

Jesus, Women, and the New Testament

by Tarcisio Beal

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is a follow up to the article, *Androcentrism Weakens Church and Society*, that appeared in the September, 2020 issue of *La Voz de Esperanza*.

If there's anything that contradicts the praxis of Jesus and the teachings of the New Testament, it is the *machismo* that has pervaded institutional Christianity and world society for more than 19 centuries. What Christianity and society have lost by practicing androcentrism (from Greek *andrós*: man, male) and misogyny (gyné: woman, female) is beyond any calculation. Even more tragic is the fact that most religions, including the many Christian and most Muslim denominations have been and continue to follow such ungodly behavior—barring women from the altar, from the priesthood and from any significant institutional authority.

It goes without saying that Christians must read the Holy Scriptures from the perspective and the example of Jesus. Many passages of the Old Testament attribute feminine traits to God, especially Isaiah (49: 15, 63: 15, 66:30), Jeremiah (31: 20), the Book of Wisdom (7-10), Proverbs (8: 23-31) and, most of all, Genesis 1:27, which clearly states that God created male and female after His/Her own image. In the OT, Yahweh is compared to a mother who consoles her children and who cannot forget the child who came out of her bosom (Is 66: 13, 49: 15; cf. Ps 20: 6).

The following passages of the New Testament speak clearly about how women who participated in the ministry of Jesus which included everyone. He asserts that whenever “two or three meet in my name, I shall be there with them” (Mt 18: 20). If Jesus is present in the love of husband and wife, how can their love be one of subordination of the woman to the man? He also praises the generosity of the poor woman who gives to the Temple the little she possesses (Mt 25: 13). **Then He declares that everyone who does the will of God becomes part of His family as “my brother, my sister, and my mother”** (Mk 1: 31-35). Women were constant companions of Jesus, listening to him and “looking after Him when He was in Galilee,” all the way to His death on the Calvary, then anointing

his body with spices. No surprise, then that, after his resurrection, He appeared first to a woman, namely, Mary of Magdala (Mk 15: 40-41; 16: 1-2; Rev 21: 43). Jesus never excluded any woman from his love and message. He even lovingly mentions a non-Jewish, foreign woman, namely, the Sidonian widow of Zarephath, who was fed by the prophet Elijah during a great famine (Lk 4: 25-27).

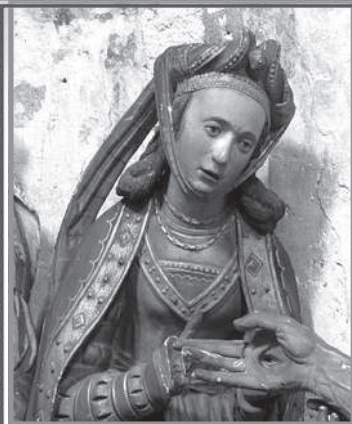
Furthermore the *Acts of the Apostles* contain a number of passages which attest that women were an integral part of the early Christian communities: Mary, several women, and male apostles pray in Jerusalem in the upper room of the house where they were staying (Acts 1: 14); the election of Mathias to replace Judas Iscariot was carried out by a congregation of

120 persons that included women (Acts 8: 15-26); Peter and John baptize the Samaritan Simon the Magic in the presence of men and women, then all receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8: 15-16); the ladies Priscilla (Prisca) and Aquilla instruct the Alexandrian Jew Apollos about the Gospel (“the “Way” of Jesus), then Apollos goes on to preach that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 18: 26-28); and in Caesarea, Philip, the Evangelist, had 4 virgin daughters

who were prophetesses. (Acts 21: 8-9).

The 4th century *Apostolic Constitutions* regulated the ordination of women as deaconesses; the Council of Nicaea (325) included women deacons among the clergy; and so did Chalcedon (451). We also know that deaconesses presided over the Eucharistic celebration. Furthermore, the Nicene Creed spells out the humanity of Jesus as “*homo*” (“*et homo factus est*”), which means a “human being,” not the traditional version of a “male/man,” which in Latin is “*vir*.”

Some male theologians, especially since Vatican II, have been denouncing the misinterpretation of the Scriptures regarding women and the institutional discrimination and exclusion of women from ecclesiastical offices and affairs. Leonardo Boff (O Rosto Materno de Deus & O Sacerdócio da Mulher no Horizonte da sua Libertação) notes that we believe in “One Lord Jesus Christ eternally begotten of the Father.” However, our experience tells us that conception comes from a mother, not a father.



He appeared first to Mary of Magdala?

Why shouldn't we be logical and call God "Our Eternal Mother?"

Mary represents the complete realization of the feminine in all its manifestations of life's mystery: as virgin and mother because she is the virgin-mother of God in the flesh and because she is intimately united with the Holy Spirit. Thus, something from Mary's femininity was hypostatically, that is, through the person of Jesus, assumed by God Himself. The flesh that Mary gave Jesus is the flesh of God Himself in history.

The Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx notes that Mary reveals something about Christ's redemption, that is, maternal tenderness, the generosity, the tenderness, the sweetness, and the peculiarly feminine that only a mother can reveal. He adds that, through Mary, the feminine contributed in a very special proportion to the physical make-up of Jesus; thus the human feminine received an eternal dimension (Mary, Mother of Redemption, Vozes, 1978). The Brazilian author Augusto Cury (O Homem Mais Inteligente da História, Rio de Janeiro: Sextante, 2016) elaborates on the education of young Jesus by his mother Mary to show that she molded his personality as it was later revealed in his practice and preaching of the Kingdom of God. The German Carl C. Jung (Tiefen psychologie der Frau: The Deep Psychology of Women) adds that, because of Mary, we can speak of a quaternity in God, with the mother of Jesus integrating the feminine into the Trinity; through Mary, the human masculine was raised to the Godhead.

Three Brazilian female liberation theologians, namely, Maria Clara Lucchetti Binger, Ana Maria Tepedino, and Ivone Gebara speak from their involvement in the reality of God's people, that is, from the Base Ecclesial Communities (BECs/CEBs). They highlight the message of the New Testament regarding women, specifically how the praxis of Jesus contradicted the androcentrism and the misogynism typical of the Pharisees and of the Hebrew tradition.

Binger notes that, when speaking of God, traditional theology, the Church Fathers, Aquinas and the Scholastics, all the way up to today's hierarchs, portray God as an image of human beings by using the masculine pronoun "He." They simply ignore the specific, special characteristics of women. However, the New Testament defines God as "agape" (love) and describes the Holy Spirit in maternal terms (Jn 14: 18, 26), thus making femininity central to the concept of God (cf. 1 Jn 4, 8). Thus – adds Binger – "the relationship of the infinite and divine love of Father and Son is established and made possible by the Spirit." On the other hand, the rationalist approach of traditional theology speaks out of the brain, not from the human reality of the body, the desires, the dreams, and the hopes of all human beings. Furthermore, traditional theology does not see Mary, the Mother of Jesus, as the sister and partner as does the popular religiosity of Latin America: Mexico's "Morena of Guadalupe," Brazil's "Black Madona" of Aparecida, Nicaragua's "La Purísima," Cuba's "La Virgen de la Caridad," Argentina's and Paraguay's "Virgin of Cacaupé," and many other Marian devotions of Latin Americans that venerate Mary, the liberationist and the prophetess of the Magnificat (Lk 1: 46-55).

Ana Maria Tepedino points to the countercultural example of Jesus towards women. He cures the hemorrhoid (Mk 5: 25-34; Mt 9: 19-22; Lk 8: 42-48), thus breaking all Jewish taboos about women and disease; a woman menstruating was considered totally impure (Lev. 15- 19-31); all that she touched, including her cooking and the chair she sat on, were deemed impure. The hemorrhoid had been suffering from bleeding for 12 years, rejected by the triple jeopardy of being a woman, being sick, and seen as living in permanent impurity. She did not have the courage or was unable to speak to Jesus, who was surrounded and being squeezed by a crowd. But she believed that touching Him would cure her. Jesus felt the power coming out of Him and said: "Daughter, your faith has restored you to health!" (Mk 5: 34) Jesus' resurrection of Jairus' daughter (Mk 5: 35-43, Lk 8: 49-56) also shows him placing life before the law: in Jewish tradition, touching a corpse made one impure, but Jesus does exactly that, thus contradicting the laws of purity.

Even more surprising and contrary to tradition was Jesus' cure of the Syrophenician woman's daughter. Here was a foreigner, a woman, and a pagan speaking to Jesus, breaking the law that prohibited a woman to speak to a stranger in public. Jesus decides to test her faith and says that He's been sent only to the children of Israel and, repeating the Jewish view about foreigners and pagans, adds that "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the house dogs." But the woman does not get angry at Jesus' initial refusal and humbly says: "Ah, yes, sir, but the house dogs under the table can eat the children's scraps!" (Mk 7: 24-30 & Mt 15: 21-28). Then there is the story of the Canaanite woman who was healed by Jesus. Tepedino also reminds us that, contrary to the traditional male interpretation that the women who accompanied Jesus were there just to feed him, Mark, Matthew, and Luke present them accompanying Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem as true disciples (Mk 15: 40-41, 47; Mt 27: 55-56; Lk 8:3).

Sister Ivone Gebara has been one of the strongest critics of the patriarchalism that still dominates the Catholic Church, earning from the Vatican one year of exile in Belgium. Her better-known work, *Rompendo o Silêncio* (Breaking the Silence, Vozes, 2000) is, as the subtitle indicates, a feminine phenomenology of evil. She details the oppression of women around the world and the machismo which uses the name of God and the Bible to justify the denial



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of women's most basic rights:

Who established a division of genders in their historical expression? Why men, who need women as much as women need men, constructed a hierarchy based on their body and on the women's body and began a war in their relationships? Why is the relationship between their bodies, which are the locus of good and evil, became the locus of crucifixion and exclusion, particularly of women?

Gebara observes that the traditional emphasis on Jesus' divinity, often in the manner of the pagan gods, turned into something

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the hierarchies could control: rituals, worship demands, abstract doctrines, rules which excluded women from the altar, and the domination of some over others. Latin American popular devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, however, sees her

with dimensions of a savior or co-redeemer, sometimes closer and more available than her Son. The people exalt her virtues, but also her suffering (La Pietà) because they feel she is close to them and hears the cries of so many suffering women.

Each of the women presented in the Gospels is a faithful and positive character. The story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan reveals all of it: after speaking with Jesus, she becomes an announcer of the Master's Good News to the people of Sychar, even as the machismo of the disciples stands in contrast with the behavior of Jesus and the Samaritan (Jn 11: 1-44). The faith of Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, is quite impressive. Says Martha: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I also know that all that you ask from God, He will grant it to you (Jn 11: 21-22, 32); The wife of Pilate tells him that Jesus is innocent (Mt 27: 19); and the Canaanite woman tells Jesus that his Good News is for all peoples, not just for the Israelites (Mt 15: 21-28)

Theologian Gebara observes that, within the early Christian community, women carried official functions and authority and were, as deaconesses and widows, part of what later was called "the clergy." The Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul attest to that: In Joppa it was Tabita (Acts 9: 36, 39), in Jerusalem it was Mary, mother of John Mark, and in Tiatira it was Lidia, who hosted Paul and Timothy in her home (Acts 16: 14-15). Paul also mentions

Priscilla (Prisca), Evodia, Syntyche (Rom 16: 3; Phil. 4: 2-3), and Mary, who worked with him in evangelization. The Acts also say that Peter's wife accompanied him in spreading the Good News, although there have been attempts to misinterpret that passage. Actually, Peter was not the head of the first Christian community of Rome, which was already established when he arrived there.

Gebara also notes that the attitude taken by the Apostle Paul towards women was truly revolutionary, for he was not only a child of the androcentric Hebrew/Pharisaic tradition, but was also tied to the Essenes, a Hebrew sect that was totally misogynistic. He speaks positively of the many women who worked with him in spreading the Gospel: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae. Give her, in union with the Lord, a welcome worthy of saints, and help her with anything she needs: she has looked after a great number of people, myself included" (Rom 16: 1-2). Paul praises the faith of the ladies Lois and Eunice (2 Tim 1: 5) and compares his evangelizing efforts with the trials of a pregnant woman: "I suffer birth pains until Christ is formed in you" (Eph 5: 22-23). He also implies that Jesus was a layman, not a priest (Heb 7: 13-14).

Gebara reviews how Paul refers to a number of the women who helped along in his ministry as "apostles," that is, as propagators of the Gospel: Phoebe, the holy deaconess of Cenchris (Rom 16: 1-2); Priscilla (Prisca), Evodia, and Syntyche (Rom 16: 3; Phil 4: 2-3), Mary (Rom 16: 6), Olympia, Julia, and Nereus' sister (Rom 16:15), Claudia (2 Tim 4: 21), who worked with Paul in evangelization; Apia, whom he calls "our sister in Christ" (Phm 2), Ninfia, in whose home the Christian community gathered (Col 4: 15), and Junia, whom Paul refers to as "outstanding among the apostles" (Rom 16: 7-8).

Theologian Gebara concludes that diakonia means ministerial service, which tells us that early Christian deacons and deaconesses engaged in serving the spiritual needs of the community. Sharon H. Gritz (Paul, Women Teachers and the Mother Goddess of Ephesus, Lanham, MD: The University Press of America, 1971) notes that Paul uses the same Greek verb *kopiaio* (hard work) that he applies to his ministry and that of his male collaborators in order to express the apostolic work of Mary (Rom 16:

6), of Trifena, Trifosa, and of Persidis (Rom 16: 12, 13), and advises the communities to follow their leadership (Rom 16: 21; 1 Cor 4: 12, 15: 10, 16: 16; Col 1: 29, 4: 1). We can safely state that without the women, the ministry of Paul would not have turned out the way it did.

No surprise, then, that women within the early Christian communi-



The Canaanite (or Syrophenician) woman asks Christ to cure her daughter. Etching by Pietro del Po.

ty carried official function and authority and were, as deaconesses and widows, part of what later was called “the clergy.”

We should also note that, contrary to a number of explanations found in many biblical translations, deacons and deaconesses, who received the Holy Spirit through the imposition of the hands of the community (1 Cor 11: 5) at least until the 12th century, were not just in charge of the poor and needy. Paul also ordains that the community supervisors (bishops) be married. The Didaché (first half of the 4th century) and the Apostolic Constitutions of laws and regulations put together in the 5th century, speak routinely about the deaconesses and their ordination by the imposition of hands by the community. The Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi (second half of the 5th century) also includes the widows among the members of the clergy. Even the legislation of Theodosius and Justinian (4th, 5th, and 6th centuries) lists deaconesses among the members of the clergy.

Now, we know that Paul’s Epistles contain a couple of discrepancies. For example, in 1 Cor 11, Paul does not object at all that women prophesize within the community; but then, in 1 Cor 14: 34-35, he apparently contradicts himself by insisting that women refrain from speaking during liturgical celebrations. The first explanation is that perhaps first Paul speaks of a general principle, then he refers to the specific problems of the Corinthian community, a city where prostitutes operated within the shrine of the Mother Goddess of Ephesus. Roger Grayson (The Ministry of Women in the Early Church, Collegeville, MN, 1976) also argues that here we have “two Pauls,” the one who, in the first case, speaks personally; then, the “other Paul,” namely, the male who edits Paul’s letter and cannot hide his androcentrism. Grayson adds that 1 Cor 14: 34-35 is probably an interpolation for two reasons: these passages break the continuity of the reasoning, carry linguistic and grammatical details strange to Paul’s writings, such as “as the law says,” and clearly contradict what the Apostle says in his epistles about

women and equality within the Christian community. What many theologians and exegetes have done throughout the centuries with 1 Cor 14: 34-35 was to interpret it vis-a-vis 1 Tim 2: 11-12, which is plagiarized from that interpolation. Other biblical interpreters added weight to their interpretation by quoting passages from the Old Testament and from Greek philosophy in order to add weight to the banishment of women from the priesthood.

Now there are great hopes that the Catholic Church, under Pope Francis, will finally rid herself of the stranglehold which has been choking her all these centuries. A major reason for optimism that androcentrism and misogyny will soon be malaises of the past is the activism of thousands of women, many of them theologians and members of religious Orders, who are engaged in shaping a new Church of true equality. In the United States, there are more than 35,000 nuns, and a large number of them could be ordained to provide the Eucharist to many parishes that no longer have a pastor, as the number of priests has been declining sharply since the late 1960s. In fact, a good number of these women already have been running the affairs of parishes around the Catholic world. Many of them are members of “Sisters against Sexism,” the “Women’s Ordination Conference,” and the “Leadership Conference of Women Religious” organizations which lead the way towards a new Church that has embraced the Preferential Option for the Poor. Their involvement has greatly increased since Vatican II and Pope John Paul I’s beautiful declaration: “Yes, God is a Father; and even more, also a Mother.” Through the power of the Spirit and the total engagement of women in pastoral ministry, God’s Reign will steadily grow within the equality and the mutual love modeled by our trinitarian God.

BIO: Tarcísio Beal, STL, PHD, Professor Emeritus of the University of the Incarnate Word, where he taught for 41 years was also co-founder of the old Archdiocesan Justice & Peace Commission headed by Rev. Bill Davis, then Pastor of St. Mary’s Parish.

Ancestors

We consider our ancestors and their legacies.
How we take them in as air to breathe
with nary study or thought.

Centuries of weapons: battleaxes and
battleships
catapults and cannons, rockets and
nukes.
And wars among tribes and empires
to bloodshed worldwide.

So masculine, virile, forceful.
Determined to dominate all,
even nature’s Mother.

Starting with women, each, every and all.
Stealing their self-sustaining powers,
making them property, chattel, cattle.



Some came up with Adam’s rib
giving birth to women and
a Father-god cursing our birthing with pain.

We consider, also, heritage of even earlier ancestors.
A sapiens-time when we survived not with weapons
yet to become but by banding and bonding,

expressing ourselves in crafting handheld statues
of Earth Mothers birthing, nursing, planting, herding,
holding families together, enabling peace.

Thus, comes our clashing legacies:
Death dealing warriors, life giving mothers.

—Tom Keene and Muse