

WOMAN AND POWER

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THE ARTICLES in this issue of *The Way Supplement* are an invitation to ponder the life and apostolic spirituality of Mary Ward, a woman who dared to act out of the belief that the power of women is gift from God. To ponder her story from the historical distance that is ours in this last quarter of the twentieth century is a distinct privilege. We owe it to Mary Ward and to ourselves to discover the claims that her journey toward inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity have upon us today. I would like to suggest that one way of responding to this challenge is to engage ourselves in the struggles and ambiguities of our time as courageously and creatively as did Mary Ward in her day. If her life has anything to say to us, it certainly is that we must live within our moment of history.

Within this orientation I would like to explore two terms I believe central to our journey today toward inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity: namely, 'woman' and 'power'. It is probably true that Mary Ward never explicitly used the latter term, 'power'. To try to find this term in her writings would no doubt be an exercise in futility. But power, it uses and abuses, was a significant factor in shaping the story of her life. The former term, 'woman' however, was often on the lips of Mary Ward. Her life proclaims eloquently her belief in her own womanhood, her faith in other women, and her hope for the full recognition of women as creative and competent. This faith and hope she translated into daring deeds and courageous action.

In remembering this woman of the seventeenth century, I invite us, then, to probe the terms 'woman' and 'power'. What do these terms signify in our day? What do these terms, when explored, reveal about ourselves, our Church and the world? What kind of journey toward inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity does the exploration of these terms exact of us? Possibly one of the best ways to celebrate Mary Ward's four-hundredth birthday is to be boldly responsive to the questions and issues which such a probing may disclose: to be open to the personal conversion that such an exploration may evoke.

Invitation

Before sharing my own reflections I invite you, the reader, to consider what images, experiences, and feelings these terms stir

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within you. I ask you to allow yourself the time and space to ponder the meaning of these terms to you. Permit yourself to be still and to encounter yourself in uncovering the history of these two words within your own life story. Reflect, too, on why I have proposed these two terms as central in discovering the journey toward inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity. Jot down your own perceptions and reflections. After doing so, continue reading this article. (Your jotting may lead you to do your own article and to pass over this one—and that would be wonderful!)

Such a personal reflection, I believe, will contribute to your own self-understanding and will deepen the meaning of conversion for us today. Let me explain.

Words are paradoxes. They both reveal and hide: reveal what is already known; hide what is yet to be known or to be recognized. The meanings we ascribe to words disclose what is and what is not acknowledged. To explore a word, and its commonly accepted meanings, and to consider what is left unnamed in its signification are risks. T. S. Eliot hints at this when he writes:

So here I am . . .

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which
One is no longer disposed to say it.¹

To play out the story of a word is to learn that every word is indeed a 'recapitulation of past processes'. Every word bears within its meanings our cumulative experiences (or lack of them). Words disclose the accepted descriptions and long-held attitudes which we subscribe to in regard to the realities words are intended to signify. Words, when examined, can become (to borrow from Eliot again) 'a new and shocking valuation of all that we have been'—and are!²

We are sometimes surprised to learn that the meanings which we give to words distort the very realities which the words are intended to signify. Words broken apart, more often than not, call us to look at the integral relationship between language and the 'reality' it is intended to point to. That look may challenge us to remove our ideological blinkers, to uncover assumptions and prejudices that need to be exorcized from our world-view, and to become the unwelcome disturbers of peace, our own and others'. We may have to admit that the very meanings we ascribe to words, yes, even the very words themselves, lock us into dead

patterns of thought and action. We may learn that we have had many experiences, but that we have missed their meaning. Language has become our substitute for experiencing experience. Life has ceased to illuminate the meanings we ascribe to words. Language has taken on a reality all its own.

A reflection on a gospel story may help us to understand how Jesus called his disciples to conversion by questioning the significance of so simple and common a word as 'mother'. We read in Mark 3, 31-5:

And his mother and his brethren came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him. And a crowd was sitting about him, and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brethren are outside, asking for you'. And he replied: 'Who are my mother and my brethren?' And looking around on those who sat with him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brethren! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister and mother'.

We, like the people who gathered around Jesus, easily identify the familial with the biological. True, sometimes we elaborate psychological, social, cultural, and religious factors that nuance more precisely the meaning of a term like 'mother'. But who among us deciphers so radically the meaning of terms as Jesus did?

Jesus declares that the reality behind the term 'mother' is more than a biological relationship. Being mother, brother, sister is more than being physically related. Familial terms signify a nurturing relationship, and only those who are faithful to the will of God can be authentic nurturers. In reflecting on these terms, Jesus likewise signals that familial terms are intended to signify more than relationships within a family. We are to be mother, sister, brother to others, no matter what their ethnic, racial, religious roots. The relationships within a family are meant to be signs of the nurturing relationships within the family of humankind.

This story and many others reveal that Jesus's way of uncovering the reality intended by words precipitated a kind of revolution. He brought about a 'shocking valuation' of a group's identity and values. Probing the meaning of the terms 'woman' and 'power' may prove to be such an experience for us.

Woman

Mary Ward, a woman of God, a woman ahead of her times. Animated by the Spirit of God and driven by the needs of her day, Mary Ward adopted a way of life which was for her a simple

and faithful response to God's will as she understood it. Her behaviour, however, was judged by many of her contemporaries as contrary to woman's nature. Moreover, her lifestyle, her way of governing her community and of ministering among people were evaluated by ecclesiastical authorities as unbecoming for one who sought official recognition of her group. Such attitudes and judgments on the part of her critics concerning the 'nature' of woman, acceptable roles for women, and appropriate ministerial services for women religious are a 'shocking valuation of all that we have been'—both societally and ecclesially.

Such attitudes and judgments prevail to this day. Thus, I would argue, one of the most exciting challenges confronting women today is to explore to what degree official and accepted definitions of woman and the norms established to determine our roles shape religious, political, and economic systems. I believe that such an exploration will uncover that one of the significant causes of unjust systems, social evil and institutionalized violence in our world is the definitions and approved norms that determine women's roles in the home, in Church and in society.

The definition and norms have become an all-pervasive paradigm⁴ for structuring relationships, both interpersonal and systemic. The definitions and norms, I submit, are rooted in a world-view from which we and others must free ourselves if we are to know just systems, social grace and institutionalized goodness, that is, if we are to experience peace. Liberation from this world-view is a journey we must undertake to know inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity.

If we accept this challenge, then, we need to examine our own life experiences. We need to probe what images of woman basically inform our self-definitions and determine how and why we relate to ourselves, others, the universe and God as we do. We need to examine in the context of the gospel, especially in the context of its liberating traditions, and in the light of contemporary sociological, psychological and anthropological research, to what extent accepted definitions of woman are in fact ideological constructs. Such a task seems overwhelming. And, indeed, it is. But we need not do the task alone. We must seek out other women with whom we can invest our energies and from whom and with whom we can learn. We must trust our own experience. While we need midwives to help in birthing our own self-definitions, we must remember 'we are always called to an act of reflection in which our own personality forms its judgment'⁵.

As a community of searchers we shall find both the strength and the resources to plumb this most critical of issues, the para-

digms that determine our world-view. In the searching we can become communities of faith: groups of women seeking to discover anew our vocation as women, whatever our distinct callings and work. Many women are creating such faith communities and are sharing their learnings with women throughout the world. Those of us who find ourselves in such groupings are energized by the experience, even if overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task, even if frightened by our discoveries!

By reflecting on my experience and my behaviour, I, like many other women, have come to realize that a patriarchal ethos and ethic inform my understanding, perceptions, and attitudes toward myself as well as toward other women. We are beginning to comprehend that we cannot underestimate the part an aristotelian world-view has played (and is playing) in shaping western thought and systems. As women within the roman tradition we see with greater clarity the impact the writings of the fathers of the Church have had in re-enforcing misogynist societies. In particular we are seeing that the meaning of the term 'woman' and the norms established for our conduct are intimately related to the 'baptism of Aristotle' by Thomas Aquinas. Add to an aristotelian world-construct the erroneous biological presuppositions of thirteenth-century medical thought on which Thomas based his analysis of gender differences, and we begin to grasp more firmly some of the reasons why, historically, women have been judged and found wanting in both their human and baptismal potential.⁶

These factors (and many others which cannot be cited in a short article) have surely influenced the meanings associated with the term 'woman'. In my reflections, however, I shall not address these factors directly. I prefer to consider the 'curse' depicted in the 'myth'⁷ of the Fall (Gen 3) as a most significant formative influence in our self-definitions and self-understanding. For me and for many others with whom I have shared, this 'myth' has played a powerful role in preserving a patriarchal ethos and ethic, especially within the roman tradition. I offer my reflections not as a biblical exegete, which I am not, but as a woman of faith who seeks to give an account of that faith.

We need to probe, then, how much and to what extent our understanding of the term 'woman' has its origins in the story of the Fall, specifically in the curse associated with original sin: 'He shall rule over you' (Gen 3, 16). Has the curse become the primary symbol to mediate both woman's and man's self-definition? Has the curse, with its dominant-subservient structure, substituted for the equality of woman and man imaged in Genesis (1, 26-27)? Has the curse with its androcentric paradigm taken precedence

over the paradigm of coequal discipleship of women and men which distinguished the mission of Jesus?⁸ Has the curse with its patriarchal focus blinded us to the transformation of relationships which our baptismal commitment calls for?

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ (Gal 3, 27-28).

In summary, has the curse been an all-powerful catechetical tool, a formative force, for legitimating a sexist society with its consequent alienating effects: women forgetting in whose image we are made; the separating of private and public spheres of morality thus creating double standards of justice; the rank-ordering and dichotomizing of all of reality into higher and lower value systems (e.g. man-woman, mind-matter, the rational-intuitive, soul-body)?

I would submit that we have been socialized to interpret the curse as the plan of God for creation, rather than as symbol which reveals what happens when we are not faithful to God's plan: women and men being coequal partners in responding to the gifts of creation and grace. Because of this socialization I believe we are predisposed to accept ideologies which re-enforce dominant-subservient relationships, both interpersonal and systemic. We have been socialized to be 'at home' with patriarchy.

On the one hand, we have been nurtured by messages that men can only become who they are intended to be by God if they are in control, in positions of authority and related to as *the* representatives of God, as superior mediators of God's will. In some instances we women have been taught to believe that men are to be the only mediators of God's will.

On the other hand, we have been told in many different ways that women can only be faithful to God's will if we are dependent, subservient and passive. The lessons we have been taught communicate, overtly and subtly, that we must accept that we are less capable of becoming fully human than men. Maleness, we have learned from our earliest years, is normative for becoming human and for full participation in the life of the Church. What departs from this norm is deficient, inferior, 'abnormal'. Too many of us, both women and men, have accepted this patriarchal paradigm as the authentic expression of God's will for the human community.

Given this catechesis it is not difficult to understand that we have come to accept and support patriarchy as the keystone of both

ecclesiastical and societal structures. Or to change the metaphor, patriarchy has easily become the heart of the organizational life of both Church and society. It functions as a basic paradigm for definitions and role functions of both women and men. As such, it serves as a primary legitimator of policies which permit discriminatory practices against women.

As a paradigm, patriarchy assigns certain human values, qualities and skills to men: men are natively endowed with these. Patriarchy denies these same values, qualities and skills to women: they are not in keeping with our nature. Ideologues of patriarchy organize life, structures, and systems in ways that deny women access to the very experiences, opportunities, and roles in which they could develop the so-called 'male' attributes.

When women are denied access to service roles simply and only because they are women; when women are told that this exclusion is God's will, no one should be surprised that women endure a profound crisis, a dark night of the soul. The Church becomes non-credible. The moral persuasive power of the Church is corroded. The Church, because of its official policies and practices, fails to witness to the standards of justice which it demands of the secular order. Double standards prevail. Justice assumes a schizophrenic quality. This schizophrenia, like a cancer, has the potential to destroy the life of the Church as a community.

We women, then, must engage in the creative and awesome project of unearthing and uprooting the presuppositions and assumptions which are embedded in patriarchy. In doing this we shall know the experience of pain, the pain of awakening to our internalization and assimilation of a misogynist world-view and world order. We shall awaken to the pain of dying to old securities (rather pseudo-securities) which keep us immature. We shall know the pain of having allowed ourselves to be trivialized. In some instances, too, women will know the acute suffering of having allowed themselves to be rendered invisible and/or mute. Like the bonsai tree in a poem by Marge Piercy we shall see ourselves as deceptively beautiful, denied our potential for growth, dwarfed in our capacity to risk because removed from the mountainside, domesticated and controlled.⁹

Many of us have loved the smallness of our stature; many of us have praised and thanked our gardeners that they have rescued us from the mountainside and saved us from lightning. The protection we have experienced has prompted us to settle for moral surrogates in our own regard and in regard to ecclesial and world questions and issues. We have forgotten, even if we ever knew, that creation has also been entrusted to our care, and not simply handed over

to the stewardship of men (Gen 1,26ff). Women and men are to be co-creators, responsible moral agents together, in making visible and credible the goodness of God and the power of the risen Christ. There is no journey to inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity without being a subject, an actor, a gardener, in regard to one's own development and the moral development of Church and society.

We must, then, liberate ourselves and our systems from a patriarchal world-view. We must make primary in our catechetical formation the paradigms of creation and grace, not the paradigms of the fall and the curse. We must become midwives in our own birthing and in the begetting of relationships and institutions that embody and reflect God's reign in our midst. We must engage in the labour required to birth a world where both women and men remember their origins: both made to the image and likeness of God; both the posterity of Abraham and Sarah, heirs of the promise (Gal 3, 29); both baptized into Jesus, the Christ, destined to live in a world freed from racism, slavery, and sexism (Gal 3, 28). This paradigm of equality, offered by Paul, must not be seen as a naive dream to be realized in eternity by God's doing alone; it must be appreciated as promise to be realized in time by the grace of God and women's and men's creative response to that grace. The vision of Paul must inspire our journey toward inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity. To be liberated from a patriarchal paradigm and to assimilate and internalize a paradigm of coequal discipleship with men we must also free our understanding and uses of power from the ethos and ethic of the curse.

Power

The structure of domination and subservience which the curse predicts also effects how we define power. Similarly, the descriptive and prescriptive norms concerning women which follow upon this structure determine perceptions and attitudes toward power.

Within the paradigm of the curse, life is viewed primarily from the perspective of original sin. Within this perspective we judge ourselves as more disposed to evil than good; more inclined to sin than to grace. Such an orientation breeds suspicion toward human creativity and in particular towards power. It engenders a sense of powerlessness because the paradigm of the curse, when dissociated from the new order initiated by Jesus (Lk 4), alienates us from God as the One who walks with us and empowers us to be about the transformation of ourselves and our broken world (Lev 26, 12; Lk 17, 21).

When the curse is central in our catechesis the power of God

and the liberating mission of Jesus are accorded a secondary place. In some instances that power is relegated to the second coming: God will reign and the salvific mission of Jesus will be effective, but outside time and without human collaboration. The Good News which Jesus preached is rendered void. Power within the context of the curse is not gift and grace. It is domination, coercion and control.

While we certainly know that power is not a univocal term, prevailing ideologies concerning power define it as though it were. Rollo May, I believe, expresses this well when he writes:

Love and power are traditionally cited as opposites of each other. The common argument goes as follows: the more power one shows, the less love; the more love, the less power. The more one develops his [*sic*] capacity for love, the less he [*sic*] is concerned about manipulation and other aspects of power. Power leads to domination and violence. Love leads to equality and human well-being.¹⁰

Most of us, I suspect, would agree with that formulation. Rarely, if ever, do we say we want power. That would be to align ourselves with manipulation, domination and violence. How often, if ever, do we speak of love as a form of power? How often do we describe power as gift and grace from God? Are we the unwitting adherents of a world-view that accepts that the primary construct for power is the symbol of the curse, the symbol of domination? My own experience and the experiences of many others led me to say a resounding 'Yes'.

No matter how legion the misuses of power we cannot afford to assimilate and internalize understandings and definitions of power which recognize only its demonic embodiments. The assimilation and internalization at best lead to confusion; at worst, to an abdication of the power that is ours through creation and grace. We deny that we have power. We assert that we do not want power. We try to live as though we could be faithful to our baptismal vows without using power.

In truth, if we have no power, we cannot be held accountable for the choices we make or fail to make. Neither can we hold others accountable for their use or mis-use of power. In the words of Rollo May, we take on a kind of 'pseudo-innocence'¹¹ in regard to power. This 'pseudo-innocence', in practice, becomes a betrayal of our birth and baptismal rights.

Rather than engaging in the awesome spiritual journey of striving to image God in the likeness of Jesus, we continue to give

primacy in our spiritual development to the effects of the curse; we knowingly or unknowingly re-enforce dehumanizing environments; we wittingly or unwittingly perpetuate systems of oppression. We become 'innocent' victims and/or we acquiesce in the victimization of others. We fail to use whatever power we do have. We abdicate our responsibility as moral agents, as subjects, in the unfolding of history.

Abuses of power do not justify our surrendering responsibility for how power is used and how it is named. Quite the contrary. The misuses of power constitute a claim on us as they did on Jesus and on his disciples. Jesus and his innumerable followers up to the present day are witnesses that power can be something other than control, coercion, manipulation and violence. Jesus and his disciples give these other names faces: they are love, compassion, fidelity and perseverance, to cite but a few. They are expressions of power that are nurturant.

Jesus gave us many beautiful examples of such power: the miracles, signs of liberating power; the parables, prophetic judgments about reversals in power relationships: the first, last; the last, first. The prodigal, fêted; the dutiful, offended. The publican, blessed; the pharisee, exposed. The Samaritan, good; the priest, negligent.

We can learn by meditating on the actions of Jesus that power is intended to mediate God's love within the human community. We can learn that the power of which Jesus speaks is a power which transforms both the mediator and the community. Consider the washing of Peter's feet by Jesus (Jn 13, 6-10).

Sandra Schneiders observes in reflecting on this incident, 'Peter realizes that Jesus . . . is subverting in principle all structures of domination, and therefore the basis for Peter's own exercise of power . . .'¹² Foot washing becomes a symbol; Jesus witnessing to 'a radically new order of human relationships'.¹³ No wonder Peter resists! The action of Jesus exacts a conversion of both Peter and the community. Not only would Peter have to act differently; the community, on its part, would have to learn new relationships with those in power.

We also see this kind of power at work in Lk 13, 17-20. In this story we catch a glimpse of what happens when power is experienced as nurture. We see the interaction between Jesus and the bent-over woman: the bent-over one stands straight. We observe the behaviour of those present: the weak become strong; they speak out; the friends of God delight in another's liberation; those who fear another's standing straight denounce the good that is done, or the way it is done, or why it is done. Power as nurture is too

challenging to the community. Too many strong people can become a problem. And surely the one who helps others to become strong must be obliterated!

In summary, Jesus showed us time and time again that power is for the loosening of bonds, the bonds of the enslaved as well as those of the enslaver. Power is energy for generating and fostering life, especially when and where life is diminished. Power is for nurturing.

Power as nurture is a paradigm, a symbol, at our disposal for transcending the paradigm of the curse, power symbolized as domination. In accepting nurturing as a paradigm for the use of power, we take Jesus at his word: 'No longer do I call you servants; . . . but I have called you friends ' (Jn 15, 15). We become one with the mission of Jesus, using power that others may have life, and have it in abundance (Jn 10, 10).

I do not propose this paradigm of nurture as another univocal construct for understanding and using power. It *is* intended, however, as an alternative to the reign of a negative paradigm of power, a paradigm with which we are all too familiar. It is intended also to help us deal with our own ambivalence about power even when we do not view it as totally negative.

In appreciating power as nurture I trust that we shall have a reliable guide in evaluating uses of power. Such trust is not prompted by a naive optimism. I am not presuming that we can or will live in an ideal world where we escape the struggles and conflicts that a life of fidelity to God, ourselves and others exacts. I am presuming that we can live in a less violent world, that we can become more just in our relationships, that we can experience that the power of God is more effective than the power of evil, that we can know ourselves as sisters, brothers, friends and neighbours to one another.

Power viewed as energy for nurturing life is rooted in a paradigm of hope. Its source is our faith in God and in ourselves as a people graced by God—empowered by God. This hope is indispensable for our journey to inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity. It does not save us from the temptations to misuse power; it does not prevent our using power wrongly. It *does* give us the courage to lay claim to the power that is ours by creation and grace. It challenges us to become responsible and creative moral agents within our Church and society.

If we are to redeem power from its demonic context, from the context of the curse, we must, I believe, begin to name the particular power at work in human relationships.

Power is energy. It is social. It is embodied in specific relation-

ships and institutions. When examined in its concrete expressions, power reveals the quality of human interactions and relationships and the quality of institutions and systems. Far from being a univocal concept, power is multivalent. I believe, therefore, if our hope is to become faith in action, that we must begin to name the particular power at work in human relationships and in institutions. We must refuse to speak of power in the generic. We must engage in the discipline of trying to name precisely the form of power that is being exercised and experienced—for example, violence, coercion, justice, love.

The discipline required to assess uses of power will call us to new forms of fasting: fasting from easy analysis of human interactions and of corporate behaviours and policies; fasting from our propensity to scapegoat others because we shy away from our responsibility in power relationships; fasting from authoritarian modes of authority because we fail to respect the social aspect of power relationships; renouncing ways of rank-ordering (discriminating) that designate some superior and others inferior.

Such fasting is in a view of something other than liberation from unwholesome dependencies and authoritarianism. The fasting is for the creation of relationships and processes that are collaborative, synergic, and life-enhancing. Such fasting has as its purpose the construction of a world of equality in which the vision of Paul becomes a reality and the reign of God in our midst is acknowledged. Such fasting is power in action, and its name is justice.

Justice compels us to take our own power seriously and to take the power of others seriously. It compels us to accept the responsibility that we have to use power as gift and grace from God; it compels us to call others to account for their use of power. In contrast to the paradigm of power based on the curse in which some are destined to control and others to be controlled, the paradigm of power based on nurturing underlines the characteristic of life-giving relationships—the quality of justice.

When we accept the personal power that is ours, regardless of the formal power (positions of authority) which Church and society allow or deny us, we are entering upon a journey toward moral integrity. Witness the life of Mary Ward! We shall learn what inner freedom and ecclesial fidelity exact of us: a willingness to experience the paschal mystery.

Concluding reflections

The story of Queen Vashti, wife of King Ahasuerus, is a striking account of what happens when an individual refuses to be a partner in re-enforcing patriarchy and thus calls into question the use of

dominative power. Ordered by the King to present herself at his party so that he might show off her beauty to his men friends, Vashti refused to come. The enraged Ahasuerus sought counsel from the 'wise men who knew the times' (Est 1,13). The wise men advised that the Queen should be banished as a warning to 'all women to give honour to their husbands, high and low' (Est 1,20). Banished she was!

This story has been re-enacted many times. It is still being re-enacted today, even if with a little more sophistication. We ourselves fear the penalties of becoming present-day Vashtis (present-day Mary Wards). We fear loss of favour. We therefore doubt or deny that such behaviour is asked of us. The fear, the doubt and denial are understandable. But they do not dispense us from looking at the question, 'Is such action required of us today?'

Given the effects of patriarchal systems and the dominance of negative paradigms of power that keep institutions and systems alive today, are we not required to help in the transformation of these systems and paradigms? Do we not have a responsibility to help dispel the toxic environments which these systems produce?

The arms race, the rape of natural resources, third/first world inequities, and east/west conflicts are among the poisonous products of systems and institutions which function from negative paradigms of power, paradigms not unlike the dominant-subservient paradigm of the curse. I am firmly convinced that if we women no longer accept that paradigm as the will of God for us (and for men), we shall have to become creative participants in the transformation of ecclesial and societal institutions and systems. We shall have to commit ourselves to daring and courageous deeds.

We and the communities to which we belong—including the Roman Catholic Church—must create alternative institutions and systems that serve as models of justice, that function from a paradigm of power as nurture. This goal will exact from us a 'gestalt shift'—a holistic and new way of seeing, valuing, judging and acting. We ourselves will have to become a new creation.

We have so assimilated a patriarchal ethos and ethic and we have so internalized a dominative power ethos and ethic that nothing short of radical conversion will enable us to be responsible and creative midwives in birthing a new social order. We cannot simply substitute matriarchy for patriarchy. A reversal in the patriarchal paradigm will change nothing. We ourselves must be changed.

We must, then, give primacy in our spiritual development to the paradigms of creation and grace; we must believe that Jesus did announce a new order; we must be convinced that the prophecy of

Jeremiah (31,31-34), reiterated in the book of Hebrews (8, 8.10), is being verified today within and among all people of good will:

I will draw up a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah
I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts;
I will be their God.

This faith and confidence in the power of God within us is an indispensable condition for our becoming a new creation. Belief in God's fidelity and trust in God's promise will empower us to appreciate that we are gifted with the responsibility to be moral agents in regard to our own development and in regard to the common good of Church and world. We will likewise appreciate that we are gifted and graced with the authority that is consonant with this moral responsibility.

We cannot afford to deny or hide this gift and grace. The story of the talents reveals the price that we shall pay for escapes from responsibility (Mt 25,14-30). In gratitude, then, we must lay claim to the power that is ours through creation and grace. In gratitude we must use power for the enhancement of life, especially when and where life is diminished.

We must continually ascertain whether we are participants in generating life-giving systems, or collaborators in preserving death-dealing ones. We must particularly examine our understanding and practice of virtues, especially of those virtues commonly associated with women; e.g., obedience, loyalty and docility. Virtues are dynamic; they are intended to be sources of life. They are social qualities; when practised they reveal how we relate or fail to relate to others. Virtues, when lived, not considered abstractly, disclose our attitudes toward our own empowerment. As dynamic, social and empowering, virtues like obedience, loyalty, and docility presuppose dispositions of mind and heart which enable us to be critically and creatively reflective. Their exercise demands responsible listening to reality and interior freedom. Their practice exacts an informed judgment. For example, no one is authentically obedient, loyal, or docile without being partisan; obedience, loyalty, and docility are options in favour of a concrete position. They imply a moral choice. They are not easy virtues; indeed, they call for a most sensitive and refined consciousness and conscience. They are not the virtues of the weak; they are the virtues of those who have accepted their responsibility to be imaginative moral agents.

Given the potential beauty and strength of these virtues, we

must not confuse obedience with unexamined conformity, servility. We must not mistake loyalty for unquestioning compliance, subservience. We must not equate docility with culpable ignorance, sloth. We must not, without qualifying our position, identify silence as the trait of those who are obedient, loyal. It may also be the characteristic of those who are servile, subservient, and slothful.

Such discernment is difficult. Many times we do not have clarity. Decisions more often than not are marked by ambiguity. But the difficulties, lack of clarity, and ambiguity should be safeguards against our assuming too facily what is or is not an act of virtue, what is or is not an act of obedience, loyalty, docility.

I believe, because virtues are concrete expressions of power relationships, that their authenticity must be judged in the context of power as nurturing. We must examine whether the virtues we practise foster in us long-suffering, in accepting patriarchy and negative uses of power. Or whether they empower us to be long-suffering and persevering in eradicating patriarchy and in creating just relationships and institutions. I suggest that the latter effects are acid tests of whether we women are journeying as Jesus did—toward resurrection. They are signs of an authentically virtuous life; they are signs of power as liberating, as nurturing.

To undertake a journey inspired by the conviction that power can be nurturing is to walk in the Spirit. It is to risk being led where we would not go. It is, to state it starkly, to risk, as Jesus did, crucifixion. But the persecution of Jesus happened not because he acquiesced to oppressive powers; he openly confronted them and their use of power. He showed them another way: power as love. To walk in the Spirit is to be a public witness to that way. Are we willing to be such witnesses? Mary Ward was.

NOTES

- ¹ Eliot, T. S.: 'East Coker', *Four Quartets*, (London, 1983) p 26. ² *Ibid.*, p 23. ³ I am of course, writing this article from my perspective as a woman. In some instances I use the term 'woman' generically, that is, as including both woman and man. In other instances, the term applies only to women. For example, women's liberation from a patriarchal ethos and ethic will be a different spiritual journey from that of men in their liberation from a patriarchal world-view. Thus, some of the reflections and observations which I offer pertain properly to women. When that is the case, the term is used to signify only women. ⁴ The term 'paradigm', means a unified symbolic configuration which informs what we perceive, see, think, feel, and value. It is a fundamental symbol for interpreting reality. ⁵ Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schüssler: *Bread not stone* (Boston, 1984), p 136; a quote from A. Schlatter concerning critical biblical theology. ⁶ Cf. Maidland, Sara: *A map of the new country: women and christianity*. (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), especially pp 11, 16, 177. ⁷ I use the term 'myth' to connote a symbolic expression, not a fairy tale. ⁸ Cf. Fiorenza, Elizabeth Schüssler: *In memory of her* (New York, 1983), pp 315-334. ⁹ Cf. Piercy, Marge: *Circles on the water* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p 75. ¹⁰ May, Rollo: *Power and innocence* (New York, 1972), p 113. ¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 51-57. ¹² Schneiders, Sandra: 'The foot washing (Jn 13, 1-20): an experiment in hermeneutics,' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981), p 86. ¹³ *Ibid.*