

The Church as Liberation Community from Patriarchy:  
The Praxis of Ministry as Discipleship of Equals

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My topic today is the understanding of Church as a community of liberation from patriarchy and the praxis of ministry for such a community of liberation. First I want to say something about the ecclesiology of understanding church as a community of liberation from patriarchy, and then something of how the praxis of ministry should be understood in the context of such an understanding of church.

The Christian church from the beginning was understood as a community of liberation from slavery and oppression, drawing on the ancient theme of Israel as an exodus community from slavery in Egypt and a journey to enter into the Promised land. Baptism was at first embraced as the sacrament of conversion and transformation through which one entered this community of liberation that overcame all social hierarchies of ethnicity, class and gender, a baptism into the Christ-nature in whom there is no more Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male or female. But this vision of a community of discipleship of equals was quickly spiritualized and the concrete reference to changing social hierarchies denied.

Soon the patriarchal voice was reinstated in the household codes: Wives obey your husbands, children your parents, slaves your masters, a reiterated demand for obedience of subjects to their lords in New Testament texts that itself witnesses to the fact that many Christians understood baptism and entry into the church as really overcoming these relationships of domination socially, as well as spiritually.

This vision of the church as a community of liberation in which all members share ministry somewhat equally has been continually recovered in Christian history, in medieval Beguine communities, in Quaker meetings and Methodist class meetings. Most recently the development of Base Christian communities as the ecclesial expression of Latin American liberation theology has rediscovered

this understanding of church. Although the critique of patriarchy has been implicit in these reclamation of small face-to-face communitarian understandings of church, this has seldom been made explicit. Thus women-church or feminist forms of Base Christian community represents a major new step of understanding patriarchy as the central expression of the powers and principalities of sinful distortion of human existence on the planet and understanding church as a community of liberation from patriarchy.

This means that patriarchy is rejected as an expression of God's will and the order of creation desired by God. Patriarchy is named as a historically constructed system by which ruling class males have established themselves in a position of domination over women and over dependent classes in the family and society, slaves, children, inferiorized racial or ethnic groups. Ruling-class males have built social structures and ideologies of cultural justification of these social structures to monopolize cultural, economic and political power in society. Others, women, slaves, inferiorized racial groups, were forbidden access to this power and confined to auxiliary status as physical laborers in production and reproduction, while ruling class males own, command and enjoy the lion's share of the fruits of this labor.

Rejection of patriarchy as the order of creation for society, also obviously means rejecting it as the appropriate order for the church. If the church in its essential nature is a community of liberation from patriarchy then it should most particularly witness to an alternative pattern of relationship between its members based on a discipleship of equals and mutual empowerment. It can witness to an alternative relationship of humans to each other and to the rest of creation in the larger society only if itself witnesses to such alternative relations in its own basic processes of life, and ministry in its sacraments, educational work, administration and mission to society. A church which claims to be the sacrament of liberation

for society while itself embodying the worse patterns of oppression internally is compounds sinful distortion with hypocrisy and is simply unbelievable.

Constructing a church of liberation from patriarchy requires dismantling clericalism. This means we have to understand the utter incompatibility of clericalism with a liberative understanding of church and ministry. Clericalism is the separation of ministry from mutual empowerment in community and its distortion into hierarchically ordered castes of clergy over laity. The clergy then monopolize sacramental action, education and teaching, administration and leadership in mission, turning the laity into passive dependents who are to receive these services from the clergy and carry out their orders, but not participate in shaping, defining and embodying these activities themselves. Ministry becomes the special preserve of the ordained, rather than based in the community and articulated within and by it.

In the official Catholic clerical myth of origins, the ordained episcopacy is declared to have been established by Christ, representative of God, who founded a hierarchy to pass down his divine power through a line of succession. Bishops then dispense this power to priests in ordination and priests in turn dispense forgiveness and access to the grace of divine life to the laity, if the laity submits to the rules laid down by the hierarchy. In this way the entire structure, sacramental and educational life of the church is distorted into a power tool of the clergy over the laity, not to mention the upper levels of the clergy over the lower levels, Bishops over priests, in the Roman Catholic system, Pope over Bishops.

Clericalism is built on and reduplicates patriarchy. The basic symbol and mode of the clerical relation on each level of hierarchy in relation to the ones below it is that of the all-knowing and all-powerful husband over a passive, dependent wife, combined with the all-powerful and all-knowing father over the dependent, undeveloped child. This means that instead of the father-husband cleric

helping the child-wife to develop and become an equal adult, the basic mode of ministry is to re-enforce dependency, ignorance and under-development.

Obviously this is the same pattern of relationship in all patriarchally constructed systems of relationship, whether it be the doctor who disempowers the patients and keeps them in the dark about care for their own bodies or the colonialist who shapes the colonized into exploitative under-development or the slave-master who tries to turn the slave into a passive tool of labor.

I will briefly detail how patriarchy disempowers the people sacramentally, educationally and politically. In the sacramental life all the symbols of the life of the community, as life grounded in the divine and experienced communally, are alienated from the people and made into magic tools possessed by the clergy through ordination from "above." For example, baptism should manifest the overcoming of alienating and oppressive modes of human relationship, and the reunion with one's authentic potential for life as one's gift in creation by God, entering into a community with confirms and nurtures such redemptive capacities of our human natures. But clericalism turns baptism into a rite by which one rejects one's natural life, derived from one's parents at birth, and undergoes a rebirth seen as overcoming and transcending the sinful and mortal life one received at birth due to the sinful sexual intercourse of one's parents. The theological key of such an alienation of sacramental life is the quasi Manichaeian Augustinianism that divorces grace from nature, redemption from creation. Once grace is defined as something transcendent to nature that negates nature as evil, it is then able to be reified as a power possessed by hierarchically-ordered representatives of an institution that alone mediates this supernatural power.

Likewise the Eucharist should be a symbol of our participation in authentic life that is our true nature, our nurture and growth in such life. Yet it has become the sacramental symbol most radically alienated from the people and transformed

into a clerical power tool. The Eucharist, above all, is the sacrament most rigidly guarded as a clerical power tool and defined as an act that no lay person can perform. Excommunication, or denial of the Eucharist, is the prime tool by which one punishes those who resist clerical control. Ordination is the hierarchially transmitted power to "confect" the Eucharist. Thus the simple act of blessing and distributing food and drink as a symbol of giving and nurturing life is turned into a power tool to control access to God and redeeming relation to God.

The disempowerment of the people educationally is a second aspect of clericalism. The clergy monopolize theological education, removing it to a place inaccessible to the people. Theological education is developed in a language unknown to the people, either a fossilized foreign language, such as Latin, which traditionally both laity and even nuns were not taught, or else a learned jargon that most people can't understand. The people are thus made to feel helpless and dependent on the clergy for interpretation of scripture and the ability to analyze theological symbols and ideas. This was compounded for many centuries by withholding the reading of the scriptures themselves from laypeople. Although Protestantism represented a reappropriation of Bible reading by the laity, it also soon developed esoteric ways of exegesis of the Bible which the lay people felt incompetent to rival and so must be dependent on preachers to understand. Thus we see a common pattern in church renewal movements by which initially laicizing and egalitarian movements are re-clericalized as the movement becomes institutionalized.

Liberation theology and Base Communities in Latin American significantly based itself centrally on a reappropriation of accessible popular Bible reading by the laity. There has also been a great movement of lay people into theological education in an ecumenical context, meaning that many Catholic lay people now have a more modern and sophisticated knowledge of theology, church, history and

the Bible than most traditionally educated priests and bishops. This is a very threatening situation for clericalism, and it is not surprising to see bishops and the Vatican trying to forbid laity and especially women from teaching in Catholic seminaries, particularly teaching priests, or even attending Catholic seminaries.

Clericalism in the internal politics of the church is a third area of clerical control over the people. In the most hierarchical church, Roman Catholicism, the laity traditionally has no role in church administration. The laity could not participate in calling much, less ordaining their own pastors. They were not elected to church councils at a diocesan level, much less national or international level. They can't help write or vote on laws regulating the church or governing it. The Second Vatican council tried to change the stratified pattern of church government for a more collegial relation of Pope with bishops, to be extended in collegiality of bishops with priests, priests with laity.

But the Vatican quickly rejected real power sharing with the bishops, and the bishops with their priests. Partly due to extreme shortage of clergy, there has been some progress on lay ministry in parishes and the participation of laity in church councils. But here the pastor holds the final decisions juridically and can't ignore the advice of the laity and dismiss the church council at will. Thus the whole system remains despotic, despite a voluntary softening by some priests who wish or need to be more collaborative with the people. But because there is no final accountability to the people, this remains a benevolent despotism at best, not true democracy.

If we understand clericalism as the expropriation of ministry, of sacramental life, theological education and church administration from the people, then feminist base Christian communities or a ministry of the discipleship of equals is engaged in the revolutionary process of reappropriating to the people what has been falsely expropriated from us. We are reclaiming sacramental life as the

expression of our own entry into and mutual empowerment in redemptive life, the renewal of authentic human life freed from alienating power. Theological education and teaching are understood as our own reflections on the meaning of reclaiming our authentic life from such distortion. Ministry is the active praxis of our authentic life and the building of redemptive communities as the bases from which to challenge systems and ideologies of oppression and injustice.

We should understand baptism as the proclamation of our entrance into a process of metanoia or turning around by which we seen through the ideologies that justify oppressive systems and get in touch with our true potential for life. Eucharist is the ongoing nurture in such life in community. The dismantling of clerical concepts of ministry and church organization does not mean an anarchism that rejects any leadership roles and skills, but rather than the community itself decides what expressions of liturgy, learning and service it wishes to engage in in order to express its redemptive life. It then becomes fairly easy to delegate various tasks to people who have the skills and readiness to undertake these tasks. In other words, there is a ministry of function, rather than clerical caste, rooted in a discipleship of equals.

A ministry of function rather than clerical caste can allow a true plurality of ministerial needs of the community to be defined and responded to. It can draw on the skills and gifts of a variety of people in the community to met these needs and thus activate their gifts in ministry. Redemptive church communities need a variety of enablers. Lumping all ministry into an ordained caste means that many of the community's needs go unmet, since no one person possesses all these skills and gifts. A creative church community needs, 1) liturgical creators, poets, artists, choreographers, dramatists and preachers, 2) teachers who know the history of religious ideologies and their relationship to various social systems and can help the community reflect on and reconstruct its inherited symbols, 3) administrators

skilled in organizing and developing the material resources of the community, 4) community organizers that can critically analyze the structures of social oppression and organize the community for social change, 5) spiritual counselors who have deep wisdom in the inner life and can be guides to others in the journey.

Thus one should ideally think of a team of ministers engaged in these various aspects of community building and celebrating, what was traditionally called "the edification of the church." I suspect there will generally be a need for someone to be the coordinator of these many processes and who oversees them all, as long as that person remains a truly a primus inter pares rather than a hierarch.

All this raises the question of whether ministry should be seen as a full-time paid job, much less as a career. Perhaps it should always be combined with other jobs, although it is appropriate for part time pay to be attached to such roles on an equal time basis. But most of all, such leadership roles should not be seen as creating a permanent caste set aside for life, but rather functional roles which should always see themselves as engaged in reproducing themselves, educating others so they can also fulfill these roles for the community.

Thus participating with someone who is skilled in doing liturgy in creating liturgy should be a process of becoming educated to create liturgy oneself. Helping in community organizing with a skilled community organizer should produce people who can take the lead in community organizing. Being in spiritual counseling should produce people that should become spiritual counselors. Instead of an education for permanent dependency, education should empower and makes the educated into a peer of the educator.

Ideally a Christian church should be able to offer sustenance in these many aspects of redemptive life, but of course this is seldom the case. Some Christian feminist liberative communities can only manage to be liturgical communities perhaps once a month or every two weeks for people who continue to go to other

churches or not. Some groups come together primarily for study. Others are primarily service groups who come together around some particular social project, such as a soup kitchen or a shelter for the homeless. Many people seek out the meeting of their many needs through different groups. The religious aspects of their hope remains implicit in much of their activities, perhaps being expressed only partially in one of these contexts. Seldom are we privileged to express the many aspects of growth in liberative life in one community. Some indeed may prefer to spread these functions around in several places, rather than be locked into one group that may become too sectarian.

In the following section of this talk I will mention a few different communities and projects with which I have had some contact in recent years that seem to express for me my communities of liberative life.

Perhaps the primary expression of liberation community for me now and for the rest of my life is Pilgrim Place, a retirement community which I and my husband joined three years ago. This community of three hundred and fifty people is ecumenical, including Catholics and people from many different Protestant traditions. Everyone has come from background in church service, education or ministry, around the world as well as in the United States. Strongly committed to justice and peace, a group conducts a silent witness against war every Friday afternoon near the freeway.

Women's peace and justice groups constantly offer lectures and discussion on different social issues, as well as opportunities for involvement. Many volunteer to help deprived groups, homeless, poor or marginalized. There is a developed ecological consciousness in the community. A group concerned with this is constantly find new steps for better sustainability. Recently grass was pulled up around the main buildings to be replanted in drought resistant California native plants. There are two community gardens, as well as over a hundred fruit trees,

scattered throughout the campus from which a weekly farmers market is offered to the community, as well as anyone else who comes. The proceeds go to a fund for those in the community in need of help with medical expenses. This fund also helps equalize the expenses of residence for those with less economic assets.

Although there is no official denominational identity, there is a non-coercive liturgical life offered to who ever wishes to come. Every Thursday there is a vespers which takes many different forms and is led by different people who volunteer to do so. More recently there was a decision to make the community a eucharistic community. So twice a month on a Tuesday an ecumenical Eucharistic liturgy devised by the group is offered, led by different members. There is also a Women-church group that offers a feminist Eucharistic service once a month. This project has a constituency that draws from the larger Los Angeles community, but its coordination has been taken up by a resident, more than half of those who attend come from our community.

There is also recreation of all sorts. People organize to go off to museums, plays, concerts or simply for excursions. Swimming, exercise machines, yoga and Tai chi classes are available. Most of all this community of people ranging from 60 to over 100 years of age are helping one another through what the Latin Americans call la tercer edad, the third age of life. A nursing facility cares for the sick and dying, and many take turns as chaplains. When someone is dying others gather around to guide them through a process as they wish to go through it. Almost everyone is present for funerals, most of which were planned in part by the dying person themselves. These punctuate the life of the community every few weeks, an obvious expression of such a group of people of this stage of life, even though the community is remarkably good at keeping people healthy and creative well into that third age.

Another community that has been essential to my life in the last forty years had been the schools of theological education where I have taught, Garrett theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois for 27 years and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California for the last six. These schools have been for me far more than jobs. They have been communities of colleagues where I share many aspects of my life, including a covenanted community for mutual support and liturgy which was a part of our life at Garrett for twenty years. Interestingly some seven members of that group is now resident at Pilgrim Place. Several faculty members from the GTU are also planning to come to Pilgrim Place. So many of these former colleagues have chosen to grow old together

For me my students have been as much a part of my community as my faculty colleagues. I have always looked at my students who are preparing for ministry or teaching as friends who are in the process of becoming peers and colleagues. I am happy to see many of my former students in ministry or in teaching positions. For me the ministry of theological education is very much a ministry of teaching into equality as a fellow teacher-scholar.

One extension of my community of theological education was the collaboration of several of the Theological Schools in the Chicago area, Lutheran, Unitarian, Methodist, with the Center for Alternative Technology which together created the Interreligious Sustainability Project of Greater Chicago. This group spent two years discussing the design for an urban ecology project that would draw on the religious congregations, not just Christian, but Jewish, Muslim, Ba'hai and any others than wish to join. Such religious congregations were seen as key bases for neighborhood organizing for ecological sustainability. A large type pamphlet was produced that showed the pattern of pollution throughout the greater Chicago area and the correlation with patterns of race, poverty and concentration of

population. A variety of ideas and community organizations for alternative ways of living in the city as a total bioregion were proposed.

Then the second stage of community organizing through the congregations, neighborhood by neighborhood, was started. A groups of congregations in a neighborhood would agree to participate. Groups in each congregation would study the pamphlet together. Then they would decide on some activity, such as a community organic garden, the creation of a butterfly garden or ecological clean up and planting of a river or lake shore and the like. Neighborhood activities were always undertaken with a sense of relating these to the whole greater Chicago bioregion. For me this is a model project of how religious congregations can work together to more livable cities. I am proud to have been a part of it.

For me another important community of reference is Catholics for a Free Choice and its Latin American sister groups, *Catolicas por el derecho de Decidir*. I have been a member of the board for this network for almost thirty years and our board meetings are truly a reunion of good friends. We often combine such gathering with other activities, conferences of our Latin American colleagues, either in Washington or traveling to a Latin American venue, and sometimes marches in Washington with both the US government and the Vatican Embassy as points of protest. We have traveled together to UN conferences in Cairo, Egypt and Beijing, China. We have assembled for the defense of the results of such UN meetings at the New York assembly of the UN itself, as right wing groups , especially the Vatican, seek to undermine its results. We take ethics seriously; one of our functions is to develop clear ethical guidelines to help Catholic laity defend an alternative, more just, sexual ethics. Two magazines, Conscience in English and Conciencia in Spanish are outlets for this work of communication. We also laugh a lot as we seek to promote a healthier church.

Another important network for me has been Call to Action. It began in Chicago when the U.S. Catholic Bishops organized the Call to Action meeting at the time of the American Centennial in 1976. Cardinal Cody declined to organize a delegation, and so Chicago Catholics organized on their own to go to the conference. The gathering quickly exceeded the Bishops' desires, and they shut it down. But since the Chicago group was not under the bishop's control, they continued and have grown into a national group, with a huge yearly meeting, as well as regional meetings in a number of areas of the US. For many Catholics CTA is a life line to a continuing vision of an alternative more liberative vision of the church.

I have spoken at national CTA meetings almost every year for over 25 years and look forward to it as a way of networking with a community of progressive U.S. Catholics, one that increasingly draws on the progressive Catholic community world wide. There is also the Women Church network and the Women's Ordination Conference that are a part of this network of the progressive Catholic community with which I stay in touch since our first meetings in the mid-1970's.

Another important network for me is the Conspirando community of Latin America. Conspirando is a journal of feminist theology and ecofeminism published by a mostly Catholic feminist groups of Latin Americans from Santiago, Chile. It is now in its eleven year of publication. It brings together a network of writers, artists, liturgists and therapists across Latin America who have also assembled for such activities as the Shared Garden conferences held twice a year. They have also embarked on many creative research projects, such as the organization of a series of teams in eleven teams in different Latin American countries that researched the legends and liturgical practices in Mariological festivals that preserve prehispanic goddesses or female divinities. Each team sought not only to assess how these sites preserve earlier female centered religiosity, but how these practices might help in

the development of a feminist spirituality for Latin American women today. The result is the book, Virgenes y Diosas en American latina: La resignification de lo sagrado, Virgins and Goddesses in Latin America: The resignification of the Sacred, published in 2004, and which my Spanish reading group read in Berkeley, California in the Spring of 2005.

Another worldwide feminist theological network of great importance to me is the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. This group brings together Christian feminist theologians from Latin America, Africa and Asia, seeking to develop their reflections in their own contexts through networks, publications and journals, as well as joint projects. For example, the African group, which had named themselves, the "Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians" has developed a project around theological reflections on AIDS in Africa which is also seeking to change the fear of AIDS and helping Africans to take hold of this terrible pandemic which is devastating their societies.

Although as a North American I am not a member of this commission, I have been privileged to be in dialogue with its development since its beginning in Geneva, Switzerland since 1982. I have spoken for some of groups in such places as India, Korea, Brazil, Mexico and Costa Rica. I regularly teach a course on Third World Feminist Theology to keep up with the work of these women and to make it known in North America.

These then are a part of my church community of liberation, both local, national and world wide. These networks are what keep me alive and continually restore my faith that, in the words of the slogan of the World Social Forum that meets yearly in Porto Alegre, Brazil, "Another world is possible." We don't have to acquiesce to oppressive and violent relationship as the unchangeable order of things either for the church, for American society or the global world. Against all

odds, we can continue to stand up for an alternative more life-giving, more redemptive way of being in relation to one another as people of God/ess, as people of love and justice, as people who remember the vision of our brother Jesus who preached good news to the poor, the liberation of the captives, the setting at liberty of those who are oppressed.