

ACCOMPANIMENT IN TIMES OF SUFFERING:
LIBERATING IMAGES OF GOD

by

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PRELUDE

As a Catholic school teacher, I am often called to go beyond the bounds of the classroom and into accompanying children and families through moments of suffering. I am humbled by the experience of being a person whom they believe will help them find God amid the uncertainty that surrounds them. In listening to people's stories on personal suffering or being present with them as they endure a challenging situation, one of the things that shakes me to the core is watching them struggle with their image of God. It troubles me that people who are members of a Catholic community have a Deist image of God. During moments of hardship, they pray desperately, trying to *convince* God to care enough for them to intervene. In extreme cases, some hold a toxic image of God in which they believe that God is orchestrating their misery. I have often felt broken by realizing that the image of God they hold increases their suffering instead of alleviating it. Not only do they carry the weight of their distress, but they also carry the heavy burden of believing in a God who is either absent from their lives or visiting calamity upon them. On many occasions, these images of God have been shaped by what they have heard from childhood catechesis, Sunday homilies, or other people in authority in the church. What are helpful images of God, and God's salvation for people who suffer?

I have struggled to reconcile theory with the reality of people's experiences, especially during moments of suffering. My theological understanding tells me that a distorted image of God and God's salvation deprives those in distress of finding consolation, inner healing, and agency through their faith. After grappling with this internal dilemma for some time and talking to other people in ministry who experience similar difficulties, I have come to terms with the fact that it is not my place to dictate or change someone's image of God. As a fellow person of faith, my role is to journey with the individual, maybe offer a perspective and possible resources that

can help them but never to change the way people see or experience God. While it is vital for Christians to have theologically grounded images of God as they accompany those who suffer, it is equally essential for them to know how to walk with others, at their pace, in their unique spiritual journey. How should Christians accompany those who suffer as they struggle with their images of God or their relationship with God without imposing their views or being passive? What are some things people of faith should avoid doing as they encounter or minister to people who suffer? Having clear theological and practical answers to these questions can help Christians be better equipped in the art of accompaniment. The following story illustrates my pastoral concern.

Laura

Laura¹ rushed into UCLA Ronald Regan one Saturday morning. She had received a call from her sister Mercedes, informing her that her daughter Valery was back at the hospital. Valery had been diagnosed with lupus nine months earlier, causing both of her kidneys to fail. She had been doing well in her treatment, but she had a flare up and was fighting for her life again. When Laura walked into Valery's hospital room, she saw Valery was asleep. The athletic 21-year-old young woman Laura once knew was now swollen with sixty pounds of liquid retention in her body. The steroids she had to take as part of her treatment had made her lose most of her long black hair. Laura's heart sank as she saw the regression for Valery since the last time she had seen her.

Next to Valery's bed was Mercedes holding a rosary and crying. It tore Laura to pieces to see both mother and daughter consumed by this situation. She hugged Mercedes and stood

¹For purposes of confidentiality pseudonyms have been used for each of the women in this narrative.

beside her, sharing in her prayer and anguish. Mercedes sat down with Laura when they concluded the rosary as Valery remained sleeping. Mercedes whispered, "They want her to go through dialysis. But both Valery and I do not want that. We need to continue praying for a miracle. God can heal her in an instant if he wants to, but we need to pray." Mercedes continued sharing details about what the doctors said and her opposition to their suggestions. Then, she said once again, "I know God can heal her, but I need to keep praying, so he listens to me." One of the nurses walked in and said it was time for Valery to take her lupus medication. Mercedes asked the nurse if it was ok for her daughter to sleep a bit more, and then she would make sure Valery would take the medication once she awoke. The nurse agreed, left the medication, and left. Valery did wake up soon after the nurse left, and Mercedes selected which pills she should take. Laura was shocked to see that Mercedes would withhold some of the pills her daughter should take. Valery took what her mother gave her, and then went back to sleep.

Laura was conflicted about what her sister was doing. She thought her sister and she shared the same faith. Laura believed that the way Mercedes viewed God during this moment of suffering only added to her affliction. Not being able to *convince* God to intervene encouraged Mercedes to control her daughter's medical decisions. Laura thought that if only Mercedes viewed God differently, such as God acting through the doctors, this would be better for her niece and sister. So, from a place of inner turmoil regarding Mercedes' image of God and out of fear of what else she could do with it, Laura began questioning Mercedes' faith. "Do you really think you have to *convince* God to care for your daughter?" "What kind of God do you believe in." This only sparked an argument between the two sisters. After reflecting on this exchange, Laura felt frustrated, upset, and guilty for trying to change her sister. She knew in her heart that

was not right or wise to do, but she did not know how to walk the journey with her sister and niece despite their differences.

Overview of the Project

It is a problem, especially during moments of suffering, that people hold on to images of God that do not serve them or are even harmful to them. Sometimes these images are rooted in early childhood and relate to people's relationships with their caregivers or teachers. They can also be fostered by the dominant androcentric culture that views God as a white male with a flowy beard. The preaching and catechesis in parishes can sometimes be influenced by Atonement Theologies that portray God as punishing and sadistic. Not everyone has the time and resources to study their faith further. Often people lack the economic resources that will allow them to cultivate their theological understanding and their spirituality. *The identified contexts that contribute to this pastoral problem are the following: childhood wounding, androcentric culture, Atonement theologies, lack of faith formation, and lack of resources.*

As human beings, we are constantly evolving in our various dimensions, and our imaging of God is no exception. While it is true that it is no one's place to change anyone's view on God, it is also true that we are not called to walk faith's journey alone. As Pope Francis states in *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this ‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5).”² Accompanying people during their moments of suffering can be healing and transformative to all people involved. I wonder how Laura can offer her personal faith experiences to others. What tools can benefit her to feel more present and not imposing to

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* Trans. (Vatican City, Vatican Press, 2013), No. 169.

people she accompanies? Each ministry in the church offers an opportunity for accompaniment in different but necessary ways. For this reason, I would like to explore different approaches, models, and tools that can help people in the art of accompaniment.

CONTEXT: ASPECTS THAT SHAPE OUR IMAGES OF GOD

The awareness of the image we hold of God is essential because it affects how we think, feel, and act in our daily lives. Modern perceptual psychology points out that behavior is directly linked to our perceptions. Most of the time, people are unconsciously influenced by their images of God. Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon draw attention to the relationship between the image of God we hold and its impact on our Christian discernment.³ Distorted images of God translate into a flawed discernment. A person who images God as cruel and tyrannical will respond out of fear in the form of servile obedience. Someone who feels God is a judge will act out of guilt. People who transfer their parent-image to their God-image will practice an infantile obedience rather than a mature one. Maintaining these images of God can stunt one's spiritual growth. By contrast, an integral discernment requires images of God that honor "the dignity of God and of human beings."⁴ These images should heighten God's love, generosity, and intimate engagement in seeking out our wholistic development.

Psychological Context

Psychology professor Heather Campbell-Enns offers two explanations from psychology to explain why people seek divine imagery, particularly during times of distress.⁵ Campbell-Enns

³ Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 106.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵ Heather Campbell-Enns, "In the image of God," *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology*, 21, no. 1 (Spring 2020):44.

notes that human beings are inclined to use “spiritual-religious coping,” and its peculiarity is related to culture. Some spiritual-religious coping practices include prayer, reading Scripture, and using religious imagery. Spiritual-religious coping can help in dealing with adversity by meeting a variety of human needs, including psychological (e.g., peace of mind), social (e.g., connectedness), or sacred (e.g., knowing God).⁶ The second reason Campbell-Enns offers for our divine imagery is attachment theory. Attachment theory focuses on the role of affective relationships individuals need for survival, emotional wellbeing, and security. According to Campbell-Enns, God “has often been closely aligned with parental figures (i.e., God as parent), so that encountering God through imagery provides the presence of a parent-like figure in times of need... From an attachment perspective, the emotional connection to God through imagery allows us a sense of safety.”⁷ Divine imagery has the potential of accompanying us through adversity in a way that is healing and lifegiving, but this is contingent upon the type of images of God we embrace.

Object relations theorists trace the formation of one's God-image and the image of self to the first interactions with the primary caregivers during infancy. Our God-image is mediated from early childhood through the affective language, symbolism, and actions directed to God by people who held moral authority over us.⁸ The relationship we had as children and maintained as adults with our parents furthered our image of God and self. Au and Cannon refer to Jungian analysis to suggest that our distorted images of God may come from *negative transference*, the unconscious process of bringing feelings from past relationships into other ones.⁹ For instance, a

⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁸ Zenon Jr. Lotufo, *Cruel God, Kind God: How Images of God Shape Belief, Attitude, and Outlook*, (ABC-Clio, LLC, 2012), 20, ProQuest EBook Central.

⁹ Wilkie Au and Noreen Cannon, *The Discerning Heart: Exploring the Christian Path* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006), 114.

person who has controlling parents may become rebellious towards authority figures and God because they perceive them through the lens they view their parents. Distorted images of God can also be *projections*, the disowned parts of ourselves (emotions, attitudes, traits) that we attribute to other people, in this case, to our image of God. Through these defense mechanisms, we can make the mistake of creating for ourselves a god in our own image.

Cultural Context

The cultural worldview on suffering is also a decisive factor in what forms our sense of the divine. In her reflection on the femicide in Ciudad Juarez, Nancy Pineda-Madrid analyses the factors that feed the violence against women. A cultural element she points to is the “social imaginary” or subconscious worldview of how a people perceive the world and their place in it.¹⁰ In her analysis on the atrocious evil against women, Pineda-Madrid uses a social-suffering hermeneutic to uncover the operative cultural imaginary at work which legitimizes the violence, suffering, and killing of women. She applies the insights of three theorists-Charles Taylor, Octavio Paz, and Emilie Townes to uncover the existing cultural worldview that maintains Latina women should suffer.¹¹ Hegemonic worldviews creates "caricatures and stereotypes" of women as pawns, legitimizing their abuse. In Mexican culture for example, the Guadalupe-Malinche female binary holds that women should suffer either because they are “spiritually superior” as Mary or because they are a traitor like the La Malinche.¹² The cultural vision, emotions, and narratives on suffering will affect our image of God and the life choices we make.

¹⁰Nancy Pineda Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juarez* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 41. <http://muse.jhu.edu/book/25079>.

¹¹Ibid.,44.

¹²Ibid., 49.

If one's social imaginary legitimizes and even celebrates suffering – how then can that influence one's interpretation of icons and devotions? Iconography is a powerful medium by which people connect with the divine. When images of God are found in places of worship, they gain greater authority and influence people's imagination. Let us consider the popular image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Despite variations, we usually see Jesus as a young white male revealing his bleeding heart, pierced by a crown of thorns. These thorns are reminiscent of the suffering of Christ during his passion. Yet, this wounded heart we see is aflame and beaming. Usually, a cross rises from the flames, which might also evoke the resurrection. While this image can be interpreted as God's unconditional love for humanity, it can also be problematic for suffering victims. This image of the Sacred Heart can potentially portray a necessary passivity in the face of victimization. While this image can speak of God's mercy to those who repent from their wrongdoing, it is not equally an image of God's salvation for those who suffer the effects of evil or tragedy. This image of God sends messages of submissive suffering rather than God's solidarity towards a path to liberation from suffering.

Devotions, such as novenas, are a form of prayer people may use during challenging times. The traditional novena to the Sacred Heart encourages the suffering person to call on God. While this prayer recalls the words of Jesus, "Truly, I say to you, ask, and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and it will be open to you (Mt 7:7)," it can also be misleading in suggesting God should be "convinced" to respond to the afflicted person. The prayer insists, "Sacred Heart of Jesus, for whom it is impossible not to have compassion on the afflicted, have pity on us miserable sinners and grant us the grace which we ask of you..."¹³ Although this prayer acknowledges God's compassion, its form of pleading leads to a narrow idea of God by

¹³ "Traditiona Novena to the Sacred Heart of Jesus," Novena Prayer, accessed February 13, 2022, <http://novenaprayer.com>.

suggesting that we get what we want from God if only we plead enough. Novenas can depict a limited or distorted image of God that can add to the pain of those who suffer.

St. Anselm's doctrine of salvation *Cur Deus Homo* (hereafter *CDH*) has a "history of effects" which is important to look at.¹⁴ It is not only necessary to understand the textual content of *CDH* or its context, it is necessary to view its impact in history. Misinterpreted Atonement theologies of the cross, such as *CDH*, have been used to legitimize violence by Christians in the name of God.¹⁵ Distorted interpretations of atonement were used to support and justify the aftermath of the Crusades. According to Brock and Parker, "Anselm's theology lent support to the crusaders who were promised that their sins would be wiped away and they would earn a place in heaven if they killed Jews and Muslims. Holy war ensured entry into heaven."¹⁶ René Girard points to the problematic speech Atonement theologies use, such as the need for sacrifice for a restoration of humanity's moral order. This language promotes violence in the "scapegoat mechanism which was used against the Jews during the Holocaust. There are traces of atonement theologies of the cross which serve to defend white supremacy in the aftermath of the U.S. Civil War. As M. Shawn Copeland has observed, "Lynching was the instrument by which black bodies were to be purged from the white body politic. Then, in a mental leap of "profound theological inconsistency," whites deliberately associated the scapegoat sacrifice of blacks with the mocked, tortured, crucified Christ."¹⁷ Atonement theologies can easily and effectively promote violence when they utilize a twisted image of God as vengeful or sadistic.

¹⁴ Nancy Pineda Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad*, 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

Perhaps the most influential aspect of Anselm's metaphor of salvation as satisfaction in *CDH* is the feudal system of the time. The feudal system of justice was concerned with maintaining the "established order" through the feudal hierarchy: the king, barons, local lords, knights, serfs, and peasants.¹⁸ Disobedience to the local lord was considered an offense to him, but it was also understood as disrupting the social order, therefore, against the common good. The seriousness of the debt or offense was measured based on the social status of the offended party. The punishment was more severe for insulting a noble than a peasant. Retribution for an offense or a debt was non-negotiable, and the punishment was accepted as an integral part of society. To pay back the debt was known as satisfaction, which was the necessary punishment to restore the honor of the offended party and, thereby, society's order. Doctrines of redemptive suffering are problematic because they can lead to a distorted image of God. Viewing God as someone who requires suffering instead of one who is interested in the fullness of life for all leads to a morbid spirituality of worshiping a cruel God. Promoting this spiritual path perpetuates evil and suffering in our world today.

The good news is that these false images of God can be recognized, acknowledged, and transformed through inner work. Psychoanalysis shows that our affective concept of God can change through positive life experiences and psychotherapy.¹⁹ There is a correlation between self-image and the image of God. Patients who came to a healthier self-image also tend to view God as more loving and compassionate. According to Gerald W. Hugues, it is not enough to have an intellectual knowledge of God to change our distorted image of God. We must pray for a

¹⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (New York, NY: Orbis Books Maryknoll, 2018), 4.

¹⁹ Lotufo, *Cruel God, Kind God*, 21.

"felt knowledge" that will affect our whole being and the way we view everything and everyone.²⁰

THEOLOGICAL COMPONENT

Introduction

Elizabeth Johnson points out that our image of God matters because it functions.²¹ That is, it leads individuals and a group of people to action. A distorted image of God and God's salvation deprives those in distress of finding consolation, healing, and agency through their faith. The hermeneutics of liberation allows me to critique the severe consequences of the various interpretations of *CDH* and its far-reaching effects. I will apply a feminist critical hermeneutic of liberation that reveals that the application of *CDH* can accommodate violence and other forms of evil against the marginalized, women, and the natural world. It is necessary to find metaphors for God that can offer spiritual sustenance to those who suffer and reimagine an alternate idea of God's salvation. Understanding God's deliverance as accompaniment, mediated through a loving community, is one pastoral approach to responding to the suffering in our world today.

Atonement theologies stemming from the Anselmian doctrine of salvation *CDH* need to be challenged because they paint a distorted image of God and God's salvation. Atonement theologies deprive those in distress of finding consolation, healing, and agency through their faith. In many cases, when people share their painful experiences of suffering, I observe a deep-seated idea that God wants them to suffer. Not only do they carry the weight of their pain, but they also carry the heavy burden of believing in a God who is associated with their suffering or

²⁰ Gerald W. Hughes, "Inner Chaos and False Images of God" in *God of Surprises* (Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 35.

²¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse 25th Anniversary Edition* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 4.

requires it to impart forgiveness, healing, and blessing. The harmful effects these notions have on suffering individuals call for a reframing of the belief in how God saves us. How do we understand the salvation of God to respond adequately to the victims of suffering today?

A reconstruction of the understanding of salvation is necessary for today, one that is emancipatory and life-giving, especially for those who suffer. I will be integrating arguments from Feminist and Liberation theologians to challenge Atonement theologies as rendering a problematic image of God and offering an inadequate understanding of salvation today, especially for those who suffer. Atonement theologies of salvation are problematic for victims of suffering, which calls for a change in how we imagine God and view salvation today.

Our Image of God and How We Perceive Ourselves

The image we hold of God matters because it can shape how we view ourselves, others, and the world. Our God image holds power as mentioned by Elizabeth Johnson, “God is that on which you lean your heart, that on which your heart depends.”²² Our idea of God determines how we see God and interpret reality and how we function in it. Our image of God influences and guides our actions or lack thereof. Everyone’s worldview and decision-making contribute to how a religious community is shaped. Johnson makes this point clear.

The symbol of God functions as the primary symbol of the whole religious system, the ultimate point of reference for understanding experience, life, and the world. Hence the way in which a faith community shapes language about God implicitly represents what it takes to be the highest good, the most profound truth, the most appealing beauty.²³

How a community speaks about God will shape its identity, value system, and praxis. A community that views God as a war hero and praises violence will readily engage in similar

²²Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., 2007), 20.

²³Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 4.

behavior. A community who speaks about God as love will be a community who tends to look after the needs of others.

Since our image of God functions, our speech about God needs to be examined. While official doctrine in the church affirms women are equally images of God, just as men, and that God who is Spirit is beyond gender, the language on God communicates a different message. The daily language on God we hear in preaching, worship, catechesis, and instructions by far communicates God as male or at least more like a man than a woman. Speech on God speaks that it is more fitting to address God as male than female.²⁴ The God symbolism held in the Catholic church continues to be patriarchal. Until it changes it will continue to function to reinforce patriarchal structures in the family, church, and society. When God is understood as male, then by default a male-dominating social order is justified, even required to represent God “more fittingly.” Excluding women from participating in equal authority is a “right” of the ruling men. As Johnson notes, “Exclusive and literal imaging of the patriarchal God thus ensures the continued subordination of women to men in all significant civil and religious structures.”²⁵ When the only metaphor for God we use is that of maleness, then all that is male is holy, and what is female is unholy or at least less holy. Maleness is seen as worthy, capable of representing God while women are seen as deficient, unworthy and even evil. As summed up by Mary Daly, androcentric symbolism sends the message that “if God is male, then male is God.”²⁶

Androcentric religious symbolism for God has profoundly impacted how women see themselves. This mentality impacts women with feelings of alienation from their own sense of goodness, worth, and authority, whether at a conscious or subconscious level.²⁷ Inversely, as

²⁴ Ibid., 5.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 37.

²⁷ Ibid., 39.

long as the mystery of God is spoken of as exclusively male, men will continue to view themselves as superior to women. Feminist theological analysis clarifies that holding an exclusive patriarchal symbol of God and literalizing it is idolatrous. It stunts the human capacity for growth in perceiving the mystery of God.²⁸

One way Johnson believes we can respond to this theological problem is by including female metaphors and symbols in our language of God.²⁹ The usage of female metaphors for God is one way to challenge the “idolatry of maleness” feminist theologians have boldly denounced. Using female language for God is a proactive way to acknowledge the equal dignity women have to men as images of God. The way men and women view themselves hinges on the image(s) they have of God. As a ripple effect, we can see that the image we have of God affects how we view salvation. Atonement theologies are no longer an adequate way of interpreting salvation, especially in the context of suffering.

The Argument of Cur Deus Homo

The treatise *Cur Deus Homo* (1098), colloquially translated to *Why God Became Human*, is also known as the Satisfaction theory or Atonement Theory. There were many historical components as to what influenced Anselm to write this treatise. In his discourse, Anselm sets out to prove to a non-Christian person why God needed to become human for the redemption of humanity. Anselm transferred the feudal socio-political arrangement of society as an analogy to his understanding of the relation between God and humans. According to Anselm, God’s honor was violated by humanity's sin, and it needs to be restored to maintain the necessary order.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 40.

²⁹ Ibid., 46.

³⁰ Anselm, Ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans, *The Major Works* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), xvii. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Anselm defines sin as "nothing else than not render God his due," and this is what "disturbs the order and beauty of the universe."³¹

Since it is God, who has been dishonored, "satisfaction or punishment must follow every sin."³² According to Anselm, "one who imperils another's safety does not do enough by merely restoring his safety, without making some compensation for the anguish incurred; so he who violates another's honor does not do enough by merely rendering honor again, but must, according to the injury done, make restoration in some way satisfactory to the person whom he has dishonored."³³ God's dignity is infinite. Therefore, the offense to God's honor is also unlimited. The only one who could restore God's honor and pay an infinite debt was God's Son, who is God-man. God did not demand of God's Son to pay the debt of humanity since the Son was innocent. It was God's Son, who freely chose to die on the cross to pay for humanity's sin and restore the right order in the world. For the people of Anselm's social context, this analogy did speak of a merciful God because retribution was expected and accepted as a social norm. Anselm's theory also went against the Ransome Theory, the dominant understanding of salvation at the time which claimed Christ had to pay ransom for us to Satan to set us free from sin.³⁴ Anselm viewed the Ransome theory as deeply flawed because Christ's death on the cross was interpreted as a payment to the devil for the liberation of humanity from the devil's grip. Anselm did not agree with this rationale because it meant God was under the power of the devil. However, this analogy is no longer liberating or life-giving in post-modern understanding of God's love and mercy. It portrays an image of an offended, angry, vindictive God which is

³¹ Ibid., 283.

³² Ibid., 289.

³³ Ibid., 283.

³⁴ Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 76.

morally repulsive to most people in the world today. In our post-modern context, the interpretation of salvation as God requiring the death of his Son to be appeased eclipses the boundless mercy of God.³⁵

Feminist/Mujerista Stance On Atonement Theories

Feminist/Mujerista theology deems *CDH* theory as problematic and calls for a change in how we view salvation today.³⁶ The feminist principle holds that whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be denounced. It is concerned with the flourishing of women, the oppressed and marginalized, and the earth/cosmos.³⁷ It also advocates for whatever promotes women's full humanity and considers it redemptive. Feminist theologians are critical of the Atonement theory because it inculcates passivity and thwarts the self-determination to resist oppressive structures. "It is women who are supposed to serve silently, obediently, without question in imitation of the Crucified One. Such glorification of passivity undermines the agency that rightly belongs to women... This kind of theology can prove intensely dangerous when domestic situations turn abusive."³⁸ Johnson believes the atonement theory should be retired because it obscures God's mercy and accommodates violence. It presents a "disastrous image of God" who is sadistic towards God's Son and vindictive towards humanity.³⁹ Feminist theologians offer an alternate understanding of God's salvation, one that is faithful to Scriptural tradition, that brings good news to those who struggle and is inclusive of the whole of creation.

³⁵ Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 16-17.

³⁶ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 71.

³⁷ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, "Feminist Theory and Latina Feminist/Mujerista Theologizing" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espin (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 348.

³⁸ Johnson, *Creation, and the Cross*, 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

Atonement Theologies Sanctions Violence

The violence suffered by atonement theologies has concrete names and faces. In *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering and the Search for What Saves Us*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker theologize using their own stories and that of other women who have suffered the harmful effects of these Atonement theologies. In her work as a pastor, Parker recalls the story of a woman she named Anola, who was the victim of domestic violence. For twenty years, Anola was advised by her priest to "accept the beatings and bear them gladly, as Jesus endured the cross."⁴⁰ Her husband eventually murdered Anola in front of her own children. Her four-year-old daughter told the police officers, "Mommy was bad so Daddy killed her."⁴¹ It is undeniable that violence, abuse, and trauma have a generational ripple effect and far-reaching consequences. As Parker points out, Anola's Christian faith should have empowered her to freedom and fullness of life rather than leading her to take the abuse to imitate Christ's suffering.

Parker also shares choices she made in her life motivated by the idea of self-sacrificing love that were harmful to her. When her husband pressured her to have an abortion, Parker did move on with the abortion to save her marriage. She sacrificed this wanted pregnancy for her husband. In her interaction with women from her congregation, Parker found the silent suffering of many women who endured emotional, sexual, and physical wounds. They endured because they felt that was their duty as Christian women. Considering the harmful effects this idea of self-sacrifice had on her and other women from her congregation, Parker concludes, "Neither

⁴⁰ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* (Boston: Boston Press, 2001), 21.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Jesus' death on the cross nor our own acts of self-sacrifice had saved us."⁴² People who suffer need an alternative interpretation of salvation aside from atonement which exclusively teaches that God required his son to die to save humanity or the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross saves us.

We need to see and recognize the violence in Atonement theology. A theology of atonement sacrifice "will leave an abused child or battered spouse defenseless."⁴³ Theologies of atonement have furthered the distortion of God to conclude that God needs to be appeased. If the image of God is that of a cruel father needing to be placated by obedience, this leads to the worship of a torturer father and legitimizes violence. Parents who do wrong to their children by any type of abuse are justified.⁴⁴ Not only is their abusive behavior legitimized by this theology, but it is made to be considered as required. Husbands who batter their wives and parents who abuse their children behind closed doors can easily justify their actions as an act of love to their victims by saying, "I hit you because I love you." Theology needs to honor our humanity by teaching how to be for ourselves and be for others simultaneously, to hold all lives sacred.⁴⁵ A distorted theology is the root cause of the legitimization of violence. A patriarchal and misogynistic culture fuels the violence against vulnerable populations to inconceivable harm.

The problem of legitimization of violence through *CDH* interpretations is exacerbated by patriarchal and misogynistic culture. Rosemary P. Carbine makes note of this when she declares, "Interpreting the death of Jesus either to appease God's wrath or to show God's love may theologially sanction violence against women."⁴⁶ Atonement theologies paint an image of a

⁴² Ibid., 7.

⁴³ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁴ Ibidl, 30.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 42.

⁴⁶ Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 89.

God who approves of violence against God's son. Jesus' passive submission to the violence directed to him puts forward a model for victims of violence to follow. Perpetrators of abuse manipulate this ingrained belief their victims hold to keep their victims powerless. In Mexican cultures the endurance of victims of violence is viewed with admiration. The Spanish expression, *que ajuante*, meaning "what endurance," seems to value suffering as heroic, which should be borne without protest.⁴⁷ "Men's heroism comes from serving their country, while for women their heroism comes from the home. In both cases the emphasis is on suffering and submission."⁴⁸ Regarding this theological interpretation of the cross, Ivone Gebara observes,

The message of Jesus on the Cross leads us to believe that suffering that comes from injustice will lead us to redemption, to victory over our enemies. For women, the path to take us there is to contemplate the suffering of this man on the cross and to accept our own crosses. The promise of the resurrection calls us to bear our sorrows and humiliations and even to renounce our basic human rights. Through experience we can say how much, in practice this theology accentuates the victimization of women and encourages them in domestic and familiar martyrdom.⁴⁹

Pineda-Madrid identifies this passivity towards victimization as it takes the guise of "spiritual development" which slowly erodes a person's sense of self. This spirituality is problematic. Karl Rahner identified a direct correlation between a person's sense of self and the health of their experience of God. The healthier a person's self-image is, the healthier their experience of God will be. On the contrary, he argued, a loss of personal identity equals a loss in the experience of God.⁵⁰ What Rahner says also points to the correlation there is between our self-image and our God image. Having the belief that God requires the *losing* of ourselves to be saved contradicts the Christian image of God. The gospel of Mark points to a God who seeks

⁴⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experiences of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 107. As quoted in Nancy Pineda Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 88.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

our life when he says, “For what shall it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and suffer the loss of his soul?” (Mk 8: 36) and “He is God, not of the dead, but of the living” (Mark 12: 27).⁵¹ If this Rahnerian principle is embraced by leadership in the church, then this principle of losing oneself as salvation should be questioned and reconstructed.

Pineda-Madrid points out that because the Anselmian atonement theory occurs outside of history it is not concerned with social justice issues. Since it does not consider social sin, Anselmian atonement theologies do not lead to a transformation of oppressive social structures.⁵² Atonement theology does not proclaim the coming reign of God in the here and now. People who suffer, such as the femicide in Juarez, need a theology in which they can “anticipate eschatological healing in the here and now.”⁵³ Anything less fails to proclaim the good news of the resurrection.

Salvation Reduced to Suffering

Atonement theologies insist on centering salvation solely on the suffering and death of Jesus as the source of salvation. Anselm's satisfaction atonement argues that the death of Jesus, offered to God, granted human salvation by satisfying divine justice. This assertion inevitably reduces the “significance of Jesus to his suffering and death, and discipleship is defined by how much people are willing to suffer and die as he did. Interpretations of Anselm go as far as to give hardly any emphasis on the ethical dimension of discipleship.”⁵⁴ This negation is dangerous as Nancy Pineda-Madrid notes, “In the context of the Juarez femicide, needless to say, the separation of salvation from ethics renders Christianity a passive presence in the face of horrific

⁵¹ New Jerusalem Bible, <https://www.bibliacatolica.com.br/en/new-jerusalem-bible/mark/12/>. Accessed April 21, 2022.

⁵² Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 93.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 87.

evil.”⁵⁵ Such warped vision of God and Christianity allows evil to take root and dominate. Oppressors are given a free pass to “gain greater corporate profit, to establish a drug cartel’s territorial control, to make money through the illegal trafficking of human organs, to assert male supremacy, to further patriarchy, and the like-- [they] may find a religious world that, at best, poses no real threat and, at worst, enhances the pursuit of such desires.”⁵⁶ Atonement theologies do not help in the face of these cruelties but instead further victimize the victim by rendering her passive by accommodating the violence done to her. A Christian community is true to its roots when it denounces the evil rather than accepting it as God’s will.

When women are identified with the suffering of Jesus instead of with his ministry, women are undermined in their subjectivity. Ivonne Gebara addresses this problem in her critique of the “ideology of sacrifice” promoted by Atonement theologies:

In addition, substitutionary sacrifice theologies of atonement sacralize rather than stand against women’s experiences of social, sexual, and other kinds of surrogacy. Women are put personally as well as theologically at risk when the death of Jesus is disconnected from its historical and theological context... Identifying with the suffering rather than with the mystery of Jesus may undermine the full subjectivity of women.⁵⁷

The harm effected to women goes to the point of erasing their self-identity. Women are made to believe that their worth comes from the service they are expected to give to husband, family, church, and society. They are made to let go of their hopes and dreams to fit a pre-determined female ideal. This idea of self-denial is rooted in the magnified image of Jesus as the one who “gave up everything so that others may live.”⁵⁸ This image of the suffering Christ, who because he does not resist is heroic, is primarily applied to women, as determined by the patriarchal

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ivonne Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women’s Experiences of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) 107. As quoted in Nancy Pineda Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 89.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

view of femaleness. Gebara insists that the ideology of sacrifice imposed by patriarchal culture is detrimental to the humanity and development of women. It requires women to renounce their human capacity for pleasure, thinking, and dreams to fulfill another's expectations.⁵⁹ In Latin America, women who do not live according to the logic are called "easy." Women who do not conform to the status quo are seen as a threat to the established order. They are feared and envied by other women. The women who do conform to this ideology do so out of fear: "fear of being separated from or abandoned by God; fear, too, of not being able to live up to the ideal demanded by the culture; fear of not being accepted by men and recognized by other women. Fear of others leads inevitably to alienation from oneself."⁶⁰ The ideology of sacrifice distorts a woman's sense of self and worth.

When religious authorities reduce Jesus' redemptive significance to his suffering and sacrifice, then suffering and sacrifice become the way to redemption. The distorted view leads to identifying suffering as "good" and therefore willed by God. By promoting this theology, church leaders distort the image of the Christian God and how God saves us. The repercussions are far too great as they fail to denounce the systemic sin underlying every act of human oppression. Pineda-Madrid insists that "women, and those who are economically poor end up having to make the greatest sacrifices in order to realize their salvation."⁶¹ What results is the distorted notion that "the way" for women and the oppressed to secure salvation is through their suffering. Instead of resisting the system of oppression, this ideology further disables the victim and enables the oppressive system. Gebara rightly observes that far too often the message of salvation is reduced to the idea that suffering injustice will lead us to victory over our enemies.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Time and time again, abuse victims are counseled by religious leaders who hold atonement theologies and encourage the victim to continue to suffer abuse to imitate Christ.⁶² This rhetoric is not faithful to the call of Catholic social teaching to defend the cause of the poor (Psalm 82:3) but instead promises the victim that they will inherit the benefits of the resurrection by patiently suffering sorrow and humiliation. In other words, they are told to renounce their basic human rights. This theology results in a distortion of the image of God, the denial of one's humanity, and the furthering of victimization. There are far too many stories that demonstrate the detrimental effects of this still operative theology.

The Ritualizing of Killing of Women

Nancy Pineda-Madrid uses a hermeneutics of suffering to bring to light the ongoing violence against women in Juarez, Mexico. By drawing attention to the feminicide, she turns our attention toward the evil that has been perpetrated against poor women for over a decade. She names the roots of this experience of suffering as “misogynist sexism, racist classism, and expansionist colonialism.”⁶³ These killings continue to occur with impunity as civil authorities manifest no interest to end them or, worse, have a direct role in them. Exposing the feminicide, naming, and telling the stories of its victims must be done to resist the double evil who attempts to conceal them.⁶⁴

The ongoing ritualized killing of hundreds of poor, brown girls and women is powered by the logic of patriarchal sociopolitical systems.⁶⁵ It is the diabolic attempt to build power hierarchies, deny all political visibility of girls and women, and uses the bodies of girls and women to assert control. Pineda-Madrid exposes these atrocious acts of violence by stating that

⁶² Ibid., 64.

⁶³ Ibid., 52.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 27.

“the genitalia and breasts of these women, the most overt corporeal symbols of female humanity, become the focal targets of the assault on these girls and women.”⁶⁶ This is the most heinous logic of a kyriarchal sociopolitical system. These ritualized killings are a product of a cultural mindset that sees girls and women as subjects of control. It is an extreme way to assert their misogynistic view that women must be kyriarchally controlled and assume this thinking uncritically as "God-given" or as the way things must be. The killers use girls' and women's bodies for the purpose of asserting control over Juárez and beyond. Since many of the women who were killed worked in *maquiladora* factories, some scholars assert that these killings are warnings for women who want to assert themselves, and work outside the home, instead of fitting gender roles. The killers use women's bodies to mark territory and assert kyriarchal power.

How we regard sexual violence against women matters theologically. If the suffering of the femicide's victims and their families is interpreted as the tragic fortune of a handful of victims and their families, then the desire for release from this evil, that is, for healing from God, can be described as the journey of the directly affected individuals.⁶⁷ The Church needs to denounce this evil rather than maintain the silence, or worse, blame the victims. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Juarez made a public statement asserting that women's immodest attire provoked men's sexual aggression.⁶⁸ The church is called to stand with the victim and not justify the evil done to her. Moreover, if the victims are somehow to blame for the onslaught of their suffering and murder, then their suffering can be reduced to the effect of their own personal sin. If, however, this horrific suffering is regarded as the byproduct of social structures—economic,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

political, religious, cultural— then the drive for God's salvific grace needs to be seen as one we pursue socially and collectively. The understanding of salvation is also directly linked to our image(s) of God.

Soteriology becomes distorted when salvation is placed exclusively on the work of Jesus Christ rather than the Trinity. We forget that that God is relationship and that before the incarnation God was saving. As Pineda-Madrid suggests, when salvation is conceived as the action of the triune God, the theological subordination of women to man (patriarchy) is challenged. We need to challenge images of God that do not liberate or promote life. In the Bible, Job contended with the existing claims of religion when his friends reinforced his suffering is willed by God.⁶⁹ He protested when he exclaimed, “Your maxims are proverbs of ashes!” (Job, 13:12). As Job, we need to confront theological claims that do not serve to promote the dignity of life. Both Elizabeth Johnson and Wilkie Au emphasize that to live a healthy spirituality, it is essential to have a balanced understanding of the immanence and transcendence of God and the apophatic and cataphatic nature of speech on God.

Ground Rules for a Healthy Image of God

The mystery of God is always beyond what human beings can perceive. God’s transcendence is necessary to keep in mind to avoid idolatry. Johnson speaks of important “Ground Rules” that equip us for the journey to right speech on God.⁷⁰ The first ground rule is: “The reality of the living God is an ineffable mystery beyond all telling.”⁷¹ The second rule Johnson gives is that “No expression for God should be taken literally.”⁷² Human language can never encapsulate the essence of God. Because our language is insufficient to express who God

⁶⁹ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 9.

⁷⁰ *Quest for the living God*, 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 18.

is we can only point to God indirectly through analogy or metaphor. It is the language of metaphor and symbol that “open[s] up levels of reality that would otherwise be closed to us...we don’t create them; they emerge from our subconscious.”⁷³ However, a metaphor or symbol should not be taken literally, or it becomes an idol. The third ground rule is that we should make use of many metaphors and symbols for God. We need metaphors that focus on liberation from suffering and the flourishing of the whole person. In the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas Aquinas argues that although there is no adequate name that can fully express God, we humans need many names to express our experience of God (I, 31:4). Johnson draws attention to the many names for God in the Scriptures; “God is seen as king, rock mother, savior, gardener, lover, father, mother, liberator, helper, friend, freshwater, fire, thunder, etc.”⁷⁴ Aquinas calls us to recognize the “poverty of our vocabulary” which is never adequate despite all its richness. “If you have understood, it is not God” (*Summa Theologiae* I, q.37, a.1). Just as we need to remember that God is transcendent, we need to remember God’s immanence.

At the heart of the Christian story is the experience of God’s radical nearness to the world. “God engages in the world and is ‘ineffably near’ or ‘in radical proximity to the world.’”⁷⁵ In the incarnation, we see God's solidarity with the world. Duns Scotus interprets the motive of the incarnation by pointing out that love seeks out the beloved. Thereby concluding that God came into the world as one of us to seek union with us. The ineffable horizon of God's mystery reaches us through God's spirit dwelling in every human heart. The free offering of God’s love in Christian language is grace, or as Rahner calls it, “uncreated grace.”⁷⁶ He declares that God's Spirit is “Imparted freely and immediately to all human beings.

⁷³ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 42.

It is God's own self-communication which permeates the world at its roots."⁷⁷ Uncreated grace is the Spirit of God dwelling at the heart of our existence.⁷⁸ God who is absolute mystery, offers every person the gift of God's saving presence. Rahner argues that God's abiding mystery is present to everyone, "not in the guise of distant aloofness but in that radical proximity."⁷⁹ God's radical immanence and transcendence is evident in Scripture as the God who is engaged in the realities of the world, especially active in the experiences of those who suffer. To undo some of the harm Atonement theologies have done to the human capacity to perceive the mystery of God, there needs to be a more balanced preaching, teaching, and catechizing on God's immanence and transcendence. This balanced way of approaching God's mystery can lead to new paths of agency and liberation during suffering. One simple, yet powerful metaphor for God that can be held during moments of suffering is that of God as a friend.

The metaphor of God as *friend* is a sobering way of contemplating God's mystery and salvation during times of suffering. Sallie McFague points out that paternal images of God are insufficient and must be balanced with other metaphors. Paternal images of God, whether they are paternal or maternal, "may stress the characteristics of compassion, guidance, and discipline, but they cannot express mutuality, maturity, cooperation, or reciprocity."⁸⁰ Expressing one's relationship with God as a friendship moves away from hierarchy and into egalitarianism, which demands greater maturity. Maturity at all levels is required in the context of suffering, which is one reason why this metaphor can be a helpful one. Scripture attests to God's desired friendship, "But you, Israel my servant, you Jacob whom I have chosen, race of Abraham my friend" (Isa.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁹ Ibid.42.

⁸⁰ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia, PA:Fortress Press, 1982),178.

41:18). John points to Jesus' affirmation that "There is no grater love than laying down one's life for one's friend" (John 15:13). Some scholars claim Jesus' table fellowship with public sinners was enough to be put to death because it crossed the line of purity held by the Jews of his time.⁸¹ Scripture gives evidence of the divine invitation to friendship with God.

A relationship with God as a friend or companion is one in which experiences are mutually shared. The Scottish theologian Ruth Page suggests God's transcendence not as God being "above" but rather "alongside."⁸² Friends are attracted to each other by sharing common values and ideals and not by dependence. God's salvation is experienced very differently in light of this scriptural metaphor. Just as an authentic friend would, God also suffers with God's friends when they suffer. As McFague asserts, "Friends cannot save one another; rather they work together for common goals in such a way that each is encouraged, empowered, and enlivened to do for the good of the whole."⁸³ If we view salvation "as the well-being and fulfillment of all that lives,"⁸⁴ it is clear God needs our cooperation in working out our salvation. What is also evident is that the outcome is not certain since God does not treat God's creation as puppets. Even when the outcome is not guaranteed, as Gods friends, human beings are part of the process of the salvation and not passive recipients. The act of God as historically involved in our salvation, as well as counting on our active participation, is witnessed by the lives of the Hebrew people and the first Christian communities.

Salvation as Accompaniment in the Old and New Testaments

Using Scripture, Johnson demonstrates that God has always revealed to be in constant saving action in favor of God's people. One common way God's people saw God's nearness in

⁸¹ Ibid., 180.

⁸² Ibid., 183

⁸³ Ibid., 184.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

the Old Testament is through the conviction that God identified with the suffering of his people. The voice of the burning bush indicates that God knew the anguish of his people. To *know* is related to an intimate knowledge of another.⁸⁵ YHWH reveals to identify with the misery of the people. Through the prophetic tradition, we continuously hear that God has a preference to act in favor of the oppressed.⁸⁶ God's name reveals the liberating power of God, "I am YHWH your God who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (Ps 81: 10). Second Isaiah boldly affirms God as redeemer.⁸⁷ "O YHWH, you are our father; from of old, your name is our Redeemer." (Isa 63:16). The book of Wisdom also refers to God's saving action through lady Wisdom. This saving action of Wisdom in the Old Testament was later applied to Jesus by the early Christians.⁸⁸ God's solidarity with those who suffer is rooted in the initial experience of Judaism and was then reinterpreted by the early Christian community.

The early Christian community also found comfort in believing God was present to them in their suffering. They interpreted Jesus' death on the cross as God's solidarity with those who suffer and die unjustly.⁸⁹ Johnson identifies a "double solidarity" of God in Christ's suffering on the cross. In Jesus' suffering on the cross, God is in solidarity with the plight of humanity and all of creation. At the same time, God, the Father, is in solidarity with the suffering of Jesus. God did not desire, nor did he need that Jesus suffered and died on the cross to save humanity. The cross becomes a symbol of God's solidarity with those who suffer, as in the case of the women in Juarez.

⁸⁵Johnson, *Creation and the Cross*, 35.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

Salvation as Accompaniment/ Solidarity with Those Who Suffer

As Pineda-Madrid points out, the Juarez community interprets the cross in a way that reclaims life and the dignity of women. Their use of the cross takes the people in Juarez, and the world at large, to a new social imaginary that reclaims the right to life and dignity.⁹⁰ Pineda-Madrid expresses this new imaginary in the following quote.

While for Anselm the cross signals the suffering and death of Jesus Christ as his ultimate sacrifice offered out of love for humanity, for the witness survivors of the femicide, the pink crosses signal a loud and public *no* to femicide, *no* to the brutal terror waged against women, *no* to all forms of misogyny, *no* to all forms of patriarchy from the most benign to the most brutal...[The Juarez community] They have chosen to cry out *for* life...*Pink* crosses mean that life can be and must be wrenched from death through solidarity that is built among those who have suffered femicide and with others who insist on hope even in the face of terror.⁹¹

The symbol of the cross, when interpreted as God's solidarity with those who suffer is very powerful, yet salvation based solely on the cross is, at best, incomplete. According to Johnson, it is a contradiction to believe that God, who is Love (1Jn 4:8), would need or require the violent death of God's Son to save the world. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross alone is not salvific. Jesus died as a result of sin because he suffered the sinful structures of injustice of his time, which rejected his message.⁹² Rebecca Parker asks, "Does Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross end dominance and submission? No. Jesus' crucifixion was a consequence of domination, not its cure. An oppressive system killed him to silence him and to threaten others who might follow him."⁹³ Johnson points out that what may be considered salvific from the crucifixion "Is not the suffering endured but only the loved poured out."⁹⁴ Through the death and resurrection

⁹⁰ Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 115.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 110.

⁹³ Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 37.

⁹⁴ Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 125.

of Jesus, the early Christian community understood that evil does not prevail, but it is always God's goodness that has the last word. Johnson reminds us that the deep incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh, points out that he identifies himself with all flesh that suffers, including all of creation.⁹⁵ Only by fusing the cross with the resurrection can we see God's saving action because "It is the resurrection of the crucified that reveals God at work to save."⁹⁶

The language of salvation in Scripture speaks of resistance to evil. The saving action of God is seen as "to deliver, to rescue from danger, to help in distress, to protect or keep safe and sound, to preserve, and to make well and make whole."⁹⁷ To be saved includes the well-being and restoration of the physical, mental, and social dimensions. The prophet Isaiah (35:4 -10) speaks of salvation when he proclaims that the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap, the mute will burst into song; the waters will flow in the desert, the grass will be turned green, there will be joy and sorrow will flee.

The saving accompaniment of God is destined for all of creation through a deep incarnation. However, Scripture tells us that God's covenant is with "every living creature of all flesh" (Gen. 9:15) and that "the Word became *flesh*" (Jn 1: 14). God's solidarity with the suffering world is not exclusive to human beings; it extends to the entire created world. Johnson identifies this solidarity as a "deep incarnation" in which God-in-Christ is with all flesh that suffers and dies, not just with human beings.⁹⁸ "God in Christ is with every field mouse caught and eaten by a hawk."⁹⁹ God is present to all of creation and actively saving the cosmos amid its

⁹⁵ Ibid., 91.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁹⁷ Johnson, *Salvation and the Cross*, 120.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 188.

anguish, pain, and suffering.¹⁰⁰ The New Testament attests that through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, all of creation is destined to a transformation that is beyond our imagination. In Rom 8: 18-25, St. Paul expresses that the whole creation "groans" in childbirth pains is waiting to be redeemed. The hymn of Colossians (1:15-20) declares Christ as the "firstborn of all creation." God's double- solidarity and the power of his resurrection is with the whole of creation.¹⁰¹ Unlike *CDH*, which is ahistorical and individualistic, feminist interpretation of salvation emphasizes the historical and social aspects that make God's salvation visible in the world.

God's salvation is both historical and social. As we have seen in Scripture, specifically the Exodus, the deliverance of God occurs in a specific time, and it involves community. It looks different depending on its context. However, it requires conversion: a new way of seeing God, self, others, and the world. Conversion involves a "radical change in our social imagination" that leads to pursue God's reign.¹⁰² Salvation is not found in the suffering of people; it is found in their response to suffering.¹⁰³ People who act according to this new way of seeing use their experience of suffering creatively towards a higher purpose. They do not succumb to a "radical pessimism," nor are they driven by an "ethical individualism" to pursue their own interests. They express their resistance of evil in a way that thwarts evil in pursuit of a greater common good. Despite situations of suffering, salvation continues to be operative in history and requires the social element of a compassionate community. However, it takes a particular type of community to further God's salvation.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 191.

¹⁰² Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation*, 131.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 126.

Accompaniment and Community

The community of Ciudad Juarez is a powerful witness of what it means to be a salvific community. They share common events and the painful experiences of the feminicide. This community has shown courageous acts of resistance through “their songs, rituals, laments; their use of religious symbols; their anguished cries for justice; their marches demanding a more just world—all these bear theological wisdom that sheds light on the nature of God’s saving presence.”¹⁰⁴ In every locality where a body of a murdered woman is found the people erect a pink cross for each woman found with the name of the victim as a sign of reclaiming their women and their territory.¹⁰⁵ “The claiming of a space enables the victimized to realize some release from their experience of evil, and in that very release, they come to know a healing presence, God's saving presence.”¹⁰⁶ The pink cross is a sign of resistance to the killers and a testimony of the faith from where this community draws its strength.

The "particular" type of community that cooperates with God in God's ongoing salvific work is committed to making this world a more humane one. It shares the painful memory of the killing of their women, and each woman is cherished as their own. They share a present in the struggle for justice and end to impunity manifested in the symbols of the pink crosses and marches. The pink crosses erected in memory of each woman killed symbolize that "death cannot have the last word and resurrection will come."¹⁰⁷ This community shares a vision for the future of a new and just world, and this makes it a community of hope. When we view God’s

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 112.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 98.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 135.

salvation as accompaniment and that God is saving the entire created world through God's companionship, we can see that we are called to be agents of accompaniment.

Accompaniment and Trauma

Survivors of trauma who are also people of faith teach us how to pave the way towards healing. Through their humanity and faith, they teach us to courageously expose the violence of trauma through literature, song, preaching, and storytelling. They remind us that community is essential in finding God in the bleakest of moments. They reassure us that protest and wrestling with God amid our suffering is an expression of genuine faith. Survivors of trauma many times have had to outgrow the image they held of God as children or young adults to relate to God. As a result, they relate to God's Mystery in a new and deeper way after their trauma. Trauma investigation further illumines and equips ministers of care to respond to the new forms of trauma today.

As pastoral ministers of accompaniment, we are called to interpret the scriptures so that trauma victims can find grace through them. Serene Jones tackles a concrete question on pastoral care to respond to victims of September 11: "How are pastors and committed laypeople to live and speak in the aftermath of 9/11?"¹⁰⁸ Jones affirms, "The church is called, as it exists in the space of trauma, to engage in the crucial task of reordering the collective imagination of its people to be wise and passionate in this task."¹⁰⁹ One creative way Jones engages the imagination is by viewing the scriptures through the lens of trauma. Jones analyses the passage of the disciples on their way to Emmaus after Jesus has been crucified and notices the signs of

¹⁰⁸ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 31.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

trauma in the disciples.¹¹⁰ The crucifixion was a traumatic event that they witnessed. As victims of trauma, Jones points out the disorientation in the disciples' inability to recognize Jesus. Jones identifies God's active grace in their lives by Jesus' action of coming to them, walking with them, engaging in conversation, and later in the breaking of the bread, which opens their eyes. This "opening of the eyes" is God's grace breaking the trauma pattern through this intimate embracing meal.¹¹¹ The scriptures and trauma theory point to the role of healthy relationships as a means by which trauma victims can learn to create a new narrative that is liberating.

As a result of her work with victims of rape, Jennifer Erin Beste challenges the long-standing Rahnerian narrative that God's grace enables each person's freedom to love God and neighbor.¹¹² Beste points out that trauma research indicates that a person's ability to be open to love is impaired by trauma. In her research and first-hand work with incest victims, Beste comes to the sobering conclusion that the evil committed to these individuals can, in fact, impair their freedom to be receptive to God's grace. Using the lens of feminist theology and her witnessing of recovery processes of incest survivors, Beste proposes that the primary way God communicates grace to severe trauma victims is through authentic human relationships of care.¹¹³ As Rahner suggests, the Holy Spirit can mediate God's grace through whichever means God wishes and "each member of the Church actively shares in building the Church-conveying grace to individual human beings."¹¹⁴ It is these types of relationships that Christian ministers are called to cultivate with trauma victims as a way to be facilitators of grace.

¹¹⁰Ibid.,41.

¹¹¹Ibid.,42.

¹¹² Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 92.

¹¹³ Ibid., 101.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 102.

Conclusion

Although it was never declared a dogma, Anselm's Satisfaction theory was accepted and spread throughout the West.¹¹⁵ Atonement theologies propose an idea of salvation as a form of transaction which is ahistorical and separated from ethics. The different versions of Atonement theologies distort the image of God who, as witnessed in the Scriptures, shows active opposition against systems of oppression that perpetrate violence. The image of God people perceive through the lens of these theologies is that of a wrathful and sadistic God who requires victims of abuse to submit passively to evil. Sadly, history shows that the Atonement theory has influenced the church's view of salvation for nearly a millennium. The influence of this theory, along with patriarchal cultural factors, people have been robbed of experiencing God's solidarity amid their suffering. A distorted idea of God has disempowered them, rather than invigorating their agency in pursuing the salvation God intends for them. Therefore, the Atonement theory should not only be retired, but all believers need to work to undo the harm it has caused.

It is time to speak about God's salvation not solely as liberation from our sins, but also from anything that diminishes or harms life. Scripture is overwhelmingly clear that God is a loving and merciful God who accompanies God's people through every situation. To further God's salvation in history we are called, personally and collectively, to exercise the art of accompaniment. As Pope Francis reminds us, accompaniment must be "steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life."¹¹⁶ Believers of all

¹¹⁵ John P. Galvin, "Jesus Christ," in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 276.

¹¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* Trans. (Vatican, Vatican Press, 2013), No. 169.

walks of life have the fascinating task of reinterpreting the cross in union with the resurrection by being in solidarity with those who suffer. One way to practice this solidarity is through Christian accompaniment.

PLAN COMPONENT

Introduction

The approach I propose to respond to the pastoral problem of finding helpful images of God during suffering is Christian accompaniment. It is through faith and through relationship that we may gain insight into where God is during life's most significant challenges. As Pope Francis states in *Evangelii Gaudium* “The Church will have to initiate everyone—priests, religious and laity—into this ‘art of accompaniment which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and compassionate gaze, which also heals, liberates, and encourages growth in the Christian life.”¹¹⁷ Catholics from all walks of life, have the fascinating calling of being in solidarity with those who suffer, through their engaged presence, listening, empathy, and facilitating inner awareness of God’s solidarity with those who suffer.

In the context of parish life, pastoral ministers often encounter people undergoing challenges that cause them to suffer. People who are active in any parish ministry would greatly benefit from having an approach and tool kit that they can use when encountering someone who suffers. The pastoral plan I will be explaining further can be applied by anyone

¹¹⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* Trans. (Vatican, Vatican Press, 2013), No. 169.

but is aimed more specifically for active people in Catholic parish ministry. The components of this approach are a two-fold process that focuses on cultivating the minister's inner life as well as fostering a practical skillset that better equips for the art of accompaniment. Similar to spiritual direction, the accompaniment process should include at least three people: the person who suffers, God, and the person(s) who accompany. I have integrated spiritual direction practices, such as developing listening, empathy, and prompting and probing skills because they are applicable tools of companionship. As collaborators with God in the work of salvation, ministers are attentive to the Spirit's invitation to facilitate the mediation of grace for those we encounter along the way.

Step 1: The Cultivation of the Pastoral Minister's Inner Life

The first step to the accompaniment process I offer requires a change of mentality from a minister-centered approach to a person-centered one.¹¹⁸ The person who is facing challenges should set the pace of the accompaniment process. She is the one who needs to manifest what type of help she needs or wants, not the minister or community. The minister needs to have clarity that his or her role is to facilitate the process of awareness of how God is acting in the life of the person who suffers. Accompaniment is not about having to "save," "rescue," or fix someone's situation. A helping relationship is one that fosters a person's sense of self-responsibility.¹¹⁹ Although, at various degrees, women and men who undergo adverse situations are still capable of making decisions that impact their present and future. A parish minister can empower people who suffer by helping them gain awareness of the

¹¹⁸ Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, (Boston, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company), 1995), 47.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

structures of oppression affecting their lives, the choices they have, and inner resourcefulness that can propel them to new possibilities unknown to them.

To grow in one's ability to be present to accompany others who suffer, one must cultivate a healthy self-integration of one's own suffering history. When we work on integrating our childhood wounding, traumas, or other types of suffering we have experienced, we are capable of remaining present with those who suffer or share their stories of suffering. Self-integration expands our ability to create a safe and welcoming space for the hurts the other brings. If the minister does not do this inner work, he or she may resort to "fixing" or avoiding being present to the other's pain. To integrate their wounding, ministers also need their support system in the form of helping relationships, rituals, therapy, and spiritual practices that foster healing. If ministers are oblivious to their own experience of suffering, they will have little to no capacity to extend compassion to others. Enhancing one's awareness, self-knowledge, and self-compassion will facilitate the ability to create a safe space for others to share their stories of suffering.

Fostering self-knowledge and spirituality will provide pastoral ministers of care with the spiritual strength to be present to others who suffer. Pastoral ministers need to be engaged in a genuine relationship with God in which they many times struggle and grapple with suffering. They should be aware of their own images of God and how they may project or transmit them to those they accompany. Both the practice of self-attunement and intimacy with God will fuel their ability to help those who suffer find meaning in their grief. In tending to her own pain and in her search for God, Rebecca Parker could minister to other women in her congregation who were suffering in silence. Parker had to grapple with images of God and aspects of her theology, such as salvation through self-sacrifice before she could help

women break the silence of their pain. As she puts it, “It wasn’t courage or wisdom that moved me to wrestle publicly with theologies that sanctioned the silent acceptance of suffering. Personal crisis motivated me.”¹²⁰ As people in the journey and fellow companions, we discover the mystery of God in the brokenness of our lives and the lives of others, in the shared stories and experiences. We are ministered to as we minister to others. Each person needs to find their spiritual path and practices that help them find greater wholeness.¹²¹ In concert with nurturing a mature human and inner life, the minister hones a set of skills that will capacitate her to accompany others in a way that is conducive to healing and giving agency.

Step 2: Building a Toolkit for Accompaniment

In the process of accompaniment, one of the greatest gifts a minister can offer to a suffering person is active listening. Active listening emanates from remaining in conscious awareness of the present moment, and it is something that can only be accomplished through constant practice. According to Thomas A. Hart, listening entails the willingness to be a companion instead of a teacher or savior.¹²² Listening is not to be responsible for another's problems, remove pain, share wisdom, or fix anything about the other person.¹²³ Sarah Butler states that “To truly listen to a person who is undergoing any loss is one of the greatest gifts a

¹²⁰ Brock and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 95.

¹²¹ Jim Clarke, *Soul-Centered: Spirituality for People on the Go*, (Mahawah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), xiii).

In *Soul-Centered: Spirituality for People on the Go* Jim Clarke speaks of key aspects of a balanced spirituality for every Catholic. He describes spirituality as a developmental process and the "Art of making connections, seeing the Divine in the human, and claiming it for ourselves." Clarke offers critical reflections on essential aspects of what it means to tend to our spirit, reflection questions, prayer forms, resources for further reading, and an ample variety of practical spiritual practices that lead to a mature spirituality that is free yet disciplined.

¹²² Thomas A. Hart, “Establishing and Orientation” in *The Art of Christian Listening* (Ramsey, NY: Paulist Press, 1980), 16-17.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

caregiver can impart.”¹²⁴ According to Butler, listening requires physical, emotional, and spiritual attentiveness. We convey physical attention by making eye contact, alert posture, touch (when appropriate), and through our words. Emotional attentiveness is expressed when we embrace the other with empathy without trying to fix anything about them.¹²⁵ Spiritual attentiveness is practiced when we see ourselves as instruments of God that are given spiritual energy and, therefore, can also offer it.¹²⁶ Spiritual attentiveness also involves inviting God into the situation through a disposition of prayer. Butler describes, “You are inviting God to be present in a very real way and even imagining that you and your care receiver are *both* listening to the movement of the Holy Spirit in your dialogue.”¹²⁷ Active listening is an art in its own right and can be explored further through reading and practice. Along with listening, the pastoral minister needs to foster inner dispositions that allow for a compassionate availability for pastoral care.

Based on what I have observed and read, four essential qualities for pastoral work are acceptance, empathy, compassion, and tenderness.¹²⁸ *Acceptance* is an attitude that communicates to another an unconditional positive regard. According to Neil Pembroke, *empathy* is more than an attitude, it is an art. Pembroke states, “In order to have the potential to reach a high level of empathic in-tuneness, a person needs the personal attributes of perceptivity, imagination, and sensitivity.”¹²⁹ Empathy is the vehicle that allows one to enter into the inner perceptual world of another. It involves being present and sensitive to what

¹²⁴ Sarah Butler, “The Gift of Listening” in *Caring Ministry: A contemplative Approach To Pastoral Care* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2000), 30.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Neil Pembroke, *The Art of Listening: Dialogue, Shame, and Pastoral Care* (London, NY: T&T Clarke/ Handsel Press, 2002), 53-54.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

affects or is meaningful to the other person. *Compassion* is a well-known theme in the Christian tradition that is powerful when meeting someone who suffers. Pembroke speaks of compassionate availability as foundational to pastoral care because it is the act of “receiving the other and her hopes and fears, her joys and sorrows...the hurt the other suffers is experienced in that space which is most intimately one’s own.”¹³⁰ The fourth dimension of pastoral availability is *tenderness* which refers to vulnerability and warm affection. According to Pembroke, tenderness radiates through seen or physical expression (voice, eyes, and touch) as well as the unseen (thoughts, feelings, and moral stance). Through these inner dispositions, pastoral ministers acknowledge they are on holy ground. Listening and presence alone are a gift to a person who suffers. Yet sometimes the person who suffers wishes to engage in dialogue about what they are experiencing, even asking for another perspective. When this case arises, using open-ended questions may help. Through an open-ended conversation, the minister can help the other person gain self-awareness and allow themselves to question the image of God from which they may be interpreting their situation.

Using prompting and probing is one way to enter into a conversation with someone who wishes to do so, keeping in mind that as ministers, our role is to care and not cure. According to Gerard Egan, prompting and probing are tactics counselors use to help people explore concerns, process issues, or brainstorm options.¹³¹ If we can remain cognizant that our role as ministers is not of a counselor and that it is not our place to diagnose anyone, we may use this tool appropriately in pastoral care. Through open-ended statements, one can help a person of faith understand themselves better and explore their faith experience at that

¹³⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹³¹ Gerard Egan and Robert J Reese, *The Skilled Helper: A Problem Management and Opportunity-Development Approach to Helping* (Boston, MA: Cengage, 2018), 122.

moment. We can use statements such as, “What I am hearing is...” “Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’m sensing you are feeling...Is that the way you feel?” An open-ended statement about the faith experience during suffering can be helpful for someone to feel heard, but also to gently question images of God that are or are not helpful. Perhaps a person is transferring their idea of a legalistic parent to God. In that case, one can ask, “Is it possible that you’ve outgrown this image of God?” “Is it possible that it is time for you to see yourself and God in a new way?” “What is this teaching you?” Probing and questioning are powerful ways to accompany someone during a crisis, which are growth opportunities. At the parish level, we can open sacred spaces for groups of people who wish to gather to share and or pray together.

Accompaniment is many times already done implicitly in parish life. We see it in parish ministries such as bereavement ministries or other support groups (divorce, widow/widower, cancer support, etc.). Leaders of different ministries, less associated with suffering, such as Bible study groups, Youth and Young Adult groups, Women's groups, or ministries for couples, can also open opportunities to talk about topics on suffering during their meetings. When Rebecca Parker began preaching about the theology of self-sacrifice as damaging to women, sexual abuse, and domestic violence, some women in her Bible study classes initially resisted her ideas. When Parker opened up the opportunity to discuss these topics, she found out that the resistance was coming from a place of pain. When the safe space was created, the silence was finally broken.¹³² Each woman spoke of painful memories they had never shared in the context of faith before. They talked about childhood abuse, the abuse they suffered silently in their marriage, and losses they had not yet healed. Parker expresses the result of this sacred moment when she states, “The warmth of their affection and

¹³² Broke and Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, 37.

their compassion for each other filled the room. They turned to me again, ‘We think you should keep preaching about what happens in women’s lives.’ ”¹³³ Parish group leaders can create valuable healing opportunities for their members if they create safe spaces that honor each person’s story with love and compassion.

Conclusion

God does not cease to accompany each person and community. When we become aware of God's engagement in the details of our lives, when we find others along the way who care for us during challenging times, and when we realize how this made a difference for us, it is easier to grasp why companionship is a necessary service and experience. To make a paradigm shift from imaging God as wanting our suffering to wanting our liberation from oppressive suffering that cause suffering, we need *new images of God* and a *new experience* of God. Accompaniment is not an addition to ministry, it is at the heart of it, and it becomes vital during suffering. Just as we offer material relief through corporal works of mercy, we sometimes need to be more aware of the deeper needs that are no less important. Christian companionship is one way we care about the other’s human and spiritual needs. We do so not by imposing our beliefs but by remaining with the other in the faith that God’s mystery will be revealed. As Christian pastoral agents of care, we are in a privileged position to accompany or facilitate the accompaniment process for others. Christian accompaniment is more fruitful when those who accompany are on a path to mature faith by cultivating their relationship with themselves, God, and others. When we hone human and spiritual skills, we

¹³³ Ibid., 38.

gain interior freedom to welcome the other. Through Christian companionship, God is working in us and through us.

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