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**CATHOLICISM AS AN OBSTACLE,  
OR FOSTERING FEMINISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

**PHD.THESIS**

**Paolo PANAIOLI**  
**(Y1212.625001)**

**Department of English Language and Literature**  
**English Language and Literature Program**

**Thesis Advisor: Assist. Prof. Dr. Gillian M.E. ALBAN**

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	Unvan- Ad-Soyad	İmza
Danışman	Yrd. Doç. Dr. Gillian Mary Elizabeth ALBAN	<i>[Signature]</i>
Üye (TİK)	Doç. Dr. Ferma LEKESİZALIN	<i>[Signature]</i>
Üye (LİK)	Yrd. Doç. Dr. Öz ÖKTEM	<i>[Signature]</i>
Üye	Prof. Dr. İbrahim YILGÖR	<i>[Signature]</i>
Üye	Prof. Dr. Cemile Günseli İŞÇİ	<i>[Signature]</i>

Tezin Savunulduğu Tarih :13/06/2017

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**Paolo PANAIOLI**







*To my spouse and children,*





## **FOREWORD**

I dedicate my work to Assist. Prof. Dr. Gillian M.E. Alban, my Gender Studies Teacher at Istanbul Aydin University. Thanks to her I learned of the problem that men often underestimate: the realization of women's full dignity in the contemporary world. I am grateful to Dr. Gillian for the love and professionalism she awarded me in the scientific research of this area. I consider myself honored to have had her as a supervisor in the development of my work, in which I wanted (as an Italian) to deepen a subject that was very dear to me – the relationship between feminism and Catholicism in our postmodern world. I would also like to thank Assist. Prof. Dr. Marshal Gordon John Ross Marshal , who was my teacher of Literary Criticism (until 2014) at Istanbul Aydin University (currently working at Baskent University in Ankara ), for the unwavering trust he has shown me in dealing with my literary researches. Finally, I would like to thank my wife Sevcan and my two sons Andrea Emre and Alessio Emir for supporting me during the last three years. They have lovingly followed me at various stages of the research, always helping me, especially in the most difficult moments.

**June 2017**

**Paolo PANAIOLI**



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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Acts</b>	:Acts of the Apostles
<b>1 Cor</b>	:1 Corinthians
<b>2 Cor</b>	:2 Corinthians
<b>Gn</b>	:Genesis
<b>Heb</b>	:Hebrew
<b>Jn</b>	:John
<b>Lev</b>	:Leviticus
<b>Lk</b>	:Luke
<b>Mat</b>	:Matthew
<b>Mk</b>	:Mark
<b>Rev</b>	:Revelation
<b>Rom</b>	:Romans
<b>SS</b>	:Song of the Songs



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## KATOLİZM 21.YY FEMİNİZMİNE ENGEL Mİ TEŞKİL EDER YOKSA ONU YÜCELTİR Mİ?

### ÖZET

Tezim , özellikle gelişmiş batı ülkelerinde toplumsal,kültürel, dini ve duygusal bakımdan insana saygının kaybolmak üzere olduğu günümüz kuşağına ve gelecek kuşaklara yöneliktir. Tezin konusunun seçiminde modern çağımızın, kadının kilit rol oynadığı aile kavramına saldırılışına şahit olması etkin bir rol oynamıştır. Görüşüme göre kadın , medeni toplumuzu oluşturan taşları bir arada tutar.

“Sanal gerçek, gerçeğin yerini almış, harita da yerin kendisi olmuştur”, Boudrillard’a göre.

Tarih artık G.B.Vito ‘un ” verum ipsum factum” a bağlı olmaktan çıkıp Nietzsche’nin öncesinde başlattığı ve bizim post-modern çağımıza kadar devam eden “ gerçeğin yorumuna” dayanmıştır.

Bugün hala batı düşüncesinde etkisini sürdüren 16.yy ‘in Cartesio’nun “res cogitans “ ve “res extensa”arasındaki ayrımı nesnenin özne üzerinde ve vücudun ruhun üzerinde tutulmasını en uç sonuçlara taşımıştır.Nesnelerin prodüksüyonunun ve reproduksüyonunun global modern dünyanın refahı için gerekli idoller olduğu bir toplumda nesnelestirmenin ve vücudun ticaretinin tamamına erdiği bir noktaya vardık.

Bu durumda, bireyin refahı toplumsal refahın üstünde olup, özellikle kadınlar arasında yaygın olan “vücut benim, istediğim gibi onu yönetim” sloganı,edebiyat, medya ve hatta politikada sayısız konuda yer almıştır.

Zenginlik üretmeyen herşeye karşı “ kayıtsız kalmanın globalleşmesine” şahit olmaktayız. Zamanımızda, bireylerin arzularının haklarıyla aynı statüste olduğu izlenimini veren “ ortak düşünce” ya da “ zayıf düşünce” ideolojisine karşı duracak hiçbirşeyin olmadığı adeta gözükmektedir.

Tezimde, insanlığı tamamıyla düşünce özgürlüğünden yoksun bir kalabalığa dönüştürmeye çalışan dünyanın ruh yapısına( mantığına) uygun ve sadece şahsi tercihlere bağlı bir kültüre götüren bu ideolojiyi tartışmak isterim. Daha da ötesi bu ruh durumu insanlığa çok tehlikeli bir teklif sunmakta, herkesin kişisel zevkine göre düşünmesini önermektedir, yani:” Beğendiğim şeye inanırım ve sonucuna göre hareket ederim” ( kişisel arzularım doğrultusunda , istediğimi yaparım).

Öncelikle insanoğlunun objektivitesine bağlı olan bu bireysel düşünme şekli toplumumuza giren en tehlikeli bölücü öğelerden biridir. Nitekim Post Modern Batıda ikili ilişkilerin çöktüğü , insanların, özellikle de kadınların varoluşsal problemlerini çözmede yalnız bırakıldığı“ kayıtsızlığın globalleşmesi” ne doğru sürüklendiğini görmekteyiz.

1970’ li yıllardan itibaren de feminist laik akımları“ anne-eş” ve “ evin meleği” ( Virginia Woolf un “Sadece kendisi için bir oda” adındaki kitabında da yazdığı

üzere)gibi çeşitli kilişeleşmiş sözlerden tamamıyla farklı kadın rollerini savunmaya başlamışlar ve kadın vücudunu ve cinselliğini şeytanlaştıran kiliseyi de misogyny ile suçlayarak saldırıya geçmişlerdir.

Nitekim uzun bir dönem boyunca , feminizm kaynaklarını çalışan araştırmacılar, yahudi-hıristiyan kültürünü, kadının ilerlemesindeki en büyük engel olarak görmüşlerdir.Tabiki yahudi- hıristiyan kültürünün baslangıcından modern zamanlara dek uygulanışında , kadın ve erkek arasındaki ilişki ataerkil bir ilişki olmuştur. Bu durum Kutsal Kitabın maskilist yorumları tarafından savunulmuş ve mazur görülmüş, dolayısıyla da yüzyıllar boyunca kadını ilişkilerde ikinci siraya atarak ,çoğu zaman da erkeklerin gözünde hizmette bulunan kişi durumuna almıştır.

Bu durum çerçevesinde , laik feminizm akımları İtalya 'yı Papa ya itaat ettiği için,İnsanoğlunun rahme düştüğü ilk anından itibaren saygınlığını korumada ve doğal ailenin savunulmasında Kilise Öğretilerine uyduğu için Avrupa'nin en antifeminist ülkelerinden biri olarak görürler.

Bu nedenle, ortak düşünce fikrinin sözde liberal bireyselliği son yıllarda Avrupa'da kimi insanları red edebilme ve toplumdaki atma düşüncesine vakıf bir toplumu yetiştirmeye başladı. Bu düşünce toplumun hayat damarı olarak düşünülmesi gereken ve anne, baba ve çocuklardan oluşan geleneksel aile kavramına da zarar vermektedir.

Araştırmalarımın önemi okuyucuya , toplumumuzda baskın olan ortak fikir düşüncesinden farklı bir bakış açısı sunmaktır. Bu bakış açısı kadının fiziksel ve zihinsel bütünlüğünün yani vücut ve ruh olarak tamamıyla yeniden değerlendirilerek ileriye gidişinde yanında olan, onu kalkandıran bir bakış açisidir.

Tezim katolizmin amacı olarak kadını erkeklerin karşısına almadan, feminizm kelimesinin var olma sebebini ortadan kaldıracak şekilde Yeni bir Hümanizm yaratmak amacı ile kadını erkeğin yanına koyar ve insanoğlunun toplumun tüm kademelerinde kutsallığını anlatır.

Bu sonuca ulaşmak için şu noktaların üzerinde durdum:

- 1) İsa'nın doğumundan önceki yahudi- yunan- roma kültürlerinde kadının saygınlığını olumsuz açıdan etkileyen tarihi- edebi faktörlerin analizi.
- 2) Kadınlara dair durumlarda Katolik kilisesinin işleyişini değerlendirmek için gösterilen ve tek bir eser olarak düşünülen Kutsal Kitabın çeşitli yorumları.
- 3) 20.yy katolik feminizmini etkileyen ve İncil'de kilit rolündeki bazı kadın figürlerinin analizi
- 4) Eserleriyle ve yaşamlarıyla batı toplumlarında büyük gelişmeleri desteklemiş olan ve modern feminizm üzerinde önemli derecede etkileri olan bazı katolik kadın figürlerinin analizi.
- 5) Katolik Kilisesinin kadınlara yönelik büyük değişikliklerini yarım yüzyıl öncesinden haberdar eden 20.yy in yarısının yahudi-katolik yazar ve filozofu Edith Stein'in başlıca eserlerinin çalışılması.
- 6) Kadının annelik hislerinin ve empatiye yatkınlığının değerlendirilmesinin yapılması.
- 7) Kadının saygınlığının yüceltilmesinde postmodern zamanımızın belli başlı ideolojik engellerinin analizi.
- 8) Çeşitli çağdaş yazarların vücut ve ruh arasındaki ilişki üzerine çalışmaları.
- 9) Radikal Femminizm ve Yeni Femminizm'de birey ve insan kavramları.

10) İki Postmodern yazar Irigaray ve Kristiva, eserlerinde ( Meryem'in Gizemi ve Stabat Mater) toplumumuzda kadının rolünün Meryem Ana figürü ile ilgisini analiz ederler.

11) Katolik feminen teoloji ve kadınların Katolik Kilisesinde daha fazla rol alması yönünden gelecek.

12) İntegrasyonun feminizmi ve Yeni Humanizm.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Feminizm, Katolizm, Annelik, İç Huzursuzluk, Patriarchal, Trascendent, Ontoloji, Meryem Ana, Periferi, Empati, Birey, İnsan Servis, Globalleşme, Metalaşması, Atık, Postmodernizm, Vücut, Ruh, Yeni Hümanizm.*





## CATHOLICISM AS AN OBSTACLE, OR FOSTERING FEMINISM IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

### ABSTRACT

This thesis is addressed to our generation and to future ones, where - especially in the rich Western countries - respect for the person in all of his/her social, cultural, religious and emotional complexity is becoming lost.

Our choice of this Thesis topic is influenced by the fact that never before our modern age have we witnessed such an attack on the family - in which the woman plays a key role. She is, in our opinion, the mortar that holds together the bricks that make up our civilized society. Hyper-reality has taken the place of reality, and the map has become the territory, as Boudrillard claimed; history is no longer based on the "verum ipsum factum" of G.B. Vico, but rather on the "interpretation of fact" anticipated by Nitzche and continued until the present postmodernism era.

The division between "res cogitans" and "res extensa" of Descartes in the sixteenth century, which still influences Western thought, led to the extreme result of the exaltation of the object over the subject, and of the body over the spirit. We have reached a point of complete objectification and commmodification of the body in a society where production and reproduction of the object are the idols held as necessary for the welfare of the modern globalized world.

In this situation, the wellness of the individual has a priority over the well-being of the collective, and the slogan "the body is mine and I manage it", especially among women, is the focus of a lot of commentary in both the literary and media fields, and also amongst politics and law.

We are witnessing a "globalization of indifference" towards anything that does not produce wealth. In our time, it seems that nothing can be opposed to the ideology of "pensée unique" or "weak thought" which tends to give the impression that the preferences of individuals have the same status as their rights.

We argue in this Thesis that this ideology leads to a culture of weak and restricted thoughts, based solely on personal preferences and conformed to the spirit (logic) of the world that seeks to make humanity into a thoughtless mob – totally lacking in real freedom. Most of all, however, this ideology suggests to humanity a very dangerous offer in proposing a prêt-à-porter ['ready to wear'] way of thinking according to personal taste: 'I think as I like!' and therefore, "I do as I please".

This individualist way of thinking, mainly based on the objectification of the human being, is one of the most divisive and dangerous elements to be introduced into our society. In fact, it is taking those of us who are living in the current post-modern globalized world into a "globalization of indifference" where the relationship with the other is being killed - leaving each person, and especially women – alone, and suffering unaccompanied through their existential problems.

From the seventies onward, feminist lay movements have claimed roles for women that are vigorously different from the stereotype of the “mother-wife” and “angel of the house” (as Virginia Woolf cited in her work, “A Room of One’s Own”) and have violently attacked the Catholic Church and accused it of misogyny and carrying out a “demonization” of the female body and its sexuality.

In fact, for a long time, when scholars studied the sources of anti-feminism, they considered Judeo-Christian culture as a primary obstacle to the emancipation of women. Certainly, from the origins of Judeo-Christian practices until modern times, the relationship between men and women has been of the patriarchal type. This was justified and supported by a male interpretation of the Bible, which for centuries led women to live in a marginalized and often servile relation to men.

And in this context, lay feminist movements consider Italy to be one of the most anti-feminist countries in Europe, due to its obedience to the Pope, and its adherence to the Magisterium of the Church in defense of the natural family and in protection of the dignity of the human person from the moment of his/her conception.

Therefore, the (pseudo) liberating individualism of the “single” thought has led in recent decades to the growth in Europe of a society capable of regarding certain members as “waste”. This thought has increasingly eroded the traditional family consisting of: father, mother and children that should be regarded both historically and in the future as the vital cell of our society.

The importance of our research consists in proposing to the reader a point of view that is different from the single thought; this alternative perspective allows for the emancipation of women and proposes that they be appreciated for their own mental and physical integrity: body–spirit. It is the intention of this Thesis to show that through honoring this body-spirit integrity in women, we have the opportunity to preserve and promote one of the most precious assets that we have for the progress of society as a whole, and for women as members of that society.

Our thesis demonstrates how the aim of the Catholicism, in our postmodern era, is the promotion of the sacredness of the human being in all spheres of society without putting women in opposition to men, but rather, working together with him to build a New Humanism in which the word feminism makes no sense anymore.

**Keywords** : *Feminism, Catholicism, Motherhood, Restlessness, Patriarchal, Transcendent Ontology, Virgin Mary, Periphery, Empathy, Service, Individual, Person, Globalization, Commodification, Waste, Postmodernism, Body, Spirit, New Humanism.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

An intelligent English writer of the eighteenth century, Jane Austen wrote in her work *Northanger Abbey*: “But history, real, solemn history, I cannot be interested in..... I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all -- it is very tiresome” (Austen, p.69).

Our author makes a valid point; women appear very little in the history books we usually read in school or at university. The traditional historiography removes the female memory or at most, it confines it to the chapters devoted to custom, families and fashion. It would seem, according to historical accounts, that women are absent and irrelevant in creating our democratic and free Europe that so robustly attracts, especially in recent years, rivers of immigrants fleeing from countries where democracy is still a mirage.

It is good to point out the democracy and freedom that characterize our continent, not having come by chance to the West, are the results of the long and patient work of men and women who were immersed in the European Catholic Christian tradition.

Four internationally renowned historians: Rodney Stark, Christopher Dawson, Thomas E. Woods Jr., and Alvin J. Schmidt have amply demonstrated in their works that one cannot consider a political, scientific, economic, cultural or social European history separate from Catholicism.

R. Stark (2006) in his work *The Victory of Reason; How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* states that the full understanding of our God-given powers of reason is not in contrast with Christian faith. He writes:

... (in the) Christian twelfth-century invention, the university, not only were science (reason) and religion (faith) compatible, they were inseparable - the rise of science was achieved by deeply religious

Christian scholars.....Real science arose only once: in Europe. China, Islam, India, and ancient Greece and Rome each had a highly developed alchemy. But only in Europe did alchemy developed into chemistry. By the same token, many societies developed elaborate systems of astrology, but only in Europe did astrology lead to astronomy. Why? Again, the answer has to do with images of God (Stark, pp. 12-14).

On the same wavelength as Stark, the second author, C. Dawson (1991) stresses in his work *Religion and the Rise of Western Culture* that although there is a distinction "between nature and grace, reason and faith and the World and Church, these distinctions are not in opposition to each other, but rather live in a harmonious agreement" (Dawson, p. 228). He argues, in fact, that the first universities in the world, like those of Bologna (1088), Oxford (1096), and Paris (1170), originated from the patient work done by Catholic monasteries in the transmission of culture and classic philosophy, and that they were active since the early centuries of Christianity. The author writes "... medieval philosophy had assimilated Aristotelian ethics and principles by integrating them into the structure of Christian thought ..... (and universities) contributed in equal measure to transform education in the West and to form the professional classes of the intellectuals who subsequently had to be the exponents of Western culture " (228-245).

C. Dawson stops his topic at the end of the Middle Ages because, according to the author, in the period from the birth of Christ to the discovery of America lay the foundations for the West's future success. It is as if the seeds sown by Catholicism in the first century A.D. had given birth, during the Middle Ages, to plants that had not yet finished growing. We should not forget that until 1521 all of Europe was Catholic and that subsequent divisions such as Lutheran (1521), Anglican (1534) and Calvinist (1535) have in fact favored the counter reform of the Trento Council (1545 -1563) and a genuine return of the Church of Rome to the truth of the Biblical message.

Also the third author, Thomas E. Woods, Jr. (2005), in his work *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization* stresses the idea that Catholicism is the basis of the development of Western civilization. The writer states, "Although the typical university text does not say, the Catholic Church has been



the indispensable builder, without which Western civilization would not have been built”(Woods, p.15).

We must not forget that, it is precisely in this Western civilization, immersed in the Catholic Christian tradition, like a fish in water, that women have undertaken, over the centuries, the long and arduous process of emancipation, nowadays called “feminism”, which is almost absent in the culture of non-Christian countries.

And it is precisely on woman’s emancipation being tied to Christianity that the last author, Alvin J. Schmidt (2009), clearly expresses himself when he writes, in his work *How Christianity Changed the World*, “...it was his (Jesus Christ’s) example that his followers reflected in their relationships with women, raising their dignity, freedom, and rights to a level previously unknown in any culture” (Schmidt, p. 122).

Specifically, what Catholicism has represented for women in the past and what it could still represent for modern feminism, we will find out in the course of this work. For the time being, let it suffice to say that the promotion of the individual and the progressive basis of Western men and women is a Catholic Christian message of hope and confidence in the full harmonious realization of the sacredness of the human being.

According to writer Franco Nambrini<sup>1</sup> (2016), this realization goes through three dimensions: religious (transcendent), affective, and political. In his work “*Dante, poet of desire: Conversations on the Divine Comedy, Vol. 1 Hell*” our author, considered to be an expert on Dante Alighieri, briefly summarizes what these three dimensions stand for - based on the analysis of “*The Divine Comedy*” which is the greatest Catholic literary work ever written. For Nambrini, the religious dimension is the perception of the transcendent – “the infinite” that is of God - which we all feel when we try to understand the true meaning of our lives. The affective dimension is our relationship with the deepest part, and perhaps the most beautiful one, of ourselves, including our dreams and desires. It is the place of the entirety rational and irrational

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<sup>1</sup> Franco Nambrini. President of the Federation of Educational Works (FOE) from 1999 to 2006, he served on the National Council of Catholic schools, the National Council of the CIS education Ministry and the Commission for the equal education of the Ministry of Education

expression of man, where the boundaries between the Cartesian *res extensa* and *res cogitans* fall. The last dimension is the political dimension, which corresponds to our relationship with “the other”, the one who is different from me. It is the dimension of the social man who lives together with others and confronts himself through his relationships with them.

Agreeing with our Italian author, we can say that it is in the balance between these three dimensions where men and women, in the quest for the truth of the self, can find an answer to the desire for happiness which lies within their hearts. Throughout the world, the desire to achieve happiness, regardless of their religious or political beliefs, race or culture is to be found in the heart of human beings. In the same way that for the correct body growth we need to take in the right balance of carbohydrates, protein and fat, so also in the psychic and moral growth of the human being we need to live in a balanced way with regard to these three dimensions; lacking a single one of these dimensions will prevent the full realization of the person. Since this thesis is titled “Catholicism as an Obstacle, or Fostering Feminism in the Twenty-First Century”, it is clear that the religious or transcendent dimension will be more the object of present interest than the other two.

To understand the importance of the religious dimension in our work, it should be noted that in one of her early works *Divine Women*, published in 1984, the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray<sup>2</sup> complains about the lack of a transcendental dimension for woman that is similar to that of men. The lack of a female trinity as a role model made it very difficult for her to develop her subjectivity, or to find her own path in life. In one of her latest works *The Mystery of Mary*, published in 2010, which will be examined in Chapters 5 and 10, the author will take on a completely new position.

At this point in the introduction, in order to effectively demonstrate the premise of this thesis, it is necessary to request an “agreement” with the non-Catholic, non-practicing Catholic or atheist reader. Without this agreement, there is a risk

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<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray is a philosopher, psychoanalyst and linguist Belgian atheist writer. She is the author of many books concerning radical feminism.

of not understanding or of trivializing the pages that follow. For the two or three hours that it will take to read this work, the reader must imagine standing in front of one of the greatest of Raphael's 1500 works - "The School of Athens" exhibited at the Sistine Chapel in Rome's Vatican Museum (Figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1:** Raphael "School of Athens". Vatican Museums, Vatican City, Rome.

At the center of the picture there are two philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, leaders of Western thought. All around them are the great philosophers and scientists known at that time, including the Muslim Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna). The detail to which the reader's attention should be drawn is not, however, the individual characters of the painting, but rather the gesture that the two central philosophers perform with their right hands. Plato points to the sky, while Aristotle indicates the earth (Figure 1.2).



**Figure 1.2:** Raphael, “School of Athens” details

The Renaissance man understood very well the meaning that those gestures represented; they were an invitation to live life putting oneself in a continuous tension between the thought of the finite (the material world, the body, the immanent) and that of infinite (the transcendent God). This tension creates the *restlessness in the human heart* that the American writer Julien Green<sup>3</sup> (1900-1998) simplified in this statement: “Until you are worried, you can rest easy” (Ravasi 2015).

The modern reader of any nationality, of any religion or in any state of religious unbelief, is therefore invited to rediscover this restlessness that exists in the face

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<sup>3</sup> Julien Green (1900-1998) was an American writer and playwright. He is the author of *Memories of Happy Days* (1942) and *Moirà (Moirà)*, (1950)

of the transcendent dimension of life, and without which we risk losing that humanistic spirit - centered on respect for the human person's dignity - that has so greatly contributed to the socio-cultural development of the West. To remove the transcendent dimension (God) from this work would be like cutting the first wire that holds the web tightly to the tree. Without this filament, that wonderful and ingenious weave of threads (the spider's web) that follows will collapse.

With having clarified and emphasized the importance of the transcendent dimension to this work, the next step will be to attempt to negotiate an understanding with the reader as to the definition of Catholicism: what it states, and on what it is based in its transcendent dimension. This is necessary in order to facilitate for the reader the understanding of the literary texts that will be examined in this work.

For the purpose of this argument: Catholicism is considered the Christian religion followed by all members of the Catholic Church. It is a religion that has its own specific doctrine, dogmas, morals and philosophy. Catholicism is considered by its adherents: a religion directly initiated and handed down by Jesus - founder of the first Christian Church, which is believed to exist in the Catholic Church by the members to the latter.

The term "Catholic Christianity" was introduced, by an edict of Emperor Theodosius in AD 380, when Christianity became the state religion throughout the Roman Empire. "Catholic" derives from the ancient greek *katholikos* - that means "universal" as it encompasses all "People of God" who in turn are made up of "all nations of the earth" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 830-845).

Although the term *Catholicism* was formally born in the fourth century AD, its origins date back to the first appearance of Jesus to the apostles after his resurrection on the day of "Pentecost" (Mt 28: 18-20).

The most central and crucial affirmation of Catholicism and therefore of the Christian-Catholic faith is the existence of one God in three distinct and consubstantial persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, creator of the universe and the giver of life and good (Jn 16:12-13). If Christ is the fullness of God's revelation to humanity, the Catechism of the Catholic Church clarifies that the profound meaning of Jesus's message is still to be fully understood by Catholic

believers in the past centuries and in our time” (CCC, ch. II, article 1, par.66). That is why the doctrine and teaching of the Catholic Church are enriched over time with new and important pronouncements.

The transcendent dimension to the Catholic faithful is based on three pillars. The first is the Scripture (the Bible), the second is the tradition - the transmission of the divine message through the faithful who live by its teachings, and the third pillar is the Magisterium of the Church (from the Latin magister, "Teacher"), the authority as regards morality and faith of all of bishops and especially the Pope, on Catholic faithful.

It is worth noting that one cannot separate Catholicism from the Roman Catholic Church. A man or woman is Catholic, because they belong to the Church, with all its limitations, flaws and mistakes made during the centuries (even those mistakes committed against women). In 2000, anyway, during the Jubilee Year proclaimed by Pope John Paul II, the Church officially took a stand on these mistakes. In fact, on March 12 of that year, the Day of Forgiveness was held in St. Peter's Square. It was a penitential act that has no precedent in history, where, in full view of the world, the Pope asked forgiveness from humanity for the seven faults committed by the church over the centuries. Among these faults (including the crusades, the inquisition, the holocaust, colonialism etc...) were also the sins of the Church that have wounded the dignity of women and mankind's unity ([www.vatican.va/ Memory and reconciliation: The Church and the faults of the past the 2000](http://www.vatican.va/Memory_and_reconciliation:The_Church_and_the_faults_of_the_past_the_2000)).

Even today, through its members, the Catholic Church commits sins and mistakes which never fail to be regularly highlighted by the media. Despite these limitations, the Catholic Church has for centuries been a witness and a bearer of the message promoting human dignity; it is a message that does not dwell on the sin of its members, which in any case must always be condemned, but rather looks to the creational plan of love that God has for humanity – fulfilled and completed with the incarnation of Jesus.

This creational project is written in the Bible (a Greek word that means “books”), consisting of 73 books, inspired by God and written by forty authors from about 1000 BC to 100 AD. This work can be imagined as a library where

all the books bear witness of what great love God is able to offer us for the redemption of humanity. In this work, God in His love for humanity and with perfect respect for the free will in each of us, intends to guide man in his earthly pilgrimage, from the childhood of humanity in the Old Testament (before Jesus) to the maturity of humanity in the New Testament (the Gospel – or, “Good News” - of Jesus).

One can guess from the preceding paragraph that God's love for man and woman is another fundamental concept necessary toward understanding this work. As a foundational principle, one must always keep in mind that for the Catholic, faith in God is identified with love; "*God is Love*" (1 JN 4: 8-16). God - incarnate in the person of Jesus - came into the world out of a supreme love for humanity, not to be served by man, but rather to serve him. "*If anyone wishes to be first (meaning, to be considered great), he shall be the last of all and the servant of all.*" (Mk 9: 30-37). It is in the service to one's neighbor, testified to by the life and works of Jesus, that one must interpret this love of God for humanity. And in the Gospel of John it is written that God gives to humanity a new commandment that is to love one another (Jn 15: 17).

Love for God and love for the neighbor are realized in the service to each other and they are always together; they can never be separated from each other. It is a contradiction for a Catholic to claim to love God, but to not love his neighbor. How this topic of God/ Love/ Service is important to this thesis will be demonstrated in chapter 10.

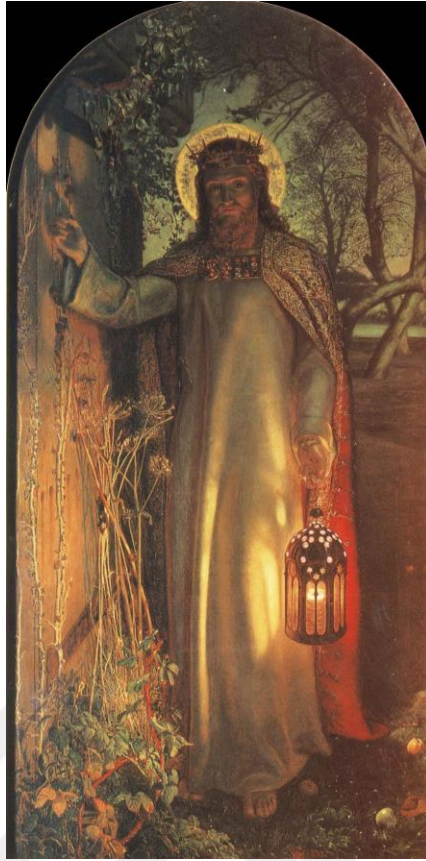
Closely related to the concept of God/Love/Service, is the concept of God/Father - often misunderstood over the centuries by a fundamentalist reading of the Bible, as will be further analyzed in Chapters 1 and 2. The fact that God is the Father means that all human beings, men and women of all nationalities, ages and social status, are considered His children, and therefore, they are each others brothers and sisters with equal dignity before the Father. The following chapters will demonstrate how important and central is this message of equality, led by Catholicism. For the moment, it is enough to mention that this message contributed over the centuries in the West to the formation of a free conscience that is the basis of any socio-cultural conquest, and among which also exists (and is required) the emancipation of women.

The God/Father of Catholicism is not a god that comes from above (vertical plane), strikes fear and keeps men at an inaccessible distance. Rather, as a Father, He approaches humanity out of love for his children, who had become separated from Him through their free will choice to sin. He descended to the earth (horizontal plane) to reconcile Himself to them, by taking the body of a man: Jesus – the Incarnation. "*And the Word Became flesh and made His dwelling among us*" (Jn 1; 14), being born of the Virgin Mary.

In the Incarnation, the transcendent (God) dwells in the immanent (man). Infinity enters into time and space for the sake of every human being; thus, God pierces the personal history of each one of us, in order to offer infinity to those who have been condemned by sin to caducity. As a result of the Incarnation, human flesh, that is to say, the body, is made sacred as it becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore, must be respected and honored "*(...) The body (...) is (...) to the Lord, and the Lord is for the body*" (1 Corinthians 6:13). However, the body, especially the female one, has not always received full respect throughout the centuries, as we will see in chapters 3 and 4.

As previously mentioned, through the Incarnation God enters into the history of each human being. Therefore, He is a God "*ad personam*" namely, personal, who dwells in the hearts of every man and woman who freely chooses to accept him. The English painter, William Holman Hunt (1827 - 1910) makes very clear to us this concept of free will of the human being in his painting "The Light of the World" (Figure 1.3) in St. Paul's Cathedral in London.





**Figure 1.3:** The Light of the World

In this painting, we see Jesus waiting outside the door of a house; he knocks, but there is no handle to open the door from outside. The message that the painter wants to give us is that we only have the ability to turn the handle to open the door to Jesus from within our hearts and to thereby let Him come in our personal history. God created us - free to choose Him; He does not impose, but offers Himself to those who welcome Him (Rev 3: 20).

It is worth specifying that the personal God of the Catholic faith is not a god "who implements social or political movements" (Schmidt 105), such as the Zealots at the time of Jesus, who were waiting for a Messiah who would come to free Judea from Rome's occupation, or as in the times of Marxist socialism (man intended as class), or as in the times of the modern nihilism where the existence of God would be denied, for some, by the sadness in an everyday social reality full of grim brutality, wars, hunger and injustices. He is also much less a God for the individual, where individual means "a being closed in itself, atom between atoms, isolated and independent from the others, with absolute freedom, which is associated with the other of necessity, in order to pursue its

own interests in peace" (typical of Liberal Capitalism). Rather it should be emphasized because of the centrality to the arguments of this thesis that the Catholic God is, first of all, "*ad personam*", where to be a person means "to relate to the other and strive to realize the true and the good as an individual and as a community – common wellness" (Azione Cattolica Italiana 2008-2009).

Therefore, this "ad personam" God issues an invitation to humanity, and when accepted by an individual, He enters the earthly history of each person - empowering him/her to realize his/her own good and that of all humanity. For this reason, this thesis begins with a scientific introduction of Catholicism, that is to say, an historical one (in G.B.Vico's meaning), and then seeks to clarify some highlights of the Catholic doctrine.

It is understandable that these clarifications of some basic doctrines of Catholicism can be tedious and/or difficult to understand for a non-Catholic, or for a Catholic not supported by faith, but if the reader will keep them in mind, without prejudice, it will allow a fuller grasp of the meaning of the authors' literary works chosen to support the thesis.

In the last two centuries, many feminist authors have written about the negative influence of the Catholic religion on the emancipation of women. Only brief references will be made to these authors in this thesis, and then only to illustrate more clearly some key concepts. It should be pointed out that these writers were perfectly correct to criticize the patriarchal view

of society by the Catholic Church. Over the centuries, the Church, made up in its hierarchy only of men, wrongly consolidated this view.

In fact, even today the Catholic Church is seen from one "part" of the feminist movement, as the last bastion of male chauvinism, where its closure to the emancipation of women and to feminism is often associated with the secular tradition of the Church. What is meant by "part" of the feminist movement will be demonstrated in Chapter 3; at present, it should be emphasized, as did the writer Toni Morrison, an author usually considered to be feminist, when asked by one journalist if her novel "Paradise" could be called a feminist work, she answered, "Not at all. I would never write any -ist. I don't write -ist novels" (Morrison 1998)

Also, two Italian Catholic authors, Galeotti<sup>4</sup> and Scaraffia<sup>5</sup> in their work *Pope Francis and Women*, have the same opinion as Morrison, and they state, "When in cultures, society and in the Church the creational project (of God) is not respected, you fall or into masculism, or into feminism, or into something other. The -ism always says something negative "(Galeotti and Scaraffia, p. 14).

To conclude the introduction, it can be said that despite the accurate historical works of the authors Rodney Stark, Christopher Dawson, Thomas E. Woods, Jr., and Alvin J Schmidt, who are all in favor of the positive influence that Catholicism has played in the development in all socio-cultural fields of Western civilization, there remains, rightly or wrongly, in different areas of our contemporary culture, a misogynist view of the Catholic Church, and that it is often identified as a patriarchal institution, built on the inequality between two categories (male and female) of the faithful. It will be demonstrated, however, in this thesis, that a non-ideological reading of the Bible and its historical actualization, through the life and works of many women - often forgotten or underestimated by historians and official literature - gives us a much more complex and fascinating panorama.

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<sup>4</sup> G. Galeotti contemporary journalist and history schola, she is editor of the cultural pages of the *Osservatore Romano*". Among her books: *Gender and Genre* (2009) and *Pope Francis and Women* (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> L.Scaraffia is History teacher at University of Rome . She is mainly interested in women's history, with a focus on female spirituality. Among her books: *Due in una carne. Chiesa e sessualità nella storia* (2008) [*Two in one flesh. Church and sexuality in history*] and *Per una storia dell'eugenetica* (2012) [*For a history of eugenics* ].



## **2 THE ORIGINS**

### **2.1 The status of women at the time of the Scriptures (1000 BC to 100 AD); patriarchy imposes itself on matriarchy?**

To properly evaluate the novelty brought to women by Catholicism we must first place our consideration in the historical and cultural context from where Catholicism originated, that is, Palestine at the time of the Roman occupation under the emperor Octavian Augustus (63 BC 14 AD). At this time, Christianity was spreading in the midst of a reality where Jewish life and its culture of the one God, governed by the holy book Torah, was meeting with and often clashing against the pagan Greek-Latin deities of the Romans for whom life was instead governed by Roman law having little or nothing to do with the God of the Jews. We will see that in both of these cultures, although fundamentally very different, the condition of women was always of a lower position compared to that of men.

### **2.2 The patriarchal culture of the Jews**

During the time of the Bible's drafting, which required over a thousand years, it is affirmed that throughout Hebrew society, the Jewish woman lived in a strongly patriarchal society. From a legal point of view, she had no relevance; the commitments she made had to be ratified by her husband, and her testimony in court was worthless. Also, she could neither inherit from her father nor from her husband. "Up to twelve and a half years old she was under the jurisdiction of her father, who had the right to choose her husband and also to sell her to a Jew for seven years" (E. Ferlito, *Woman: Memory and Present* "vol. II, 1, p.12-48). A married woman had to give full respect and loyalty to her husband, but not vice versa, because her husband could repudiate her even for trivial reasons. In the Old Testament, in the book of Deuteronomy 24: 1, it is written that a man can write a bill of divorce to his wife if he finds something he does not like in her.

In case of infertility, she herself chose concubines and female slaves for her husband. The Jewish woman took care of the proper functioning of the house with a wide range of jobs: spinning, weaving, making bread, taking water from the well, cooking, nursing children, making the beds of the family and working wool.

With regard to religious matters, Jewish women were exempt from certain obligations and responsibilities that instead belonged to men. "*Women, slaves and minors are exempt from K'riat Sh'ma*" ([www.torah.org/learning/rambam](http://www.torah.org/learning/rambam)). Women had special places to sit (the matroneum) in the synagogues. Even in everyday family life, Jewish women lived in situations of inferiority compared to men. "during the meal they served the men standing up behind them, they were almost always at home, where often the windows that opened on the street were guarded by a grate; if they went out they were protected by a veil. They should not speak to anyone; on the Temple Mount and on the road they had to keep the sidelines"(Ferilto et al. 1991).

Menstruation made woman unclean at the social level, degrading her to the status of a dirty person to be avoided if you did not want to be contaminated. In the book of Leviticus 15; 19-22, a series of observances are given. Some of them are: a woman, who has her menstrual cycle, is considered impure for seven days. Anyone who touches her, or any furniture or garments touched by her, is also considered unclean.

Despite this patriarchal society, which would worsen even more under Roman occupation, there were virtuous and courageous women figures in Israel who were able to break with male social patterns, as will be demonstrated later in this thesis.

### **2.3 The patriarchal culture of the Hellenistic-Roman period**

The primary difference that stands out when we compare the Hellenistic-Roman culture to the Jewish culture is that the first one is pagan and polytheistic, while the second is monotheistic. Despite this difference, the low status of women was not significantly changed.

In ancient Greece, the *oikos* (house) was assigned to women, while the *agora* (square) was the territory of men. The only women who had a certain freedom were hetaerae, or mistresses, who were the companions and sexual partners of men. For example, we might consider the charismatic figure of Aspasia, companion of Pericles, a woman who was endowed with great charm and intelligence, and a teacher of rhetoric to prominent men of her time. There were also differences in women's status from one *polis* (city) to another, such as in Sparta, where women were trained in the same way as men for war. Beyond these exceptions, however, the attitude of the Greeks toward women can be summed up in Aristotle's quote: *Femina est mas occasionatus* - the female is, as it were, a defective male - (De Gen. Animal. 2.3).

While in ancient Greece, the hetaerae enjoyed some freedom, in ancient Rome the vestal (virgin priestess) lived rather independently from men and legal obligations. The vestals, who were chosen from patrician girls at between 6 and 10 years old, had the task preserving the sacred fire in the temple of Vesta for 30 years and guarding not only the sacred fire, but even their own virginity during their obligation to the temple; only at the end of their service were they free to marry. The vestals could go out freely and enjoyed privileges that made them quite unique among Roman women. Free from parental authority, they were maintained at state expense. The vestal was the only Roman woman who could make a will and testify without oath. When encountering a vestal, the magistrates halted their progress and ordered their *lictors* (subordinate officials) to lower their *fascēs* (bundles of the wooden rods with a blade axe emerging). She even had the power to pardon a condemned person who she met on her path. The only serious penalty for a vestal would occur if the sacred fire went out, or if she had sexual relations; in both these cases, the priestess was sentenced to death through live burial.

These examples serve as evidence of the situation faced by women inside the patriarchal societies that we have examined; women had very little chance of emancipation. It seems that only in situations related to her body and sexuality, as in the case of hetaerae or vestals, could women achieve a certain autonomy from the world of men.

## 2.4 The matriarchal culture

Several modern feminist researchers oppose these types of patriarchal societies and suggest “a resumption of matriarchy religious symbols as best suited to inspire the women's spirituality” (The sign of Ruth; <http://cdbpinerolo.ubivis.org/viottoli>) and their emancipation.

Gillian M. E. Alban<sup>6</sup> in her work *Melusine the Serpent Goddess* in A.S. Byatt's *Possession in and Mythology* argues that:

Biologically speaking, it is females who are seen to create new life, not males, and the earliest thinking envisaged a female potency as creating the world and all that is in it, and consequently worshiped her for millennia. The male sex was secondary .....When one takes the possibility of a female deity seriously, male primacy no longer seems necessary or logical.....We have lived for too long with the assumption that the natural gender for a deity is male” (Alban, pp. 4-5 ).

On the same topic, another author states: "The Hebrew patrilineal social structure was threatened by this female authority .... They (Hebrews) emphasized an omnipotent, omniscient evil deity; to worship any other deity was forbidden. " (Miriam Robbins Dexter, *Whence the Goddesses*).

Surely our authors are right in saying that since ancient times God was identified as a male figure in the Catholic religion and in fact God is often called “Father”. These ideas belonged to popular belief and were further supported by a good dose of sexist and fundamentalist interpretations of scripture. Today, the vision of the church leaves no doubt on different interpretations of the sacred text as can be deduced from the second paragraph of Catechism of the Catholic Church. This important book of the Catholic doctrine declares that:

God is “Father”. By addressing Him this way in the Catholic faith He is the first origin of all creation and the omnipresent transcendent authority. God represents the first beginnings of all influence, of a higher power with a benevolent love and tenderness for all his children. Within “Father” lies “Mother” and all that motherhood brings – protection, love, nurture. God is both. He is the parent of humanity, moving spiritually through His believers. He is the Architect of His mortal creations.

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<sup>6</sup> Gillian M. E. Alban teaches English Literature at Aydin Istanbul University, Turkey



Faith speaks of human parenting (the offspring of God) as His representatives on earth. However, as earthly parents we are not without mistakes. Such imperfections distort and discolor the true mission of parenting. When we fail we need to call upon God's standard - where we rise above the mundane to understand that God has no dissimilarity between the sexes. He embodies both the male and female – the Father and the Mother (CCC par. 2: 239).

We can state that compared to the past, the Catholic Church now has a distinct and clear position on this issue of God's gender identity , which for centuries has favored a denigration of women. Considering this position will enrich even further the cultural debate concerning the emancipation of women.





### 3 WOMEN IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND THE SONG OF SONGS

#### 3.1 Eve the Mother of all living beings, allegory for all women: has she a hubris in her DNA ?

Eve is the first woman we encounter in the Old Testament and she is often presented to us as a negative allegory of all women for two main reasons. The first is related to chapter 2 of the book of Genesis when God created woman from the rib He took from man (Gn 2: 22-24).

The language of this chapter is not precise, but descriptive, metaphorical and closer to the language of the myths known at the time and it is often interpreted in a misogynist way, as if the woman was taken out of man (when in reproductive reality it is the opposite). The second reason is that Eve convinced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit "Bringing ruin upon herself, Adam, and the rest of humanity, particularly female humanity" (Dexter, 1990).

Therefore, since ancient times in the Catholic tradition, the woman has taken upon herself what the Greeks called "hybris". This was a stain, a fault, a kind of disease that woman has found on herself, and which she has not obtained solely through her own actions. This stain is a bad thing and something for which one must atone, and is also dependent on one's parents or ancestors. It might be attributed to a crazy chromosome in the DNA. What is this great "hybris" that the woman has found on herself? It is the famous "original sin" (R. Virgili<sup>7</sup>, [www.viandanti.org/wp-content](http://www.viandanti.org/wp-content)). The woman thus enters into the religious history with this black spot: she is more the culprit than Adam.

Often in the Old Testament, the language of myth is used to describe the mysteries that can only be narrated, as in the case of the book of Genesis. The negative images of Eve that we still have in our times are the consequence of a

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<sup>7</sup> Rosanna Virgili, a graduate in philosophy, biblical scholar. She is professor of exegesis at the Theological Institute of Marche. Virgili contributes to several magazines including "Word Spirit and Life", "Rocca" and "Biblical Historical Research".

fundamentalist reading, namely a metaphrase of the biblical text. The historical socio-cultural context from where this language originated is completely ignored and furthermore, as it is pointed out by the biblical scholar Rosanna Virgili, in an article published on Viandanti entitled "The Woman from the Bible to the Church, "... the interpretation of sacred texts has always been made by men." In fact, until the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) women were excluded from theological reflection within the church. The situation has now improved. Due to the collaboration of several female theologians and Biblical scholars, we now have new pronouncements, such as the encyclical "Mulieris Dignitatem" (J.P. II 1988), perhaps little known, but still an official document of the Catholic Church.

The main concept of the encyclical is that in the biblical beginning God created man and woman in His likeness and image (Gn 1: 27). This concept constitutes the fundamental basis of Catholic anthropology and the starting point of the second chapter of the Genesis.

In his encyclical the Pope J.P. II states:

the woman is created by God "from the rib" of the man and is placed at his side as another "I" - as the companion of the man....the woman is immediately recognized by the man as "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones" (cf. Gen 2:23) and for this very reason she is called "woman". In biblical language this name indicates her essential identity with regard to man - 'is-'issah - something which unfortunately modern languages in general are unable to express: "She shall be called woman ('issah) because she was taken out of man ('is)" Gen 2:23. (Pope J.P. II, p.15).

From that we can understand that a woman is not, therefore, a duplicate of man, but she comes directly from the creative act of God in which man does not participate in any way because he is sleeping. The woman is thus not a creation of man, but of God. The English Presbyterian minister Matthew Henry (1662-1714), in his work titled *Commentary of the Old and New Testament*, wrote:

“The woman was made of a rib out of the side of Adam; not made out of his head to rule over him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of his side to be equal with him, under his arm to be protected, and near his heart to be beloved.” (Henry 2016, Gen 1).

It is worthy to know that M. Henry is not catholic. And his poetic declaration makes us understand how the interpretation of the Biblical passage of the first book of Genesis was controversial even in the protestant countries.

In Catholicism, Pope Francis, at the General audience of 22/4/2015, gave a final explanation about this critical Biblical passage. He stated: the image of the rib expresses that between man and women there is complementarity, and not subordination and inferiority, because they are made of the same substance, “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bones” (Gen 2: 23); there is now between Eve and Adam, mirroring and reciprocity.

Even the origin of original sin traditionally attributed to Eve, cannot be properly understood without reference to the mystery of the creation of Adam and Eve in the likeness of God that has just been demonstrated. That original sin is a hybrid of humanity, created by God as both male and female cannot, therefore, be left imprinted solely on the DNA of the woman.

### **3.2 The matriarchs: serpents or doves?**

The Old Testament that contains 32 books, many of them in common with the content of the Jewish Torah, and presenting characters and content shared in the Koran of the Muslims, is full of examples of women who break with the narrow Jewish patriarchal patterns of that time. In the book of Genesis, in addition to Eve - the mother of all living persons – there are four strong female characters: Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel –the mothers of Israel - the four Matriarchs.

These women, along with the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are the founding figures of the Jewish people. A common characteristic among these women is their cunning, that, combined with female sensibility, seems to embody the famous saying that Jesus spoke to the twelve disciples, "*Behold, I am sending you like sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and simple as doves*" (Mt. 10:16). The Matriarchs “emerge from the biblical text in their simplicity and strength: they take part in important decisions together with their husbands and they have an impact in history and in the private and in public sphere. They are mothers and women who between sensitivity and

practicality represent also the woman of today, with their conflicts of their complexity "(Bahbout 2014).

### **3.3 The matriarchs: serpents or doves?**

Beyond the Book of Genesis, several women figure significantly in other books of the Old Testament, and among them there were also foreigners and a prostitute. They were: Tamar, Ruth, Rahab, and the beautiful Bathsheba, mother of Solomon; all of their pregnancies occurred in circumstances that were considered to be outside of the official Jewish ethics. These four women are even mentioned, along with Mary of Nazareth, in the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. They are therefore considered to be Jesus' direct ancestors, and the very inclusion of them was something unthinkable in those days when only the male line of descent was legally recognized.

But St. Paul writes that "God preferred the weak and the foolish to the powerful and wise. And, He considered nothing of those who were considered something by the world. In this way, the apostle, stated that our pride should be directed to the Lord, we should boast of His greatness and not in ours, for all things depend upon Him ( Cor 1 : 27-31).

Other memorable heroines in the Old Testament are: the Queen of Sheba (with a wisdom equal to that of Solomon), the prophetess Deborah, the courageous Jael, Queen Esther, and the intrepid Judith (who saved her people), the barren Anna (who, through her prayers obtained the grace of God in the gift of her son Samuel), and the faithful Susanna (who by her moral integrity opposed herself to perverse men at the risk of her life). A.M. Le Pelletier (2015)<sup>8</sup> writes:

When the life of Israel is threatened by the enemy, women arise, revive the courage and reopen the future. In a word, these women are not just silent mothers. They know how to get out of the anonymous penumbra of their lives when they have to confuse a tyrant. The Christian West has not ceased to interrogate these women through its faith as well as through the images of its art ( Le Pelletier, p. 22).

Thus, we see that even though in minority compared with men of the Old Testament, these female figures represent a valuable lighthouse for all women

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<sup>8</sup> A.M.Le Pelletier is University professor of Comparative Literature; she currently teaches Biblical exegesis at the Ecole Cathedrale of Paris.

who want to engage seriously in their mission to become - each according to her own characteristics – the image of God on earth. This mission can be clearly seen in the Books of Wisdom – Proverbs, and Song of the Songs, in which the role of the woman is enhanced in two ways that seem to be polar opposites. In the former, woman is presented in her wisdom to be equal to that of God and in the latter she is represented in her corporeality and sensuality: characteristics so often objectified in our society. It is the intention of this thesis to demonstrate that both ways fully belong to woman and therefore, one cannot be considered the opposite of the other, but rather as qualifying traits of the human being.

### **3.4 Wisdom between Woman and goddess**

In Proverbs, Wisdom is the ability to make the right choice but not so much, say the Jews, to choose between a good and a bad thing, but to choose from a good thing and a better or lesser good. This is wisdom: the power to choose good, to be able to defend life.

The figure of Wisdom initially reminds us of a woman honored in the pagan world as a “goddess”, who joined God in the process of creation. In the book of Proverbs 8: 22-31, Wisdom is nominated as a "She" who was beside God as "his craftsmen", generated before the foundation of the earth, the seas, the sky and of the whole of creation. If we read the Old Testament with the eyes of the New Testament, Wisdom is the foreshadowing of Christ.

Instead of being rejected by Israel, this Old Testament image of woman / wisdom similar to a creator goddess is, reinterpreted and elevated. This is a sign of the promotion of women in biblical society and of a deeper understanding of the female face of the mystery of God - present in creation; “*God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them*” (Gn 1: 27).

Rosanna Virgili<sup>9</sup> states:

If it is true that the woman (Eve) gave with her transgression a possibility of limited knowledge - knowledge that cannot erase the pain, the fatigue, the sweat, the domain – she feels obliged to follow a precise path: to not abandon man on earth to those that are the fruit of an imperfect knowledge: therefore, she is the spokesperson of a Wisdom that becomes perfect, it gets really complete, because it compares itself with God's Wisdom. It becomes a knowledge of relationship, so much so that in Proverbs it is presented again - not as the woman away from God, as we left it in Genesis 3, but a whole that works together with God in this creation of the world and it then learns from Him the secrets to revive the world. This is a large fresco which naturally leads to a rethinking about man and woman since these are very ancient texts that we have considered until now (Virgili, 2011).

We cannot, however, consider this fresco of the Old Testament to be finished if we do not speak of the importance of sexuality and the woman's body as it is poetically described in the Song of Songs; certainly, these are also central topics of modern feminism.

### **3.5 The Song of Songs; eroticism or mysticism?**

The *Song of Songs* is a poetic composition in the Old Testament that leaves us surprised by its contents. At first glance, considering the language of love, we might think that the text refers directly to the meeting between a man and a woman in its erotic dimension. In a more careful and thorough reading, we can also clearly see how the Song of Songs has supernatural and mystical references to be counted in the ambit of the encounter between God and his people. Love is described as "strong as death" that "many waters cannot quench" (SS 8: 5-8).

In the Song of Songs, the erotic dimension becomes one of the human ambits chosen to illustrate some fundamental dimensions of the relationship between God and Israel. It is a dimension perceived and lived in a light of an unexpected positivity, in a natural and uninhibited attitude that, in fact, sees, in this erotic and sexual dimension, one of the aspects of human life more suited to express something of the divine reality on the edge of a mystical experience. If there is

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<sup>9</sup> Rosanna Virgili is graduated in philosophy, biblical scholar and PhD student in biblical studies at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. She is professor in Exegesis at the Theological Institute of Marche.



no doubt that the traditional Christian exegesis of the Song was allegorical, this does not alter the enhancement of erotic and sexual experience of the two lovers, protagonists of this poem, with the description of the beauty of the female body, even exalted in its details: navel, breasts, thighs, body, etc.... (SS 7: 2-7).

The eroticism, which permeates the Song of Songs, is considered by the Bible normal and worthy of the highest consideration as it is the basis of various forms of courtship aimed to marriage” (Perrani 2000).

The German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in a Nazi concentration camp, stated in a letter from prison dated 20 May, 1944;

Is there not in the Bible, the Song of Songs? In truth, we would not imagine a warmer, more sensual, and more glowing love than the one that is sung in this book and it is important to find it in the Bible to disprove all those who see moderation of the passions in Christianity (but where is ever this moderation in the Old Testament?) (Bonhoeffer 2016).

We can now consider this fresco in which we painted women in the Old Testament to be concluded, from Eve in the paradise to the sensual woman of the Song of Songs in the land of King Solomon. An overview of female figures that the Bible wanted to present to us in their flaws and virtues, but always, however, in a perspective of redemption of the human being that will culminate with the birth of Jesus.



## 4 WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AT THE TIME OF JESUS

### 4.1 Jesus Christ; a Superstar, or a Revolutionary?

*Jesus Christ Superstar* is an inspiring 1973 British film directed by Norman Jewison, a Canadian director. The film portrays a ‘hippy’ singing Jesus who metaphorises into a superstar immediately after his resurrection. Beyond the musical and choreographic effects of Norman Jewison's work, this film holds an important truth for all Christians: Jesus' victory over evil and fear of death in the world. The final scene of the film depicts all the actors singing and dancing, promoting a strong message of hope and joy. For Catholics, this contains the very heart of the Gospels' message as reported by the evangelists Luke 10: 20-24, John 16: 31-3 and Matthew 10: 26-31.

These messages of joy and hope were not written by Jesus. In fact, he never wrote an utterance : except an unknown word tracing his finger in the sand before an adulterous woman when he was tested so that a charge could be brought against him (Jn 8: 6).

Four evangelists are responsible for the words and actions of Jesus: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Together with these Gospels are the Acts, the New Testament Letters, the Catholic Letters, these constitute what the Christians call *The New Testament*. Each evangelist wrote of Jesus' life from a particular angle, due to the different identikit of the recipients to whom the work was intended for. But one feature that unites all four scribes is that ‘the Jesus event’ does not change, and that special attention is given to the women Jesus encountered. Jointly with men they are also the recipients of Jesus' message of salvation.

It is only in recent decades (especially in the studies and works of various female biblical scholars) that the importance of the female figures in the Gospels are increasingly highlighted. Thanks to their calling, the Catholic Church now has fully accepted that women have had a decisive role in the witness and spread of the Bible. For the moment, suffice it to mention the key

roles of two women – Mary, the mother of Jesus of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene. One highlighted at the beginning of the Gospels and the other at the end

The first: the Virgin Mary, revealed in the New Testament became the mediator between God and man. She was chosen to realize God's plan of salvation for mankind. Whereas in the Old Testament, in the book of Genesis, the mediator is a man - Adam. In fact, without Mary's consent – *Fiat* - "May it be done to me according...." (Lk 1: 38) of God's plan, there would be no incarnation of Jesus. His work of redemption would be aborted before it began.

The second woman, Mary Magdalene, is the first witness of the resurrection, and without her, the message of hope and joy (written in the Gospels) would never have emerged. It is thanks to her that the small group of frightened men (the apostles) found the courage (lost at the crucifixion) to leave their place of hiding and return to Jesus.

At this point, we can now say that all Christians of every denomination and all feminists can agree upon the extraordinary open-mindedness of Jesus toward women, especially as it was in an era dominated by a Judeo-Greek-Roman culture that was fervently patriarchal.

As mentioned in the introduction to this work: in spite of this male chauvinist culture, the emancipation of women was born and developed in Christianized countries. Whereas, in other secularized nations there still is difficulty for it to root with different religious traditions.

Therefore as a way of explanation for the above statement one would assume that in Western countries there must have been a real cultural and political revolution, that started from the periphery and that still influences our modern society. A revolution, also largely due to the strong attraction (throughout the centuries) that women have for Jesus and his preachings.

#### **4.2 The foam of the sea and the unhomed home: the periphery of our society**

Michel de Certeau (1984) a postmodern contemporary philosopher, in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life* showed how often cultural changes in society

were brought forward by the weak - those who are under dominant power. The author writes:

We are concerned with battles or games between the strong(s) and the weak(s), and with the “actions“ which remain possible for the later(s).....They circulate, come and go, overflow and drift over an imposed terrain, like the foam of the sea slipping in among the rocks defying of an established order”(De Certeau, p.35).

We fully agree with this French author in regards that the dissident force of the considered weak subverted human history. Unfortunately, few are left to register in our historiography. According to the French author, slowly the action of the weak, considered always on the edge and periphery of our society, manages to overturn a reality that seems strong and consolidated as a rock.

The post-colonial writer Bhabha (1994) had a very similar theory as De Certeau regarding the cultural changes in our society. In Bhabha’s work ‘*The Location of Culture*’, the author analyzed the resistance that the colonial apparatus aroused in the colonized/the Other. The peculiarity of his postcolonial critique resides in his attempt to return to the Other that had subjectivity been stolen by colonialism in all its forms: cultural, political and economic. In search of an identity, Bhabha put himself in the shoes of the Other and the following question arose: Who am I?

To answer this question, our author considered two levels: one concerned psychoanalytic issues, with particular reference to J. Lacan and F. Fanon’s theories, and the other concerned the semiotic issues implicit in the discursive dimensions of authority. Referring, therefore, to these issues, Bhabha used terms, such as “camouflage, hybridity and mimicry” to describe strategies of resistance that the Other implemented in order to respond to what our author called, *unhomed home*.

In his attempt to give voice to the subordinates, or the defeated in history, the author explained how our modern culture determines not only the protagonists of Western culture but also those people (the others, the weak) living in indeterminate spaces, in which their hybrid and marginal cultures could develop innovative projects of life. And it is in those indeterminate spaces (unhomed home), in the peripheries of our society that we can locate the women at the time of Jesus. They counted for nothing according to the dominant power, but,

as we will demonstrate in our work, they have a relevant role in Catholicism and feminism in our postmodern time.

### 4.3 The periphery and Jesus revolution

Jesus was born, lived and preached in the periphery of the Roman Empire. In fact he went to Jerusalem (the largest city of the I century A.D. in Palestine) only twice. The first time, when he was 12 years old, together with his parents. There he spoke publically in a temple. The second (and last) time when he was 33 years old to die on the cross. And now, in the XXI century, the current Pope Francis has asked catholic religious, both men and women, to follow the example of Jesus and to start a new evangelization from the periphery.

In an interview with A. Spadaro<sup>10</sup> in 2014, for the magazine *Civiltà Cattolica*, Pope Francis argued that:

Starting from the periphery of the world, we can have a different vision of life. Moving around the outer reaches, we can then look back into the center to better analyze the ‘whole’ giving one a wider viewpoint from all angles. Great historical changes were comprehended in this way.

Assuming a point of view beginning from the periphery, we can better interpret reality and be critical towards the dominant ideology. By only watching life from the periphery (stated the Pope) “We ought to get use to thinking...” (Spadaro, pp.3-7).

We agree with the Pope that it is from the periphery of our society that we should start to think and to move beyond our comfort zones of false beliefs, myths and ideologies. In this way we can reach a point of view different from the *simulacra* of reality imposed by our globalized world.

It is therefore from the periphery, that Jesus comes into contact with the spiritual and material misery of the human race with all forms of discrimination of the lower classes - the poor, the sick, children and women. From this social reality Jesus did a *revolution*, although he cannot however be considered a revolutionary in its classic meaning. Because, if this were so, he would then be

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<sup>10</sup> A.Spadaro (Messina, July 6, 1966) is a Jesuit, Italian writer and theologian, current editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

remembered as one of the *great men* (kings and popes) who filled the books of history so little loved by Jane Austin.

For catholic scholars, Jesus is himself the *living revolution* that renews itself from 'age to age with a passion always intact and timeless' (Quaglia, p.277)<sup>11</sup>, as reported by Luke in chap 1, 50-54.

#### **4.4 Jesus revolution begins in the heart of women**

In the Christian religion, God made man through Jesus, is the one who, proposes to his beilivers a new life in which the last will be the first in his plan of salvation '.....For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest ' (Luke 9: 48). And who could receive this message - able to deeply change the existence of the human being- better than a woman? Rocco Quaglia states:

Women had no power nor rights to defend it they were the last, the only good they had was their own life. Unlike men they could simply be.

A task unites women to Jesus; they have a life to give with their own life. No wonder if they, first, perceived how gravid was the message of Jesus, "A thief comes only to steal and slaughter and destroy; I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly" (Jn 10: 10). What they saw in this man so different from others? They saw the man according to the purpose of God, and through him they felt what Life felt for them, that is: gratitude. Jesus revolution begins in the heart of women .... ( Quaglia, p. 228).

In Catholicism, it is precisely in the hearts of women that the new religion finds the fertile ground to grow and develop. The writers Giulietta Galeotti and Lucetta Scaraffia <sup>19</sup> in their book *Pope Francis and Women* state that:

In recent years it has been strongly emphasized - especially in feminist studies - the presence and importance of women in the Gospels, and even more, in the early centuries of the spread of Christianity. The new religion offered women the possibility of a spiritual equality that could achieve up to holiness and in the choice of chastity in case of a religious vocation ..... but also in the equal weight of rights and duties required to both spouses in Christian marriage. A framework of equal

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<sup>11</sup> Rocco Quaglia is a psychologist and psychotherapist. He is professor of Dynamic Psychology at the University of Turin.

opportunities for women and men never realized before”. (Galeotti and Scaraffia, p. 148)

But who are these women of the Gospel? Why is talking about them so important for the pursuit of our work? Which are the most appropriate methods to arrive at a scientific interpretation of the Bible, as close as possible to its human and divine natures?. We will endeavour to answer these questions in the next section by making a critical analysis of some female figures found in the Gospels, and by assigning the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus a paragraph for her alone.

#### **4.5 Women in the Gospels – are they invisible?**

The Gospels give evidence that Jesus met women in their genuine condition that is a condition of misery on the edges of a male-dominated society of the 1 Century A.D. They often present them anonymous, as sick and humiliated women: a mother pleading Jesus to have her daughter healed a widow in tears for the death of her only son, or a widow in the temple and other women that we are going to meet in the following pages. But the fact that many of them are nameless must not lead us to think that they are invisible or secondary characters in the Gospels.

To clarify this, we will to quote the thought of biblical scholar Rosanna Virgili<sup>22</sup>an author- along with three other women researchers Rosalba Manes, Annalisa Guida, and Marida Nicolaci- of *The Gospels translated and commented by four Biblicalists women*. The writer explains:

Anonymous, almost invisible, only referred to as mother-in-laws, wives, mothers, daughters of someone, etc., a sign of a cultural reality that did not want them, nor allow them to be autonomous. Referred to as subjects related to someone more important than them. This is an identity typical of the ancient world where a woman was not considered an ‘individual’ but part of a relationship structure – unlike Western contemporary cultures.

Men too were caught in this relationship structure but were in a more favorable position than women. They were owners of their families, or owners of their activities, whereas it was not the same for women who were subjected to laws and rules of conduct that saw them removed from a full dignity, equal to that of men. (Virgili et al., p.165).



Despite this cultural reality, Jesus shows the women he meets during his three years of preaching as models who continue to question Catholic believers and make them reflect on the centrality of the role of women in the Western cultural tradition.

For the Catholics the fulfillment of redemption of mankind, which culminated in the birth of Jesus (pg 9), enlightens women with new light. This leads us to rework and, to better clarify some issues already discussed in our thesis and to add new ones relevant to our research. Thus, compared to the female figures discussed in the Old Testament, this analysis of women in the New Testament will go deeper and with more detail.

In order to better carry out our academic investigation on these women in the Gospel, we will refer to the main methods that catholic biblical scholars follow in their works. These methods are listed in the guidelines on *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, drawn up by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1994.

#### **4.6 Female interpretation of the Bible: A big achievement for women**

*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* gives a detailed description of various methods and approaches in the interpretation of the Bible as historical, critical, based on tradition and literary. We will briefly summarize the *Contextual Approach* that is relevant to our Thesis, which include the feminist *biblical hermeneutics*.

The Contextual Approach gives the following information:

“The Woman’s Bible” was a revision of the Bible produced by The United States at the end of the 19th Century. The Feminist biblical hermeneutic encompassed three main forms: the radical, the neo-orthodox and the critical form.

The radical form rejected all links to the Bible, deeming it as a production (once again) by men seeking to dominate women (androcentrism).....

The neo-orthodox form saw the Bible as prophetic and as the potential of service to the oppressed, and thus to women; highlighting whatever in the Bible favored the liberation of women and the acquisition of their rights.....

The critical form's methodology set out to redefine the role of women in Jesus's life and within the Pauline churches.....

Feminist hermeneutic did not employ new methodology. But added two new barometers: the feminist and the sociological criteria.

The first involves a stepping out of the text. Since history is written from the point of view of the victors, the truth of a text cannot be fully trusted and one must look for clues that could disclose something completely different.....

The second criterion is sociological – based upon the study on women's social stratification during the biblical era..... (Pontifical Biblical Commission, pp. 45-48).

We will see in Chap. 10, how this feminist approach is important in the investigation of the Scriptures. Without this achievement for women in the teleological field, the voice of half of the catholic faithfuls would have been remained unheard..

As a consequence, of what we have written thus far, in next section, we will study four *invisible* women in the Gospel. We will make them shine because in our opinion, each and everyone of them has a message, (often underestimated) to convey to catholic feminism.

#### **4.7 The mother-in-law of Simon: *deaconate***

The first one is the mother-in-law of his disciple, Simon. She offers us the opportunity to reflect on the theme of the service/*deaconate* (from the Greek word *diakonia*) in the Gospels, and in modern life, which is often associated with women's functions in a denigrating sense. The Evangelist Luke writes that "Jesus rebuked her fever and that she got up immediately and started to wait on them (Lk 4: 38-39).

This last sentence "*She started to wait on them*" would seem an evangelist sexist position, but, as noted by the French writer Michel Gouggues in his work *Neither Man nor Woman*:

According to the use that the evangelists are making ( in the Gospels), the verb *diakoneo* and the lexicon of the service can not be applied, mainly , to "women at the service of men," but to a basic attitude of the believer to whom we are all called, men and women, anyone "wants to be first "(Gouggues, p. 36).

So the word *service* has a much deeper meaning than the one we usually think nowadays. It is the necessary condition for entering the Kingdom of Heaven. It's a believer's attitude against any form of ideological conditioning to whom all Catholics are called - both men and women.

The biblical scholar Raniero Cantalamessa in his book *Cast the Nets; Year B*, writes:

Service' for Catholics is not submission to the power of another, but rather is a different form of power, it is in fact a power for the others and not a power over others. The latter confers authority, while the service (power for others) confers something more; authoritativeness that means esteem, respect and real ascending over others (Cantalamessa, p. 312).

The mother-in-law of Simon, together the Virgin Mary became the first *deaconess*<sup>12</sup> of the Gospel; she is the symbol of all those women who, even before the Apostles - and then in the modern age long before priests and clergymen- embody the announcement of God deacon or servant, as Jesus was.

The question of the diaconate of women is an issue on the agenda of Catholic Church. The Vatican is aware that the issue can not be postponed and in this last period, the Pope set up a commission to evaluate the evolution of the diaconate of women in centuries. By Catholic feminists there is a great expectation for the commission's findings as we are going to see in the last chapter titled *Theological feminism*.

#### **4.8 The widow of Nain: *compassion***

The second woman we are going to investigate is the widow of Nain who only appears in Luke ch.7, 11-17. In this passage Jesus' compassion for a woman crying for her dead son, urges him to operate the miracle of her young boy's resurrection by touching his corpse.

Jesus embraces the pain of this widow, wounded by grief and marked by great loneliness, knowing what this means for the widow's existence; the loss of her husband is also the end to her only source of income and the loss of her only son means all hope for her future survival is gone.

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<sup>12</sup> Deaconess or *evangelic service* has a deeper explication in p. 89 of our work.

In the Gospel this widow does not speak. Her words are in the form of tears. This woman was the image of grief: a pain that leaves no word, which seems to frustrate all hopes. Jesus is not afraid of possible infection and breaks the law forbidding touching the dead. Biblical scholars state that what led him to this act of compassion was not the deceased son but the crying woman.

The word compassion, that has been taken from the Latin - *cum- passion* meaning *suffering together* – (taking upon oneself the pain of others and sharing in their suffering), brings to a deeper understanding of others. Compassion/empathy is the subject of the academic analysis of Edith Stein in her work *Essays on Woman*.

#### **4.9 The Samaritan: an impure woman is the first Catholic theologian**

In John 4: 5-30 we meet another ‘foreign’ woman. She is from Samaria, whose people like the Canaanites were enemies of the Jews. Jesus asks her to give him a drink when he met her at a well in the town of Samaria.

One of the few freedoms of women in Jesus' day was to go to the well to fetch water. Apart from the *oikos* (house) it was a free place for women where they could meet and behave more freely. Usually the well area was empty during the heat of the day, except this time when the Samaritan woman was there. As a woman she would never have spoken with a Jew (considered an enemy of her people). She did not ask anything of Jesus as she did not know him and had never heard of him; she went to the well simply to fill her water jug.

It was Jesus who sought dialogue with her. He asked for her help and showed interest in her questions. Jesus moved the topic of their conversation from the material to the spiritual and his words illuminated the heart of this woman. And her illuminated heart brought the Samaritan woman to be recognized as the first witness of her faith, even though she was considered by the Jews the lowest in the social categories of that time.

Catholic biblical scholars, in their modern feminist interpretation of the Gospel, stressed out that every message of overthrowing the status quo imposed by a patriarchal and egoistic society was given first to woman. It was Mary, the Mother of Jesus who, in fact, first welcomed the message of a Savior for the

Jews. The Samaritan woman was the first to hear, and to spread the salvation proclaimed by the Jewish Jesus for her people. Another woman: Mary of Magdalene sees the risen Jesus and reported the news to the fearful apostles. Rocco Quaglia argues in his work *The Little Women of the Gospels*:

The woman forgets herself, the water jar, her home, her reputation, and she runs to the city of Sychar, as if she were pulled by an invisible torrent.

In the Gospels no male figure could rejoice as the women rejoiced in announcing to others the Messiah. The race of the Samaritan woman recalls the breathless race of Mary Magdalene, on the morning of the resurrection, or the race of Mary of Nazareth on the mountains of Judea to bring the words of the angel to her cousin Elizabeth. Women run, they run even when they hear of the arrest of Jesus; men also run, but in the opposite direction, to escape (Quaglia, p. 209).

The Samaritan woman was impure because not Jewish. She belonged to a people despised by the Jews, and she was sinful, as Jesus reminded her, referring to her five husbands. Nevertheless Jesus involved her in a profound and ultimate dialogue, which was focused on faith and on the way to worship God. As Benedict XVI pointed out in a homily on February 2008, "Jesus confided to her, very rare case - to be the Messiah." Jesus did not discuss these issues with theologians, but with a woman who answered promptly and with a slight of impertinence, a woman with whom, according to the conventions, Jesus would not have to talk.

#### **4.10 Mary of Magdalene: cooperation (with a prostitute)**

In the Gospel of John 19: 25 it is written that when Jesus was on the cross, his mother and Mary of Magdalene together with two other women were standing by him. In the most dramatic and glorious moment of Jesus' life, women experience hope while men experience despair. And the line between the two experiences does not break because it is always held together by the loyalty of women.

Among these women, stands the figure of Mary Magdalene. Her fidelity would not be proven completed if, a few days after the crucifixion of Jesus, she had not gone to his tomb to pay homage to his body that she thought she would find lifeless (John 20, 11-18).

In fact she had a partial knowledge of the mission of Jesus unlike Mary, the mother of Jesus, who knew everything about the future of her son (Luke 2, 35) and chose to keep everything in the secret silence of her heart (Luke 2, 51). Mary Magdalene had not yet fully understood that Jesus would rise again. But thanks to her partial understanding she became, for the Catholic Church, before all the men who followed Jesus, the first missionary of the Good News.

On this subject, Damiano Marzotto writes, in his work *Peter and Mary Magdalene; The Gospel runs in two voices*:

If it is clear that Jesus associates women (and in particular Mary Magdalene) in his mission of salvation, although with a different role, in addition to the twelve (and in particular Peter and John) we can even see how among the two groups there is cooperation. In particular, without Mary Magdalene Peter and John would never see the empty tomb, but it is significant that Magdalene, in her puzzlement of the missing body of Jesus, felt the need to address the two disciples. ( Marzotto, p. 36)

So even in times of trouble, the women of the Gospel, through the example of their lives transformed by Jesus, involve men in spreading the message of hope and joy that is the core of the New Testament. For catholic feminist writers, the cooperation in the Gospel between, men and women (in the respect of their specific roles) is mostly what their work focuses upon.

For the Church as institution, it has always been difficult to recognize the primary role (in evangelization) of this woman, a prostitute, compared to that of the apostles. The ecclesiastical male hierarchy has always sought to mitigate the role of this troublesome female figure in many ways. So much so that in classic iconography Magdalene was almost always painted with red hair, a symbol of her previous life as a prostitute, in contrast to the white and blue robes of the Virgin Mary - a symbol of virginal purity.

During the 60s many feminists gave their daughter the name Magdalene, as a sign of rebellion against the Catholic religious tradition. And in our postmodern era, the secular world has gone so far ahead in its collective imagination to take into account the alleged marriage of Mary Magdalene with Jesus as described in the best-seller *The Da Vinci Code*.

Recently, (June 10, 2016 Osservatore Romano) Pope Francis officially declared July 22<sup>nd</sup> as a liturgical day dedicated to Magdalene. This is a very strong message to all Catholicism because, now, thanks to Magdalene, the recognition of the role of women in the church can finally begin in earnest. This official act of the Pope confirms that women in the Church have always existed, that they have played important roles and have contributed (in Christian countries) to the construction of cultural and civic tradition.

#### **4.11 Conclusions**

Unlike the mental limitation of the culture at the time, Jesus' attitude towards women was one of openness, respect, acceptance and tenderness. In this way he honored their dignity which together with men's dignity had always been in God's project of love written in the Bible.

These women of the Gospel, often anonymous and considered the lowest in the male-dominated society of those times, offer, as we highlighted in this section, several messages and points of reflection to the catholic feminist and to our modern society.

For Catholicism, Gospel's women embody, perhaps even better than men, the entry of God in mankind's history. They are the best evidence of what the Italian philosopher and historian G.B. Vico (1668 –1744) says in his work *New Science* (1725): “God enters in human history through its courses and re-courses -cyclical feature of historical development- to realize his plan of salvation.”

Another scholar, the biblical researcher Rosalba Manes, co-author of *The Gospels translated and commented by four Biblicists women* writes:

Most of the women of the Gospel build the sacred history with their generosity, with their ability to welcome, to be neighbor, to acculturate with their daring and their incredible capacity for endurance over the obstacles of life. They are at the service of life: maternal, volitive, sensitive to pain and to joy. They are the gospel's authentic 'fires' that warm over cold indifference, and they are not afraid of tenderness..... Capable to let them go through the Good News, they can free their heart on the wings of faith and infect the disciples of yesterday and of all time (Manes, p. 16).

But more than any other woman in the Gospel - the Virgin Mary is the one who best embodies the model role of the catholic woman in Christian society. In fact, during the ages, she is an inspiration (not only to writers - catholic and non-catholic) but also in all areas of art in Western culture.





## 5 THE VIRGIN MARY - PROBLEMS BEGIN

Whilst the extraordinary openness of Jesus toward women is more or less recognized by all feminists, believers and non-believers, the Virgin Mary, mother of Jesus is often the cause of misunderstandings resulting in problems which require clarification. Because of this we decided to dedicate an entire chapter to her with the aim of highlighting some key points.

Mary is a point of reference for Catholic feminists and she has over time increased her role as a model for many women. Over the past two centuries there has been an outpouring by scholars and writers, which created rivers of literature on this subject.

But what is the origin of such interest, either positive or negative for a woman who, after all, speaks only four times( annunciation, magnificat, holy family, wedding at Cana) in the Gospels ? We will try to find out in the following pages some key points concerning the Madonna which are often the subject of misunderstandings by non Catholics.

### 5.1 Annunciation: The risk of faith and motherhood

The evangelist Luke introduces Mary to us in this Gospel passage, classically called Annunciation, in which the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she will conceive Jesus, the son of God (“*even if she does know man*”)<sup>13</sup>through the power of the Holy Spirit. And with her answer “*May it be done to me according to your word*”, she accepts this mysterious plan of God that is beyond the understanding of human logic. ( Luke 1, 26-45).

In Literature normally in the *Annunciation*, Mary's attitude to fulfil God's request is summarized in a very short term - *Fiat* -“May it be done to me according to your word” (Luke 1, 36). But Mary never spoke the word, because

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<sup>13</sup> This expression means that Mary has not yet had sexual intercourse with her betrothed Joseph, so Mary is doubtful about the possibility of giving birth to a child.

*Fiat* is a Latin word and she did not speak Latin or even Greek. What she said was *Amen* which in Hebrew means - *unconditional assent* to God's will.

The Fiat/Amen of Mary means woman's availability for motherhood and for the gift of herself to accept a new life. Motherhood together with fatherhood reflect the eternal mystery of giving birth. The Creator, for the believer, is the one who gifts a child to the parents.. Motherhood, as a human phenomenon, is tied to the physical structure of women. And it is explained on the basis of the truth about the person considered as a unbreakable unity between finite and infinite, which has in Mary the higher woman's model.

A contemporary author Silvia Menegotto in his work *With the Women of Jesus* writes about the Annunciation:

In the Semitic culture a woman could not even get close to God. The Annunciation upturn the norm and exceeds the tradition: God, through the Spirit, knocks at the door of a suburban girl in Nazareth, to be welcomed. The fiat is not blind obedience, but it is radically destabilizing (Menegotto, p. 23).

It's destabilizing because the ethical substance of the Annunciation is that God treats Mary as a real and aware person. He needs her assent, and is respecting of her interior dispositions. He does not force her in her decision. After engaging in conversation with God Mary gives Him active and responsible consent, which was not reticent nor hasty. She shows above all a trust without reservations in the plan of God who calls her and she also shows an incredible courage to make room for the new life that will transform her previous situation profoundly. The biblical scholar Raniero Cantalamessa in his book *Cast the Nets; Year B*, writes:

The philosopher Kierkegaard said that "Believing is like to advance in a street where all the signposts say: back, back! It's like being in the open sea, where there is seventy-stage depth under you. It is like performing an act for which one finds himself completely thrown in the arms to the Absolute. "Thus it was indeed for Mary, she had found herself in total solitude without anyone else to talk with except God.

Mary knew what was written in the law of Moses: if a girl who, on her wedding day, was not found in the state of virginity had to be brought immediately before her father's house and stoned to death (Deuteronomy 22, 20). Mary really knew the risk of faith (Cantalamessa 26 ). Mary's faith is taken to the point where she can define herself as a 'servant of the Lord' and prophetically anticipates a renewed and revolutionnary manner of relations within a 'new

humanity', an approach based on mutual service. In fact the first thing Mary did after the Annunciation, was to serve Elizabeth, her cousin ( Luke 1: 39-40).

For Christian believers this new humanity began a little over 2,000 years ago in a small remote village of Palestine called Nazareth, on the outskirts of the Roman Empire where no-one expected anything monumental could happen (John 1: 45-46). But it is from this small village that begins the 'anything good' (John 1: 46). A new era for humanity, thanks to the *Fiat* of a woman of humble origins - the Virgin Mary, who was chosen as the Mother of God.

The attributes of Mary, as *virgin*- "I have no relations with a man" (Luke 1: 34) - and *mother* are often under attack. They create problems to those who see motherhood, virginity and also chastity as signs of debasement and limitation for women in society due to the patriarchal system of our culture. They forget that motherhood is parenthood and therefore includes men and that virginity and chastity apply for men as well.

Irigaray, in her book *The Mystery of Mary* writes:

We often spoke of Mary's virginity in derogatory terms not only for Mary but even for every woman and for our religious tradition itself. God, as the absolute patriarch, would have used, in some way, the adolescent Mary to give light to a child outside of any romantic relationship with her, both of body and spirit

To make credible her role in the mystery of the Incarnation, Mary's virginity - like that of every woman-must correspond to her ability to maintain her breath, her blow independent and partly available for the advent of a future not yet happened (Irigaray, p.22).

Virginity and chastity are values hardly understood by men and women in our secularized society. Only in a transcendental vision of life are they accepted. In the course of our work the Virgin Mary is the paragon of virtue who has inspired Catholics and continues to do so in promoting the emancipation of women.

Thus Mary, especially among non Catholics is often considered an inconvenient figure compared to the centrality of the figure of Jesus. She then becomes the subject of different assessments by part of some feminist movements. They claim that the *cult of Mary* is functional to the reproduction of all forms of patriarchy and to the moral justification of subordination in which the Church

has relegated women together with the process of blaming the female gender and in particular their sexuality.

The French hermeneutics and biblical scholar Anne-Marie Pelletier, first woman in 2014 to win the *Ratzinger prize* for scientific research, writes in her work - *Christianity and Women*:

One can assess differently the role of the reference to Mary in Western discourse on woman. One can deplore in certain moments, mythologizing glides that make her a kind of goddess, in deep contrast with the spirit of the Bible, or even a guarantee of an eternal feminine with suspicious characteristics. But one can not deny that in Mary, Christian faith associates, in a regal way, woman in the deepest center of what she believes. No man among those that accompany the story of Jesus has equal weight of her, which is resolutely theological. So, it is the annunciation to Mary, daughter of Israel, in the obscure village of Nazareth and not the annunciation to Zechariah, priest of Israel, officiating in the Temple, which introduces the biblical story in "new times" (Le Pelletier, p. 33).

## **5.2 Magnificat : upheaval in patriarchal values**

Mary announces the 'new times' for mankind's history in her song *Magnificat* where she speaks for the second time in the Gospel, describing how the presence of God in human history will be realized (Luke 1: 46-55).

Mary's liberating song at her cousin Elizabeth's house is in effect a hymn for the subversion of the status quo. "*God has thrown down rulers from their thrones and lifted the lowly.*" (Luke 1, 53) He has also destabilized once and for all the hierarchy between man and woman by making a girl the greatest accomplice for the salvation of the world.

## **5.3 The Holy Family: The anthropological conceived family**

Jesus at 12 years old disappeared while on a trip to Jerusalem together with his family. His parents found him with the doctors of law, teaching in the temple. (Luke 2, 41-52). This event is so important that the Catholic Church places it in the liturgical calendar, as the feast of the Holy Family, which is celebrated on the first Sunday after Christmas.

So the Catholic Church chooses this passage in the feast of the family that must be intended, anyway, as anthropological conceived; father, mother and children.

It is worthy to note that in this Gospel passage Mary does not speak in the singular but in the plural about the worry for the loss of Jesus; she says "*Your father and I ...*" (Luke 2, 48). She speaks of an anguish that is shared with her husband. This relationship is mutual, although. Mary has to bear the heaviest weight of education of the child because, from the beginning (Luke 2,25-35), she knew of the suffering that her son would go through in his life<sup>14</sup>, but she "... kept all these things in her heart" (Luke 2, 51).

The development of the faith of a person is expressed by Mary's attitude to progress and grows in the intelligence of Christ's revelation. Mary testifies to catholic believers in this Gospel passage the faith on God is the most important condition fulfill oneself in life and to embark on a journey of sharing and complementarity in family and community.

The analysis of this Gospel's Holy Family passage, together with its multitude of references throughout the Bible is very important on our thesis on *Catholicism, as an obstacle, or Fostering Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* because the *anthropologically conceived family* is the core of many writers' works. In our postmodern Western society their works are the last bastion against major ideologies that want to discriminate and destroy the main cell (family based on the relationship between two different sexes) upon which, our evolution is based. Over the last few months (whilst still working on this thesis) many non-Catholic authors have taken a step back on these ideologies - in subjects regarding *surrogate mother* and *stepchild adoption*. They is now taking a position equal to that of Catholic feminists as we are going to see in the chapter of feminism and postmodernism.

#### **5.4 Wedding at Cana: maternal attention**

The fourth and final time Mary speaks in the Gospels was during a wedding feast she went together with Jesus. Mary realizes before everybody the lack of wine showing a particular attention, moved by tenderness and mercy to the needs and happiness of others which Jesus did not perceive. This maternal

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<sup>14</sup> *And you yourself a sword will pierce* (Luke 2, 34): Mary herself will not be untouched by the various reactions to the role of Jesus.

attention to the needs of the others, especially belonging to women, gives them a unique role in our Western society and history. Two examples among many are the two mystic women, Saint Catherin of Siena and Saint Johan of Arc who profoundly influenced Western history, through their compassion for the needs of their people

Mary urges Jesus to operate his first miracle as if he expected the request of his mother to begin his mission of evangelization after 30 years of living in anonymity in Nazareth. For Biblical scholars Mary is the only person who manages to change Jesus' ( God's) will, as the two mystic women manage to change kings and Popes' wills, in a time of internal and fratricidal war in the Catholic countries.

After giving birth to Jesus in Bethlehem, Mary steered him to publicly recognize his divine role, which she always knew but *kept in the silence of her heart* from the day of the Annunciation. This silence from Mary that we find reported many times in the Gospel, and which continues to question many feminist writers, believers and non believers of every generation, needs now special clarification.

### **5.5 The silence that questions: a reserve of words for future**

Mary's name is mentioned more in the Qur'an (34 times) than in the Gospel (12 times) and as we have seen she speaks only four times. But beyond her apparent lack of participation in the Gospels she is described as “(the) mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus advanced (in) wisdom and age and favor before God and man” (Lk 2: 51- 52). So Mary does not disappear but she is always present in the Gospels where in silence she participates in Jesus's life, death and resurrection.

This silence challenges many people deeply by transmitting that restlessness, which from the first centuries of Christianity has promoted a great number of artistic and literary works on Mary. Among these works is: *The Mystery of Mary*, written by feminist Luce Irigaray. She describes the silence of Mary as a form very close to the Catholic faith:

In Western culture, to talk is regarded more highly than to be silent. Someone who speaks is able to demonstrate his abilities, while those who keep silent are considered to be exhibiting their impotence, or submission. The value of the spoken word as compared to silence, however, is reversed in certain traditions such as in some Eastern cultures (Buddhism).

Mary's silence is often interpreted in a negative way - especially by women. Such a judgment is determined by western values in which the male mentality predominates. Mary's silence might also be understood in another way. It may serve as a method to preserve her intimacy with herself – a form of self-affection, or it could be a way to prevent becoming lost - particularly into speech that is not her own.

To keep her lips closed, and even to couple her hands, or to close her eyes, is a way to join together the two parts of the self, and to deeply indwell herself.

In Greek mythology, Persephone (abducted by Hades) keeps her mouth open because now she has lost intimacy with herself. Mary's silence is therefore not necessarily to be considered a lack of words, but a reserve of words for future events that are still unknown (Irigaray, pp. 27-32).

Irigaray reaches this position after two decades of publication of her works on the emancipation of women related to secular materialistic and essentialist thought, to which non-Catholic feminists referred to in the nineteen-eighties. This secular materialist culture (originated around 1800 in Germany) considered that the development of Western thought was negatively influenced by the Christian religion. And in particular, it delivers a strong critique to the faith in Mary promoted by the Catholic Church and strengthened through its various dogmas.

The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) in his work *The Essence of Christianity* (1854) lays the foundation for what will be the atheist-materialist Western thought. In the following passage taken from Umberto Eco's work - *History of Philosophy* Vol.III, Feuerbach expresses his idea about the Virgin Mary:

The Virgin Mary is the expression of the fact that the individual, at a pure level of consciousness doesn't want to be subjected to logic and the law of science, but wants the will of imagination and heart. Man wants the virgin's figure as a symbol of chastity and purity but also the mother figure as a symbol of love and filial affection but it must be untouched and spotless that means private from instinctual and sexual connotations (U. Eco, p. 23).

Thus Feuerbach laid the foundation of the atheist materialist thought emphasized by the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche in his "*Got ist Tot*" (God is dead)<sup>15</sup>. In the twentieth century this thought was followed by the existentialism and the secular feminist movement of the modern era, which we will look at in the following chapters.

For Catholic feminists the distinction between material and spiritual dimension does not exist and Mary becomes the gateway between infinite in the finite. Without this female gateway God could not have achieved his plan of salvation for men and women, considered in their entirety of spirit-body.

On this subject the Byzantine iconography is very helpful. In the museum/church in St. Saviour in Cora in Istanbul the iconography of Mary and the adult Jesus face each other at the entrance of the church. The mosaic of Mary (Fig.5.1) shows, in a simple way that great theological truth of the *Infinite* (God) inside the *finite* (Mary). The figure of Mary holds the image of the child Jesus in a circle and written in Greek are the words *Chora tou achoretou* (She is the one who contained the uncontainable).

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<sup>15</sup> Different position about this materialistic thought had the English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who stated : Scientific knowledge and philosophy are not opposed to the spiritual dimension of man..... faith is an aid to philosophy and science, because it reminds man of the relative nature of the results achieved. Philosophy, in turn, prevents the transcendent unknowable object of faith to stop man's desire to knowledge: the unattainability of the spiritual dimension should be understood as a movable limit of knowledge, which acts as a stimulus to mankind progress evolution. (U.Eco, History of Philosophy Vol.III, 144)





**Figure 5.1:** The image of the *Virgin and Child* accompanied by the inscription *Chora tou achoretou* (She is the one who contained the uncontainable) 1315-1321. Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora ( Kariye Müzesi, Kariye Camii), Istanbul.

## 5.6 Conclusion

In 1958, the Orthodox theologian Pavel Evdokimov said – in a paradoxical but undeniable way - that “a world, essentially male dominated, in which woman has no function, is more and more a world without God, because, without a mother, God can not be born.” ( G. Ravasi, *Mary the Mother of Jesus*.cfr. 5). It is indeed the mother of God ( Theotokos in Greek) that is celebrated in the Christian tradition since the Council of Ephesus (431), particularly linked to the Catholic faith and feminism.

With this short sentence, Pavel succeeds, maybe better than many other theologian and philosopher, to define the dignity and vocation of women to motherhood, (not only from a biblical point of view but also from an anthropological one). For Catholics this is closely combined to Mary's role as the mother of God and the mother of the Church, and of humanity.

Pope Francis (1988) in his work *Mulieris Dignitatem* argues that:

In Catholic Church, Eve is considered the first woman and Mary (in the duo Adam-Christ/Eve-Mary) considered the 'new Eve'. This likeness moves forward from the Book of Genesis (3:16) and marks another 'beginning' in which the "woman is in the bosom of the Most Holy Trinity" and therefore in the mind of God. For the Pope, Mary marks 'the new beginning' as a symbol to all women of their dignity and their vocation (Pope Francis, pp.20-30)

Mary is the new Eve, the one who crushes the head of the tempting serpent that in Genesis caused the expulsion of woman and man from Paradise. And if at the beginning of the Old Testament the link between humanity and God was Adam - the first man; now in the New Testament the link is a woman - Mary, who accepts the Incarnation.

The catholic feminist Anne Marie Le Pelletier writes:

So, if Mary is in the heart of the Gospel, it is not primarily because she physically generates the Messiah of Israel, as only a woman could do. It is because she is the perfection of Israel who does the will of God, according to a vocation that belongs to the whole people of God. It is because, in the Christian tradition, she is both the mother of the Church and its mirror, icon of the Church, in its male and female totality. (Le Pelletier, p. 34)

For this very reason in Catholic Church Mary is more important than any bishop or apostle and she is the subject of a huge Marian cult worldwide. Worship expressed not only through prayers (Rosary), folk festivals and pilgrimages: the most famous - Lourdes (France), Fatima (Portugal), Guadalupe (Mexico), Medugorje (Bosnia and Erzegovina) and Ephesus (Turkey) but, as we already saw, also through all art forms, throughout the ages.

In our opinion to deny, denigrate or underestimate the role of Mary in Western thought means to deprive the world of culture and contemporary feminism of an important reference point in the valorization of women's dignity. Mary has been and continues to be a spring of inspiration for many writers whose works we are going to study in the following chapters.

## 6 CATHOLICISM AND WOMEN AFTER JESUS

At this point of our work, it could be argued that the answer to the subject of our thesis *Catholicism as an Obstacle, or Fostering Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*, is that "Catholicism fosters feminism". In fact, in Christian countries, following the critical analysis we have done of the Bible and of the excerpts from the Gospel concerning the full emancipation of women promoted by Jesus should be sufficient. Using the scriptures and the examples of Jesus and his mother Mary we would not even need to talk about feminism.

But things did not go this way. As we have already clarified in our work, Christianity was born in a historical period (the Judeo-Roman/Greek one), where male mentality covered all areas of women's reality. The feminist interpretation of the Bible that we have seen in the preceding pages is only a very recent opening of the Church of Rome towards women. Suffice it to note that the document on the Interpretation of the Bible by the Catholic Church including its feminist biblical hermeneutic approach, is dated just 1994.

We can state that for many centuries (in the Church as an institution) a male interpretation prevailed over Christian Sacred Scriptures. We had to wait until the Second Vatican Council (1962-64) to see the first steps of the Catholic Church towards a greater recognition of the dignity of women in all fields, both cultural and social.

However in the first period of Christianity until the institutionalism of Catholicism, as the state religion by Emperor Theodosius (A.D. 380), there wasn't a separation of feminine and masculine roles. Under the protective mantle of the early Church (not yet corrupted by the lust for power) Christian women were able to play roles other than traditional ones – where previously

the function of women was the procreation of children; and they were labeled by their relationships with men - 'daughter', 'wife', 'mother'<sup>16</sup>.

Christian women were also esteemed in society, something that was unknown in the world of Greek-Roman culture. In the new reality, brought by the Gospels, women (with their loyalty to the Holy Scriptures) could plan their lives outside family and marriage. Because: the virtues of equality of all believers, through faith<sup>17</sup>, women were now potentially equal before man and God.

Many women devoted their lives to charitable works. In their membership of the Christian community they prepared liturgical celebrations opening their houses to cultural meetings and religious debates<sup>18</sup>; they taught practices of Christian life to the younger followers and devoted themselves to contemplative life.

Amongst these women (from whom only a few pieces of written evidence is preserved) we remember: Prisca, martyred under Emperor Claudius II; Perpetua and Felicity - martyrs at Carthage; Paola Melania the Younger and the Empress Pulcheria. The feminist author Marcella Farina writes:

(These women) play men's traditional functions; they preach with courage, study the scriptures, and have an understanding that surpasses that of men; they prophesy boldly and interweave dense relationships networks, converting their relatives, especially husbands and children, as well as the political and social personalities. They are ready to die for the faith overcoming torments and trials disproportionate to the "weaker sex" (M. Farina, *Woman: Memory and Reality*, vol. II, pg 29).

Apart from those first few centuries of Christianity when women had an important role in the Church equal to that of men, patriarchal mentality gradually brought women under the cloak of invisibility which Jesus had fought against. In this sense we can say that the Gospel was betrayed and molded to suit a patriarchal cultural institution.

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<sup>16</sup> The Role of women in consecrated life, linked to the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, will be introduced later in the Catholic Church. It began together with the first male monastic orders in the fifth century A.D.

<sup>17</sup> *Justification by faith* will be explained in the following pages of our work.

<sup>18</sup> The first Churches, defined *Domestic Churches* (*domus* in Latin means house) were created thanks to women who allowed the persecuted Christians to come together to celebrate mass in their houses.

Christianity became a religion with predominantly male hegemony which increased its patriarchal character with its institutionalization as a State religion. From that time onwards the Church deliberately confused its mission of service (power for others) with that of power over others on the poorest and most vulnerable, especially women. Power that increasingly took on a temporal aspect, rather than a spiritual one, creating in this way harmful consequences for Europe and for women in particular<sup>19</sup>.

It is historically ascertained that this male hegemony of the Church was also supported by a misogynist Catholic theology. This fact was mainly confirmed by the writings of Saint Paul, (the great apostle of Christianity) and by those of the early Christian philosophers and intellectuals.

### **6.1 Was St. Paul misogynous?**

St. Paul (10-67 AD) - born in Tarsus (Turkey) never knew Jesus. He was an educated man of Jewish religion and a Roman citizen. Initially he tried to hinder the spread of Christianity resorting to persecution and murder. After his surprise conversion to the Gospel, due to a Theo-phony, he became the greatest herald of the new religion brought by Jesus.

But the message of freedom for women, central to the preaching of Jesus (as we have amply highlighted in the previous chapter of our work) seems completely betrayed by Paul. Some of his writings <sup>20</sup> carry a contradictory character that can easily give rise to the type of misogynous interpretations widely denounced by feminists.

In his writings, Paul expresses himself against women by saying that they should be subordinate to their husband and to God because man is the glory of the Lord and woman is the glory of man. Woman must be quite because Adam was created before Eve and plus she deceived Adam. She must veil her head and

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<sup>19</sup> In almost two thousand years of history, there were millions of deaths in wars between European states. These were justified by religious motivation, backed by several popes and aimed, mainly, to increase the temporal power of the Catholic Church. In addition to these wars you must add the witch hunts, promoted by the Church, in the period between the fifteenth and seventeenth century.

<sup>20</sup> Saint Paul is author of the 13 letters in the N.T. called the *Epistles of Paul*

she can not have authority or teach to man. If she wants to learn anything she has to ask her husband at home.

Although in these letters you notice a extreme misogyny in Paul in the totality of his work, however, you also perceive a strong laceration between the evangelical freedom, open to women, and the old patriarchal mindsets related to the three Jewish, Hellenistic and Roman boundaries, in which Paul carries out his preaching.

The apostle tries to distance himself from these three limits testifying (in his work) of a God who comes to meet humanity and reverse the social status quo, with the aim to humble the powerful and exalt the poor. Paul did not hold back in his task of evangelization and was tried and sentenced by Roman law. He was beheaded in Emperor Nero's Rome in 64 or 67AD.

Paul, accepted the risks. He pushed the boundaries for God's people by centering his work in the "justification by faith", as highlighted in his Letters to the Galatians, 3:23-28. The apostle argued that before Jesus life was disciplined by law. "But after the revelation of faith by Jesus we became children of God and therefore the need of the law no longer applied. Faith ensured that the discrimination between different nationalities, circumcised and uncircumcised, male and female, free person and slave ceased" (Gal 3:28).

For Christians: baptism represented an entry into the new faith. It rendered women equal to men. On a ritualistic level (also a symbolic one) Christian baptism ratified the end of circumcision and its discriminatory nature against women.

There is no doubt that, in the first Christian communities, the transition from circumcision to baptism involved a fundamental change in that ritual framework. Baptism became the founding custom of the Christian *ecclesia*. Now, women (who were previously excluded from the custom of circumcision) were considered on the same level as men through baptism. The social and cultural rights established by Jewish law, and reserved for men (circumcision being an initiation into a grouping of 'the same people') was now extended to women in baptism.

This upheaval in traditional roles according to gender (and based only on the faith proclaimed in the Gospels) unnerved Paul. He did not, or could not, fully pursue this path. A path that has also frightened the Church over the centuries. In fact, the ecclesiastical hierarchy, on one hand, continued to proclaim and defend (in rare cases) the equality and dignity of women, while on the other hand it widened the gender difference.

This last position in the Church, based upon the male prejudices of Paul's writings, and of some works of the early Christian intellectuals, has prompted many influential Catholics to discriminate against women in the family and in the Church, fostering their marginalization in society.

In a situation not very different from that of Paul, were the *Fathers of the Church* and the first theologians, who (as the founders of the Christian theological and philosophical thought) have always been torn between the for/against issue on the dignity of women. Among many we would like to quote Tertullian and Gregory of Naziansus.

## **6.2 Opposite theological positions on woman**

Tertullian (155-240 AD) was born in Africa in the city of Carthage during the Roman Empire. He wrote, in his work, *De Cultu Feminarum* (On female fashion), that the woman (Eve) is the "devil's gateway" through which the evil entered the history of humanity bringing death and sin. Because of this woman, the image of God's man was destroyed, and both of them expelled from Paradise.

Certainly Tertullian, in his aversion of women, was himself responsible for the entrance of evil in history. It opened up, for the believing Catholic, an ontological question that was difficult to understand: How can God allow evil to enter heaven and tempt first the woman? The answer to this question, found in the Book of Job in the Old Testament still rings discordantly with Catholics of the past and of today regarding woman's original sin.

The completely opposite thought to Tertullian's was from the theologian Gregory of Naziansus (329-390). He was born in Turkey, in the town of Nazianzus - currently: Güzelyurt in Cappadocia. He was Archbishop of

Constantinople and a theologian venerated by the Christian churches. Also recognized by the Catholic Church as Father and Doctor of the Church.

Our author, in his work *Orationes*, wondered upon the reason why there were laws tolerated for men, but condemned, for women, such as chastity and adultery. He did not accept these man-made laws that discriminated against women mainly in placing children under the authority of the fathers. In fact, Gregory of Nazianzus recalled that the first commandment said to honor equally the father and mother, and that both have equal dignity before God, because they were created by him.

It is very difficult to find a common thread amongst the first Christian intellectuals regarding women. Their comparatives are not simply explained by differences in sensitivity or temperament but curiously these contrasts are also internal in each of the author's works wherein contradictions are commonplace. These intellectuals were pursuing the same goals of all human-beings: happiness, justice, freedom and love. But their identical pursuits contained contradictory content.

The early Christian philosophers could not change their surroundings, the natural order, nor the political order (because they were excluded from any possibility of government). Their proposal for change was based on a search for a happiness that depended only on the education of the person who voluntarily adhered to the belief in a God who became man<sup>21</sup>. This educational proposal was a change at the basic level for those who did not accept the contradictory fear tactics of the external and observational practices of Roman law<sup>22</sup>.

Within this educational proposal *ad personam* the moral concept is an important element in common with the first Christian intellectuals. For them the moral

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<sup>21</sup> The neutral *theion* (impersonal deity) of the ancient Greeks and the Romans *numina* (common deities) had become *O Theos*, meaning one person (Jesus), who had the strongest ties with man on a person to person level.

<sup>22</sup> In Roman law, for a Christian it was enough to publicly practice religious rituals to the gods or to a deified figure for the emperor to save his/her life.



concept was based on the idea of *renunciation*: a word evoking fear that continues to frighten men and women throughout time<sup>23</sup>.

### **6.3 The Panopticon of the church missed something**

When the renunciation is expressed in its two most important forms for Catholics: poverty and virginity/chastity<sup>24</sup>, this is often viewed negatively or misunderstood by scholars particularly modern ones. They, for the most part, follow the common morality of postmodernism, always influenced more from a market that drives the masses towards new sexual desires and consumption. And certainly not to the deprivation or renunciation related to higher human values, both ethical and ontological.

The two evangelical renunciation actualizations: poverty - understood not as an escape from material goods, but as the use of these in terms of a common good; and: virginity/chastity (guided by love for God), have led for centuries (in Western civilization) Christian women to make a choice between consecrated life or marriage/motherhood.

After the fourth century the Church, as a male hierarchical institution, did its best to resize the vital and significant closeness of Jesus with women. And if on one side it won, relegating them to the background of the Christian tradition, on the other side, however, it lost, because something was missed.

In fact, the Church had underestimated the generative potential of women in fields often considered marginal by men, such as marriage/motherhood and consecrated life.

But surprisingly, it is in these two fields that Catholic believers built, little by little, the foundations of their emancipation from male oppression, often supported by the Church itself.

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<sup>23</sup> The first Christian theologians claimed that between being possessed by carnal and worldly forces and being possessed by the divine power, runs the same difference that exists between slavery and independence.

<sup>24</sup> St. Augustine notes that virginity or chastity for Christian widows differs from that of the Gentiles mainly for the freedom of nature. The commitment to virginity/chastity for Christians is called *propositum* to mark the difference of the Roman religion, in which the Vestal Virgins were taken away from the family at age six (Captio).

#### 6.4 Does motherhood belong to woman?

At this point of our work, some questions may arise for the reader. How is it possible to say that marriage and consecrated life could have contributed to the emancipation of women? Especially after the sixties with the launching of the pill, the Kinsey report and the sexual revolution. Coupled with the legalization of divorce, abortion and the spread of queer theory.

Aren't these two subjects (considered by feminists) the symbols of subjection of women in patriarchal society?

We will try to answer these concerns through the works of several authors, which we will analyze in the following sections. For the moment, it is important to briefly clarify some key points on the benefits of women in a Christian marriage and in consecrated life:

1) Christian marriage demanded the same duty of loyalty on the part of the married couple. It claimed the equality of man and woman not only religiously but also on a social and legal level. On the social level, "claiming the indissolubility of marriage", Christianity: unique among monotheist religions proclaimed monogamy. This ensured the protection of the weaker contracting party. It protected the woman from repudiation for infertility or for adultery (L. Scaraffia p. 27)<sup>25</sup>. Whilst on the legal level, the canonical law governed the responsibility of fathers in relation to legitimate and illegitimate children and the transmission of properties. It abolished the *Jus vitae ac necis* (The right of life and death) redefined the figure of the master father.

2) In the IV century AD, at the end of the persecution of the Christians, (if the misogyny of the Church's hierarchy prevailed) the choice of chastity offered to women became a chance for opportunities. Consecrated life in the Church has constituted, for many centuries, the only possibility for women to live free from a dependence upon man and from the biological rhythms of pregnancy. In a cell or convent, a woman had access to education with time to devote to writing, giving her a degree of culture that is prevalent in some of their works. Many of them knew Latin, often wrote in that language, and they had a great familiarity

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<sup>25</sup> L. Scaraffia, *The Women of the Church*, Città Nuova, Rome 2015

with the Holy Scriptures and patristic literature. The survival of Latin culture and of the classical traditions is owed to nuns as much as to monks thus leading to Humanism and to Renaissance.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Catholicism, that is generally configured as a male-dominated religion, with a hierarchy barred to women, offers them, in the *symbolic motherhood*<sup>26</sup>, an opening of thought and visibility. This unconscious process of woman's emancipation promoted by the Church, led some female writers to have a profound effect on the course of Western history and on the formation of Western women's identity<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Kristeva called "symbolic motherhood" the spiritual vocation as nun of St.Teresa of Avila (L'Osservatore Romano, March 02, 2015)

<sup>27</sup> Such woman's emancipation, through chastity, does have a downside. In fact, it helped spread the stereotype that motherhood is incompatible with culture. This subject will be addressed in the section of our work dedicated to Edith Stein.



## **7 BETTER LATE THAN NEVER: CATHOLIC FEMALE WRITERS IN THE MALE HIT PARADE**

The previous chapters hold an explanation of the historical significance of Catholicism and the formation of western thought; the meaning of Catholicism and its foundation; a critical analysis of the Bible and the role of women in the scriptures with the renewed dignity Jesus gave them (but almost entirely lost after his death); the role of Mary; and women, four centuries after the birth of Christ. Now with the testimony of various Authors we further explore and corroborate how Catholicism came to influence modern feminism.

It was only after the year 1,000AD that some female authors emerged (thanks to the abundance of their writings we have) and laid the foundations of discourse on woman's dignity, for the centuries ignored in the Church. Only in the last 50 years, the Catholic Church has officially recognized their merits and, as a result of changes, brought in by the Second Vatican Council, some of them were elevated to the Olympus of the Doctors of the Church<sup>28</sup>; others appointed as patron saints or saints.

In chronological order, the female authors we are going to study in the following sections are: Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich , Catherine of Siena and Therese of Avila.

### **7.1 Hildegard of Bingen: The eclectic Sybil**

In eleventh century Europe emerged an Abbess often ignored or undervalued by our culture. It is important to know, that in many cases, the Abbess exercised powers similar to those of a Bishop. She enjoyed a very wide spiritual and

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<sup>28</sup> Doctor of the Church is a title given by the Church of Rome to religious personalities who have shown, in their lives and in their works, special lighting qualities of the doctrine more out of loyalty than for disclosure or for theological reflection. Until a few decades ago this title was restricted to only 28 theologians and Christian philosopher Saints. From 1970 to 2012, this title has been given to four women: Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), Therese of Avila (1515-1582) and Therese of Lisieux (1873-1897).

temporal jurisdiction in the monastery. In neighboring territory she judged on ecclesiastic causes; she accorded the right to confess and to preach; she gave ecclesiastic charges; she often managed double monasteries, divided into female and male parts.

One of these Abbesses' was Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). She was born in Rupertsberg (southwestern Germany) almost a century before the spread of mendicant orders in Europe, when a promotion of reform took place from the *periphery* of the Catholic Church.

Hildegard is best known for her literary and musical works, her prophecies, and for her knowledge in the field of science and natural medicine. What is surprising, in addition to the amount of her written works, is her diversity of cultural fields, explorations and studies.

She wrote on theology, philosophy, morals, hagiography, science, medicine, cosmology; composed poems, wonderful music and entertained an intense exchange of letters with numerous correspondents throughout Europe. She wrote in Latin, having never studied it and still she proclaimed herself ignorant. The body of her writings exceeded both in quantity and interest the work of other medieval authors. Her main works being *The Book of Visions (Scivas)*, *The Book of the Merits of Life (Liber Vitae Meritorum)* and *The Book of the Divine Works (Liber Divinorum Operum)*.

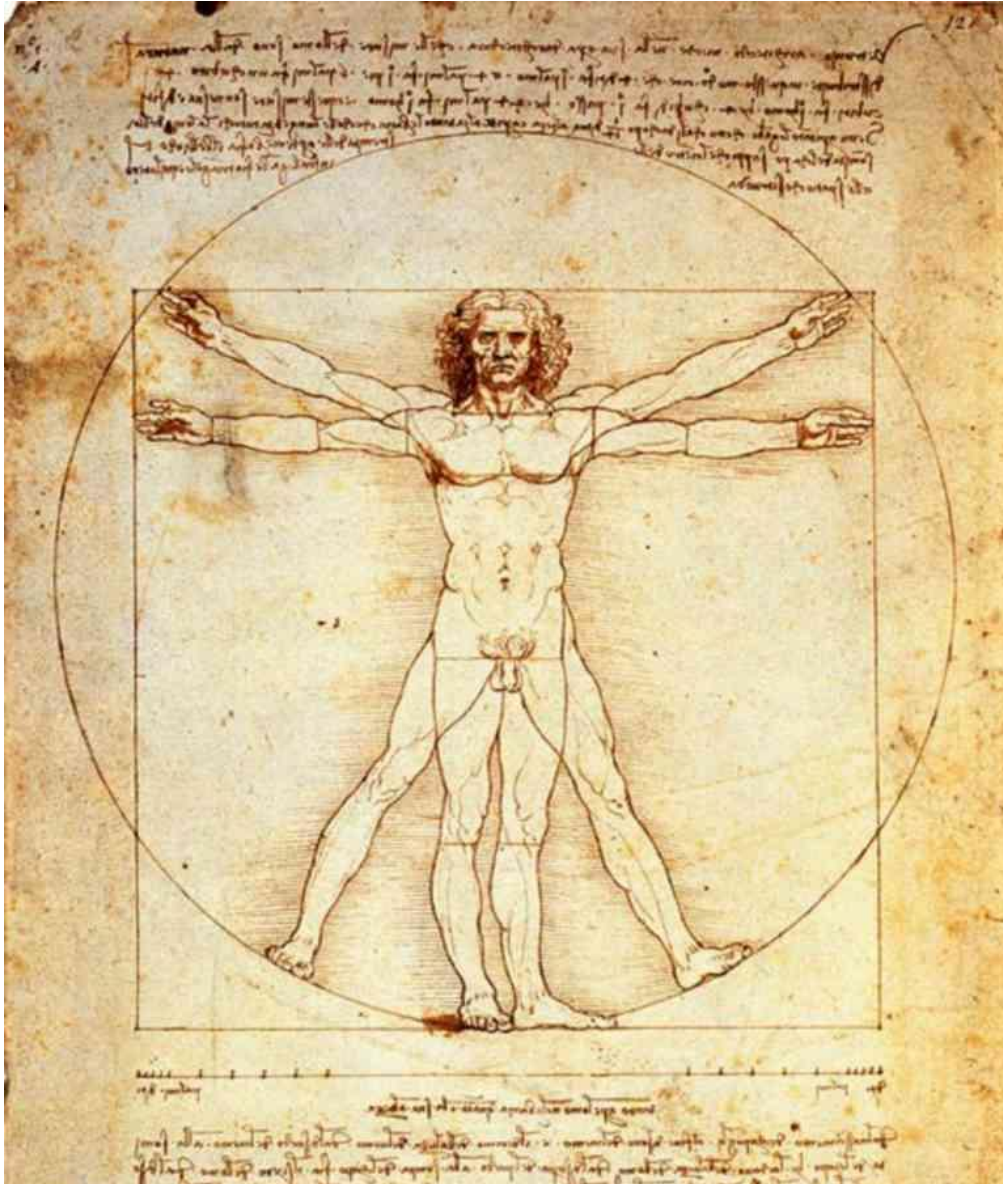
In one of her intuitions, reported in the *Liber Divinorum Operum*, three centuries before the advent of Humanism and the Renaissance, Hildegard summarizes the Renaissance humanist thought that considers man as a subject of knowledge, and at the center of intellectual speculation. In fact, in its portrayal of the Universal Man (Figure 7.1) We can see the rationality of the human mind in the six circles, winds, the cardinal points, lines crossing generating geometric shapes, rectangles and triangles, animal figures represent the winds . And all this is dominated, externally by a figure (of which you can see the arms), that is God who holds all, is above all things, and embraces the man collocated at the center of His creation.

The reproduction of Hildegard's vision, reminds us, in an incredible way, the design called the Study of the proportions of the human body according to

Vitruvius, more commonly known as The Vitruvian Man (Figure 7.2) that Leonardo da Vinci designed almost three centuries after Hildegard. But while Leonardo's drawing was chosen as a symbol of humanism, or rather, of the centrality of man in the rational nature of the universe or of the harmony expressed by geometry (mathematical correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm), Hildegard design ended in oblivion.



**Figure 7.1:** Illustration of the Second Vision of Hildegard (1165) - Miniature from the *Liber Divinorum Operum*, State Library, Lucca, Italy



**Figure 7.2 :**Leonardo da Vinci (c.1490), *Vitruvian Man*, Cabinet of Drawings and Prints of the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice, Italy

To Hildegard: Man is the core of space, containing the universe because he is the substance of creation itself. In his composition of body and soul he is simultaneously inserted into the structure of the cosmos, and contains within himself all the elements of the universe. Man is immersed in this world as God's work and he has to operate as a being endowed with reason. He is a creature under the gaze of God and never considered in an isolated way, neither male nor female but one embodiment with equal relationship to other human beings. Hildegard said that reciprocity and equality between the sexes can only be



understood in an ontological vision of human existence which also includes the mystery of sin.

Pope Benedict XVI (2012), proclaiming Hildegard doctor of the Church, explained:

Sin is apparent in mankind. We know this, and its first appearance in history takes place in the Garden of Eden between Adam and Eve. Medieval authors placed the burden of sin with Eve and the ultimate fall from Grace that became the consequence of her failing. However, Hildegard reverses the placement of liability, citing Adam as the perpetrator of the sin by being unable to control his passion for Eve (Pope Benedict XVI 2012, p.5).

However, even if humanity is marked by fragility and weaknesses, these are useful to human beings to understand their limits and then, to prepare themselves for an attitude of humility before the grandeur of creation.

Catherine proposed a reform that, to influence the entire ecclesial structure of the Catholic Church, must start from personal conversion. She referred to self-love as the cause of all vices and humility as the first of the virtues. Catherine recommended a sober life, far away from earthly pleasures, but addressed to the good of souls and inspired by purity, peace and charity.

Everything in creation is sacred, even the sexual act as an act of love within marriage, is divine. In her medical notes she writes:

When a woman is making love with a man, a sense of heat in her brain, which brings forth with its sensual delight, communicates the taste of that delight during the act and summons forth the emission of the man's seed.....

The man's love compared with the woman's heat of ardour like a fire blazing mountains, which can hardly be put out, whilst hers is a wood fire that is easily quenched; but the woman's love, compared with the man's one, is like a sweet warmth proceeding from the sun, which brings forth fruits ( Dronke, p.175).

For Hildegard the gratitude is a true celebration. So much so that she established certain practices to celebrate the holidays with her sisters. A ritual of harmony and grace where they join the body, the spirit, the beauty and art, as in a play. With her sisters, she placed herself in the church choir, her hair covered by a white silk veil that reached the floor and adorned by a gold crown decorated with two crosses at the back and a picture of a Lamb in the front. On

these occasions, some nuns wore jewels. When someone rebuked her for this practice, Hildegard replied:

There are no prescriptions which require that the virgins hide the beauty of their hair, but they do it willingly as a sign of humility. [...]. They are the brides of holiness, and the dawn of virginity in the Holy Spirit [...]. By virtue, which is given to them and the mystical revelation of God's finger allows them to wear a cloth of bright whiteness (Hildegard, p.17).

Hildegard also saw the contradictions present in the lives of individual believers and exposed the most deplorable situations. In particular, she emphasized how individualism in doctrine and practice by both lay and ordained ministers is an expression of pride and constitutes the main obstacle to the evangelizing mission of the Church to non-Christians. She called for a reform of the Church, not as a sterile change of structures, but as a change of heart.

Hildegard does not belong to the mystical current of beguines<sup>29</sup>, which reached its peak a few years later, but strongly supported this new "mystique" of love inspired by the Song of Songs. She not only invented new words, but also a new language. It had its own alphabet and contained a thousand words she used in everyday life.

Hildegard von Bingen was an independent woman who always attempted to build (literally and figuratively) a space of freedom where she could express herself. But despite her wide margin of maneuver and her reputation she was controlled in some practices. In particular, in the practice of the Uffizio's song, and in the dramatic representations of gratitude. Her creativity, her knowledge and her independence was not always appreciated or acknowledged: among other things, she was canonized very late (in 2012) and she was included amongst the four women doctors of the Church.

In our postmodern era, Hildegard returns to be considered a leading figure in Catholic feminism; not only for her mystical visions, but also – on a par with many male colleagues - for her rational and scientific knowledge. This

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<sup>29</sup> Beguines and Beghards are names that, since the thirteenth century, were used to indicate members of religious associations formed outside the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church with the purpose of a spiritual rebirth of the person through a monastic life but without votes.

knowledge included cosmology, anthropology, ethics, medicine, music and poetry.

The Catholic Church thus expressed about her :

For these reasons the attribution of the title of Doctor of the Universal Church to Hildegard of Bingen has great significance for today's world and an extraordinary importance for women. In Hildegard are expressed the most noble values of womanhood...(Pope Benedict XVI, p.5).

## **7.2 Julian of Norwich: God is our Mother**

“England is a land that has given birth to many illustrious people, who with their testimony and their teaching have embellished human spirituality. One of those (venerated both by the Catholic Church and the Anglican Communion) is the mystic Julian of Norwich ” (Pope Benedict XVI 2010). Her prophetic activity was less evident than that of Hildegard of Bingen, or Marguerite Porete<sup>30</sup>, but the works, in which she chose to describe her experiences, enjoyed a certain diffusion. Although many other women of her time were living in the same conditions and also had similar experiences, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) was the first woman who (with her book *Revelations of Divine Love*) inaugurated this literary genre in English. It is believed that the book *Revelation of Divine Love* is the first English text written by a woman.

Her biographical data is scarce and is derived from autobiographical passages contained in her work. Even the name Julian can not be attributed to her with real certainty. In fact, many believe her name was derived from the church of St. Julian in Norwich, where she lived nearby for many years.

Julian was born in 1342. Of the origins of her family and her early years, we know nothing of. At the age of thirty - she herself cites the year 1373 -, she fell dangerously sick and she and her family believed death was near. During her illness she had a total of sixteen visions. Once healed she put them in writing in a book titled ‘Revelations of Divine Love’. Her first edition was a Short Text (1373), strongly marked by autobiographical news. The second was a Long Text (1393) with added theological reflections.

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<sup>30</sup> Th mystic, Marguerite Porete (1250-1310), French author of the *Mirror Souls*, was accused of heresy and burned alive.

Julian of Norwich chose to live her life as an anchoress (derived from the Greek word meaning “to retire”). She lived in a cell, located near the church dedicated to St. Julian, within the city of Norwich, which was at the time an important urban center, near London.

Pope Benedict XVI (2010), during the General Audience on Julian of Norwich, explained:

Within the convent cells, the anchoresses or “recluses” gave themselves up to meditative thought, devotion to prayer and study. In their self-imposed exile from the world they developed their sensitivities of human frailties and heightened their spirituality. People of all class and ages looked upon them as wise sages. They sought them out for advice and to find peace in difficulty circumstances. Cutting oneself off from the world was not an escape for exclusiveness with God but to develop fine skills to help others. Julian was capable of doing this work, comforting, listening and extending her advice to those who sought her out (Pope Benedict XVI, p. 87).

Very soon ordinary people realized the great significance of this woman, who had apparently retired from the daily struggles of life. People went to her for comfort, to ask for prayers, for advice or just a desire to see her. "Mother Julian" as she was called, had become a reference point of support for the entire city and beyond. In silence, in prayer and in recollection, she revised her visions and she wrote her masterpiece: *The Revelations of Divine Love*.

Her work contains the description of visions that reveal sound theological knowledge, both in the Augustinian tradition and Benedictine. Julian had a lot of confidence in the biblical texts, which she relates to her work, clearly quoting from memory. She defines herself (in her book) as an "unlettered person," which usually meant someone with no knowledge of Latin and theological science.

The central topic of Norwich’s work is God’s motherhood that she takes from the Bible, but deals with it in a very personal and innovative way. In fact, motherhood's images of God that are generally found in the Bible and in the writings of other authors are isolated and found in particular places of these works, without this the subject is treated systematically. But this is not the case with Julian, who instead approaches the theme in different parts of her work, thus giving it an original slant.

The teaching of Christ's motherhood is always placed in the reflection on the Trinity. Outcome of the vision is the contemplation and meditation of the suffering on the Cross. From this, Julian develops a reflection on the motherhood of Christ in creation, the new creation and the effectiveness of grace.

What is noteworthy is the fact that Julian does not speak "in parables": Jesus, like a mother washes her baby, comforts, punishes or forgives him/her:

And so in our Mother, in whom our parts are kept unparted, works in us in various ways; for in our Mother, Christ, we profit and grow, and in mercy he reforms and restores us, and through the power of his Passion and his death and rising again, he unites us to our essential being. This is how our Mother mercifully acts to all his children who are submissive and obedient to him ( Julian of Norwich, p. 185).

The most striking novelty of Norwich is that motherhood of God is attributed to all three persons of the Trinity, demonstrating a spiritual sensitivity towards women more so than ever before. In this regard the mystic claims in the book, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, chapter LIX that :

God conquers evil with good. And Jesus, who conquered the devil too, is therefore our true mother. "We received our 'Being' from Him and this is where His Maternity starts". He is our creator, which is where motherhood begins. As with all things: maternal love surrounds and protects.

God embodies the Good of the Father, the Wisdom of the mother, the light and grace of blessed love. He is the Trinity and the Unity. The one who propels you to love and desire.

It appeared illogical that God could be Father and Mother, but as he is our creator, he is therefore all those things. We thank our Lord for creating us; we pray to our Mother for mercy and compassion and to the Holy Ghost for help and grace (Julian of Norwich LIX).

In the last few years, the book of Norwich is back at the center of Catholic speculation after so long in oblivion; not only because it was written by a woman but also for her great intuition fully describing Christ as "Our most tender Mother and dearest" (Pope Benedict XVI 2011).

As we said before, this idea was already present in the Bible and in medieval Christian spirituality, but she once again gave it great prominence. And in our

postmodern era, the intuition of Norwich is fully part of the debate on motherhood of God and on the need for a new theological language<sup>31</sup>.

Julian of Norwich contribution leads to a vision of God fuller and thus more attractive to the contemporary feminism. Her female vision, after a great deal of male theology, has helped feminists to erode the misogyny view of women in Catholicism.

### **7.3 Catherine of Siena: A woman's voice shakes Catholicism**

Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) is one of those women who profoundly helped to influence the history of Europe and today's Catholic feminism through her strong personality and her writings<sup>32</sup>. Catherine lived only thirty-three years, but she reached celebrity status over this short time due to her charitable and political activity, as well as for her exchange of letters. Her family origins were relatively simple of the petty bourgeoisie. She was born in Siena in 1347 as the twenty-third daughter of the dyer Jacopo Benincasa and his wife Lapa. That period was blighted by many plague epidemics, political and ecclesiastical turmoil.

Still very young, Catherine had a mystical vision. Above the choir of the Church of San Domenico, Christ appeared to her dressed in papal garments among the apostles and blessed her. This circumstance led the child Catherine to make a vow of virginity, but this vow she kept secret for a time.

At the age of twelve years old, her parents decided to marry her off. To demonstrate her disagreement Catherine cut her hair. Only after a lot of time passed involving disputes with her family was she able to apply and be accepted by the Sisters of Penance of St. Dominic, the so-called Mantellate in 1364.

Years followed during which she lived highly secluded and in the "mystical marriage" with Christ reaching its highest point. Her activities turned first to the

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<sup>31</sup> The importance of Julian Norwich has assumed in recent decades in Catholicism, it is also demonstrated by the fact that some of her reflections are inserted in the book of *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

<sup>32</sup> Before Catherine of Siena, another woman - Saint Clare of Assisi (1194-1253) managed to bring her voice to the Pope. She received special privileges at that time for all the Clarisse, to keep the extreme Franciscan vow of poverty and not to be forced to receive possessions. Claire is the author of the Rule of Life, the first set of monastic guidelines written by a woman.

care of souls and the sick in their cities. Even the plague and leprosy that raged over that period could not prevent her visiting the sick.

In 1370 Catherine had a spiritual experience in the form of a mystical death; after which her political activity began. She wrote letters to important personalities with particular aim to push Pope Gregory XI to return to Rome from Avignon and to create policies for favorable conditions in Italian cities. In 1374 Catherine had to justify this behavior and give an account of her thoughts before the Chapter of the Dominican order in Florence.

As her spiritual adviser and inspector, Raymond of Capua was chosen by the Church to stand with her. Catherine further committed herself with more intensively to search for a peaceful solution to the conflicts between the papacy and the king. During this period she made many trips to Avignon to try to convince the pope to come back to Rome. In September 1376 Pope Gregory XI returned definitively to Rome. In 1378, shortly after his death and the election of Urban VI, the schism took place following the election of the antipope Clement VII. Catherine accepted the invitation to go to Rome to support Urban, but did not see the end of the long schism, because she died in Rome in 1380.

The writings that Catherine of Siena left to us consisted of: 380 letters written between 1370 and 1380 to all the powerful of this time, *The Dialogue of Divine Providence* - which Catherine called "the Book" - written between 1377 and 1378, and finally a collection of prayers. She dictated these works to several secretaries simultaneously. *The Dialogue* was developed as an interlocution between the soul and the divine truth. The basic steps were words of God. The language Catherine wrote them in was Sienese (the dialect of her city). She never made use of the Latin literary language. The circle of addressees of her letters was primarily made up of men with whom she entertained in the language of her homeland. *The Letters*, her early writings, were the continuation of an oral communication.

We do not know anything about Catherine's formative years. Legend has it that in a miraculous way she learned to read and write, without help from anyone. For sure we know that, when she was a child, she had not received any form of education.

But look and see how my Bride is defiled in her face, as leprous for garbage, and swollen by the love for pride and for avarice of those who graze at her chest, [...] I say this of my ministers, which are fed at her breasts [...]. See with how much ignorance, darkness, ingratitude and unclean hands, this glorious milk and blood of this wedding is administrated? And with how much presumption and irreverence is received ( Catherine of Siena 2008)<sup>33</sup>.

Catherine was relentlessly committed to promote the reformation of the Church 200 years before the Council of Trent. But the political situation suggested that such a reform must take place at the hands of good and holy priests and not by means of war. In letters to priests

Catherine proposed a reform that, to influence the entire ecclesial structure of the Catholic Church, must start from personal conversion. She referred to self-love as the cause of all vices and humility as the first of the virtues. Catherine recommended a sober life, far away from earthly pleasures, but addressed to the good of souls and inspired by peace, charity and purity.

To achieve what she wanted, she also wrote to the Pope, urging him to intervene. Catherine wrote; “[...] In the garden of the holy Church now grow flowers that smell terrible, flowers full of filth and greed, swollen with pride; these are the evil pastors and rectors who kill and rot this garden”.<sup>34</sup>

Catherine was blessed with a great sense of spiritual motherhood which she instilled in everyone who came to know her. She had the ability to speak to everyone, from the most simple to the most powerful, with extreme tenderness that all felt, and admitted that Catherine was right.

Antonio Royo Martin in his work, *Tre Donne Sante Dottori della Chiesa* [*Three Saints women Doctors of the Church* ] writes:

She spoke to them as effectively as possible: she did this with mystical tenderness, joining together the will of God and her will. In her letters she constantly used expressions like, "Beloved son, my son in Christ, father and my son...", so much so that those who knew her called her: Mom ( Martin, p. 170).

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<sup>33</sup>Catherine of Siena, *The Dialog*, chapter XIV, ESD-Dominican Studio Ed. 2008, p.25

<sup>34</sup> Catherine of Siena, *Lettere* [ *Letters* ], Ed. Paoline, Rome 1972, page 68 ( translated from Italian to English by the thesis writer).



Catherine had a strong will; "I want..." was an expression that appeared frequently in letters and in other writings. She begged Popes in the name of Christ crucified; to the King of France she said. "Do the will of God and mine". To the terrible Bernarbò Visconti, to the Queen of Naples, to the Cardinals, to various writers and men of arms she demanded, "I want!". And to God she dared to sometimes say, "I want this. It is Catherine who asks you this!".

This strong approach did not contradict her profound humility and spirit of absolute submission and obedience to the Church, which Catherine maintained throughout her life. The *I want!* of Catherine is because God wants it, because that is the will of God. That is why she did not draw back or yield when faced with any obstacle.

Within Catherine was the most exquisite femininity and the most robust virility. Femininity refers to the tone of her way of being, to the warmth of her personality. Virility was at the basis of her human and mystical formation: "Be virile"- God told her in one of his communications that preceded her public life - "and face with courage all that Providence is about to give you".

Catherine; when addressing Pope Gregory XI urging him to reform the church, had the audacity to say:

That's what I expect from you, and if you have not so far been firm on this point, I really ask you and pray you that the reform must be accomplished in the shortest time, manly, as a real man, behind Christ, of whom you are the Vicar (Martin, p.171).

We notice in her writings a femininity that allows her to be an affectionate mother without diminishing her extraordinary virile energy that had its basis in what Catherine called the "knowledge of self" obtained through reason, enlightened by faith.

The central themes of her works were self-knowledge and the knowledge of God, which went hand in hand and were indivisible. In self-knowledge she became aware of her nothingness and thus recognized God within herself. Self-knowledge was always knowledge of her own nothingness. If she had remained in this nothingness, the result would have been despair.

From this *knowledge of oneself*, present in all her works and in which we can trace the *starting from oneself* in contemporary feminism, Catherine unsettled

the mind and the conscience of her contemporaries which caused social and cultural changes that still influence the Western world.

#### **7.4 Teresa of Avila: a woman's voice on reformed Catholicism**

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) was born in Spain during a very difficult period for Catholicism. She was only two years old when Luther nailed the 95 theses on the Wittenberg church door (31 October 1517) in protest against the sale of plenary indulgences by the Church of Rome. This public outcry against worldliness and corruption of the church and the subsequent splitting of Christianity led the Church of Rome to remedy in two ways.

First: it intensified repression against all that might have seemed heretical and contrary to the ecclesial doctrine using every means at its disposal. One of these means was the book *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of the Witches) a treatise on the prosecution of witches, written in 1486, which was applied to the letter, and many women suffered unjust sentences under the Tribunal of the Inquisition.

Second: it convoked the Council of Trent () finally responding to many requests that came from the lower classes (the pitiable and the peripheries of society) for an overall reform of Catholicism in accordance with the Evangelical Scriptures.

And in this difficult period of Catholicism, as a result of the Lutheran Reformation, Teresa, at 20 years old, entered the Carmel order, fleeing from home, intending to do what she could despite being a woman. In her book *The Way of Perfection* (ch I, p. 41), she wrote that she believed herself incapable of serving the Lord in ways she desired to because she was a woman. However, she longed and continued to strive to do what she could in his name by joining holy orders and to encourage those she was in contact with to do likewise, believing that God remained with those who give up everything for him.

Teresa had had the intuition to establish a strict cloistered order of total poverty, obedience and chastity within the Carmelite order. In August 24, 1562 the Teresian reform came to life in the little house in San Jose. The great Spanish mystic realized that, in the face of the Church's lacerations of its time,

her response had to ensure she was a faithful wife and daughter of God with adherence to the religious rules she subjugated herself to.

The small community of Discalced Carmelites (referred to as the nuns of San José) offered assured sanctity that soon many young girls asked to embrace the life in which joy and austerity, rigor and gentleness, loneliness and warmth blended in an admirable balance.

When Teresa was 52 years old a new stage of her religious life began. She established cloisters and monasteries: Medina, Malagon and Valladolid (1568); Toledo and Pastrana (1569); Salamanca (1570); Alba de Tormes (1571); Segovia, Beas and Seville (1574); Soria (1581); Burgos (1582) travelling Castile's roads, in the most severe cold and dusty summers by mule or in covered wagons without ceasing to pray and meditate.

She became a "handler of business," as she herself described herself in her autobiography. She discussed the price of land on which to build convents; she conversed with the civil authorities to obtain the necessary authorizations; and she looked for trustworthy collaborators.

In 1567 she met a young priest - John of the Cross, who was studying in Salamanca. Teresa immediately understood his value. Between them arose an extraordinary spiritual friendship both in prosperous times and in the saddest of times.

In 1577 the nuns in Avila dared to elect Teresa the prioress of the convent, as a result their provincial Bishop excommunicated them. As a recluse in the convent of San José Mother Teresa of Jesus remained safe from trial. However, John of the Cross was arrested in her stead.

Teresa did not give up her position and refused to resign herself to the injustices of human authority. She turned to King Philip II of Spain to save the reformed male and female branch of the Order. In 1580 she obtained a papal brief by Gregory XIII, which constituted the Discalced in a separate province. If Teresa had not fought, against authority the healthy reform would have sunk under from persecution and hostilities.

Teresa of Avila -survived the Spanish Inquisition and was a key reformer of the Carmelite Order. She built a new model of asceticism and mysticism that was

the heart of the Counter-sponsored by the Council of Trent. On Teresa's death the reformed female monasteries totaled 17. Teresa is the patron for Catholic writers (1965) and a Doctor of the Church (1970): the first woman, along with St. Catherine of Siena, to receive this title.

Teresa is one of the greatest writers in Castilian, author of some of the most precious treasures of Catholic literature of all time. Her works - especially the four most famous (*The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*) - along with historical news embracing the inner human soul.

In her work, Teresa delved deep to understand the dignity of human beings and particularly of women. She gave fundamental value to the interior knowledge of a human person, obtained by searching a space (that she called *The Interior Castle*) located in her soul. Paraphrasing the work of Virginia Woolf's, *A Room of One's Own*, we can say that Teresa aspires to *A Castle of One's Own*, whose conquest leads to freedom and realization of human dignity. In her main work "The Interior Castle" Teresa provides an uncomplicated program and at the same time urges a great step on the path where the human soul has to make a start to know oneself.

In *The Interior Castle*, Teresa's main work, she has a simple and at the same time grandiose conception of the path that the human soul has to make to begin to know oneself. In chapter I of this work the author wrote:

We can consider our soul as a castle divided into many dwelling places. Made of a single diamond or of a very bright crystal, in which there are as many rooms as there are in heaven. Some of these are placed at the top, others at the bottom or at the sides. In the center, in the middle of all, there is a main room, the one where we place things of great secrecy between God and the soul (St.Teresa 2013, p.13) .

Teresa wrote that human interiority was similar to the image of the structure of a castle with seven rooms. At the same time, the author introduced the symbol of the silkworm reborn as a butterfly, to illustrate the transition from the natural to the supernatural. She was Inspired by the Holy Scripture, especially the Song of Songs, for the final symbol of the "bride and groom", described in the seventh room when the soul could finally embrace her husband (God).

For Teresa is important not to stop at the externals of the Castle, because this does not allow the development of the full potential of love that is present in

every human being. To stop at the walls of the castle would mean living life on the surface preventing the road to self-knowledge and of one's own dignity as a person created by God .

In fact the author explains in *The Interior Castle* (chap. I, p.284) that she saw shame and misfortune in the inability to understand ourselves and to truly know who we are. She wrote that it would be the same as not knowing where we came from and from whom. That we endeavor to learn of this and ensure we know the history of our physical self and that we often forget our soul. We know of its existence from what faith has spoken of but we don't give it the value it deserves. Our soul contains all our beauty, all of what is perfect and good. We do not consider who may reside in it and yet we concern ourselves with the outer wall of our castle, all focus on the physical form.

In her book Teresa faced a central issue (even in our postmodern society) that is the relationship between the body and soul. Our analysis of this subject can be found in chapter 10 of our work.

Another fundamental book is the *The Way of Perfection* in which Teresa proposes, to the nuns, an intense program of contemplative life at the service of the Church. At the root of it there are the evangelical virtues and prayer. In writing this book, risking censure and inquisitions she deals with the male hierarchy of the church that tends to stifle the beauty and freedom of the feminine spirit.

In *The Way of Perfection* (ch. I, pp.50-51) she praised her God, offering servitude to his greatness and believing her God would not fail her in whatever she begged of him. As a woman, she pointed out that the Lord did not despise her sex; that in fact, he held compassion and love for them, even loving women more than he did man. Her writings held beliefs that, in time, the world would know of the quiet reflection of women, who (because of social restrictions) were not able to demonstrate their love for God in public, nor speak truths. She iterated that the judges of her world were men who held all women in suspect and to undervalue them was wrong.

In *The Way of Perfection* lies, perhaps, the first germ of feminism and the first unthinkable yearning - female emancipation. Unthinkable because it was

expressed by a woman of the sixteenth century voluntarily locked in a cloistered monastery. But even if Teresa was an irrepressible innovator with a rebellious personality, she found in the Catholic ecclesiastical orthodoxy <sup>35</sup>a way to express herself fully, achieving peaks of human and religious wisdom, admirably engraved in her literary works.

In modern literature the figure of Teresa becomes a model of affirmation of what women can achieve and dreams they can pursue. In a contemporary society, authoritative and positive models of the past, contribute to the movement of feminism. Feminists (not only Catholic ones) find in Teresa an example of a woman, strong enough to fight the male hierarchies with courage and achieve positive results.

In recent years the "feminism" of Teresa constitutes one of the first illustrious examples of "word of woman". Teresa in fact had not only dealt with humor and awareness of her condition as a woman, but she even anticipated what would later be one of the strengths of Catholic feminists: the presence of women in the New Testament.

We would like to conclude this section on Teresa of Avila by including, a summary of the interview of Julia Kristeva<sup>36</sup>- one of the major secular scholars on Teresa (published in *L'Osservatore Romano*, March 02, 2015). More than anybody, Kristeva, contributed to the rediscovery and appreciation of the role Teresa of Avila in contemporary feminism.

In this interview Julia Kristeva speaks of how she encountered the Spanish nun: Julia spent about 10 years with her prolific works, having previously hardly heard of her. However, this nun became a vital source of European culture for her. She voiced thanks for someone who had brought forth a Baroque dynamism that had changed medieval Catholicism leading to the opening of doors to Enlightenment.

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<sup>35</sup> Although Teresa had always fought against hypocrisy, ignorance, male chauvinism, intellectual myopia of ecclesiastic hierarchy, she did not go out of the Church. When she was dying she said. "At the end, Lord, I am daughter of the Church" (Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience. 2011).

<sup>36</sup> Julia Kristeva is a well known academic atheist writer . Her works include linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy and narrative

Tackling Teresa's belief, forced Kristeva, who is an unbeliever, to immerse herself, not just in Teresa's work but also in her thoughts and feelings. She understood that Teresa (without prejudice and judgment) invited the secularized world to readdress their own beliefs and thoughts by underlying the desire for knowledge. Kristeva spoke of Teresa's faith as mystical in her partnership with Jesus. She explained that Teresa's soul was consumed by desires with no answers nor understanding except that God was within them (The Interior Castle). Teresa stated that, "The pain (of the wound) was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it".

Teresa's pain was not physical, although her pain took on a physical sensation but it was, in fact, very much spiritual. Having experienced it her soul could not now be satisfied with anything less than its presence of God there. In *The life of Teresa of Avila by Herself* she described, our mortal selves as not angels, stating we live in bodies, and points out that God is a man and the body reacts thus to him.

Kristeva studied depictions of Teresa (as well as her work) in the work of others. She reflected upon the Baroque art, which (for her) brought a closer understanding to Teresa. Bernini's marble portrayal of 'The Ecstasy of Teresa' (Fig. 7.3) in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome carried all the pain and pleasure of the nun.



**Figure 7.3:** Bernini, G.L. (1598-1680) *The Ecstasy of Teresa* (1651) Church of Saint Mary della Vittoria in Rome

Teresa was capable of expressing herself vividly and concisely in her writings. For Kristeva (when reading her words) it held all the passion that transmuted into prayer. With the extra elements of music, painting and sculpture it elevated her writings out of the boundaries of words alone, where we could experience her physically. The gaunt, emaciated physical shape capitulated in erotic ecstasy and in search of ‘the Other’. St. Teresa’s ecstasies carried the weight of physical phenomenon, a unity between the spirit and the flesh when one cannot exist without the other and yet it moves between the two: “the body never tires of taking part in the game, and even very much so” ( Kristeva, *Modernity of a Mystic*, 2015). Object and subject, lost and found, inside and outside and vice versa, Teresa is a fluid, in a constant state of flow.

Kristeva beautifully described this fluidity as ‘water’, an element she aligned herself with. She spoke of Teresa’s constant state of flow in this way and in her thinking, perhaps linked to baptism and the purification of water used in the rite. Teresa’s written work is one of conquering imagery and yet these images are not one of sight but of feeling and of the spirit. These ‘visions’ could be reached through the other senses – touch, taste and sound before they reached sight. In Teresa’s Inner Castle, if the flow of water, was her symbolic intention



it would be easy to understand why *The Inner Castle* was made up of a jumble of rooms where energy flowed between them; where her divine God inhabited. She did not depict her Inner Castle as a tall tower, neither a fortress but spread out as if God inhabited them as a dweller. This spoke of God being in her, not around her or beyond her. This line of thought inevitably led to her trouble with the Inquisition.

Teresa denied in 'The Way of Perfection (28.10) that she was a theologian. She modestly proclaimed that she was only the author of a fantasy. Husserl was later to term it "that vital element of the sciences of the spirit".

With regards to Teresa's testimonial role in today's humanism, Kristeva held with Freudian psychoanalysis that queried the mythology apparent in the history of all religions. Even though many had moved away from religious beliefs it remained as doors to an inner life in the modern world. What we must take from them is a detached view, a look from afar at each individual. Lacan marks Teresa's 'jouissance' as unquenchable. The more she dives into it the more she desires. With all her senses inflamed at once she almost reaches points of insanity. She was able to look back upon herself in her ecstasy and wrote with passion on these 'insane' experiences. Her testimony points to the fact that Christian humanism exists. It continues to be misunderstood but is required to explain European culture and to grow from it.

Kristeva chose a 16th Century woman to study because she believed her a contemporary. Teresa did not discover psychoanalysis, nor modern writing, however through her words written 500 years ago she was able to convey, what the body, soul and senses experienced – a profound understanding that passed the boundaries of accepted realization. Kristeva used the word 'seduced' in her description of how this Carmelite nun had won her over, especially with her two favorite works, 'That Holy Irony', which touched upon atheism. In the passage 'Way of Perfection', Teresa suggested the nuns engaged in games of chess to "Checkmate the Divine King", even though the game was banned in the monastery. It was a take on Meister Eckhart's formula, which was to: pray to God to make you free of God. Kristeva's second choice of work was formulated by Leibniz, who in a letter to Morell dated 10 December 1696 wrote how right it was to value the works of St. Teresa. From it he formulated a thought that one

should perceive the world as if there was only God and the soul in it. This thought extended to an idea in philosophy which he made use of in one of his many hypotheses. Is Teresa the inspirer of Leibniz's monads that contain the infinite? Could she be the forerunner of the infinitesimal calculus? Her words and works appeared modest in structure but there was a love of language, of words that she expressed in the description of her raptures, giving her work a contemporary feel.

Teresa's femininity bears a message for us today believes Kristeva as she spoke of Teresa as a baroque saint of exaggerated sensuality. Unique among mystics of both genders who chose suffering; unusual in her abandonment of pure rapture to it rather than a pervasion of the senses. For Kristeva, Teresa is also "the most virile of nuns". Quoting Huysmans (borrowing Freudian terminology) she expanded that Teresa was, "namely of a psychic bisexuality – almost assertive and demanding".

The essence of Teresa's 'motherhood' survived the centuries to secularization where it is the only civilization devoid of a discourse on motherhood, reflects Kristeva. Teresa (in her work as a Carmelite) detailed in her *Book of the Foundation*, a vision and a practice of her symbolic motherhood as "mother superior". With surprise, some of her reflections illuminated *genetrices* (women who carry children in their wombs) when they become mothers and experience that first bond to the Other, for them it is the bond with their child and from there the communication of love, words, feelings, thoughts. For Teresa her suffering was a way towards her bond with God which was the inevitable path of motherhood. She expressed a holding back, which she did not recommend. Did she talk about not immersing herself totally in the pleasure of pain or the pleasure of the enjoyment of it? She called it 'Doing God's Will', where you consider others but without restricting yourself. This dedication to others is supported by the Other and could be termed as maternal dependence – not being content to enjoy in oneself and for oneself, but to welcome and think of 'a Third'. Shoah Hannah Arendt named 'radical evil' as the conception of when people reject, or are not able to think of others from their viewpoint. Kristeva states that:

Well, to put it briefly, for Teresa, being a mother would be quite the opposite: the capacity to think from the other's viewpoint. Teresa's freshness today makes it possible to rediscover that a complex, an unusual, Catholicism exists that "speaks" to the intensity of our need to believe and our desire to know, for which we lack corroboration (Kristeva, *Modernity of a Mystic* 2015).

In our opinion there is no surprise that Kristeva, a non-believer intellectual scholar, praised a Catholic saint. The mysticism of St. Teresa goes beyond Catholicism and does not belong to any religion. St. Teresa lived the experience of a unique contact between the finite and the infinite, between the immanent and the transcendent, which is also found in other cultures. What does change however, is the way people live this experience. To date there is no mystic in the world (past or present) who has described this ecstasy in the same way.

What is certain is that this experience (impossible to describe) involves the entire human person: the spirit, the soul and the body. Bernini himself relied on Teresa texts when recreating his portrayal of her ecstasy in the moment of orgasm; when her body participated with all its senses to a mystical union with the divine. In Catholicism sexuality is not demonized (as claimed by neo-liberal ideology) but rather sanctified. It is not by chance nor an oversight that the Bernini statue of Santa Teresa is located in the center of one of the main catholic churches of Rome.

What is surprising is Kristeva's article making a continuous reference to the maternity of the Saint. Kristeva was very careful to describe St. Teresa symbolic motherhood as "mother superior". Maternity is the first bond with the Other that creates mutual dependence. In fact Kristeva says "So this is what could be called maternal dependence: not being content to enjoy in oneself and for oneself, but considering the existence of a Third, acceding to the will to respect and support others and never to disappoint" ( Kristeva, *Modernity of a Mystic*, 2015). That is, the empathic relationship: the ability to look through the eyes of the other - an intrinsic characteristic of the mother. This is a value we should preserve if we want to avoid the "radical evil", whose advent would mean a new Shoha for humanity.

## 7.5 Conclusion

Although the religious choice presented to women were sometimes an escape from a male-dominated society; our authors, as evidenced in their work, chose the monastic or hermit life as a genuine desire for a closer contact with God, and not as an obligation imposed by the family; or as an escape from a male-dominated society.

We deliberately emphasized the importance of these writers in our work because there was (until a few years ago) a tendency to not want to see (especially within Catholicism) the cultural and social contribution that these veiled women led and continue to lead in contemporary society and in respect of women. Their independence has always been viewed with suspicion by ecclesiastic hierarchy and civil society. From the onset they were strictly controlled; called to defend themselves by the courts and censored, or their work partly modified.

It took another 300 years for the Church of Rome to finally weaken its attitude of suspicion towards feminine genius. Not because the Church recognized the value of women but because it was forced to by consequences resulting from the French Revolution.

L. Scaraffia and G. Galeotti (2015) in their work *The Church of the Women* write:

The ecclesiastical institution, which for centuries also led civil society was cut off from power. To avoid the overwhelming secularism that inspired the revolution and spread from the nineteenth century onwards, the Catholic Church was forced to ally with another oppressed social group: women. Not that this approach mitigated the underlying misogyny of the Church, but this alliance, when properly enforced bore fruit. The paradox, then, is that while the ecclesiastical institution, on the ideological front, resists attacks, it in practice opens and grants because he has no choice.

As it is known: the secularization caused men to abandon faith en masse. With the desertion of males, women: although also secular were still practicing their faith within the family unit and promoting it there. Many unmarried women sought religious vocations, and by the late nineteenth century religious female vocations outnumbered male.

Only few can remember it: but the forced alliance of the Church with women (in the mid-nineteenth century) was a great victory of the latter over the former. And the nicest thing is that - the institution

relied on them to keep them from shattering. (Scaraffia and Galeotti, p.34).

In fact they received permission to start new congregations and open schools, hospitals, orphanages, clinics, centers of assistance for the poor (illiterate and marginalized). These new foundations brought Catholicism into contact with life on the mundane level at a very critical time of cultural and social levels in the West through practical actions in promoting human dignity.

It should be noted that the strength of these institutions was not based on money or power, (typical of male ecclesiastical hierarchy) but rather on the maternal sense of these unproductive mothers who devoted their whole lives to the social and spiritual recovery of the poor and marginalized. In her article, on the *Osservatore Romano*, G. Galeotti writes:

In our Christian imagery, the images of the Pieta (Michelangelo), reveals the extreme act of the mother caring for the body of her crucified son which constitutes the highest and strongest symbol of this ability to care and love that continues beyond death. As is written by Julia Kristeva: "if any love for each other is rooted in this fundamental archaic experience, unique and universal, that is maternal love; if maternal love is the least ambivalent, it is upon the maternal love that Christian caritas and secular human rights are based." Maternal care, in fact, is the model of reference for all humanitarian relations ( Galeotti, p.5).

We will see in the following chapter how “maternal care” is the key word of our work. The full analysis of this word (in its symbolic and natural meaning) will lead us to the final conclusion.

The foundresses were the first women to drive themselves successfully and obtain considerable sums of money. They managed themselves effectively in new social situations and travelled to unfamiliar places all over the world. These new congregation for women overturned the rule to keep within an aspirant nuns' dowry. In fact they started with a minimum capital, sometimes even from zero.

The survival of the new congregation rested on the business skills of the foundress who often come from middle-class families with a high level of education. This enabled the foundress to become professional nuns prepared in

various cultural fields (especially as teachers and nurses) which in turn freed women belonging to the poorest working classes.

But although maternal love was the *primum movens* on which the female religious foundations rested, this alone was not enough to bring forward (through time) the countless institutions born in all parts of the world. Other qualities are required for foundresses, and they lived up to them, despite man's mistrust of their authority.

They didn't theorize the right of the emancipation of women (as the secular feminists did), but Catholic nuns of the nineteenth century did prepare the ground for it. They proved how women were able to play important roles in areas that until then were considered exclusively male.

In our day, a renewed and universal awareness of woman's dignity can not help but draw from the creative and the unconventional intelligence of these protagonists of history. Their spirituality, their sense of motherhood, care and treatment of human suffering, illuminates the present that sees woman, more and more involved in many sectors of active and speculative life.

It was the feminine genius of these women; and in particular the maternal dependence, (described by Kristeva) of Teresa of Avila that illuminated the life and work of the next author: Jewish Catholic postmodern Edith Stein.

## **8 POSTMODERN FEMINISM AND THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF WOMEN: EDITH STEIN (1891-1942)**

Edith Stein came into this world during the feast of atonement (Yom Kippur being a very important Jewish religious festival). Edith's parents welcomed their 11th child on the 12 October 1891 in Breslau. She never knew her father as he passed away when she was only 2. Her mother, alone with her children, had to carry the full burden of running the family timber business and bringing up the children. Hard-working and devout, her time was spent doing what was necessary to keep her family fed and clothed and she neglected to pass on her strong religious beliefs to her children.

Edith worked hard at school and in 1911 she studied German and History at the University of Breslau. Here she was interested on women's issues becoming herself, for a short time, a suffragette. At the university she had the opportunity to attend some of Edmund Husserl's philosophy lessons. She was fascinated and realized that her passion was the phenomenological school created by Husserl in Gottingen.

In 1913, Edith transferred her studies to Gottingen University. Her internship under Husserl as a student, and soon after as a teaching assistant, was an innovative time for all who were captivated by Husserl's new philosophical outlook on reality. His phenomenology inadvertently drove a lot of his students towards Christianity.

With the assistance of Husserl, Edith Stein passed her doctorate *summa cum laude* (on August 13, 1917) at the age of twenty-five years. She was the only woman in Germany of that year to pass a PhD. Not only had she passed but she was awarded a distinction for her thesis entitled: "The Problem of Empathy".

Whilst writing her thesis she recalled a pivotal incident when she had gone to the Cathedral in Frankfurt. There, she watched a lone woman placing a shopping basket to her side and kneeling to silently pray in the empty church. Accustomed to Judaism's collective cults, it was the first time she saw someone

enter a church as to have an intimate conversation with a friend. It was something she never forgot.

Edith's ambition led her to leave her job under Husserl and work independently. Her aim in 1918 was to win a professorship. Husserl encouraged and helped her by writing the following to the committee. Her goal was denied, not only for being a woman, but because of her Jewish heritage.

In 1921, Edith spent a few weeks in the country mansion of a married couple of philosopher friends in Bergzabern. Whilst she was there she read St. Teresa of Avila's autobiography. It captivated her and she read it throughout the night, at one sitting and when she closed the book she realized that she had finally found the truth. Edith confessed that the reading of Avila had ended her long search of the true faith, and that seeking the truth, even through reason, is seeking God. A few months later she converted to Catholicism and wanted to join a Carmelite convent.

Whilst working on her anthropology Edith accepted a lectureship position in 1932 at the German Institute for Educational Studies at Munster University. Within a year of this new position in the Roman Catholic division Germany's future road had taken a very wrong turn. Edith had known of the terrible things that the Jews had suffered in the past and understood that God had once again, laid a heavy burden on his people. She soon realized that the burden was also hers. The new order in Germany made it impossible for Edith to continue teaching. The Aryan Law of the Nazis prevented Edith from seeking other opportunities and she found herself foul to their regime: she had become a stranger in the world.

With little chance ahead for her, Edith went to Cologne and joined the Carmelite Convent on 14 October. Within 6 months, on 15 April 1934 her investiture ceremony took place. The Arch-Abbot of Beuron celebrated the mass and Edith Stein emerged as Sister Teresa Benedicta de la Cruz. Anti-Semitism took a firm grip on 9 November 1938 when synagogues were burnt and the Jews in Germany were terrorized. Whilst in prayer with her sisters in the chapel the Gestapo entered the convent on 2 August 1942 and arrested Edith Stein.



Five days later in the early morning, Edith Stein was taken, together with 987 Jews and interred in Auschwitz. It was possibly on the 9 August (2 days later) that she and her sister (including many others) were gassed.

Edith Stein was beatified in Cologne on 1 May 1987 by Pope John Paul II and declared a saint on 11 October 1998 in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome; and patroness of Europe in 1999 together with Catherine of Siena and Brigit of Sweden.

Stein's literary production was immense (and not all has been translated to English). For our work we will focus on the following titles: *On the Problem of Empathy*, *Essays on Woman*, *The Hidden Life*, *The Science of the Cross*, *Finite and Eternal Being*, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, *Self-Portrait in Letters* (1916 -1942), *Potency and Act*, and *Studies toward a philosophy of Being and Science of the cross*, which remained unfinished due to her death in Auschwitz.

Edith Stein was a complete and at the same time complex figure. She was complete because she possessed intellect, morality and religion in which a human being can best manifest its potential. Her life was characterized by a plurality of activities: with an open and friendly character she was interested in every expression of common humanity.

Edith is a complex figure because in her existence of plurality, "wires" guided her along different paths: that of anthropological, philosophical and theological research, spirituality and of the exemplary moral life she lived.

In our work we are particularly interested in her intellectual commitment to women and in her *vocation* in society aimed to reflect on many issues present in the tradition of the history of Western culture. But her effort is not however, confined to an abstract theory but descends into a concrete social and historical situation. This was evidenced by her additional commitment as a woman lecturer in the years 1928-1932 - a fertile period from the point of view of her theoretical research, her spiritual life and her educational activities.

Before we further analyze her work - *Essays on Woman* and try to grasp all the meanings of originality and modernity, which make Stein a postmodern

feminist, we have to advance by stages to work out which kind of sap her masterpiece was nourished from.

The first stage will cover her training at the phenomenological school of Husserl, the second stage will be on her doctoral thesis on empathy and the third and final stage will cover her specific work on women. For our research we will rely, almost exclusively, on some of Stein's literary works.

## 8.1 Phenomenology

All her life, Edith Stein had set herself the following questions: *What is the meaning of existence? What is its ultimate fate?* With an innate sincerity Edith explored the ways of truth and did not accept compromises. Edith Stein writes in her autobiography, *From the Life of a Jewish family*:

We are in the world to serve the truth (Stein 2007).

And in this anxious search for truth, Edith entered the school of Husserl as an atheist. And his phenomenology theory influenced much her intellectual formation.

In an anti-dogmatic, descriptive and essential attitude, Husserl based his research method, (not deductive but ostensive), on the "essence", the *epoche*<sup>37</sup> (or transcendental reduction), through which consciousness is analyzed and gives life to an inter-subjective and interpersonal research. The substantive element, therefore, was not reduced to a quantity or to a structure mathematically detectable, but was understood through a philosophical and not a scientific process.

For Husserl phenomenology was the search of the last and objective essentiality: in the Husserlian specificity, the phenomenon was both what manifests to the philosopher (the show that is presented to the viewer), and the manifestation itself as such, original and transparent (*epoche*). To use the words

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<sup>37</sup> Epoché (stop, pause in Greek). Act by which you put "in brackets" the contingent existence of the order of things to draw the pure essence. In the sense that, the thinking person, to know the value of something, must evade the emotional suggestions and project the value itself in a sphere separated from direct experience.

of Stein in her work, *What is phenomenology?* “The spirit finds the truth; it does not produce the truth. And the truth is external” (Stein 2007).

Phenomenology implies the impossibility of separating the *differences*: it proposes the overcoming of subject and object, through a resumption of the Scholastic theory of *intentionality*<sup>38</sup>, mediated by the lesson of Franz Brentano (1883-1917) Husserl’s teacher.

A duality with no dualism: sees the world not as an object and rejects objectivism as reductionism. Duality, then, that does not exclude (out-out) but includes (et-et) and where the intention is the key to understanding the correlation of consciousness and reality, *logos* and phenomenon.

Phenomenology: as a science of the essence and of a methodological calling; to go out on your own and to go to the other: the logic of integral human training. This allows you to divert attention from the surface, the factuality inessential, to finally see what is; thereby, it feeds the detachment from subjectivism and promotes the desire for a filling which comes from the other, perhaps also from elsewhere, in any case not attributable to the individual ego.

Regarding the phenomenological view Stein says in her work, *Finite and Eternal Being* :

We use the term vision (Schau) because for us ‘to see’ is the most penetrating and convincing way of knowing. But we must point out that it is not something that resembles the way we usually see, that is to grasp from the outside, from a distance. But it is a knowing that is one with the object of knowledge: it is like the depth we have of knowledge about our own life (Stein, p.68).

According to Edith Stein: the way in which phenomenological philosophy looked at the world of modernity inaugurated an attitude not only new but also humble, docile, malleable and obedient. Stein anticipated (by several decades) the themes of our postmodern era and read Husserl beyond Husserl. She had the ability to look beyond, and with humility, the contingency of philosophical-

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<sup>38</sup> The word *intentionality*, taken from the medieval Scholastic, is the fundamental trait of psychic phenomena of being directed to an immanent object: the feeling to hear, the representation to the represented etc. Psychic phenomena can, therefore, be classified according to the characteristics of their intentions, that is according to the way in which the object, they refer to, is given to consciousness (U. Eco, *History of Philosophy*, p.317).

anthropological speculation of her time which confirms her autonomy, originality, freedom and even the courage of her thoughts.

It is well worth reading this entire testimony, centered on humility of phenomenological attitude, which she learned in the school of Husserl and that she preserved in all her works and life. In her work *The search for truth. From phenomenology to the Christian philosophy*, Edith Stein writes:

About Husserl: it must be said that the way in which he explored the object (the things) and the way he taught us (students) to intellectually understand it -in all its force- and to describe it objectively, accurately and thoroughly has released us from an arbitrary ego, leading us to a simple, obedient and humble attitude to the objects.

This attitude has also led to liberation from prejudice to an unconscious availability to accept intuitive evidence. And towards this attitude, which he has accustomed us consciously, Husserl has made many of us also free and available to the Catholic religion, so much so that, a large group of his students have to thank him if they did indeed find the path of the Church: the path that he never found (Stein, p.106).

## **8.2 On the Problem of Empathy**

The analysis of the first stage (phenomenological) of the intellectual formation of Stein is complete. The second stage concerns - empathy. This subject has returned to the fore in recent years, especially in relation to the discovery in the neurological field of mirror neurons<sup>39</sup>. This confirms, even more, the relevance and modernity of Stein's work.

In the summer semester of 1913, following the seminar of Husserl on nature and spirit, Edith was impressed by Husserl's argument regarding the problem of objective knowledge of the external world. Her teacher stated that such knowledge was attainable only in an inter-subjective way; that is, by a number of individuals who found themselves together in a mutual exchange of knowledge. The understanding of empathy described by Husserl was not just to

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<sup>39</sup> Mirror neurons are a class of neurons that are activated when someone executes an action, deed or feat and then observes the same act executed by someone else . They were discovered in the 1980s and 1990s, by the neurophysiologist Giacomo Rizzolatti. These neurons confirm that empathy does not arise from an intellectual effort, but it is part of the genetic makeup of the species.

be aware of another person's feeling of their experiences, but to also appreciate and be aware of their own experience of that matter.

Stein, in her dissertation, decided, therefore, to study in depth - empathy. She explained it as the act by which we perceived different experiences of the other in an unoriginal mode. To illustrate empathy, she made the following example, in her work *On The Problem of Empathy*: "A friend tells me that he has lost his brother and I become aware of his pain. What kind of awareness is this?" (Stein 1989, p.6).

In the example: empathy is to grasp the pain of her friend as her pain, that is. It does not originate from pain in her own life. Stein summed this up when she stated that empathy is "to become aware" of what happens to the other (the one different from oneself), it is "love for each other" that makes it possible for this meeting "from person to person." It is a "feeling for the other but remaining as ones own self ": to live the other's feelings in oneself , in order to reach a common understanding, taking up the joy, the pain, the hope of those around us.

Stein shows, working on this issue, what her dominant interest is: the human person with the close connection within a social dimension. In fact the problem that urged her more was to clarify the possibility of understanding between people. The author writes:

If we take the self as the standard, we lock ourselves into the prison of our individuality. Others become riddles for us, or still worse, we remodel them into our image and so falsify historical truth (Stein 1989, p.116).

In her doctoral dissertation, Edith Stein deals with a subject that is central to her later work *Essays on Woman*: that of otherness. That is the relationship between one's own subjectivity and that of others; and the other's knowledge, preliminary taken from the affective and ethical position. Within this study she tracked down in human subjectivity - the bodily dimension as an indispensable tool of communication, but also the psyche and the spirit dimension.

Moving from an analysis of the acts that characterize a human being, by bracketing (epochè) as tradition had taught, but not denying its value, Stein analyzed the phenomena that presents itself as specific acts of the psyche and spirit. She read through this research on the essence of such acts and concluded

that the human being is made up of the corporeal, psychical and spirit. The phenomenological analysis confirmed what the classical philosophical schools had taught about human structure. In her PhD on empathy Stein explains that:

I live each action of another person like an action that proceeds from a will and this in turn, by a feeling; with that, it is simultaneously given a layer of the person and a range of values that are remedies available for him/her in principle.

A single action, and also a single body language - a look, a smile-can therefore offer me the opportunity to gain an insight into the person's heart (Stein 1998, p.218).

The author also points out that the subjective-spiritual empathy can also be a powerful tool for self-knowledge and self-assessment, that knowledge is crucial, not only for the other, but for ourselves. Because as personal empathy structures are formed, it can become clear what we are and what we are not compared with the other person. Stein claims that:

From what we have said, comes out also which meaning plays the knowledge of the others for the purpose of our "self-knowledge". That not only teaches us, as we have previously seen, to place us as an Object of ourselves, but it leads us even to the development of what "slumbers" in us. And therefore it makes us clear, (because empathy of personal structures are formed differently), what we are and what we are more or less than the other. With this given at the same time, in addition to self-consciousness, is an important help for self-evaluation. For a person, the fact of living a value is fundamental compared to his value. Thus, with the new values acquired by means of empathy, his eyes unfold simultaneously on the unknown values of a person. While, empathizing, we encounter spheres of value to us precluded, we become conscious of its own defect or disvalue (Stein 1985, pp.227-228).

Stein, still far from faith, closes her dissertation with an interesting challenge that certainly is worth knowing. Being a person and also a spirit, at this level with whom can we empathize? Only with other people? Stein states:

Are spiritual people not riddled with contradictions? There are those who claim to have experienced the grace of God and thus a profound and sudden change in them takes over; and others who believe an angel guides them through their life, protecting and consoling.....

In any case it seems to me that the study of the religious consciousness is the best means for the answer to this problem, as indeed this response is of greatest interest in the field of religion. In the meantime I must postpone further research on the answer to this question and satisfy myself with a "non liquet," "It is not clear" (Stein 1985, p.230).

Stein found an answer to these questions, when (at the height of her intellectual maturity) she arrived at the Catholic religion. From this moment on the theme of empathy linked to its three aspects, spiritual, physical and psychological, was developed in all of her works.

We can conclude this analysis of the work of Stein *On The Problem of Empathy* summarizing her concept of empathy as: living in the other's feelings, in order to reach a common understanding, taking up the joys, the pains, the hopes of those who are beside us. "Because without common understanding, the ultimate goal of man, his realization, is unreachable" (Stein 1989). It is not just understanding the experiences of the other, but in some sense taking them on as one's own. In empathy, one takes the place of the other without becoming strictly identical to him.

This statement deserves special attention in our work for two reasons. The first is the close relationship between this topic and Catholicism where empathy is the basis of the personal relationship between Jesus and women in the Gospel. Where to go towards the person (sharing his humanity) is the essence of Christian love testified by Jesus. The second reason is the close relationship between empathy and the maternal sense of the woman, theorized by Stein in different works.

Contemporary studies are only now beginning to offer what she wrote then. She was perhaps 100 years ahead of her time. In fact, it should be emphasized that empathy has found a great academic interest in our postmodern era. Actually, new scientific studies<sup>40</sup> claim that women, as well as the females of primates are genetically more predisposed and capable of empathy. These studies show that women are genetically more interested in their similarities and thus naturally predisposed to the mothering role that pushes them to take care of their children and to pay close attention to their communicative signals, even non-verbal.

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<sup>40</sup> University of Tampere (Finland) together with the University of Milano-Biocca (Italy): Motherhood and oxytocin receptor genetic variation are associated with selective changes in electro-cortical responses to infant facial expressions, published in *Emotion, (American Psychological Association) May 2014.*

Royal Society Open Science: *She more than he: gender bias supports the empathic nature of yawn contagion in Homo sapiens*, January 8, 2016. <http://rsos.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/3/2/150459>.

The phenomenological empathy, and maternal sense linked to it were found in her lectures regarding woman and her vocation, contained in the book *Essays on Woman* - which we are going to examine next.

### **8.3 Essays on Woman**

The book *Essays on Women: her Role According to Nature and Grace*, is a collective series of conferences on woman held by Stein between 1928-1932. The titles of these conferences are from the following chapters in her books: *The Ethos of Woman's Professions* (1930), *The Separate Vocations of Man and Woman According to Nature and Grace* (1932), *Spirituality of the Christian Woman* (1932), *Fundamental Principles of Women's Education* (1931), *Problems of Women's Education* (1932), *The Church, Woman, Youth* (1928), *The Significance of Woman's Intrinsic Value in National Life* (1928) and *Mission of the Catholic Academic Woman* (1929).

Throughout her work Edith was always careful not to theorize because of her involvement in education as a teacher. For her, the objective of education was in fact to accompany each person as they discovered their own vocation, which is not something "added from above", but a reality that God had inscribed for each female or male being.

A further consideration about the Edith's position is that of her constant focus of the individual person. We do not belong to the human race simply as women or as men: each one of us is a being in himself, unique and unrepeatable, the bearer of special features, values, skills, called by vocation to a task that is his alone.

Edith, who arrived at the Catholic faith a few years before these conferences constantly referred to the Holy Scriptures. She especially espoused the first three chapters of Genesis, as well as the Letters of St. Paul to the Ephesians, to the Corinthians and Timothy. The reference to the Virgin Mary, which for Stein was certainly the model of every human being and, in a special way, the prototype and reference of every Christian woman.

Edith was in contact with feminist movements, and she knew all the feminist theories, from the most radical to the most moderated. The aim in her work was to redefine the woman question, making a careful philosophical analysis of the



male-female ratio. A philosophical analysis that could seize, in the unity of the human being (in his anthropological unit), the differences that exist between man and woman. Together with that, she wanted to also grasp the differences that human beings, taken in their totality, had in their choice of vocation in life. Stein, thus, proposed what could be termed as a *dual anthropology*, in which every human being is made up of a male and a female component. Steins writes:

The species, man and woman, is expressed in individuals differently. First, they are more or less perfect realizations of the species. They express more forcefully the traits of one or the other. The man and woman have the same basic human traits in their essence, and some of these prevail not only in the sexes, but also in individuals of this or that sex.

Therefore, some women may have a strong approximation to the manly species, and vice versa. Which can be connected with to an individual mission. Of course, for all women, marriage and motherhood are the first task, but they are not for every particular individual. There may be women called to particular cultural works, and for these their talents are suited.

Each individual has his place and his task in the great development of mankind. Humanity must be conceived as a single large individual .....

Every particular man is a member of this whole. In each member the essential structure of the whole is repeated, but together each one has its own character of member that he has to make develop if he wants that the whole develops.

The human species is realized only in the course of history, in which the great individual, the humanity, is concretized. And only in this overall development, the man and woman species reaches its full realization. (Stein 2012, pp.205-206).

So in this anthropological approach Stein wondered what the meaning and essence of the woman is? The preliminary and fundamental observation that she proposed concerned the inability to think seriously about the role of women unless the characteristics of the two sexes are analyzed. The author explains:

I am convinced that the human species consists in two species man and woman; that the essence of human being comes in two different ways to express itself, and that only the whole structure of the essence makes clear the specific footprint. Not only the body is structured in a different way, not only some special physiological functions are different, but the all life of the body is different, the soul's relationship with the body is different, and in the soul itself is different in its psychic life as well as that of spiritual faculties between them. The female species says units, closing the entire body-spirit personality, harmonious development of power; manly species says

elevation of individual energies in order to achieve their most intense performances (Stein 2012, p. 204).

The author does not see a limit to the development of female dignity based on sexual diversity. In this context Stein expresses her thoughts about virginity. She doesn't see it in conflict with a woman's vocation to her full realization. Stein, personally found, in the religious vocation the full achievement of her dignity. She writes:

Comparisons should not be made between choices of spirituality and marriage. The protection of virginity offered as a personal communication with the Savior, the development of all abilities in service to Christ can be viewed as a spiritual motherhood. However, a woman who chooses the path of wife and mother has a spiritual duty to God too. Both vocations, in the New Testament, align themselves with a divine task (Stein 2012, p.117).

In this paragraph Stein places, at the same level, spiritual and the natural motherhood. This subject is still problematic for believers and non-believers to understand. It is difficult to comprehend the reason why a woman should renounce her sexual life choosing virginity, which is one of the three oaths given when a man or woman is ordained. The author states:

Virginity at its highest, ultimate meaning is not something negative: not empty deprivation, renunciation of something towards which the desire is always oriented ..... but not even aversion to what we have not experienced..... It's something extremely positive: union with Christ in perpetual communion of life (Stein 2012, p.250).

Stein explained in her work how virginity can be understood only in relation with Christ. In fact, for Catholics, the consecrated life is another type of vocation that has the same value as a marriage, but in which sex is elevated to a spiritual level.

As said in the previous section concerning the issue of empathy, Stein looked at the complexity of the woman consisting of body, mind and soul. And it is in the understanding of this complexity that woman finds her realization. Stein writes:

The human soul is not something finished and static. It cannot remain in a state of inertness. It is being in the process of becoming...

In order to improve and grow in her personality a woman must tap into her spirituality. For men, even if they do not envisage it as aim, they develop their own personality when engage themselves in work, action and objective achievements. The soul of both lies in the body

dependent upon the health and power of the body, and yet the body relies too upon the soul for its drive and direction (Stein 2012, p. 109).

This interaction between body, soul and spirit is distributed differently between the male and female species. For Stein: the maternal calling of a woman's nature would always prevail even in its spiritual form. The author explains:

There appears a difference between the sexes with regards the soul and the body. With women the soul and her body are more intrinsically woven. Her intuition is often her soul used as a natural guide to steer her body. She speaks with her soul as it pervades her very being. In this way she has the ability to elevate her soul above the requirements of her body. It serves, in this case, as her vocation for motherhood. Whereas man, has the ability to detach from the soul, to use the body as a tool, for work or a task. The needs of his body does not require the soul's involvement (Stein 2012, pp.109-110)

Stein was always careful to relate the different female and male characteristics, with the aim of showing their complementarity. In this complementarity, the material and the spiritual aspects of the human being must find their balance. And particularly women's emotions play a fundamental role in this balance. Stein claims:

It appears that the more we feed the body with pleasure, the more it demands feeding. A situation that goes on to destroy or ignore the spiritual needs of 'the self'. Thus by not elevating the spirituality of man and restraining the body we destroy the character of the human being.

Man's effort is geared predominantly towards the cognitive and creative activity; the strength of the woman is rather her affective life. This clearly depends on her orientation towards the personal being. Women are more influenced by emotions. It is within the emotions where the soul can be viewed and acknowledged. With sentiment we come to understand what something is, how it is; we can comprehend the relationship of one to another and appreciate its importance on its effect to the exterior, the impersonal and the unfamiliar. Therefore emotions are indispensable if we are to understand something in its totality (Stein 2012, pp.110-111).

Edith continued this reflection by stating that any external formative activity could not be left aside from the given by nature. And the spousal relationship and motherhood, however, should not be seen only in their biological sense: they were rather the ways of being that the woman lives in every dynamics of a relationship. Edith lingered to describe some features that the feminine soul was called to cultivate in order to fully live her vocation as a woman.

The feminine soul must therefore be comprehensive and open to all humanity; she (female soul) must be full of peace, because the small flames would extinguish in the storm; she should be warm, not to freeze the tender seeds; she must be light, because, in the wounds and in dark corners do not line up weeds; she must be reserved, because the irruptions from outside can impair intimate life; she must be empty of herself, to leave ample space for the lives of others; she must finally be mistress of herself and of her body, so that her whole personality is ready to serve to every call (Stein 2012, p.137).

For Edith Stein the different qualities of men and women were meaningful particularities of their sexual bodily capabilities. They must be valued and not discriminated in order to diminish the dignity of women: "..... the woman's diversity is no longer regarded as inferior, but has particular value ....." (Stein 2012, p.165). She writes:

the same gifts are manifested in both man and woman, but in different relation and proportions. Men carry the abilities for struggle and motor movements necessary for domination and conquest; bodily taking what is outside his surroundings in order to expand his presence in the world. Women are the protectors, the caretakers of the future. Living in mortal body, bound by her physical abilities she moves silently, adapting where necessary, understanding what is tangible and acclimatizing to new situations. And she is able to endure great emotional and physical pain. Equal in adaptability she also has the aptitude to do jobs that man can, sometimes in place of him and sometimes at his side (Stein 2012, p.116).

Stein puts no limits between men and women with regards to profession. What is important is not to remain confined by the human aspects of struggle for women's right in a profession. The author states:

Women's paths were written out for them for centuries. A girl was prepared from birth to either serve as a wife and mother, or to serve God as a nun. Throughout time hardly any other calling was afforded a woman of reasonable standing. The nineteenth-century Industrial Revolution was also a revolution for women. From that time onwards women had more options to exercise their varied potentials (Stein 2012, p.121).

In the following paragraph Stein strongly supports the idea that we have to study women's role in society, in its historical context. In fact, according to Catholicism and to G.B. Vico, only with deep analysis of the succession of historical facts can we read the plan of Providence that guides humanity in its entirety.

The historical period in which, with clear separation, housework belonged to the woman and the struggle for life to man, must now be considered completed because of the changing social reality in recent decades. In which way this development has taken place, it is not very difficult for us to understand today. The triumph of the natural sciences and technology, the progressive use of the machine in human labor, have created a great relief to female obligations.

Efforts to achieve a now necessary change have yielded their effect, but not without a serious crisis in the development. This crisis was caused in part by passion - the pioneers of the women's movement and their opponents. Arguments expected and human..... (Stein 2012, p. 92).

We should not forget that Edith Stein in her youth participated in the suffragette movement. She left it after a few years when she realized that searching the full development of woman's dignity in the struggle between men and women, based on their sexual differences, was not her path. She was looking for something closer to the original Jesus message of collaboration between the two halves of humanity, even if she did not know it then.

According to Stein no woman is only a woman; we can no longer think of women linked to only roles as wives and mothers, but we must now have a wider view of the female gender. Woman can express her vocation, and spiritual motherhood, in any profession. Stein writes:

To answer a second fundamental question with regards feminine vocations other than the one of procreation. One would have to be deluded to ignore the last decades of fact placed before us. Women have demonstrated they are capable of extending themselves beyond the lives they once lived. In fact, every stable, normal and healthy woman is capable of holding virtually any position and doing any profession that a man can. A woman, who dedicates herself to a chosen path can attain remarkable goals, should she find herself in a position of having to replace the breadwinner of her family, or sustaining a role as a single mother, and/or taking care of aged family members. Her versatility is admirable and her talents can lend themselves to unusual careers. It appears a woman is not just a woman, she is man too. Similar to her male counterpart she has her own specialties and strengths in all possible disciplines, be it in the field of science and medicine or in the arts. She is even capable of diversifying into areas outside the norms of female paths (Stein 2012, p. 56).

So Stein forecasted the modern vision of the Catholic Church for woman. The classical male idea of a woman as wife, mother or nun did not belong to Catholicism anymore. In many encyclicals various Popes have stressed that

even in this new dimension of working life, women can achieve their full potential.

Dr. Stein promoted a Catholic feminism that combined the peculiarity of women as educators of their children (but also men), with their professional implementation and entry into public life, according to the vocation of each. This was Stein's prophetic vision that only in the last 50 years the Catholic Church has supported.

What asks our time as woman? it asks a need to earn a living ..... ; it calls to collaborate as a wife and mother to the moral health of people; it asks to smooth the way to heaven for others.

Our time, in the end, requires women to possess a true knowledge of life, prudence, practical aptitude; and be morally strong women..... (Stein 2012, p.145).

As in chapter 6.2 of our work we talked about how Tertullian considered woman as the "devil's gateway" and now we can see how Stein views women as "Paradise's gateway". Female qualities in family and professional life were seen by Stein as a strong basis on which it was possible to build a better society. According to Stein, a woman's profession is not only her right but it is a blessing for all of society. And the Virgin Mary must be the source of her inspiration. Stein writes:

Therefore, the participation of women in different working disciplines may be a blessing to private and public social lives, as long as she preserves the specific feminine ethos. Once again we glimpse the Mother of God - Mary at the wedding in Cana: her silent and observant gaze realized something was missing before anyone noticed. She found a way to offset embarrassment and was ready to solve the problem by giving the necessary directives. She did this all in silence and without drawing attention to herself or the issue. Mary can be taken as an example for woman in professional life- for wherever she works, she can do her job in silence and obedience without claiming attention or accolades. At the same time, she should keep an eye on the whole situation with vigilance. She could sense if something was missing, if anyone needed help, and be ready to intervene or regulate, in a discreet way, as far as possible. Thus spreading blessings everywhere, like an angelic spirit (Stein 2012, pp. 58-59).

In this paragraph Stein anticipates the core of the Catholic message of the Council Vatican II (1963). In fact in all official documents of the Church after that date, the role of women in society was seen as a blessing for the progress of

humanity. The promotion of women for the Catholic Church runs on two binaries at the same level of importance: spiritual and material. And in the material the main concern of the Catholic Church is: the right for women to work earning the same wage as men.

In her work on women, Stein put the empathy at the base of her academic speculation, but always in relation to a transcendental dimension of life. Without which it is not possible to develop the masculine and feminine nature of the human being. Stein states:

She can enter with empathy and understanding in the territory of realities that, in themselves, are distant from her and of which she never would care if a personal interest did not put her in relation to them.

This gift is closely connected with her disposition as a mother.....

I think that it would be a meritorious work to ponder these questions seriously and thoroughly. In fact it would have a beneficial service in partnership of the sexes in professional life, but only when both sides have achieved an objective awareness of their talents and limitations, and deduced practical conclusions from it. God created humanity as male and female, the one and the other in his own image. Only when the respective masculine and feminine characteristics are fully developed, can we reach the possible maximum similarity with the divine, and then common earthly life becomes all powerfully penetrated by the divine life (Stein 2012, pp.52- 66).

The analysis of human nature in its anthropological duality is basically the analysis of the person living in a historical and social context. But who has in himself a deep and unique core that Stein defined as the spiritual soul. It is in this spiritual soul that we find the transcendental aspect of the human being, without which we can not be fully realized.

According to Stein, if the cruciality of her work is the description of human nature and its vocation, it does not mean that culture can not be an important element. We respond in this way to some feminist scholars such as Simone de Beauvoir. She denied the distinctions between genders because she considered them a source of discrimination and she attributed the differences only to cultural influences.

According to Stein: human beings are people, despite their differences, and they all deserve their dignity. Certainly they are not always respected, and they do not respect themselves because they have not recognized their dignity. And this

happens for cultural reasons - thus it is important to take action; to work on the formation of consciousness, through even a new educational system for schools<sup>41</sup>.

Throughout her life, Stein fought for women to have access to education in any type of school and university faculty. Her position was very similar to that of her contemporaneous English writer Virginia Woolf. In her work *Three Guineas*, Virginia refuses to donate money to support the army because the idea of war belongs to a male mentality. Instead of this, she preferred to finance projects regarding the betterment of women's education.

For Stein, the education of consciences (based on a historical-anthropological transcendental vision of masculine and feminine genders) could help improve human coexistence, recognition in the *community*<sup>42</sup>; where we live and what is essential and what is related to circumstances.

Stein, faithful to her intellectual vocation of scholar testifying the truth, was strongly committed to appealing to the conscience of the Church of Rome, which seemed not to understand what the Nazi ideology was destroying in society. With great courage, equal to the veiled women previously studied, Stein in 1933, wrote a letter to the Pope asking him to intervene and stop the madness of Hitler.

This prophetic woman foresaw, in her letter, the danger of that inhuman ideology when (in 1933) all heads of government still admired Hitler and his policies. She observed weeks of injustice which contradicted the religious

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<sup>41</sup> Throughout her life, Stein fought for women to have access to education in any type of school and university faculty. Her position was very similar to that of her contemporaneous English writer Virginia Woolf. In her work *Three Guineas*, Virginia refuses to donate money to support the army because the idea of war belongs to a male mentality. Instead of this, she preferred to finance projects regarding the betterment of women's education.

<sup>42</sup> Stein was very careful of the meaning of each word she used in her work. In her work *Psychology of the Spirit*, she explained the meaning of community in the following way: "For community we mean the natural and organic relationship between individuals, for society we mean the relational and mechanical relationship.....: when it happens that a person is placed in front of another as the subject to the object, he examines the other and he treats him according to a plan established on the basis of acquired knowledge and he draws from it targeted actions; in this case both live together in a society.

When, on the contrary, a person accepts the other as a subject and he doesn't put himself in front of the other (as the one who examines the object), but lives with him and he is determined by his vital modes; in this case the two subjects form a community" (E.Stein, p.110-111).



beliefs of the German people who no longer appeared to 'love thy neighbor'. Before their take over, the Leaders of National Socialism had already started brainwashing the people by advocating hatred and fear of Jews. Once in government their abhorrence extended to take on, as followers, known criminals.

Personal stories of prejudice against the Jews reached Edith as public outcries were gagged and excesses of injustice kept suppressed. However, pressure from abroad impeded their movement of hate and the government resorted to more subtle methods, and disguising their true intent by issuing an order that protected the Jews from any abuse. Boycotts became the new way to target Jewish businesses driving many to lose their livelihood and dignity. Edith advised those who had brought these events to pass must bear responsibility for them and those who remained silent about them were as guilty.

Edith pointed out that the discrimination against the Jews was organized by a Christian government. Not only the Jews but many Catholics in Germany (and abroad) waited for the Church of Christ to speak out against, what was clearly unfair. Edith argued that to ignore the abuse of the Jews was to disregard the very teachings of Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Apostles. The Catholic Nazis appeared to have forgotten that Jesus died on the cross praying for his persecutors and forgiving their misdeeds. Edith concluded that: as children of the Church, we must open our eyes to what is clearly happening and to the danger of the loss of status of the Catholic Church if we continue to ignore what is happening. Soon it will be too late to have any influence on the situation.

The Pope never replied and Stein realized her fears with her death under the hands of the Nazis. For years, her letter was kept in the Vatican archives and not released for inclusion in Stein's published correspondence. It was released to the public on February 15, 2003 as part of the documentation dating from the pontificate of Pius XI now available for study.

Recently, Stein was canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church (October 11, 1998).

## 8.4 Conclusion

Edith Stein: by focusing on her academic speculation on woman and her vocation, according to nature, appears to us as a female figure of great relevance, not only for Catholicism (that has always been in favor of motherhood) but also for non-Catholic feminism. Edith strongly argued in her lectures that the dignity of woman was linked to three areas, body, mind and spirit. She objected to any ideology of power that deprived woman of their true specificity - to have natural relations with others and whose primary concern is with their child.

Edith was a modern “Antigone” who opposed (until the last) any tyrannical law that deprived woman pietas (observed with respect from the ancient Greeks) that characterized the specificity of human beings, but in particular women. And as Antigone who paid with her life, she too must for her opposition to the ideology of the moment.

She was a pioneer of *new humanism* because she invited us to step out of ideological colonization of postmodernism where market laws (more and more patriarchal) were introduced which undermined the peace and dignity of human beings.

In Stein's days there was Nazism, now in our time, in many countries of Christian origin, there is an attempt to destroy family anthropologically formed by man, woman and children. In this culture of abortion and waste: a culture in which the body is no longer "mine" (old slogan of secular feminism) but belongs to the market, Edith invited us to seek the profound truth of being a woman.

A search that can only be carried out if, in addition to the promotion of woman there is also a renewal of man. Reflect on the role of male next to the role of female is the task that Edith Stein entrusted to future generations if we want to move towards the path of overcoming conflicts and nurture the hope of peace.

## **9 THE POST-MODERN WOMAN'S CONDITION: FEMINISM OR FEMINISMS?**

### **9.1 Some important clarifications.**

At this point of our work three main points (A, B, C) require clarification to avoid misinterpretations of our Thesis focused on the relation between Catholicism and feminism.

A) No theological work:

The subject of this thesis is of a delicate topic; as is the relationship between Catholicism and feminism which could be understood more as a theological work than a literary one - but for us that is not the case. The works of authors: such as Irigaray, Cixous and Dexter could be construed as theological especially Irigaray in her work 'Divine Women' (in "Sex and Genealogy") which highlighted the following points referring to the Catholic religion;

- God is created out of man's gender.
- If women have no God, they are unable to either commutate or commune with one another.
- There is no woman God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit.
- The most human and the most divine goal woman can conceive is to become a man.
- The virgin relationship with the Father always remains in the shadow.
- The Father is not a single entity. He is made up of three. The Virgin is alone in her sex.
- The divinity of woman is still hidden, veiled.

The author places at the basis of her work on feminism a personal interpretation of the doctrine of the Catholic Church and of the Pope's magisterium. It is

worth noting that on these points, (clearly expressed by the writer) lies part of postmodern feminism

In the opening pages of our work it was important to explain, to the reader in summary, several themes of Catholic theology (based on the Gospel and on the official position of the Church of Rome) in regards to the relationship between God and women. This paved the way for thought on a different kind of feminism (fully explained later).

Irigaray's concerns on Mary (already partly covered in Chapter 5 ) are further studied in postmodern key in Chap. 10.

#### B) References to Literary criticism:

Since our clarification that this work does not fall under the field of theology, but rather within the literary field concerning the relationship between the other, the *Other* (God) and woman, we move on to a second point that can be confusing; what is the current literary criticism on which this thesis is based?

In my course of studies for this PhD, our professor of Literary Criticism, Dr. M. Gordon, continually invited students to clarify at the onset of their research - the basics of literary criticism on which to lay their work. This was to prevent questions from researchers that had nothing to do with the structure of the students work.

For our –thesis we referred to Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) whose literary thinking was strongly supportive of our work. We will only mention a few main points of his thought relevant to us. Bakhtin lived and grew up in Russia, which was, at the time, totalitarian with the freedom of thought and expression curtailed. His position was not aligned with the Marxist way, prevailing in Soviet culture. This led to his marginalization and made his literary criticism difficult to place in any specific trend. Unlike other authors, Bakhtin reckoned that awareness on the historical context was crucial for text interpretation. Actually, each text message was issued in a given situation, which, if not understood, could compromise the communicability of the text. A key point for Bakhtin was dialogic conception of language. Any word is dialogic, it is meant to reach the interlocutor, more than to express the interiority of the speaker and thus it is set up for this purpose. Therefore

analysis of the text, based only on linguistic elements, was considered by Bakhtin to be limited. In his work, *Discourse in the Novel*, he states that a living language must display *heteroglossia*, that is: a socio-ideological language which he described as:

“... the internal stratification of any single national language into- social dialects,' characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, .....this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence, is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it .....“. ( Bakhtin, p.1192).

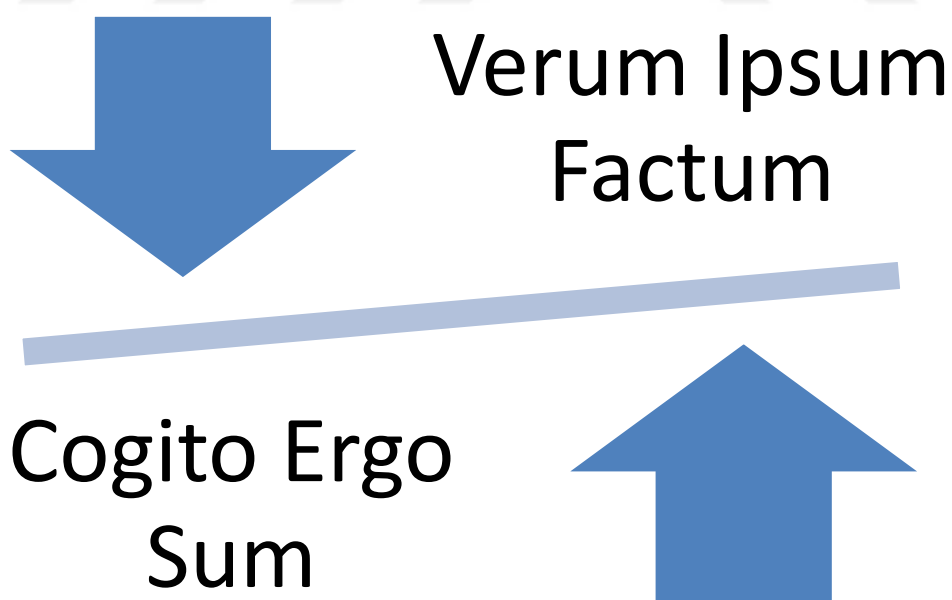
For Bakhtin, an author's role is not only dynamic, in the creation of meaning and text, because he must consider all ideological activities of daily social life, but it is also a defiant attitude to power, through laughter generated by a grotesque style. Bakhtin, with his polyphony of languages (*heteroglossia*), including history, moral, political and social values), made the text more actual. His harmonious dialogism between all the various instruments of the “orchestra” (internal stratification of language), gives the author a dynamic, responsible and challenging role in literary criticism. It is with this “*heteroglossia*” literary vision referring to multiple sources (historical, anthropological, psychiatric, sociological, philosophical and ontological) that can give support to our work. Analyzed by a different basis of literary criticism this thesis would lose its effectiveness and can be subjected to different interpretations.

Another writer on which we lean our research on is the Italian G.B.Vico (1668-1744), author of *The New Science*. According to Vico: history progresses towards perfection, but without reaching it (“ideal”), interrupted as it is by a break or return (*re-course*) to a relatively more primitive condition. Out of this reversal, history begins its “course” anew, albeit from the irreversibly higher point to which it has already attained (idea of a spiral) Fig.9.1.



**Figure 9.1:** The idea of a spiral; course and re-course in history (G.B.Vico)

In his work he expressed a fundamental concept for our thesis, which is in line with Bakhtin: the importance of the historical context. For Vico it was based on *Verum ipsum factum* (the truth is precisely what is made) that was completely in opposition to the *Cogito ergo sum* of Descartes(1596-1650), the founder of western rationalism (Fig.9.2).



**Figure 9.2:** Verum Ipsum Factum (G.B.Vico) versus Cogito Ergo Sum (Descartes).

So for Vico the truth was “precisely what is made” (*verum esse ipsum factum*) and “*Verum et factum convertuntur*” (the truth and the made are convertible).

The author emphasized that science should be conceived as the “genus or mode by which a thing is made” so that human science in general is a matter of dissecting the “anatomy of nature's works”. Vico stated that “For the mind does not make itself as it gets to know itself, and since it does not make itself, it does not know the genus or mode by which it makes itself”. And so the truths of morality, natural science, and mathematics do not require “metaphysical justification” as the Cartesians held, but demand an analysis of the causes - the “activity” through which things are made. Vico stated: “The Cartesian cogito will be able to give certainty to me of my existence, but this does not mean knowledge of the nature of my being. Conscience is not knowledge, I will have consciousness of myself, but not knowledge since I have not produced my being but I have only recognized it”.

One could state that Vico (an author in 1700) is irrelevant. But in our post-modern time we should take into consideration authors such as Homi K. Bhabhain, in his work on postcolonialism: *The Location of Culture* and Edward Said, in his work *Orientalism*, often referred to Vico as well as the feminist writer G.A.Alban in her work *Melusine the Serpent Goddess in A.S. Byatt's Possession in and Mythology*.

The literary and historical research in our work concerning the relationship between Catholicism and feminism is based on facts and do not belong to the genre of search for truth, called *post truth*, inserted in the Oxford dictionary in 2016, that characterizes our post-modern period <sup>43</sup>. So the “Verum ipsum factum” is at the foundation of our work in which we have shown, (in chapter 1) through four scholars of differing nationalities and religious education, Christianity does not object to reason; on the contrary it favors, not only science, culture and democracy, but also the empowerment of women in Western countries until the first half of the 1900.

Things changed after 1949 when Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, where she stated that “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman”. That

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<sup>43</sup> In the dictionary post-truth is an adjective defined as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’.

statement also went through an evolution over the years which led to different developments in the feminist movement.

At the beginning of our work we explained what Catholicism is. Now it is time to explain what feminism means, otherwise we remain in a too general field of investigation, missing the aim of our work. And here we come to the third key point that must be clarified in our work: What is feminism in our time? Without elucidating this point we are open to many interpretations of our Thesis, which can even contradict.

C) What is feminism in our post-modern time?

Feminism: in addition to being a social transformative movement, is also a theoretical reflection: it analyzes situations that discriminate against women, it recovers and enhances the thought of women, reflects on the nature of the female subject and imagines a world in which "sexual difference" finds a place.

Feminism, before becoming theoretical reflection, is a women's movement to change a situation deemed unfair and stifling for women. We state that there are many currents within feminism, but two are the most easily identifiable:

1 - Radical feminism or feminism of difference (Irigaray) believes that today's society is a male society, which therefore provides a partial model of humanity. It claims that the representation of the female figure is the result of a male point of view that has led to the creation of public and decision-making symbols that excluded the reality of women.

2 – New feminism or feminism of complementarity claims access to society with a practice of equality between men and women emphasizing the differences without claiming any superiority of men over women nor women over men.

Grasping the difference between these two feminisms is fundamental to understanding our work. Comparisons in the following points 1 and 2 will explain which of the two feminisms Catholicism refers to.



## 9.2 Feminism of difference

In Simone Pillon's work *The philosophical-historical roots of sexual indifference* (2014)<sup>44</sup>, we can find the ideological basis of the first type of feminism. Descartes who re-examined The pre-Christian philosopher, Plato (at a stroke) eliminated centuries of Christian cultural work. Descartes theorized that the human being was not an intrinsic unity but a division. According to this thought: human beings are - *res cogitans*, (partially devoted to thought) and *res extensa*, (partially attached to a material life).

*Res cogitans and res extensa* are two very distinct realities: the good part, the noble part is the *res cogitans*. This is the part of the human being who thinks - the brain, the soul, the ability to seize, to reason, to think also has feelings. The material part is the *res extensa* which is nothing if not the animal residue.

Christian anthropology - inspired by the mystery of Christ-- taught that man is a unity of body and soul, is an incarnated soul, a being called to the beyond, to the earthly life and the transcendence towards heaven; a soul that lives in unity with a sensitive body with which one can compare. Descartes instead took up the themes of the Platonic soul-body dichotomy. The body - according to Descartes - is simple matter, governed by the laws of mechanics and it led him to compare it to a clock.

This thought was further developed over centuries. From 1650 it advanced numerous steps, and is increasingly being refined by other thinkers. The theme of duality becomes the starting point for the so-called dialectical relationships, primarily attributable to Georg Hegel (1770-1831), with the famous "master-slave dialectic where alterity has to pass by the dialectic (comparison) between thesis and antithesis to reach the synthesis.

This dynamic was fully taken up by Karl Marx (1818-1883), who based his political thought on the dialectic (fight) between the masters (bad) that exploited the workers (good). The only possibility for the latter was the "class

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<sup>44</sup> Simone Pillon: Italian lawyer and National Advisor to the Forum for Family Associations.

He is co-author of several publications and numerous family law projects at the Italian and European Parliament.

struggle" which aimed to subvert the power of the masters to establish the "dictatorship of the proletariat".

Another thinker: Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) went further and applied the principle of dialectics to family relationships. He was a contemporary of Marx (one of the founders of socialism). Engels argued that at the end the duality, body-soul, or *res extensa* - *res cogitans* was also found in every human relationship where every human being could relate with a "something other than itself."

Engels in his work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* argued that this dynamic between the self and the other was always a dynamic, so-called dialectics (conflict), and he believed that the first conflict was the relationship between man and woman, between the male and the female. So much so that according to Engels he believed that the family was the worst way to organize society. As in marriage, the woman - due to her fragile body and to her needs of child gestation, needed help. Thus exposing her to the dominion of the male, who is stronger, bigger and can physically dominate her. This puts her in the position of subordination where she must respect her male counterpart. So every wedding, according to Engels, in every family you can find the submission of women to men.

Engels noted that only when all legal discrimination fell, the true relationship emerged between man and woman. So it is clear that in the family the woman played the role in society that belonged to the proletarian and the husband - the role of the bourgeois.<sup>45</sup>

Engels argued that men who were fathers, brothers, husbands and subordinate women (wives, sisters, daughters) that for them the only solution for a woman was a rebellion against the family institution. Firstly she must refuse to marry and then rebel against the family by fighting and demanding her rights. This theory ripened and became a political movement toward the very end of the

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<sup>45</sup> Engels *"L'origine della famiglia, della proprietà privata e dello Stato* (The origin of the family, private property and the state) Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1963, p. 101-103 and 109-110)

nineteenth century when it encountered the beginnings of the feminist movement.

### 9.3 Phases of the feminist movement

Simone Pillon stated that the feminist movement was not a monolithic block, but a fertile soil through which we can identify three phases.

The first phase of the movement (characterized by the suffragettes), the author defined feminist emancipatory as a fight for equality and the conquest of equal civil rights by women. This phase formally began in the second half of the nineteenth century and lasted until the first half of the twentieth century (although its foundations date back to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution).

The second phase, characterized by the work of Simone de Beauvoir "Second Sex "(1949) and the sexual revolution flowed into the sixty-eight protests. During that period, the goal of the feminist movement was to obtain an equal chance of career and job but also eliminating the obstacle of maternity. During that period many countries passed laws and measures for the legalization of divorce and abortion. In the eighties the second phase of feminism developed further due to contributions from Luce Irigaray and her "theory of difference", in which was stated that there must be a conflict between man and woman (*Body against Body*).

In this idea of conflict there resides the recognition of otherness: in recognizing the other, even in, discord with the other, there is still inherent recognition of the other as one's alter ego, as "other than oneself ", with which we compete with. It is not until the third phase that the feminist movement can accept the idea that: to achieve the emancipation of women, we must fight hard against the dictatorship of the male, of "the other", so far as to claim not only equal dignity but the same "identity".

In the third phase of feminism, Judith Butler, in the Nineties, inaugurated a new season in which feminists could choose non-conforming gender orientations. Post-modern feminism in this sense completes the initial battle against biological barriers (like motherhood) which - according to the activists -

discriminate against women. The class struggle becomes the struggle against gender power structures established by sexual desire to whom would be necessary to rebel through alternative identity choices that are based on the new *queer* paradigm.

At this phase, it is important to highlight, the strong and clear distinction between sex and gender (already started in the early Seventies), which passed from medicine to social and historical sciences.

This is the time when feminism looked for an academic and scientific legitimacy: departments dedicated to Women's Studies and Feminist Studies opened in American Universities - which have now become *Gender Studies*, a change justified by the need to study not only women, but men and women in their relationships and in their differences.

For Pillon, the distinction between sex and gender is perfectly suited to express the famous idea of Simone De Beauvoir written in *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Second Sex): "Woman are not born: they become". Sex is determined by the nature, whilst gender is socially constructed from culture, regardless of sexual data by which a person is instead globally characterized.

In the 70s and 80s, many feminist researchers began to systematically study how different societies (through stereotypes and social roles) build the difference between the sexes; what particular society is expected towards its female members .

The "Gender Theory" then arrived, as we already mentioned, in the nineties to the "Queer Theory", according to which the choice of one's sexual identity is never final, but every day it can be subjected to evaluation and choice, so that the identity of gender is a mutable and vague attribute, worn and changeable everyday.

#### **9.4 Hell is other people: the death of the "You"**

Over the years, various thinkers have understood that the real issue at stake in human relations and in particular between men and women was the "dual relationship." The man developed from the path of history understands that the

real problem of every ontology is the relationship with the other (Other); the duality.

The relationship with God, the relationship with other human beings, the relationship with the world can be carriers of problems and conflict. "Hell is other people"<sup>46</sup> said Simone de Beauvoir's partner, the existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre who was awarded Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964.

The thought of Sartre goes into the depths diade self other than self , and it experiments in this way the human existential loneliness, because the other is always hell, the other does not think like you, the other is different from you, the other destroys you, the other puts you in crisis.

Bringing the reasoning of the dialectic to its extreme consequences, we therefore arrive at the so-called deconstruction, which was theorized by German Martin Heidegger and Frenchman Jacques Derrida. They essentially argued that Western thought had finally identified in the duality the root of all evil, and to defeat it we must go beyond the dualism and overcome the duality, because in this one there always hides a conflict where one of two succumbs to the violence of 'other'.

The typical Western thought on dualism must therefore make way for a new interpretation of reality which is free from "the binary theory" to embrace a substantial deconstruction of all certainty, of each ontology, and this is not only at the linguistic and semantic level, but also at the social and political, cultural and scientific level.

Therefore, according to this way of thinking, for a world without conflict, we must destroy the duality. "Two" should no longer exist, there must be only "one" which rises its individuality to the universal oneness and abrogates any natural difference and otherness.

In post- feminist context this thought was developed in the "Theory of Gender", in which Judith Butler was one of the prime exponents.

The "Gender Theory" si based on the idea that gender identity does not have

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<sup>46</sup> Sartre, J.P. (1959) No Exit , Samul French, Inc

anything biological, but is merely the result of cultural superstructures that condition the subject by attributing to it social "roles" and induce it to follow the so-called "stereotypes of gender".

The fight against such cultural conditioning goes through trying to reset any cultural indication about the roles typical of the gender of belonging and, on the one hand, to the multiplication of genres (today more than 50) and on the other to the total freedom to choose to which of these genres the subject wants to belong.

## 9.5 New Feminism

Even if New Feminism held in common with Radical Feminism, the search for full recognition of equal dignity between man and woman would be different in the path that it follows.

In fact, the two feminist movements were very distant at the time when radical feminism accepted the idea that in order to reach the emancipation of woman we must fight with all the forces against the dictatorship of the male, the "other", to the point of claiming not only equal dignity but identical "identity".

For Michel de Certeau (1925-1986) in his book *Never Without the Other* (published in 1993), the one who is different from myself (the other) is not to be considered an hell as it was for Sartre, but as a source of growth for human being. The author writes:

"What is different threatens us. So let's do everything to clear the tracks; others, death, God, all that designates a break that must be blurred. In order to be identical to ourselves, we need to bring all disparities into resemblance. Chain reactions tend to disguise alterity as this emerges in the field of experience .....( Certeau , p. 86)

Certeau expressed in these few lines a natural attitude of the human being that was to try to apply to the other human being, stereotypes and judgments that are part of its own cultural and social baggage. This was with the aim to frame the other according to categories that may not belong to the other; as if it were an attempt to colonize someone who is different, because it is of another color, religion, or sex.

In another work titled *Shattered Christianity* (1974) our author writes: "In personal, national, social, historical and up to the relationship with the Third World the other is the postulate of conquest" ( p.66).

For Certeau, there was, however, constantly an attempt to subdue the other (the different) to our perception of what was right and good because we rejected a priori the difference.

The author wrote in *Never Without the Other*;

But there is an undefined preliminary: to overcome that instinct of society and security that rejects the difference. Believing that it is possible to ignore or eliminate it would be a dream. Homogeneity is always and only a utopia .....

Victor Segalen said "There is no mystery in a homogeneous world". Certainly where there is no union, the difference is inert; it has no longer a fermenting sense . But the union becomes sterile and insignificant if it no longer re-emerges from the difference that puts it into question. (Certeau, p.116).

Certeau pre-announced a different view of the mainstream postmodern thought that was, the difference is fundamental to questioning one's self. It is a ferment of sense and opportunity when it is no longer accepted as a danger but as a source of growth, in the face of every effort to impose "a uniformity to which the egotism of the powerful, the conformism of the weak, or the ideology of the utopian would seek to impose on us"<sup>47</sup> (M. de Certeau ).

This thought, which puts its foundations in a non-antagonistic relationship between the other and the self, differs from the existentialist thought of radical feminism, principally for the different meaning given to a person and to an individual.

## **9.6 Person or individual?**

Understanding the meaning of a person, partly already mentioned in p.14 of our Thesis would allow us to fully understand the core of New feminism.

To deal with this sensitive issue we refer to Lucetta Scaraffia's review of the work recently published by the French historian Jérôme Baschet "Corps et âmes. Une

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<sup>47</sup> Pope Francis. Speech at Independence Mall of Philadelphia (26/9/2015)

histoire de la personne au Moyen Âge” (Body and souls. A history of the person in the Middle Ages, Paris, Flammarion, 2016). Scaraffia's review is titled “Se finisce il paradosso dell’interiorità” (If the paradox of interiority ends) and it was published in the Osservatore Romano of February 18, 2017, p.5.

The fundamental theme of the work is the concept of person and its Christian origins. How much of this religious root influenced the creation of the specificity of Western culture? How did this separation between spirit and matter make this culture different from all the others based on monistic concepts of the human being? Decisive separation because it then corresponds to a sharp division between the human being and the animal world and, more generally, between the human being and the natural world, which becomes thus a free field to be conquered with the technique.

In a Europe that denies its Christian roots, it does have a certain effect to find out that the term itself of person (understood in its present meaning) has ontological roots derived from the concept of the Trinity, defined as one essence in three people. In the Council of Chalcedon in 451, it was established that in Christ there were two natures, human and divine and that they were united in one person. It wasn't until the twelfth century that the term ‘person’ slipped from the trinitarian and christological to the anthropological, and has since been used to designate the human being. The human person is in fact defined as a complex articulation of two highly differentiated entities, the soul and the body.

The formation of the body comes from the parents, particularly the father - according to the scientific theory of Aristotle, typically preferred to that of Galen, who gave a place also to the mother - while the soul is created immediately by God. The origin of each human life thus becomes a personal intervention of God, a kind of supplement to the initial creation. And it is precisely thanks to the singular creation of each soul that the concept of individual being is born. A concept that is then confirmed and strengthened by the idea of the survival of the single soul after death. Individuation is therefore accomplished through a unique and exclusive bond with divinity. Although



death means the separation between the two constituent entities, the survival of the soul ensures a strong continuity of the person.

Baschet documented the anti-dualist tendency characteristic of medieval culture, which built a dialectical and continuous bond between the two natures that made up the human being, and extended to a vision of the relationship with the animal kingdom and the natural one much less separated from the human being as we understand today, for both are parts of creation, and thus the result of divine will.

This anti-dualistic tension is found in the dynamic between body and spirit, between men and women. Not only was Eve's birth from the rib, that is, by the side, symbolizing a horizontal dimension of the relationship between her and Adam, but in any case the formula *mulier ex viro* applied only to the body, that is to the underside of the person.

In essence, the egalitarian dimension of the sexes is based on their common relationship with God. The identification of the female with the body means that the rehabilitation of the one also involves the other: a process so embedded in Western tradition that we have seen a realization in the last decades of the twentieth century, when the female liberation was accompanied by a very strong body valorization.

The statue of the Church, at the same time symbolically feminine and incarnated by men, is conducive to an intense work of articulation of the values associated with male and female.

Here we find the presence of a hierarchical element and of an egalitarian tension, confirmed by the certainty that does not exist in the soul distinction of sex. From this comes, in fact a fundamental consequence: man and woman are both in the image of God, because it is with the soul that we are in the image of God.

With Descartes the difficult balance that mediaeval culture continued to seek between soul and body broke: the self was identified with the soul, that is with the part he thinks. This statement implied a reconfiguration of the relationship between human and non-human, which, by eliminating the possibility of an intermediate entity, the sensory soul, strongly accentuated the gap between man

and animal. Thinking was the absolute beginning, the foundation that required nothing but itself: this clearly revealed the self-bearing character of the thinking substance.

With Locke: self-consciousness completely absorbed the soul: it was conceived as a pure interiority that depended solely on itself. So in the European intellectual landscape there appeared the radical novelty of a person's conception that could be defined as non-relational, because it did not include in the person itself any relationship necessary for its constitution.

Thus, modern individualism was born, based on the self-perceived conception of the person, claimed only as consciousness. For this reason, the individual is considered to be the supreme value, even superior to society, since he has nothing to do with anyone, and the theory of social contract is inaugurated, which postulates the priority of the individual to society.

The decisive breakthrough occurred with the indisputable affirmation of the human exception, which involved the transition from analogism- that is, from a world in which nature presented aspects of relevant analogy of humanity- to naturalism. So the self-founded and non-relational individual depends only on his own consciousness. He is freed from any constituent bond with the world and with transcendence. He is authorized to consider himself as his foundation and to refer to himself alone. With this he can feel as if he is the master of the natural world. The separation between spiritual and material is the condition for the birth of modern science: first there is the concept of creation, on which God's shadow is watched (as in the Illustration of the Second Vision of Hildegard of Bingen p. 75 ), then there will be nature without God.

## **9.7 Conclusion**

Following the comparison we have done by analyzing the works of several Western authors and researchers, we can now attest that feminism is not a homogeneous body. It has at least two main different currents but with a common goal: the realization of absolute dignity for woman.

And our thesis based on the relationship between Catholicism and feminism, while acknowledging the value of those who think differently, responds to a kind of

feminism, that of inclusion. In this kind of feminism the *other* is intended as a source of growth and the concept of person, very different from that of an individual, is based upon the recognition of the other as "you" and oneself as part of "us".

Now restricting our search to the specific context of the relationship between Catholicism and feminism we can see the appearance in literature of a possible meeting point. Indeed, in spite of the different foundations on which the two feminist thinking currents analyzed so far, Irigaray and Kristeva, (famous authors of numerous books on the dignity of women in society) found a point of contact with new feminism through a postmodern analysis of the figure of the Virgin Mary as shown in the next paragraph.



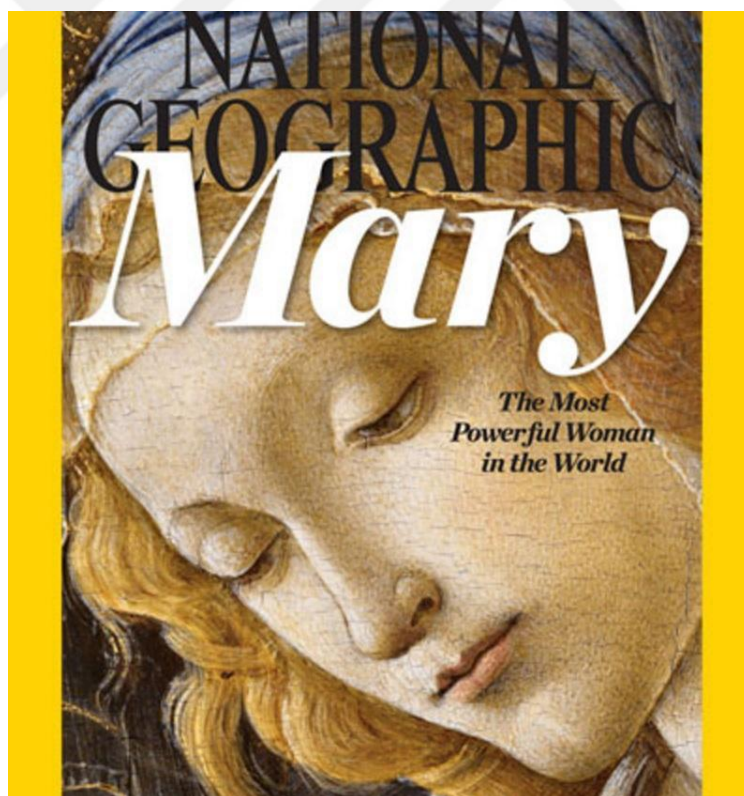


## 10 IRIGARAY AND KRISTEVA: TWO POSTMODERN FEMINIST WRITERS AND THE VIRGIN MARY

### 10.1 The Most Powerful Woman in the World

As we have already mentioned in the conclusion to Chapter 5, many feminist authors of differing thoughts have explored and compared the figure of the Virgin Mary; for Mary has attracted the attention of feminists and non-feminist writers in many countries.

To further attest to her exalted presence, the scientific journal The National Geographic, in December 2015's edition, gave as its title cover: Mary The Most Powerful Woman in the World (Fig.10.1).



**Figure 10.1:**Cover page of The National Geographic in December 2015

The importance of this *powerful woman* in the Catholic faith has already been analyzed in our work. Now we will try to understand why two famous feminist

authors, Irigeray and Kristeva, were so interested in her, enough to write two works *The Mystery of Mary* and *Stabat Mater*, and what contact points can there be between these two postmodern authors with the New Feminism.

To answer these questions, it is imperative to analyze how over the centuries the figure of Mary, even before the doctrines of the Catholic Church, has assumed a strong positive value in both popular and educated culture even outside the Western world, as in part documented by the National Geographic magazine. The following two images of this magazine show the places of worship of the Virgin Mary in the world and in Europe recognized or not by the Church of Rome (Fig.10.2 and Fig.10.3).



**Figure 10.2:** Places of worship of the Virgin Mary in the world.



**Figure 10.3:**Places of worship of the Virgin Mary in Europe.

In this section we base our work on the analysis of several masterpieces of art that will allow the reader to grasp, in a simple and instantaneous way, the messages that the figure of Mary has transmitted to various generations. We remember that paintings have for centuries been the people's literature as an easy way to understand, both for the well-educated and the less educated people of all ages. We will see how these messages transmitted through works of art have contributed over the centuries to the emergence of a feminine reference model for women; often criticized but also beloved by many female writers, among them Irigaray and Kristeva.

During the first millennium, as the Catholic Christian religion became the religion of the Roman Empire and spread throughout Europe, Mary was depicted with regal attributes, as we can admire in the two Madonnas of Constantinople (Fig. 10.4 and Fig. 10.5). She appears in similar stature to an Empress, dressed in gold and purple.



**Figure 10.4:** Madonna of Costantinopole in Nepi ( Viterbo), Italy



**Figure 10.5:** Madonna of Costantinopole in Bellizzi Irpinio ( Avellino), Italy.



It was not until the year 1,000 that Mary underwent a great change to become more accessible and more maternal to ordinary people. The medieval historian Miri Rubin of Queen Mary University of London stated; “She underwent a dramatic shift, evolving into a more accessible, kinder, gentler maternal figure..... A mother’s love came to express the core of the religion story” (National Geographic. p.37).

This statement from the British historian can be confirmed through the Annunciation, by the Italian artist Lorenzo Lotto (Fig. 10.6);



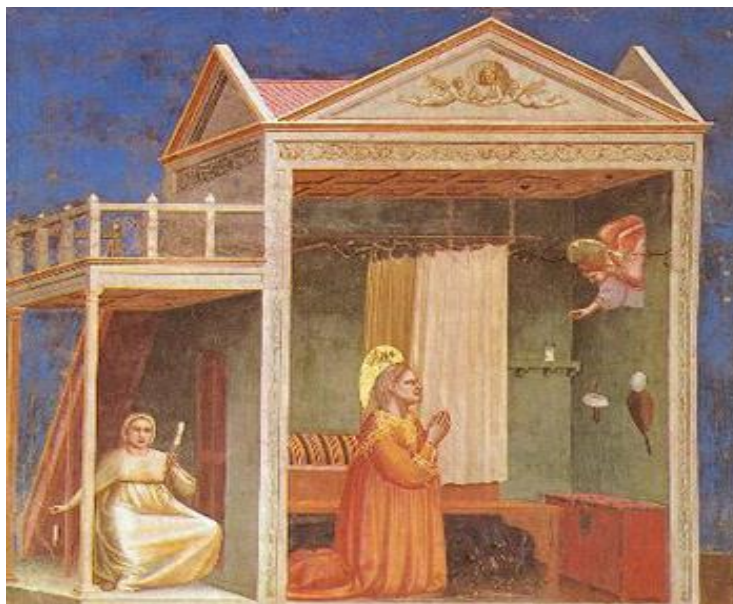
**Figure 10.6:**Lorenzo Lotto (1480-1556), Annunciation (1536), Civic Museum of Recanati (Italy)

In this painting there is a reversal of the figure of Mary Queen, in fact we see a fully humanized Mary. The sudden appearance of the angel scares Mary, who looks for shelter as she turns to the observer. Taken by surprise she moves quickly from the faldstool where she was in prayer. A cat (the symbol of domesticity) also escapes, fearfully. This is an important detail because this was at the time when the inquisition and the hunt for witches was at its zenith and

for the first time a cat was represented in a work of art. It was until 1536 that the cat was associated with witchcraft and was especially attributed to women and it was banished by the Churches. Only Lotto released the cat from witchcraft and linked it to domesticity. This was to emphasize the daily life of Mary and to bring her closer to the reality of women. Mary no longer has an idealized face, but takes the shape of an ordinary woman in which all women can be reflected.

Professor Amy-Jill Levine, a professor of New Testament and Jewish studies at Vanderbilt University, points out that the lack of information about Mary allows people to project the image of grieving mother, the young virgin, the goddess figure, that "just as Jesus is the ideal man, Mary is the ideal woman." She seems correct in describing an avenue for people to connect with Mary" (National Geographic, Dic. 2015, p. 37).

So this ideal woman inspired many artists from different countries, who often portrayed the main scene of the life of the Virgin Mary that of the 'Annunciation'. Among the most famous artists we will mention only a few: Giotto (Fig. 10.7), Fra Angelico, Raphael (Fig. 10.8), Botticelli (Fig. 10.9), Caravaggio, Leonardo da Vinci (Fig. 10.10), El Greek, Philip Lippi, Perugino, Reni, Jan van Eyck and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Fig. 10.11).



**Figure 10.7:** Giotto (1267-1337), Annunciation (1306), Scrovegni Chapel, Padua, Italy



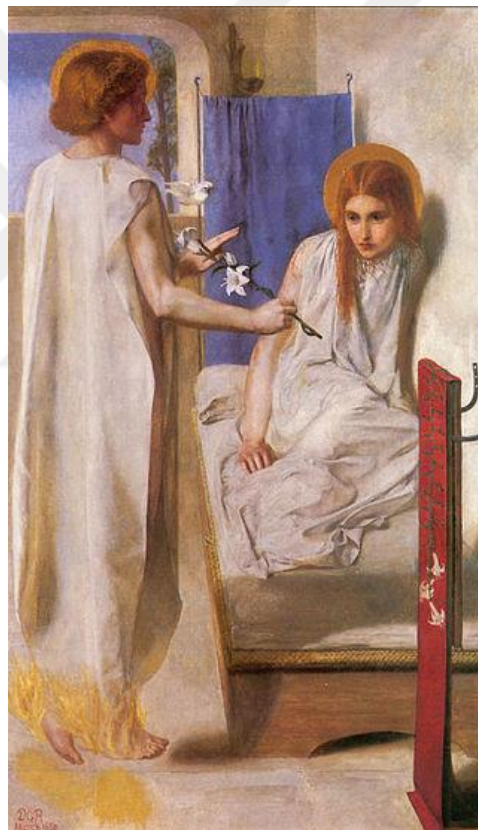
**Figure 10.8:** Raphael Sanzio ( 1483-1520) Annunciation 1502-03. Pinacoteca Vatican, Rome, Italy



**Figure 10.9:** Botticelli, Sandro (1445-1510). Annunciation 1489 Uffizi, Florence



**Figure 10.10:** Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). Annunciation 1472-1475. Uffizi, Florence



**Figure 10.11:** Dante Gabriele Rossetti (1828-1882). Ecce Ancilla Domini (1950)-  
“Annunciation” Tate Gallery, London

In architecture, thousands of churches, cathedrals and basilicas around the world are dedicated to Mary. The Basilica of Notre Dame de Paris (1163) is perhaps the most famous of them all. Even churches not dedicated to her always feature a statue, a chapel or a crypt devoted to the Virgin Mary. For example: in Barcelona, Gaudi’s the Sagrada Familia (Holy Family 1882-) one of the largest

basilicas in the world (still under construction) has a crypt (the most sacred section in a church ) covered by a dome of the Annunciation. (Fig.10.12).



**Figure 10.12:** Annunciation at the crypt's dome of the Sagrada Família Barcelona

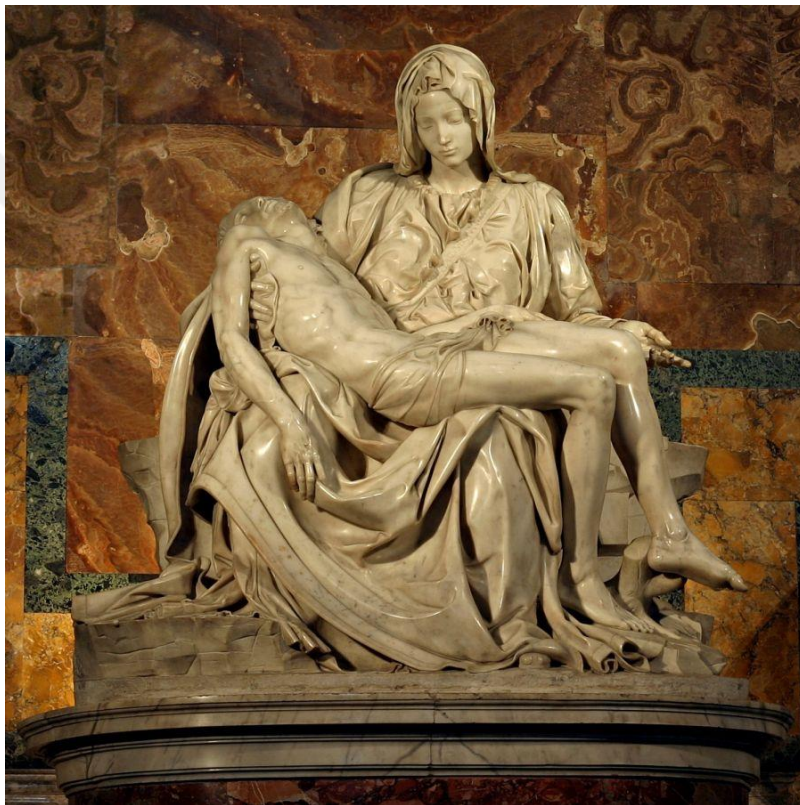
The idea of this work is to demonstrate that the inner center of the church and of the family (also called domestic church) is always to place women as the foundation stone of people lives.

In literature, Marian themes began in Italy with the Canticum of the Creatures of Francis of Assisi (1181 - 1126) and then by many authors: such as Dante, Petrarch, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Angelo Poliziano, Torquato Tasso, G.B. Vico, Alfieri and Manzoni. In other European countries, Marian themes were developed by F. Villon, Pierre Corneille, Paul Claudel, Charles Peguy, Cynewulf, Chaucer, Cervantes, Calderon de la Barca, Goethe, RM Rilke, Gertrud von Le Fort and many others.

In music we have the most famous masterpieces of the Stabat Mater by Schubert and Ave Maria by Liszt, Verdi, Bruckner, Giacomo Puccini, Rossini; and perhaps the most listened of all - the Ave Maria by Charles Gounod.

But in our opinion, more so than any architecture, painting, literature and music, is the sculpture by Michelangelo titled Pietà (Fig.10.13) that symbolizes the highest expression of Catholic believers' faith in Mary the mother of Jesus. This work, realized in 1497 by Michelangelo, at a young age of just 22 years old, is displayed in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome.

The Pietà is an expression of the search for a transcendental beauty, which unfortunately is no longer found in modern works that are now only autoreferential.



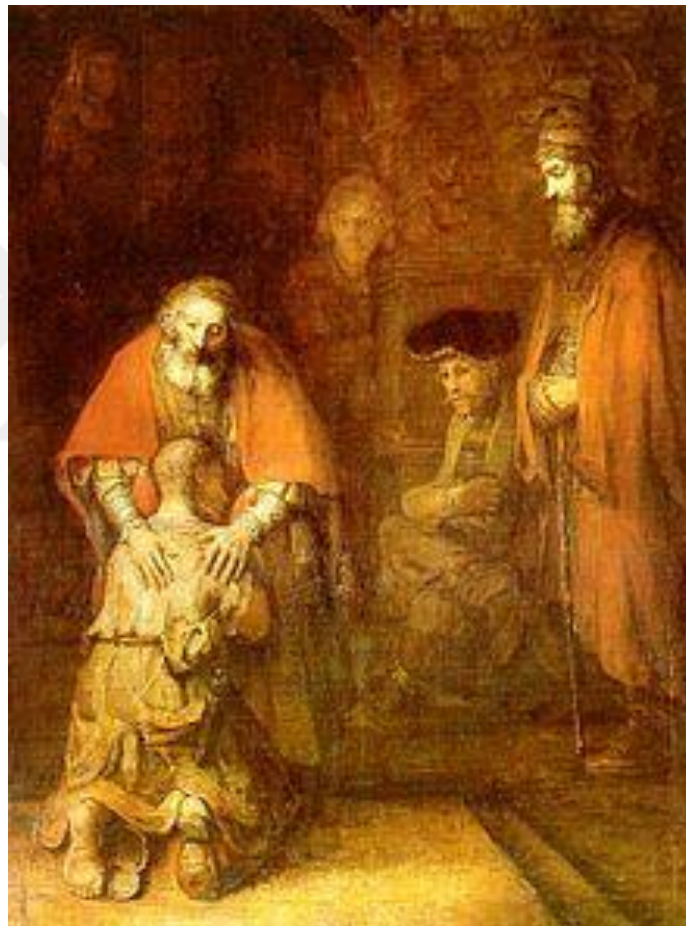
**Figure 10.13:** Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1464) The Pietà (1497-1499). St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, Rome

In the serene gaze of the Virgin Mary we can glimpse the greatness of a woman who leaves room for hope, even in the face of death. Her hope is supported by her strong faith in the given word of her son on his resurrection. She is at the highest phase of faith and closeness to God that a woman has ever had on earth, exceeding all women of the Old and New Testament that we met in our work. Her faith and closeness to God are artistically transmitted to us by Michelangelo's masterpiece showing Jesus in close physical contact with his mother. In his abandoned position, on Mary's knees, Jesus appears asleep rather

than dead, showing to her mother and to us that death did not win even though his body displays signs of his crucifixion (punctures in his right hand and foot).

Purity and serenity on the Virgin Mary's face, looking silent and merciful, her dead son on her lap – a scene that still fascinates and conjures up questions for millions of believers and non-believers of every generation.

We can assert that Mary opened the way to the "feminine" in Christian art and in Western culture so much so that the female part of God begins to become a fundamental component in the Catholic faith, as, for example, we can admire in the painting of *The Prodigal Son* by Rembrandt (Fig.10.14).



**Figure 10.14:** Rembrandt (1606-1669), *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. Russia

There is much to say in the details of the hands belonging to The Prodigal son's father (who is God). These hands rest on his son's shoulders; the Dutch Painter

wanted to bring out the feminine side of God. A closer inspection will register that one hand is feminine and the other masculine<sup>48</sup> (Fig.10.15).



**Figure 10.15:** Rembrandt (1606-1669), *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Detail of hands)

Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. Russia

The father's left hand is strong and muscular, his fingers are opened as he clutches his son's back with masculine energy. The father's right hand is refined, delicate, tender ... the fingers are close and elegant, it is resting gently, wants to caress, offer comfort and feminine consolation. God is father and mother. The mother's appearance is also captured by the father's red mantle, where the referral goes to the *Our Lady of Mercy*, typical of the 1500s, with her mantle covering a group of people, representing the whole population (Fig.10.16);

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<sup>48</sup> Nouwen, H. J.M, "The return of the Prodigal son: a story of homecoming", Doubleday Publishing Group; Reissue ed. 1994





**Figure 10.16:** Ghirlandaio (1449 - 1494) Our Lady of Mercy, 1472 Florence, Church of All Saints, Chapel Vespucci, Florence

The female part of God and of the church, already expressed in the literature by our authors Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena and Therese of Avila., is now depicted not only in the Madonna but also in the figure of the Father. We can assert that the feminine in Catholic culture, even if contrasted by the patriarchal ecclesiastical hierarchy, finds its full expression in literary and in artistic expression.

But it is still Mary who, more than all the references to God's feminine in the Scriptures, is considered the female face par excellence of the Catholic faith. She is also seen by the people as their protectress because it is in her that Jesus was born. And it is important to emphasize that, in the fourteenth century, Mary was not only the mother of Jesus, but also became the Mother of the Trinity as testified by very few statues of the still-preserved *Opening Virgin* (*Vierge Ouvrante*), Fig. 10.17 and Fig.10.18.



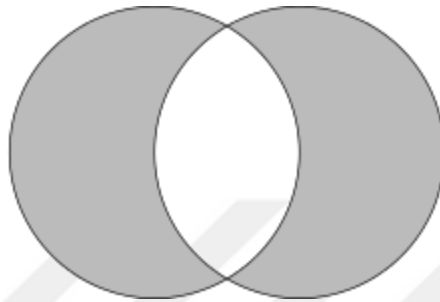
**Figure 10.17:** Vierge Ouvrante ca.1300, Metropolitan Museum of Art N.Y.



**Figure 10.18:** Vierge Ouvrante ca.1300, (Detail), Metropolitan Museum of Art N.Y.

After the Council of Trent (1545-1563) this representation of Mary, with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit inside her body, was forbidden. It was considered heretical by the Church- maybe because it was too close to the pagan worship of the Great Mother.

Even though *The Opening Virgin* was banned by Catholics hierarchy, it is still in Mary that the infinite meets with the finite on the same plane, as we can see in the two circles of Fig.10.19.



**Figure 10.19:** Spheres that intersect representing the finite and infinite contact

The shape of the almond, produced by the intersection of the two curves of the same diameter represents the union between heaven and earth, between spirit and matter. It also refers to the shape of fish and all human orifices: eyes, mouth, also the bladder. It is not by chance that the technical name given to it in art is vesica piscis. In the Middle Ages the term was used for female genitalia (vulva).

It is from the vesica piscis (vulva) that Jesus originates, as we can see in the following pictorial representations (Fig.10.20 and Fig.10.21).



**Figure 10.20:** Fra Angelico (1395-1445), *The Transfiguration*, Saint Marc Florence Museum.



**Figure 10.21:** Almond with Christ Blessing, fresco inside the church of the Abbey of Sant'Egidio in Fontanella (BG)

In 1942 the Jewish French writer Simon Weil wrote in her work *Waiting for God* that “If the Church wants to attract, it must change” (Weil p.83). And certainly she was right because, despite the strong popular demand expressed in all forms of culture, the patriarchal ecclesiastical hierarchy was reluctant in validating that 50% of Catholics were made up of women.

Not until the Second Vatican Council (1963) did the Church progressively open the door to women through various papal encyclicals. Official apologies were made by the Pope in the Jubilee of 2,000 referencing the evil attributed to women by the church over the centuries. But still much remains to be done. Lucetta Scaraffia in her book *From The Last Bench* wrote .

The Church is now faced with a twofold task: on the one hand, to become more fully male and female, on the other, to save female values without retaining women in the jinn of attractive and passive qualities, from which they want to go out, to be treated simply as people. It has been forty years, but since then little or nothing has changed and much remains to be done (Scaraffia p.106).

In our post-modern times, therefore, the ecclesiastic hierarchy can no longer remain deaf to the voice of the people, who for centuries have turned in every way to Mary, as we have already seen through worship, folk tradition, music, art and literature. And it is precisely from this modern vision of Mary, in which she assumes the image of the feminine in the Catholic Church, that we can now begin to compare the works of our postmodern authors, Irigaray and Kristeva.

## **10.2 Adjoining bridge; The Mystery of Mary and the Stabat Mater**

Irigaray and Kristeva have dealt with the theme of women's dignity, always keeping one eye on transcendence. Everyone with her style and thought has analyzed the question by linking it to a truth that goes beyond the mere objective reality. Beginning with Irigaray we notice how, in her work published before her book *The Mystery of Mary* (2010), our author leaned towards Catholic assumptions about women and their interpretation. In her previous book *Divine Women* (1984) Irigaray wrote;

- It is true that Christianity tell us that God is in three persons, Three manifestations, and the third stage of manifestation occurs *as a wedding between the spirit and the bride*. Is this supposed to inaugurate the divine for, in, with woman? The female?
- There is no *woman* God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit.
- ....over the last two thousand years there has been a male trinity God, and a virgin mother: a mother of the son of God whose connection with the father is given little consideration.

- The virgin's relationship with the father always remain in the shadow. (*Divine Woman* 62)

Without the Mother of God, there can be no God.

- “Where faith in the Mother of God sinks, there also sinks faith in the Son of God, and in God as the Father. The Father is a truth only where the Mother is a truth. Love is in and by essentially feminine in its nature” (Feuerbach) .
- The divinity of woman is still hidden, veiled. ( *Divine Women*, 71-72)

In her work, *The Mystery of Mary*, our author interviewed by the journalist Patrizia Melluso for the online Italian magazine *Fuoricentroscampia* seemed to almost contradict herself on her previous observations. To confirm this, we reported almost the entire interview;

Interviewer

Your book, *The Mystery of Mary*, opens with the observation that in the Christian tradition this figure of Mary has been marginalized - especially by theology - while for faithful people, she is very important. For what reason does she remain so important to people?

Irigaray

I wrote that the figure of Mary is certainly not central to Christian theology and ritual, as she is for popular fervor and for artists, who will remain loyal to Mary even when they leave the texts and official cults.

I think the theological discourse has moved away from the Christian mystery of divine incarnation and forgotten about the decisive role of a woman in this advent.

The logic underlying Christian theology has become more and more of a male metaphysical logic that has grown at the expense of the importance of flesh - primarily female flesh - for our redemption.

Interviewer

We feminists always thought that the virginity of Mary had the function of preventing the generation of the divine (the Incarnation) from having something to do with the body and sexuality.

In fact, Western religions have always devalued the body and sexuality, unlike the Eastern religions that consider the body to be one "way" to achieve spirituality. On a symbolic level, why is it important for you to revalue the virginity of Mary?

Irigaray

I do not know what you mean by "we feminists". The use of this phrase appears to be in conflict with my position on the Mystery of Mary. The interpretation of the virginity of Mary to which you alluded is that of the more traditional theology that separates body and spirit, as it generally does in Western philosophy. For me, the divine incarnation means reconciliation between body and spirit, and between body and word. The virginity of Mary's breath is what allows this event to happen.....

Mary is the one who gives new meaning to the world thanks to her alliance with flesh that is animated by a breath that is not only vital, but even spiritual. A daily practice of Yoga and my approach to this tradition led me to understand the virginity of Mary in this way. My interpretation seems more appropriate to the incarnation of the divine in humanity and it entrusts women with an active role in our spiritual redemption.

Interviewer:

You argue that the silence of Mary - which the Church interprets as a submission to the male Word of God - is actually what "can leave us free to invent a future in our own way." Could you explain that?

Irigaray

In the book, *The Mystery of Mary*, there is a chapter on silence. I try to clarify the value of silence according to different cultures. If our Western tradition gives more value to the spoken word, this is not the

case for certain Eastern traditions. Buddha, for example, tries to get close to silence and not to words.

Irigaray

Mary's silence testifies to her belonging to a less patriarchal tradition than ours, in which the spoken word has not yet supplanted life - especially that of the flesh. Mary's silence could mean a way of preserving intimacy with herself – a way to prevent becoming lost in words - particularly into a discourse that is not her own. Mary's silence evokes for me the touching together of the two lips that provides a perception of herself for the woman.

Interviewer

You identified three important stages in your previous works. The first one is the male's culture criticism, the second is the definition of the creation of an independent female's identity, and the last is the search for coexistence between men and women. In recent years, finally, your books have increasingly examined the issue of how to live, respecting differences, in our multicultural times. To which stage does the Mystery of Mary most closely relate?.

Irigaray

The Mystery of Mary is related to all the stages you are referring to. I insist that the redemption of human mankind can not be only a man's task or a male's genealogy task. I indicate the way that a woman can take towards the conquest of her autonomy, especially the spiritual one. I explain how a breathing's culture allows a woman to share her life with man without sacrificing herself Irigaray

I insist that Mary's role is not limited to being a child's mother but it is first of all to be a woman faithful to herself and who takes care of her deification. Finally, I explain how a figure, such as that of Mary, represents or prefigures that of a "woman who could be a bridge between the past, present and future. A bridge between all cultures of the world due to her spiritual virginity, that is, the preservation of a living breath and blow irreducible to anyone or anything “.



Among the various radical feminists, Irigaray was perhaps the one that most of all included in her work continuous references to the Catholic religion. According to Lucia Vantini (il Respiro di Maria , aria di libertà per tutte? [www.diotimafilosofe.it](http://www.diotimafilosofe.it)),<sup>49</sup>Irigaray is a writer who tried to interpret some dogmas of the Christian faith as a woman who senses deeply the difficult condition of women. Now, If she had a different idea, it was because starting from her works on sexual difference, she gained an intellectual opening that allowed her to broaden her horizons without undermining herself. It was a gesture, however, that she judged vital not only for her, but also "for all women and for all men in search of their release."<sup>50</sup>

However, it's not a novelty: Irigaray has always focused on women's thoughts open to theology, convinced that when philosophical questions overlook the relationship with God, "they risked a little more to banish us out of our female story."<sup>51</sup>

With that perspective Irigaray considered Mary as a gift to whose destiny was accessible to all. The statement is important because she knew very well that many women intellectuals and feminists did not care about this story and that it may even annoy them, since they prefer Eve's disobedience and malice to Mary's qualities, as we can see in *The Passion of New Eve* of Angela Carter. In fact, Irigaray recognized in the affair of the girl of Nazareth a possible path of female freedom. A virgin woman was, for our author, a woman who was not named in relation to men and thus presented herself as a symbol of female autonomy.

For Irigaray, Mary represented not only an aspect of symbolic independence for women, but also the possibility of establishing strong relationships with the "others" without undermining her own differences. *Mother* and *virgin* terms then earned a very different meaning, since they allowed Mary not only to relate to the ones different from her, but also to not lose her intimacy and to protect herself.

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<sup>49</sup> Lucia Vantini is Philosophy teacher at Verona University , Italy

<sup>50</sup> L. IRIGARAY (ed.),*The Breath of Women. I believe in feminine*, The Saggiatore, Milan 1997, p. 129.

<sup>51</sup> L. IRIGARAY, *The Breath of Women*, p.149

Interested in Oriental disciplines, such as yoga, our author appreciated Mary's breathing that allowed her to remain coherent to herself through the exchange between inside and out. Mary answering "yes" to the angel and thus allowing her to become a mother, awakened in her a kind of spiritual breath. In this way Mary became the one who was ingratiated to accommodate the divine, becoming herself, in some way, divine. Here therefore, Irigaray has taken a new course of search for a divine in Mary, that we stated at the beginning of this paragraph and found in her *Divine women's* work. The Annunciation to Mary transformed her into a confident girl of her creativity and made her able to discover her capacity to create the unexpected.

It must be said that Mary had also played a spiritual role in the incarnation and therefore in human redemption: Jesus was born of a woman who knew how to be collected in herself and not share herself; a truly free woman. If it did not start from this fact, Christianity would be destined to break against the mutual impenetrability of the human and the divine. Irigaray admitted that not all women are able to transcend themselves in this way. It was certain that Mary's event offers a chance for woman's personal growth, because her silence leaves her "free to invent a future of her own." For our author, all women are then called to a divine generation and have a personal responsibility in his incarnation on earth. However, women will not all be able to pick up the challenge, probably because of male interventions that hinder female creativity.

Kristeva's approach to Mary is different from Irigaray. The semiologist psychoanalyst Kristeva knew the suffering of a difficult motherhood due to having a child with a severe and rare neurological disorder. Unlike Irigaray, Kristeva understood that there was no escape for women. Whatever you do to distract yourself: ignore, refuse to comprehend, reject thought, was in vain: "a mother is always marked by pain, called back to the fragility of another's life and to the impotence of not being able to save it from harm".

Our author explained it well in her text *Stabat Mater*, woven through a double register of motherhood, cultural and personal. Drawing on her unique experience, she wrote:

The infant weeps unrhythmic spasms. I do not feel anymore, but this sound travels like a vocal vertigo to my skull, to the roots of my hair.

My body is no longer mine, it has become his: it fights, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, teething, slavers, coughs, breaks into erratic movement and laughs. When his (my son (the other)) joy is back, his smile refreshes my eyes only. Pain and sorrow is something that comes from within me now, never separating me from a moment's respite. It is as if pain were the only thing I put into the world and now it refuses to leave me, persisting to go back into me to persecute me permanently. One does not bring children into pain, it is pain that one bears. My son is the representation of hurt installed in me forever. Obviously you can close your eyes, block your ears, teach courses, run commissions, clean your home, think about other objects and subjects but a mother is always marked with pain, she surrenders to it ( Kristeva, p.224-225).

They are very strong words. They first describe the strange fusion of bodies between mother and child: her body is no longer exclusive to her, it takes the child's cold, feels the teething, laughs at her smile ... But it is the pain of the creature, above all that slips into the mother's flesh. That pain cannot be observed, measured or judged. It is buried deep inside and has captive of the soul and so Kristeva expressed, "one does not bring children into pain, it is pain that one bear."

In *Stabat Mater* pain is not an end to itself but becomes, in the Mother and Virgin Mary, a source of humanization:

The Virgin becomes the anchoring point of the humanization of the West and in particular of the humanization of love. The celebrated Nativity of Piero della Francesca (Fig.10.22) in London, in which Simone de Beauvoir was too quick to see as defeat for women because it depicts a mother kneeling before her newborn son, actually fits the new cult of humanist sensibility. For the high spirituality that assimilated the Virgin to Christ, the painting substitutes an altogether human image of a mother made of flesh and blood (*Stabat Mater* p.228- 229).



**Figure 10.22:**Piero della Francesca (1470-1475), Nativity, National Gallery, London

As already mentioned in Mary's motherhood, infinity meets with the finite, spirit and matter blend together. But for Kristeva there was also, in Mary's motherhood, as for every mother, a part of 'taking on' that weighed heavily in her experience. Our author wondered how this 'taking on' could actually be built into the woman who was about to become the mother of another, another that is not only for her, but exposed to the world and belonging as an entity in its own right. However, it is certain that when it comes to dealing with the transcendent, be it divine or not, it is no longer possible to return back to her/him/self and maintain the outlined boundaries.

The atheist Sartre, marked too by his personal suffering, like Kristeva did not remain immune to the motherhood of Mary. Sartre wounded by the suffering and pain experienced in his imprisonment in the concentration camp Triers, wrote the theatrical work *Bariona* for the Christmas night of 1940. This was an original play written for his companions of misfortune in which the existentialist philosopher played on stage the part of King Balthazar (one of the three wise men who went to pay homage to the newly born Jesus).

Sartre in this work, that in some ways approaches the *Stabat Mater* of Kristeva, took a different position than that of his life partner Simone de Beauvoir when faced with the Nativity of Piero della Francesca. In fact, in *Bariona*, the

existentialist philosopher, like Irigaray and Kristeva, did not remain indifferent to Maria's humanizing action and had words of turmoil regarding her motherhood.

Sartre wrote:

Mary looks at her son and thinks, "This God is my son. This divine flesh is my flesh. He is made of me, he has my eyes and the shape of his mouth is the shape of mine. He looks like me. He is God and he looks like me. And no woman has had her God for her alone. A small God that can be taken in one's arms and covered with kisses, a warm God who smiles and breathes, a God one can touch and who lives. And it is in those moments that I would paint Mary, if I were a painter, and I would try to make the expression of tender audacity and timidity with which she stretches out her finger to touch the little sweet skin of this child-God. She feels his tepid weight on his knees and he smiles at her. This is all about Jesus and the Virgin Mary.<sup>52</sup>

### 10.3 Conclusion

Irigaray, the philosopher of difference, had pointed out in her work *The Mystery of Mary* that Mary's silence was not a symbol of submission, but rather a reserve of words that elevate women to be architects of a bridge between the transcendence and humanity. But, in her work Irigaray did not reach that tension delivered by Kristeva in the *Stabat Mater*, in which pain and silence were combined. In the atheist Kristeva, the pain of Mary was nothing tragic, it was pain testified only by her presence. This was withheld by the Gospels that said nothing about how Mary felt as she lay at the foot of the cross, they only suggest that Mary "Stayed". And it was in this "Stayed" (Stabat), that aroused the fantasy of art and literature throughout the West that Kristeva saw depicted in Mary - the humanizing expression of woman, mother and protector for humanity.

In this humanization seen by Irigaray, in Mary's breath (symbolizing - the continuous passage between material and spiritual) and by Kristeva, in Mary's presence in front of pain - the two authors stretched their hand out towards New Feminism. In this way they created a path that these two feminist writers hoped

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<sup>52</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Bariona or the Son of Thunder, Christmas tale for Christians and non-believers*, Christian Mariotti Publisher, Milan 2003, p.90-91

could be undertaken by all women, beyond any ideology and belief, and that it could be the basis of a future for the humanization process.

In this process, proposed by Irigaray and Kristeva, the Catholic Church, (who calls herself "mother"), identifying herself with the figure of Mary, can no longer continue to be deaf to the voice of women. In their quest for the recognition of women's full dignity and greater female emancipation, the Church must have an active part in this very important process in our postmodern era; which we will explore over the next chapters.



## 11 CATHOLICISM AND FEMINISM IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

The (forced) *alliance* between Church and women created after the French Revolution (which threatened to wipe out Catholicism) began to fade after World War II and was interrupted during the twentieth century in the sixties by The Kinsey reports, the sexual revolution and the birth control pill.

World War I led to many deaths and destruction, but on the other hand it opened new lives for women who took the place of men in the factories and offices showing operational capacity equal, if not superior to men. The traditional division of labor was upset and feminist movements spread like wildfire. The right to vote was the greatest social achievement for women over this period.

Scientific knowledge of the physiological mechanisms allowed more and more women to have greater control over motherhood which had been imposed by the patriarchal mentality. As happens often in history: every victory involves victims. And in this case the victims were the two values - chastity and motherhood; before the sixties no one ever questioned this. Scaraffia and Galeotti in their work *Church and Women* write:

Feminist movements demand the right to education, political participation in the broadest sense, and the access to all professions, whilst always maintaining attention to the maternal role. Catholic feminism and secular feminism, of the first half of the twentieth century, had in common the impression of moral superiority because of motherhood.

Women entering the public sphere showed they were not mere photocopies of men but improved and enriched society. It was therefore a feminism that considered woman different from man, thus reversing the traditional prejudice: ceasing to be a reason to justify their psychological and moral inferiority (as was the case for centuries) the difference became a value.

It is important to remember this, because everything changed radically in the sixties, with the sexual revolution. Thanks to the use of chemical birth control making its way in Western societies that feminism, de facto, woman's freedom and emancipation, rejected motherhood, and all those typical care activities of the female role (Scaraffia and Galeotti, p.37).

In the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century, the religious sense thinned and increased the gap between Church and society with the approval of laws in favor of divorce and abortion. There was a switching from the modern to the postmodern society, characterized by the transition from a society that produced to one who consumed. Postmodern consumer society identifiable by a globalization of the market in which we are going to highlight some key elements supported by contemporary authors, important in reaching the conclusion to our work.

Western philosophical thought (started by Aristotle and Plato) was upheld for nearly 2,500 years and had placed its origins of that restlessness in the human heart that existed in the face of the transcendent dimension of life. This transcendent dimension was suggested by the painting 'School of Athens' by Raphael (p.15 of our Thesis) which in postmodernism has completely changed.

In the following paragraph, we will briefly summarize the great change that the West experienced over the centuries and what exactly influenced the present situation of women..

### **11.1 Waning of affect in postmodernism culture**

Aristotle, in his work *Poetics*, and Plato in his work, *Republic*, based their quest of true and meaning of life, carefully about the relationship between the *subject* (myself), the *object* (which is outside of myself) and, to be more precise, the *Subject* (with a capital "S", who is to be understood as Logos, or God ). In the course of the historical development of philosophical Western thought, these three elements were always present, but they assumed different value depending on the author who considered the topic. For example, Aristotle and Plato put more emphasis on the *object*, Kant placed more on the *subject* and Schiller and Hegel put more importance on the *Subject*.

A radical change in these perspectives came at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Nietzsche stated, *Gott ist Tot* (God is Dead) in his work, *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, declaring in this way the *death of the Subject* ( capital " S "). This approach continued in our postmodern time with Fredric Jameson, who stated the *death of the subject* ( small " s") in his work, *Postmodernism, or the*



*Cultural logic of late Capitalism*. At the end, out of the three fundamental elements of Western philosophy, only the *object* survives, but in this case, it is now considered to be only a commodity. In fact, there has been a “commodification of objects” (Jameson, p. 9) in a globalized society run by the market and the media with a general integration of aesthetic concerns in the production of goods. Another author, Baudrillard, in his work, “*Simulacra and Simulation*”, emphasized even more than Jameson the creation of meaning as it applies to objects in our society, and so, in his ultimate analysis, *the object* - par excellence - becomes the body. Therefore, the body is now considered to be a “hyper-commodity” in a “hypermarket” (Jameson, p. 75) where consumption, production and the media are the new pagan gods. The body is like an object to be controlled and monitored by the power elite, as Michel Foucault states in his work, *Surveillance and Punishment*, and it is viewed as a product, a commodity to be marketed in postmodernism .

Another of Jameson’s ideas that is very relevant for my dissertation is the concept of the “waning of affect”. The author takes as an example the comparison of two works of art: one of Van Gogh, “A Pair of Boots” ( Fig.11.1 ), and the other of Warhol, “Diamond Dust Shoes” ( Fig. 11.2 ).



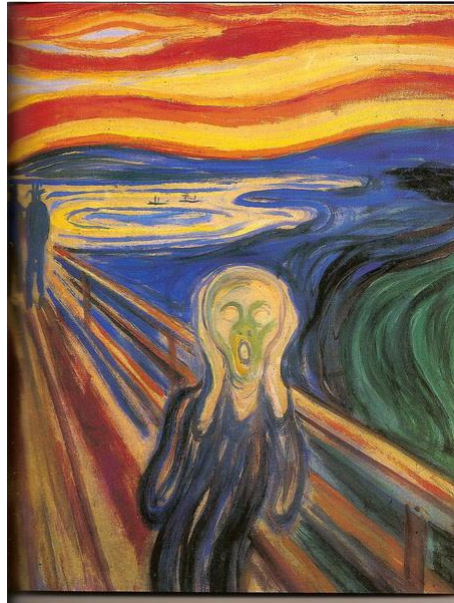
**Figure 11.1:** Van Gogh, “A Pair of Boots”



**Figure 11.2:** Andy Warhol “Diamond Dust Shoes”

Jameson explains that if the farmer’s shoes in Van Gogh’s painting require an act of interpretation (in light of a symptom of some vaster reality which replaces it as ultimate truth), the ballerina’s shoes in Warhol’s work - taken as a symbol of postmodern art - remain superficial and mysterious; "they do not speak to us at all," and they act as "dead objects" and fetishists. What we are witnessing with Warhol is what Jameson calls the "waning of affect in postmodernism culture" (10), regarding not only the object, but also our society. It thus creates a kind of alienation of human beings such as we would experience, for example, when we entered the lobby of a monumental modern hotel.

The elimination of a truth that transcends the human being, the “death of the subject” and the consequential “waning of affect” have led both women and men in modern society to that desperate cry of alienation immortalized by Munch in his work, “The Scream” (Fig.11.3).



**Figure 11.3:** Edvard Munch “The Scream”

In this crying figure, with an unclear gender distinction, we see more of the desperation of women than of men, due not only to the increased objectification of women’s bodies, but even to a more marked suffering and solitude (for natural physiological reasons) caused by the “waning of affect” in an alienating postmodern society.

## **11.2 The *Man of Sand* in a *Liquid Society***

Suffering and solitude which generate insecurity in a sentimental relationship are what Zygmunt Bauman (sociologist and philosopher of Jewish origin) defined as liquid love. That is: a love related to the fragility of the emotional bonds, in which it emphasizes the transience and consumerism that satisfies a momentary need, and then disappears.

Bauman's idea was not only related to interpersonal relationships, but also to the relationship that each one establishes with himself, what our author calls "liquidity of oneself."

On the same line of thought Bauman, Catherine Ternynck, French psychoanalyst, specialist in family ethics, defines the human being of our time "Man of Sand". In her book *Man of Sand: individualism and loss of the self*, the author writes:

The consumption had to give him happiness ...; he turns out dissatisfied, dependent on the global market that always promises more, always better. The technological knowledge had to make him a master of life ...; he realizes that this knowledge raises new questions to which he can not answer.

When the first signs of discomfort are felt, the cultural deconstruction is largely initiated ..... Today there is no longer anything to lean on. But without a sufficient base of values, beliefs, shared ideals, on what can he lean? Where can he put his bases? .....

The man-individual discovers that emptiness weighs. Without the support of a culture, the ontological void is unbearable for a single human being (Ternynck, p.19).

The human soil is depleted; therefore it is emptied of its human relations, bonds, responsibilities and has become brittle and inconsistent. It is on this sandy ground that Western man becomes unable to find certainties outside those of the commercial market and the ideology of the moment even though he wants to believe they are true. Constantly looking for recognition and rewards, man return to the only certainty that the human being can touch and see, which is his body. But the excessive attention to the body does nothing but feed the market and enrich those who lead it, excluding those who do not respond to this sound of sirens.

Pope Francis at the Jubilee of the Sick and Persons with Disabilities on 12 June 2016 said:

In an age when care for one's body has become an obsession and a big business, anything imperfect has to be hidden away, since it threatens the happiness and serenity of the privileged few and endangers the dominant model. Such persons should best be kept apart, in some "enclosure" – even a gilded one – or in "islands" of pietism or social welfare, so that they do not hold back the pace of a false well-being." The world does not become better because only apparently 'perfect' people live there – I say 'perfect' rather than 'false' – but when human solidarity, mutual acceptance and respect increase (Pope Francis 2016).

We have studied in chapter 7 of our work that human solidarity and respect for others are qualities closer to the female and not male nature. For this reason women are the ones who pay the higher price of suffering in a society where these maternal qualities are underestimated. A person is considered a waste if he does not produce richness for our consumerist modernity.

### 11.3 Body versus Spirit

In our *liquid modernity* based on production and re-production the body, when considered as an object, is the center of interest and philosophical speculation in a male-dominated society. In this situation, secular women, having no models with which to compare themselves other than those generated by men, fight the battle for emancipation through their own bodies. This is also exacerbated by the culture-wide waning of an appropriate sense of guilt, and by the increased use of reason divorced from the mediation of faith.

Women's bodies have for centuries borne all the attacks of Western culture (supported by a patriarchal interpretation of the Bible), and now women are rebelling and asking for autonomy outside of the narrow constraints of the phallogocentric world. Their own bodies are all that remain for women when they are deprived of any role other than that of a commodity to be commercialized in post-modern society. The female body has become an object to be exploited in the voyeuristic and consumer based market that is imposed by the mass media. One must add to this the negative influence that, for over a century, the pseudo-scientific thinking of Freud's psychoanalysis had on society's attitudes towards women's bodies. In fact, the Freudian concepts of the Oedipus complex, penis envy and castration anxiety pushed women even harder against the ropes – forcing them to fight with all their strength to obtain a central and significant role in a society and culture that had always denied these to them.

The accumulated suffering of women over the centuries exploded into a veritable declaration of war against both the male-dominated society's schemes and the Catholic religion in literary works such as, "The Second Sex", by Simone de Beauvoir, "The Laugh of Medusa", by Helene Cixous, and, "Divine Woman", by Luce Irigaray. Common to all these authors is the struggle to achieve independence from the phallogocentric world – even through the free use of their bodies and an exploration of sexuality outside of marriage. In their works, there is the search for identity outside of the traditional models of wife, mother or nun and for Irigaray she also expresses a desire to have a female deity to whom to refer. This fight is definitely a strong signal to men that women want to be seen in a different way from the traditional canons of male imagery

of a woman as wife, mother or “Angel of the house”. Women no longer accept the role of the victim – or, “the scapegoat” – of our patriarchal society, and they are struggling to come into their own power.

#### **11.4 Body and Spirit**

At this point of our work , one must ask: Where is the true spirit, and the soul of women described by all the authors, which we have already studied in chapters 7 and 8? Where is the immaterial part of the human being that makes the specific qualities of each person unique? To answer these questions we have to remember that the centrality of the Bible message is the incarnation of Jesus, being born of the Virgin Mary, and his resurrection in body and spirit (Chapter 1 of our work).

The French philosopher writer Simone Weil (1909- 1943), in her work *Notebooks* argued that: "The civilization in which we live, in all its aspects, crushes the human body. The spirit and the body have become strangers to one another. The contact is lost" (Weil, p.149)

Weil was not Catholic but labeled herself - "willing to die for the Church, if ever needed, rather than enter it." <sup>53</sup>

Weil, also an anxious observer like Stein to the degradation of civilization, which the Nazi ideology carried, stated (with clear and strong words) the sanctity or sacredness of the human body. For Catholics in this sacredness the sexuality of human being is was also included. That, sexuality as an expression of unselfish love within marriage promoted and consolidated the union of a man with a woman.

In all the authors studied in our work the body and female sexuality were never subjugated to the power, or ideology dominating, but found their full maturity in a spiritual and intellectual superiority linked to maternal sense of a woman. This quality for Catholicism requires the involvement of men to be realized. As Stein had written, otherwise it is not possible to make any kind of human progress.

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<sup>53</sup> Simone Weil. (2015) *Waiting for God*, Adelphi Ed. Milan p.83

Feminine qualities are seen as strengths for women who are called upon to take care of the life of others. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is perhaps the most notable example of this. Both her and her nuns spent their lives taking care of the outcasts of society. They made no distinction of sex, religion or race. When asked the secret of such devotion, she answered with *The Simple Path* of her life, in these words:

The fruit of Silence is prayer.

The fruit of Prayer is faith.

The fruit of Faith is love.

The fruit of Love is service.

The fruit of Service is peace” (Mother Teresa, p.19)

These words guided Mother Teresa during her service to humanity and in respect of the dignity of each human life. Her service to the world gained international recognition in December 11, 1979 when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. On that occasion, the little nun of Calcutta gave a memorable speech on the importance of women in caring for the life of the weakest. She said:

.....but I feel the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is a direct war, a direct killing - direct murder by the mother herself..... Our children, we want them, we love them, but what of the millions. Many people are very, very concerned with the children in India, with the children in Africa where quite a number die, maybe of malnutrition, of hunger and so on, but millions are dying deliberately by the will of the mother. And this is what is the greatest destroyer of peace today. Because if a mother can kill her own child - what is left for me to kill you and you kill me - there is nothing between. ....I will give you something terrifying. We are fighting abortion by adoption, we have saved thousands of lives..... (Mother Teresa 1979).

Over the past 50 years, the abortion issue is a topic of strong division between the secular and Catholic feminists. For the latter the sanctity of human life begins from the first conception of the child. The fetus is not an object that you can freely use so that you can also delete. It is a gift that must be welcomed and cared for. The defense and care for life in all its forms, children, young, old and sick characterizes the work of so many lay or religious women, who in the silence of the media, carry on a discourse of welcome and peace.

Mother Teresa held another important speech on women in Beijing in September 1995 to the UN Women's Conference. In her speech she explains that men and women are not the same. It is their differences that make them unique and wonderful. They are, but one piece each of a whole. Both created from love to love. They love in different ways, and with their union they become a perfect sphere of God's love better than can be achieved alone.

God's gift to women is the ability to produce life. It is Motherhood that makes a woman special and yet this bequest is annihilated by abortion. God's greatest gift to women is rejected and with it the ability to love as only a woman can.

Mother Teresa of Calcuta states:

Those who deny the beautiful differences between men and women are not accepting themselves as God has made them, and so cannot love the neighbor. They will only bring division, unhappiness, and destruction of peace to the world. For example, as I have often said, abortion is the greatest destroyer of peace in the world today, and those who want to make women and men the same are all in favor of abortion.

Instead of death and sorrow, let us bring peace and joy to the world....  
(Mother Teresa 1995).

We agree with Mother Teresa that the most precious gift of woman is motherhood, a subject that we've covered through the various authors we have studied. But the novelty in her speech is to tie the abortion mentality to "those who want to make women and men the same". Mentality that leads woman to not accept herself and therefore to become an instrument of division in society, denying her finest quality, which is "to love as a woman."

The Catholic Church, following the example of Jesus, who did not condemn the *sinful woman* (John 8: 3-11), condemns the *sin (abortion) and the hypocrisy of men* who favor it. Pope John Paul II writes in *Letter to Women*: "Men are not free from blame on the abortion issue. In this hedonistic and commercial society, that encourages sexuality, women are corrupted by the urges of men in cases where young girls allow (or are pressured) into prostitution. Abortion resulting from this is still a sin and without man's desires the root issue would not exist" (Pope J.P.II 1995, p.9).

In these words the Pope launched a heavy accusation on the responsibility of man and masculinist society which takes profit from the body of women. In a



later encyclical of 2104 *Laudato Si*, he lists that man's responsibility is for the protection and safeguarding of creation and therefore of the dignity of women. He invites the reader to reject a self-service mentality, where people prefer to live the quiet life of indifference. *Globalization of this indifference* is what the Pope calls the main sin of our postmodern society.

## 11.5 Conclusion

In our postmodern times an epochal change took place in feminism. The secular woman, driven by the market and by temporary ideologies, disconnected from any ontological reference, is shifting increasingly ever forward in the search for her own identity. This research has its roots in the swamp of individualism and selfishness, where good is to be intended only as a satisfaction of one's own desires.

Because the secular society has decreed the death of God the transcendent dimension

(Divine incarnation) is lost, and the strike between body and spirit is dominant.

Concerning this subject Irigaray in her work *Mystery of Mary* writes:

For me, the divine incarnation means reconciliation between body and spirit, and between body and word. The virginity of Mary's breath is what allows this event to happen. Mary is the one who gives new meaning to the world thanks to her alliance with flesh that is animated by a breath that is not only vital, but even spiritual.....My interpretation seems more appropriate to the incarnation of the divine in humanity and it entrusts women with an active role in our spiritual redemption (Irigaray, p.58).

The incarnation of the divine in humanity means, for Catholics, the unity between body and spirit. In fact the cultural laceration began in Western civilization with the *res cogitans* and *res extensa* of Descartes: a division was sewn by the transcendental reality that took human body and sacralized it.

Entrusting women with an active role in the spiritual redemption of humanity is the most important task that Irigaray gives to women. And we have to stress that, in New Feminism, the spiritual redemption of the human being is always connected to the material and social requalification of all humanity.

In the next chapter we are going to highlight the spiritual side of the Catholic feminism through the role of theological feminism in our postmodern society.



## 12 THEOLOGICAL FEMINISM

After World War II, some Catholic and non-Catholic historians and theologians became critical of the Church of Rome. They concerned themselves directly with Jesus, the person and the origins of Christianity. To these Sacred Texts these researchers entered evidence of Jesus's Jewish origin from a historical-anthropological approach.

Catholic theology was based primarily on a dogmatic approach to the Bible. This anthropological-historical interpretation, along with other differing methodology,, were entered in the final document of the Interpretation of the Bible prepared by the Pontifical Biblical commission published in 1993 ( chapter 4.6 of our work).

As we have extensively analyzed, the last of these approaches is the feminist one which takes into account the different needs of women's movements. These elements we found in texts that belonged to the 'female identity “So to highlight whatever in the Bible favors the liberation of women and the acquisition of their rights” ( Pontifical Biblical Commission).

The authors: who contributed to the revision of the sacred texts of the schemes of dogmatic Catholics which paved the way for a different study on the role of women in Christianity, were of different nationalities with differing cultural backgrounds. A few authors (briefly analyzed) are: Strauss, Bultmann, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Hans Kung.

David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874) was a German philosopher and theologian of Hegelian School. He wrote the *Life of Jesus* - a historical-critical investigation of a philological nature. Strauss was interested in testing the reliability and internal consistency of the biblical sources and studying their historical and cultural context. Those features foreshadowed the fundamental thesis of his work which reduced the Gospel text as a cultural product (historical) and eliminated any transcendental connotation. As a result of the

scandal caused by the publication of his work Strauss was removed from his job and strongly criticized by his colleagues.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) was a German Lutheran theologian, He recognized that the faith of primitive Christianity originated from a syncretism, blending Jewish elements that were especially in vogue. In some circles this belief was apocalyptic holding pagan elements of Hellenistic derivation. Nevertheless Bultmann wanted a truly theological work and he worked on it using the phenomenological method of investigation of Husserl's school. Where all the Christological and redemption formulations of the New Testament (according to Bultmann) were drawn up with the language of a "mythological" era. It is necessary to therefore demythologize and interpret such language, taking into account the laws of mythological language to get to the object of the existential interpretation.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) was a Jesuit, French philosopher and theologian. He introduced the man as a "final product" of evolution in the universe (Teilhard de Chatdin, p. 254). Human body is a fragment of the universe and to have a body means, for a soul, to be rooted in the cosmos. His perception was astounding for anticipatory capacity, clarity and courage: conceiving a body- vision hitherto unheard of in the field of Catholic - as a vital inter-connected sphere.

For the French author, Christ, the Son of God incarnate, was thus considered as the unifying principle of human history and the universe, from the beginning. So, with the birth and resurrection of Jesus, it is revealed to believers the authentic and complete sense of the *human phenomenon*.

The merit of these three authors was to have brought Jesus down from a dogmatic pedestal created by Catholic theology and interpreted him as a person placed in a very specific historical context. This work of humanization of Jesus favored the Kung work, which was covered more fully in the role of women in the Sacred Texts.

Hans Küng (2005) was a theologian, priest and Swiss writer. He summarized in his book "*The Woman in Christianity*" some fundamental points of his theology about women and the Church. The theologian raised the question about

what had prevented a genuine emancipation of women through the centuries. Among the different identified factors; he emphasized three, which in part we faced in the course of this work:

The rise of hierarchical structures: ..... the principle of equality is affirmed decisively only in private, while in the domain of the sacrament male authority is especially vital.

The hostility towards sex: it is not derived from Christianity, but it is a general phenomenon of late antiquity; in Christianity receives, however, its particular stamp.

The devaluation of the cultural education: ..... This greatly contributes to the perception of women exclusively as a body (Kung, p. 47).

All these authors had problems with the Catholic Church. However, they were reassessed and their texts used to construct an approach to the interpretation of the Bible closer to its human value than divine. The dogmatic position of the church gradually diminished leaving room for a rich set of interpretive approaches.

To the theological contribution of these authors we want to join the thrust that the radical feminist movements gave to Catholic theology by creating a more feminine theology. In fact, the merit of the battles of secular feminism by Simone de Beauvoir onwards, was to have placed, at last with force, the center of the interests of the Catholic Church on the question of the role of women in the Gospels and in society.

We can say that these feminists: advocates of sexual liberation, the pill, the laws on divorce and abortion caused a jolt to Catholicism similar to that caused by Luther 500 years before.

Pope John XXII convened the Second Vatican Council, in which for the first time 23 women (13 lay and 10 religious) were admitted as auditors. Since then the importance of women has always been more highlighted in the Catholic Church, which rediscovered and beatified many women (including the first 4 doctors women) as we have witnessed in our work.

In recent years the number of women theologians has increased greatly in the Catholic Church. And it was the study of these theologians and feminists who have opened a new reading of the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene as women. It happened so that only in the second half of the twentieth century it

was realized that in the Gospel there were many women protagonists of decisive encounters with Jesus, and that the majority of them were "irregular", that is impure according to Jewish tradition either as they were sinners or as they were suffering from a disease that made them unclean (Hemorrhagic woman. Luke 8, 43-48). Among the latest the establishment of July 22 as a liturgical celebration day for the prostitute Mary Magdalene of the Gospels has made quite a stir in the newspapers.

*But now, what are the demands of female theologians to Catholic Church?*

They can be summarized through the voice of the American theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson president of the Catholic Theological Society and of the American Theological Society. In her book titled *She who is, The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse*, she writes:

Feminist theology calls for a reform of the civil and ecclesial patriarchal structures and intellectual systems that support them in order to liberate all human beings, in view of more suitable designs of life between people and with the earth. Far from being a theology only made for women, it calls women and men who care about justice and the truth, seeking the transformation of the whole community "(Johnson, p. 27).

This recall of Johnson to men and women for community transformation has not gone unheard by the church. In fact, this spirit of cooperation has been achieved, in the last decades, especially in Catholic lay movements, such as that of Chiara Lubich<sup>54</sup>.

## **12.1 Feminism of inclusion**

The Second Vatican Council marked a watershed: although direct references to the theme "woman" were limited to a dozen citations in official documents.

Post Counciliar pastoral sections have increased for women: catechists, operators of charity and of the liturgy, pastoral coordinators and missionary communities; all present in ecclesial national and international organizations, associations and lay movements.

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<sup>54</sup> Chiara Lubich (1920-1980) was the founder and first president of the Focolare Movement. It has the goal of unity among peoples and universal fraternity.

Among the lay movements it is worth noting that of the Focolare Movement, founded by Chiara Lubich (1920-2008) in 1943 brought together millions of believers around the world. It was initially opened only to women. Then in 1948 the male branch was formed. Its objective was the achievement of unity between generations, between cultures and religions. For this reason the movement went beyond the Catholic religion and brought together people of every faith, race and country.

On 18 May, 1987 Chiara (1920-2008)) was invited to give a speech at the Malcolm Shabazz Mosque NY. The Pope, heads of state and governments from around the world received her with honors. The emancipation of women was one of humility, observance to Catholic doctrine and made with the collaboration of man; a female revolution made in modesty and privacy where the difference between the sexes was valued and not down played; where the search was for the inclusion of the other and accepted for what it is.

The Focolare Movement is a movement that Chiara Lubich named also Work of Mary in order to emphasize the female character that must constitute the soul of it. The foundress asked and obtained from Pope John Paul II that the presidency would always be entrusted to a woman. This movement is, still, the only Catholic lay movement which always has a woman as a guide, by statute.

## **12.2 Priesthood for women**

As regards the possibility of women entering the priesthood, we must remember that for Catholics to be a priest is a vocation, not a profession. The priesthood has the same value that 'a nun, a lay - single or married has in the commitment to the church. The power and authority of the clergy (as we have pointed out many times) should be seen as a service to the most needy. Women act well in the tasks for care and assistance and therefore could leave men to the administration of the sacraments.

But the positions within the church on priesthood for women are different and sometimes conflicting between those who support it and those who exclude it while remaining in favor of only a closer cooperation with women. In any case,

one thing is for sure: finally the Church of Rome seems to have acknowledged the prophetic words of Teresa of Avila in *The Way of Perfection*:

Yes, indeed, the day will come, my King, when everyone will be known for what he is. I do not speak for myself, because the world already knows my wickedness – and I have rejoiced that this wickedness is known publicly – but because I see that these are times in which it would be wrong to undervalue virtuous and strong souls, even though they are women (St.Teresa 2010, p. 51).

In fact, women can play the same roles of men, but in many cases they will do them in different way. Not only because they have provided for thousands of years free service, the gift of themselves (which in the catholic tradition is the highest value), but also because the ecclesiastic career is not opened to them, so they can not cultivate ambitions in this direction.

Women are thus in condition of great freedom and they have a greater ability to adhere to the evangelical model. For the Church, their presence in decision-making places can therefore be an antidote to careerism and to all temptation to appear, that belongs mostly to men.

It is interesting to note that even the atheist feminist writer Irigaray, in her work *The Mystery of Mary*, did not agree with a priesthood for women. She wrote:

The very masculine character of our culture prevents women from assessing their role in becoming the spiritual founder of humanity, a role that they neglect, and even scorn, in favor of an ecclesial task, more social and more visible, that belongs rather to men. (Irigaray, pp.27-32).

However, it should be noted that it is these days that Pope Francis has appointed a commission to evaluate the role of women deacons in the church, already present in the first 400 years of Christianity. Diaconate is the first step toward priesthood, theologically forbidden to women because at the time of the institution of the Eucharist (the Last Supper) women were not present.

But Pope Francis had already dismantled this theological position in the first Holy Thursday of his pontificate in 2013. In fact, on that occasion, in the rite of the washing of the feet by the Pope, he wanted some women, among the twelve people chosen. An opening that became a possibility for all the parishes of the world: and perhaps an opening to a female priesthood?



After all, female priesthood is not the primary need of the majority of Catholic women. They seek to expand their presence in the decision-making places of the Church. This is happening quickly with Pope Francis. He has appointed women as rectors and teachers in seminaries for future priests and two women in the Pontifical Biblical Commission. In 2015 for the first time in Catholicism, four women theologians, published *The Gospels Commented by Four Female Biblical Scholars*.





### 13 CONCLUSIONS

Over the centuries the Catholic Church, as an institution has made countless mistakes with regards to women (documented by many studies) and for which the Pope has officially apologized in the year 2000. Women, however, despite the clear misogyny of ecclesiastic hierarchy, have not lost faith in their personal encounter with the transcendent: Jesus (chapter 1 of our work). An encounter that opened their eyes to a new world with no hierarchies and male superiority.

Despite its patriarchal character marking the catechesis, the ecclesiastical structure and liturgy, the Church has (for two thousand years) leant on women, even if they count for little in its decision-making. The exclusive reference to married woman and mother has not completely disappeared yet and her word is rarely recognized as authoritative; although the theological production of women has grown in quantity and quality.

At this point of our work, it may appear that we have gone off subject. The present research tries to answer the question: What does Catholicism (church) do or not do for the promotion of women? However, the answer is more suited to the question: What did women do for the church?

As we have already discussed in our work: Catholic women testified in their lives, and in their writings, that the most revolutionary and feminist text of Western culture is the Gospel. Their strength, coming from the many examples of Jesus with the women and the Virgin Mary led them to fight to achieve equal dignity with men, as described in the first chapter of Genesis. This explains why countries in which women began the emancipation movements were all of Christian origin. It is the equal dignity of man and woman in front of a God, seen as father and mother that drove many women of faith to speak up and fight in a world controlled by men.

Their peculiarity was that these women remained, always, within the church, even risking their own lives. Catherine of Siena and St. Teresa of Avila risked the Inquisition but did not bend to the arrogance of clergymen and they still

remained church daughters. St Teresa wrote: "At the end, Lord, I am daughter of the Church".

Despite everything, Catholic women, with both virility and irony, managed to carve out a place in the interior of the church's misogyny. From this place they favored human development - not only on behalf of women but also men. With their natural predisposition to empathy, coming from their maternal attitude, they contributed a lot to the development of Western culture.

In this light, we can deduce that Catholicism and Catholic women is the same subject and that there can be no Catholicism without women. *The Church is Mother*, says Pope Francis, because *she* is the bearer of mercy and compassion for those most in need. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is, perhaps the best-known example in the world.

Having said that, the Church is a Mother, because *she* has, in *herself*, all of the characteristics of love, care and attention that a mother can express for a child, we can now answer the question of our thesis: *Catholicism as an Obstacle, or Fostering Feminism in the Twenty-First Century*. The answer that we draw out from our work is that: *Yes, Catholicism fosters feminism*, provided that the *maternal dependence* is preserved. For it is through this *maternal dependence*, which does not interfere with a woman's working career that the Catholic woman built not only her identity in history but also the identity of all Western society.

Having answered the question of our work, other issues related to the topic our Thesis remains open. These issues are: *Which is the point of Catholicism, in our postmodern society where consumption, production and the media are the new gods? Does it still make sense to talk about promotion of women through the maternal dependence in a liquid modernity where procreation and motherhood are separated?*

Until a few decades ago, the uniqueness of the woman, even the poorest in the world, was her ability to pro-create a new life. A uniqueness, which has always aroused men (over the centuries) to envy, thus doing everything to repress female sexuality. But the sexual liberation of the 60s, that at first appeared to have finally brought freedom for women to make decisions about their own

bodies has in recent years with surrogacy made even the more radical feminists appear closer to Catholic positions.

Only a few years before when women suffered only *sexual commodification*, they now have their motherhood for sale. In fact in our consumer society, the mother figure can be split into three profitable parts: supplier of eggs, pregnant woman on behalf of a third person and the social mother.

Zygmunt Baumann writes: "The neo-liberal market takes seeds and sells them back to us, it takes the water and sells it back to us, it also takes our bodies and it sells back to us, turning us into consumers of ourselves". It is a new form of patriarchy, the last offensive against the woman and her body, addressed to what is unique in woman: that is her motherhood and her relationship with her son.

These secular feminists<sup>55</sup> are now rediscovering the Catholic Church. Since it is not linked to any lobby of power; it is the only barrier against the omnipotence of postmodern neo-liberalism, because Catholicism acts on the human being's inner limit, which is his conscience.

In the article entitled *Humanism is Feminism* in the *Corriere della Sera* of 27 October 2011, Julia Kristeva states:

The struggles for juridical, economic and political equality require a new reflection on the choice and responsibility of motherhood. Secularization is the only civilization to be still without a discourse on motherhood. The passionate bond between the mother and the child, that bond in which the biological continuity becomes sense, otherness and speech, relied upon and trusted. Different from the religiosity and from the paternal function; maternal confidence complete them both, thus participating fully to humanistic ethics (Kristeva 2011).

Fully in agreement with Kristeva, we can state that, through a discourse on motherhood, we can restore the original alliance between Catholicism and women when man and woman can be placed next to each other, and each complete the other. Unity in diversity should be in our opinion the future for a *New Humanism* where the word feminism makes no sense anymore.

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<sup>55</sup>Among these feminists we cite the Italian writer, Marina Terragni, author of *Madre surrogata: Utero in Affitto e Mercato dei Bambini* [ *Temporary Mother: Rented Womb and the Children Market* ], Vanda e publishing, Milan, 2016.



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## **RESUME**

Paolo Panaioli is an Italian teacher, graduated from the University of Studies in Rome “ Foro Italico”. He has two Masters degrees: the first is in Preventive and Adapted Motion Activities (Sports Sciences and Human Movement) and the other in Science Education. For twelve years he worked for the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the Italian High School I.M.I. in Istanbul. He is currently teaching in Rome.



