The Female Face in Patriarchy
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Chapter 12

Removing the Stones

We can't just stay in our little corner and bow our heads to the Vatican. We need to be prophetesses and go where there is life!¹

If we reflect for a moment on the story of the women at the tomb in Mark 16:1–11, we gain some insight into how Brazilian women might take courage and find ways to remove the stones that impede their progress toward equality in their culture and church. The women of Jesus' time were as severely impeded by their culture as are Brazilian women today, yet they found ways to remove obstacles.

Love and faithfulness were shown in culturally appropriate ways as the women waited until the end of the Sabbath before going to anoint Jesus' body. At the same time, they moved out of their cultural boundaries because of love. Normally, a woman anointed another woman's body while a man did the same service for another man. In this case, the women on their own initiative undertook this final service of love and respect for Jesus while the men, his friends, were in hiding.²

By overcoming their fears the women at the tomb were rewarded with the call to be the first apostles, sent to preach and pronounce the resurrection message.

In previous chapters, Brazilian women described some of the stones that block their way to freedom and equality both in society and the church: clerical deification, machismo, self-oppression, the male image of God, fear, jealousy, oppressive education/formation, a struggle for power, and a sense of hopelessness. Though it is difficult for many to see beyond these obstacles, some women proposed creative ways to begin to remove them. Suggestions came from the simplest rural women, from educated academics, and from both sisters and other women.


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Following are reflections from sisters in various parts of Brazil on how women can begin to effect change so that future generations will not be blocked by the same obstacles in the church and society:

Change will come about if women concentrate on raising awareness everywhere they are. I have more than four hundred students and have a great opportunity to effect change. I can pass a consciousness on to my students. Women have these openings in a great number of environments. [Middle-Aged Woman, São Paulo]

Women need to work toward a new society where roles are diffused and power is decentralized. Everyone can contribute not only in society but in the church as well. In reality women are holding all this together. We will find a new way to be church where everyone will participate, a more democratic way of being. [Older Woman, Salvador]

In this model of church there isn’t room for the gifts of women. We need to talk about a new model because we are just reproducing the old now. We must get to know ourselves as women, how we are different from men, and then put this difference into practice. We need to be different in treating people. This difference will bring about change. There will be a struggle and sometimes the cost will be high. [Widow, Petroplis]

A young sister spoke about her experience at a university and how her own awareness of women’s oppression grew during her time there. She noted that it was not in the classroom that she learned the most. It was with a group of women who got together and talked things out. The group put pressure on the men and, because of their demands, the men’s attitudes toward them changed. “We can do the same in the church,” she said.

Another added that it is a question of education, that women have to start changing their thinking. Also, she said, because sisters do not have husbands to control them, they can be freer to tell a priest they will not accept what he is proposing.

Our vocation as women is to be prophets. Prophets of the identity of women. We have to be ministers of hope, a hope that has been denied to women in their dreams to be equal. We have to be able to talk about the dignity of women who are excluded and have been excluded for thousands and thousands of years. We have to be in solidarity with those calling out who have been excluded. [Sister, Alagoinhas]
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“The problem is,” added an older sister, “the unfairness keeps on going. Our dream is to change the structure, not to become priests in this structure.” A younger sister elaborated on what those changes could mean. “It is we who believe that this new thing in the church we are looking for is equal space for women,” she said. “We should have had it a long time ago. We have to assume our roles, celebrate, and be priests.”

There are others who would warn that such an approach is a painful one.

A female Methodist minister related:

The fact that some denominations permit the ordination of women does not mean that these structures have ceased to be deeply machista. Therefore, we need to help in the construction of a new church that lives out a liberating, hope-filled faith, without discrimination or legitimized oppression.

Possible ways to overcome the obstacles Brazilian women face as they struggle for equal recognition and acceptance in their church and society, along with reasons for hope, also came from theologians, Scripture scholars, philosophers, and educators. They presented a continuum of insights ranging from the high hopes and idealistic assessment of a Scripture scholar who maintained, “In spite of all the oppression of the hierarchy, now is the hour for the feminization of the church; it’s happening,”3 to the pain-filled reality of Ivone Gebara, who, when interviewed, was facing a two-year silencing by the Vatican for her “questionable” theology and writings.

Now I am alone, we are a very few here and there. We cannot be considered powerful. If 200 women in Brazil were thinking in the same way, I would be much more powerful.4

In 1997, after her two-year silencing, Ivone had this to say,

Re-imagining Human Life, God, evil and salvation in a woman’s perspective upsets the authorities of the Roman Catholic Church. Because of that, they invited me to study more theology, to leave for some time my narrow perspective and open my mind to the traditional thoughts of the Mother Church. . . . In the present moment I don’t know what those authorities are thinking about me. They are worried about the theology of my friend Father Tissa Ballassurya from Sri Lanka. I hope they forget about me.5

Others presented a variety of suggestions and observations. As one psychologist said, “Women must be committed to substituting a more feminine
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model for the father model. A feminine person in a masculine society scares men."

And a former sister observed:

There is an awakening of women, especially through re-reading the Bible. Women are getting encouragement from it. We have more women studying theology, facing down their sons and husbands who oppress them, breaking down barriers with a lot of patience. I can't say there are many, but there are some. There's a little bit of stagnation among religious, but among laywomen there is great growth.7

When asked what her hopes were for the future of this church, Tereza Maria Cavalcanti responded, "If this church continues to survive, she can't survive without women. I hope what happens will be the same as what happened to the gerontological hierarchy in the Soviet Union. It fell apart." With the continuing appointment of strong "Opus Dei" bishops and the priests they train, it would appear that this hope is slim.

Frances O'Gorman said she believes the feminists have opened the door to church renewal but have been rejected because they appear too radical to most. However, she said, a lot of what they have put forward will gradually become a part of the future. "This won't happen," she noted, "unless we question the whole male-oriented structure of the church and society along with the formation of priests and seminarians." What was most disturbing to her were the young Brazilian (macho) priests. "We have to build up the dignity of all people, women as well as men, before we can celebrate together."9

The most radical challenges to liberation theology, analysts say, are coming from feminist theologians. Women scholars are demanding an anthropological approach within liberation theology that is not patriarchal, and they are critical of male counterparts who fail to question male domination in the church more forcefully.10

According to Gebara, there are two groups of feminist theologians in Latin America. The larger group works in traditional theology and is trying to break it open and proclaim that God has both a male and a female face. They agree with tradition, dogma, the sacrificial structure, and all the traditional feelings about God, but they try to open all this to a feminist perspective. These theologians can work in the universities and publish in Catholic periodicals.

Those in the smaller group are trying to connect with European and North American theologians in saying there are problems in the whole structure of
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Christian theology. These theologians say we need to re-image human beings, God, and Jesus. This process does not have great acceptance in the official church.11

Elsa Tamez, speaking against male chauvinistic ideology that dehumanizes both men and women, invites her male theological colleagues to join women in this struggle, “so that together we can give birth to a new theology.”12 Gebara expresses the need even more poignantly:

We need to produce a new theology that doesn't fear discord with tradition. When I read the few texts of Latin American women theologians, I see their fear of saying things that differ from the tradition. Even I have this fear! But in my heart, in my body, in my inner being, I beg to speak differently!13

Feminist theologians, particularly in Latin America, are encountering the same suspicions, misunderstandings, and distrust on the part of the Vatican that liberation theologians faced in their beginning years. Could it be that the patriarchal church sees feminist challenges as an even greater threat to its power and prestige? Latin American theologian Julio de Santa Ana offers his opinion:

When men are presented with the possibility of sharing with women in the life of the church, in an equal way, there are really pathological reactions. St. Paul had a problem with women; there is no doubt of this. But the fact that Paul had a problem doesn't give us the right to continue to react to women the way he did.14

A group of women, who were from the rural areas but had been living and working in a CEB on the periphery of São Paulo for many years, suggested ways to remove obstacles to women’s equality:

I've worked for seventeen years in the community and now I see there are a lot of these women who haven't caught the idea, and I feel they never will. I think we have to start working with the younger people, those who haven't been involved, to try to analyze the situation because these other people will never change. [Middle-Aged, Married Woman, Bahia]

We have to somehow influence the women around us and say, this happened to me and I didn't like it, and I did such and such, what do you think of it? We have to get women to start questioning situations instead of just accepting them. [Young Woman, Salvador]
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This discrimination against women comes from the pope on down, the bishops, priests and seminarians. They all have the mentality that the woman is there just to serve, wash their clothes, etc. If we ever want to change attitudes we have to somehow change their minds. We have to work on them. We have to be proactive. [Older Grandmother, Telemaco Borba]

We have to transmit to our children a different way of seeing the role of women, what constitutes a good woman, that she is not just to stay in the home, wash clothes and iron. She has a right to study, give her opinion, and become active in public discussions. [Married Woman in Her Thirties, Salvador]

This particular group had come together after a long separation. Their CEB had been dismantled by a new pastor who told them they could not meet in the church anymore because the church was only for praying, not for discussing justice issues. These women highlighted four key ways of changing the future for women:

— start working with younger people;
— get women to start questioning situations instead of passively accepting;
— work at changing the minds of the clergy;
— teach children a new role for women.

As they talked, their own awareness of what they could do was intensified. The women in this CEB had become discouraged and had lost some of their zest for the struggle. They had been deprived of support from the clergy and hierarchy, which made them extremely vulnerable. Our meeting with them infused new life in their struggle, making it difficult to end our discussion. We left them still talking about what they could do to effect change in the future.

The type of experience described by these women is becoming more and more frequent in the Brazilian church. “The church of the base communities is merely a tolerated church,” wrote Clodovis Boff. “They’re allowed to continue with the permission of the pastor, and he can dissolve them at will, send them all home.” Boff said that progress made by the laity, and women in particular, toward stronger participation in church life can be “reversed at a stroke, changed overnight with the arrival of a new bishop or a change of parish priest. Even the most thriving community of participation can be reduced to nought.”15

If, as some contend, the CEBs as we have known them are diminishing, what do Brazilian women see as the next step? For the most part, they are searching for something new. As one educated woman put it, “The seed is still
there and it needs to be watered and cultivated, and from there something new will come.” She is encouraged by women theologians, though few in number, who are beginning to stand up and speak out. When such women put forth an argument that is clear, transparent, and without double meaning as a proposal to be studied, it helps advance the cause of women. On the other hand, she indicated that she is discouraged by many sisters in Brazil, who tend to be very obedient and supportive of the priests. “I wish they would be a little more rebellious,” she said.

Women from other parts of the country spoke hopefully for the advancement of women. A school teacher from the North said she hopes that as women continue developing in society, they will also begin to move forward in the church and be ordained as deaconesses and priests. She based this hope on women’s historical record. “It is women who have taken the message of Jesus and walked in his path, not the men. Men have put us a thousand years in error.” Another woman pointed out that because there are so few men in the CEBs women have to be more courageous and take active responsibility in their leadership of the people. That is why, noted Irma Passoni, “It is important to enter into dialogue with the bishops and priests to convince them that the church needs women, that the church would be enriched by their contributions.”

It is obvious from all that has been said that Brazilian women face enormous barriers to equality both in their culture and in their church. It is equally apparent that it is women who must remove those obstacles, or at least begin to address them by spreading the “good news” that:

— machismo is not ordained by God; therefore, to challenge it and raise their sons differently is not wrong;
— women are also made in God’s image, they are not second-class citizens and should have rights equal with men;
— the clergy are not divine, and to challenge and question them is not displeasing to God;
— God is not male but pure Spirit, and therefore the female is equally God-like; mothers, daughters, and wives are of equal value to God with husbands, sons, and fathers.

Brazilian women’s oppression of themselves and of other women stems largely from their deep-seated fear of proclaiming these messages. Hence women’s unwillingness even to allow themselves to believe the “good news.” If they believe, they will have to act, and the consequences for the few among so many are, as we have witnessed, very painful.
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We must remember, though, that discomfort and fear are essential to change. . . . The wonderful counterpart of the pain Gebara must feel as she leaves behind her people to fulfill Rome's dictates, is that the sanctions have made people worldwide—especially women—more acutely aware of the importance of her theology.17

From the beginning of the New Testament to the end, women have been told not to be afraid. At the time of the Annunciation the angel said to Mary, "Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God" (Lk 1:30). When the women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus, the angel spoke to them, "Do not be afraid. I know you are looking for Jesus the crucified . . ." (Mt 28:5). Jesus himself stood before them and said, "Do not be afraid! Go tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where they will see me" (Mt 28:9). The message is not that the women ceased to fear, but rather that their faith and love overcame their fear and moved them to action. In his first epistle, John tells us "There is no fear in love, for perfect love drives out fear. To fear is to expect punishment, and anyone who is afraid is still imperfect in love" (1 Jn 4:18).

As long as Brazilian women continue to expect punishment for transgressing unjust cultural norms or protesting against punitive church regulations, their love will remain imperfect and their fear will dominate and keep them submissive. Perhaps one of the philosophers was correct when she said, "No one discusses love anymore, but we discuss every other topic. To talk about love is to be accused of being old-fashioned. Only love builds, only love unites, only love can change society. We have to operationalize this!"18

The challenge is clear to Brazilian women. They must be willing to put aside their fear, jealousy, and desire for power, and love one another in a manner that will support all women when they have to endure insults and shame; nasty comments from men, clergy, and some women; or the abuse or abandonment of husbands. They must be ready to be misunderstood in their struggle to remove the stones that impede their progress toward equality. Rising to this challenge is their only hope for new life in church and society.

Notes

1. Woman from the north.
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11. Gebara, interview.