

MARY AS A MODEL FOR WOMEN OF ASIA

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Abstraksi

Penindasan terhadap wanita terjadi hampir di seluruh belahan dunia ini. Hal itu terutama sangat tampak di negara-negara dunia ketiga, seperti negara-negara Asia. Penindasan tersebut membuat kaum wanita menjadi miskin dan tertindas. Maria, Bunda Yesus menjadi model bagi wanita Asia. Maria berjuang dalam penderitaannya untuk menerima dan memahami setiap peristiwa hidup dalam iman. Dengan iman kokoh pada Allah ia mampu mengalahkan kejahanatan hidup sosial dan bahkan memperoleh keselamatan kekal.

Key words: Woman, model, oppressed, poor, faith, God, liberation, Asia.

Mary as woman

When Mary talks about herself as being lowly, she has a good sense of who she is and a healthy self-esteem to be even able to say about herself that she was lowly and in need of God. Mary is free to let God work through her. She is a spokesperson for women addressing the social evil of her day.

One can appreciate the *Magnificat* from a new viewpoint when one reads it interpreted by people from third world countries in terms of a song of liberation and Mary as a glaringly radical person in proclaiming this and really making a strong statement on the side of the poor and on the side of the oppressed.¹

Mary's strength and freedom as a woman arises from her faith, which is the faith of Israel. Mary is a woman of deep faith and she is aware of God's goodness and mercy to her, and she expresses this joy with enthusiasm and shares it with others. Filled with God's life, Mary goes to Elizabeth. Visualizing the scene of the visitation is especially meaningful to women who expressed that they feel a life-giving, healing presence of Mary. Joy as a response to God's goodness and mercy is an emotion that most Asian women can relate to strongly.

Luke 1: 51-53 shows Mary to be conscious of social evil. Her words reflect her awareness of the poverty, oppression and horrors of her day. She identified with the oppressed and downtrodden and made a strong statement on their behalf. Having the experience of God's mercy herself, she identified with God's upholding of the poor and the oppressed.² She saw how they suffered but she said his mercy is going to come from age to age on those who fear him. "God

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¹R. BROWN, *Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes*, Westminster, Philadelphia 1984, 78-81.

²BROWN, *Unexpected ...*, 79- 81.

will stand by those who are poor or oppressed" (Lk 4: 18-19). As she stood at the foot of the cross she must have wept and it is certain her tears were of submission, of strength and of courage because her soul still magnified the Lord who looked on her humility and her lowliness. Now looking at Asia she indeed sees the sorrow and suffering so common there.

Mary for Asian women

Speak about women from a Christian point of view means speaking about Mary of Nazareth venerated by Christianity from the beginning as a perfect woman. Mary was, and continues to be, presented to women as the model to be imitated and inwardly assimilated. However, traditional Mariology has often presented an image of Mary, one not of promoting and liberating women, but one confirming and confining them to their ancient oppression.³

The theology of liberation set out to recover the figure of Mary in its liberating and prophetic potential. Stressing above all the text of the Magnificat (Lk 1: 46-55), its theology gives hope to poor women. Mary, the valiant and prophetic woman, committed to justice, faithful to her God and to her people inspires and strengthens women's unity and struggle, redeeming and enabling them in their own eyes.⁴

We acknowledge that in Asia there is need for economic, political and cultural transformation of society. This is the necessary though not sufficient condition of women's liberation. There is no total human liberation without the liberation of women in the society. And this is not an automatic consequence of either economic development or political revolution. The most important strategy is organization, because oppressed groups are empowered by organization.⁵ The importance of raising a woman's awareness of her self-worth cannot be over-emphasized. Accepting that God transcends all human understanding, is important in restoring woman's true image of herself.⁶

Mary is a role model for domestic women and oppressed people. Asian women, for example, were supposed to be imitators of Mary, see her as "the mature and committed (Asian) woman, the peasant mother who cheerfully wears herself out to feed and clothe her carpenter son; the worker's wife wearing holy furrows on her face... an image reflected in millions of Asian village mother today."⁷

Katoppo saw her as the first fully liberated human being, whose *Magnificat* is central in the Theology of Liberation, and saw her in the wider context of

³U. KING, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World*, London 1994, 313.

⁴KING, *Feminist ...*, 313.

⁵V. FABELLA and S.A.L. PARK eds., *We Dare to Dream: Doing Theology as Asian Women*, Hong Kong 1989, 105.

⁶M. KATOPPO, "Compassionate and Free" in *An Asian Woman's Theology*, New York 1980, 17.

⁷KATOPPO, "Compassionate... ", 22.

love and self-giving. She shares the mission of bringing the good news of salvation to the world, she is a model not only for woman, but also for man.⁸

Human liberation often seems to be a grim and joyless struggle. The Magnificat shows otherwise. And Katoppo exult in the fact that the Asian Woman, this Mary, upon her encounter with God, bursts out into this great song of thanksgiving and joy given to God, who liberates through the oppressed themselves. Through Mary, Asian women in some special way personify the oppressed, although Mary represented all oppressed peoples, not just women.⁹

Yet many Asian women feel closer to Mary as a model for full humanity than to Jesus for the obvious reason that Mary is a woman. In most Asian churches where the maleness of Jesus has been used against women in order to legitimize the sexist ideology of women's inferiority, women have found comfort and self-worth through the presence of Mary, an invaluable woman for human salvation.¹⁰

Mary's visit to Elizabeth has shown women's solidarity with other women of the same situation. Mary and Elizabeth understood each other; they opened their whole beings to the work of the Spirit. They are two sisters who are walking on a new road, risking the safety of a conventional life, due to their commitment to the salvation of Israel.¹¹

Their hearts extend to solidarity with all who are struggling to claim their dignity and power as people. Han Kuk Yun of Korea describes this point in her fictionalized Mariology:

I (Mary) was afraid to meet people's eyes and even Joseph's. However, a soon as I met Elizabeth, my fear suddenly was gone. Elizabeth shouted just when she met me, "Why should this great thing happen to me, my Lord's mother come to visit me?". "How happy you are to believe the Lord's message to you will come true." It will be said this is a spiritual communication. These words of Elizabeth impressed me greatly. I come to realize what great power comes from understanding encouragement by a person who is walking the same road. This could be called sisterhood.

This sisterhood that takes care of each other, supporting each other is very important for bringing about God's social and institutional change. To accomplish a certain task there should be solidarity of similar minded people, like the solidarity Elizabeth and I had. So solidarity is an important fact of forming and enriching community. Solidarity, sisterhood does not arise if itself. As Elizabeth, inspired by the spirit, knew my situation, sisterhood arises from the work of the Spirit. As Elizabeth conceived by God's grace, persons standing in the same situation could and should be joined by bonds of sympathy. In that sense, I would like to have solidarity with all people,

⁸KATOPPO, "Compassionate... ", 23.

⁹KATOPPO, "Compassionate... ", 23-24.

¹⁰C.H. KYUNG, *Struggle to be Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology*, Maryknoll, New York 1990, 75.

¹¹KYUNG, *Struggle...*, 80.

especially women who challenge a new possibility. Because women know women's suffering and pain.¹²

The Status of Asian Women

The social position of women has unfortunately been built on discrimination. It is important here to examine women's social climb in the tradition and in the life of Asian women. On account of the emphasis on the patriarchal system, the males become more important than females; hence a male born in the family succeeds his father and continues the family line. The right to own land is the first status of men, and with land available, he can cultivate land, build a house and found his new family. There is no greater torment to a family than to be without having a male child. A male child is the family's insurance and the pride of woman.

For a woman therefore, marriage ranks first in the grade of values. A married woman has to confirm her marriage rights and status by the birth of a male child. A married woman with no male child is in danger of being divorced or abandoned at any time, or of having in her husband's home one or more rival wives to her husband. A woman's family background also affects her social status.

The analysis of women's status is basically the study of their activities and behavior in their lives in the midst of the community. All their activities and behavior are very much influenced by the community's outlook, by the opportunities and capabilities they have. This description told for many Asian countries and cultures, even within the same countries but it is not for all women.

Emancipation of women

Over the last twenty years or so, the women of Asia have suddenly woken up to their situation in life and society. They protest against their oppression and seek liberation. A good way of understanding the many ways in which women are oppressed is to look at the story of an average woman's life.¹³

¹²KYUNG, *Struggle...*, 80-81.

¹³Detail reports and testimonies can be found in the following: *Asia Partnership for Human Development*, "Awake: Asian Women and the Struggle for Justice", Sydney 1985; G. DIETRICH, "The World as the Body of God: Feminist Perspectives on Ecology and Social Justice," *The Journal of Dharma* 18 (1993), 258-284; M. J. MANANZAN, *The Women Question in the Philippines*, Pasay City 1991; R.M. CECCHINI, *Women's Action for Peace and Justice: Christian, Buddhist and Muslim women tell their story*, Maryknoll Sisters; I. SEN, ed., *A Space Within the Struggle*, New Delhi 1990; L. DEVASIA and V.V DEVASIA, eds., *Women in India: Equality, Social Justice and Development*, New Delhi 1990; J.T. NAYAK, "Why This Oppression of Women?" *Jeevadharma* 17 (1987), 9-22.

The Historical Context of Asian Women's Theology

Life is the key to a feminine interpretation, for a woman knows that life is fragile and needs to be cherished and cared for.

Women do theology with passion, passionately giving themselves to this ministry, trying to put together rationality, scientific precision, and relation. They accomplish this ministry with compassion, with sensibility for other's pain. For it is in suffering together with the oppressed and marginalized people that they are grounded in reality, searching to collaborate in building God's kingdom. A tree deeply rooted in the earth, with its branches like arms wide open to the sky, giving shadow and a resting place-seems a good image for women's theological image.¹⁴

Asian women's theology has been created out of the historical context of Asia's struggle for full humanity. The women of Asia awakened from silence and began to speak their own language about their experience of the divine.¹⁵

Asian women's public visibility first occurred with the rise of the anti-colonial and nationalist movements in many Asian countries at the dawn of the twentieth century. Women fought alongside men to break the chain of imperialism and to recover the independence and self-determination of their countries. When women were politicized by their participation in the anti-colonial struggle, they also started to question feudalist, patriarchal customs and values in their respective countries. In many Asian countries the radical women's movement was suppressed after their independence until the 1970s. When many Asian women's societies had achieved relative peace and independence, all other freedom struggles were subdued and women were encouraged to retreat into their home. Recently, Asian women historians have uncovered these radical ideas on women's liberation, which originally developed during the period of decolonization.¹⁶ They began to reread the Bible from women's perspectives and challenged the patriarchal biases of Christian theology and the church's practice.

Historically, Asian Christian women's theology arose with the help of the organizations which provide most of the material in this book: The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA), the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).¹⁷

The Women's Desk at the Christian Conference in Asia

After World War II many Asian countries were liberated from their colonizers. The Christian communities of Asia, which were implanted from the

¹⁴E.S. FIORENZA, *In Memory of Her*, New York 1984, 171.

¹⁵KYUNG, *Struggle...*, 11.

¹⁶J. LIDDLE and R. JOSHI, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India*, Delhi 1986; K. JAYAWARDENA, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, Dehli 1986.

¹⁷KYUNG, *Struggle...*, 12.

West and dominated by Western missionaries, had to deal with the tasks their countries faced in order to be relevant to the people's struggle for full humanity.

In a workshop addressing Asian women's reality, poverty and oppression, Asian women encouraged one another to articulate women's situation in Asia from their Christian faith and to interpret the Bible with Asian women's specific life experiences. The following is a resolution from the Women's Concerns Committee:

We want women's perspectives to be considered in decision making. We support women doing things in their own unique way. However, women's struggles in Asia must not be seen in one dimension, as simply a struggle against men. It is vital to see the many aspects of the structural dimension (social, political, cultural and economic) which everywhere keep "the weakest" and "the least" in society women as well as men disadvantaged and deprived.¹⁸

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians

The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) was formed in 1976 by a group of theologians from Asia, Africa, and Latin America who saw the need of a forum for promoting theology in the context of third world social, political, economic, religious, and cultural realities.¹⁹ The option for the poor and oppressed was fundamental to the theology deriving from EATWOT. The organizing conference of EATWOT in Tanzania focused on the issue of the division between the rich and the poor.

Subsequent international conferences were held in Ghana in 1977, Sri Lanka in 1979, Brazil in 1980, India in 1981, Geneva in 1983 and Mexico in 1986.²⁰

¹⁸See CCA Women's Concerns Committee, *Women to Women; Asian Women in Solidarity: Mobilizing Women in Struggles for Food, Justice and Freedom*, Singapore 1986, 1.

¹⁹For the history of EATWOT's beginning, see O.K. BIMWENKI-KWESHI, "The Origins of EATWOT." The term "third world" is objected to in some circles, but EATWOT defends the expression saying that the term has acquired layers of meaning which vary from the purely geographic (South), to the socio-economic (poor), to the political, to the theological. They prefer it to expressions such as "Two-Third world because they say, the expression Third World refers more to the quality of life than to numbers (see V. FABELLA and S. TORRES, eds the "Preface" to *Irruption of the Third World XII*.

²⁰The accounts of the EATWOT meetings have been published. For the Ghana meeting, see K. APPIAH - KUBI and S. TORRES, eds., *African Theology En Route* (Maryknoll, New York 1979); for the Sri Lanka meeting, see V. VABELLA, ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity* (Maryknoll, New York 1980); for Brazil meeting, see S. TORRES and J. EAGELSON, eds., *The Challenge of Christian Communities* (Maryknoll, New York 1981); for the India meeting, see V. VABELLA and S. TORRES, eds., *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology* (Maryknoll, New York 1983); for the

The second EATWOT International Conference held in Accra, Ghana, was a pan-African meeting focusing on the development of an African Theology. They introduced the contradiction of men talking about liberation in general but having great difficulty in addressing women's liberation in particular. For example, Mary Odugoye pointed out African men's "irrational fear of blood (menstruation)," which excluded African women from religious practice. The final statement from the conference stated:

We recognize that African women have taken an active role in the Church and in shaping our history. They have shown themselves to be an integral part of the liberation struggle. But we can not ignore their exclusion from past theological endeavors. The future of African theology must take seriously the role of women in doing of theology.²¹

The third conference of EATWOT was in Sri Lanka (1979); it focused on the development of an Asian theology.²² The most significant progress in women's theology was an essay written specifically from a feminist perspective by Marianne Katoppo of Indonesia. Her paper, "Asian Theology: an Asian woman's perspective", started with her personal experience as an Asian and ended with her claim to Asian women's right to be free from both Western and men's control.²³

At EATWOT's fourth meeting at Sao Paulo, Brazil the concerns of the particular oppression of women seemed to make some progress. Latin American women challenged Latin men to see the interconnections of the oppression of class, racism, and sexism.

At the meeting in New Delhi in 1981, Virginia Fabella summarized as follows: Prior to the Delhi meeting, it had been accepted that the Third World theology is contextual, liberation, biblically based, and ecumenical; it is inductive in its method, starting with the faith experience of the poor and oppressed. The context is understood to include both the socio-economic-political and religious-cultural dimensions, liberation is both personal and social; the text and the context are related dialectically in biblical reflection.²⁴

The final statement of the Delhi conference says that the God-image in the poor is the most meaningful image and expression of God in today's world and so theology must be based on the liberal praxis of the oppressed of the Third World.²⁵

The EATWOT in Mexico was largely on people's experience of struggle and hope. What came through clearly was the contribution of women's

Geneva meeting see V. FABELLA and S. TORRES, eds., *Doing Theology in a Divided World* (Maryknoll, New York 1985).

²¹APPIAH-KUBI and TORRES, *African...*, 194.

²²See V. FABELLA, ed., *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*, Maryknoll, New York 1980, 161.

²³FABELLA, *Asia's ...*, 161.

²⁴FABELLA, *Irruption...*, 15.

²⁵FABELLA, *Irruption...*, 200.

experience. The provisional final document refers to their way of doing theology “with passion and compassion, with the heart, the body, and the mind.”²⁶

Just how is women’s theology different? Women say that they have their own way of organizing and systematizing insights into God’s revelation and that the key to their theology is the notion of life.²⁷ Anna Maria Tepedino explains that “since she carries in her womb for nine months a new life that is coming into being, a woman feels and expresses her experience of God in a different manner.”²⁸ Women are deeply covenanted with life-giving, protecting and sustaining life. They point out that certain theological themes such as the image of God and the experience of God could be deepened from the woman’s viewpoint.²⁹ Not only do they have a contribution to make, but many feel that without their contribution God’s image and God’s plan will be “distorted.” As Virginia Fabella says, “Without women’s perspective and their contribution to theology, God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, church, and mission will be only half understood.”³⁰

Women are also making an impact in their attempt to reread the Bible with women’s eyes and with women’s feelings. The Third World women say that not only do they suffer the dehumanizing conditions of the Third World, but they are also exploited and restricted as women. This experience is basic to their theology and must be part of their reinterpretation of the Bible. They say that the provision for a feminine hermeneutic will help to ensure that those dimensions of God’s word that can be properly understood only by women are brought to light for the benefit for all.³¹

Women’s contribution to theology is a particular example of how human experience can influence our perception of God’s revelation. Women claim the possibility of discovering a new face of God and a more human and closer image of Jesus.³² Within Third World theology their influence can be seen particularly in a growing understanding of God as the God of life.

²⁶V. FABELLA, ed., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, Maryknoll, New York 1988, 188.

²⁷FABELLA, *With Passion...*, 188.

²⁸A.M. TEPEDINO, “Feminist Theology as the Fruit,” in V. FABELLA, ed., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, Maryknoll, New York 1988, 167.

²⁹FABELLA, *With Passion...*, 182.

³⁰FABELLA, *With Passion...*, 117.

³¹T. OKURE, “Women in the Bible,” in V. FABELLA, ed., *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, Maryknoll, New York 1988, 56.

³²L.B. ARELLANO, “Women’s Experience of God,” in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, Maryknoll, New York 1988, 148

Examples of Oppression

Even as child is conceived, the family is looking forward to a male child. In some places, modern tests are used to identify the sex of the fetus, and a female fetus may be aborted. Even if the child is not killed, she is made to feel unwelcome by the wider family and even by her father.³³

If a woman is a working woman in an urban situation, she has a double load, as she has to work at home as well as carry another job outside the home. Her work at home is not quantified, and even the Marxists would not consider her labor to be of productive value. If she is poor, she has to go to superhuman lengths to secure basic necessities, such as water. Sometimes she may be a migrant domestic worker in the city.³⁴

In a patriarchal social order, she has no power or decision making ability. The decisions in the family are made by the husband and the woman is taken as an extension of the man. Due to prolonged care-giving, she is denied the opportunity for professional growth. Child care and education is also her responsibility because most men still do not feel that they have to participate in housework and child care. This places a double burden on working mothers.³⁵ She has unequal status in life. In the Chinese and Indian traditions, she is dependent on her father in childhood; in adulthood, she is dependent on her husband; in old age, she is dependent on her son.³⁶

In the religious sphere, she has no dominant role or authority. The dominant gods are male. Their representatives are also male. The woman is often considered ritually impure, because of her menstruation. She is the temptress, in the image of Eve. The submissive, chaste, hardworking, even suffering wife is held up as the ideal.

The concrete manifestations of these attitudes and situations may vary from country to country and culture to culture, but the oppressive structures are similar everywhere. A group of Asian women summarizes these oppressions in the following words:

We have come to the realization that these women suffer from triple oppression: as citizens of developing countries in an unjust world's economic system, as workers and as women. Women are treated as inferior in society, denied their rights to participate in decision-making and to develop as full human beings. The low status of women is derived from their relationship with the male members of their families. Often women are victims of rape and other form of violence. As part of the most exploited and oppressed

³³M. AMALADOUSS, *Life in Freedom: Liberation Theology from Asia*, Maryknoll, New York 1997, 32.

³⁴AMALADOUSS, *Life in...*, 31-33.

³⁵Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences: F. JOSEF, ed., *For all the Peoples in Asia* 2, Manila 1997, 114.

³⁶AMALADOUSS, *Life in...*, 33.

groups, industrial women workers suffer as cheap, docile and dispensable labor.³⁷

In Asian society there is still a myth that women are treated as goddesses and that motherhood is sacred. It is an image that should bring dignity and the freedom to women, but the reality is the very opposite.

The political and social situation

As was noted in the Asian Synod (1999), the political panorama in Asia today is highly complex, displaying an array of ideologies ranging from democratic forms of government to theocratic ones. Military dictatorships and atheistic ideologies are very much present. Some countries recognize an official state religion that allows little or no religious freedom to minorities and the followers of other religions. In others countries, there are no human rights. In some places Christians are not allowed to practice their faith freely and to proclaim Jesus Christ to others. They are persecuted and denied their rightful place in society.³⁸

A number of Synod Fathers underlined the external influences being brought to bear on Asian cultures. The persistent reality of poverty and the exploitation of people are matters of the most urgent concern. In Asia there are millions of oppressed people who for centuries have been kept economically, culturally and politically on the margins of society. Reflecting upon the situation of women in Asian societies, the Synod Fathers noted that “though the awakening of women’s consciousness to their dignity and rights is one of the most significant signs of the times, the poverty and exploitation of women remains serious problem throughout Asia.”³⁹ Female illiteracy is much higher than that of males; and female children are more likely to be aborted or even killed after birth. It was reassuring to hear the Bishops at the Synod mention that in some cases these matters are receiving greater attention at the national, regional and international levels, and that the Church is actively seeking to address this serious situation. In the recent years, most governments have recognized the importance of education for their female population. Official legislation has been enacted in many countries to increase women’s opportunities to obtain formal education. Yet in most parts of the developing world there are many more boys than girls enrolled in school.⁴⁰

Development of Asian Women

Virginia Fabella shares the following from her experience:

³⁷ Asia Partnership for Human Development, *Awake: Asian women and the Struggle for Justice*, 12.

³⁸ JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, New Delhi 1999, 20.

³⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia...*, 18-19.

⁴⁰ L. CURTIN, *Status Women: A Comprehensive analysis of Twenty Developing Countries*, WFS, 1982, 10.

As a woman religious, my commitment to the oppressed, which started with political militancy, developed into a commitment for the struggle of women against gender oppression. Together with Asian women coming from different religious and cultural backgrounds, we came to the insight that all religions have oppressive as well as liberating elements, which could serve against women.⁴¹

The starting point of this Asian effort at theologizing from the women's perspective is the particular struggle of Asian women. The statement of the Asian women's consultation in Manila in November 1985 summarizes this in its first paragraph:

In all spheres of Asian society women are dominated, dehumanized, they are discriminated against, exploited, harassed, sexually used, abused, and regarded as inferior beings who must always subordinate themselves to the so-called male supremacy. In the home, church, education, and media, women have been treated with bias and condescension. In Asia and all over the world, the myth of the subservient, servile Asian woman is blatantly peddled to reinforce the dominant male stereotype image.⁴²

Virginia Fabella, for example, makes the following critique of the way Mary has been taught and how the emerging feminist theology tries to correct it: One of the ways Catholicism has contributed to the subordination of women especially in the Church is by its portrayal of Mary. Through the ages of Mary has been depicted as silent, sweet, self-effacing, docile, passive, submissive, a Mater Dolorosa. Actually this portrayal of Mary is a masculine perception of idealized femininity, which has been inflicted on us and which many of us in turn have tried hard to internalize. In the recent times, however, women have begun to appropriate the Bible for themselves without the mediation of male interpreters, and realize how Mary has been misrepresented. They see Mary of the gospel, especially of the Magnificat, as a woman of faith and intelligence, who is gentle and attentive, yet decisive and responsive, a woman of deep compassion but also great courage, who is able to take the initiative and make great sacrifices and is willing to risk in order to accomplish God's word and will. This is, to a growing number of women, and should be to us, the true Mary, who is proto-disciple, yes, but above all, woman.⁴³

The Empowering of Women

By reading the Gospels through women's eyes, one can see how Jesus rejected the patriarchal system and set women free. Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, was born of the Virgin Mary, who had never "known man." When Korean women were campaigning for the amendment of the Family Law, they

⁴¹FABELLA, *We Dare...*, 109.

⁴²*Statement of the Asian Women's Consultation in Voices from the Third World*, 8/2 (December 1985) 32-33.

⁴³V. VABELLA, "Mission of the Church in Asia: Role and Position," in M.J. MANANZAN, ed., *Essays on Women*, Manila 1987, 144.

faced strong opposition from those who would have even risked in their neck to retain the Family Law because of the importance of the male seed or sperm. It seems to Ahn Sang Nim, Korean Feminist Theologian, that by being conceived of the Holy Spirit, without this power of a man's sperm, Jesus rejected the patriarchal culture. When she began to think about it she became very excited. Jesus came to this world only through a woman. No man brings another being into this world. She learned later that this idea had already been written about a few decades ago by Karl Barth in his Church Dogmatic, in the article "The Miracle of Christmas."⁴⁴ Be born of the Virgin Mary means being born not because of male generation but solely because of female conception.

Jesus' purpose for coming is found in Luke 4: 18-19 "To preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and to recover sight for the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Women are poor and women are oppressed under the patriarchal culture. To such women Jesus came to preach good news. Jesus came to proclaim the acceptance year of the Lord, the year of Jubilee. In Leviticus 25 we read, "You shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee year for you." It was God's command to return property to its original owner and to set the slaves free.

We have spent much time reflecting on, analyzing, and reading the stories of women involved in many aspects of development. Some of the stories are personal because we know the women telling the stories. Some of the projects are new to us, but the stories identify with our own stories or one we know from other women.⁴⁵

The story in Matthew's Gospel 15:21-28 is one of a woman who felt that she could relate to the popular healer, Jesus. The woman came from somewhere near the cities of Tyre and Sidon and this made her a non-Jew, a Canaanite woman. To Jews, therefore, she was a second-class person. She was also a woman, and as woman had no standing in the Jewish society. This led to a double discrimination. Her purpose, however, was simple. Her daughter was very sick. Only the mother, who was closely involved with her sick daughter, knew the trauma, the anguish, and the need for healing for her child. The story points out many interesting facts. At the confrontation Jesus is silent. The disciples attempted to send her away by giving Jesus negative advice: "Send her away! She is following us and making all this noise." The story is a typical reference to women who become too insistent and forceful even today. When Jesus finally speaks to the woman, he seems to be on the defensive: "I have been sent only to the lost sheep of the people of Israel." It is hard to know what Jesus meant by this statement. He could have reverted to his Jewish traditions by stating his mission within the context of the Jewish race. The woman was an

⁴⁴A.S. NIM, *We Dare to Dream Doing Theology as Asian Women*, Hong Kong 1989, 129-130.

⁴⁵KING, *Feminist...*, 202.

outsider in this situation. She appealed to the compassionate side of Jesus' nature: "Lord help me!" Jesus continues to speak as an elitist Jew: "It isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said: "Yes Lord, that's true but even the dogs eat the leftovers that fall from the master's table." Her argument is strong and forceful and she has a valid point. Jesus then says: "What you want will be done for you." Her daughter is healed.

Women need to be able to handle conflict and not run away from situations that seem oppressive. They need to develop the skills to stand up to men when they use masculinity as a form of oppression. By challenging Jesus to recognize her need, the woman learned that Jesus' message was for non-Jews as well as for the Jews.⁴⁶

Discipleship of Women

For us it is important to discover that women occupy an important place in the group of the disciples - they are among those who follow Christ - and their role is not simply one of taking care of housekeeping duties, but also one of receiving the Master's teaching.⁴⁷ In the account of Martha and Mary where tradition shows two kinds of women, one was active and the other contemplative. Mary's position at the feet of Jesus is that of the disciple at the feet of the Master (Acts 22: 3). The woman who met Jesus at Jacob's well was the first missionary to witness to Jesus as the Messiah. Martha of Bethany confessed Jesus as the Christ, just as Peter did.⁴⁸

It is interesting to observe how the Fourth Gospel presents the Bethany family to us: Jesus loved Martha, her sister Mary, and her brother Lazarus (Jn 11: 15). This Bethany family was a friend of Jesus.⁴⁹ It would seem that when Jesus went to Jerusalem he lodged at their house (se Mk 11: 11; 14: 3). They were his disciples and Jesus was their master.⁵⁰

The text tells us that when Martha hears that Jesus was coming, she runs out to meet him. Although Lazarus has already been dead for three days, Martha is both anxious and confident, for she expects Jesus to do something. (Martha reveals that, at this point, she shares the faith of all the Jewish people in the resurrection of the dead on the final day). In the dialogue with Jesus, her faith becomes strengthened.⁵¹

Contradicting the style of the Fourth Gospel, in which Jesus always takes the initiative in the beginning a dialogue, this time it is Martha who begins it. She is presented to us as a person full of life and faith, with initiative and determination abounding in hope.⁵²

⁴⁶KING, *Feminist...*, 204.

⁴⁷JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Vatican, 1988, 16.

⁴⁸FABELLA and PARK, *We Dare...*, 131.

⁴⁹A. JAUBERT, *Reading the Fourth Gospel*, Sao Paulo, 1984, 24.

⁵⁰TEPEDINO, *Feminist...*, 169.

⁵¹TEPEDINO, *Feminist...*, 169.

⁵²TEPEDINO, *Feminist...*, 169.

Luke 8 showed a picture of women disciples. Also when Jesus was carrying the cross, who stayed with Jesus? It was the women who stayed with him. On the way to Golgotha there were weeping woman who had followed Jesus all the way from Galilee.⁵³

After Jesus was buried in the Tomb, the male disciples hid themselves, but the women went to the tomb, to care for Jesus' body. Yet early in the morning Mary Magdalene and the other women went to Jesus' tomb (Lk 24: 8-10). The risen Jesus sent these women to his disciples to witness his resurrection. Even though women could not speak in public at the time, Jesus sent women as witness to his male disciples.⁵⁴

In I Timothy 2, "No woman is to teach or to have authority over a man. She is to keep silence". But Paul declares in his first letter to Galatians, "all of you are the children of God" since everyone of you that were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male or female, you are all one in Christ" (Gal 3: 26-28). This unity does not cancel out diversity. The Holy Spirit, who brings about this unity in the supernatural order of sanctifying grace, contributes in equal measure to the fact that "your sons and daughters will prophecy." "To prophesy" means to express by one's words and one's life "the mighty works of God" (Acts 2: 11), preserving the truth and originality of each person, whether woman or man.⁵⁵ Those who have been baptized are free of any discrimination of sex, race, or class. Baptism is a sacrament, a call to equal discipleship. Those who are baptized and have confessed Christ are all disciples of Jesus Christ. Among Christian there should be no discrimination.⁵⁶ In Romans 16, Paul also worked with women and in his letter he greets them as fellow workers in the service of Christ Jesus.

The Woman's Role as Prophetic Discipleship toward 2000

The most appalling phenomenon in the world, especially in Asia, is poverty. The question that is the most pertinent to our concern is the poverty of women. How can a woman lead herself and others out of the house of bondage, unless she knows who she is and where she is going? What is our common need? Are women poorer than men? The answer lies in the figures for health, nutrition, education and participation in the labor force that show women are in a highly disadvantaged position compared to men, even poor men. Women are the appropriate people to help the deprived in society, i.e. women in solidarity with women. Those in a better situation in society should help those who are less fortunate. However, it should not be taken for granted that this will happen. Unfortunately, women, or rather people in general, who are in a better situation

⁵³FABELLA and PARK, *We Dare...*, 131.

⁵⁴V. VABELLA and M.A. ODUYOYA, *With passion and compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, Maryknoll, New York, 1988, 25.

⁵⁵JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 16.

⁵⁶VABELLA and ODUYA, *With Passion...*, 132.

economically and socially, often are insensitive to the conditions of people around them. Therefore, it is necessary to raise their consciousness in order to sensitize them to their social environment. We need to increase the education of women and we need women professionals. This means that we need more participation of women in the public sphere.

At the IV Plenary Assembly on “Christian Discipleship in Asia,” in Manila, January 1995 the Bishops and the Churches of Asia realized that they could not turn a deaf ear to the sufferings of women.⁵⁷

Encouraged by Pope John Paul II’s celebration of the “feminine genus”⁵⁸ and filled with the hopes of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC), participants from 17 Asian countries met in Thailand in November 1995 and sponsored a consultation on “the role of women in the Church and society towards the Third Millennium.” Open to the Spirit, these women and men deliberated to grow in the greater awareness of the situation of women and the injustice done to them. The Bishops of Asia are listening. All over their continent, they can hear “the cries and the pain of the women,” (FABC 6, Workshop on Women report)-women struggling to survive beneath the weight of poverty; women without a voice. And the Bishops are touched.⁵⁹

In the midst of the miserable conditions of women in different countries, we also saw the emerging leadership of committed women at the grassroots level. We observed with hope the many contributions of women in the Church and in society to creatively improve the situation. Many women are coming forward to undergo training so that they are better equipped for the mission of the transformation of the world.

How can a woman lead herself and others out of the house of bondage, unless she knows who she is, and where she is going? Birgitta said, “Woman as woman is bonded in sisterhood”⁶⁰ In Exodus, we see how “all women went out after her (Miriam) with dancing.” It was not only a performance, no ego-trip for Miriam. It was a magnificent expression of sisterhood. As religious women, you have the structure and the network to be informed and you also have the bonding.

Be your self.⁶¹ Know your self. Say to your self: “I am the bearer of God’s image. I have an assignment in this life; I will discern this assignment and carry it out.” What is the vision which you keep in your heart? Make it come true! Let us look to Miriam. She was just a little girl, a member of an oppressed minority, devoid of any power. She loved her little brother, and did not want him to die. So she did not just weep and wail, nor try to find somebody to blame but she did something. She was not intimidated by the power, the pomp and splendor

⁵⁷ Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, *For all the Peoples in Asia* 2, 92.

⁵⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Women*, Vatican, 1995, 10.

⁵⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter...*, 91-92.

⁶⁰ *Prophetic Discipleship in Asia /Oceania AMOR*, 9 (Sukabumi, Indonesia, 1991), 78.

⁶¹ *Prophetic Discipleship...*, 78.

which Pharaoh's daughter represented. She found the way to reach her, and to talk to her. Does this shape our vision of the year 2000?

We are Christian, followers of Christ. What was the vision of Christ? It is perhaps summed up in His description of His mission in Luke 4: 18-19, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me..." How can we, through our lives make Christ present even today to end all forms of human bondage, and to release the marginalized and the exploited? In John 10: 10 we hear Jesus saying: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." How many of our Asian sisters have life, let alone abundantly? Not just the Asian woman, but all women, all human persons, of every time and in any part of the world.

As Christians, we are called to build the community of sisters and brothers who live as faithful disciples of Jesus and bear witness to his message for our world. This means to provide services for the poor, to maintain and improve the reproductive health of women through maternity clinics, to set up schools and to organize home visits to care for the sick and the old and the needy. Therefore, in our resolutions and recommendations, we seek to become, by working together in mutual respect and through sharing gifts and talents, effective instruments in affirming the values of God's reign in today's Asia.⁶²

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⁶²Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, *For all the Peoples of Asia* 2, 94.

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