. These voices remind us of the importance of gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, class and social location, locality and nationality, as crucial factors in understanding culture and

⁷⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., “A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Dreyer & Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2005), 56.

⁷⁸ Schneiders, “Contours and Dynamics,” 16.

experience. The study of spirituality cannot ignore how these factors impinge on our understanding of the spiritual life.⁷⁹

I can say without equivocation that the fact of my gender has “impinged” on my own experience and understanding of spirituality as specifically Christian. Indeed, it has in large part defined the contours of my struggle. As Schneiders wrote in one of her earlier pieces on the topic: “the agony of the Catholic who is a feminist is experienced primarily in the area of spirituality.”⁸⁰ The agony of the Catholic who is a feminist lies in almost always hearing only half the story.⁸¹

It is true that a feminist or any other gender-oriented spirituality is a general category into which one must delve deeper to obtain a “thick” description of a unique person’s multifaceted and mysterious experience, but lenses like gender help to “unmask even greater generalizations...to ignore gender as a primary category of human experience also obscures the ways each person’s experience is constructed through appropriation of these basic dimensions of selfhood, and the ways social reality both forms and “de-forms” people along lines of power shaped by gender and other generic categories.”⁸² These categories do function in our lives. Gender is not the only thing that will affect our spirituality – social and geographical location, race, and cultural identity will all play their part.⁸³ I have therefore couched my feminist inquiry more in terms of gender as a “*hermeneutical* rather than a *classificatory* framework.”⁸⁴ A scholar cannot decide, *a priori*, what gender means to a particular person or experience. Still, as “most

⁷⁹ Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows, eds., *Afterward in Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 2005), 367.

⁸⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Feminist Spirituality: Christian Alternative or Alternative to Christianity?” in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. by Joann Wolski Conn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 47.

⁸¹ Schneiders, “Feminist Spirituality,” 53.

⁸² Dahill, “The Genre of Gender,” 103.

⁸³ Wendy M. Wright, “Woman-Body, Man-Body: Knowing God,” in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. by Joann Wolski Conn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 85.

⁸⁴ Dahill, “Genre of Gender,” 106.

feminist issues are also spirituality issues because they focus on self-transcendence,”⁸⁵ I would like to keep a feminist lens close by, even while I acknowledge it isn’t a refined enough lens for the deepest study of Christian spirituality and while also acknowledging that the term “feminist” must be qualified as a term that does not speak for all women universally.

I see a need for feminist theologians and scholars of Christian spirituality to fill some gaps that classic Christian spiritualities, traditionally European and male, however true, however beautiful, inevitably cannot avoid creating. I see a need for feminists who are not celibate, who are mothers, to fill some gaps as well. To say, “Yes, but; yes, and,” again and again. Everyday life must be reflected, for it is here, in everyday life, that spirituality, and especially much of a woman’s spirituality, is found. Embodied practices have spiritual meaning.⁸⁶ The idea of “interconnectedness” has meaning.⁸⁷ And so, with this warrant to proceed from a feminist stance, we will move into Chapter Two and where feminist spirituality might take us.

⁸⁵ Joann Wolski Conn, “Dancing in the Dark: Women’s Spirituality and Ministry,” in *Women’s Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. by Joann Wolski Conn (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996), 11.

⁸⁶ Meredith B. McGuire, “Why Bodies Matter: A Sociological Reflection on Spirituality and Materiality,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 2-5.

⁸⁷ Schneiders, “Feminist Spirituality,” 43.

Chapter Two: Where Can We Go? A Catholic Feminist Spirituality

*Thus feminists, unable to communicate with the God of patriarchy, are imprisoned in a night of broken symbols.*⁸⁸

What is a Feminist Approach to Catholic Spirituality?

Feminist theological thinkers affect a woman's spirituality - and, one would hope, also a man's spirituality - in profound ways when they breathe fresh air into names of God and when they emphasize the importance of community/relationship and our embodied selves. These are "guiding principles" of feminist scholarship that I would like to look at briefly in this chapter in order to build upon them in connection with the Ignatian Exercises in the next.⁸⁹ But first, a more basic feminist stance on anthropology should be made clear: both male and female are normative as human. At first glance, this seems an obvious truth, but the history of Christianity, and indeed, history itself, has begged to differ. "Simply being a woman has, historically, meant being not a full person but an inferior and derivative version of the human. In this construction of reality, the male, by virtue of being male, is superior."⁹⁰ This "construction of reality" is called *patriarchy*, technically "rule of the father," and basic to it is a hierarchical, dualistic framework that exists as an invisible grid ordering our perception.⁹¹ Things come in pairs, but not, in the final analysis,

⁸⁸ Constance Fitzgerald, "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, Second Edition, ed. by Joann Wolski Conn (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1996), 427.

⁸⁹ Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2001), 167.

⁹⁰ Sandra M. Schneiders, *With Oil in Their Lamps: Faith, Feminism, and the Future*, 2000 *Madeleva Lecture on Spirituality* (Mahway, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), 9-10. Elsewhere, Elizabeth Johnson writes, "Feminist scholarship makes clear that statements about women that emanate from a male-centered thought system do not correspond to historical reality." (Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 187.) And then there is the now infamous description by Aristotle, picked up by Aquinas, of the female as "misbegotten male." To read further in those texts makes the point ever clearer.

⁹¹ The word "patriarchy," like the words "Christian," "feminist" and indeed, even "Jesus," are so loaded that they tend to illicit an automatic negative response in many because they have each been used to wield a divisive sword. The term "patriarchy" has gone in and out of fashion in feminist scholarship - it's exactly precise in describing our societal context, it's not precise enough, etc. I use it throughout this paper as an accurate enough tool to describe the water we *all* swim in - women and men. It is the binary structure fundamental to patriarchy that interests me. Chapter 4 will address this further.

side by side as much as one up, one down, one superior, one inferior: “masters and slaves, adults and children, rich and poor, clergy and laity, royalty and commoners, and so on. But basic to all of these dualisms is the fundamental, biologically based, ontologically unchangeable, paradigmatic dualism: male and female.”⁹² In a patriarchal system, the male is the norm (and therefore somehow more real?) and the female is...*other*.⁹³ Susan Abraham emphasizes that this is *not* to say that “all hierarchy is inherently bad: our classrooms, parliaments and churches would be in complete chaos without hierarchical systems...if hierarchies were indeed dynamic systems that organize themselves around individual gifts of complex selves, feminists might not be critical of hierarchies.”⁹⁴ In other words, both women and men are uniquely individual complex selves who cannot be squeezed into a dualistic framework that considers one, however subliminally (or not), as “higher” than the other even *if* they are ontologically different. Hierarchy is necessary for the smooth functioning of society – just not one that rests upon a dualistic patriarchal *anthropology* that sees male as normative and female as something other than, and therefore necessarily less than, the norm.⁹⁵ Schneiders agrees when she writes, “reality,

⁹² Schneiders, *With Oil in Their Lamps*, 24. A poignant (for girls anyway) example of the “superiority” of the male in a patriarchal system is found in John Marcus Sweeney, *I’d Rather be Dead than be a Girl: Implications of Whitehead, Whorf, and Piaget for Inclusive language in Religious Education* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), Ch. 1. Explaining his title, Sweeney cites a study in which boys and girls were first asked what they would like to be when they grew up, then asked what they would like to be if they were the opposite sex. Sweeney writes: “In many cases when the girls imagined themselves as boys, they raised the conventional prestige of their career choice [ie: from nurse to doctor]. In too many cases the boys simply could not wrap their minds around the possibility of being a girl. One boy succinctly verbalized his non-plussed reaction, ‘I’d kill myself!’” Traditional appeals to complementarity between the sexes do not, and perhaps *cannot*, erase this binary outlook that perceives one member of the pair, male and female, as being superior to the other. “Equal but different” too easily turns back into equal...*but with one preferred over the other*.

⁹³ It must be emphasized that “the goal of feminist theology...is not to make women equal partners in an oppressive system. It is to transform the system.” (Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse, Tenth Anniversary Edition*. (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 2002), 32.

⁹⁴ Susan Abraham, “Praying the Trinity: Transforming Feminist Trinitarian Theologies,” *Modern Theology* 30/4 (Oct. 2014), 590.

⁹⁵ The concept of complementarity between the sexes, upheld by the Catholic hierarchy, claims male and female are equal in dignity, just different in nature. Much space is then given to what the female nature consists of, ie: a genius for relationship and family. But it is just plain odd to have an all-male group of celibate men expound on what it is to be a woman. It’s just...*odd*.

especially human reality, is irreducibly plural and not merely hierarchically dualistic.”⁹⁶ It is the *binary* that is key here, and this is something a feminist approach will question. As Susan Abraham’s quote above indicates, there is a wide range of human characteristics and gifts, spread across a wide range of humans, male and female, of every race and color. A dualistic framework cannot hold the truth of this wide range. A feminist lens simply rests on the assumption that male and female equally reflect a human norm. In Christian terms, both are *imago dei*.⁹⁷

Now to names of God. The basic feminist stance here is “the holy mystery of God can be represented by female symbols in as adequate and inadequate a way as by male symbols.”⁹⁸ Language of God can never be definitive. We reach indirectly for an understanding that can never be complete. Traditional Catholic God-language is expressed by analogy, for example: we experience good things in the world, develop a concept of goodness and then *affirm* this goodness of God, who created all things. We then *negate* the affirmation, because God is infinite and so cannot be limited by our concept of good in the finite world. But we still think of God as good, so we *negate our negation*, understanding that God is good in a way that far surpasses our human understanding.⁹⁹ And so, exclusive, or nearly exclusive male imagery for God in Christianity reflects truth, as far as we can grasp truth through language of God. *But* it is an incomplete truth, like a great painting, half of which has been torn away:

The ordinary habit of Christian language that uses a few male images for the divine to the exclusion of all others appears restrictive and even distorted. Theologically the words tend to be reified so that God is wrongly understood to be masculine in a literal sense, however subliminally. The human heart thus creates an idol. Spiritually and psychologically, all male imagery of the divine also deprives women of seeing

⁹⁶ Schneiders, *Oil in Their Lamps*, 44.

⁹⁷ Or, as humans are ontologically beings in relationship, humans are also *imago trinitas*.

⁹⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 72.

⁹⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 17-21.

themselves as created directly in God's own image and likeness unless they abstract themselves from their own bodies. They are thereby deprived of a source of spiritual power.¹⁰⁰

It's as if we all, male and female, have (traditionally) been gazing at a beautiful half of an analogical masterpiece not recognizing *it isn't the whole painting*. Feminist scholarship on names of God opens our eyes – all of our eyes – to a more complete canvas. And though Elizabeth Johnson points solely to the spiritual cost to women of all male imagery for God, I would suggest the spiritual damage done by all male imagery affects us all. It is a different spiritual damage for men perhaps (read *King Lear* or the daily paper), but it is spiritual damage nonetheless. Programs for removing sexist language are not a cure-all¹⁰¹ – still, an expansion of our imagination through language drops redemptive water on images of God that have gone dry for many of us.

Now to relationship. When feminists address the concept of community or relationship, they are doing more than just being gals. They are shining a light, not only on human experience, but on the nature of reality itself. “Women typically witness to deep patterns of affiliation and mutuality as constitutive of their existence and indeed of the very grain of existence itself.”¹⁰² The essence of God, as Trinity, is communion. Relation.¹⁰³ We exist as selves in relationship and as selves in relationship, we exist in God, who is Being, existence itself *as* “the event of persons

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 72. It has been argued that feminism itself supports a binary point of view. I disagree. This paper argues that the embrace of the feminine within a patriarchal context is the very means by which destructive binaries can successfully be addressed.

¹⁰¹ Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 428. All of our images of God can, and will probably be “shattered by life experience (Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 418).” But this does not negate the need to expand our imagery. “Feminists need to realize that the gap that exists between human, patriarchal concepts of God and what is internalized by them in impasse is exactly what promises religious development and is the seed of a new experience of God, a new spirituality, and a new order.” (Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 429.)

¹⁰² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (Tenth Anniversary Edition)*. New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 2002), 225.

¹⁰³ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 243.

in communion.”¹⁰⁴ In other words, “reflecting its creator, the universe has relationship as its fundamental code.”¹⁰⁵ Rita Nakashima Brock expands upon the concept of relationship in community as a means to mend a broken-hearted society and a patriarchy that needs to be turned, not so much upside down as “inside out, to reveal its ravaged, faint, fearful, broken heart, and to illuminate the power that heals heart.”¹⁰⁶ A feminist approach to the Exercises, then, will embrace a sense of relationship and community – a “women’s strength in affiliation as a *human* strength, something “good” for humankind, and not just some kind of ‘default setting’ for women.”¹⁰⁷ This will be explored in the following chapters.

Lastly, embodiment. The feminist stance might be described as one which reminds us that we do not live solely in our heads. Or more precisely, we do not live *ideally* - or really, at all - outside of our bodies. Here, in the emphasis on body, a spotlight is cast upon, and is again critical of, the dualistic, hierarchical framework we’ve inherited and its relationship to relationship. Historically, Christianity has ranked the body as lower than and dependent upon the soul – it is the inferior dimension of a person.¹⁰⁸ Though Christianity is an incarnational religion by the very nature of the fact that it rests on God becoming flesh and dwelling among us, historically, the hierarchical viewpoint of soul over body overshadows the incarnational viewpoint.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, somehow, the body went missing:

¹⁰⁴ LaCugna, *God For Us*, 249.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 228.

¹⁰⁶ Brock, *Journeys by Heart*, xv.

¹⁰⁷ Katherine Dyckman, S.N.J.M., Mary Garvin, S.N.J.M., and Elizabeth Liebert, S.N.J.M., *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2001), 20. (*italics my own*)

¹⁰⁸ Colleen M. Griffith, “Spirituality and the Body,” in *Ethics and Spirituality: Readings in Moral Theology No. 17*, ed. by Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 233.

¹⁰⁹ Griffith, *Spirituality and Body*, 235.

It was there, buried in the deep recesses of Christian tradition. The mythic story of Creation affirmed its goodness. Incarnation gave it theological significance. Resurrection deemed it integral to human fullness of life. But where did it go? How long has it been missing? Why has the body disappeared?¹¹⁰

Our mind and spirit are not ghosts floating around in our body trying somehow to not get too close to this corporeal self. Walter Burghardt puts it nicely when he writes, “I am not naked spirit; I am spirit incarnate; in a genuine sense, I *am* flesh.”¹¹¹ Bodies are the most obvious and unavoidable fact of our existence. Bodies are the place where we meet others, our world, and God. “Without the full involvement of the material body, religion is likely to be relegated to the realm of cognitions (i.e., beliefs, opinions, theological ideas). Embodied practices – including mundane and seemingly unexceptional activities like singing and preparing a meal – link our materiality as humans and our spirituality.”¹¹² So, what are some feminist claims regarding bodies? One is that “*bodiliness [is] the location of our spirituality.*”¹¹³ When an embrace of bodiliness - “as *vital organism, sociocultural site, and product of consciousness and will*” - is abandoned in favor of a dualistic approach to body where body is inferior, all sorts of things go out the door with it, notably, the full “breadth and depth of human bodily being as the location of spirituality, something grasped not as isolated individuals but as people in relationship.”¹¹⁴ Another feminist claim is that our hierarchical division of the human person into higher soul and lower body reverberates out into the world in destructive ways:

Far too often, the hierarchy endorsed in the tradition gets extended outward to the social order where male and female bodies get differentiated by means of a parallel association with soul and body and spiritual/intellectual nature is made to stand over and against corporeal nature. A whole division of creatures ensues.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Griffith, *Spirituality and Body*, 230. Charles Taylor refers to a kind of “excarntation” within Christianity that is antithetical to its roots. “[This excarntation] takes us ever farther away from the network of agape. This can only be created in enfleshment. Agape moves outward from the guts.” (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 741; also 771.)

¹¹¹ Walter J. Burghardt, SJ, “Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. by George W. Traub, SJ (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 92.

¹¹² McGuire, “Why Bodies Matter,” 15.

¹¹³ Griffith, *Spirituality and Body*, 232.

¹¹⁴ Griffith, *Spirituality and Body*, 244.

¹¹⁵ Griffith, *Spirituality and Body*, 234.

In other words, female is associated more with body, the inferior dimension of the human, and male is associated with spirit and intellect, the superior dimensions of the human. And then, as Susan Ross writes, despite Christianity's claim of veneration of the material world (including body) through its sacramentality, it is also "hostile to women's bodies."¹¹⁶ This is a clear example of how the binary framework *functions*.

I set this basic foundation of feminist thinking here because body and relationship and names of God will enter into my experience of the Ignatian Exercises. And without a feminist lens, I lose my ability to communicate the Exercises in the comprehensive way I suggest we need at our Thanksgiving table. In the conversation between faith and culture, half a masterpiece will not do.

¹¹⁶ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 9.

Chapter Three: How Shall We Go There? Ignatian Spirituality

*This isn't a contest but the doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak.*¹¹⁷

The Exercises

The Ignatian Exercises are nothing if not flexible. Ignatius *begins* his handbook with annotations that make space for the differing circumstances, personalities, and physical constitutions of those who will make them. Those who make the full Exercises in a thirty-day retreat, removed from daily life, are participating in the way described in the 20th Annotation.¹¹⁸ Those who cannot remove themselves from their everyday lives for thirty days can make the full Exercises over the course of about eight months, participating in the way described in the 19th Annotation. The 18th Annotation makes clear that “weeks” can be shortened or lengthened according to the needs of those making the Exercises; certain exercises may be left out by a director at his or her discretion if it becomes clear that they would be “useless or even harmful” in a particular instance; and after the preparatory period, or the first “week,” the guide (director) and the person making the Exercises may discern that it is best to not continue further if continuing would not prove fruitful.¹¹⁹ For the purpose of this paper, we will nevertheless proceed, addressing all four “weeks” of the Exercises, while keeping in mind that the preparatory stages alone would be enough to fill a conversation for hours and that, no matter what we include, we are leaving out far more.

Simply put, the *Spiritual Exercises* is a handbook written for the person guiding a retreat, not something followed page by page by those making a retreat. The contents are intended “to

¹¹⁷ Mary Oliver, “Praying,” in *Thirst: Poems by Mary Oliver* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2006), 37.

¹¹⁸ A Jesuit priest or brother will make the Exercises in this way at least twice in his lifetime.

¹¹⁹ David L. Fleming, S.J., *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation & A Contemporary Reading of The Spiritual Exercises* (Saint Louis, MO: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 17.

help people make decisions that order their lives and on this basis act differently, because people's actions ultimately constitute their relation with ultimate reality...every major decision is spiritual."¹²⁰ Amidst the cacophony of voices inside our heads – and we all have this conflicted cacophony – we learn to hear the still small voice of our heart, of God, and in the face of the myriad options of what to do with our lives, we become better able to respond.¹²¹ Some have called the Exercises “consciousness raising,” because in them we learn to discern what Ignatius calls the voice of the spirit of God (or the Good, aimed at human flourishing) and the opposing “spirit” of “destruction and disorientation.”¹²² The Exercises are meant, in other words, to lead the retreatant to spiritual freedom. But the Exercises are not a game of naval-gazing – “they also orient the one who makes them towards self-donation.”¹²³

When I first made the Exercises, I was hardly aware that there was a text associated with the retreat – I just placed myself in the hands of my guide and journeyed from week to week, with bits of the written Exercises given to us on photocopied sheets as needed. I mention this, because the Exercises are something one journeys through – not something one reads about or studies:

One who is familiar with the Exercises...knows they are an extremely compact collection of considerations, observations, and points that instead of being read must be experienced in a retreat, under the guidance of a person who knows their methodology and applies it to retreatants with power yet simultaneously with delicacy. In order to know these Exercises, it is necessary to practice them, to live them: one must add to the printed text the vital function of a guide and still more the intensive contribution of retreatants themselves. Especially noteworthy is the portion of the task left to them, since, properly

¹²⁰ Roger Haight, S. J., *Christian Spirituality for Seekers: Reflections on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 222.

¹²¹ Ronald Modras, “The Spiritual Humanism of the Jesuits,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. by George W. Traub, SJ (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 9.

¹²² Monika K. Hellwig, “Finding God in All Things: A Spirituality for Today, in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. by George W. Traub, S.J. (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 51.

¹²³ Howard Gray, SJ, “Ignatian Spirituality,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. by George W. Traub, SJ (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 61.

speaking, they are the ones who *exercise* themselves. One who would be content with simply reading Ignatius' book from beginning to end would remain outside its marvelous world.¹²⁴

Years after I made the Exercises, I would study them more extensively, grateful for the chance to widen my horizon but also very grateful that I was not “in my head” with them when I first made them. This is why writing *about* the Exercises will always fall short of what they might mean for an individual person making them.

Not that this has stopped anyone from trying. There are an untold number of books and articles on Ignatius and the Exercises, so I will not map out the course of his life or draft a complete guide to the Exercises here. I am not qualified to do so in any case. For this paper, it is enough to outline the general structure and purpose of the Exercises, giving a few examples of experience of them, while asking forgiveness for a necessary incompleteness. In the outline of their general structure, it is of course necessary to refer to the term God and to the person of Jesus – the Exercises are, after all, essentially our individual journey through and meditation upon the Gospel story of Jesus, learning along the way, as best we can, how to discern God's will as we learn to read our own heart. This journey can be made, I suggest, by both Christians and non-Christians – *if* we proceed with open hearts and minds toward one another and *if* we clear the air of the most egregious misunderstandings of what the word *God* refers to. Regarding the possibility of employing Jesus as a bridge, even for those who bristle at the thought of religion, Roger Haight writes, “the possibility of an experience of Christian spirituality for even non-Christian seekers lies precisely in the humanity of Jesus and his ability to be approached and understood by any other human being...the Exercises raise these stories of Jesus up against the vacuum left by theological language that no longer seems credible and the embarrassing public

¹²⁴ Ricardo Lombardi, S.J., *Communitarian Dimensions of Ignatius: Communitarian Spiritual Exercises* (Silver Spring, MD: Movement for a Better World, n.d. (circa 1980), 259. Quoted in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. by George W. Traub, S.J. (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 116.

postures of the churches.”¹²⁵ So Jesus is not the problem in building our bridge. Jesus can speak to us universally. “The premise of the Spiritual Exercises lies in the conviction that Jesus represents a universally relevant teaching about ultimate reality and a model of human life consonant with it.”¹²⁶

But talk of God is another story. In order to proceed in conversation at this table of varied family members, it is even more necessary to come to some understanding of what that loaded term “God” means, especially in a Christian context. We must clear the air of images of an old man in the sky with a white beard and an axe to grind who watches our every move waiting for us to slip up or a guy who throws his son under the bus because he needs his bank account balanced. When we refer to God in the rest of this paper, we are saying something more like this:

God is not anyone’s name. There is not some person out there someplace, much older, much wiser, much more powerful than you or I whose name is *God*. *God* is not the name of a class of which there happens to be only one member. The word *God* is a bit of shorthand, a stand-in which functions in Christian theology almost as *x* functions in algebra. When working an algebraic problem, one’s central concern is *x*. But *x* is the stand-in for the thing one doesn’t know. That is how *God* functions in Christian theology. It is the name of the Mystery that lies at the root of all that exists.¹²⁷

In other words, though we can know something of God, by analogy, for example, as stated above, we can never claim to know the totality of God. At the very least, we know that God does not refer to an entity, like us, only a bigger and better version. Reference to knowledge of God always demands of us a certain humility.

We can all agree that there is existence – there is something rather than nothing. And why? This is the ultimate question we ask ourselves and it is, ultimately, even for the atheist physicist, a mystery. “Ludwig Wittgenstein was trying to make this point when he wrote, in

¹²⁵ Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, xxii and xxiv.

¹²⁶ Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, 105.

¹²⁷ Michael Himes, “Living Conversation: Higher Education in a Catholic Context,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, ed. by George W. Traub, S.J. (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 225-226. He continues on 228: “Within the Christian tradition, *God* is really more of a verb than a noun...It is the name of a relationship.”

typically cryptic fashion, ‘Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is.’”¹²⁸ This is not, then, a mystery as in who killed Colonel Mustard in the library with a candlestick. It is not a mystery that we can work out for ourselves with enough elbow greased thinking. It is Mystery, with a capital “M,” just as each one of us is *mystery* – describing any of us by the color of our hair or where we went to school or what year we were born will only barely begin to touch upon who we *are*. To emphasize this point that Christianity speaks analogously, but never definitively of God, or even speaks *not at all*, I cite Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-395) who writes, “in speaking of God, where there is a question of his essence, then is *the time to keep silence*.”¹²⁹ Another, Dionysius the Areopagite (ca. 500), writes, “the unknowing of what is beyond being is something above and beyond speech, mind, or being itself.”¹³⁰ Meister Eckhart (ca. 1260-1328) refers to God as *no-thing*. God is “the ground or sustaining energy of being itself.”¹³¹ For Ignatius, God can be *found* in all things, in Creation, whether or not one is Christian, non-Christian, atheist, or agnostic and God is, moreover, acting in creation for the benefit of each person:¹³²

Non-Catholics, non-Christians, even nonbelievers, conceptual agnostics, and atheists can be living in the divine presence and serving as instruments of grace. Reaching out for and being touched by sacred mystery does not require having correct ideas about God.¹³³

¹²⁸ John Horgan, “Scientists Will Never Explain Why There’s Something Rather Than Nothing,” in *Scientific American*, April 23, 2012: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/science-will-never-explain-why-theres-something-rather-than-nothing/> He adds: “When scientists insist that they have solved, or will soon solve, all mysteries, including the biggest mystery of all, they do a disservice to science; they become the mirror images of the religious fundamentalists they despise.”

¹²⁹ Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335-395) as quoted in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts, Volume 1*, ed. by William Franke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 140.

¹³⁰ Dionysius the Areopagite (ca.500) as quoted in *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts, Volume 1*, ed. by William Franke (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 160.

¹³¹ Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, 111.

¹³² Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, 65. The basis of Ignatian spirituality, its ideal, is *finding God in all things*.

¹³³ Modras, “Spiritual Humanism,” 15.

I am suggesting that if we agree that there is existence – would you be reading this or grocery shopping if there weren't? – and we can agree, at least in theory, that there is a *ground* to existence – a sustaining energy if you will, God as *verb* not noun – then we can proceed.¹³⁴

Having set these parameters (there's no "man upstairs" and Jesus/his story can speak to anyone), I concede that some may still have to suspend their disbelief in God for a moment, just as they suspend their disbelief when they go to a movie or a play and enter fully into that experience while still aware they are sitting in a theater. But isn't this more interesting, at least as an exercise in conversation, than continuing on forever and ever slinging mud across a divide?

The Exercises are divided into four "weeks," though a "week" in these Exercises refers more to a specific dynamic than to a strict period of seven days.¹³⁵ In each of the "weeks," we are seeking a particular grace – gratitude, the knowledge we are loved, awareness of our part in the problems of both our own and the wider world's existence, to know Jesus more intimately, compassion, joy, again deep gratitude, again love. There is an introductory period in which we contemplate God's unconditional love in creation, for humankind, and for each of us individually. We are encouraged in these Exercises (wouldn't this be great in all of our lives?) to be "more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it" and, if we can't do that, to ask for clarification, correct misunderstandings with love, and do everything in our power to interpret the other in a good way.¹³⁶ We learn a pattern of prayer that will be employed throughout the retreat and we are especially encouraged to practice the prayer of daily

¹³⁴ God as *verb* points to the Christian symbol of Trinity, which will be addressed later in the paper. See also footnotes 196, 197, 199, and 230.

¹³⁵ In the thirty-day retreat, the "weeks" might more closely follow the pattern of four calendar weeks. Or... they may not.

¹³⁶ Kevin O'Brien, SJ, *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2011), 43.

“Examen,” a “daily practice of discernment”¹³⁷ in which we review our day, our “ups” and our “downs,” grateful for our blessings, asking God to show us where God showed up and we turned away, too busy or angry or distracted to take notice, and, having made this review, looking forward to another day in which we will try again. This prayer of daily examen was so important to Ignatius that he told his directees if they could pray in no other way, they should at the very least practice this daily prayer. The period of preparation before entering the four “weeks” of the Exercises takes over a month in the 19th Annotation format and prepares us to face the meditations of the first “week” – we must be at least fairly grounded in God’s love for us before we are able to enter more deeply into the Exercises.¹³⁸

The dynamic of the first “week” rests on allowing God to reveal to us humankind’s and our own sin and tendency toward sin – a breach in the love bond with God who, nevertheless, loves us. With the word “sin” we reach another impasse for those who are not Christian or who do not believe in the transcendent: the word “sin” inspires irritation at best and repugnance, fear, and a complete lack of patience with anything Christian at worst. But it is most helpful and accurate to think of “sin” as that which demeans human life or prevents God’s intent for human flourishing. This is something, I suggest, we can *all* understand as unwelcome:

Sin is not only objectively wrong but also breaks a transcendent bond of love and trust. The topic of sin extends far beyond doing or not doing this or that. It inspires reflection upon the very character of the human and the status of each person’s existence...Personal sin may be described as self-actualization that is self-centered and unconcerned with others; or, by contrast, personal sin may consist of a failure to assume responsibility for the self...social sin has a far greater destructive scope. Social sin refers to a systematic pattern of social behavior that consistently injures human life or represses human freedom...Many social structures, institutions, and systems damage humanity and destroy human lives, but individuals support them. Slavery and patriarchy are good examples...sin grasps the human person existentially.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 118.

¹³⁸ William A. Barry, S.J., *Finding God In All Things: A Companion to the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1991), 27: “It took four years of patient pastoral care by Ignatius before Pierre Favre was sufficiently grounded in the experience of a loving creator to be able to enter more deeply into the dynamic of the Spiritual Exercises.”

¹³⁹ Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, 130.

Sin is both personal and social. It is our sin and our participation in social sin that perpetuates so much of the suffering and tragedy all around us. In this first “week,” we are asking *where are we turning our back to the light and casting a shadow over everyone and everything around us, making the world a darker place?*¹⁴⁰ And yet this focus on sin in the first “week” of the Exercises leads to *gratitude* – gratitude that springs from our “deep and personal understanding of [our] place in the cosmic order; as well as...a realization of [our] use or misuse of God’s gifts. This entire process leads to a deep experience of God’s unconditional and passionate love.”¹⁴¹ And this, in turn, leads to real effects because when we finally take responsibility for who we are and truly accept real forgiveness, then we are free to act in a way that we were not free to act when we were hiding from both ourselves and God.¹⁴² Mariola López Villanueva sums up the first week nicely, managing to avoid the word “sin”:

This is the time when we acknowledge our blindness and our clumsiness in letting flow through us the love that we are. It is a time to feel sorrow for the harm that we do – institutional, social, psychological and emotional – and to come face to face with God’s overwhelming desire to free us, to cure us, to reconcile us. This is the time to recognize God’s great mercy as never before.¹⁴³

Villanueva’s summary works in our setting. I suggest that we all can feel sorrow for the harm that we do whether-or-not we believe in the transcendent. And we all yearn to be free of our “blindness and clumsiness” and reconciled to God, or, at least, to ourselves and our world.

After the first “week,” the following three “weeks” are focused on the ministry of Jesus: the second “week” follows Jesus through the Gospel stories, allowing us to know and, in knowing, love and follow him more closely; the third “week” takes us into his passion and death as we walk alongside him and share in his suffering; and in the fourth “week” we share in the joy

¹⁴⁰ Margaret Silf, *Inner Compass: An Invitation to Ignatian Spirituality* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 1998), 69.

¹⁴¹ Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 177.

¹⁴² Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, 134.

¹⁴³ Mariola López Villanueva, “The Ignatian Exercises in the Light of Stories About Women,” *The Way* 48 no. 2 (April 2009), 111.

of the resurrection.¹⁴⁴ Along the way, we are instructed in how to read and deal with our inner movements of consolation and desolation – movements that indicate our direction toward or away from God – and this aids us more and more in “discerning in our experience what is of God and what is not of God.”¹⁴⁵ In other words, to better discern what leads to life and what to death. The Exercises are, in sum, a collection of methods to “help us become more and more aware of this ever-present God.”¹⁴⁶ And they are a way of “[entering] into dialogue...with the story of Jesus of Nazareth”¹⁴⁷ as we “fuse” his story, the story of Ignatius, “who has written his own experience into the way the story of Jesus is presented,” and our own story of deepest desire, sadness, apathy, joy.¹⁴⁸ It is understood that the way will not be smooth – “our hearts are something like a battleground.”¹⁴⁹

A Feminist Retrieval

The Exercises were written by a man in a man’s world mainly, though not exclusively, for men.¹⁵⁰ They are filled with images of a king’s call to his soldiers, battle standards and battle fields, and vows of allegiance that echo vows made by a knight to his lord. In counterpoint, they also include a peppering of images that are derogatory toward women:

Twelfth Rule. The Twelfth: the enemy attacks like a woman, in being weak against vigor and strong of will. Because, as it is the way of the woman when she is quarreling with some man to lose heart, taking flight when the man shows her much courage: and on the contrary, if the man, losing heart, begins to fly, the wrath, revenge, and ferocity of the woman is very great, and so without bounds, in the same manner, it is the way of the enemy to weaken and lose heart, his temptations taking flight, when the person who is exercising himself in spiritual things opposes a bold front against the temptations of the enemy...etc.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁴ Something even the most ardent atheist, when watching a Hollywood action film, can relate to. The protagonist in those movies is forever walking out of impossible situations alive.

¹⁴⁵ Barry, *Finding God*, 14.

¹⁴⁶ Barry, *Finding God*, 20.

¹⁴⁷ Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, 69.

¹⁴⁸ Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, 63 and 276-277.

¹⁴⁹ Barry, *Finding God*, 17.

¹⁵⁰ Nerea Alzola, “Women Helping to Give the Spiritual Exercises: Variations on a Theme,” *The Way* 49/1 (January 2010), 49. Also David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 199.

¹⁵¹ Ignatius Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, [325]. One must ask: why *woman* specifically? Have we not all seen male bullies attack and then take flight when someone stands up to them? Must we shut Martha up when she

The experience for a woman, when she reads these sections of the written Exercises, can be likened to a trip she is happily making only to realize, mid-journey, that she hasn't necessarily been invited - the itinerary is written in her brother's language, not her own. Per the example above, she will have to smile and be good natured while she reads or discusses – making it clear she isn't *that* kind of woman - and accept that for Ignatius, it is a woman who came to mind as a perfect analogy for the cowardly bully who is the enemy of human nature (i.e.: Satan). She will have to digest, in other words, as she has so often had to digest, a description by a man about women in which women are defined *per se* without the input of an actual woman:

The Spiritual Exercises face the same critique as spiritual classics in general; the elite and powerful dominate the subjects and sources of spiritual writing as in other historical writing. The “underside” of the history of spirituality, both theory and practice, reveals that persons on the margin of society are often ignored or trivialized. Men speak for and about women. Male biographers or chroniclers interpret women in terms of male perspectives and norms. When women are present in the history of spirituality, it is usually through the viewpoint of a male writer.¹⁵²

A woman can have a difficult time reading even the basic Principle and Foundation of the Exercises without at least some level of discomfort:

2 Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul.

3 And the other things on the face of the earth are created for man and that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created.

*4 From this it follows that man is to use them as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them so far as they hinder him as to it...etc*¹⁵³

When she reads this, images of the ways women have been used and discarded spring to a woman's mind. In my own copy of the *Spiritual Exercises*, I see I have penciled in:

makes a complaint, or fight her as we fight an enemy? Is there not a call here to *listen*? See my paper: “There Was an Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe: Was It Martha?”

<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1020&context=saysomethingtheological>.

¹⁵² Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 18. I am reminded of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and of Church documents on complementarity between a man and a woman written by men alone. Complementarity becomes weaponized compliment in the latter case.

¹⁵³ Fleming, *Draw Me Into*, 26.

3 *And the other things on the face of the earth (women) are created for man that they may help him in prosecuting the end for which he is created.*

4 *From this it follows that man is to use them (women) as much as they help him on to his end, and ought to rid himself of them (women) so far as they hinder him as to it...*

That notation is underscored when one discovers that Ignatius very briefly accepted a few women who had been his patrons, his spiritual companions, and caregivers into the Society of Jesus, only to appeal to the Pope very shortly afterwards to please allow him to release these women from their vows and free the Jesuits from the responsibility of working with women under the Society's obedience ever again.¹⁵⁴ Of-course, when reading the *Spiritual Exercises* or studying its history, one knows one is reading a text from another time and will make whatever adjustments are necessary in order to be able to appropriate the text for our time. The Exercises have been translated into contemporary, more inclusive language, in many instances.¹⁵⁵ Still, the words "a man is to use...and ought to rid himself of..." sit uneasily. Katherine Dyckman and her fellow authors agree when they write, "although "man" presumably refers to humankind...women's current consciousness that for thousands of years they and nature have been used as a means to an end triggers a painful reaction."¹⁵⁶

And yet. None of this mattered to me when I made the Exercises. At least not at first, and ultimately, I suppose, not really at all. I was in the hands of a guide, a sister in a religious community nearby, who "[reverenced] the culture of the Exercises from deep personal

¹⁵⁴ Regarding this issue of women under the obedience of the Jesuits, Ignatius is also quoted in a letter as writing: "As far as we can judge in our Lord, what really matters is to keep the Society free to move unhampered in order to meet essential demands, and we must not tie ourselves down to unessential things. Moreover, we must, if we wish to progress along the way of the Lord, think first of ourselves and look after ourselves." (Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 43.) One can understand the connection made here to the Principle and Foundation and women as an example of "unessential things."

¹⁵⁵ For just a few examples, see Fleming or O'Brien, or Elisabeth Tetlow, "The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola: A New Inclusive Language Translation," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development*, ed. by Joann Wolski Conn, (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1996), 288-294.

¹⁵⁶ Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 88.

experience and love” and who revered the retreatants’ reality as well while not getting in the way of our individual experience of God in prayer.¹⁵⁷ I suppose I slipped around the sexist language out of habit in order to “capture the prize” of the Exercises. But the sexist language does point to a *disorder* that I suggest a feminist retrieval of the Exercises can address, if not heal completely. And in doing so, this retrieval can perhaps help to lead some over this community bridge that I hope will foster greater mutual understanding in a pluralistic world, if, of course, we all agree to proceed with open hearts. (A big *if*, I know, but not impossible. We’re at a family gathering, remember? We all have a horse in this race.)

In the next section of this chapter, I will offer some examples of a feminist retrieval of specific moments in the Exercises. Of necessity, these will be only a spattering of examples from the adventure in prayer that the Exercises essentially are. Meditation here refers to a method of prayer that relies on reading and thinking through a small section of scripture, or even just a word or two, reasoning and considering how it might apply to one’s life, using memory, etc. and ending in conversation, or colloquy, with God. Let’s call it a pondering followed by dialogue.¹⁵⁸ Contemplation, on the other hand, refers to a method of imaginative prayer that is uniquely Ignatian. It asks that one place oneself inside a scene from scripture, using one’s imagination and one’s senses to make it vivid and personal - bringing it to life with oneself a part of the scene.¹⁵⁹ I will go back and forth between these two methods in my “spattering of examples” from the weeks of prayer. But first, to start at the beginning. There must be some consideration of one’s

¹⁵⁷ Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 69. Re: guides, Silf writes of “God’s midwifery skills” in calling us to freedom in the Exercises. The true guide is God. (Silf, *Inner Compass*, 155.)

¹⁵⁸ For example, when I made the Exercises, I found myself at one point pondering the first two words of Proverbs 3, “my child,” for four or five days.

¹⁵⁹ “Ignatius was convinced, through his own experience, that God speaks to us in our imaginings.” (O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 130.)

image of God or we might not be able to get past the first hurdle. And there must be some consideration of what we each truly and deeply *desire*.

Some Fruits of Feminist Retrieval

Preparation and First “Week”

We will not get far in the Exercises if we cannot grasp at least the hem of the truth that we are loved. We are loved by God and God “deeply desires for us to experience the joy of our creation.”¹⁶⁰ But when images of God are presented primarily in masculine language, the ability of women *and men* to relate to God in a way that reflects a fuller spectrum of the divine is hindered. Because the Exercises begin with meditation upon God’s creation and love for us, we must think about the images that pop into our heads when we think of God and ask ourselves if these images open us up, shut us down, or indeed, just produce a neutral nothingness of response, for how can we begin to believe in God’s love if our *image* of God is bland at best and destructive at worst? It is only when we are able to find a “workable” image, biblically supported (and so many are, we must remember that God the Father is only one), that we can then be inspired to hear and respond to God’s call despite our very human “fears, prejudices, greed, the need to control, perfectionism, jealousies, resentments, and excessive self-doubts.”¹⁶¹ Our need for an image of God that speaks to us somehow from deep in the silence of our hearts can help to free us to move on:¹⁶²

The most basic image necessary to the process of the Exercises consists of God as loving creator who calls us to full humanity, to identity and to collaboration. Seeing oneself as a unique and precious creative act of God gives a joy that does not come from success or external validation. Freely and willingly handing oneself over to this God, to a relationship of mutuality that transforms and transcends what one knows about oneself, removes probably the single most difficult psychological obstacle to spiritual growth.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 56.

¹⁶¹ O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 57.

¹⁶² Mother Teresa of Calcutta (now St. Teresa of Calcutta) is quoted as saying, “In the silence of the heart God will speak.” (O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 51.)

¹⁶³ Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 107.

But how to do this if God the Father rings hollow? If this image does *not* move one to believe in God as “a relationship of mutuality that transforms and transcends what one knows about oneself?” If prayer becomes blocked by this image that all too often conjures up feelings of judgement and not love? David Lonsdale writes, “many of our false and distorted images of God and church are associated with patriarchy, male power and the injustice meted out to women in Church and society.”¹⁶⁴ Unfortunately for women, *and men*, the image of God as father, *because it is almost exclusively used not because it is wrong to use*, can attach itself to patriarchy and the belief of male power as divinely sanctioned. For both women and men, the image of God as solely father can prove stifling. This is where I found myself in the early weeks of making the Exercises when meditating on a psalm:

I finally get to the suggested Scriptures, focusing on Psalm 139...God “knit me together in my mother’s womb.” Knitting is something mothers do. That strikes me, so I search again for how God forms us in Psalm 139 and I see knit, woven, fashioned – all terms that have to do more with women’s work than men’s. I feel an instant opening when an image of God as Mother, rather than Father, comes to me. I go back and forth between saying, “Father” for God and “Mother.” When I say “Father,” I hit a blank. Nothing bad or negative...just...nothing. When I say “Mother,” it is as if a green meadow opens before me. A whole world. Love. I think, “Ah...that’s what people are talking about.” I don’t feel God as a party going on “over there” anymore. I want someone to “search me out and know me” and have it be ok. To me, now, this seems infinitely possible with God as mother...there is a perpetual kind of orphaning when we lose God as Mother.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ David Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY, 2000), 202.

¹⁶⁵ Praying with female imagery for God can be considered a more feminist approach, but in no way does that imply that it is for *women* only. A diocesan priest “had not intended to pray with female images of God, but came to an interior knowledge of being in the Womb of Mother God...he realized he was not someone who simply worked for God: Mother God would go forth with him as they laboured together for others.” (Maria McCoy, “Ignatian Spirituality and Christian Feminism,” in *The Way* 54/2 (April 2015), 94.) An 85-year-old grandfather, when introduced to praying with female imagery of God, starts to think about “all the children in our world who have had bad experiences of being fathered. How can they relate to God as Father?” As he faces aging, he finds “strong consolation in the mantra: ‘The Holy Spirit is in charge of my life. She is with me and within in me.’” (McCoy, “Ignatian Spirituality, 96, 97). A male doctor, after praying with female images of God, writes, “I am more aware of my need to love and to accept myself and to do so less conditionally. My image of the Holy One is growing and changing. I have a greater sense of God’s love and creativity as in birthing and nurturing versus mighty and powerful. It is a new way of seeing God. All ways are of a loving God. But, this shows me a side that to me emphasizes unconditional love.” (McCoy, “Ignatian Spirituality, 97.)

Imaging God as Mother is nothing new. But every time it happens, it somehow *feels* new. Why is this? Christian mystics such as Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) imaged God as Mother centuries ago. Images from the Hebrew scriptures point to God as Mother: “the Divine Womb is experienced as a place of protection, where we are intimately known, nurtured and nourished in divine life and *Rehem/Divine Womb Love*.”¹⁶⁶ In these scriptures we find images of the divine as a pregnant woman and mother, a woman “crying out in labor, giving birth, breast feeding, carrying her young, and nurturing their growth.”¹⁶⁷ In Matt. 23:37, “Jesus compares himself to a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings to protect them from harm.”¹⁶⁸ Indeed, “in Syriac Christianity the Spirit’s image was consistently that of the brooding or hovering mother bird.”¹⁶⁹ Pope John Paul I spoke of God as Mother – “God is our father; even more God is our mother” - using the analogy of a mother sitting vigil next to her sick child, the world, doing everything she can “to break the violent fever and bring about peace.”¹⁷⁰ The image of God as a mother sitting vigil is the image of God as *accompaniment*. And very like a mother’s love, we do not earn it:

Thanks to Christ we are justified by the grace of God freely given: this has nothing to do with deservingness and everything to do with divine love meeting human need, for which a mother’s love is an excellent paradigm. The absolute mystery of the unoriginate origin of the universe has the character of a mother’s compassion.¹⁷¹

The image of God as mother is brought to mind both when I, a mother, sit vigil next to my younger daughter all night as she suffers from a debilitating migraine, but also when my husband, a father, sits vigil next to our older daughter all night when she has a raging fever. For

¹⁶⁶ Maria McCoy, “Ignatian Spirituality and Christian Feminism,” in *The Way* 54/2 (April 2015), 94. See also Is. 49:15: *Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.*

¹⁶⁷ Johnson, *Quest*, 101.

¹⁶⁸ Johnson, *Quest*, 101.

¹⁶⁹ McCoy, “Ignatian Spirituality,” 100.

¹⁷⁰ Johnson, *Quest*, 102.

¹⁷¹ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 180.

centuries, God as Mother has been an active yet somehow “under the radar” image for Christians, but images of God as mother complete a picture and, though perhaps more poignant for women, bless us all for “what is truly good for women must surely, in the end, be good for all, both women and men.”¹⁷²

Secondly, we must take a brief look here at desire. And again, at sin:

Understanding sin as damage enhances responsibility and healing instead of miring us in blame and guilt...[it is] a symptom of the unavoidably relational nature of human existence through which we come to be damaged and damage others...sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed.¹⁷³

We are asked early on in the making of the Exercises to answer the question, “What is your deepest desire?” Or to try to answer it – and then try, try again as we learn throughout the retreat process how to discern what is our deepest desire and what is its “reverse face,” our deepest fear, and then “to start consciously feeding the wholesome plants and to stop watering the weeds.”¹⁷⁴ The question, though simple, is difficult to answer, for if we are honest, we must travel through the thicket of our ordinary desires – our life *denying* attachments and addictions – in order to become more aware of our deepest life *giving* desire. “This taking stock is not easy, but awareness is a grace when it leads us to freedom *from* a self-centered isolation and freedom *for* loving service of God and others.”¹⁷⁵ But for many women who have been victimized or who traditionally find their place in serving others in anything but a self-centered isolation, “the traditional categories of sin do not address the situation of women...the ‘sin’ which the feminine role in modern society creates and encourages in women, is not illegitimate self-centeredness but failure to center the self, the failure to take responsibility for one’s own life.”¹⁷⁶ This can make it

¹⁷² Lonsdale, *Eyes to See*, 200. Though these images are not new and are certainly biblical, there is a strange resistance in the Church to referring to God in feminine terms. For a more complete study of the image of God in feminine language, see Johnson’s *She Who Is*.

¹⁷³ Brock, *Journeys*, 7.

¹⁷⁴ Silf, *Inner Compass*, 120.

¹⁷⁵ O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 103.

¹⁷⁶ Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 164.

particularly difficult for a woman to name her deepest desire, her values and gifts. Understanding this counterpoint to the way sin is envisioned in the Exercises can help anyone making them to grasp a more complete picture of sin, both individual and social. And, since we are all in this together, to not only understand that a prayer of contrition for what we have done or failed to do is appropriate to the first “week” of the Exercises, so is a prayer of lament appropriate as a starting point.¹⁷⁷

The journey to the stillness of our hearts, where our desire and God’s desire are one, is full of distraction. But as God meets us in a variety of ways in our individual experience – in people, things we read, things we see – we are met perhaps most notably in our deepest desires:

We...find God in the holy desires brewing deep in our hearts. This is a central insight to Ignatian spirituality. Because God, our Creator, gives us life and because we are the image of God, God’s desires and our deepest desires are one and the same. What we truly desire is also what God desires for us. Discerning these desires takes practice.¹⁷⁸

In other words, God is not our enemy. God, in a manner of speaking, is where we are loved despite our many faults and where our deepest desire meets the deepest desire of existence itself. And this God can and should be imaged as compassionate mother as well as father - not just in *theory*, but in common practice.

Second “Week”

In the second “week,” Ignatius introduces his version of contemplative prayer. I would like to offer three examples of this prayer from scripture - the Annunciation/Incarnation, the Nativity, and the Wedding at Cana in order to illustrate how a feminist lens widens our imagination and understanding of the scenes.¹⁷⁹ I’d like to then combine two non-scriptural and related exercises from the second “week” - the Call of the Temporal King (an imaginative

¹⁷⁷ Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 166.

¹⁷⁸ O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 71.

¹⁷⁹ The Wedding at Cana does not appear in the original text of the *Spiritual Exercises* though it is often used as a scripture in making the Exercises today.

contemplation) and the Meditation on Two Standards – and look at these through a feminist lens in order to open them up as well. The experience reflected here shows a deep desire for a sacramental respect for embodiment – call it an incarnational awareness – and a greater focus on relationship and community than is normally emphasized in these scenes.

First, the scene of the Annunciation/Incarnation. We imagine seeing “the great capacity and circuit of the world, in which are so many and such different people: then likewise, in particular, the house and rooms of Our Lady in the city of Nazareth, in the province of Galilee.”¹⁸⁰ We are seeing from God’s point of view: people being born and dying, people suffering and laughing, people old and young, rich and poor, despairing or rejoicing, etc. We hear their conversations, see them in their daily lives. In my journal, I have written that I hear sirens, “the sound of what God sees.”¹⁸¹ And then, we zero in on one particular scene in Nazareth and go into the house of Mary as a young girl. We enter the scene of the Annunciation/Incarnation and watch Mary. We see and hear Gabriel and his message. We look at the expression on Mary’s face. We absorb the colors of the walls of the room, the sounds outside the house, etc.

Traditionally, the emphasis of interpretations of this scene featuring Mary, the first disciple and Mother of God (*theotokos*), is on the significance of Mary’s “yes” to God’s call: an immediate and unhesitant, if at first perplexed “yes” in counterpoint to our wavering. Mary is an inspiration for us in her faithfulness and obedience. She is someone we venerate and whom we try to emulate when we, too, are asked to do something that seems impossible. As she birthed Christ into the world, so must each of us allow a birthing of our unique manifestation of God, or

¹⁸⁰ Fleming, *Draw Me Into*, 90.

¹⁸¹ The examples given in this paper are taken, for the most part, from a combination of journals when I myself made the Exercises and when I studied them afterwards, though the experience of others is also well represented in footnotes.

else God’s dream for us will not come to life.¹⁸² Indeed, God is “incarnate in each of us as he was incarnate in his Son, who called us his brothers and sisters.”¹⁸³ This is all good and true. *But* – this is not how I experience the scene when I, a woman who was Mary’s age once and who has been the mother of young girls like Mary, imagine entering it. I am struck by how tenuous a moment it is, even for Gabriel. And I am struck by *when* Mary says yes, not *that* she says yes:

I see young Mary, slightly panicked, frozen. I hear “Listen!” and it seems like a firm shake to get Mary to focus. Gabriel could lose her in this meeting. It’s tense - the outcome is uncertain. We are told this story as if Mary is basically serene. Why would Gabriel have to say, “Do not be afraid. Listen!” if this were so? When my daughters start to spin out about something, I too must say to them, “Listen!” and they snap to. Mary snaps to. Gabriel has her attention. He says, “Here’s the deal. This is what’s going to happen...” Gabriel goes on and on – in this scene, he is having to gently lay out this amazing news, brick by brick, and slowly. It strikes me – he keeps talking because *she hasn’t yet said yes*. But then – she hears about Elizabeth. She hears she is not alone in this. It becomes crystal clear *when* Mary calms down enough to say the famous words, “Let it be with me according to your word.” *Mary says yes only after she hears about Elizabeth*. She will run to Elizabeth almost the minute Gabriel leaves.¹⁸⁴

This is a very female story. Mary needs accompaniment. She goes to Elizabeth, who is in her sixth month. She stays about three months. I imagine that she stays until those first, often precarious three months of pregnancy are safely behind her, and also until the birth of John the Baptist – during which she can accompany Elizabeth. And then she returns home. This is a story about *relationship* – about life always happening in the context of relationship. The context of this story is *community* – Mary is not an independent warrior on the battlefield of life, all alone when saying “yes” to God. She is a young woman, frightened but willing, now able to say yes with comparative ease – read again the flow of the scene - when she hears that her barren relative Elizabeth “in her old age has also conceived a son.”¹⁸⁵ Gabriel’s announcement of Elizabeth’s miraculous (if not divine) pregnancy is a gift of extreme kindness to a young girl upon whose

¹⁸² Silf, *Inner Compass*, 24.

¹⁸³ Silf, *Inner Compass*, 248.

¹⁸⁴ The scriptural passage, depending on the translation used, has Gabriel saying, “Do not be afraid...Behold!” or “Do not be afraid...Look!” or – and this must be the translation that was in my mind when I contemplated the scene, “Do not be afraid...Listen!” (See Silf, *Inner Compass*, 31.)

¹⁸⁵ Luke 1:36, NRSV.

shoulders the greatest blessing, and a great weight, is being placed. And then, in person, Elizabeth confirms her extraordinary experience – another great kindness.¹⁸⁶ The wisdom of the timing of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, and its announcement to Mary in this scene, is, in my view, the Wisdom of God. Trinity. Community.

Much of the romantic vision and veneration of Mary seems to miss the point of what it would be like to be told, at 13 or 14 years old and unmarried, that one is pregnant and, later, what it is like to *mother*. Or, perhaps more precisely, these points are taken but then quickly sidelined. I have never heard anyone mention that news of Elizabeth is crucial to Mary in this scene. It is a scene that has not been fully fleshed out when written and interpreted by men alone. Which is why I am suggesting we need to also hear a female voice in the telling of it.¹⁸⁷

Second, the scene of the Nativity - another quintessentially female scene that comes down to us with no woman, except Mary, in it. Again, from my journal:

Such a female scene, the scene of childbirth, and yet the most famous story of birth has...no women in it. I don't believe this for a second. Other than Mary, the record shows Joseph, three rich wise men, and a bunch of rough male shepherds. When the scene comes into focus for me, I am Mary's mother. I am caring for her, along with another woman and maybe that woman's daughter. Mary treasures the words of the wise men, she ponders them – able to do this as she falls back on her female supports. I cradle her head, I walk her baby up and down so she can sleep, I watch, I listen, I am alert. What have men (who usually write about this scene) experienced about childbirth really? About the pain, the fear of possible death, the blood, the violence of the contractions? About how hard the *baby* has to work, as well as the mother, to be born. God did not slip into this world without a sound, antiseptically, but amidst the cries of Mary, her blood, her labor...and his. God entered in a distinctly female scene...If the fallen world does not love male and female equally, God certainly does.

The Nativity is, of course, also a metaphor for all of us – for how God is birthed in each of our lives. But the lack of women in the biblical record of a scene so defined by femaleness is striking, especially to a woman. Even Ignatius added a maid: “see the persons; that is, see... Our

¹⁸⁶ And later, many others will do the same: the wise men, the shepherds, Anna and Simeon – and Joseph, if we imagine him sharing his dream with her. Mary is *not alone*. She receives this news, and it is confirmed, in community.

¹⁸⁷ I am in good company in suggesting it. Both Karl Rahner and Elizabeth Johnson suggest it is perhaps “time for men to stop writing books about Mary and let women have a go at it, since there is much wisdom in that quarter that has not yet come to light.” (Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 17.)

Lady and Joseph and the maid and, after his birth, the child Jesus...”¹⁸⁸ It is the casting of a feminist lens on a scene that is in its *essence* female, that we broaden its horizon and, in doing so, cause both women and men making the Exercises to more fully embrace the feminine. Men giving the Exercises might especially benefit from contemplating a feminist approach, and especially in relation to this scene of birth. “The person who accompanies assists the one accompanied to grow. The woman, who is herself capable of conceiving, helps the exercitant to become the womb of Mystery and to give birth. We are the midwives who help the birth process; we are witnesses of the first vital cry because we have been there many times to help Mary as she gave birth.”¹⁸⁹

Kevin O’Brien writes, “when contemplating the Gospels, we are often gifted with memories from our lives that correspond in some way to Jesus’ life.”¹⁹⁰ A scene from my own life came into my mind as just such a gift when I was contemplating the Nativity. It made the image of Jesus as a vulnerable infant with Mary, and his incarnation, a tangible experience for me for a flash of a moment:

It is an ordinary afternoon. I have fed my daughter, of course, many many times – we have a routine. But this one moment stays with me, sun streaming through the window beside us gliding back and forth in the chair, looking down at her, and then – time standing suddenly and softly still as she turns from my breast and looks up at me, looks *into* me, almost as if to say, “I, too, am Jesus. I am the divine and also so fragile I could be lost at any moment. All is well. I trust you.” A moment of awe-inspiring love and calm and absolute terror of intense responsibility all at once. I make connections to the Incarnation, of course, but also to Jesus as mother, to eucharist “this is my body...” feeding us. To the ambiguity of *all is well* in a world almost defined by its sinful structures.

Where the Annunciation/Incarnation might be considered an example of the importance of community and relationship, the Nativity is nothing if it is not also an example of the centrality

¹⁸⁸ Fleming, *Draw Me Into*, 96.

¹⁸⁹ Alzola, “Women Helping,” 54.

¹⁹⁰ O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 147.

of embodiment in our human lives. In fact, both scenes are, at heart, scenes of relationship and embodiment.

The Wedding at Cana is another story the interpretation of which can be widened when imagined through a feminist lens. The scene is important traditionally as the first of the signs, or miracles, performed by Jesus. But as a scene *imagined* as if one were there, it is something more basic than that: it is another example of a woman responding to life as community. As relationship. Mary notices the wine has run out. She understands the embarrassment this will bring upon the family of the bride and maybe especially the bride herself. She understands the bride and her family will be humiliated and this will cast a pall not only over the wedding, but possibly over the marriage itself as this first moment of the couple's married life will be defined by a sudden break in an important community celebration and a not-enough-ness that reflects the "precarious economic situation in which the wedding guests all lived."¹⁹¹ Caring deeply about the moment and the people involved, Mary mentions the wine to Jesus. Jesus responds, in effect, "What has that got to do with us?" What does a little embarrassment over wine running out have to do with *us*?

There is something very specific being illustrated here. As written, the man in the story, the human Jesus, doesn't notice the problem – he doesn't notice what is going on in the details of relationship around him and, when the problem is pointed out to him, he doesn't register its importance. He says it is not yet his time. Mary doesn't care. The problem is *now*, not later when the more perfect hour has come. She tells the servants, "Do what he says" - in effect demanding of Jesus *do what I am asking you to do*. It is the woman in this scene who sees the relational problem and makes certain it is addressed. The woman who understands that very small choices

¹⁹¹ Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 289.

reverberate out to the wider world. *Balance* is found, and a simple wedding is rescued from possible shame, when the one who is doing the seeing is heard by the one who can do something about it. I am reminded again of Gabriel's "Listen!"

Elizabeth Johnson reflects further on Mary at Cana, illustrating how meditation on this scene through a feminist lens can open an exercitant's eyes to great need in the world. She writes:

Feminist reflection espies here the kind of woman whose movements typically run counter to the expectations of idealized femininity. Far from silent, she speaks; far from passive, she acts; far from receptive to the orders of the male, she goes counter to his wishes, finally bringing him along with her; far from yielding to a grievous situation, she takes charge of it, organizing matters to bring about benefit to those in need, including herself. . . . Mary's strong impulse to call for relief corresponds to God's own dearest desire, giving us in the Cana story an enacted parable of the coming of the reign of God's hospitality. . . . this challenging plea addresses the conscience of the body of Christ today, especially in the richest nations on earth. "They have no wine, no food, no clean drinking water": you need to act.¹⁹²

This opening of our eyes in meditation upon scripture, an opening that leads to our greater compassion for and action in the world, is exactly what Ignatius intended. And, as illustrated here, it is a feminist lens that can gift us with a very specific type of clarity of sight.

Lastly, an important part of "week" two of the Exercises revolves around what Ignatius describes in military language (he was a knight, after all) as the Call of the King – an imaginative contemplation that occurs at the very beginning of the "week" – and a meditation, later in the "week" on The Two Standards. I combine the two here as they are related. These scenes involve imagining a king's call to his people, and then Christ's call to follow him as he ventures forth to conquer the enemy, and to imagine a battlefield, or fields, with Christ's standard flying "in a great field of that region of Jerusalem" and Lucifer's in "that great field of Babylon."¹⁹³ Under whose standard do you stand? Are you taken in by the false light of the enemy? In the end, we all

¹⁹² Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 289-290, 291.

¹⁹³ Fleming, *Draw Me Into*, 111-112.

must choose – we’re either part of the solution...or part of the problem. There really is no middle ground.¹⁹⁴

David Fleming translates into modern language the way of entering the contemplation:

“let me put myself into a mythical situation – the kind of story-truth of which fairy tales are made.”¹⁹⁵ We all know how to enter these scenes – we’ve done it since childhood:

I sit in silence, imagining the scenes – they are exciting and familiar to all of us. Except, wait. No woman in these fairy tales is called. Unless I turn myself into a man in these scenes, I cannot imagine the call and still be consistent with these fairy tale images. In fairy tales, the call is for men across towns and country. A trumpet blast, a man on a horse, inspiring men to great deeds, and off they go. Do we ever hear what happens back in the town with the women and children after the men leave? (Other than possibly rape and murder by the enemy.) Does anyone care? Does it warrant admiration or is the admiration, the *focus*, to forever be on the conquering knights, the only story worth telling...I can appreciate this call of the king, because I too come from this culture and feel the excitement of its pull. But there is no cultural hook that ultimately catches me, or my daughter. I can politely and silently translate within myself, but I am tired of translations. I want to stay with this Ignatian language and see if I can make it fruitful for myself *not* in translation from male imagery. I search for a comparable image that will move me. I ask myself, if a man dreams of his father (or Father), his King, saying, “Ride with me, suffer with me, prevail with me in great deeds (usually *away* from family),” and if a man dreams of hearing, “This is my son, with whom I am well pleased,” what does a woman dream of? Here is the gentle answer that comes: “This is my son with whom I am well pleased,” spoken by a King is, for her, a community saying, in harmony, “This is *our* daughter with whom *we* are well pleased.” The fairy tale equivalent is her community, for whom she has “battled.” She too fights and protects and serves but her imagery is different. *God as Trinity is the feminine principle.*¹⁹⁶

I quote that passage at length because it points again to the importance of community – both for us and for a Christian understanding of God. This contemplation was, for me, not the call of the King but the Call of Trinity. The Standard I was drawn to is *Trinity*.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 170.

¹⁹⁵ Fleming, *Draw Me Into*, 83.

¹⁹⁶ In this journal entry, I also wrote: “I speak here of cultural *imagery* that might spark a man or a woman, not about gender roles...as the King calls my brother, the Community (Trinity) calls to me.” And yet I must stress again here the importance of God as Trinity: “God exists as the mystery of persons in communion. Only in communion can God be what God is and only in communion can God exist at all.” (Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 239) William Barry writes: “Indeed, one can argue that the Ignatian Exercises rest on the theological assumption that God creates the universe precisely in order to invite other persons into the relational life of the Trinity.” (Barry, *Finding God*, 14.)

¹⁹⁷ I am not alone in experiencing God as Trinity at moments during the making of the Exercises - and not alone in seeing the value of this as a value imparted in great part by a feminist lens when cast upon them. Another retreatant wrote, “Without an aspect of Christian feminism, I don’t believe I would have been able to gain the richness of the gifts the Trinity offered me and/or continues to offer...At the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, I had an extreme difficulty entering into them due to the masculine imaging of God as Father and/or male...Once the adaptation [to Trinity vs. God as Father] was made, I was able to enter into the Exercises more fully and be more open to the graces being offered.” (McCoy, “Ignatian Exercises,” 102.)

Trinity's divine attributes are inclusivity, relationality, and mutuality.¹⁹⁸ And these attributes point, I suggest, to a feminist call not to drown out the patriarchal voice in just the way so many voices have been drowned by it, but to balance it into health.¹⁹⁹ I suggest it might not be a bad idea from time to time for those most likely to imagine themselves galloping off to follow the King on a great adventure to pull up on the reins a bit and consider that not everyone is riding with them, or has been invited to ride. Many, most often women and children, are left behind in the village of this fairy tale. Theirs is a story too.²⁰⁰

Third "Week"

In this "week" of the Exercises, "we accompany Jesus into the mystery of human suffering."²⁰¹ And we give up any idea that we can make sense of it. William Barry writes, "If any one incident in the history of the world blows away the just world hypothesis by which most of us unconsciously live, it is the cruel suffering and death of the sinless one."²⁰² While we contemplated the sins of this world during the first "week" of the Exercises, experiencing the love of God nevertheless, we experience compassion for those who suffer, and so for social justice, in the third. This is where we meet each other at this Thanksgiving table where each of us, who have suffered in large and small ways, sit together. And where, in the Christian story, God's love is most clearly communicated:

A profound and intimate encounter with God is called forth as one faces one's suffering...the daily deaths one experiences can signify Holy Presence in all aspects of human life. No one can ever totally understand the mystery of suffering and death, but presence to God and to those who suffer teaches compassion. These

¹⁹⁸ McCoy, "Ignatian Spirituality," 99.

¹⁹⁹ "The structure of the triune symbol stands as a profound critique, however little noticed, of patriarchal domination in church and society. The power of an interpersonal communion characterized by equality and mutuality, which it signifies, still flashes like a beacon through a dark night, rather than shining like a daytime sun." (Johnson, *She Who Is*, 223.)

²⁰⁰ I understand that today, unlike in the time of Ignatius, a woman might be a warrior and see herself riding toward a banner on a battlefield. That is all very well and good. Still, half the story is left out. Women and children are not part of Ignatius's imagery. Women and children were then, and often are still now, back in the village.

²⁰¹ O'Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 213.

²⁰² Barry, *Finding God*, 124.

times – when few if any words are needed – remind one that presence alone suffices in the face of inevitable suffering. Suffering, as with other human experiences, moves the seeker into another dimension of the mystery of relationship, compassion or ‘suffering with’...One simply knows that ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together with it’ (1 Cor 12:26).”²⁰³

Again, relationship – with God and each other. I meditate on the crucifixion. On the women who stayed. On how women are so often the ones who accompany suffering – “the ‘great feminine heart’ that could choose to be up close to the suffering...of Jesus...and the world.”²⁰⁴ And I consider the soldiers who cast lots for the seamless tunic while Jesus is dying above them. I wonder, what do they do after the crucifixion? Return to the barracks or to their wives? “How was work today honey?” “Good. I won a tunic in a bet.” There’s an odd imbalance illustrated here in the biblical record: the women stay. The male disciples are not mentioned. The women accompany, if at a distance.²⁰⁵ The men in the scene crucify and then cast lots to pass the time. There is something of the “feminine” being illustrated here and I suggest we simply take notice and ponder its meaning for we all, men and women, carry within us the feminine dimension.²⁰⁶ In this “week,” we suffer with Jesus and, like the women at a distance or at the foot of the cross, or like the mother sitting vigil next to her sick child, we stay. It is here, in contemplating the suffering and death of Jesus, and the common human experience of our own suffering in our

²⁰³ Dyckman *et al*, *Exercises Reclaimed*, 224.

²⁰⁴ McCoy, “Ignatian Spirituality,” 105. Mariola López Villanueva writes: “For the Third and Fourth Weeks we are helped along by the **women looking on from a distance** (Mark 15:40-41), by the **mother**, Mary (John 19:25-27), by the **women who bought spices** (Mark 16:1-8), and by **Mary Magdalene** (John 20:1-18), the first person to *discern* the action of the Risen Lord. There is no need for me here to add what can be left to the imagination and good sense of my readers.” (Villanueva, “The Ignatian Exercises,” 117; emphasis is Villanueva’s.) She then considers the possibility that Jesus himself “may have deepened his experience of God as he gained ‘interior knowledge of all the great good’ he had received (Exx 233) in contact with women.” (Villanueva, 117)

²⁰⁵ In the Gospel of John, one male disciple is mentioned at the foot of the cross with the women. In the three synoptic gospels, the women are present, but at a distance, and no male disciples are mentioned. The male disciples’ absence in the record of the crucifixion in all four gospels is palpable.

²⁰⁶ Villanueva, “The Ignatian Exercises,” 106.

bodies and in our communities, that we all meet. It is here that we are all connected – in relationship.²⁰⁷

T.S. Eliot once wrote, “We had the experience but missed the meaning.” In this “week” we pray, “please help me reduce my tendency to miss the meaning.” None of us want to be the soldiers in this scene, making a bet over a tunic while someone suffers on a cross right above us.

Fourth “Week”

And then, resurrection. And the joy of consolation. And, in the Exercises, an imaginative contemplation by Ignatius of Christ’s first appearance after the crucifixion being to his mother. I’d like to focus here, at the end of the journey through the Exercises, not so much on a feminist retrieval, but on what it might mean in general for each of us and all of us. In this fourth “week,” we contemplate God bringing life from death and hope from despair. We celebrate all the “risings” in our life in renewed friendships, unforeseen opportunities, and the learning that can spring from our losses. We don’t forget our suffering, just as the resurrected Christ still bore the marks of his crucifixion. But these wounds are redeemed.²⁰⁸ Yet, this is territory we will resist entering. Resurrection is not something easy to believe. It is not easy for any of us to accept all that has happened in our lives – to accept the deaths in order to welcome the rising to something new. And we will resist because death is frightening. The resurrection tells us, yes, death and suffering happen. And yet, “fear not; the things that you are afraid of are quite likely to happen to

²⁰⁷ Another retreatant’s experience of childhood abuse sprang to her mind twice during prayer. The second time, Jesus became, for her, her *sister*, taking on her suffering as he took on the suffering of the crucifixion. She writes: “I experienced Jesus as being between me and the abusers, taking the abuse himself in order to protect me from the full brunt of what was happening. The next year on retreat I experienced the same scene, only this time the Christ was my sister and the experience was even more powerful – that She would choose to suffer for me, to willingly accept such abuse for love of me. The love and sense of intimacy were overwhelming and stay within me still.” (McCoy, “Ignatian Spirituality,” 98.)

²⁰⁸ O’Brien, *Ignatian Adventure*, 244.

you, but they are nothing to be afraid of.”²⁰⁹ This is what John Macmurray calls “real religion.”²¹⁰ And this “real religion” is what we are trying to communicate to the unbelievers in the transcendent at our table.

Resurrection is always happening, somewhere, and it is happening in the now...and the “not yet.” In writing about the “Godseed” within each of our hearts, and about resurrection,

Margaret Silf notes:

I feel sure that as soon as a human heart awakens to the life of its Godseed, resurrection begins, not just for that person alone but for the whole human family. Every time we touch upon our own true north, we touch the resurrection glory. Every time we feel the freedom that flows when we are living true, we are feeling the flow of eternity. Resurrection is a now moment, a sacramental moment that at once both points toward and brings about the fulfilling of God’s dream.²¹¹

Having contemplated the joy of resurrection, Ignatius ends his Exercises where they began – in a contemplation on the love of God. And, if one looks closely, on an image of God as mother:

[236] Third Point. The third, to consider how God works and labors for me in all things created on the face of the earth – that is, behaves like one who labors – as in the heavens, elements, plants, fruits, cattle, etc., giving them being, preserving them, giving them vegetation and sensation, etc.²¹²

Like a mother in childbirth, God labors. For us. And we, I hope, respond.

²⁰⁹ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (London, U.K.: Faber & Faber, 1961), 171. As quoted in Barry, *Finding God*, 128.

²¹⁰ Barry, *Finding God*, 128.

²¹¹ Silf, *Inner Compass*, 240.

²¹² Fleming, *Draw Me Into*, 178-179.

Chapter Four: Why Should We Go There? The Haunted World Yearns

*The poverty of the West is a different kind of poverty – it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There’s a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.*²¹³

I have argued that the Ignatian Exercises might be a bridge in the conversation between faith and culture, facilitating a deeper understanding between believers in the transcendent (in this case Christian/Catholic) and unbelievers in the transcendent, because the Exercises enable the conversation to jump over the myriad complaints against an imperfect Church and straight into the faith that enlivens believers, even as they suffer periods of doubt. As Charles Taylor noted at the beginning of this paper, people often *want* to hear the message of Christ, or at least know that someone somewhere, like Mother Teresa, takes it seriously, but they often bump up against the institutional church and conversation is aborted before it’s even really begun.²¹⁴ The Exercises, on the other hand, can speak to everyone because they reach to the heart of each human story - something anyone can relate to: his or her own life - and put that story into conversation with the Gospel story. They put each of our many different stories, in other words, into conversation with God.²¹⁵ And they ask questions we *all* ask. They point in a direction in which we all can and must grow if our pandemic burdened, climate changing, beautiful and suffering world is to survive and thrive. The Exercises can communicate clearly where the

²¹³ Mother Teresa in *A Simple Path*.

²¹⁴ Perhaps the battle between faith and culture is more often than not a battle between Church and culture. Those who believe in God are conflated in the mind of those who do not believe with everything the institutional church has ever done wrong. I was once asked, “How can you be Catholic? What about the Albigensian Crusade?” What is left out of this conflating is something Charles Taylor points out: “What Vatican rule-makers and secularist ideologies unite in not being able to see, is that there are more ways of being a Catholic Christian than either have yet imagined.” (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 504.)

²¹⁵ Hughes, Gerard W., Introduction to Silf, *Inner Compass*, vii: “A friend of Ignatius, Jerome Nadal, on being asked for whom the *Spiritual Exercises* were suited, answered, ‘For Catholics, for Protestants, and for pagans!’” A reminder of our definition of God – *God* does not refer to a man in the sky with a white beard who is very busy juggling a rule book and a cosmic bank account.

institutional Church itself might have a habit of turning people off in a secular world. This will help our conversation.²¹⁶

So we have a bridge. And we have a hint of why it is needed: this haunted, secular world yearns. Sarah Coakley writes of “the devastating spiritual poverty of a world ‘come of age’ – without roots, traditions, or obvious hungers of the soul...the gaze of secular indifference.”²¹⁷ Maria Bingemer writes of our context as “a ‘moving’ and unstable context...‘the century without God’...a secular age where God’s traces are almost invisible.”²¹⁸ M. Shawn Copeland writes of “the increasing drift in U.S. culture and society...a cultural life lived in thin, nearly amoral air and bereft of humanity’s essential humanness...a domain of sin and evil...a house of disordered love.”²¹⁹ Constance Fitzgerald writes of “profound societal impasse.”²²⁰ Even a committed atheist philosopher such as Alain de Botton concedes the danger of a world which “lacks reminders of the transcendent.” When God is dead, human beings take center stage and all manner of hell breaks loose. “They imagine themselves to be commanders of their own destinies, they trample upon nature, forget the rhythms of the earth, deny death and shy away from valuing and honouring all that slips through their grasp, until at last they must collide

²¹⁶ “Ignatius forged a spirituality for the frontiers of faith, that land where belief and unbelief, where the church and unchurched, where indifference to the lot of the poor and uneducated and profound human pain and need met...such a spirituality breathes a plurality that is not a ploy but simply a result of its own integrity...[it is] the Christian experience, faithful to its foundation in the gospel, eager for the translation of that gospel in and through the times we live.” (Gray, *Ignatian Spirituality*, 71 and 79.)

²¹⁷ Sarah Coakley, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” in *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*, Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 82.

²¹⁸ Maria Clara Lucchetti Bingemer, “Seeking the Pathos of God in a Secular Age: Theological Reflections on Mystical Experience in the Twentieth Century,” *Modern Theology* 29 no. 3 (July 2013), 1, 12.

²¹⁹ M. Shawn Copeland, “Racism and the Vocation of the Theologian,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 2 no. 1 (Spring 2002), 15, 20.

²²⁰ Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 422. She writes: “What if, by chance, our time in evolution is a dark-night time – a time of crisis and transition that must be understood if it is to be part of learning a new vision and harmony for the human species and the planet?” (Fitzgerald, “Impasse and Dark Night,” 411.)

catastrophically with the sharp edges of reality.”²²¹ Jeremy Carrette and Richard King write that “following the breakdown of traditional society and ‘tradition loss’, individuals are ‘tradition hungry,’ in the sense of ‘needing ideas to live by.’”²²² In the cacophony of voices yelling out, “Trust in me!” it seems clear that the Exercises can be a tangible anchor in a yearning world.²²³ After a journey into them, perhaps we can all see that there are answers in places we might least expect – or, at least, established paths that lead us in a good direction.²²⁴

What I’d like to explore further for the remainder of this chapter is the feminist thread of this braid. If the Exercises are the bridge and the secular 3 context offers up a reason to need such a bridge, what does the feminist lens do to actually help us get *across* that bridge? I’ve briefly illustrated above ways in which the horizon of the Exercises is widened when a feminist lens is employed. But one could argue that the Exercises on their own will lead anyway to the fruits of feminist scholarship and involvement that I’ve outlined above. Surely someone making the Exercises, male or female, employing a feminist lens or not, will reach a sense of compassion

²²¹ Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believers Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York, NY: Random House/Vintage International, 2012), 200. De Botton will proceed to write a book in which he proposes we “import” all the best ideas and practices from religion - wisdom, community, kindness, education, tenderness, a healthy pessimism, perspective, art, architecture, and successful institution - but leave out any belief in God. In other words, he proposes we pluck all the best flowers from the gardens of Christianity and Buddhism and put them in a vase where they will bloom forever while unconnected to the ground from which they grow. He fails to point out that most of the flowers in the Christian garden have a hard time growing in wisdom, kindness, etc. even *while*, presumably, attached to the plant and the ground it grows in. De Botton is an example of the religious *haunting* the secular, even as the secular believes itself to be completely separate from the religious. Sandra Schneiders might call what de Botton does a “naïvely disrespectful ‘raiding’ of other traditions or “a creative form of post-modern *bricolage*.” (Sandra Marie Schneiders, “Religion vs Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum” in *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003), 164, 176.)

²²² Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 138. They then argue that corporations, and their brands, fill that gap today. William Cavanaugh agrees, writing, “brand loyalty functions as a substitute for traditional religion.” (William T. Cavanaugh, “Strange Gods: Idolatry in the Twenty-First Century,” *Commonweal* 147 no. 1 (January 2020), 30.) Basically, write Carrette and King: “Capitalism has become the new religion of the contemporary (postmodern) world.” (Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 174.) And then, “as commodities take on life, life is drained away from actual people.” (Cavanaugh, “Strange Gods,” 29.)

²²³ “Trust in me!” points to a speech made by Pope Francis in *Lumen fidei*. (Cavanaugh, “Strange Gods,” 30.)

²²⁴ This reminds me of another Marilynne Robinson quote: “It is a triumph of science to have, in some degree, described the electron, and preposterous to suggest it has been explained.” (Marilynne Robinson, *The Givenness of Things: Essays* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 222.)

and community, and perhaps, in their prayer practice and daily life, a sense of our spirituality being inextricably bound to our bodiliness. Someone might be overcome by a sense of God's care and nurturing love without ever imaging God as mother. Do feminists have a corner on the market of relationality? Or bodiliness? Or refreshing God imagery?

I'd like to say, in this context, that yes – they kind of do. And the context has put them there. Whether because women are ontologically different by nature from men and that nature gives them a genius for relationship and earthy things, body things, like menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, and taking care of everyone, or whether women possess this genius because they've simply had a lot of practice at relationship in a patriarchal society that drops the baby and the household in their lap is something I cannot address here. That argument will rage on and on. In the end, we can never know for certain what percentage of a woman's assumed ability and/or quest to relate is nature and what percentage is cultural nurture. For whichever reason or combination of reasons, women have something to say from a position that has been granted to them either by society or by existence itself or both. We need to listen.²²⁵

So even if, even when, a good is achieved without a feminist lens applied – or any lens from a traditionally marginalized group for that matter – that hardly negates the human need to listen and, in listening, one hopes, to improve our ability to *see*. A feminist lens helps us *see* more clearly as we cross this bridge of the Exercises.²²⁶ The car's windows get defogged. It

²²⁵ If at the anthropological level we speak of humans, and at the ontological level, the level of existence itself, we speak of inherent binaries (male female, light dark, etc), do we not, at the *theological* level, the level of the nature of ultimate existence, speak of unity? (For Christians and many others, though not all, yes.) In other words, if human beings are *imago dei* - made in the image of God – and, in a Christian sense, God is understood as the mystery of three in one, Trinity, communion of equal persons, then human beings are *imago trinitas*, beings in relationship. And if God is unity – then ontologically, human beings could be different as male and female but, even more fundamentally, *theologically*, male and female would be one: *human*.

²²⁶ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz argues something similar in *In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 202. She writes: “The poor can see and understand what the rich and privileged cannot, because power and richness are self-protective and, therefore, distort reality.” In other words, in a

doesn't make everything clear, of course – no single lens ever will. But it is a necessary part of the puzzle that can help us to grasp things in a both/and way, instead of an either/or way. This is, in fact, the classic approach of Catholicism and it suggests, in theory anyway, a bringing together of dichotomies. In other words, neither “side” – either in the battle between faith and culture, or in discussion of what it is that constitutes the very nature of a man or a woman – can speak alone and definitively without the input of the “other.”²²⁷

Herein lies the problem at our table where we are seeking real conversation: with a solely binary view someone always has to win. And when we're trying to build a bridge, we can't think in terms of winning because if we do, someone has to lose. And if someone has to lose, we have to blow up the bridge. With dismay or dismissal or disinterest or destruction. And as we're blowing up the bridge, we are doing anything *except* listening and building relationship or community. The feminist wider-lens approach to the Exercises embraces a wider range of people and context. It fills the seats at the table of conversation that have traditionally been empty while male voices speak. What Catholic feminist spirituality offers is a critical and honest awareness that its androcentric tradition is far from perfect. It understands implicitly, *painfully*, that all have been invited to the table though not all have been given a seat.²²⁸ It seeks to open up the invitation list to every *other* so that the table is full and the conversation lively and inclusive. I am suggesting a feminist approach, from within the tradition, that speaks to the spiritual yearning

patriarchal society that places male above female, however subliminally at times, a similar argument can be made. Those on the sidelines often see what those on the “inside” do not see. (Shakespeare uses this fact often in his plays.)

²²⁷ This brings to mind a cartoon recently sent to me depicting a group of women on one side of the frame and a group of men on the other. The caption reads: “So Ladies, thanks for being the first to witness and report the resurrection and we'll take it from here.”

²²⁸ As pointed out above, a classic duality is spirit and body. And a classic deduction drawn from this split is that these reflect the ultimate duality of male and female. Then, naturally, one side of the body/spirit divide must represent the “masculine” – spirit – and one side the “feminine” – body. And then, because in this system one side must be above the other *in order for the system to make sense*, a value is assigned: spirit (male) is better, higher and body (female) is lower, earthier. But what if the difference *is* there...but the classic deduction drawn from that difference, because of our sin, is *off*?

so apparent in our secular world, an approach that says: “What about this? This has meant a great deal to me. Perhaps it can mean something to you too. This is how and where I’ve made warranted adjustments so that it speaks to me, as woman, and, if you can bear to listen, perhaps it can speak to you too.” This is an approach that is more circular than hierarchical.²²⁹ This is feminism that seeks unity in difference - like Trinity, three in one, community - rather than a system of binary’s that forever and ever land at a place that communicates “we” *ipso facto* are better than “you.”²³⁰ A feminist lens catches binary’s that split and whispers, “No. There is *unity in difference*.”²³¹ Isn’t this something that we will need for true *conversation*?

The reason I clear such space here for explanation of a feminist approach, or, as it were, feminist “car” driving us over the bridge with defogged windows, is that I do not know how we ever truly reflect the love of God in a binary patriarchal setting. The numbers just don’t add up. We can try and try, but, in my view, we won’t make it. We might get close from time to time, but one in our community will always be “less than” another in this equation. Rita Nakashima Brock notes that “Christianity is afflicted with a hierarchical view of power that undercuts its understanding of love in its fullest incarnation – that we are all part of one another and cocreate

²²⁹ Schneiders, “Feminist Spirituality,” 43: “The word which has progressively come to serve as a cipher for feminist spirituality is ‘interconnectedness’...[feminists] are seeking ways to reunify everything that has been divided by the all-pervasive dichotomous dualism of the patriarchal system...Feminist spirituality prefers networks to chains of command, webs to ladders, circles and mosaics to pyramids, and weaving to building.”

²³⁰ Jeffrey C. Eaton puts it succinctly when he writes: “the judgement on patriarchal relations is the Trinity in which the divine Persons are at once perfectly united and perfectly distinct.” (Jeffrey C. Eaton, “Simone Weil and Feminist Spirituality,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 no. 4 (Winter 1986), 703.)

²³¹ Just as “feminism” is not coterminous with “women,” “unity in difference” does not mean “we are all exactly the same.” I will never be an Olympic athlete, a mathematician, an architect, or Meryl Streep. All of these are better than me at certain activities, and will win the race, the math contest, the Architectural Digest cover, or the Oscar and I will not. But this doesn’t make me – or you - a “loser.” It just makes you and me...you and me. Someone else in this circle.

each other at the depths of our being...[this power of connection] is the energy of incarnate love.”²³² Analyzing the spirituality of Simone Weil, Jeffrey Eaton writes:

Her work sheds light on...the sense in which patriarchy is an offense not only to feminist sensibilities, but is an impediment to the realization of the love of God. Even as Weil’s work suggests the lineaments of a feminist spirituality that is genuinely transcendental, so too does it present possibilities for a Christian spirituality set free of the patriarchal influences that have obscured the light which Christians believe Christ shed on life, human and divine.²³³

At this Thanksgiving table, if we do not communicate love, we communicate nothing. And though we may never be able to make our path understandable to every friend and neighbor, we can certainly embrace our family and neighbor well, in real conversation, using this feminist approach.

Which leads us to one more thing that needs to be highlighted. Feminism isn’t *ultimately* a conversation about men and women. Or, as happens tragically at times, a conversation that turns *human beings* into men vs. women. The concept “feminist” is not *per se* coterminous with the identification “woman.” There are, and must be, men who are feminists too. James Keenan agrees when he writes, “in the twenty-first century, women should not be outsiders. I have finally understood that I, like other men, must become feminists.”²³⁴ This is why I have focused on the binary, winner-loser way of seeing things – it’s as if we have thrown half of our *human* nature into the marked-down bin and turned away but *we need that half*. At our Thanksgiving table and beyond, we all, not just women, need that half. Rita Gross writes:

The problems with the traditional female gender role are not the tasks assigned to it, which must be done, or the psychological traits associated with it, which are emotionally healthy, but the rigid way in which these tasks and traits were assigned to women alone...rather than confining the nurturing and relationship

²³² Brock, *Journeys*, 49. Brock imaginatively addresses the idea of relationship and community when she proposes an image of *Christa/Community* instead of Christ alone as an image that better serves women and men if we are to break free from a solely patriarchal frame of reference. *Christa/Community* might serve in the Exercises in the way Trinity, instead of Christ, served me when I contemplated the “Call of the King” and “The Two Standards.”

²³³ Eaton, “Simone Weil,” 703-704.

²³⁴ James Keenan, “The Gallant: A Feminist Proposal,” in *Feminist Catholic Theological Ethics: Conversations in the World Church*, ed. by Linda Hogan and A.E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 228.

skills associated with the female gender role to the private sphere, we need to infuse the public arena with these skills and see both men and women exhibiting these skills.²³⁵

According to Gross, what we've done in the past decades is thrown perceived feminine traits/the feminine gender role under the bus while climbing *en masse* onto the pedestal of the male gender role without asking ourselves: is this even a good version of a male gender role that we're all emulating?²³⁶ And don't we all, as *human beings*, have a portion of both masculine and feminine traits within us? "Our understanding of masculine and feminine characteristics does not place them mechanistically in discrete areas, but sees them rather as tendencies which are likely to be more frequent in one sexual group than in the other."²³⁷ What Gross is arguing is that if men do not understand that they are gendered too, and if they do not make a move to embrace that portion of a full humanity within them which is labeled "feminine" (I can feel the cringe now, which illustrates my point that binary's require a loser) in a way that women have embraced, in the past decades, that fuller humanity within them which is labeled "masculine," then we are in trouble.²³⁸ Without the holistic fullness that a feminist lens provides *all of us*, a certain malaise

²³⁵ Rita M. Gross, "What Went Wrong? Feminism and Freedom from the Prison of Gender Roles," *Crosscurrents* 53 no. 1 (Spring 2003), 11, 17. She continues to write that "only a massive defection from the conventional male gender role by men, parallel to women's defection from the conventional female gender role over the last thirty years, will bring us a more humane society. I do not believe that women can do much more to solve the cultural malaise surrounding gender." (Gross, "What Went Wrong?," 18.) Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Unfinished Business* New York, NY: Random House, 2015) explores similar territory. She titles one chapter of *Unfinished Business*, "The Next Phase of the Women's Movement is a Men's Movement" and suggests there are "two complementary *human* drives: competition...and care...These are the two great motivators of *men and women alike*." (Slaughter, *Unfinished Business*, 83, *italics* my own.) She continues: "I am not proposing to *devalue* competition; I am proposing to *revalue* care, to elevate it to its proper place as an essential human instinct, drive, and activity." (Slaughter, *Unfinished Business*, 121-122.) And she writes: "Self-interest and caring for others [are] the twin forces of human nature." (Slaughter, *Unfinished Business*, 230.) I just wonder: could the unbalanced nature of the world we live in contribute to the ridiculous hoarding of toilet paper during the Covid-19 pandemic? A competition for essential supplies trumps care for community and taking only as much as we need?

²³⁶ Gross, "What Went Wrong?," 9. She writes: "Instead of freedom from the prison of gender roles, we have gained freedom from both the virtues and the defects of the female gender role while we – both women and men as well as the entire culture – have become ever more enamoured of the male gender role – and a fairly unsatisfying version of that role."

²³⁷ Alzola, "Women Helping," 45.

²³⁸ "I would argue as strongly as I can that these presuppositions and reactions about human genderedness are rooted in a deep cultural preference for the cultural construct of maleness over the cultural construct of femaleness, which is why women want to act like men, but men don't want to act like women. It is so much more

ensues.²³⁹ There is a radical incompleteness evident in a binary hierarchal system that denies our full humanity.²⁴⁰

We are all in this together – “the liberation of the one is bound to the liberation of the other.”²⁴¹ We can’t all jump to one “side” of the boat. And neither can we keep this boat afloat humanely if we split up into sides where only one side is given the bulk of responsibility for relationship/community or is in a noticeable minority in honoring our bodiliness, or in the minority in opening up cultural language and imagery. It won’t work – because when you’re in a boat, you’d better all work together on these things or you’ll capsize. Mariola Villaneuva has an interesting way of looking at this. She suggests that Jesus himself may have learned God’s *order of procedure* from women, not from some rabbi or priest or legal expert – how to wash feet, serve at table, etc. In her mind, Ignatius, five centuries after the Exercises were written, would now want to remove his remark about women resembling the enemy (a remark that reflected his time) and change it to this: “Men, especially some of you, be not afraid! The friend comes like a woman.”²⁴²

acceptable for a woman to take on “masculine” traits and tasks than for a man to take on “feminine” tasks and traits. Surely that prejudice exposes deep cultural misogyny.” (Gross, “What Went Wrong?,” 13.) See also f.n. 92 re: *I’d Rather Be Dead Than Be A Girl*. And Mary Beard, *Women and Power: A Manifesto* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017.)

²³⁹ Gross, “What Went Wrong?,” 14. “We have no dearth of women taking on male traits in our time. But there has been no corresponding eagerness on the part of men to escape the prison of the male gender role and take on some of [the] healthier and more sane human traits that have stereotypically been associated with women...[men] often are not as comfortable with or competent in the vital human tasks of relating and nurturing. Herein, I would suggest, lies much of the malaise of our times.” In other words, in order to get to his larger human nature a man must pass through the maligned feminine.

²⁴⁰ I am arguing, then, that it is not an ontological or cultural or combination-thereof difference between women and men that is our problem. It is the application of a *false hierarchy* to that difference, and the resulting dismissal or downgrading of the female half, that gets us in deep trouble. The idea is not that we all bleed into each other in a sort of bland lack of difference. The idea is that human beings can be both ontologically and/or culturally male and female and theologically, if you will, one, in unity, yet different. Like Trinity. Again: our sin creates a hierarchy of difference which is destructive. Feminism strives to go beyond dualism while not erasing difference.

²⁴¹ Gross, “What Went Wrong?,” 8. Gross is quoting Elie Wiesel in *The Town Beyond the Wall* when she uses this concept.

²⁴² Villaneuva, “The Ignatian Exercises,” 118.

As Mother Teresa says in the quote at the top of this chapter: *there's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God*. The feminist lens, applied to the Exercises, helps us address this hunger in a necessary and holistic way.²⁴³

²⁴³ One last quote about binary thinking: "Dualistic consciousness is the ultimate sinful attitude that prevents our experiencing the union with being and with God." (Matthew Fox, *Breakthrough: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 90.)

Conclusion

*Every moment, it turns out, is an invitation to recognize our interconnectedness. 'You are the other me and I am the other you.' ...our separation is an illusion.*²⁴⁴

I am someone who feels not only the cross-pressures of our secular 3 age but also, specifically as female, I feel the cross-pressures within Catholic faith itself. As a woman, I find myself forever translating something in the faith that jars me – everywhere, is the male example and the blind assumption that females will live in translation. And the question, “why *continue* with this?” nags at me. And *yet*. There is a vein of gold that runs through Catholicism: a vein of gold that shines clearly in the Exercises.²⁴⁵

I asked myself a very simple question years ago: was I really qualified to throw out much of history, and many people with it who were and are smarter, wiser, and more spiritual than me, and keep living as if my horizon embraces the whole truth? I thought: if I am yearning for something deeper, why not start again where I am: in the twenty-first century in a western nation?²⁴⁶ David Tracy writes, “A courage to allow oneself to be played and thereby to play this game of the truth of existence must replace the fears and the opinions of the everyday.”²⁴⁷ And

²⁴⁴ Gregory Boyle, S.J., *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 180, 182.

²⁴⁵ As Sandra Schneiders writes: “There is no guarantee against the distortions of religious tradition by institutional agencies but the latter are finally powerless to undermine genuine spirituality.” (Schneiders, “Religion vs Spirituality,” 181.)

²⁴⁶ Burghardt, “Contemplation,” 97-98: “To me, an ironic, scandalous facet of the contemporary search for the transcendent, for direct experience of the real, is that the searcher rarely seeks it in our Western culture, in Western Christianity. Ironic and scandalous because this is our ageless tradition. It goes back to Jesus, alone with his Father on the mountain, in the desert, in the garden. It goes back to the Fathers of the Church and the fathers of the desert: Gregory of Nyssa finding God in the image of God that is our inner self; Antony seeking God in community, Pachomius in solitude. It goes back to the medieval mystics, to Eckhart and Hildegarde, to Ruysbroeck and Julian of Norwich. It goes back to Teresa of Avila ravished by a rose, to Ignatius of Loyola in ecstasy as he stares at the stars. We have betrayed our tradition.” David Dark puts it this way: “The least we can do is try to observe consciously what’s been given to us to know. We will inevitably miss so much, but we don’t have to miss it all. We can be among those who insist on being awake to their own experience.” (David Dark, *Life’s Too Short to Pretend You’re Not Religious* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 93.)

²⁴⁷ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), 126.

that is where I started on the adult chapter of my journey. I allowed myself to be played. There simply are others who have “smashed through boundaries and stretched human limits to the walls of infinity.”²⁴⁸ Here in Christianity. Here, in Catholicism. There are others who have known “things into which angels long to look.”²⁴⁹ I longed to look too.

I understand that I have gone against the generally accepted cultural tide. And I am often struck dumb by the feeling that it is impossible to heave my derided choice over the great divide between the logical pride of atheism or the safety of agnosticism on one side and the now radical belief in God on the other. But I still find it deeply important to try. And so, I chose the Exercises as a “conversational tool” for this pluralistic Thanksgiving setting I have imagined for the reason stated above: with them, one might reach out to the unbeliever in the transcendent, the “spiritual but not religious,” and the institutionally antagonistic because the Exercises take one right to the heart of the Christian story, and indeed, right into our own hearts, bypassing the straw man arguments put forth by the ‘cultured despisers’ of Christianity and, for the most part, bypassing the flawed history of Christianity itself. (Surely everyone understands that *any* context where humans are involved will be flawed? And can’t blindness and a lack of self-understanding exist at any stop on the spectrum of beliefs in our modern world?)²⁵⁰

The Exercises connect the scripture of our lives with the scripture of the gospel story and help us to answer those universal questions we ask ourselves: “Where am I? How am I and why? Who am I?”²⁵¹ And, in this way, they reach out to everyone at our dinner, though not all will

²⁴⁸ Burghardt, “Contemplation,” 96.

²⁴⁹ 1 Peter 1:12 pt.

²⁵⁰ Charles Taylor writes: “The modern world, religious and secular, suffers from a deep rift in its self-understanding, an ideological blindness of massive proportions.” (Taylor, *Secular Age*, 689.) Gregory Boyle puts it nicely: “As human beings, we often don’t always get things right...welcome...to the human race, the whole catastrophe, in all our imperfection.” (Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir: The Power of Radical Kinship* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 123.)

²⁵¹ I take these three interconnected and ever deepening questions from Silf, *Inner Compass*. She structures her book upon these three questions.

lend an ear. But Ignatius, as I have suggested, cannot make that gesture of hospitality today without the help, again, of women at his side. Without a female voice, especially here in Catholicism, here in the Exercises, without the voice of that which holds up half the sky, we are all, women and men, deeply impoverished.²⁵² I've offered here a feminist retrieval of the Exercises, focusing especially on relationship/community, because when we lose our ability to honor true relationship as an ontological category of our existence and live instead in a hierarchical system founded on power over "lesser" or forgotten others, break down, even tragedy, can ensue.

Less than ten years after Ignatius died, the greatest playwright in the history of the English language was born. In his *King Lear*, Shakespeare illustrates the effects of a blind and brokenhearted patriarchy and, subsequently, the compassion that comes with suffering and an embrace of the other. There is an implicit underlying imbalance that sets the scene for this play: no mothers are in evidence anywhere. The two main households, indeed *all households* in this play are motherless. The dark imbalance of Lear's kingdom is unsettling.

But as the play proceeds, step by bloody step toward its tragic end, we see Lear transformed. The blind and bullying king enters the territory of the marginalized. He suffers and in suffering, notices and feels, for the first time, the suffering of those around him:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp,
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them
And show the heavens more just.²⁵³

²⁵² I take this image from Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2009).

²⁵³ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes (London, U.K.: The Arden Shakespeare, 2003), 273. A footnote on this passage reads: "Lear's prayer [voices] the social teachings of the medieval Church. In his painful

Lear is loosening his grip on patriarchy – on a too rigid either/or, my way or the highway, hierarchical view of life where, in previous scenes, the feminine is joked about, coerced, banished, or despised.²⁵⁴ Lear is, in a way, in the first and the third “weeks” of the Exercises – he is seeing and taking responsibility for the misuse of his gifts and for his sin. He is suffering and experiencing compassion *and becoming more fully human*. Still, this is a tragedy and the consequences of Lear’s inability at the beginning of the play to put his relationship with his youngest daughter, the only child who truly loved him, above his pride and his need for power over others, are not avoided. When Cordelia, who one might argue represents a femininity that has not been destroyed by Lear, returns to the kingdom, it is too late. The damage is too far gone. The feminist claim that “we must move from seeing power as a commodity possessed by a self toward seeing it as the bonds which create and sustain, and are recreated and sustained by relational selves” is well taken.²⁵⁵ There is a kind of power implicit in this feminist retrieval focused on relationship. Relationships make an ultimate claim on our very being.²⁵⁶

And deeper relationship and understanding between those who see themselves on opposing sides of the battle between faith and culture is what I’m after at this Thanksgiving

epiphany, the pagan king for a moment grasps the nature of Christian *caritas*.” It is important to note Lear’s, “*O, I have ta’en too little care of this.*” This is exactly the point Anne-Marie Slaughter is making in her book *Unfinished Business*. (See f.n. 235)

²⁵⁴ Two of the most evil characters in this play are Lear’s older daughters. But in judging them, one must also consider something often missed when this play is analyzed by men alone: observe how these two daughters are treated by their father. Hear what Lear *prays* as he argues with his eldest daughter: “Hear, Nature, hear, dear goddess, hear: Suspend thy purpose if thou didst intend to make this creature fruitful. Into her womb convey sterility, dry up in her the organs of increase, and from her derogate body never spring a babe to honour her. If she must teem, create her child of spleen, that may live and be a thwart disnatured torment to her. Let it stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth, with cadent tear fret channels in her cheeks, etc.” (Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.4.267-277.) This outburst is in response to his daughter suggesting that she and her servants can care for him and a more reasonably sized retinue – that he might not need “a hundred knights and squires” eating her out of house and home, making it “more like a tavern or a brothel than a graced palace.” Again, imbalance. And an actual *prayer* for a kind of death of the feminine. In Goneril and Regan’s case, the apple has not fallen far from their father’s tree. They are unabashedly competitive and uncaring and, in this play, do not grow as Lear himself grows. The play is titled *King Lear* after-all.

²⁵⁵ Brock, *Journeys*, 34.

²⁵⁶ Brock, *Journeys*, 8.

dinner in a secular world. I've set a table here that includes people from all walks of life and belief over a period of hundreds of years – a very large family. I've built a bridge and offered transportation across it that provides a clear view from my seat to yours. I'd like to think I've improved the quality of our conversation and our understanding of those who believe in the transcendent in an unbelieving world by those who do not believe in the transcendent in a context that favors that position.

It seems to me that without a spiritual foundation that moors us, to some extent at least, we are floating and fractured. Contemporary spiritualities seek answers but often ask us to turn only inward, toward an even more intense individualism that can, ironically, feed our loneliness and disconnection.²⁵⁷ With its 2000-year history, I am suggesting to everyone at this table that Christian spirituality, specifically the 500-year-old Ignatian Exercises, can help one to “play this game of the truth of existence” and help us to reach both inward and then outward toward neighbor and world.²⁵⁸ “What is at stake here is the possibility of *choosing* to open up to the transcendent in the midst of the secular waste land, which in the final analysis is a “return” to the religious, but a return, in the words of T. S. Eliot, to ‘where we started/And know the place for the first time.’”²⁵⁹

Catholic feminist Ignatian spirituality is a gift that can be offered to a wider world. It is a gift that seeks to lend a hand in facilitating the event of understanding that will make our Thanksgiving dinner one where those in attendance are truly known. And because a gift can

²⁵⁷ Sandra Schneiders writes: “The argument I am making for religion as the most productive context for spirituality, for both the individual and the community, is that the quest for God is too complex and too important to be reduced to a private enterprise.” (Schneiders, “Religion vs Spirituality,” 177.)

²⁵⁸ Sandra Schneiders puts it this way: “Christianity, despite all the disgraceful lapses in its 2000-year history, has faithfully carried a unique and crucial religious and spiritual insight that, in my opinion, is desperately needed as an ingredient in any unity we humans can achieve.” (Schneiders, “Religion vs Spirituality,” 179-180.)

²⁵⁹ Jefferson M. Chua, “Travelling in the Secular Waste Land: de Certeau and the Irruptions of the Mystical,” *Landas* 28, no. 2 (2014), 56.

never be forced upon someone, it remains simply that: a gift offered with the hope of being received. “Hope comes into its own when it is shaped by belief in God,”²⁶⁰ so perhaps this is easier for me to imagine than for some at this table who are uncomfortable with talk of God. But as Charles Taylor wrote in a quote above, conversation is difficult, but not impossible. Because “Ignatian spirituality is grounded in intense gratitude and reverence,”²⁶¹ a table of thanksgiving is a good place to start this conversation.

²⁶⁰ Haight, *Christian Spirituality*, 210.

²⁶¹ Hellwig, “Finding God,” 52.

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