

Coming Out of the Shadows: A Feminist Vision of a Participatory Church

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Abstract: In this essay, I propose that a figurative restoration of the famous work of art – Michelangelo’s *Last Supper* – can be of assistance in getting a glimpse of what lies beneath some of the varnish and oil residue that has covered over some of the deep significance of the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. It is the first step in the realization of a feminist vision of a participatory church. This painting, which seats Jesus in the middle of a rectangular table with six male apostles on each side, has helped to shape the Christian imagination about the church and those persons in the church who were not only closest to Jesus but also chosen to represent him in the world.

Keywords: Michelangelo, Last Supper, participatory Church, shadows, work of art

Rembrandt’s famous painting *Night Watch* (1642) can be found in Amsterdam’s renowned Rijksmuseum. It is breathtaking in scope and color. A number of years ago, the decision was made to restore the painting and remove the residue that had built up over the centuries on this work of art. As this delicate work began and layer after layer of varnish and oil residue was removed, all were amazed to find that the painting was not as dark as originally thought. The darkness, which *did* give *Night Watch* a particular beauty, was the result of the layers of protective varnish and not the artist’s intent. Gradually other figures in the painting were seen more clearly as they were lifted from darkness into the light of “Night Watch’s” original beauty. An amazing story to be sure and, I suggest, an apt analogy for the work of restoring the church to its original vision of

participation and equality, as embodied in the life and praxis of Jesus of Nazareth. This vision has also been covered over by layers and layers of protective coating (interpretation and tradition) and is in need of restoration.

In this essay, I propose that a figurative restoration of another famous work of art – Michelangelo’s *Last Supper* – can be of assistance in getting a glimpse of what lies beneath some of the varnish and oil residue that has covered over some of the deep significance of the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. It is the first step in the realization of a feminist vision of a participatory church. This painting, which seats Jesus in the middle of a rectangular table with six male apostles on each side, has helped to shape the Christian imagination about the church and those persons in the church who were not only closest to Jesus but also chosen to represent him in the world. This restoration will uncover the gifts that the church has to claim, the shadows that need to be explored, and the boldness of feminist vision as a transforming grace for the church. The following steps are required. First, I will set forth some of the feminist critique concerning women’s experience in the church. I will then explore the gospel vision of Jesus as well as insights from the Second Vatican Council and feminist biblical scholarship as response to this experience. The new learning and challenges presented to the church by Vatican II and the insights of feminist thought are tools of restoration that permit an examination of the experience of “darkness” that is a reality for many women as they struggle to be faithful followers of Jesus and valued members of the community of faith. Finally, I will look at the challenge that a feminist vision brings to a world church, and the courage needed to allow a feminist vision of a participatory church to come to reality in our church. The movement towards a feminist vision of a participatory church is rooted in Jesus’ preaching of the Reign of God and fosters participation of each one in a vision of the community of faith which is inclusive, egalitarian and liberating. It is a manifestation of the life of the Trinity within and among us.

Beginning Restoration

Religious art has a particular power to shape the imagination of believers and non-believers alike. *The Last Supper* is a case in point. The picture of Jesus alone with his twelve male apostles has insinuated itself into Christian consciousness as a true rendering of what that “supper” was like and subconsciously legitimates the patriarchal structure of the church. The oppression experienced by many women in the church finds expression in the use of an exclusive male imagery and language for God, dualistic ordering of sexual stereotypes, lack of voice “in areas of ministry and moral decision making where their experience has been excluded, but where decisions affect their lives” (Hines 1993: 163). The church’s sacramental life is one arena where women’s earnest desire to be converted to a life that reflects “good news” becomes one more place of struggle to become who God calls her to be. Liturgical prayers that include an ordering of hierarchal privilege within the church shape the consciousness of Christian believers into a model of the church that reflects male privilege. Through the choice of male language for God, liturgical practice and church organization, women are constantly reminded of their “place” within the church. Never do they hear the invitation to “come higher, friend.” Upon examination, one finds that this hierarchical ordering of the church does not cohere with the vision of an egalitarian community of believers found deep within the heart of the gospel and at the core of a feminist vision of a participatory church. This is no small matter.

A number of years ago, I was asked to give a seminar on feminist theology in Taiwan. The participants (mostly women) were serious about understanding feminist thought and learning to read the scriptures from a feminist perspective. They were actively engaged in the process of recovering women’s stories from the Gospels and the Testament. Of particular interest was the reclamation of Mary of Magdala as the “apostle to the apostles” and the active role of women in both, the house churches and the early Christian missionary movement. Now, it just happened, that this seminar was held during the last week of June when the church celebrates the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul. Imagine the surprise of the women, who had just spent a week searching the scriptures, to find the opening prayer

praising Peter and Paul because it was from them “that the church first received the faith.” In contrast “when we read the occasional Pauline references to women in their own setting, we recognize that the Pauline and post-Pauline literature know of women... as prominent leaders and missionaries who – *in their own right* – toiled for the gospel. These women were engaged in missionary and church leadership activity, both before Paul and independently of Paul. Without question, they were equal and sometimes even superior to Paul in their work for the gospel” (Schüssler Fiorenza 1983: 161). This consciousness has not yet made its way into our prayers as Christian liturgical practice continues to be shaped by the male imagination and understanding of scripture. Women’s participation and activity in the Gospel story is consistently co-opted by the male apostles.

A pervasive understanding that the male is the only one who can fully represent God has grave implications for our sacramental life. Presently, women have access to the sacraments only through a male minister. The claim that women do not “bear a resemblance” to Christ does not cohere with the earliest tradition of the church where women – as well as men – were regarded as *image of Christ/ imago Christi* – especially in giving their life for the faith in martyrdom. In contrast, the liberation that *is* the praxis of God’s reign shows itself as a guiding light into a more complete theological anthropology that shows all as *image of God/ imago Dei*. Christian feminists (male and female) “recognize that women are fully human, acknowledge the *imbalance* and *injustice* that for centuries has, in church and society, characterized the situation of women, and are committed to righting that wrong” (Carr 1988). When this imaging of God is not only acknowledged but also lived out in the lives of women and in the wider context of social justice, it will change not only the shape of our church, but that of our world.

The Christian Gospel compels feminist women and men to call the church to a renewal that will restore the original vision of the early Christian communities. Women’s struggle to integrate their experience within Christianity will give rise to major shifts within the ecclesiological landscape. An ecclesiology that embraces the experience of women will challenge the church to be a community, which is inclusive, collaborative and radically centred on the praxis

of the reign of God. It calls the church to be faithful to what has been experienced and learned through the life and praxis of Jesus. This ecclesiology will be shaped by a new understanding of how God has called us to be in Christ, a call to repentance from the personal and social sin that has insinuated itself into church structures and a commitment to theological dialogue between the magisterium, the theologians and, most importantly, the lived faith of the Christian communities. This new vision is the transforming grace that women's experience has to offer the church and all humankind.

Gifts to Claim

One of the major tools that ground the feminist voice within the church in this effort of restoring the Last Supper to its original story, is the work of the Second Vatican Council. The effects of this Council and its major documents opened the door for women and the laity to reclaim their baptismal role and responsibility in the church. New understandings of the church as the people of God, a pilgrim church and a church of the poor and oppressed, are just a few of the images that emerged from the Council and ignited the hearts of the faithful. Careful consideration of the "signs of the times" – first voiced in John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* – compelled the Council Fathers to be attentive to the changing role of women and the rise of feminist consciousness. Various movements aimed at transforming the church "from below" emerged from the growing consciousness that all baptized Christians are equal and all are the church.

Among the many Council documents that helped to lay a firm foundation for an emerging feminist vision of church are *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, and *Dei Verbum*. *Lumen Gentium* affirmed the "equal dignity" of all the baptized; *Gaudium et Spes* confirmed that this equality is based on creation, redemption and the call to holiness; *Dei Verbum* emphasized Scripture as the font of life for all believers. As women began to study the scriptures in earnest, they discovered heretofore unacknowledged and unrecognized women in the gospels. They became conscious of the ecclesiological implications of acknowledging women's discipleship in the gospels and their leadership role in the house churches and the early Christian communities. The fact that women's discipleship and participation

in the church community has been marginalized and silenced cannot be denied. Reversing this marginalization is an urgent task.

The biblical work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has played a significant part in the emergence of a feminist consciousness that leads to a transformation of church structures. The depth of her scholarship continues to make powerful contributions to the exploration of the Christian scriptures and recalling the “dangerous memory” of Jesus Christ and his women disciples. Schüssler Fiorenza’s fundamental assumptions concerning the writing and editing of our scriptures give another viewpoint from which to look at the founding story of Christianity. In brief, these assumptions caution and invite the reader to notice that the biblical texts are androcentric, ie., the world view in which they were written reflects male interests with the result that they do not tell or reliably recount what women have done. Therefore the scriptures need to be read with a *hermeneutics of suspicion* – always asking questions and looking behind the text to discover hidden meanings and insights. A crucial insight for the formation of a feminist vision of a participatory church is the recognition (and admission) that not only the biblical text but also the translations, the preaching and the biblical commentaries, are all done from a male perspective. Her analysis of the Jesus movement as a “*discipleship of equals*” has captured the Christian imagination and propels Christian women into a movement for an inclusive church.

It comes as no surprise that her work and viewpoint are not readily accepted by all. This can be illustrated by the following story told of the University Professor, a well-known scholar in church history, who was asked by a few of his female students why he did not include any women in his lectures on early Christianity and the formation of the Christian churches. After giving some thought to this query, the professor answered quite simply: “Well, the answer is that there *are* no women to include in this part of history. They were not there. If they *were* there they would have been included in my course; but there *were none*, so they are not included!” While this story may anger some, delight others and find advocates on both sides of the divide, it brings an unsettling question to the fore: what of this professorial response? Is it true? Or has the light of our original Christian story been covered over with layers of protective covering just as was Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*?

Shadows to Explore: Marginalized Women

The task of understanding Christianity's founding story and realizing the vision of a participatory church impels Christian believers to return to the experience at the heart of the Gospel proclamation. This is an essential step because any changes in ecclesiology can only be measured by the heart of the Gospel message. This is not an easy task since there are several elements internal to Christian ecclesiology that inhibit the church's ability to measure and advance its ecclesial understanding regarding women's role and participation in the church.

Ecclesialogist Nicholas Healy argues that these elements are rooted in a "pervasive confusion about the theoretical possibilities and limitations involved in describing the identity of the church" (Healy 1996: 47). Two aspects of this root problem are firstly, the supposition that "there is a single aspect of the church that is most basic" and which renders all other aspects of the church as derivative or secondary, and secondly the belief that "it is possible to discover this primary aspect and then define or model it by means of a concept or image." He suggests that theologians need to be guided by their theological imagination and a narrative ecclesiology that describes the church by telling its story. In doing so "every theologian must make a "single, synoptic imaginative judgment" as to the identity of Christianity. An important part of that judgment is deciding how God is to be understood as present to the faithful . . . [This decision] will determine the way in which we interpret Scripture and tradition, and thereby shape our treatment of all theological *loci*, including ecclesiology" (Healy 1996: 49-50).

A feminist "single, synoptic judgment" regarding the identity of Christianity is found in the core of Jesus' preaching – the Reign of God. A feminist vision of a participatory church is set in motion by this perspective. This vision is not a matter of "adapting" women's concerns or imposing women's issues and voice, onto a church that is basically male-oriented. It does not mean that all one needs to do, is "add women and mix!" Rather it is the reception of a much-needed transforming grace. The Reign of God as preached by Jesus is made visible through the healings of Jesus and by his "open table" which welcomed all into communion and companionship. Being with Jesus

brings happiness and awakens joy in all. At his “table” there is no pride of place, no “top-down” seating. The poor sit elbow to elbow with the rich; the powerful with the powerless; women with men; repentant sinners with those sinned against, and children all around. It is a “Last Supper” vision that draws the whole community into the dangerous memory of Jesus Christ.

The “open table” of Jesus is the core symbol for a feminist vision of a participatory church; the core story that gives the courage to embark on such a vision, is that of “the woman who came out of the shadows” (Mark 5: 24-35) also known as “the woman with the hemorrhage.” As traditionally read and understood, Jesus and his power of healing is at the centre of this story; the woman simply allows him to show forth this power. However, reading from a feminist perspective brings different understandings into the text, and new insights emerge. For example, when this nameless woman is allowed to come from the margins of the story – as she came from the margins of the crowds – to the centre, she plays a central role in the unfolding of events. She has a disease which, according to religious standards and practices of society, renders her “unclean.” She is a person of no account, someone marginalized from family and society. It is such a woman who initiates contact with Jesus and who, in the process of claiming healing for herself, makes him – a male Jew – unclean. This periscope allows us to know not only what she does but also what she thinks and feels. Her intentionality in touching Jesus’ garment unleashes his healing power. Jesus, himself, is startled that healing power is released without his express command. He does not “control” his healing power which comes from God and which is available to anyone and everyone without distinction. The woman who came out of the shadows is a model for the feminist movement within the church. Her “courage compels her, despite her fear, to refuse her own exclusion and invisibility . . . [and to] present herself in full view in front of him. *She makes herself visible*. From behind, she moves to front, face-to-face, heart to heart. Only then is Jesus able to see her” (Brock 1994: 84). Her behavior brings healing and praise from Jesus and inclusion in kinship – she is called “daughter.”

Why is this visibility – this “coming out of the shadows” – so important? What is at stake here? What needs to be removed from a

model of the church, which excludes women and renders them invisible? As women see themselves more clearly in a new portrait of the “Last Supper,” other figures also emerge, for it is not only women who are hidden in the shadows. These figures are the non-western local churches that also must come into the light. The call for a feminist vision of a participatory church is also a call away from a western, male-dominated model of the church; it is a leave-taking of western, male hegemony over how the church and church structures are understood.

Shadows to Explore: Marginalized Local Churches

The work of setting out a theological framework helpful for this discussion of a feminist vision of a participatory church, which encompasses east and west, north and south, finds an invaluable resource in Karl Rahner’s essay on a fundamental theological interpretation of Vatican II. In this well-known essay, Rahner describes the Second Vatican Council as one which “in a rudimentary form [was] still groping for identity, the church’s first official self-actualization as a world Church” (Rahner 1979: 717). He maintains that at the Council, a qualitative leap took place in the church’s self-understanding, namely, the faces of those present for the Council deliberations, were no longer solely the faces of the West, but those of a world-wide indigenous clergy. He argues that the coming of a true world church, that is, one composed of local churches of many different areas of the world and not branch offices of Europe or America, has been in process throughout the three epochs of the church’s history. Each of these epochs has its own theological framework born out of the very different situations into which Christianity proclaimed its message. They are: the short period of Jewish Christianity, the long period of the church in a distinct cultural region (Hellenism and European culture – which lasted until mid-twentieth century), and the period following Vatican II in which the sphere of the church’s life is in fact the whole world.

In the first period of Jewish Christianity, diversity existed not only in Christology but also in ecclesiology, namely, in the self-understandings of the early Christian communities and in the churches the apostles left behind. The New Testament writings describe some of these understandings as: the body of Christ, the people of God,

spirit-filled charismatics and those living within structures that guided and shaped their lives. The earliest churches were rich in pluralism. There were diversities of theologies, heritages and contrasts in life style (Brown 1984).

Within the context of preaching and forming a community within its own historical situation, Rahner claims that it was not theologically self-evident for St. Paul to inaugurate a change from Jewish Christianity to Gentile Christianity. The decision of the Council of Jerusalem to allow non-Jews to receive baptism into Christianity without submitting to the Jewish law on circumcision, began this transition. This constituted a genuine break from the former understanding of what was required in order to follow Jesus and began a radically new period in the church characterized by the movement into Hellenism and European culture and civilization that lasted until the mid-twentieth century. Rahner claims that the present day church is experiencing a transition into another epoch of church history much like the break that occurred once before in the transition from Jewish to Gentile Christianity. He also claims that the challenge Paul faced in the historical situation of Jewish Christianity and Gospel proclamation to the Gentiles, was not greater than what the church is experiencing today.

This takes on concrete meaning, as feminist consciousness struggles to draw the church into a more participatory model. Rahner argues that the challenge is clear: “either the Church sees and recognizes these essential differences of other cultures for which she should become a world Church and with a Pauline boldness draws the necessary consequences from this recognition, or she remains a Western Church and so in the final analysis betrays the meaning of Vatican II” (Rahner 1979: 724). The new faces coming into the light in our church today are not those of an indigenous, male clergy but rather the faces of women of different races, nations, cultures and non-western local churches who have been baptized in Christ and whose faith and vision call for transformation. If the church denies them it will be at its own peril. The challenge that a feminist vision brings to the church today is clear: either our church sees and recognizes the different gifting in the church among women and men and search out new participatory models of the church, or it will

remain forever a western, male-dominated church and thus betray Jesus' proclamation of the Reign of God for all. Rahner claims that the church of today needs a "Pauline boldness" to meet these challenges; is not feminist consciousness and vision *the* Pauline boldness needed for our times?

Challenges to Embrace: Feminist Vision as a "Pauline Boldness"

What particular steps express this "Pauline boldness?" One of the more obvious areas is in the areas of liturgy and church organization. A church, which desires to be truly participatory, needs a liturgical life that continues to convert believers into the egalitarian praxis of God's reign. It needs a manner of relationship and organization that explores, enhances and calls forth the gifts of the baptized into the various leadership roles needed by the community. These roles are to be open to all if the meaning of being baptized in Christ is not to be compromised. Current liturgical service emphasizes a structure of domination where the role of the People of God is relegated to the margins (like the woman in Mark 5), while at the same time the role of the presider is given a central place with power over the assembly. Current liturgical practice which is still highly dominated by practices that come from the ecclesiastical tradition of another age needs to be challenged and changed if a feminist vision of a participatory church is to become a reality.

Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris gives concrete evidence of the ecclesiastical elements in need of change. He argues that during our liturgical celebrations the proclamation of the Word of God gets lost in a cacophony of words, the People of God who share in the priesthood of Christ are eclipsed by focus on the priest who is seen as the celebrant and the recognition of Jesus in the breaking of the bread is hindered by the church's imperial past (Pieris 2000: 432). Agreement with his assessment demands that the people of God come out of the shadows and work towards celebrating a liturgy that reverses this tradition and restores not only the centrality of the Word and the communion that exists among Christians but also our intimacy with God in imitation of Jesus. Simply stated, a feminist vision calls for conversion from power over God's people

to the formation of a discipleship of equals. Movement towards the formation of this discipleship of equals directs a participatory church in right speech and right action for the coming of God's Reign.

A "discipleship of equals" describes an ecclesiological model which expresses a feminist vision of a participatory church. It may return us to the concept of "house churches" of the early Christian movement of which today's "Basic Christian Communities" are a manifestation. In such an egalitarian meeting of the followers of Jesus, any simple division of the church into "leaders and followers" or "teachers and learners" is not allowed. All are baptized; all partake of the Body and Blood of Christ; all teach and all learn. This is a church of relationships between all the members as well as between the "healer" and the "healed;" it is a church where everyone has a place at the table. Egalitarian relationships in this discipleship of equals are a manifestation of the Trinitarian life of God in which we share and which has the power to shape us individually and as a community.

The Trinity is the grounding for a church praxis of a "discipleship of equals." Growing in understanding from a hierarchical view of the Trinity to one of equal relationships, is a task engendered by a feminist vision for our church. This requires a Pauline boldness to uncover the hierarchical layers heaped upon the Trinity over the many centuries so that its model of equal relationships can radiate into the lives of Christians once again. Acknowledging God as a mystery of relations, begs the question: what kind of relations? The Gospel of Jesus is our sure guide. Jesus' preaching of the Reign of God does not proclaim patriarchal rule. The God of Jesus Christ is not a hierarchical, dominating power, but rather God in solidarity with the poor, the marginalized and the outcasts. Trinity is Christian speech about God as a mystery of relations and these relations model a social order that is open to the poor. It is a model that resists oppression. A feminist vision of a participatory church recalls this Trinitarian imagery to the forefront of Christian life and affirms that the community of believers is called to be an icon of this life. It is a source of inspiration, enables the critique of the unequal relations that exist right now in the church and urges the emergence of a fresh vision of the church. The mystery of equality in the Trinity

needs to be regained and imaged in ways that shape the life and praxis of the community into a discipleship of equals.

Conclusion

My constant companion during the writing of this essay was a poster from the year 2000 Jubilee celebration in Taiwan. This poster – with many participants seated around an “open table” of Jesus – is a lively image for a feminist vision of a participatory church. The imagery is the exact opposite of the *Last Supper* painting that we have critiqued and restored. This poster could very well be a modern day rendering of the Last Supper meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. Jesus is in the midst of this wonderful diversity of people: women, children and men, various groups that comprise the people of Taiwan: mainland Chinese, Amoy, Hakka, aborigines and representatives of five different political parties! Their hands are joined around the word in the middle of the table: “Love one another.” There is no pride of place at this table. All are one in Christ at this table of love. They are seated under the Tree of Life, which shares its nature delights with them, and are surrounded by the beauties of the countryside and the urgencies of the city. Here is a people who know they are the people of God; a people who acknowledge that they are pilgrims and called to participate equally in a service of dialogue, mutuality and accountability to serve God’s poor and oppressed.

This picture does not need restoration. What is needed is implementation! It cannot be only a dream of “what could be” but rather a visible image of *what is coming to be*. Reclamation of their baptismal role and responsibility gives, Christian believers the courage to leave behind the familiar way of being the church in the past (the darkness which still has its own stark beauty) and walk calmly and surely into a future that is a truly participatory church. This is God’s work of art; a work of transition from a patriarchal to an egalitarian model of a church that is inclusive, respects diversity and calls to the lost and forsaken. *This is!*

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