

Chapter 3: Women and the Building of the *Kingdom*: Women and Space in Catholic Christianity, Past and Present

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Abstract

The aim of this chapter is to explore some relevant issues at the intersection of the three topics of the book --religion, women and space- within Catholic Christianity, past and present. Because of the wide scope of the ground to be covered, both historically and geographically, this text does not intend to present a systematic or overarching panorama of women and space within Catholicism but presents an overview. The chapter is divided in three sections. The first provides some preliminary observations on women and space in the New Testament. The second section looks at the role of women in the Church and addresses the issue of male-only priesthood. The final section illustrates how women have contributed to building community spaces of religious practice within Catholicism.

Keywords: women, space, Catholic Church, leadership, community building, gender equality

Introduction

A great deal has been published on women, religion and space (including architecture and cities): as separate, relatively disconnected topics, but far less on the inter-relationships between these factors. For example, much has been written about church architecture and its meanings (McNamara, 2009). In the Middle Ages Christianity permeated Western culture, and city design was religiously inspired (Mumford, 1965). Scholarship on the history of daily life has uncovered many aspects of the social history of women in Christianity and the lives of prominent individual women (Duby, 1990; Martinez, 2000). Art historians have addressed theological, cultural and social meanings of iconographic representations of women in sacred art. Philologists have done the same in poetry and literature. Feminist theologians are recently looking at the role of women in the Church from both theological and practical points of view. However there has been little research (such as Schulenburg, 2005) on how the three factors inter-relate within Catholicism.

The Roman Catholic Church is the longest standing and the most organized from among the three main branches of Christianity, with a global reach and a 2,000-year old history (Brenan, 2016). This short article will only allow to identify a limited but relevant number of the many issues that could be approached. A gendered research approach usually looks at the representation and participation of women in the organization under consideration and then at the level of recognition of the issues affecting women's lives therein and the ways of ameliorating the situation, for example in my work on women and urban planning (Sánchez de Madariaga and Roberts, 2013).

This chapter will use this distinction as its main analytical approach by addressing women's participation and how women's issues are taken into consideration. The first section provides some preliminary insights by looking at the depiction of women and

space in the Bible. For Catholics, the Bible is revealed word of God and one of three sources of doctrine together with the tradition and the magisterium of the Church. The second section discusses the role of women in the Church and explains the theological grounds for male-only priesthood. The last section illustrates how women, both lay and consecrated, have contributed to building community spaces of religious practice within Catholicism.

Some Preliminary Words on Sacred Words

The New Testament of the Bible narrates the story of Jesus of Nazareth, an itinerant preacher who lived two thousand years ago in a distant province of the Roman Empire. A Jewish rabbi, he had no home nor family of his own, and was followed in his wanderings by a group of women and men who had left jobs, fathers, and homes. Jesus had no home nor family of his own, a relevant fact to keep in mind when considering the intersections of space and gender in Christianity.

Women in the New Testament

References to women in this text abound. In fact, women appear as very relevant actors in extraordinarily positive ways for the society of the time. We read for example, about an elderly woman named Ana who as a prophet—a highly recognized function in the Jewish world—identifies baby Jesus as the Messiah, just as another prophet, a man named Simeon does the same (Luke 2, 25-40). We see women leaving homes to follow a wandering rabbi, with some from among them of high economic means providing financial support to the group (Luke 8, 1-3). We read about women, like Mary, Martha's sister (Luke 10, 38-42), and a foreigner of dubious sexual reputation, the Samaritan, receiving teachings on a person-to-person level (John 4, 4-42), speaking with him as men of the time would only do with other men, and only with Jews at that. Women put ointment and kiss Jesus' feet (Mark 14). We read about women at the margins, many of them outcasts and untouchables: widows (Luke 7, 11-17), prostitutes or adulterers (John 8, 11), chronically bleeding women and hence ritually “unclean” women (Matthew 9, 20-22) being addressed by Jesus with affection, being taught, healed, or saved from lapidation. Jesus spoke of marriage as a covenant between a man and a woman as two equals made in God's image and likeness (Matthew 19, 1-12) as opposed to the Mosaic law allowing men to unilaterally divorce women.

Women are the ones who do not fearfully flee when things get tough and dangerous, along the *via crucis* from the Mount of Olives up to Golgotha. We find women are the ones present at the most important events: at the crucifixion (John 19, 25)—not the men except for John—and at the resurrection, of which they are the ones charged by Jesus to bear testimony (Matthew 9, 20-22)—testimony in Antiquity was male privilege. Mary Magdalene is the one who carries the good news, the gospel, of Jesus being alive, which is the cornerstone of Christian faith, for as Paul says “if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1Cor 15, 14).

Mary the mother of Jesus heads the group of those, women and men, receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). Later, women are leaders in the first Christian communities. The first Christian gatherings described by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles met in houses headed by women, such as that of Mary, mother of Mark, whose female servant

Rhoda opens the door for Peter when he is freed from jail (Acts 12, 13-15). In this book and in the letters describing the first decades of expansion of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, women appear on equal grounds with men among those receiving and transmitting the faith (Acts 12, 13-15), organizing, and ministering to others, as well as among the first martyrs of the prosecutions.

There are many women among the recipients of Paul's letters, some of which are mentioned as local church leaders. Some women like Lidia appear as the ones who take the lead in the creation of new local churches: "If you consider me a believer in the Lord, she said, come and stay at my house, and she persuaded us" (Acts 16, 15).

Women like her would organize everything when the itinerant Christian preachers arrived at a new location, creating the physical support for the "life in the communion of the spirit". Women, together with slaves and foreigners, that is, those not in positions of public authority, are the first to convert massively, including many Roman Patrician women.

While the treatment of women in these texts imply a rather astounding qualitative change in their favor with respect to contemporary standards, references to space are also worth considering.

Space and Place in the New Testament

In the New Testament, people are on the move. Jesus the rabbi and his followers are a wandering group that is permanently on the road: they walk from village to village around the Galilea lake preaching the gospel. When the timing of religious festivals requires it, they go up to the center of the Jewish world at the time, the Temple in Jerusalem. Sometimes they flee or go practically into hiding. Other times they retire to solitary places like mountains and deserts for prayer. Specific buildings to which they often go are private homes, mostly for meals, but also for ministering to the sick, and small synagogues in villages. The architectures of power also appear by the end of the text: palaces of the Jewish and Roman authorities -as well as jails and places of execution located in many cities, from Jerusalem to Rome.

Some spaces acquire special status becoming sacred places by virtue of the events that happened in them, such as in Mount Tabor, the Cenacle, Mount of Olives, or Golgotha. Pilgrimage to these and other sacred locations became, across the centuries, a key spatial dimension of Catholicism. Pilgrimage is both a metaphor of the inner path in the spiritual life and an actual and powerful spiritual practice, which could last years and was often dangerous for the traveler until relatively recent times (Maddrell et al, 2015). From among the many sacred places of pilgrimage that will continue to appear in the coming centuries, those linked to apparitions of Mary as at Lourdes, Fátima and Guadalupe (Warner, 1976)) will become among the most important. One woman, Egeria, is the first person to have left written testimony in the late 4th century of her several-years-long pilgrimage to the sacred places of Christianity, including the Chapel of the Burning Bush in Sinai (McClure and Feltoe, 1919).

Place as Path and Non-Place

In these texts, space involves places to leave behind, and places to arrive to; however, these new places of arrival also involve moving on. The important physical place seems to be the way. The way to where?

Now, it seems this “where” is not a physical location, or *urbs*. It is neither the social or political dimension of the city, or *civitas*. It is something else, neither *urbs* nor *civitas*. In order to understand this, we need to look at other type of spatial references in Sacred Scripture: places referred to as places “to come”, places “at hand”. Such words point out to theological meanings: “the house of my father”; the “kingdom of heaven” which is not of this world, the “new Jerusalem”, or “celestial Jerusalem”.

This place, or city to come, is not a physical space, nor the socio-political organization through which the physical space is built and social life is ordered. It is something else, to be hopefully found after the death of our physical bodies, of which only some insights can be obtained while in the body. It is the “place” of “eternal life” in the love and peace of God.

Metaphorically described in physical terms with measurements, orientations, materials, and colors, in the Book of Revelation (21, 12-27), this “city” should be considered, together with Platonic thought, an early predecessor of later ideas of utopian cities (literally non-place cities). From Saint Augustine on with his book *The City of God* (435 AD), whether when proposed by Christian writers like Thomas Moore in his *Utopia* of 1516, or when put forward by the many later secular utopian thinkers after the Renaissance and up to a certain strand of modern city planning well into the 20th century, the notion of a future ideal city fuels the imagination of city planners and decision makers as a recurrent idea within Western thought.

However, we need to keep in mind that “the kingdom” of heaven and the “celestial city” at not utopian cities in the sense of a model ideal city to be built in which the evils of present-day societies would disappear. The “kingdom” is not a place, nor is it a social organization, because it is “not of this world”.

The physical manifestations (*urbs*) that will be built and their social organization (*civitas*) will be only the means through which small Christian communities at the beginning (the expanding Christianity later, including today the shrinking community of Catholics in the West) organize their social life and its physical space. It will be done in ways ordered to live a life conducive to “sanctification”, that is, the inner experience and outer ways of life conducive to the “kingdom”, “salvation”, or “eternal life”, after death.

Place in the Old Testament: A People on the Move

Space as path and as metaphor of something not physical in the New Testament is in many ways prefigured in the Old Testament that Christianity shares with Judaism. References to space and place in the Old Testament have a similar flavor: many centuries before Jesus was born, the first individuals to progressively have received the revelation of the single God of the Jewish and Christian faiths received also this revelation while “on the move”.

Abraham, Jacob and their descendants received the revelation of God being one, and not the many gods of the various contemporary cults, in the long processes of abandoning their land of origin in Mesopotamia, wandering for many years as a nomadic people, then going through slavery, deportations, exiles, and wars, across the generations, for decades, and centuries, before settling in a “promised land”. Abandoning, wandering, arriving, rebuilding, before finally settling in, using the language of place as metaphor for something that is not a physical space—the promised land, the kingdom, the house of my father, the celestial city—all appear as recurrent themes throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Significantly enough, the first piece of land ever acquired as property by these nomadic people, many centuries before they were able to settle in, was to bury a woman—Sarah wife and half-sister of Abraham (Genesis 23, 1-20) in the field of Ephron, in Machpelah.

Women and the “Kingdom”

From a theological point of view, there are several relevant things for women regarding this new place, the ”kingdom” not of this world. The first is that, in this ”kingdom”, Paul explains, there are no distinctions between women and men—all human beings are radically equal in the “kingdom”, whether Jews or foreigners, men or women, slaves or free persons (Galatians 3, 28)—slavery being the condition of many in Antiquity.

The second is that women abound among the saints, those whom, throughout the centuries, popular devotion and the Church officially has recognized as having reached this “place” of “salvation” which is not a place of this world. The earliest saints are the martyrs of prosecutions, those to have suffered death because of their faith. The Congregation for the Cause of the Saints is the organism in the Vatican charged with defining the procedures, setting the models for the different steps toward canonization, and deciding on it. To grow in sanctity is to grow in communion with the Holy Spirit. Considering that sanctification is the whole aim of the Christian Catholic life, and sainthood the most important state for Catholics (not priesthood) it is highly significant that no difference here exists between the sexes.

The third is that women abound also, even more so, among the Catholic mystics, those individuals who, again throughout the centuries, have received glimpses during physical life of what this non-physical, eternal “kingdom” might be like. Some of the greatest mystics have been women. Following the Scriptural century-old tradition of using place as metaphor for spiritual things, so common in the prophetic books of the Bible, the great mystic Saint Theresa of Jesus in her book of 1577 explains the inner experience of sanctification in architectural and spatial terms: with pedagogical intent, she speaks of an inner castle and its dwellings as words that point out to the ineffable.

Finally, and particularly important, the first human being to have fully reached the “kingdom” and model for all humanity to follow on the path to sanctification, is a woman named Mary, mother of Jesus (Luke 1, 46-55). The Virgin Mary precedes all humanity in reaching this place of peace and love, of eternal life—or salvation. She is “full of grace” through her humility—humility in Christian faith being a radical version of what non-Christian spirituality today would refer to as “without ego”. She is free of

“sin”—*hamartia* in the original Greek, literally meaning “missing the mark”, or that which leads one astray, off the path to “salvation”. She is “Door”, helper, intercessor for others. In the litanies, she is depicted in the many ways by which she helps those who entrust her. Saint Bernard speaks of Mary as “Aqueduct” between earth and heaven. Virgin Mary has been, throughout the world, the source of deep and extended popular devotion down through the centuries (Warner, 1976).

Among these theological issues, most important for Catholics—also for Orthodox Christians—is anything related to the Virgin Mary. Mary is described at the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) as *Theotokos* “the one who fabricates God in her bosom” as Jesus—who is fully man and fully God in inextricable way—is incarnated in her through the action of the Holy Spirit. I don’t have the space here needed to elaborate on the theological meanings of Mary’s virginity and motherhood, as well as further theological explanations regarding the body, celibacy, marriage, and Jesus’ incarnation in Catholic theology. These are highly relevant issues for further discussion on women, gender and sex in Catholic Christianity deserving deep examination that cannot be provided for in this chapter.

The Role of Women in the Church

The Church, strictly speaking, is not only an institution, but comprises the whole community of the believers, and is a manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Women are a majority among the approximately 1.272 billion Catholic believers (Pew Research Center 2014). They also have historically played and continue to play a very significant role in many different dimensions of the life of the Church. According to L’Osservatore Romano (2016), the number of professed women religious worldwide in 2014, up to 683,000, was significantly higher than the total number of religious men, which included priests (415,792), permanent deacons (44,566) and professed men who are not priests (54,559).

The Historical Role of Consecrated Women in the Church

The New Testament provided a historical breakthrough for women. The radical consideration of women and men as both made equal in the image of God, “male and female he created them” in His “own image and likeness” (Genesis 1, 27) sets the religious underpinnings that in time would develop in Western culture the foundations from which our contemporary political understanding of gender equality derives.

Up to the 20th century, the Church opened opportunities for women that civil life would not allow, through the alternative that a consecrated life provided outside of marriage (Duby et al 1990; Martínez et al.). Since its early times, the Church created possibilities for a life in community with other women, independent from the authority of husbands, fathers or other male relatives which has been women’s legal status until well entered the 20th century, and still is in many parts of the world.

Convents and monasteries were from the 4th century and up to the 20th century a main life option for unmarried and widowed women, particularly for those without significant independent means of existence. Destitution when dependence on extended families

was not possible laid in the horizon for most unmarried or widowed women, as only the widows within the higher echelons of the aristocracy, and later the bourgeoisie, would have both the economic means and the legal independence that allowed for an independent living.

Surprisingly as it may be for some contemporary readers, the Church has been historically the institution providing greatest opportunities for leadership to women of any social class and background. Throughout the centuries and up to the mid-20th century these opportunities were far above what civil society would allow. As nuns in monasteries and convents, or as semi religious living with their families or with other women, consecrated women could voluntarily escape the authority of husbands and fathers, the very real dangers to life of continuous pregnancies, and the hard labors of childrearing and housekeeping in premodern times.

Men and Women: Equal in Dignity, Complementary in Vocation

In Christianity women and men are fundamentally equals in dignity and value while at the same time having specific vocations in the world. It can be said that the understanding of gender equality in Catholicism falls within what has been called a feminism of difference that recognizes differences among men and women, sees them as complementary, puts value on what have been traditional women's roles, and does not allow for discrimination based on such differences—this based on the basic equality of dignity and value of all being created as image and in the likeness of God.

It is obvious that, at times, in the long history of the Church, the focus on complementarity and difference has been overemphasized, with significant social impacts in ways that have reduced women's possibility of accessing education and employment, and more specifically non-traditional feminine types of employment, such as technical and scientific professions.

A good analysis of what are today's Catholic perspectives on women can be found in the work of philosopher Edith Stein (Stein 1988; 1996), a convert to Catholicism who was canonized as Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and is a Doctor of the Church, as well as patron saint of Europe. Stein, an outspoken feminist since her youth, supports a radical defense of women's equality in education, the professions and the workplace, while setting this into a conceptual framework that could qualify as a feminism of difference.

Writing in the early 20th century, Stein's discussion on women's professional vocations supports full professionalization of women in any and in all fields of endeavor -a rather radical, even revolutionary position in her time. At the same time, she affirms the existence of a specific feminine professional vocational *ethos*. Both assertions are built into one single intellectual argument which uses concepts with specific meanings. For her, the specific feminine professional vocational *ethos* can manifest through motherhood, through traditionally feminine professions, and through traditionally male professions.

Stein's discussion goes on to analyze how and in what ways this happens, the specific implications for women—whether they work in traditionally feminine professions, in male dominated professions or are stay-at-home mothers—and in wider terms for the

work done, the workplace, the professions and society in general. Important sections of this discussion are particularly relevant for contemporary policies specifically designed to attract women into male-dominated STEM areas and particularly those related to the built environment, in which efforts to attract women students and to keep women professionals have not always yielded significant results.

Stein's arguments can provide a sound foundation for balancing the arguments of radical equality in the workplace, with those of valuing traditionally feminine roles and values, both for the Church, and for wider public policies in the secular sphere.

Male Priesthood and the Sacrament of Order

Today the position of women in the Church, particularly their role in leadership, is an important issue to be dealt with. Contemporary aspirations to radical gender equality in public life and in the workplace (to which let us remember Christianity provided historically the religious and philosophical underpinnings), although far from actual reality, has become a general aspiration, as well as a widely supported political and social demand which seem to be at odds with Catholic only male priesthood and its impact on many aspects of the workings of the institution. More specifically, the issue lies on the fact that a hierarchical and clerical institution prevents women from reaching many of its main positions of responsibility particularly at the Vatican, because these positions are only open for ordered persons, who can only be men.

The argument supporting male only ordination to priesthood is theological, being the key issue, in part unlike in Protestantism, that the order of priesthood is a sacrament. Being these issues deep theological issues, it suffices to say that the Church is not owner of the sacraments, but only their depository and transmitter, implying that their substance cannot be changed (Catechism art 6; Ratzinger 2017). Male ordination is based on the revealed word of God showing Jesus appointing only men among his apostles to exercise the sacrament of order. The apostles were twelve men whose names vary slightly in the various lists appearing in the gospels.

The manhood of Christ and of the apostles to whom he conferred the exercise of this ministry is not secondary nor accidental, but an intrinsic sign value or substance of the sacrament over which the institution of the Church has no authority. Unlike in Gnosticism and in some modern-day spiritualities where a wedge is so often placed between soul and body, Catholicism places great importance on the body as inseparable from the soul, this implying that sex and sexed bodies are relevant theological issues (Pope Benedict, 2005). The fact of being man or woman is theologically relevant because *eros* in conjugal love, is or should be, a means to and a manifestation of *agape*, God's love.

The issue as to whether Jesus might have appointed only men because that would have been consistent with the customs of the time is not considered acceptable by the Catholic Church. Since, on so many other things related to women, Jesus did act against contemporary local customs and prohibitions, and always in favor of women, the argument goes, thus, in the eventuality that he should have wanted to appoint women, he would have done so. Additionally, priestesses were very common in the many contemporary cults around the region of Palestine. Hence, appointing women, while

contrary to Jewish custom, would not have been an unfamiliar fact to Jesus' contemporaries in that region of the world.

Priesthood within Catholicism is not a profession nor a job, it is a vocation or state of life, to be exercised as a service that provides the means to help others in the path of sanctification. Let's remember that sanctification is the important thing and the aim in life for all—both priests and the laity. Receiving the sacrament of orders is not a right but a gift; whoever feels a call for it, must submit it to the authority of the Church who has the responsibility to call someone to receive it.

By the sacrament of order, those ordained help others develop the grace received at baptism; God's grace, freely given to us, being a necessary ingredient for sanctification. Those ordained participate in the priesthood of Christ acting *in persona Christi Capitis*, meaning it is Christ himself who is present in the person of the priest—"only mediator between God and men" (1Tm 2,5; Catechism para 1544) and "only high priest according to the order of Melquisedec" (Hb 5, 10; 6, 20; Catechism para 1544)—who is present in the person of the priest. The order confers to the priest a "sacred power" so that when he ministers the sacraments it is the grace of the Holy Spirit that is involved, irrespective of the personal merits and sins of the human being (Catechism para 1544).

The most important of all the acts in which Catholic priests act *in persona Christi Capitis* is the celebration of the sacrament of the Eucharist (the Mass) which is the source and summit of Christian life (Pope Paul 1966) whose main liturgical rites celebrated today were instituted already in the 2nd century. For Catholics, as for Orthodox, and unlike in Protestant churches, the Sacred Sacrament of the Eucharist contains the body of Christ in a real, true and substantial way, as well as his soul and divinity, and hence Christ himself in real and integral presence (Catechism art 3). This presence is not known through the senses but by faith. The consecration of bread and wine by the priest (*epiklesis*) operates the conversion of all the substance of bread in the substance of the body of Christ, and of all the substance of wine, in the substance of his blood. This mystery is called the transubstantiation. In the celebration of the Mass, Christ is made present and real in both the person of the priest and in the sacred form of the Eucharist.

Through its current three degrees (bishops, presbyters and deacons), ordered persons continue the mission Christ gave his apostles, which is mainly to celebrate the sacraments. All those who have received baptism, the Eucharist and confirmation—the three sacraments of Christian initiation giving God's grace for the vocation to sanctity—have been consecrated for the common priesthood of all Catholics. The sacraments of marriage and order, on the other hand, are particular consecrations, meaning that while they also aim at the personal salvation of the person receiving them, they do so through the service the person will give to others: priests to believers, husbands and wives to each other.

The model for the exercise of leadership by priests is not that of leadership through power relations in secular work environments, but a model of service to others, as a shepherd looks after his flock. Although not always lived up in practice by some of its members, it is a model of servant leadership, exemplified at its deepest dimensions by

Jesus the rabbi washing his disciples' feet (servant's job) in the last supper as narrated in John's gospel (John 13 1-15).

In the early times of the Church, the order of priests was one among many orders, or groups of persons, such as the order of the widows, or the order of the married. Each of these groups, or bodies, are an integral part of the Church, body of Christ.

Leaving now theological arguments aside and speaking the secular language of policy, it could be argued that male only ordination is not to be considered a discriminatory practice but rather a practice that is akin or comparable to what governments normally do, for a variety of different reasons and policy objectives, when they apply specific policies to design programs that target specific groups of people. Targeting specific groups is normal practice when defining most policies and regulations that address persons. Specific criteria that allow to identify the targeted population are normally defined through thresholds of relevant parameters, in order to ensure the objectives of the regulation are achieved. The parameters defining the population to which regulations are directed can be related to age, geographical location, sex, income level, or family status, a combination of these, or other criteria. In the secular world, only universal programs, when they exist, such as universal health care, escape from having to define their target populations and can hence avoid establishing restrictions of access to those not fulfilling the requirements defined for the efficient success of the policy. In the case of ordination, the arguments that sustain the appropriateness of a sex restriction would be of theological, rather than sociological, economical, or political nature. But the underlying rationale that could justify it as a legitimate non-discriminatory practice can be analyzed also from this secular lens.

Women in the Institution of the Church Today

Today the vast operations of the Church in the fields of social work, education, missions, health, and other programs, in parishes and dioceses, are full of women. They occupy all sorts of positions: many of them work in lower echelon jobs, but many occupy management and executive roles (Brenan, 2016). Across these sectors of activity of the Church it is estimated that women far outnumber men at all levels of work, including in decision making positions, well above the average in similar positions in the civil world (Stewart 2008). The reasons for this high participation of women includes the fact that the main activities of the Church fall within the traditional feminine professions in the fields of health, education and social work. Another reason is that women are more likely to accept Church salaries, which are lower than civil world equivalents, with also far smaller differences among higher officials and lower ranking workers. The numbers of women in all these sectors and the extension of the operations of the Church in many countries contribute to their chances of shaping, or at least influencing, decisions that are related to urban policy, as they manage for instance investments in buildings.

Most catholic women however do not work for the Church. Catholic women work in all kinds of occupations and in all professions and at all levels, many at the highest ranks of their professional fields. Many catholic women (as many catholic men too) have been educated in catholic institutions from primary school to university level. Many of these institutions provide first rate quality education that feeds their graduates into the ranks

of top-level positions in all fields of the labor market. For many women, their Christian faith is a motivation in their careers. For many, reconciling work with a preferential attention for their families, which is a hallmark of Catholic understandings of gender specificities, represents a challenge not always easy to address.

Still, across the Vatican, the many dioceses distributed around the globe, and in many ecclesiastical organizations, women seem to be treated in patronizing ways and as second-class religious. In these places, nuns fulfill all kinds of household tasks, from cooking, to cleaning, to washing, and are often treated as service women. All sorts of menial housekeeping tasks are often done by women religious who have completed theological studies. The first woman to work at the Roman Curia did so in the 1950. By 2005, 21% of the Vatican workers were women, a percentage that remained constant by 2015. (International Business Times, 2015)

The Way Forward for Women?

What does this all mean for contemporary demands for gender equality in the Church? First, in religious institutions theological issues come first, and political and administrative concerns are second. This implies that the issue of increasing the participation of women in leadership positions necessarily needs to be addressed keeping in mind that priesthood will continue to be only male.

Some steps are being made. Since 2014 women have been appointed to several important positions of responsibility at the Vatican with symbolic value, including the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences and the International Theological Commission. Many other positions that are open to the laity could in the future be occupied by women, such as diplomatic representations including that at the United Nations, judges and magistrates, and economic managers. The reform of the so called C9, a Council of cardinals set up by Pope Francis states that only those positions that specifically require to be occupied by clergy will be so, opening the door for the nomination of women.

At a conference organized at the Vatican on Women's Day by the non-profit organization Voices of Faith, Carolyn Woo, president of Catholic Relief Services has proposed the following recommendations (Voices of Faith 2016): that leadership positions occupied by women become a normal thing instead of rare exceptions; that women are treated as full members in their own right, and not as invitees who are not to participate in decision making; that the Church takes an active role as advocate for the dignity and the rights of women against the many discriminations women face around the world; that the idea of the feminine integrates in ample ways women's capacities and gifts, including perseverance, a capacity to speak out the truth, and a capacity of initiative, and not reduced to notions such as kindness, maternal instincts, or esthetic inclinations—the sort of feminine qualities that contemporary secular feminist would define as gender stereotypes.

As the Church advances along these paths, new opportunities will arise for women to fully develop their gifts and talents, in all professional areas within the many institutions of the Church and at the higher echelons of the Vatican, with the only exceptions of those positions for which being a priest is a requirement. The fields of architecture and planning are among those in which women surely will be required in the future, as the

many organizations that make up the Church hold very significant land, architectural, and real estate holdings requiring this type of professional work as well as involvement in construction management, investment decisions and property law.

Revisiting Utopia: Women Building Communities

Women have contributed historically in different ways to building Christian communities. Sometimes, as leaders of groups of both men and women, other times, by living together among them, without men or families. They have created communities dedicated to the service of others, or to prayer and work in the confine of the cloister. They have written feminist utopias, and supported, in quiet ways, the lives of others and the work of the institutional Church, whether as religious women, or as laywomen, mothers, and wives, in parishes and neighborhoods.

Women in the Early Communities

Early Christians created communities in which people were able to develop new kinds of personal bonds akin to a family based on Jesus' almost last instructions to his disciples: 'love one another as I have loved you' (John 13:34). Jesus had spoken to his disciples as children, referring to the group as his new family, one not based on blood ties, but on a spiritual reality expressed through the desire to carry out the will of God (Mk 3:31-35). In fact, the word church, in the original Greek *ekklesia*, literally means assembly, group of persons, community. The Church is the community of the believers.

The new Christian communities flourishing throughout the Roman Empire during the first century were places where persons could live fraternal love in communion with each other and with the Holy Spirit. These communities would meet for common prayer at private homes, headed and organized by women as described in the book of Acts and in the apostolic letters, at times hidden behind closed doors to be protected from prosecution. Such tightly knitted communities of spiritual practice were extremely successful. They spread rapidly throughout the Roman Empire also because of the novel protective social networks they created preventing many, particularly women and orphans, from the then common fate of falling destitute.

Apocryphal writings, which comprise various texts produced during a period spanning from the late first century up to the early 3rd century, provide an additional source of information to be considered from sociological, historical or anthropological viewpoints. These texts are not part of the Catholic Bible and hence cannot be considered a source of theological meaning. However, they can be useful complementary sources providing information on the complex social world within which early Christian communities emerged. Such early communities appeared throughout an extensive geographical area in three continents (Europe, Asia and Africa), which opened the door to a great diversity of theological viewpoints and ways of living. While the central currents consolidated what in the next centuries became the institutional Church, minority groups separated in a variety of heretical movements. Some of these texts seem to have been written by extremely ascetic groups called *enкратites*.

Davies (1980) for instance suggests that some of the apocryphal books were written by women for other women. The audience would be either widows or women who after being converted to Christianity had abandoned their pagan, often abusive husbands, for the church, choosing a life of perpetual celibacy. A recurrent theme regarding the women featured in these texts is their problematic life experiences, and the difficulties they encountered when, for the sake of their new faith, they abandoned their husbands, some of which were powerful pagan civic and political leaders. According to this hypothesis, and as described in the texts, these women revolted against their husbands and marriage in general, and against the basic social patterns of the time, while, in the process, creating feminine celibate and ascetic communities.

The Orders of the Widows and the Virgins

The acts of the Apostles describe how individuals in the early Christian communities would share whatever material wealth some of them had, so that the poor, the orphans and the widows would be taken care of. One paragraph in Acts describes how persons of repute are appointed for the specific function of ensuring bread was equally distributed among the widows irrespective of them being from Jewish or Greek origin (Acts, 6 1-7). Paul speaks in his letters of the organization of the widows as a group, or order, including criteria for admission, conditions, and responsibilities. The order of the widows had spiritual and caritative roles specifically defined. By the end of the 4th century the order of the widows disappeared as such as it merged with feminine monasticism (Duby et al 1990).

Those young women who decided to remain virgins and live a celibate life for the sake of the “kingdom”, remained for life inside the Church, with specific tasks, under the protection and economic support of the community. Some of them would live in specific places as small communities; others would live within their own extended families; some would live independently. But all of them within the framework of the community. Celibacy in Christianity is not something that is imposed on the person, but on the contrary it is a positive attitude, something that springs out of the person. It is a redirection of the human yearning of the infinite inherent in sexual desire (*eros*) towards the infinite love of God (*agape*) through the consecration of one’s life in a spousal relationship of divine love. In the words of Jesus “there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it” (Mt 19, 12).

The order of the consecrated virgins exists today as a special vocation. Consecrated virgins are not nuns and they live and work for a living in the world. Today they live alone, with their family, together with other consecrated women or in other situations that facilitate the expression of their vocation and the fulfilment of their plan of life (Holy See 2018).

The Cloistered Life of Feminine Monasticism: Ora et Labora

When in the 4th century Christianity became the official religion of the Empire, the cult left private homes, and temples were built, giving the Church an architectural presence in urban space. Women lost ground as the small communities gave way to the new hierarchical structure of an institutionalized Church, under the authority of the bishop

assisted by presbyters and deacons, which mirrored certain aspects of both the Jewish priesthood and the administration of the Empire. Clear distinctions were drawn between the male clergy and the lay. Albeit formally excluded from the spheres of power, women of the aristocracy, who converted massively, had significant informal power and influence in the workings of the Church.

As the Church grew in power, many yearned for the simple, close to the Gospel, life of earlier times. Thousands of men and women left the cities in the 4th and 5th centuries to become hermits in the deserts searching for a life in aspiration for the “celestial city”. This solitary way of life was soon reorganized by grouping people in cenobitic communities of women and of men, opening the way for the apparition of the monastic organizations that became the dorsal spine of Christianity.

Monasteries (and nunneries) provided the spatial and social organization that allowed individuals to live in community in ways conducive to the spiritual experience. Saint Benedict of Nursia wrote in the 6th century the rule by which cloistered monastic contemplative life has been organized in Catholicism ever since (Benedict, 516 AD). Monastic architectural typologies were devised to provide the physical environment in which such life could be lived, most often in remote places away from cities. Through the motto *ora et labora* he organized the rhythm of life around the Liturgy of the Hours, by which the cloistered monks and nuns pray by singing seven times a day, with in between periods for work, leisure, common meals, and personal prayer. Very often the founders of the early monastic orders and of the later congregations were inspired by the Virgin Mary, who is sometimes even mentioned as direct founder of the community.

The monastic orders gradually became centers of knowledge and self-sufficient communities independent not only from secular authority but, to some extent, from the church hierarchy. They owned very significant agricultural estates and economic enterprises, as well as building some of the best examples of gothic architecture.

Women's monasteries (including nunneries and convents) were initially created as off-shoots of or on dependent of men's organizations. The creation of the first totally independent female monasteries was not without difficulties, as in the experience of Saint Hildegard Von Bingen in the 12th century (Maddock, 2013). Schulenburg (2005) describes attempts by the male church hierarchy to control women's monastic organizations, restricting their ministry amongst the general public and within the city, by containing them within enclosed orders. But with time it was accepted that local bishops and superiors had no power over these communities, as many were put directly under protective Papal Authority, giving them the choice of being open or enclosed orders.

At the female monastery, women could follow a life dedicated to prayer and contemplation, and undertake a variety of artistic, managerial, and political and scientific endeavors, in the company of other women. The earliest orders, including the Benedictine, Cluny, Cistercians, Carmelite, were mainly contemplative. Life at the convent was often very modest and sometimes at the verge of poverty. Some orders were mendicant (supported by begging); however, others allowed richer women of means to bring their wealth and possessions with them, financially benefitting the community but also creating internal social distinctions.

Within female monasteries, convents, and abbeys, from the Middle Ages onwards, many women achieved positions of significant economic, social and political influence

in society, managing extensive estates and organizations with hundreds of members extended sometimes across many countries, as abbesses, mother superiors and generals of religious orders, and as mystic counselors to kings and Popes. The most famous include, Saint Catherine of Siena, Brigitte of Sweden and Hildegard von Bingen (Maddock, 2013). But there were thousands of other female leaders, of various social classes, who over the years ran hundreds of religious congregations of sisters with specific vocations for service: including running hospitals, orphanages, schools, asylums, and ministries to single mothers, prostitutes and the homeless, and working as missionaries throughout the world (Brennan, 2016).

Urban Communities of Working Semi-Religious Women: the Béguinages

The *Béguinages* (*Beaterios* in Spanish), were institutions comprising sets of buildings and sometimes entire neighborhoods, many still existing today, in which unmarried and widowed women lived together without men. Women in the Middle Ages could enter this form of semi-religious life which flourished particularly in the textile centers in Flanders and Germany, such as the ones in Bruges (now a UNESCO heritage site) (Majerus, 1997) and in Brussels. Béguines had non-permanent celibacy vows so they could leave to get married. They could attain financial independence by working in the textile industry. Thus non-consecrated women could voluntarily escape male authority while working in the world (Swan, 2016).

The Béguinages were not enclosed, secluded communities, so women had the liberty to move around the city, gaining respect and protection in wearing the habit (compare chapter 8 on the protection of religious clothing). As semi-religious women, they may be considered to be the precursors of later non-cloistered and lay feminine congregations. But, their presence and liberty of movement in urban space was not without opposition from the clergy, the guilds, and the municipality. They were legally subject to certain municipal laws and duties. For example, the city could require them, at personal risk, to attend the sick in times of plague, as unpaid nurses. But professionally and architecturally, the Béguinages had an impact on cities, their building complexes designed by women constitute early examples of women and planning principles. The Béguines themselves also providing living examples of alternative social life paths and employment opportunities for women: outside of both the convent and marriage.

A Feminist Utopia: The City of Ladies

The concept of the ideal city in which the evils of present-day society would disappear is a recurrent theme. This is illustrated in Christine de Pizan's 15th century publication, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (Pizan, 1405). This may be the first feminist urban planning book. Pizan reveals and confronts the many prejudices and injustices perpetrated against women in her time. She tells the stories and achievements of many famous women throughout history. These women are housed in her city of which they are also the building blocks. In a fictitious scenario, her heroines, drawing on their virtues and merits, debate with famous contemporary male philosophers, and successfully argue in favor of women's education and participation in public life.

Pizan's book included ideas on how to design cities, to create spaces for both women and men, which challenged ancient gendered zoning principles, which generally supported women being restricted to domestic roles. For example, in her 'dream vision'

of the ideal city, she envisaged high buildings with towers and turrets, surrounding welcoming courtyards inside the walls where women could read, discuss philosophical and religious ideas and pursue their education.

Feminine religious congregations providing service to other women and the needy

The many religious feminine congregations of the so called “active life” represent an important contribution of women to city building. This contribution to urban space materialized in the buildings they built, many of them urban landmarks. But more important was their pioneering role in providing social, educational and health services to urban populations. Such services were the forerunners of modern health and educational facilities later provided by civil authorities and private corporations.

Feminine congregations have historically been founded by women, although some of them have also been founded by men, often as feminine branches of congregations with both friars and sisters. With different degrees of vows, they flourished around Europe since the XVII century onwards and rapidly expanded around the world. Nuns and sisters belonging to congregations of active life do not live a cloistered life as do the older monastic contemplative orders but lead lives of full activity and service to others in the world, a service which is the “fruit” of regular daily prayer and contemplation.

Women of all social backgrounds have been founders and leaders of hundreds of religious congregations of consecrated women with specific vocations of service in the fields of education, health and social assistance. Most often these congregations focus on specific groups among the needy: the sick, the orphans, the handicapped, the elderly, prostitutes, single mothers, HIV patients, the poor, or the homeless. Others run main health, social, and educational institutions, sometimes first-rate organizations in their kind, addressing wide segments of the population.

A recent study has identified one hundred of such new congregations founded by women only in Spain during a period spanning slightly over 100 years during the 19th century, all of them still in existence and working today (Torres 2018). Some of the founders of these congregations came themselves from very poor backgrounds. They were all great leaders who, against all odds, were able to raise the funds, acquire or build the buildings, get political support from public authorities, and obtain the corresponding authorizations from the Church. All of them did so under a calling that they identified as God’s.

Communities of the lay: intentional communities

Since the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, it was common that communities of lay people moved to live in the vicinity of convents and monasteries. In fact, the Spanish word “laico” (lay) comes from the expression “al laíco,” abbreviation of “al ladito” (very close to) and referred to those persons who settled close to the monastic and conventional buildings that were built in Granada since the early XVI century. Today, many orders, both contemplative, as the Cistercians, and of active life, like the Franciscans, have groups of lay persons that they formally recognize as part of their community. These groups of lay people affiliated with specific religious orders or congregations include men and women, married and unmarried. They do not necessarily

live close to each other, by they are communities of the lay sharing a common charisma grounded in the spiritual practice and vocation of the order to which they are affiliated.

Lay women, as well as religious sisters, were active in building new utopian ventures. Communities of minority lay populations built on common spiritual practice and ordering different aspects of life have been created since the 18th century in some parts of the protestant world, particularly in the USA. Hayden (1977) and Kanter (1972) provide in-depth studies of these historical communities, some of which are still in service or functioning, showing the ample diversity in living and organizational arrangements, in religious practice, and in architectural and urban design. These communities show various degrees of integration with the surrounding city and society, as well as different roles for women and the organization of family life within them. As the Medieval examples of the Catholic béguinages, the convents and the monasteries, they are earthly utopias built for a life ordered towards the “kingdom.”

Rather than struggling on, trying to minister to and change modern society from within, some Catholics are taking the view that it is better to start again. Currently the Benedict option (Dreher 2017) is being developed as a social model for building alternative future urban settlements by lay Catholic visionaries. These settlements will nurture the spiritual life of the laity in a post-Christian society where believers are becoming a minority. The Benedict option provides an adaptation of the monastic rules created by Saint Benedict, for lay people living in cities. The objective is to create a strong supporting framework to facilitate spiritual practice, ordering the different aspects of life towards sanctification. This would be for both men and women, and families and would continue to promote the ‘Kingdom’ on earth.

Parishes: Laywomen’s Contributions to Building Community Within Neighborhoods

Prior to the current processes of secularization in the Western world, in traditionally Catholic countries like Spain, urban space and the daily living of the faith by the laity, that is, for most people, has been historically organized around the neighborhood church or parish. Historically, parishes have been places in which laywomen have deployed their organizational abilities and their work in pastoral, liturgical, and philanthropic activities. While the life of the Church at this neighborhood level is well and alive today in many countries around the world, with parishes fulfilling many of these roles, the realities in Europe are very different. In a context of generalized secularization, the influx of parishes in the lives of a largely non-practicing catholic society, is today circumscribed to the rather small segment of the population who keep an active Catholic life.

Conclusion

Today, the many institutions and diverse charisms that make up the Church, allow for a diversity of life options in community and their corresponding spatial arrangements, for women (and men) believers, that include contemporary versions of all the above. This chapter has suggested some relevant themes for a study of women and space within Catholicism. In doing so, it has attempted to address both the tangible aspects of city and community building and living, and of leadership and participation. The selection of the topics is obviously biased by the perspective of the author, and the treatment necessarily brief.

However, being the aim of all religions something ineffable, some sections address non-tangible concepts and ideas. While these sections might present some difficulty for readers not familiar with the Christian faith, they are the basic foundations on which the tangible aspects are built.

By putting in practice Jesus' teachings, the early Christian communities created probably for the first time in the history of humanity practical conditions for equality at the same time solidly grounded in religious and philosophical foundations that see men and women as radically equal in dignity and value. While not lived up to its fullness in many ways, this original promise of equality in the early times did open, across the centuries, innovative roles for women of all social extraction, which have not been available in civil life in the West until the second half of the 20th century, and are not still available in a number of countries.

It is now time to explore in deeper ways how contemporary demands for gender equality, which, it is important to stress, could not be understood without considering their Christian roots, can be made compatible within the Church with the implications for women's roles in the life of the Church of the theological reasons that place a sex restriction on the ordination to priesthood.

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