

SAINTS IN THE CUBAN HEAT¹

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[In I. Lara & E. Facio (Eds.). Fleshing the spirit, spiring the flesh: Expressing our spiritualities]

When I was a girl of eight or nine, during another hot and humid Christmas season in Havana, *los Tres Reyes Magos* –the Three Kings or Wise Men who bring presents to children on January 6, the feast of the Epiphany, in many Catholic countries– brought me a small book: “*Niños Santos*.” I was already an avid reader; “*Niños Santos*” became my constant companion. I read its stories so often I could recite from memory the lives of the young people it contained. Around the same time, a film on the life of Rose of Lima, the first canonized saint of the Americas, became a theater success in Latin America. “*Rosa de América*,” a black and white feature film, triggered my fantasies about

¹ Parts of this paper have been published in Espín, O.M. (2008). My “friendship” with women saints as a source of spirituality. In C. Rayburn & L. Comas-Díaz (Eds.). WomanSoul: The inner life of women's spirituality (pp.71-84). Westport, CT: Praeger and, Espín, O.M. (2011). The enduring popularity of Rosa de Lima, first saint of the Americas: Women, bodies, sainthood, and national identity. Cross Currents, 61(1), pp. 6-27. Spring. (Journal of the Association for Religion in Intellectual Life). Earlier versions and segments of this article were presented at: Conferencia Internacional “En el Umbral del Milenio” [International Conference “At the Threshold of the Millennium”], Lima, Peru (April 1998); National Women's Studies Association, Oswego, NY (June 1998); International Conference on “Saints and Communities,” International Hagiography Society, Groningen, The Netherlands (July 2000); Association for Women in Psychology, Los Angeles, CA (March 2001); Congreso Internacional sobre “Cuerpo, Saberes y Nación: Constitución de Identidad de Género en lo Público y lo Privado en América Latina [International Conference on “Bodies, Knowledges, and Nationhood: The Construction of Gender Identity in the Public and Private Spheres in Latin America.”], Santiago de Chile (September 2003); Coolidge Fellowship Colloquium, Association for Religion in Intellectual Life, New York (July 2005); National Convention of American Psychological Association, San Francisco, CA (August 2007).

sainthood. Watching Rosa on the screen after reading about her in “*Niños Santos*,” made saints even more real to me.²

I was mesmerized by Argentinean actress Delia Garcés playing the role of Rose of Lima. Garcés was a beautiful woman, as Rosa was supposed to have been. She played many other glamorous roles in Argentinean cinema but none made her as famous to the Latin American public in the 1940s as her role as Rosa. Her beauty made sainthood seem like an attractive possibility. Her long dark curly hair, so much like mine, made me think I could be like her if I tried. Maybe if I behaved like her I could become as beautiful and as good as she was. And Rosa was Latin American, not European like the other saints I was hearing or reading about. This made her particularly attractive to me. The incessant tremors of Cuban political history, the distant echoes of life and death dramas in the politics of other Latin American countries, were present even then when I did not have a full understanding of all those events. As you will read later in this paper, Cuban history with a big H has been a most important determinant in the course of my life. I think my child’s intuition, not matter how unformed, made me understand that I had more in common with Rosa than with all those other European saints.

Then, when I was ten or eleven, I watched the now legendary film in which Ingrid Bergman played the role of Joan of Arc, and for days after I passed the time jumping on furniture carrying my banner, a broomstick with a rag tied on one end, pretending to be Joan of Arc conquering fortresses. While Joan of Arc evoked fantasies of achievement in my childish mind, Rosa had built her sanctity through acts of self-mutilation. Many

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decades later I learned that because women's bodies were presented as sinful, impure, and imperfect by centuries of cultural and religious discourse, many women equated sanctity with controlling and reducing their bodies. Therefore, women who aspired to sainthood showed the power of their spirit through the mutilation or even annihilation of their bodies. Such control was the best demonstration of the strength of their souls (Espín, 1998). But, as a child, I did not have a gender analysis of Rosa's behavior. Imitating Rosa meant hurting my body. I was lucky enough not to wear a veil that could hide a crown of nails or clothes that might conceal a locked iron chain around my waist as Rosa did. Instead I filled my school shoes with beans, knelt on pebbles to pray whenever possible and ate foods I strongly disliked. I even went long hours without drinking water in the Cuban heat, while dreaming about founding a religious order named after St. Rose of Lima. I spent hours designing the habit my nuns would wear, making it as beautiful as possible: white pleated chiffon, trimmed with black velvet at the neckline, the sleeves and the waist. I guess I wanted to be a fashionable saint!

I had read other stories and fairy tales and seen other films about young female heroines. Indeed, Disney's Snow White was the first film I saw. But the stories of young women devoted so deeply to God that they reached the Catholic Church's pinnacle of sanctity, captivated my imagination. Transforming the world in which they lived or the lives of others looked a lot more attractive than marrying an unknown prince. I liked that they played an active role in their own lives, instead of waiting for that prince to wake them up with a kiss. What I wanted most in the world was to be a saint. I fantasized about being some self-sacrificing martyr or hermit, play acting the roles on a daily basis. The

saints who stimulated my imagination most were women. The intricacies of these women's lives have stayed with me.

Yet, the saints weren't the only catalysts in my life. My childhood memories are also full of 'snapshots' of my budding feminism. One anecdote remains vividly present. I was five; my sister and I were playing with my two cousins on the porch of my paternal grandmother's house watched closely by one of my father's sisters. The four of us were about the same age, three girls and one boy. In the course of our play talk, I referred to the four of us as "*nosotras*." My aunt corrected me, saying the right form to use was the masculine "*nosotros*" because my male cousin was part of the "we." Although at the time I had no idea of what sexism was I quickly responded to her that it did not make any sense: Manoly was only one boy and we were three girls, we were the majority; the feminine form should prevail! How my aunt responded, I cannot remember, but I imagine she probably said the rule was the rule regardless of what I thought.

In the course of a life full of dramatic change and uncertainty, these two strands have remained constant, shaping the backdrop against which I have made decisions and into which I have woven other strands of my life. One is the guiding force of spirituality; the other is the sustaining force of feminism, both present in my life even before I had a word for them. The stories of women saints are one way I have found to connect spirituality and feminism.

Sainthood, spirituality and mysticism

Why have the lives of women saints³ created this peculiar point of convergence of two main strands of my life? I believe that it is because I have seen how, in the lives of

³ I am aware that the word "woman" is a noun, not an adjective. In several languages other than English (e.g., Spanish, French, Italian, German, Slavic languages), the grammatical gender of the noun "saint"

these women, faith and heroism have worked together. They set out to do what they believed God wanted from them, regardless of what others thought. Obviously, whatever they believed to be God's wishes was dictated by their own thinking. And, even though they could not fully subtract themselves from the influence of their cultural milieu –as no one fully can– they used the tools of their culture to implement their own will in the name of God. In rather contradictory ways, they used negative cultural and religious gender norms to challenge what was expected of them as women. It must have been the paradox at the center of the saints' lives that attracted me. I remember having an inkling that even the most apparently submissive among them had challenged authority.

Most of the stories and narratives about saints, particularly those presented to little girls as role models, portray them as compliant, obedient, self-sacrificing masochists, faithful to the dictates of authority and completely neglect or deny the fact that their behavior frequently challenged the norms and expectations placed on them as women. But, once I grasped that they understood their lives through the lenses of their historical and cultural contexts, these women's stories had the opposite effect on me. They were examples of the effects a "passionate spirituality" (Dreyer, 2005) could have on the development of a "radical wisdom" (Lanzetta, 2005) unique to women's spirituality. Reflecting on their capacity to alternatively accommodate to and rebel against patriarchal dictates of the Roman Catholic Church, I found that their experiences, despite the differences in historical circumstances, were frequently close to mine. Their femaleness, like mine, presented specific limitations and provided specific avenues to

provides a feminine form, rendering the qualifier unnecessary. In those languages, the word "female" is frequently a term reserved for animals or a derogatory term for sexualized women. Therefore, I am opting consciously to use the word "woman" as a qualifier, rather than "female," a term that sounds pejorative to my ears and perhaps those of others.

spiritual achievement. They became for me models of self-assertion and rebellion against arbitrary dictates of authority because my perspective on the stories of these women goes against the grain of established traditions.

Although the human developmental journey is widely different in different historical and cultural settings, in many ways, saints are like us—down to earth. Their gritty resistance to authority and sometimes stubborn conformity can illumine our own lives' struggles. All over the world and across generations, Christian girls (e.g., Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Anglican...) have been raised on stories of saints and a few other female heroines who have been presented to them as models to imitate. In Latin American countries, the feasts of patron saints, celebrated with processions, dance, song, and food punctuate the calendars of small towns and big cities alike. As McGuire (2005) puts it aptly, "Religion [and spirituality], in broad sociological sense, consist of how people make sense of their world—the stories out of which they live" (p.118). In Latin America, those stories are powerfully and deeply tinged with the historical and daily experiences of the materiality of life. For as McGuire (2005) elaborates, "All religions engage individuals through concrete practices that involve bodies, as well as minds and spirits" (p.119). The food, songs and dances in honor of patron saints engage the bodies of participants and make the spiritual meaning of the ceremonies accessible to those who cannot rely on texts for their spirituality. Moreover, food preparation and eating—so important in Latin American culture and so intertwined with the lives of women in our cultures— "can be highly meaningful spiritual practices [that give us] a different appreciation of women's [...spiritual] roles" (McGuire, 2005, p.127).

The central focus of my spirituality, based in large part on what I learned as a child about some women saints, who have been my role models, has grown “against the grain” of traditional beliefs and has helped me develop a relational perspective on “the life of the spirit” that, in turn, has brought me closer to my spiritual self and to my fellow human beings. True spirituality is, by definition, relational, since it is fundamentally about a relationship with whatever we understand “God” to be. And this, in turn, determines our relationships with other human beings. Spirituality is “embodied in ways that activate memory, deeply felt emotion, social connectedness and meaning” (Schneiders, 2005, p.63). In other words, there is a profound “materiality” to spirituality. My personal and professional choices have been guided by this relational spiritual perspective, albeit not always consciously. In these pages, I make my own memories available as a tool to understand the transactions between these women’s stories and my own, as well as their possible significance for the spirituality of everyday human life.

Early, I became more or less consciously aware that at the core of these women’s lives, was a profound personal connection with what they understood God to be. Indeed, sainthood is not about “religious” activities or roles, but about relationship with the Divine, which is what “mysticism” is all about. That relationship in turn, brought them to active transformations in themselves and others. As German theologian Dorothee Soelle says in her book about mysticism and resistance (2001), “mysticism and transformation are insolubly connected” (p.89). For these women saints, “the experience of being with God [was] stronger than [their] fear or depression and stronger than all authority based on hierarchy or custom” (Soelle, 2001, p.84); stronger than cultural and historical limitations

imposed on them. And that strength, derived from their mysticism, is what made them saints.

From these saints' lives I intuited early in life that "a defining characteristic of Christian mysticism is that [...it] impels a person towards an active rather than purely passive, inward life" (Sheldrake, 2005, p. 287). Indeed, true Christian mysticism "is founded on the practice of common human everyday life rather than on private experiences or on purely devotional or ascetical exercises" (Sheldrake, 2005, p. 283) and it has nothing to do with political domination or right-wing perspectives that seem to be associated with the word "Christian" these days. In fact, as Michel de Certeau (1992) asserts, saints, like the mad, stand for a kind of otherness and live on the social and even religious margins. Their otherness gives them the ability to defy conventional sources of power and privilege. Women saints are, in their own unique ways, culturally and politically subversive. They may have "mouthed" and believed in culturally approved norms, and yet, they lived their lives acting against those norms. For them, as for us, spirituality is a center from which to challenge structures of power and privilege, particularly as they affect women.

Feminism and spirituality

"Redemption" for women is not about selflessness and submission. On the contrary, as theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether (1998a & 1998b) and others have made clear, for women, "redemption means overcoming patriarchal subordination of women in all its forms and creating societies and cultures of just and loving mutuality between men and women across classes and races" (1998a, p.13) because "redemption happens when we resist and reject collaboration with injustice and begin to taste the joys

of true well-being [...and] when life is lived in solidarity with others in mutual well-being, every act of sustaining life becomes a sacrament [...] whether it is bread broken and shared, sexual pleasure between lovers, tilling the ground, making a useful product or giving birth to a baby” (Ruether, 1998a, p. 103).

Needless to say, my understanding of both spirituality and feminism has changed dramatically over the years. Both could have developed very differently or not at all were it not for the jarring changes and transformations of my life. The question of what to do with spirituality in a secularized world, of how to preserve spirituality without falling into the trap of fundamentalism that denies and suppresses the insights of feminism, remains alive for many women. The need to recover, revitalize, breathe life into faith traditions continues to be felt by many women, myself included, as this writing demonstrates.

In this process, I focus my attention on the individual experiences of these women and the specific details of their cultural and historical contexts. Any understanding of spirituality cannot ignore “the importance of gender and sexual orientation, race and ethnicity, class and social location, locality and nationality, as crucial factors in understanding culture and experience...and how these factors impinge on our understanding of the spiritual life” (Dryer & Burrows, 2005, p. 367).

In my previously published work, I have written about immigrants/refugees and Latina women from psychological and gendered perspectives (e.g., Cole, Espín & Rothblum, 1992; Espín, 1997; Espín, 1999; Kawahara & Espín, 2007; Kawahara & Espín, 2012; Yakushko & Espín, 2009). Working as a professor at state and private universities, I have lived most of my adult life in the world of the secular academy, researching women’s lives and studying the psychology of women of ethno-cultural

backgrounds less frequently considered as subjects by psychology. My teaching positions have been supported by public funds or by student tuition at private institutions for the training of psychologists. The professional institutions to which I have belonged have been committed to the non-sectarian study of Psychology and Women's Studies. I have taught courses about women saints and presented this material at professional conferences, but in those settings it has not always felt acceptable to speak of the significance of this material for my own life. I am now beginning to give myself permission to write as a spiritual person, even as I also write as a scholar. Thus I speak in two voices. I speak directly and unabashedly about some of the implications that this material has for my spiritual life. The seemingly small stories of my childhood and my encounters with these women saints create the thread that ties all these stories together. But I also speak as a Women's Studies scholar recovering the rich and complex legacy of our foremothers. As a psychologist I am interested in what shaped these women's life experiences; as a woman, I am interested in what these experiences might have meant to them and might mean to us.

As I write in my two voices, I try to reach others like me who have been searching for ways to weave together their feminism and spiritual beliefs. Many women mistrust and reject traditional religion because its patriarchal positions have been a powerful source of women's oppression. Alternative forms of spirituality, such as goddess worship and nature-oriented rituals, have been developed or rediscovered in the context of the women's movement. Yet, many women—feminists included—do not find adequate spiritual fulfillment in these approaches. For some women, more traditional religious

beliefs continue to serve as a source of inspiration in their struggles for liberation. For them, as for me, such traditions remain a source of strength.

In the early nineties, when I started teaching Women's Studies full time, my interest in women's stories and their lives crystallized in more expansive ways that took me beyond psychology or purely psychological interpretations of lives. Almost coincidentally, as I started using women's stories more actively in my teaching, I started remembering the saints' stories of my childhood and wondering about the meaning of my favorite saints' life stories. As Women's Studies scholarship recovered the stories of women's lives in history, literature, anthropology, and as psychologists understood women's emotional experiences and psychological conflicts to be healthy reactions to oppression rather than pathological responses to individual mental health challenges, I began reading Teresa of Avila again. Although it would be anachronistic to say that Teresa was a "feminist," her sharp understanding and critical interpretation of the constraints of women's circumstances remain relevant today. I had read Teresa's writing in high school Spanish literature classes in Cuba, but as I read her through different lenses, I began to see that Teresa was not the obedient daughter of the church described to me as a child, and rediscovered in Teresa the story of a woman of stature in early modern Europe tenaciously struggling against Church authorities to fulfill what she believed to be God's will. Reading Teresa with this new understanding made me want to explore the stories of the other women saints of my childhood. My interest in these stories was fueled further by the importance of narrative and story-telling evident in the last few decades of research and writing in many academic fields.

As I write about saints, I find myself writing partly memoir and partly scholarly analysis of saints and sainthood. And I tackle the issues their lives present from the perspective of my main academic epistemological perspectives. Because I am a psychologist, I see human behavior through the lens provided by developmental, social, and clinical psychologies. Because I am a feminist I read all historical information about these women with a certain “hermeneutical suspicion” that helps me see important information in the interstices, in what is not said by them as well as by other writing about them. Although I am not a theologian or a historian, the work of feminist theologians and historians illumines this exploration for me.

History and life

Having grown up in a convulsed Latin America, means I have lived immersed in contradictions, and each one of these women had something to teach me about contradictions. Moreover, my life has been marked by the experience of migration. As an outsider in many cultures I have experienced being “different” with all the positives and negatives involved. But even among those who shared my same historical and cultural circumstances, I have felt more than once as an outsider.

Since my early childhood, my family had lived a life of genteel poverty, no less harsh because it was hidden beneath the trappings of the middle-class life that my parents had known in their youths and wanted to believe they still enjoyed. Before I was born, my father had been a lawyer in the Cuban navy, a position he had earned after years of study and days of written examinations. Armed with his shiny white uniform and newly acquired credentials, he had married my mother shortly before the beginning of World War II and had had two daughters, thinking himself securely employed.

We had then lived half a block away from my mother's family in Santiago, in a house with a central courtyard full of trees around a gurgling fountain. I vaguely remember being placed in a big tin bowl that served as my boat as I floated round and round that fountain. I have a picture of myself –2 years old, perhaps– sitting very properly at the fountain's edge.

Then, in December 1941, Fulgencio Batista –who had been elected president for the first time the previous year after several attempts at seizing power —“reorganized” the Cuban Armed Forces, and that was the end of my family's middle-class life. Batista fired my father and all other officers in the military known to be unsympathetic to his government. My father was left without a job and with a young wife and two daughters to feed –in Santiago, a city where the chances of employment were next to zero.

He had a teaching credential, and, with more hope than understanding, my father decided to start his own elementary school and commercial academy. Barely six months after Batista's action, we moved to Havana, to a flat above a house-painting store in a commercial district. There my father started his school. The patio with its trees and its fountain disappeared from my life, and I found myself, not knowing how, in a cramped space amid the traffic bustle of Havana.

The rest of my childhood took place in this space. My two brothers were born there. My sister and I had our first periods there. And there I built a world of fantasy in my head to compensate for the dreary and limiting surroundings in which I felt imprisoned. I spent my childhood surrounded by desks and blackboards, eating lunch and dinner quickly because our dining room had to be turned into a classroom for the afternoon and evening classes. I spent hours staying as quiet as possible behind forbidden

doors so that my father's classes wouldn't be disrupted by any sense of our presence. And during my vacations and on weekends, when all the students were gone, I played at being Joan of Arc, conquering castles for France or some other saint engaged in some other heroic activity. My parents had wanted to preserve for me and my siblings the middle-class opportunities that would have been ours but for arbitrary political events beyond their control. So my father, using his Church friendships and connections, had managed to get scholarships for me and my three siblings at private religious schools for middle-class girls and boys. There, even more than in my solitary adventures as Joan of Arc or some other saint, I learned to lead a double life. By day, I lived among girls who, at four o'clock, went back to homes with the porches, patios, gardens and garages that I pretended to also have. At the end of the school day, I retreated to the two rooms in the back of my father's school and, as quietly as possible, did my homework and read and fantasized in silence. The next day, I made sure none of my classmates knew where I had spent the night.

Those years were an exercise in watching affluence close by but from the outside.

From the distance and vision provided by five decades, I believe I do not exaggerate when I think Joan of Arc not only saved France but also saved me. My fantasy opened the doors of possibility. Being Joan of Arc over desks and chairs, with my broomstick banner and ruler sword, gave me a taste for personal power and helped me realize that I could go anywhere and do anything without a chaperone. It also taught me graphically that sometimes women pay dearly for daring to be all they can be.

I have not saved any countries from invaders. And I am still here so, clearly, I have not had to pay for my challenging of societal norms by been burned at the stake. I'm

far from being a saint. Yet both the triumph and the pain of Joan's struggle have been present throughout my life. And even though I don't climb desks or chairs anymore, I continue to reach into the possibilities for personal power that Joan and other women saints, centuries after their death, introduced to me.

Some final thoughts

In addition to Joan, Rosa and Teresa of Avila and other women saints also became role models for me. Together, Joan of Arc and Catherine of Siena demonstrate that it is possible for women to have political influence despite the discriminatory practices that may still be prevalent. Teresa of Avila and Edith Stein point up the value and spiritual power of intellectual pursuit. Even little, quiet, unassuming Thérèse of Lisieux—the most popular female saint in the Catholic church—who spoke to the Pope in public after a specific injunction to remain silent in his presence and never hid her ardent desire to become a priest even though she was a woman has something to teach me. The Latin American saints in particular, Rosa of Lima, Mariana Paredes of Quito, and Teresa of Los Andes, exemplify alternative ways to be Latina despite racial tensions, social injustice and political upheaval and point out the pitfalls of relying on individual, personal spiritual development in the face of our unique mixture of historical circumstances.

Sharing what I know and understand about women saints has become my passion and my work. I want my own appreciation of women saints to open doors for others as it has for me, enabling others to recover, as I have, some of the meaning and spirituality I had lost because of the rigidities of Church positions about women. De Certeau (1988) speaks about the ability of narrative to mold and revolutionize human situations. I want to

share my struggle against the indoctrination in sanctimony and docility I received through the distortions of these women's stories and thus to create a narrative that would transform the lives of other women. And I want to share my struggle to develop strength from the presence of these saints in my childhood imaginary; the many ways in which they led me to believe that many things were possible. In other words, I want to share my personal quest with other women. I offer these reflections in the hope that the stories of these women open doors for others as they have for me.

Notes

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