

June 2014

Silent Liberation: Navigating Feminist Theology through the Christological Lens of Mary of Bethany

Karen M. Kiefer

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, obsculta@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Ethics in Religion Commons](#)

ISSN: 2472-2596 (print)

ISSN: 2472-260X (online)

Recommended Citation

Kiefer, Karen M.. 2014. Silent Liberation: Navigating Feminist Theology through the Christological Lens of Mary of Bethany. *Obsculta* 7, (1) : 61-86. <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/obsculta/vol7/iss1/7>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Obsculta* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

SILENT LIBERATION: NAVIGATING FEMINIST THEOLOGY
THROUGH THE CHRISTOLOGICAL LENS OF MARY OF BETHANY

Karen McClain Kiefer

Often in life we find ourselves in the paradox of effecting the very antithesis of the goal we pursue. Such might be said about feminist theology, which seeks a greater unity in the Church through greater inclusivity of women within it, thereby freeing women's experience from biblical and historical suppression. Yet, feminist theologians disagree among themselves as to what this unity looks like, and therefore do not provide a cohesive platform from which to operate. Held in tension are the compatibility of feminist theology with Christianity, Scripture, and even the very nature of Jesus Christ. Ultimately and tragically, their views can discard the very voices of women in biblical history that many have admirably sought to liberate. Standing in the midst of confusion among these disparate views within feminist theology, a woman in the Church is a witness to this antithesis.¹ She hears a cacophony of voices screaming for liberation and reform that have arisen amidst the oppression, omission and amputation of the feminine experience from Christian tradition and Scripture as the result of misogyny and an androcentric church history and structure. On one side, voices insist on destruction

of existing church structures and discarding Scripture and tradition; and on the other are cries for the reconciliation between patriarchal bias within tradition and the changes we need to make within the church. This dissonance can leave her questioning Scripture, tradition, roles, and even Jesus himself. This woman who loves the church and believes in Jesus Christ can easily feel torn between honoring her dignity as a person and honoring her deep faith, especially as she tries to answer those beautiful and haunting words of Christ, "Who do you say that I am?"²

Only when she looks back at Scripture might she find solace from timeless truth that honors her very existence. She can look to Mary, the understated sister of Martha and Lazarus. Through Mary's experience with and understanding of Jesus, she can serve as a key exemplar in what it means to be a woman devoted to Christ, and aid in the understanding of the person of Jesus and how he calls both men and women to be in the church and, therefore, the world. Through the Christological lens of Mary of Bethany, it is maintained in what follows that if feminists can expand their vision beyond a primary preoccupation with structure and roles they can better understand and embody their own call and move closer to the currently elusive goal of greater unity within the church.

To examine this, this essay will focus on: (1) The cause of feminist issues within history and the church, (2) The disruptive division within feminist theology which claims to be a voice for women in the church, (3) The Christological lenses found within feminist theology, what may influence those lenses and how that Christology informs the understanding of God's call, and (4) The inspiration of Mary of Bethany to navigate feminist issues and the call of women in the world and the church.

Feminist theology did not emerge without cause.

For centuries, women's voice has been suppressed in history and in Scripture. We hear very androcentric accounts of world events and biblical events. Women have been blamed by some for the fall,³ and even Aquinas himself stated that "the male sex was normative for humanity and that the female was a defective instance of human being."⁴ There has been a great deal for women to overcome. Even today, there are structures in place that can be argued as exclusive and can seem alienating to women. The effect on the psyche and self-image of women in a male-dominated landscape is not to be underestimated.⁵ As a result, the historical, prevalent bias toward androcentric hermeneutics has fueled a strong and growing response in the form of feminist theology. Women are not happy with the absence of their story in history, and have taken up arms in alternative ways of looking at Scripture and tradition. Fr. Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B. agrees: "The angry reaction to the texts of Scripture and tradition denigrating women formed some of the suppositions to feminist hermeneutics [and] exegesis."⁶ The feminist response has varied, from throwing up hands in frustration and leaving Christianity altogether, to a reformist response that recognizes that the Christian church is not patriarchal in its essence and can be reformed to honor women's experience as well as men's. Both responses have significant Christological impacts.

These two broad groups of feminists, *revolutionary* and *reformist*,⁷ that have emerged from within the church seem to proceed from the same theological locus—to proclaim, "that women are fully human beings made in the image of God"⁸ in equal dignity as men.⁹ The following seems to be a broad consensus in defining feminism that both groups embrace:¹⁰ (1) this equal dignity of women has been persistently denied

and changes need to be made in attitude, concepts or structures to manifest this equality, and 2) feminism is not merely the call for women to have an equal place in the current system. It is a call to rethink and perhaps remake the system itself in light of women's experience. From there, the two camps can diverge quite drastically in some cases, leaving a woman in the church unsure how to navigate her participation in it. Both views are examined below, and then compared to Mary of Bethany's example of discipleship.

The Revolutionary Feminist

Those who share a revolutionary view of feminist theology seem to dismiss the church altogether, and generally call themselves "post-Christian" because they fully reject Christianity at its very roots as an androcentric patriarchy. Daphne Hampson expresses this in her book, *After Christianity*, "The position that I advocate is clearly *after* Christianity in that I think the myth of Christianity untenable on both moral and epistemological grounds."¹¹ Hampson and other revolutionary feminists argue that Christianity is inherently oppressive to women and is unable to adapt to include women's experience as a central part of the faith. As a result, they declare feminist theology as incompatible to Christianity, and remove themselves altogether from the church, its traditions, doctrines, and perhaps most tragically, Scripture—which contains the very voice of women suppressed over the millennia that some feminists have admirably sought to liberate.

Because of this absolute rejection and separation from the church, it could reasonably be argued that their views are inconsequential to a discussion that desires to stand from

within the Church to examine women's concerns and experience. McDonnell echoes this concern: "There is... [a] dangerous element in some feminist texts: absolute frustration from which there is no exit."¹² However, as a group that emerged from Christian tradition, their voices are important to acknowledge as part of the greater mosaic of women's identity and experience that has been so distorted and nearly lost throughout the millennia of biblical history and tradition. The fact that they were so frustrated with the oppression of half of the population of the church as to determine the need to leave the faith justifies a look in to their concerns, and McDonnell has done just that in his studies.¹³ He reviewed several feminists' reactions to their anger about women's subordination in the Christian tradition, and while he focused primarily on their responses through the development of their Mariologies (doctrines on the Virgin Mary), much of what McDonnell reports applies as well to their general feminist theological position. Regarding the problem revolutionary feminists have with Scripture, McDonnell notes: "[T]he problem most of the time is not in the interpretation. 'The problem is in the text.' Men see only what male experience allows them to see, they write what male conscience allows them to write."¹⁴ It would seem then to underscore the claim that revolutionary feminists do not wish to mine the Scriptures at all for the treasure of a deeper understanding of women's experience, but wish instead to disregard them completely as the tainted product of misogyny. McDonnell summarizes:

These particular Catholic feminists feel—whether rightly or not—that they cannot rely on Scripture, as it is hopelessly patriarchal. Nor can they look to the structural Church, dominated by old men, who will not implement even those changes in favor

of women that the present Roman theology allows. These men, they say, hand out texts in praise of women while boarding up the entrance door to a range of positions and activities within the Church... If women cannot look to Scripture, to the organizational Church, or to the tradition, they are then left to their own resources: anger, experience, and the sisterhood of wounded women.¹⁵

Behind this portrayal of the patriarchal hijacking of Scripture and tradition lies great pain and the tragedy of the offense of silencing so many women throughout biblical history. It is certainly a condition worth remedying by seeking to reclaim women's experience. It is not apparent that the revolutionary feminist response is reconciliatory, however. Great pain can elicit a strong response, and revolutionary feminists seem to come out swinging in creating their own structures and claiming their own positions. Rosemary Ruether, American feminist scholar and theologian quoted by many major and reputable Catholic feminist theologians, and one of the first to lay out Christian feminist systematic theology,¹⁶ seeks the "dismantling [of] the clerical power structure... in the church."¹⁷ She goes on to also justify the absolute, separatist response of the revolutionary feminist group to the patriarchal church, "Whatever denies, diminishes or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive."¹⁸ In a sweeping statement of power, Ruether dismisses some key teachings of the Catholic Church. This also appears to be a kind of declaration of autonomy which has extreme Christological implications as will be demonstrated.

Ruether advocates feminist base communities, including *Women-Church*.¹⁹ These communities "reappropriate the sacramental life that has been the preserve of the clerical caste,"²⁰ and are necessarily autonomous in order

to seek “liberation from patriarchy.”²¹ It is difficult not to see these communities as a replacement of the accused patriarchal structure of the current Church and exhibiting similar exclusivity, and it is impossible at this point not to address women’s ordination. It has been strongly advocated by so many feminist theologians that it could be argued to be the agenda (hidden or stated) behind the expressed principle of reclaiming the full humanity of women. “For the contemporary Roman Catholic church in the West, nothing has so focused questions of anthropology as the movement for the ordination of women.”²² While both revolutionary and reformist feminists argue for women’s ordination, they again diverge in their approaches. Reformists work within the church traditions to affect change. Revolutionary feminists have taken matters in to their own hands and ordained themselves in these separatist feminist base communities such as Women-Church. Both groups see the restriction against women’s ordination as a key part of their oppression in the church.

At the heart of the cries against oppression of women throughout church history, and as related to ordination, is the hotly contested declaration of the Catholic Church²³ on the teaching of *in persona Christi* (“in the person of Christ”) and its ministerial implications. In *Inter insigniores* St. Thomas Aquinas is quoted, “Sacramental signs... represent what they signify by natural resemblance,”²⁴ and then his statement is applied within the context of gender to explain why women are not able to be ordained to administer the sacrament of Eucharist:

The same natural resemblance is required for persons as for things: when Christ’s role in the Eucharist is to be expressed sacramentally, there would not be this “natural resemblance” which much exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man.²⁵

Because it could certainly be argued that excluding women from administering the sacrament of the Eucharist is “denying, diminishing or distorting” women’s full humanity as Christians, Ruether would certainly dismiss the application of *in Persona Christi*, the sacraments performed under that restriction, and even the institution itself as “not redemptive.” Beyond issues of ordination, roles and church structure, *in Persona Christi* understood this way has Christological and soteriological implications that will be discussed below.

McDonnell raises a compelling concern about the frequent and central use of “autonomy” by revolutionary feminists, and considers it to uncover some startling revelations in the relationship between feminist theology and Christology. He identifies in some views complete incompatibility between the two. “[Scottish feminist Daphne] Hampson, who left Christianity over the feminist issue, believes that ‘autonomy is what feminism has been about... To be autonomous is to overcome heteronomy.’”²⁶ Feminists like Hampson and Mary Daly not only refuse to be subordinated to *men*, but reject subordination of any kind, even subordination to the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ.

In the view of some feminists, to be autonomous is to be one’s own law, a radically free self, unbound by anything beyond one’s own moral agency. To be autonomous is to reject subordination. In this definition even Christ is compromised. Because Christology must also necessarily be heteronomous, Hampson, writing now as a post-Christian, states ‘there can be no Christology which is compatible with feminism.’²⁷

This is a staggering claim to make within the context of Christianity, hence the departure of these feminists from

it. It is unfathomable to consider, within a Christian discussion of feminist theology, a feminist theology which does not uphold the transcendent divinity of Jesus Christ. This destructive tearing apart of the feminine from Christ appears an utter arrogance in either reducing Christ to human status or elevating feminine humanity in god-like fashion.

This Christology falls below what even Arius professed about the nature of Christ at Nicaea. Although Arius did not see Jesus as divine, he did uphold Jesus as the supreme created being and recognized humanity as subordinate to him. Daly, Hampson and others decline even that, in the name of being subordinate to no one. This full autonomy also resembles a Pelagian view of elevated control over one's circumstances without the need for God's ongoing grace. Again, however, even the Pelagians upheld Christ as the ultimate exemplar and affirmed his divinity. The comparison of these autonomous feminists to declared Church heretics is paradoxical given the counter argument that Anne Carr, a more moderate, reformist feminist theologian, makes against the "abuse of Jesus' maleness by the official Church."²⁸ She calls attention to the patriarchal abuse, "If the New Testament and postbiblical emphasis on the full universality of redemption is to be maintained, then the appeals to the 'maleness' of Jesus for exclusionary purposes are 'heretical.'"²⁹ She does make a compelling case regarding the church's view of the maleness of Jesus as a discriminating factor in negating women's ability to stand *in Persona Christi* to administer sacrament as equivalent to negating women's very redemption - for if women cannot stand in the Person of Christ, it is then argued that Christ cannot stand in for women.

Jesus himself, then, becomes a point of contention for

revolutionary feminists. “[T]here is no more fundamental and problematic... issue for feminists than the person of Jesus.”³⁰ The scandal of particularity of Jesus’ maleness is not reconcilable for them. It is not surprising then that revolutionary feminists consider themselves “post-Christian” and that many, like Hampson, leave the faith for this reason. However, it is interesting that even while rejecting Christology and Christianity as they understand it, revolutionary feminists still maintain “Christ” or “Christian” as part of the description of their identity. This is evident not only in the term “post-Christian,” but also ironically in the Christological view of Rita Nakashima Brock, who “declares she is ‘developing a Christology not centered in Jesus.’”³¹ Clearly there is cause for confusion. It may be surmised that revolutionaries have smashed their Christological lenses, and that their understanding of God’s call is the feminist-centered focus of liberation for women through building separate structures.

Returning to the woman in the church trying to navigate feminist issues, it is understandable why revolutionary feminist theology may cause her to question the future of the Church and her place, as a woman, within it.³² Were she to look to Scripture or tradition for reconciliation, she may not find recognizable common ground on which to stand with revolutionary feminists. Having abandoned Christian texts and traditions, those feminists simply aren’t there.

The Reformist Feminist

There are other voices that the woman in the church hears, however. Reformist voices cry out for their sisters’ stories lost in history and tradition. While

reformist feminist theologians begin from the same principle starting point as revolutionary feminists, which is to reclaim the full humanity of women, the former begin working from within the tradition of the Church. Christians, especially women, who seek the inspiration of Scripture and the continuity of the apostolic tradition of the church will likely find the reformist view much more compatible with their Christian identity and belief in Jesus Christ. Much of revolutionary feminists' Christologies and dismissive attitudes toward Scripture and tradition lie outside what most Christians would consider an acceptable position or measure (rule) of faith. Making that distinction may be helpful in determining a better picture of what lay inside, and provide a landscape against which to compare reformist feminist theology.

Elizabeth Johnson, a preeminent reformist, offers a much more optimistic view of women in the church and sees future possibilities to reconcile and reform it to free women's experience from the silencing bonds of an historically oppressive patriarchy. Johnson finds hope that women can and do rise above oppression and androcentric patriarchy to stay connected to the heart of Christianity—Jesus Christ and his message. "For women have consistently read themselves into the Christological mystery despite the patriarchal barricades that stand in the way."³³ Indeed, there are innumerable examples of this, not only in the recorded lives of countless women saints and martyrs from history, but also in contemporary women who stay committed to the gospel message despite the institutional conditions.

Although committed, inspired and resilient women affirm this hope against patriarchal

barriers, those barriers still exist, and Johnson assigns the Christology of patriarchy as the primary root of the problem.³⁴

The basic problem identified from the feminist academic perspective is that Jesus Christ has been interpreted within a patriarchal framework, with the result that the good news of the gospel for all has been twisted into the bad news of masculine privilege... What results is a Christology that functions as a sacred justification for the superiority of men over women.³⁵

Johnson claims the church's interpretation of the maleness of Jesus and the way in which that interpretation informs the perspective of the Person of Christ have been distorted through the lens of an androcentric patriarchy. This has led to a Christology that has suppressed and excluded women more than any other doctrine of the Church. Johnson cites three primary examples of the distortion to support this claim.

First, the emphasis of the particularity of the gender of Jesus over other particularities, such as race or ethnicity, is used to reinforce an exclusively male image of God. This emphasis points to maleness as an essential characteristic of divine being itself. Second, the maleness of Jesus is used to legitimize the subordination of women to men. The male gender becomes normative because the Son of God chose it over the female gender to enter in to the world. This supports the argument of *in Persona Christi* to restrict priestly ordination to men, and, it is argued, effectively shuts women off from full identification with Christ. Third, the very salvation of women is jeopardized if the maleness of Jesus is to be elevated. If maleness is essential for the Christ role, then women are cut out of the loop of salvation, for

female sexuality is not taken on by the Word made flesh. If maleness is constitutive for the Incarnation and redemption, female humanity is not assumed and therefore not saved.³⁶

As a *reformist*, Johnson does not believe that the church is patriarchal and androcentric at its core, and does not wish to eradicate the male experience of Christianity. She does not dismiss tradition, history nor Scripture, rather she seeks to reconcile and reclaim them to better include women's experience as a valid context to experience Christ. In fact, she *uses* tradition and Scripture in attempts to re-contextualize the symbols and language used for Jesus, as a corrective to the skewed Christology of church patriarchy.

Johnson takes advantage of Augustine's use of the feminine pronoun to describe aspects of the Trinity in *De Trinitate* to augment the symbol of Christ as Logos with the divine feminine *Wisdom-Sophia*.³⁷ Wisdom pre-dates the gospels as a creative, redeeming and sanctifying force. "But she was sent in one way that she might be with human beings, and she has been sent in another way that she herself might be a human being."³⁸ By the inclusion of the divine feminine Wisdom *with* Logos, and not as the replacement of Logos, Johnson argues her approach provides a fuller context of the Christian experience and theology without replacing one dominant gender-centric structure with another.

Another way in which she seeks to re-contextualize the Christian tradition, doctrine and experience is by trying to clarify some of its language, particularly in the Nicene Creed. In the first few centuries of the Church there was struggle among different contextual views of God, the Trinity, and Christ as early Christians were coming together from different cultural backgrounds and experiencing Hellenistic enculturation. Johnson is particularly interested in clarifying

the Latin texts, which describe Jesus entering time and taking on the fullness of humanity by becoming “a human being” (*homo factus est*) or becoming “man” (*vir factus est*). Depending on how the original Greek is translated, this phrase could mean either. Given the issues already described, this would affect the very salvation of women, for what is not assumed is not redeemed. From a *reformist* context, Johnson and others have a higher Christology than the *revolutionaries*. The *reformists* see Christ as a liberator and mediator and, aside from the translation and language concerns, also as a divine redeemer. Ultimately, *reformists* call for a more inclusive view to image Jesus. Johnson argues that Jesus transcends gender and was not a typical male, rooted in what it meant to be “male” in his day. He was unmarried, took company with the outcast and sinners and was considered unusual.³⁹ Yet he was God incarnate who came to redeem the world. In this way, she believes that he breaks down barriers of stereotypes of gender, subordination by gender and breaks ties with an image of exclusive masculinity associated with himself. However, even *within* the particularity of gender Johnson sees Jesus’ maleness as very effective, “The crucified Jesus embodies the exact opposite of the patriarchal ideal of the powerful man and shows how steep the price to be paid in the struggle for liberation.”⁴⁰ She explains:

If in a patriarchal culture a woman had preached compassionate love and enacted a style of authority that serves, she would most certainly have been greeted with a colossal shrug. Is this not what women are supposed to do by nature? But from a social position of male privilege Jesus preached and acted this way, and herein lies the summons.”⁴¹

Johnson observes that, within that summons and in his ministry, “Jesus unleashes a hope, a vision... Women interact with Jesus in mutual respect, support, comfort, and challenge themselves being empowered to acts of compassion, thanksgiving, and boldness.”⁴² Reformists seem to see God’s summons, then, as one of bringing hope and vision to women in liberating and reclaiming their experience; uniting God’s people by restoring the church to wholeness; and supporting a relationship with Jesus Christ who empowers “acts of compassion, thanksgiving, and boldness” in us.

The woman in the Church might find comfort and empowerment in the reformist views, but may still be wondering how she is to participate in liberating, reclaiming and restoring, and what that restoration particularly looks like. Outside of describing an inclusive structure, that of course incorporates women’s ordination and leadership, it still may not be so clear how to “be” a woman in the church. She may need to look to the very treasure of Scripture that one feminist group has discarded and the other has tried to liberate.

Mary of Bethany

Before contemporary feminist chatter there was another “voice,” a quiet one. Mary of Bethany, a woman whose actions spoke louder than words and who was an exemplar even to Jesus himself reveals through a glimpse of her bold and humble actions what it means to be a woman devoted to Christ. Before it even existed, she embodied Christianity—as a woman. Before Jesus “anointed” and commissioned his disciples, *she* anointed *him*.⁴³ Therefore, to understand how women may be called within the Church, the women in the Church can look no further than Mary of Bethany. She may intuitively

be one of the last biblical woman a feminist might consider for inspiration as many scholars and exegetes depict her as passive and mild, the quiet sister of Martha (the one who gets things done).⁴⁴ But in Mary is revealed a model of discipleship that can inform our own roles today, especially in the church. The key is her Christology, and how it compels her to act and to be.

Every time Mary is mentioned in the Gospels she is at Jesus' feet. In the Gospel of John, we see her at his feet after Lazarus' death (11:32) when she runs out to meet him in her extreme grief, and again in the anointing scene in the next chapter in which "she took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair" (12:3). In Luke we read that Mary "sat beside the Lord at his feet listening to him speak" (10:39). Mary clearly places herself in a position of humility before Jesus at each encounter, thus subordinating herself to him. This is not a sign of a low Christology.

In the extravagant anointing act, we see most clearly Mary's Christology as she responds to Jesus as a devoted follower. She demonstrates great self-giving love and emptying of herself as the nard is emptied and used up on Jesus' feet. This emptying could be compared to Jesus the Logos' kenotic act of emptying himself to become fully human. Several commentators also note the parallels between the fragrance of the nard spreading and the gospel message being spread throughout the world.⁴⁵ This is congruent with the anointing depicted in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, for in those accounts, "the woman's anointing provides a reference to the Gospel being preached throughout the world (Mark 14:9 and Matt 26:13)."⁴⁶ This reference to preaching the Gospel also alludes to the prophetic

nature of the act, as a kingly or messianic anointing; and even the anointing of a bridegroom as depicted in parallel passages in Song of Songs.⁴⁷

Christologically, Mary affirms Jesus in the flesh with the very sensual nature of her act, while at the same time adoring him as the divine Messiah. “Her caressing of Jesus’ feet is the ritual adoration directed to the one who, in the Johannine view, replaces the temple as the locus of true worship (2:13-22; 4:19-26). The unashamed nature of the physical contact confirms the Incarnation and the sanctity of the flesh.”⁴⁸ Mary’s silent act is anything but passive. She demonstrates that actions speak louder than words. This act speaks as a bold and prophetic witness of what others attempt with words. Both Peter and Martha proclaim Jesus as Messiah with their words in Matthew 16:16 and John 11:27, respectively. Mary proclaims this with her anointing ritual of Jesus.

Additionally, even though she is anointing him, it could appear that she is also accepting a commission. Raymond Brown might agree with this suggestion, especially in light of Mary receiving this oil of anointing on her own head, specifically her hair, “[*T*he effect of Mary wiping Jesus’ ointment-bearing feet with her hair is that she has been anointed via the body of Jesus [emphasis Esler and Piper]. She has quite literally been anointed with the very ointment that she has used for Jesus.”⁴⁹

Perhaps there is no more compelling affirmation of Mary’s discipleship and leadership than the exemplar she was to Jesus himself. In the very next chapter after the anointing in John’s Gospel, Jesus assumes the same position at the feet of the disciples as Mary took at his, and performs a similar act, that of washing and wiping their feet. Jesus explains the meaning of his act as an

example of and a call to discipleship, “If I therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (John 13:14-15).

Jesus not only models Mary’s action, he also acclaims it. In the parallel anointing passages in Matthew and Mark, Jesus declares, “Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Matt 26:13, Mark 14:9). This certainly solidifies her role as witness and leader among followers of Jesus, and therefore as a clear model of discipleship and proclaiming the gospel by action. These are the very roles to which Jesus called all his followers, commissioning them in his last words before ascending.

Jesus clearly empowered women, as disciples and leaders, to overcome patriarchal systems, but he did not equip them to build or redesign structures. Jesus himself operated within and in spite of systems and laws, and he is the one who reckons them. Joan Chittister, O.S.B. seems to agree, “Jesus knew church law about women, all right. And then despite it all, in great, grandiose, graphic gestures, Jesus came and swept it all away... Jesus told women—and only women—that he was the Messiah... Jesus sent women as apostles to the apostles. It was women who anointed him, and women who proclaimed him.”⁵⁰ Women are indeed empowered to be strong disciples and leaders. Given Mary of Bethany’s example, women can have full dignity *regardless* of the structures in which they find themselves.

Feminists who seek to build a church structure in which women are in mutual leadership roles with men might take a lesson from Mary of Bethany. She spoke only once throughout the gospels, yet her profound action was the only

one that Jesus himself replicated. Through this modeling and ultimate commissioning of his followers, Jesus himself revealed what the act meant—a call to discipleship. Mary, a woman, so clearly demonstrated that leadership. And she did it within an oppressive patriarchal structure, without regard to gender, positions, titles or roles. She simply preserved her attention on Jesus, served him actively but submissively, and did what she was compelled to do. Conversely, feminists in both groups can seem to fall in to a trap in which they are commissioning Jesus for *their* purposes, a natural human temptation. Even when based on good intentions, an over-identification with self-interests can impede the true gospel message and call to discipleship. “Christ the Liberator” can easily be re-appropriated as “Christ the Utility for Liberation” if feminists maintain self-focus on the cause of freeing women from structural oppression and underemphasize their need for grace and the boldness of humble service.

Pope Francis seems to recognize this struggle and confusion, and affirms it as an issue for the woman in the church trying to navigate a patriarchal structure amid the cacophony of feminist voices. He cautions against losing the particular dignity of women in the process:

I am wary of a solution that can be reduced to a kind of ‘female *machismo*,’ because a woman has a different make up than a man. But what I hear about the role of women is often inspired by an ideology of *machismo*. Women are asking deep questions that must be addressed. The church cannot be herself without the woman and her role. The woman is essential for the church. Mary, [mother of Jesus,] a woman, is more important than the bishops. I say this because *we must not confuse the function with the dignity* [emphasis

added]. We must therefore investigate further the role of women in the church. We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman. Only by making this step will it be possible to better reflect on their function within the church.⁵¹

Pope Francis seems to affirm the example of Mary of Bethany in her priority of dignity over function—dignity in her bold yet humble action, affirming the dignity of Christ as Messiah, in action, inspired by self-giving love.

Conclusion

A woman in the church today, in her journey to discover what it means to be just that, may find a closer connection and exemplar across time in Mary of Bethany than in either the *reformers* or *revolutionaries*. Perhaps neither group will be effective unless they empty themselves as Mary did in serving Jesus at his feet, and through *kenosis* of Jesus in taking on our humanity. Mary of Bethany presents a very simple model for a woman in the church. In her humanity and with devotion to Jesus, she simply preserved her focus on him. That focus and resulting inspiration compelled her to action. Her inspired actions twice were acclaimed by Jesus in the gospels, and proclaimed his message. This simple model seems to transcend gender and structures. And it started with focus, with vision of Jesus, not with structures. It was not through her own will. In this way she could be compared to Mary the mother of Jesus in Chittister's summation of a woman of the church:

Mary [mother of Jesus]. . . could withstand and confront every standard of her synagogue and of her

society, and take the poverty and the oppression and the pain to which that led because the will of God meant more to her than the laws of any system. That's the kind of woman God chose to do God's work. That's the kind of woman that the Church raises up for women to be.⁵²

Chittister seems to also recommend Mary of Bethany's starting point, "The fact is that what is right about the Church for women is the vision of Jesus."⁵³ Mary of Bethany reminds women through time how true this is. A woman's response to this vision and to Jesus' Christological question, "Who do you say that I am?" is her key to answering how to "be" in the church, especially while navigating through patriarchal systems and reform.

In the reality of historical domination by patriarchal structures, the power of Mary of Bethany's story and model of discipleship is like a message in a bottle washed up on the shore.⁵⁴ An important, life-enriching message from antiquity sits waiting in Scripture for a receptive witness. The responsibility rests with the person encountering the message and how he or she chooses to respond.

Notes:

¹Carlton Chase, conversation with author, December 13, 2013.

²Mark 8:29. See also Matthew 16:15, Luke 9:20. Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible references in this paper are to *The Catholic Study Bible* (NAB) 2nd edition, eds. Donald Senior and John J. Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³Sirach 25:23. Bible citations that are part of exegetical examination in this paper will be cited parenthetically in the document

⁴Mary Aquin O’Neill, “The Mystery of Being Human Together,” in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993), 148.

⁵Cf., Anne E. Carr, “The New Vision of Feminist Theology,” in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993), 9: “When home and family life, education, the churches and synagogues, and the various professions... all came under feminist academic scrutiny, scholars pointed out that religious and theological views of women had helped to shape subordinating social structures and women’s own negative self-perceptions.”

⁶Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., “Feminist Mariologies: Heteronomy/Subordination and the Scandal of Christology,” *Theological Studies*, no. 66 (2005): 531.

⁷Much of the discussion on revolutionary and reformist feminist groups comes from a summary by Dr. William Cahoy, Professor and Dean at St. John’s School of Theology, Collegeville, MN, in class materials and discussion for DOCT 406 Christology in the Fall Semester of 2013.

⁸Mary Catherine Hilkert, “Cry Beloved Image: Rethinking The Image of God,” in *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara Graff (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), 192.

⁹Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), 5.

¹⁰Cahoy, DOCT 406 Christology course material, Fall 2013.

¹¹Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2002), xiii.

¹²McDonnell, “Feminist Mariologies,” 564-565.

¹³*Ibid.*, 531: “[U]nless the whole biblical text is Scripture for [women], none of it really is... Still [responsible exegetes] ask whether self-respecting women can continue allowing Scripture to norm their faith life, or for women to continue within the Christian Tradition.”

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 530. McDonnell elaborates on a quote from Sandra M. Schneiders, *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic*

Church (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004), 38.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 565.

¹⁶Anne E. Carr, “The New Vision of Feminist Theology,” 13.

¹⁷Mary E. Hines, “Community for Liberation,” in *Freeing Theology*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993), 167.

¹⁸Anne E. Carr, “The New Vision of Feminist Theology,” 13.

¹⁹Mary E. Hines, “Community for Liberation,” 168.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 167-68.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Mary Aquin O’Neill, “The Mystery,” 150.

²³Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Declaration *Inter insigniores* (Declaration of the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood), October 15, 1976, Vatican Archive, The Holy See, accessed December 13, 2013, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html.

²⁴Saint Thomas, *In IV Sent.*, dist. 25 q. 2, quaestiuncula 1a ad 4um, as cited in *Inter insigniores*, sec. 5.

²⁵*Inter insigniores*, sec. 5.

²⁶McDonnell, “Feminist Mariologies,” 531.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 541.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 544.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 542.

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹*Ibid.*, 544.

³²Standing as that woman, I have encountered many angry, revolutionary feminist voices, and have even been publically maligned by

some after a staged monologue performance in which I suggested a call to women as well as men to a higher standard of sexual purity.

³³Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," in *Freeing Theology*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993), 116.

³⁴Ibid., 116.

³⁵Ibid., 118.

³⁶Summarized from Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 119-120.

³⁷Ibid., 127. Johnson quotes from *De Trinitate* regarding the use of *Sapientia* (Wisdom/Logos) as feminine: "*Sed aliter mittitur ut sit cum homine; aliter missa est ut ipsa sit homo*" ("But she [Sapientia] was sent in one way that she might be with human beings; and she has been sent in another way that she herself might be a human being."); Augustine, *De Trinitate* 4.20,27; translation by Johnson.

³⁸Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 127.

³⁹Matt 11:19: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they said, 'Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'"

⁴⁰Johnson, "Redeeming the Name of Christ," 126-127.

⁴¹Ibid., 126.

⁴²Ibid., 123.

⁴³*Mary took a liter of costly perfumed oil made from genuine aromatic nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and dried them with her hair; the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil.* John 12:3.

⁴⁴Reference to the account in Luke 10:38-42 of Martha serving while Mary sits at the feet of Jesus.

⁴⁵Cf., Dominika A. Kurek-Chomycz, "The Fragrance of Her Perfume," *Novum Testamentum* 52:4 (2010): 340.

⁴⁶Philip F. Esler and Ronald Piper, *Lazarus, Mary and Martha* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 67.

⁴⁷Reference to kingly anointing of Saul in 1 Samuel 10:1; priestly anointing in Leviticus 16:32; Messianic anointing through her worship and in Luke 4:16-22, Acts 4:27, Acts 10:38; bridegroom reference with nard in Song of Songs 1:12, 4:14.

⁴⁸Dorothy Lee, *Flesh and Glory* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), 210.

⁴⁹Esler and Piper are quoting Raymond Brown. Cf., Esler and Piper, *Lazarus*, 66-67.

⁵⁰Joan Chittister, O.S.B., "What's Right with the Catholic Church?" in *Common Good, Uncommon Questions: A Primer in Moral Theology*, ed. Timothy Backus, William C. Graham (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 72.

⁵¹Antonio Spadaro, S.J., "A Big Heart Open to God," *America* (September 30, 2013), Online version, accessed December 13, 2013, <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

⁵²Chittister, "What's Right," 76.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁴Chase, conversation, December 13, 2013.

References:

Carr, Anne E. "The New Vision of Feminist Theology." In *Freeing Theology*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 5-29. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993.

Chittister, Joan, O.S.B. "What's Right with the Catholic Church?" In *Common Good, Uncommon Questions: A Primer in Moral Theology*, edited by William C. Graham and Timothy Backus, 69-77. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997.

Hampson, Daphne. *After Christianity*. 2nd Revised. London: SCM Press, 2002.

- Hilkert, Mary Catherine. "Cry Beloved Image: Rethinking The Image of God." In *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, edited by Ann O'Hara Graff, 190-205. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995.
- Hines, Mary E. "Community for Liberation." In *Freeing Theology*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 161-184. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993.
- Johnson, Elizabeth A. "Redeeming the Name of Christ." In *Freeing Theology*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 115 - 137. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993.
- Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992.
- McDonnell, Kilian, O.S.B. "Feminist Mariologies: Heteronomy/ Subordination and the Scandal of Christology." *Theological Studies* 66 (2005): 527-567.
- O'Neill, Mary Aquin. "The Mystery of Being Human Together." In *Freeing Theology*, edited by Catherine Mowry LaCugna, 139 - 160. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1993.
- Sacred Congregation for the Faith. *Inter Insigniores* (Declaration of the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood). October 15, 1976. Vatican Archive. The Holy See.
- Schneiders, Sandra M. *Beyond Patching: Faith and Feminism in the Catholic Church*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2004.
- Spadaro, Antonio, S.J. "A Big Heart Open to God." *America* (September 30, 2013).
- The Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible*. 2nd edition. Edited by Donald Senior and John J. Collins. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.