

Why
Am I Still a Catholic?
2014 Ibero-American Essay Competition

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Frida Varinia Ramos Koprivitza
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FOREWORD

Why Am I Still a Catholic?

The Catholic Church does not grant, us women, the moral authority to make decisions, nor it allows us to be priests. Thus, why are you still a Catholic? What keeps us, women, within the Catholic Church?

Based on these questions and this consideration, in April 2014 was launched the essay competition promoted by Documentacion y Estudios de Mujeres, A.C.¹ (DEMAC), Catolicas por el Derecho a Decidir, A.C.², and the Red Latinoamericana de Catolicas por el Derecho a Decidir³.

Indeed, this is not a trivial matter if we bear in mind that, in this region, the Catholic population is a little more than half a billion people (about 40% of the world's Catholic population), and that a little more than half of them are women who are denied the moral authority to make decisions. Thus, it is important to ask:

Why do we still are Catholics if our Church treats us so badly?

- We, women, take care of churches.
- We, women, teach our daughters and sons the prayers.
- We, women, wash priests' clothes and we cook for them.
- We are the most faithful servants.
- Also the most devotees and churchgoers.
- We keep alive both Jesus teachings and the Catholic traditions.
- We organize baptisms, first communions and confirmations.
- We are the majority of the missionaries in the most remote regions.
- We are those who take care of sick persons.
- The nuns of the world are those who support the Church's service mission.
- We are professionals of many different disciplines and we develop theology, a precious theology stemming from the experience of women, from the feminist experience.
- We participate, support and encourage the different actions and rituals that constituting life in communion in our Church.

And, nevertheless...

- The institutional Catholic Church deprives us from the right to participate at the board where decisions are made.
- We are not allowed to be priests, let alone Bishops, Cardinals or Popes.
- Neither we can say mass, forgive sins, preach, anoint the holy oil or confirm...
- The Church hierarchy deprives us from the right to decide conscientiously on our bodies, on our souls, on our lives.

It seems that the male dominance and the patriarchal and misogynist ideology still epitomize the Catholic Church majority, at least that of its leaders. It seems that what women do or say has no weight to them, that they consider it trivial, and that, so far, those positions have no consequences for the prevailing project in the institutional Church.

However, we cannot overlook two recent facts very relevant for the Latin American Catholic parish that might have—at least that’s what we hope—a positive effect on the status of discrimination against women that persists in the Catholic Church. First, the election of the Argentinian Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope, a Jesuit Pope with a discourse much closer to social justice and the realities of people who has dared to challenge the internal mafia of the Vatican, who wants to clean up the Church finances and to change the ostentatious style of its hierarchs for a life more congruent with the values of humility, goodness, option for the poor and the excluded, and who practices what he preaches since he assumed the papacy, when he refused symbolically to wear the cape embroidered with precious stones and the Prada red sandals.

Francisco is also reviving topics related to sexual morality, for example, with measures much tougher against priests and bishops accused of sexual abuse, as it was the case of the former nuncio in the Dominican Republic, Jozef Wesolowski, who was expelled from the Church and confined to house arrest. Although these measures are far from the demands of the victims and organizations seeking justice for the sexual abuse cases, certainly they indicate a different course.

He is a Pope who has even expressed the need to respect homosexuals and to assist women who have faced the need of abort, but who, ambiguously and contradictorily, unfortunately has ratified the refusal of the institutional Church for women to exercise the priesthood, and he has opposed the possibility of changing the teachings related to abortion for the Catholic women. His allusions to the nuns as “spinsters”, and his lack of knowledge of the vast theology production arising from the experience of women, of the feminist theology, among other issues concerning women, were also unfortunate.

On the other hand, the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was convened on “The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization”. This Synod was preceded by a questionnaire about marriage and family structures that the Holy See issued in November 2013, sent to all parishes in the world and which resulted in a document summarizing the responses, the *Instrumentum laboris*, that was analyzed by the bishops during that supreme meeting in Rome, between October 5 and 19, 2014. When this book will come out on the market, we will already know the reflections and recommendations resulting from this synod, but undoubtedly the mere fact of its call with the questions issued is remarkable.

The second event that deserves to be pointed out has to do with the results of multiple studies and surveys showing the increasing distance between the moral teachings of the Catholic hierarchy and the practice of the parishioners. According to a survey carried out by Univision between December 2013 and January 2014 in four Latin American countries (Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico), 90% of the Catholic population of these nations has a viewpoint that differs from that of the Catholic Church regarding the contraception, close to 70% has an viewpoint intermediate to that of the Church regarding the teachings on abortion, a little more than half of it thinks that women should be allowed to be priests, and one in every three Catholics has a viewpoint that differs from that of their Church regarding the marriage between persons of the same sex.

Likewise, national surveys on these topics have been carried out in Mexico. Catholic Women for the Right to Decide ordered three of these surveys in 2003, 2009 and 2014. Their results also reflected parishioners who take their decisions on sexual morality disregarding the prohibitions of the Church hierarchy, and who does not want the institutional Church to become involved in public policies, mainly those related to the health and the rights of women. Some data from the 2009 survey reveal this situation (the 2014 data are still in process of analysis):

- 1) Catholic parishioners (61%) consider that civil officials must govern bearing in mind the country's diversity of opinions; and only 18% consider that they must govern in keeping with their religious beliefs, without taking into account neither the general interest nor the social plurality.
- 2) Six in every ten devoted Catholics (57%) agree that the law should authorize abortion in certain circumstances; while one in every four (24%) consider that a woman should be entitled by law to have an abortion whenever she decides so.
- 3) Between 70 and 74% of the total number of Catholics interviewed agree that a woman can undergo an abortion if her life or health is at risk; 69%, if the woman has HIV and AIDS; and 66% if her pregnancy is due to a rape. It is important to point out that more than one third of Mexican Catholics (37%) agree that women should be allowed to interrupt their pregnancy within the first 12 weeks of pregnancy.
- 4) Despite the Church's homophobic campaign, 57% of the interviewees support categorically that the State guarantees the respect of the public and private life of lesbians and gays.
- 5) 83% of devoted Catholics consider that public health services must provide emergency contraception pills (ECP) to women victims of rape, and 70% of them to women who had unprotected consensual sex and want to prevent a pregnancy. Likewise, 74% of them consider that teenagers should have access to public health counseling services and contraceptive methods when they ask for them.

The results of these studies and surveys show and confirm once again the gap that exists between the teachings of the ecclesial magisterium and the Catholic parishioners. Cleverly, when the Pope visited Mexico for the last time, some colleagues said that "Mexican women and men love the Pope, but they do not comply with his teachings". One more reason to wonder about the permanence of millions of women in the Catholic Church; and, in this regard, it is worth emphasize that we can remain in this Church, promoting changes and transformations in line with the evolution of times, so that women are recognized as moral subjects with capacity to make decisions.

That is why we endorse the role assumed by the Catholic organizations for the Right to Decide, whose members, despite the discredits they received from the ecclesial hierarchy, are still convinced of their permanency in the Church, defending their Catholic identity and disseminating among their sisters-in-faith the arguments they have discover to defend the dignity, the moral authority and the right to decide of women in all aspects of their lives. They have also assumed the defense of laicism of states and the need for the Catholic institution to be held accountable and subject to the laws of the countries where it performs an active role.

Documentacion y Estudios de Mujeres, A.C., has been working for 25 years in the empowerment of women, mainly those living in situations of social alienation, inviting them to tell their stories in writing, with courage and honesty, to later disseminate them. Among the objectives outlined when it was founded in 1989, "rescue experiences and female testimonials allowing Mexican women to look at themselves under their own parameters and not through the prism of values alien to them" stands out. By disseminating Mexican women's thought through the publication of their autobiographical writings, DEMAC fosters the social reflection regarding their reality.

Within the framework of DEMAC's Mission, this competition was launched in collaboration with the Latin American Network of Catholic Women for the Right to Decide and in the context of the 20th anniversary of Catholic Women for the Right to Decide in Mexico, and it was put into words bearing in mind the effort achieved by this organization to defend the moral authority of women to make decisions, to rescue the message of Jesus and valuable arguments of the Catholic tradition that provide the basis of that defense, and to spread the

right of us, Catholic Women, to dissent from moral teachings not corresponding to our needs and desires. Freedom of conscience, the *probabilism*—Catholic principle stating that where there is doubt there is freedom, which is the case of the moral teachings of the Church’s magisterium—and the consequent nonexistence of dogma are the main arguments supporting this point of view.

In the face of such an adverse context for women within the framework of the Catholic Church, the question that comes to mind is, why women stay in an institution that keeps them in a constant humiliation and treats them in an unfair and disrespectful manner? This is not a minor question, as we already said, because it suggests many responses that affect millions of women who, for the most diverse reasons, decide to stay in this Church and seek to solve their moral dilemmas—when they have them—in different ways, but as long as they not imply for them harming their relationship with God.

With the essays included in this book, we try to answer precisely those questions and bring to light the diversity existing in the Ibero-American region, the specific situations that women live every day, dramatic most of them, enriching all of them, and source for reflection and analysis for those of us who are committed to give them their due at all levels. The nearly 200 works that were received—a very good response to the call—constitute a mirror of the realities of submission, exploitation and inequality that women of Latin America and Spain keep facing, but also of the uneasiness that has arouse among those Catholic women aware of their position of disadvantage, and the intelligence and passion with which they resolve their dilemmas, many of them entrusting their peace of mind, their confidence and their hope in a better life in their relationship with God.

This volume is a sample of the richness and vitality of women’s feelings concerning the Catholic religion, reflected in the essays that were awarded in the Latin American competition. The jury decided to award the first and second place to the following texts:

- ▶ The first place was won by **Marcela Gallegos Ruiz** for her essay entitled “Hearts singing blows of life”, submitted under the pseudonym *Plenilunio de abril*⁴, coming from San Cristobal de las Casas, State of Chiapas, Mexico, and by **Margarita García Mora** for her essay “Why am I still a Catholic?”, submitted under the pseudonym *La discipula de Jesus*⁵, coming from Tlaquepaque, State of Jalisco, Mexico.
- ▶ The second place was awarded to **Frida Varinia Ramos Koprivitza** for her essay “I wasn’t born a believer, I became one: story of a conversion”, submitted under the pseudonym *Maria Egipcíaca*⁶, coming from Temixco, State of Morelos, and to **Lourdes Raymundo Sabino** for her essay “I am Catholic because faith in this religion is what my mother and my father could give me”, submitted under the pseudonym *Ana Fernanda Carlos*, coming from Mexico, D. F.
- ▶ The third place was assigned to **Sonia Corral Villar** for her essay “Towards a women’s liberation theology”, submitted under the pseudonym *Sor Liviantada*, coming from Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain.

We want to thank each and every one of the participants for having dared to tell their stories linked to such an important dimension of life and for having contributed with so valuable reflections on this proposal to think on our role as women in the construction of a church inclusive and respectful of our right to decide.

We plan to publish shortly all the texts received in response to the call, as we consider they all deserve to be disseminated. We are sure that the reading of these essays and those that

are to be published will generate a thoughtful reflection on the status of women in the Catholic Church and on the need to demand changes to the structures and teachings that constrain our autonomy and deny our moral authority.

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INTRODUCTION BY THE AUTHORS

Marcela Gallegos Ruiz was born in the beautiful valley of San Cristobal de Las Casas, State of Chiapas (Mexico). Certainly, both the beauty of the mountains and the intercultural wealth characterizing her hometown influenced her sensitivity to contemplate the mystery of the divine presence in nature and in the various manifestations of faith surrounding her. Words have played a very important role in her history since childhood, so that writing has been for her the most appropriate means to express the language of the heart. She is a woman in love with life and she is proud of her female being. She loves to learn from other people, to know other points of view and to exchange ideas, and she is convinced that through the assistance to others it is possible to build new and better roads for humanity. She has been a tireless seeker of options to quench her spiritual thirst, and she currently considers herself a Catholic in the sense of having a universal and inclusive heart with a clear tendency to fraternity and sorority.

Hearts singing blows of life is an autobiographical essay resulting from the desire to share experiences and personal reflections that led me to recognize myself as a Catholic. It's a real story about agreements in the middle of a vast sea of disagreements: a story of love, of fire, of nostalgia and thirst for God, along my spiritual pilgrimage through very different paths—at times antagonistic—that I traveled in the bosom of a congregation known as the Catholic Church; paths in which I faced the egomaniac god enforced by the patriarchal vision of the Church—obscurantist, segregationist, accusatory and deadly—and trails where I discovered the caring, close and inclusive face of God, through hearts that sing blows of life, of hope, of social commitment and of freedom. It is also a song of pride and gratitude dedicated to women who invite me to dream of a Church resurrecting with a woman's face.

Margarita Garcia Mora was born in Guadalajara, State of Jalisco, on October 24, 1968, with the intuition typical of those belonging to the sign of Scorpio and between two older sisters and a younger one, all of them in honor rolls, so since childhood she faced her limits and felt driven to be better so no one could take advantage of her, process by which she developed a sensitivity on edge, coupled with the one she already had for being a 'middle girl'.

From her relationship with a feminist mother, who due to her education let drip some chauvinism, and a macho-intelligent father who became a feminist for his love to his daughters—although without giving up his privileges—, she inherited a strong tendency in favor of women and against the exclusive men's prerogatives, and she has the firm aspiration of contributing to the creation of a more balanced world.

Some of her passions are to know and understand herself, the human behavior and what is said about God on this every day land of ours. She is deeply grateful to God for all that He has given her to develop these passions, but specially for her inquisitive faith, her family, her son with his short life, her master's degree in Human Development, her pleasure for reading, and for living in an era having color television with cultural programs, wide dissemination of books, and where a woman can live alone without arousing too many suspicions.

Now that she has known firsthand what the beginner's luck is by receiving the DEMAC award, she would like to keep on writing, in the hope that she could cause in others the same pleasure and reflection as reading produced in her.

Why I keep being Catholic? is an introspective trip along the life of the author, in which she seeks to find a sense to the apparent nonsense of belonging to a Catholic Church decadent

due to its practices of exercising power, of dissociating itself from the poor, of amassing wealth, and due to the huge distance that it keeps vis-à-vis the people of God by refusing to see the needs of a reality surpassing its conception of an ignorant, childish and subordinated parish which it can keep oppressing with anachronistic and chauvinist precepts, and in which women continue to be the wound on Christ's mystical body side. Regardless of being close to Jesus' heart, of making sprout the grace, of their countless signs of maturity, women are still considered inferior subjects by the Catholic hierarchy who denies them the moral authority to decide and the possibility to exercise the priesthood. Despite all this, *La discipula de Jesus* has the ability to recognize within the Church the presence of God, who keeps inviting us to strive so that men and women of our time are greeted with equal dignity in His Kingdom.

Frida Varinia Ramos Koprivitza was born on March 21, 1960 in Mexico City, daughter of Milena Koprivitza— exceptional, studious and loving woman, art teacher and historian—and of Raymundo Ramos, writer, teacher and mostly poet. She studies Latin-American literature at the U.I.A., a Jesuit University, and she specializes in Mexican fantastical tale, a book published by Alfredo Castro, her editor and with whom she gets married; they have two children, Milan and Isis. She is a member of the Society of Writers of Morelos and of the Culture Seminar, Cuernavaca's representation. She belongs to the group Women Poets in the Country of Clouds. She has been included in several anthologies, including Gabriel Said's *Asamblea de poetas jóvenes*⁷ and INBA's *Diccionario biobibliográfico de escritores Mexicanos*⁸. Her texts have been translated into English, Italian and Czech. She has published over fifteen books. She has been a public officer, editor, cultural promoter and professor at educational and cultural institutions. She received CREA's Young Poetry award in 1986; honorable mentions of the National Federation of Women Journalists in 1993; Juana Santacruz Contest of the Ateneo Espanol de Mexico, 1992; National Poetry Award Ignacio M. Altamirano, Guerrero State Government, 2005; the XLVI Juana Melendez Floral Games National Poetry Award of the UASLP, 2007. She is currently a CIDHEM PhD philosophy student and a UAEM Professor.

I wasn't born a believer, I became one: story of a conversion. This text intends to be an answer to the spiritual need of being a believer. First, I expose my condition as a woman outside the Catholic religion, since for family reasons I didn't receive a religious education. From this first approach, I ask myself why I am not Catholic and I develop an introduction from a fragment of my father's poem and, finally, I follow the course he set for me: there are those who depart from the idea of God as a certainty in their life, and therefore they possess an initial faith; and there are those who, not having such certainty, seek God as a point of arrival.

That is why I allow myself to begin a journey of a very personal spiritual quest, which I reveal in this text: the search, the call, the meeting, the confession and the miracle.

Thanks to this great need to find a spiritual incentive, in parallel with my intellectual formation, I was able to discover that my literary vocation was not only a profession but a mission, and I found in writing, in poetry, a sort of gift that allowed me to know myself and experience a true conversion.

The challenge implied in writing this essay drove me to organize not only a literary work, but a critical path, so as to give meaning and direction to my faith, and it allowed me to accept myself, but, above all and most importantly, to get reconciled with my own life story.

I am **Lourdes Raymundo Sabino**, a Tlahuica and feminist woman. I was born in San Juan Atzingo, Ocuilan, State of Mexico, on January 8, 1987. Since my childhood I have been interested in studying and I have strived to succeed. During my basic education I took part in contests of escorts, general knowledge, reading and writing, basketball, and spelling. I was part of the first class graduated from the San Juan Atzingo Distance High School Center, and subse-

quently I joined the Chapingo Autonomous University, where I studied a major in Rural Sociology. After that I obtained a master's degree in Social Anthropology at the Center for Research and Higher Studies in Social Anthropology, where I had the opportunity to perform fieldwork with Nahua women of Puebla's North Mountain Range. Recently, I started my professional life performing teaching and research activities at the Intercultural University of the State of Hidalgo.

I am a Catholic because faith in this religion is what my mother and my father could basically give me. The title of my essay is the answer to the question "why am I still a Catholic?" which I developed based on four experiences in my life: the violence I lived next to my father, my parents' stewardship, my Tlahaica⁹ origin and my feminist stance. Those experiences make sense because I perceive in them a special bond with my family. I point out that faith in the Catholic religion allowed me to ponder over the violence that I endured. The stewardship led by my mother and my father was important so that I could understand myself as a Catholic; whereas my tlahaica identity has allowed me to fill with a special content my being a Catholic. Finally, I emphasize that my faith in the religion is not compliant, and I advocate that we must position, question and transform our patriarchal roots, so that everyone can confer a new meaning to his/her way of being Catholic.

Sonia Corral Villar. My childhood shyness made me stutter and it frustrated me so much that I decided to devote myself to communications. I was born in a cold town close to Burgos in Spain, from which I escaped devouring books and waiting for the fortnightly visit of the mobile library. I suffered my teenage years in a boarding school run by nuns and I managed to study my dream profession: journalism.

During the last year of my career, I got a scholarship to go to Mexico. Later, I washed dishes in Edinburgh and Berlin to learn languages, but I missed the Sun.

The Canary Islands were my next destination: the weather and its people made it final. Here I have worked as an editor at several newspapers and as a television reporter. After my experience as Director of Communication in several institutions, I restarted my Aztec adventure. In Puebla, I studied a master degree in Communications Management and I was a writing teacher.

I made my debut as a mother together with the economic crisis and during these years I have worked as a store clerk, teacher and... whatever comes up. I never stopped studying and now I focus on the Internet communications: I expect this to be my professional future.

Towards a women's liberation theology. Women who have been educated in Catholicism we can renounce the religion, but our moral cannot. Latin American women we are the stronghold of a Church whose "non-churchgoers" are on the increase, but this vocation prevents us from having a minimum feminist consciousness.

Throughout two millennia, the Catholic Church and its hierarchy have doomed us to a service role, ignoring that contemporary society has been built thanks to women's emancipation and to their values of freedom, equality and justice. From its privileged position, the Holy See keeps limiting our autonomy with its antediluvian view about abortion and contraceptive methods, and it also forbids us to be part of the ecclesiastical structure. Women and feminist Catholic associations spread its interpretation of the word of God, but the Church still does not listen to us. Instead of fearing us, it should be attuned to our time to gain credibility, and it should stop restricting our personal development to hold us in its ranks: it should adopt a women's liberation theology.

HEARTS SINGING BLOWS OF LIFE¹⁰

MARICELA GALLEGOS RUIZ

To those women who have shaken me...

The Encounter

Now that there are religious, spiritual, esoteric options custom-made for the “user” (as the customer must be offered what he orders), it would be appropriate to ask myself: why do I consider myself a Catholic?

Years ago, I lived a very singular fact. It was an ordinary Sunday. As a good Catholic, I went to mass, as I attempted to do it in recent years when I committed myself more deeply with my faith. Some days before, I had been talking to an atheist friend of mine who admires Sister Juana Ines de la Cruz. We both agreed on that aspect and we pay no attention to the fact that she had been a nun, as if that were not important or as if it were not the part that mostly attracted us about her, as a model of culture, intelligence and autonomy, despite the religious obscurantism surrounding her, despite living within the jaws of the enemy. Thoughts about Sister Juana and about smarter work options in the Church occupied my mind while the Sunday liturgy proceeded. Suddenly, we all stood up to hear the Gospel. Hear. The Church makes us passive beings, voiceless beings who must accept unconditionally the unquestionable truths that will take us to heaven. Heaven? What Heaven? Why do we have to live for another life without living this that we really have? Can't we live this one as an intense and passionate *allegro* taking us to the next *tempo*?

Stand up! Sit down! Kneel down! The religious gathering, which should be the leading celebration of each week, has simply become a sequence of orders. Only orders, only commands, only obedience. Only blindness.

My heart could not withstand that moment. Every word uttered by the priest was an invitation to my rebelliousness, to leave the place, to run away desperate in search of my freedom, in search of my peace. Ironically, I didn't feel at peace inside the temple, inside that holy place of encounter with the divinity. However, I faced that rebellious impulse and I stayed, even against myself, or in spite of myself, in that place until the mass concluded.

Why I stayed? What made me stay there? The questions that spawned this essay made me recall that experience and ponder at that moment, *hic et nunc*, here and now, why I am still a Catholic, why I'm still here in spite of the many moments in which this structure, built around the figure of Christ, has stolen me peace and has sunk me in obscurantism. Through the following pages I will try to explain or explain myself the reasons that I have had to stay in the ranks of Catholicism.

I must make clear that I am not a theologian, and that the foundations of my essay, rather than being theoretical, are experiential. Throughout my life story I have come across different trends of the Catholic Church: from very conservative groups, to others moderately conservative, up to the contact with more liberal groups and liberationists. To this assortment of experiences I can add a close relationship with atheists and Evangelical groups (likewise, some extremely conservative and others more liberal).

I happened to know that part of the Catholic Church that turned its back on a single mother who was a member of the missionary youth group I belonged to. But I have also known the

face of the Catholic Church which welcomes single mothers without requiring them any specific creed, which welcomes couples living out of the sacrament of marriage and works with them, which respects the exercise of sexuality as an extension of the sacred presence of God, as a gift entrusted into our hands and hearts.

Therefore, I want to expound my arguments as a love story, a story of agreements in the middle of a vast sea of disagreements.

The cross on the lips: my first catholicity

Being born within a family considered Catholic simply because it has carried that title since time immemorial is a common fact nowadays. Such is my case. I grew up in a family that did not attend mass every Sunday, but rather appeared at the church only for special events such as baptisms, first communions, “fifteen years” thanksgiving ceremonies, weddings, funerals. Besides those scarce attendances was our ignorance of the protocol: we didn’t know when, how or why we had to kneel, stand up or sit down. We were ignorant of the formulas corresponding to the celebrant or to the parishioners as well as of the most emblematic symbols of Catholicism. And, as a frame for this picture, my parents often expressed their criticism to the ecclesiastical structure.

Despite this environment, or perhaps as a result of it, my maternal grandmother assumed as her task to provide me with some rudiments of the Catholic faith. She taught me the Lord’s Prayer, and she told me several Bible stories as if they were children’s stories for bedtime.

One of the most significant contacts I had through these teachings was to learn how to make the sign of the cross. My grandmother used to say aloud, “By the sign of the Holy Cross...” while she led my right hand on my face and my chest. I don’t know how many times we repeated the procedure, but I remember with affection my feeling of joy caused by the brush of the small cross formed by my fingers on my lips. So far, whenever I cross myself I recall my grandmother and her legacy stemming from a simple body movement.

During this first Catholicity, the only contact that I had with consecrated persons was with a cloister nun and a diocesan priest. I met the nun when I was seven years old through a book about the life and work of Sister Juana Ines de la Cruz that my dad brought home. I felt fascinated by this woman of extensive knowledge and with an immense love for books. I used to tell my second grade teacher of my admiration for Sister Juana and my dream to be a nun.

Due to my childhood innocence, I thought that being a nun entailed being studious, wise and talented. I imagined that my intelligence would not be wasted in the convent, but on the contrary, that I could acquire a lot of knowledge and I would have time to read plenty of books. Such image of the religious life as a synonym of intellectual development would mark my coming years by sowing a doubt in my heart: would the best route that I could take in my existence be to adopt the consecrated life.

Unlike Sister Juana, I did not meet the diocesan priest through books, but personally, one afternoon that he came to have a cup of coffee with my family. I don’t know the reason for his visit, but I guess the link was that he had been a colleague of my father in a school a few years before. For me it was a special occasion since it was the first time we received the visit of a priest at home. I don’t remember how old I was at that time, but I was still a girl, and my curious eyes scrutinized every movement of the priest who acted as any common person, who held the cup without odd movements, and who laughed as the rest of the human beings who I knew around me, although his laughter was extremely sonorous. However, as soon as his mouth was free of the coffee he was drinking, of the bread he was eating, or of his sonorous laughter, it was filled with expletives. And I am not alluding to the hymns typical of the Good Friday office, but the high-sounding words that flowed out of his lips to criticize the actions of

the Bishop in turn. Due to the scarce knowledge I had of my environment, I did not know that this priest and the Bishop of that time had ideological clashes: a libertine priest against a Bishop identified with the theology of liberation.

The foundations of my childhood led me to an adolescence inclined to freethinking and atheism. However, at the same time the germ of my spiritual life began to sprout, eager to keep under control the domain of my existential conflicts.

My father's ringing bells: transition to my second catholicity

One Friday afternoon, my father heard the chimes of the Temple of Santo Domingo, whose sound is the most beautiful of all the bells that chime in our city. He heard them and said: "This Sunday I want to go to mass." I was almost seventeen; I had a restless mind, four months since I had proclaimed myself an atheist, and I was greatly surprised when I heard that a freethinker wanted to go to mass. I could not miss such an event! And, indeed, I didn't miss it. Although, with the perspective of the years gone, perhaps I was the one who got lost.

Something happened in that mass which led me to repeat the experience a few days later. It was not a revelation but something typical for a young woman of that age: at the Sunday celebration I saw a guy who I liked and I wanted to see him again. Fortunately, I did not have to wait until the following Sunday, but only until Wednesday: Ash Wednesday, the first one for me. I had never seen so many people gathered in a church. As I couldn't find a seat, I had to stay standing against the front door, squashed between the humanities encircling me. The curiosity that characterizes me activated my eyes and ears to observe what was happening around me, while the community liveliness when saying the Lord's Prayer—the only prayer that I knew of all that were said during the mass—lit in my heart the fire of an intense spiritual quest. That was the first blow. The second, the celebrant's words when he put ashes on my forehead: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel." In the style of Saul's conversion, I felt that a force greater than mine had thrown me down of the horse of my ideas. And like Paul, I lost my sight, I got lost. I left the church next to the guy who at that moment had already ceased to interest me. My sole company was a deep nostalgia of God.

My middle age: my second catholicity

"You were passing over there; I don't know exactly what vibrated inside me and, without thinking, I went behind you..." so says a song by Mecano, entitled *J.C.* And, in the same manner, without thinking, I went behind Him, or behind what I thought would take me to Him. My thirst for God was insatiable. I acquired my first Bible to quench it. It didn't fully work. Perhaps what quenched it somewhat was the place of my purchase: a religious shop run by nuns belonging to a missionary community. After buying the Bible, I began to visit them frequently on the pretext of purchasing a rosary, a holy card, a chocolate lollipop. In fact, I was driven to them both by the same thirst that I mentioned above, and by a craving for missionary life stories in Africa and Asia. The dream of my childhood—to be a nun as Sister Juana—was reviving, but now with new nuances: I didn't see myself in a cloister surrounded by books, but instead in remote locations, surrounded by needed people who I could help with my service.

I fell in love head over heels with the possibility of being a missionary. My relationship with the community of those nuns became for me something similar to my first love: full of youth, of excitement, of innocence, of absolute dedication and—why not admitting it—blindness. That love made me decide to join the juvenile group of lay missionaries that was counseled by those nuns.

Thanks to the time that I passed with the missionary group I could know the work of the

Catholic Church bases, mainly that of nuns and missionaries lay who are in direct contact with the sectors of the population most neglected by civil authorities and who, perhaps, do not even receive a personal visit from the high Catholic hierarchy. It was there where I was able to know first-hand the deep spirit of service of young people, of men and women who dream of building a better world. All of them filled me with hope and lighted in me the fire full of cravings to serve others.

A few days ago, I found a quote attributed to Anthony de Mello: "If you find your rest in Jesus Christ, you will no longer find a moment of rest." That's exactly what happened with my life after those missions: never again it could be the same.

Then I met the anonymous holiness, the basis holiness, the holiness that breaks bread with those who lack it, the holiness that walks for hours from one village to another, the holiness that walks in the mud, shoulder to shoulder with the indigenous communities, the holiness that travels in public transport or muleback. Unfortunately, it's also a holiness often infested with fanaticisms.

Despite all the good impressions I obtained at that time, there were also broken hearts, as it happens often with the first love, especially if it occurs in a state of immaturity. Due to my blind infatuation, I could not recognize the alarm signals, and when I saw them, they were accompanied by hard-to-quantify damages.

The Catholic polytheism and its invitations to desertion

I woke up abruptly and painfully from the daydream in which I ensconced during my time within the missionary group. The board of directors of the group, integrated by love, peace and forgiveness messengers, together with the Mother Superior of the nun's community that counseled us, decided to expel one of my missionary companions due to her pregnancy outside of marriage.

Her case was not made known within the group. Most of the companions were unaware of what was happening and thus they wondered why a girl as committed as she was, suddenly had decided to quit the group. However, I had the opportunity to be closer to her, because we had had a close friendship during our high school studies, and thus I had to see her crying amid confusion and feelings of guilt while she got rid of the symbols that she had carried with her since she had been accepted as a member of the group. I did not have yet those insignias because I was in a stage of candidacy, to call it some way; "obtaining them" had been very difficult for her, and just a few months later she was losing them. As she entrusted me, I acted as a messenger to deliver her letter of resignation (required because of the "seriousness of her fault") and the said insignias. And together with the envelope that I delivered, my heart and my mind began to work out their own letter of resignation, though I was not fully aware of it.

I was not the one who could judge her, nor my companions and the advisory nuns had reasons to judge me or my other male and female companions who, months or years later, we decided to follow other paths taking us apart from the asphyxiating behavior codes the members of the group were required (or continue to be required) to stick to.

Those messengers of love, of peace and of forgiveness filled with enormous blames and confusions the suitcases that I carried on my new paths. Likewise, they were the messengers of my enmity with myself, with my humanity, and they sowed discord, restlessness, desolation. They were the inquisitors who marked our lives with the labels of sinners that we deserved for all kinds of afflictions. They were the fierce guardians who, with their statutes in hand, closed us the doors of heaven.

Angels and demons coexist in our humanity. We have already sowed in our hearts the seeds to be like Gandhi or like Hitler. It's up to us to make the decision regarding which one

we want to let grow more. Beauty and cruelty coexist inside every human being in a dance of chiaroscuro which, like King Midas, imbue with that duality everything they touch. The sublime and the perverse coexist not only in each heart, each body, each mind, but in any human enterprise. Hence, the Catholic Church, more human than divine, does not escape this reality.

In one of his sonnets, Pablo Neruda says that “life is double-sided, word is a wing of silence, fire has a cold half”. We are beings of lights and shadows, constituted of chiaroscuro. We are not beings in black and white, but of colors, nuances, different shades that are artistically combined to manifest ourselves to the world with our uniqueness. In short, we can't have just one good side or just one bad face.

Perhaps not only the Word lived and was present in the beginning, but also the paradox, in such a way that we cannot expect to be just light, if through the organic processes we can perceive that nature requires shadows, day and night, the four seasons of the year.

Apparently, the most conservative members of the Catholic Church have managed to reject everything that is at odds with their concept of “good”, as if it could be said that night is bad, while day is good. Their vision is exclusive. It overlooks that we are composed of a range of psychological, emotional, intellectual, academic, social, physical, and the like factors which do not always coexist in harmony. Trying to group all of these factors as good or bad, and get rid of the bad ones, would imply to deny our essence, and with it, to annihilate ourselves. In one of his letters to the Romans, St. Paul says: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose” (Rom 8: 28). All things. All.

Just over one year ago I wrote this letter to a friend of mine who was having hard times:

Imagine yourself on a lovely beach, sunbathing on a beautiful day... Delightful! Right? The sunlight combines beautifully with the blue of the sea and creates new shades worthy of wonder; that same light provides your skin with a special color (even better if you use sunscreen). Imagine yourself walking or running along the beach, but eh... wait! Now imagine that in that beach it never gets dark, but also that there are no trees or houses or objects that may protect you under their shadow. Imagine that you expose yourself to the Sun for twenty-four hours without any shelter. How beautiful is the light! Right? But not in those circumstances! So are our lives: we cannot always have light; for mental and emotional health we need some shadows. We need the night to rest, to recoup, to dream. A properly managed darkness can help us to rethink what we are doing, to recover energy, to grow, to reinvent ourselves, to pause and see what we have already done, to enjoy and thank for what we now have, and to look forward. You're a person of the light; so I am sure that you will not get stuck in the shadows, but while you're in it, get some benefit of it, get some advantage of it, because for those who love God and those who let themselves be loved and transformed by Him, everything, even the pain, even what we call error, cooperate for His wellbeing.

There should be a commandment compelling us to love ourselves with our lights and shadows, and to fully accept who we are. However, the religion of light seems to be mostly focused on the shadows. It has become a prosecuting institution: “Religion is about our dignity, not our depravity” (Martel, 2001). That is, religion should be centered on our dignity, on all the matters making us worthy, and not on our worst facets, much less on our miseries.

From this perspective, the Catholic Church, often dubbed “mother”, is a mother who spans, censors, rapes, jails, blames, judges and punishes; it is a mother who has lost sanity and its humanistic sense by turning its back to reality, to the hearts, to the joy of living. A mother who enjoys the suffering of her children as a way of salvation, thirst of sacrifices, of pains, of martyrs, of meaningless repetitive formulas, of robots seeking immaculate behavior

patterns, of individuals who follow obediently God's plan, but a plan that only she, the Church, claims to know.

The religious interpretation of the divine plan leads me to think that those who advocate this version of god envision him as a selfish being, someone who doesn't like freedom, who abhors freedom! Who also hates creativity and sincerity; who prefers to keep us tied so that he can nurture his ego and his selfishness. Such a religion not only disowns the God-love, the God-infinite, the God of life, the God of forgiveness and warm hug, it goes against Him and invents another god: the god-horror of intimidation, of guilt, of fear, of paralysis, of the absurd repetition; the god who justifies the abuses on this land because they are only temporary and will be forgiven due to his infinite mercy. What a convenient mercy! It's forgiveness subject to the fluctuations of the religious market, the conveniences of the hierarchy. This god they have invented for us, based on the patriarchal vision of the Church, is a god of violence and discrimination. If they believed in what they preach, they wouldn't commit so many misdeeds that offend mankind, pederasty being one of the most clear and painful examples today.

That god-horror is a differentiating god; a god who tolerates inequality, who justifies the preferential treatment to the priests according to their rank, and who segregates nuns—for being women—and the believers; the intolerant god who endorses excommunication when the ideas or procedures of his sons or daughters do not adhere to the moral code enforced by his holy Church; the exclusivist god who only recognizes salvation for those who belong to the only Church which he founded, as if the Church were a demanding membership club.

It is a commercial god who is offered as the best product in the religions' market and who tries to snatch the first gullible around. I recall my meetings with communities who exert a practice which I call "religious marketing", through which they used to imbue me with a doubt about whether my vocation was or was not that of dedicating myself to the religious life. Young, single, "well behaving", I was an easy prey (like the rest of the young girls who boast those features) to arguments ranging from "you must dare to discover what is the plan that God has for you", "perhaps He wants something else from you", "sometimes the Lord invites us to make a deadly leap". But, what kind of a lord is the one who orders me to throw myself blindly down a cliff without a parachute and without any kind of protection?!

That god-conformism is the god of resignation who compels us to live in this life as if we were inert bodies, spirits and minds. Rather than being mortals, rather than living always aware of our finiteness, it would seem that, under the strict observance of the religious norms, we live eternally dead.

Speaking of death, that god-denial hides our bodies and our minds under the veil of guilt and stigma of sin. What for do I have a body that I cannot use, that I cannot move, that I cannot explore? What for do I have a brain that I cannot keep fit through questioning? The Persian poet Omar Khay-yam stated it right: "You gave us eyes, Lord, and you let the beauty of your creatures dazzle us; we can be happy and you expect us to rebuff the pleasures of this world? That is so foolish as to intend to turn upside down a glass without spilling the wine it contains!" (Gallardo, 1974).

The uncompromising god, colluded with his prosecutor Church, invents sin and authorizes sacramentally the confession of the crime so that he can appropriate our freedoms. In the film *Land of Angels*, also known as *As it is in heaven*, 2004, Inger, the wife of an evangelical pastor, argues with him about the existence of sin and tells him in a conclusive way: "God does not forgive us because He has never condemned us. God does not condemn! The Church invented sin. Sin does not exist!" Inger claims that sin only lives in our heads, but in fact it doesn't exist. What we call "sin" is a fabrication of the Church, which points at us guilty with one hand, while with the other it offers us redemption. Everything is a lie of theirs to annihilate the people and to win power. The truth is that God has nothing to forgive, because He

never condemns.

If God knows everything, if He has created everything and has been since the beginning of times, He must have known since the beginning that human beings we were going to yield to what the Church calls “sin”. Sometimes the idea of sin handled by the Church makes me think of a wicked god, creator of a huge videogame in which we come to participate unwillingly. Only he knows the paths to follow, the tests to overcome and the score to reach. If he, the great designer, knows everything, why he brings us to this world if he knows, since the beginning, long before our existence, our weaknesses and our failures? Why that god of labyrinths lets us get lost, commit “sins”, and then ask him for help and beg for his forgiveness to get saved? Wouldn't he be an egomaniac god at its best? Or, as Khayyam said it poetically: “I drink wine in the same way as the roots of the willow (drink) the clear lymph of the stream. ‘There's no other God but Allah—you say—, only He knows everything.’ Then, when He created me, He didn't ignore that I was going to drink. If I didn't that way, then Allah's wisdom would fail” (Gallardo, 1974).

All these gods imposed by the Church have invited me on countless occasions to defecting from the ranks of Catholicism. However, to quench my spiritual thirst I keep turning to sources identified as Catholic. What are the reasons that I have found to feel such affinity? Next I will expound them, as well as my third moment as a Catholic.

My third catholicity

The *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*¹¹ recognizes as the first meaning of the word “Catholic” the adjective “universal”, i.e. “that includes or is common to all”. The institution we know today as Catholic Church took advantage of that meaning and appropriated it. Currently, we identify as Catholic religion that “Christian creed ruled by the Pope as the Vicar of Christ on Earth” (2001).

I am Catholic because I am universal, not because I have signed an exclusivity agreement with that human congregation run by the Pope. Although my background is Catholic, my mind and my heart are open to ecumenism and to the interreligious and inter-creed dialogue. I like to learn about other expressions of faith, provided that they don't have fanaticisms or divisions or impositions, but unity, love, construction and solidarity. Sometimes, jokingly, I have identify myself as an “independent believer”, certainly with a greater degree of affinity with currents which, somehow, belong to that congregation called Catholic Church, so I make mine the words that on several occasions I have heard say a professor who I respect: “Every day I become more spiritual and less religious.”

Religions are only labels driving us into conflicts. They do not address the brotherhood, the identification of all of us as human beings. Perhaps this conviction that I have upsets me whenever I hear the ideas expressed by John Lennon in his song *Imagine*: “Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try; no hell below us, above us only sky... Imagine there's... no religion too.”

As a result, my third catholicity consists essentially in being universal and in accepting my humanity. I am Catholic because I have learned to love me and forgive me, and hence I feel invited to be patient with myself and with life, to treat myself with dignity in line with my convictions, and to see my actions as learning experiences, not as the absolute segmentation between good and evil, between white and black, because our emotions and the actions and the decisions we take based on them cannot be nor should be classified that way.

From my new catholicity, I have discovered Jesus as a brother, friend, companion and accomplice of my mischiefs and of my dreams, master... as a heart always disposed to understand, to love, to accept, to forgive and to hug. And I owe this to the men and women whose hearts have given me songs of light, hope and life.

After having going through the ranks of extremely conservative Catholic groups, I started my journey of encounter with my authentic catholicity through my close contact with a moderately conservative community. The ideological basis of this secular movement got me in contact with a new concept of freedom: inner freedom. I have called this stage my “Rebirth”.

Despite the traditional view of women’s role as submissive, gentle, silent and obedient, I had a crucial encounter with didactical tools which helped me to heal the wounds that I had due to the feeling of guilt caused by the “huge number” of sins that I had committed throughout my life, and as a result I could forgive and accept myself, and see as something alive the first hints of the “freedom” concept. My Rebirth was a repair shop of my fragmented soul.

Once recovered, in other Catholic circles I met young people of fire, whose hearts became inflamed when going on the Missions; priests of fire, whose homilies spoke of social justice, of the immediate problems of our environment, of virginity as a state of the soul and not as a state of the body. Those circles were the bridge that led me to a new stage which I would call “Illustration”. In my own Illustration, I found plenty of light and hope. I learned to value the sacred art (poetry, painting, sculpture, music), the mundane art inspired by sacred issues, and the mundane art, clearly inspired by worldly aspects, applicable to the spiritual life. I discovered that what has been created by the world doesn’t conflict with what we consider spiritual or divine.

Finally came into my life the time of consolation through the Ignatian Spirituality and retreats; rites, workshops, unconventional activities, creative, liberating, experiential, deeply humanist dynamics which flooded me with joy and hope.

At this stage I met a sister Church, in which for the first time a priest asked me to call him by his name instead of calling him by its function, i.e., instead of calling him “Father”, thus capitalized, as a differentiating expression of roles and hierarchies, from a vertical relationship of superiority to subordination. And later I met nuns who, similarly, had not to be called “sister” or “mother”, but by their names. Treatment between equals, as brothers and sisters in Christ.

I have also had the privilege of knowing the intercultural Church that lets you soak in local displays of faith. I can share an experience I had at a Tzotzil community in San Andres Larrainzar. The community gathered with Dionicia’s family to mourn the departure of her father two years before. The elders counseled the family, and all its members had the opportunity to share with words their pain, their current problems. This way, the widow, one of the daughters, one of the sons, the son-in-law took the floor. The community heard, suggested, hugged, and wept. It was not a gathering adjusted to the normal duration of a liturgical celebration in the city. No. Here it lasted what it had to last, as if time was something accessory, as if only recovering peace in the hearts mattered, because every individual suffering becomes a collective suffering. The individual pain cannot be neglected, because it becomes a collective wound. When the Tzotzil people say “I’m happy”, they mean “my heart is complete”. The heart of the community must also be complete. If only the Catholic Church could learn from the so rich philosophy of life of our native peoples.

Thanks to the creativity of youth groups, priests and nuns who mainly work under the Dominican and Jesuit spirituality, I met a Church who does not reject those non virgin single women, who does not reject those couples living together without being married, who does not reject those who think differently. Likewise, I had my first contact with ecumenism through the Taize style prayer.

I admire the creativity and the openness of these women and men who break schemes, and who, in the style of early Christians, have hearts singing blows of new life. I remember the injection of hope and inspiration that was for me the homily of a nun (recognized for being a very cultured woman, with a high sensitivity and a great commitment to social causes) during

the offices of a Good Friday. I saw her and I thought: "What a remarkable woman! It's with women like her that I imagine the feminine priesthood!" I deeply regret that doors have not yet been opened to women of great talents and moods who would surely lead the Church along roads of greater humanism, solidarity and love.

Moonlight serenade: the role of women in the Church

Last year I had the opportunity to take part in an educational mission where the cultural and religious diversity of the children attending the summer of activities proposed by the team of organizers and volunteers are respected.

Sitting at the round table of the residence of the nuns who coordinated the activity, I realized that I was exclusively surrounded by women: the nuns and the female volunteers who we had arrived from several places of the country to assist that community. There I opened my eyes to my female being. There I felt fully proud of being a woman, a disciple of Christ, a sister of Christ, a friend of Christ. With that awakening to light, my moon heart was able to embrace great women who have helped me to identify myself as a Catholic: Mary Magdalene and Sister Juana; Clara, Francisca, Luisa and Helena (nuns who I met in recent years); Dionicia, Martha, Alberta, Lorenza, Candida, Manuela and Maria (Tzotzil women who, serving as catechists, strive to obtain more rights for themselves and for the women in their localities).

When I took ownership of my female being, I could realize that if a woman suffers, I also suffer; that if there's a woman happy, all others have the right to be happy as well. All women are bonded: in each of us live the women who preceded us (mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters), but also those who live elsewhere in the planet. Due to this sisterhood, we can change our role in society if we succeed to identify ourselves not only one with the other, but one in the others, and the others in me. In other words: the Sorority as a way of empowerment, in the Church and in society.

As sisters, we have the power to decide which women we want to exist within us: the one who turns her back on other women or on herself, or the one who fights and empowers? Living within me, I want women eager to take ownership of their identity; proud of themselves; women willing to give plenty of life, and by this I don't mean women disposed to have children "as God disposes", but women who, from their fullness, from our fullness, we can provide life around us with our words, sometimes with our silences, our actions, our work, our proposals, our struggles, our hugs, our laughter and our tears.

Nonetheless, the most conservative sectors of the Catholic Church keep the female figure as silent as possible, as a model of an almost invisible woman; a woman who, just like the Mary that they want to sell us as the mother of Jesus, keeps in her heart everything that happens around her: selfless, delicate, compliant mother whose maximum expression is the *Fiat* she uttered before the Lord's Angel. And, why they don't show us the active Mary, the one who makes decisions on her own, as when she goes to visit Elizabeth? The one who lulls and disciplines her son? The "disobedient" who asks her son to give wine at the Cana wedding?

Jesus lived surrounded by women. Surely his education was tainted by an influence more female than male. There's a lot of Mary in him. Once, I heard that an evangelical pastor had a very feminine side because his mother had been a single mother. He asserted that such circumstance allowed him to better understand his wife and the women who surround him. The sensitivity of this man moved me, and it makes me think about the complete Jesus who identifies himself with the grief of others; that complete Jesus in full control of his being male and being female; that Jesus who breaks the barriers that we tend to create to separate us.

As sarcasm, we call "mother" the Church Catholic, but those who have made the most fundamental decisions throughout its history have not been women, but men. We have male

but not female Popes. We have priests, but there is no place for women in the priesthood. Why they fear us? Why they label us as Eve's heiresses, as the origin of the sin and the cause of the fall of humanity? Why are they so determined to discredit us as they did with Mary Magdalene? Our silence and our submission benefit them. We ought to raise our voice and be the voice of those who have been silenced, deprived of their conscience. We deserve to vindicate ourselves as disciples of Jesus, as well as Magdalene. Our vindication shall be hers, and hers shall be ours. We deserve to build the Sorority that transcends ages and borders. We deserve a Church that resurrects with a woman's face, with the clear mission of giving birth to hope as a path of life. That is why I am a Catholic; that is why I am universal, because my essence is life, because I'm linked with life, because I want to convey life.

The conclusive creed

Along my spiritual journey, I have found clues that lead me to believe in the road of catholicity, not as the only one of its kind, but as an option truly based in the heart. Among those clues I can mention priests and nuns who devote and commit themselves to their people, such as Raul Vera, Samuel Ruiz, Alejandro Solalinde, Ituarte, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, Clara, Francisca, Luisa, Helena, among others.

I feel a great penchant for the Church that performs grass-roots work with immigrants, the least fortunate; for the Church that fights in favor of human rights; that promotes women empowerment; for the Church that invites everyone to be a family and to be an answer to the world, especially to devastated people.

I feel inspired by the ministers, the nuns and the believers in general who are sowers of dreams, who opt for inclusion and not for alienation, who arm themselves with fraternity and fullness to fight against selfishness and egotism.

I feel attracted by those who build, day after day, not a religion but a Catholic spirituality—in the universal sense—based in love, in dignity, in freedom; a spirituality of life, plenty of life, of human life. If I could have my own creed and share it with the community of believers, it would be as follows:

I believe in one God, who is father and mother, brother and sister, light, word and embrace; maker of internal and external universes, of what we can explain and of the inexplicable; who shows up in the world, in everyday life, in the streets, in nature, in silence and in time. Lord of many names, many roads, many graphic and iconographic representations. I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, friend of mine and brother of life, of joy and of love; friend and brother of other prophets, of anonymous, rebellious and liberating holy men and women who struggle to get their daily bread, shoulder to shoulder, without exploiting their fellows. Sower of hope, source generating bread of joy and meat of love, made miracle in a hug and multiplied as eternal food which transcends borders and ages. I believe in the Spirit of strength, consolation and freedom; light that enlightens the mind, fire that kindles the heart of those who love. I believe in the Church, which belongs to the community, which is inclusive, which is sister, which is family, which pays no attention to hierarchies, but to solidarity, reflection of the lifestyle of early Christians. I expect the resurrection of consciences and hearts of today Christians in the essence of life of early Christians, dancing in harmony with the signs of the times. Amen.

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WHY DO I KEEP BEING A CATHOLIC¹²

MARGARITA GARCIA MORA

I answer this question from what I have been, from what I have been building during all these years, from my dreams of becoming someone important.

Despite—and to my great regret as a Catholic—of all the manipulations, deceptions, misrepresentations, bloody wars to consolidate power, tortures inflicted to heretics and interpretations of Holy Scriptures in favor of men—only to mention some of the faults committed by the Catholic Church power elites—I keep being a Catholic because it is religion that I learned in my family of origin.

The teachings and the practical way in which my parents understood them, wrapped me up, infused me values, taught me to discern between things well done and those bad done, and to opt for things well done or, at least, for the best way that they could be done; they provided me the strength to overcome some of my fears; they supported me during my small struggles over things that I thought were unfair and that I tried to solve.

They were also—how ignore it?—the origin of my guilt complex, of my sexual taboos, of my fears of the devil, of my almost heroic peaceful resistance to manipulations, blackmail, and psychological abuse of a loving and wounded mother who, many times, forgot to put on silk gloves to educate with an iron hand. Without those teachings, I might have put my mom in her place, and I would have become independent earlier and with less guilt.

Of the Catholic Church I learned the ingrained concept of sin which, very likely, was the root cause of my shame when I became a single mother.

I learned that good people receive their reward and that God listens to them more than he listens to bad people who, sooner or later, receive the punishment for their faults. I learned that God performs miracles if you ask Him with great faith; with faith enough to swallow through nine days a small holy card on India paper with the image of our Lady of the Perpetual Help, so He could do me the miracle of healing my son who was diagnosed with cystic hygromas during my pregnancy. That's why I lost faith when my three months and three weeks old son died and I couldn't answer myself why God had not listened to my request to heal my child if I could be considered a good person. Why He hadn't taken pity on my son? As immature as that was my faith.

In the Church pervading the society where I grew up, I met some “truths”, such as the one that states that the Virgin who champions a homeland is the real one; that Catholics are the good guys and non-Catholics the bad guys; that Jesus was very intelligent on choosing only men for the priesthood, because women, prone to gossip, we don't know how to keep secrets and, thus, confession would be impossible.

The image of a righteous God—almighty to such an extent that he made a virgin give birth; more interested in laws and in his will to the point of deciding that his own son had to die in a bloody and dishonorable way to save us—was the one I learned and practiced in the Catholic Church, at the same time as that of a magic Jesus who multiplied loaves and healed people just with a touch of his hands.

Nonetheless, along with these negative concepts—for wheat and darnel grow together¹³—

it was also by means of this Church that I had my first contact with the divine, with God, with the transcendent; with that man with a lady's heart, Jesus, who spent his life loving and doing all the good that he could, even at the time of his death.

In and by the Church, I got to know the mercy preached by Jesus, his love for the poor, the weak and the marginalized; the importance of turning faith into works; the need and the beauty of sharing who we are with others; I also got aware of the story of men and women from all over the world, of all times, religious and lay people, who gave their life on behalf of others, without any privilege, in the likeness of Jesus and according to his mandate of love.

It was in the Church, I remember it well, where, when I was twelve, I heard a young Guadalupe missionary say: "Blessed Protestants who came to awaken the Catholic Church." For me, that short statement opened my knowledge about the existence of other people, within the Catholic Church, who think in a more beautiful way, less stigmatizing, more in harmony with the true Jesus that I imagined, although I didn't know him in depth.

The elapsed time of my existence, with its past, with the ups and downs of lived experiences, allowed me to gradually confront reality with the ideas learned, and to recognize that many of them buckled under the facts; so I could let go many of the negative concepts of religiosity and keep the good ones, those that helped me keep on growing.

This, coupled with the knack of questioning things, and having, since I was a child, a great number of questions I had always been interested in answering—after having overcome my guilt complex for being an skeptical rebel—led me to seek explanations to find the truth.

Paradoxically, inside the Catholic Church I found my death and my resurrection.

Christology and Ecclesiology, that I learned during a theology course conducted by Jesuits and lay people trained in Ignatian Spirituality, have allowed me to know a Jesus so human that He shows us His divinity, stripped of the publicity of miracles; lover of women and upset by the life conditions they were subjected to by the male chauvinism of His environment; more worried by the whole person than by their genitalia and whatever they do with them; a Jesus with a love invulnerable to adulteries, distances, corruptions, elitisms, orthodoxies.

A Jesus who stretched out his arms to receive us and hug us all, without distinction of race, sex, religion, social status, sexual preferences, works or omissions, to bring us closer to a loving Mother-Father God so we could all live as His children, with the prerogatives and duties entailed by such a filiation. A Jesus who even left His arms nailed to the cross, not to be the hallmark of Christians—He told us that we would be known because we love each other—but so that we never forget that His arms will never, and without a reason, be closed for anyone who approached Him.

I am aware that the order of the Jesuits has helped in different moments of history to strengthen the Catholic Church which we now criticize, full of power, chauvinism, excesses and corruption, and I know that within its ranks there are also priests who do not carry out their priesthood with dignity, and to whom I don't forgive anything. However, it has been one of the few religious orders that have had the ability to renew itself from inside and to open up more, although not without difficulties, to the signs of the times, and that has helped many others, like me, to gain a more mature faith which leads them, among other things, to exercise the right of conscience.

Thus, despite its many faults, for me the Jesuits were the instrument used by God to bring me close to Him, once I overcame the atheism in which I fell after my son's death.

How could I stop being Catholic if it's the religion I carry marked in my bone marrow and my subconscious?

How could I not be Catholic if just here my religious conception and experience were saved? How could I change religion if in the Catholic Church has born my hope of walking

together with others towards a religion more similar to that of the first Christian communities, even if that involves a decrease in the number of followers?

Even though a religion change could imply for me to enjoy the rights that the Catholic Church has denied me as a woman, I think that such change would tear me apart as a person, since being Catholic is an intrinsic part of my being, it is the core of what I am, of my existence, of my hope. If I were divided and dead, those rights wouldn't do much good for me.

WHAT KEEPS ME IN THE CHURCH?

Besides the resurrection that I experienced and the fact that it was part of my education, it's the firm belief that it is the Church originated by those who were the closest to Jesus, although Himself had not visualized the creation of religion, much less the existence of a church as the one we know today: powerful, wealthy, vertical, repressive, chauvinist, selective.

I cannot conceive that a Church that has committed so many, so varied and so serious blunders still exists after more than two thousand years. I cannot but believe that the *Ruah*¹⁴ has really been present in it, certainly not in the abuses of the hierarchy, but supporting and allowing its followers to have, despite the ups and downs of its daily life, a broader, more human and more transcendent vision of the Resuscitated than the one provided by the hierarchs of the Church.

Even at the risk of giving the impression of being an heretic, I think that the *Ruah* has also been present in the disobedience of the followers confronted with anachronistic dogmas and mandates hard to comply for being out of touch with reality, and even in the abandonment of tidal waves of Catholics who leave the Church for preaching asphyxiating stances. These absences have confronted the Church in its duties and, on the other hand, have served as a sieve for many boastful believers. Perhaps those who have abandoned the Church are the Luthers of our time.

Then one might wonder: If the Church has been assisted by the Holy Spirit, why it doesn't seem to transform itself into something better?

I think that God, amorous Mother-Father, expecting, as any good parent, that His kids work out their problems so they can mature and become independent, would not destroy the Church—no matter how bad it might have been and has been—with a devastating lightning, in the style of Zeus, but instead He has been allowing the Kingdom to flourish as the mustard seed, though no one knows how¹⁵, and He has encouraged different goodwill persons and institutions to be like modern prophets spreading the good news as they fight for justice and for the other values of the Gospel in any setting of the world.

Thanks to these Catholics who live their faith in alliance with the spirit of Jesus, I keep considering the Catholic Church as a representation of Christ on Earth. But there is something else: I remain in the church because I'm a woman. Women we embody God's femininity that Jesus came to emphasize in a world where women, together with children, were considered as nothing.

This femininity makes us unconditional lovers, friendly, intuitive, attentive to the signs of the times; able to knead in our daily activities, even in the most humble and monotonous ones, the ferment of Jesus good news, which become life's bread in everyday routine. Above all, we are faithful up to the cross: fighting for causes that seem lost, being at the bedside of the sick or dying child, accompanying those held in physical or mental prisons, encouraging the losers and feeling moved by others' needs is our task.

The Church is mother and teacher¹⁶, but today, and since many years ago, it's a sick mother in intensive care whose teachings doesn't reach people's ears, doesn't touch a nerve of

their sons and daughters. This mother is in great need for firm, loving and wise hands that help her recover her health.

SHOULDN'T THOSE HANDS BE WOMEN'S HANDS?

I remain within the Catholic Church because I think, as a woman, that it is not the time to abandon it, but to put at its service what I am and what I have, from my trench, to make the Church as Jesus would have expected it to be.

Although many people still do not recognize it, women have had a leading role in the history of humanity and the Church, although men have persisted in brushing it off or submitting it to interpretations serving as a frame for men prominence.

Jesus became incarnate in a woman¹⁷; women followed him and supported him with their goods during His public life¹⁸; they remained at the foot of the cross¹⁹ when his Apostles, men, abandoned Him²⁰. Women were, together with Mary, Jesus mother in the lead, the first who could “see” and understand Jesus resurrected, and those who leaped to give evidence of such an event²¹, although for obvious reasons that fact was not given the rightful relevance within the sacred writings.

Through the ages, women have been spreading the Gospel teaching their children their first prayers; they have fostered religious vocations; they have sponsored seminarians, and they have opened their homes to endow them shelter when their mission thus has required it. They are the ones who currently go to churches to go on with the priests' addresses and to support their occurrences, right or wrong; they are the ones who keep embroidering altar cloths, preparing the wafer and the hosts, and cleaning up the mass stuffs.

Women, religious and lay, are those who in many places of the Catholic World, where priests cannot reach or don't want to go, are there, presiding over the paraliturgies to bring to the people the seed of the word that is deposited in the fertile fields of poverty.

There are many religious women who strive to live the Gospel through the execution of the most simple, monotonous and common duties, as the household tasks, in the residences of male religious communities, so that the priests can perform the honorable role of studying, preaching, and shepherding the flock.

For their part, women's congregations strive to study and prepare themselves despite having to carry on their back their own household duties along with their apostolate. Among them it is not considered proper to ask for help for their household duties, as they are women and hence must know how to do those tasks, not to mention the fact that many times they lack the necessary economic resources to take on a maid.

There are also nuns who have left congregations that, due to their insistence on sticking to a misinterpreted Gospel, turn out to be hostile and degrading to women; for that reason, they have been forced to carry on with their lives, under silent protest, serving Jesus and working for the Kingdom.

Modern female theologians are writing with freshness about the Gospel, providing female visions of the word that had never before been considered.

Having no other choice, lay women have been fighting their way across chauvinist societies to keep on gaining rights inherent to the human condition, but denied to them by the mere fact of being women.

Women have dared to “sin”, following the dictates of their consciences, and to get out of the places that men have been assigned them, disobeying “divine mandates” that go against their health or dignity. They have dared to invade men fields of activities, even if that means for them to assume the male and the female role at the same time; to denounce all kinds of

violence, even if they infringe the misinterpreted Paul's mandate of submitting to their husbands.

And, with those "sins", women have been changing history, and they have changed it for the better in many ways.

Perhaps today, once again, God is asking us, women, our approval to incarnate a new Church, and this is only possible if we remain within it.

I think that, together with this request, a crumb of hope appears in the pontificate of Jorge Mario Bergoglio who, although he has not taken a stance in favor of women priesthood, nor he has recognized their moral authority to make decisions, he has dared to cover some of the Catholic Church critical issues, such as corruption, pedophilia, celibacy of priests, and he has insisted on the return to the origins in terms of mercy and the closeness with the poor.

Perhaps it's only a matter of time and of keep fighting so that the Church starts seeing women as equal to men in rights, as well as attending to their needs.

We already know—because we have already experienced it in each battle undertaken by and in favor of women—that the gestation of new concepts brings uneasiness, deformations, widths that require more space, insomnia and needs; and that with every success we have confirmed that childbirth pains are tough, that there's still swords piercing our hearts²², that despite our fear we must remain faithful before the cross, but that in the end we shall give birth to something much more painful than a son: consciousness, which is the cornerstone of any change, of any improvement.

With the birth of this consciousness, women we don't enter into quarantine serene because we've achieved something in our favor, but we get pregnant once again by the Spirit that has made us co-creators with Him, so that each girl or boy that we give birth to, each consciousness that we wake up, saves all members of humanity, as did Jesus, as there's no doubt that every battle won by women has given rise to achievements benefitting another part of the marginalized population and has been in favor even of men themselves. For instance, today in some countries of the world the fathers enjoy the right to spend a few days with their newborn children, which, in addition to the benefits for the woman and the child, recognizes the need of men to exercise their right to a fatherhood rooted in a basic and early closeness with their children.

Although it upsets me to admit it, I have the hunch that many of us will die before we can enjoy the kisses of these new consciousness in the Church.

If the right to vote of American women was recognized in 1920 by the Constitution of the United States, a nation with a liberality and innovation path, fifty-one years after the oldest scrutiny on women's right to vote was passed in Wyoming in 1869²³, one cannot expect the Church, which has a long path of misogyny, to acknowledge in a short time the moral authority of women, their equality with men, respecting the differences? How can we expect that it grants us women the rank order that we should have within the Church, if the strongest argument it puts forward is the authority of a tradition that crop up during the Patriarchate, nurtured and sustained by males, based in the facts that Jesus chose men and not to women as Apostles, and that even the son of God was a man and not a woman, so there would be difficulties for its followers to accept priestesses as an image of the paternal God that has prevailed for so long? And, according to the Church, who might oppose the divine wisdom that so established things?

Behind the women's rights that we enjoy today, there were generations of women who fought for them but never enjoyed the benefits of their struggles. What choice have we got but to keep on working?

And God asks us to carry out such endeavor in the light of the Gospel, according to the

Spirit of Jesus who, loving each and every one, got closer to the weak, the blind, the poor, the possessed who feared the presence of God, the leprous, the paralyzed, the Orthodox concerned about the road but indifferent to mercy, and the sinners He never abandoned: not only He approached them but He remained among them, and with them He started God's Kingdom among men.

I think that, within our society, the hierarchy composed of priests and sponsored by laymen and laywomen who favor the status quo—no matter who they trample on—and who refuse to see in women the image of God alive, are blind and deaf individuals who refuse to listen to the claims for justice; they are the paralyzed of our time who just don't take firm steps in favor of a change; they are the Pharisees who condemn women healing attempts, disregarding that the Church was established both for men and women, and not the other way around, that is, women and men for the Church; they are those who fear losing the wealth, the power and the prestige they have enjoyed for thousands of years—who wouldn't be afraid of losing all of that?!—and they make a pact with the devil, who strives fostering inequality, separation, injustice; they are the sinners who we are asked by the same teachings of the Church, and according to Jesus directions, to welcome through one of its seven acts of charity: "correct those who err".

In this new gestation of a Church, where all of us get saved and reach the knowledge of the truth²⁴, I think Jesus remains beside women, praying so that we don't give in temptation of trying to reach the recognition of our rights, segregated from males, so later we trample on their rights, using androgyny as our flag; so that we don't look, with pride under our arms, for churches where we are given a personal prominence that quenches the thirst for justice existing in every sincere follower of Christ, nor we establish churches with women leaders on the grounds that men don't deserve us within the Church that they have built in their favor.

Since we are universal, the Catholic women must not allow ourselves the luxury of despising anyone, or of splitting up with anyone, no matter how wrong he or she may be, much less when that abandonment infers that the Church keeps infringing upon universality and discriminating women, as it has done until today, and disregarding the spirit of the Gospel.

Indeed, with its stubbornness before the realities of our world and due to its disregard for certain rights of women and other groups that it discredits, the Catholic Church has filled us with scandal, and the first thing that comes to mind is to leave it as thousands of Catholics have already done. But, perhaps, the Jesus who still turns up in his Church asks us women, as once He asked His disciples: "Do you also want to leave?"

I remain in the Church because I am Catholic by desire and conviction. Jesus came to bring fire to Earth—so He told us²⁵—a purifying fire to destroy old and useless concepts and to allow new abundant life to grow on clean ground for everyone; to fully warm our hearts so that we welcome our Church and convert it into the leafy tree where any bird can nest²⁶, thus making it an authentic symbol of the Kingdom of God.

I know that, for being a woman, God has entrusted me a flame of that fire, and with my desire for a better Church and my commitment to thrive in its transformation, I answer the Lord: "Who shall I resort to, if only You have words of eternal life?"

I WASN'T BORN A BELIEVER, I BECAME ONE: STORY OF A CONVERSION

FRIDA VARINIA RAMOS KOPRIVITZA

My believing in God is not as important as it is important that God believes in me...

Raymundo Ramos

Maybe my maternal grandmother is the key of everything, mainly because she was very close to me during my teenage years, when I started to perceive the differences we had at home with regard to the rest of the world; when I questioned myself about a myriad of details that, without a doubt, turned us into a different or unique family. I guess that all are different, but I refer to those aspects having to do with our habits and customs, particularly, our religious beliefs which my grandmother Carmen would later explain me in part.

The first thing that I remember on this matter is one day when there was an earthquake. We were, as usual, at my friend Etna's. Suddenly, before I could realize it, all the persons had gathered in the garage and, almost automatically, they had kneeled and started to pray, making that such a scene amazed me more than the earthquake itself. Why were they praying? Who were they praying to? I went back home with those questions in my mind? I was six or seven years old at that time.

Some other time, Christmas was approaching. We never did anything; we just used to go visit some friends of my parents who had their whole house decorated with that leitmotif; there wasn't one single space that didn't display the Christmas spirit. In those early years of our childhood, we didn't really notice the difference, but when I started elementary school, we joined an educational system called "active". A wonderful school which in the eyes of others wasn't so much, because one of our neighbors, when we played with her daughter, used to harp on at us: "Of course, as you go to a school that allows you to do whatever you want, where they don't believe in God, of course you don't have limits, no one can tell you anything." I didn't really understand what she meant, but since that time I registered the word "God".

The problem became complicated each year when the Christmas issue turned up again. My friend Ana, my neighbor next door, used to receive a lot of toys and gifts on that day, the dolls most in fashion and expensive. Why if it was not her birthday? It was only Christmas. Perhaps for us it was difficult to understand because nobody explained us clearly what happened in those days of collective celebration.

Once, my father travelled to Germany and when he came back he brought two beautiful dolls with blond silky hair, one for me and one for my sister. As I was the older, before my little sister could notice anything I hid both very well. This happened in October, and it was not until December 25, when all children brag their gifts, when I took out the famous dolls and I pretended they were Christmas gifts. Since then I started trying to be like anyone else, like those around us; to share their habits and to have a feeling of social belonging.

When I was already nine years old, my mother told me that on those days we didn't celebrate the birth of Jesus because we weren't believers, we weren't Catholics, and that's why

we didn't put up a Christmas tree and much less install a nativity with the Magi. Nonetheless, the following year I cut a sufficiently leafy branch of our garden, I stuck it in the living room and I decorated it as I could. My grandmother Carmen told me that in Yugoslavia, where my grandfather was born, they had that custom of decorating, not a traditional pine, but a small and modest branch. I continued to not understand the issue.

Many years later, and with no intention of judging my parents, I understood that my Slavic grandfather had educated my mother without a specific religion, and when she married my father, both decided to be atheists, this linked to their Socialist conviction of those emblematic years of the 1960's.

The attraction that I felt for the religious figures, for the Saints, for the items that—now I know it—are part of the liturgy, and the mysterious air that is breathed in the temples, since always have had a special effect in me. We used to go quite often to the churches, not to mass, of course, but to visit them as artistic, cultural and historic sites. My parents used to travel every weekend to different parts of the republic, from village to village, visiting colonial churches, pyramids and pre-Hispanic structures, markets and other popular expressions.

When we entered a church, I used to feel a singular magic. At that time, it was still common that women and girls covered their head with a mantilla as a sign of respect, and I liked that; sometimes my sister and I entered the churches wearing shorts and then the parishioners gave us a bad look, while my mother watched delighted and very carefully at all the details of the altarpieces, the baptismal font, the oil paintings, and my father spent his time recording everything with his photographic camera.

At that time, somehow for me the word *art* and the word *religion* had only an educational meaning which was far away of the doctrine and its moral strength. Now, as I recall all those passages of my life, I am putting together a kind of puzzle whose parts are fitting together gradually, with a care and a dedication that I don't know if I will be able to explain. Most of all, I want to explain to myself why I am as I am.

I used to take a very close look at all the things having to do with beliefs and, as a result, I noticed that many people, when passing in front of a Catholic Church or of any image or that of Christ, or simply when entering a cathedral or a sanctuary, crossed themselves, and I got that etched that as a kind of obsession.

I remember that my grandmother Carmen used to put holy water on my forehead and that, although she tried to transcend the ritual practices of the Catholic Church, she brought me closer to those forms that, when you're young, leave a stronger mark in you. Carmen studied the metaphysical thinking and she accompanied me in my personal search during that adolescence I mentioned earlier. It fascinated me to envision the golden altarpieces as that possible lesson of the Gospels which, through a high relief, is explaining you the facts. I also liked to see, on the façades of the architectural ensembles, the sculptures chiseled on pink quarry.

And using a little analogy, I also chipped stone considering that I searched not only in the Catholic religion, but I also inquired into the Qur'an philosophy, the zen Buddhism, the Eastern religions, the Islam, the pre-Hispanic cosmic vision. I knocked at as many doors as I could; I went to the Great Universal Brotherhood and to all the places where I could quench my big thirst, until my life took a 180 degree turn, when, at the height of my youth, I uncovered in writing a way of expressing my strong desire for what today I would call "vitalism", that is, to be positive and to reflect that which gives us strength and fosters the human being energy. From that point, I distinctly leaped into eroticism, thinking that there I could pay homage to nature, that reading Walt Whitman would take me, without any doubt, to a sort of pantheism, as this passage conveys it:

Here is the idea, here it is all wrapped in this small mystical sphere;

these engraving eyes, throwing at you their sparkles so you transmit it to the future ages,
so you to throw it and make it turn obliquely through space,
from them emanates, for you, whoever you are, a glance.²⁷

But it was not at all easy. That's why they say that "who doesn't know God kneels almost anywhere". Thus, despite of enjoying the privilege of word, as well as having studied and walked hand in hand with "knowledge", I fell many times and I made mistakes and blunders, and I had sorrows, until I finally recognized what Whitman said: "Faith is soul's antiseptic."

How, then, could I overcome my lack of faith? How could I believe, if all my education was deep rooted in rationalism, in intellectual and logical thinking? I had to get rid of that hanker of the egomaniac writer who exploits the gift he enjoys bragging about it. I had to discover—as in a revelation—the real experience of the sacred, and find not in something or in someone what emanates from the heart, but what the silence hides, as Maria Zambrano says, or as Octavio Paz states more accurately: [We must] "Open our hearts or our entrails to allow that 'other' hidden to come out. The revelation, considered as a gift or a grace that comes from outside, gets transformed when man opens to himself [...] God lies hidden in the heart of man."²⁸

I used to consider that I owed much of my rationalism and my endless search for scientific truth to my father's teachings, without realizing that we were both in the same quest; that we had come to literature for different reasons, but when I read his poem the pieces of the puzzle reoccupied their places once again:

Proof of God

That I believe in God lacks importance,
I'm a feeble atom, wandering adrift,
and all my science lies in writing to the world
with my wicker pen, which bleeds and obeys.

What really matters is, that God believes in me
and attends to such poor and meaningless thing;
that He has his eyes on this being so eaten away
by the world's leprosy; that's the very idea.

That He exists or not, is not something significant,
because if He exists He must, as an afflicted father,
welcome the idiot who had abandoned Him.

But if the Father doesn't exist, nothing has been lost.
Who is, in any case, the one who must be confirmed?
He who can it all? Or he who can do nothing?²⁹

Deeming that the reiterated reading of this beautiful sonnet was not enough, my father Raymundo Ramos wrote an anthology, *Deictic of Mexican Religious Poetry*, published by Lumen Mexico, which includes the best religious poems of our country, I don't have the least doubt. But even here, in this sacred space for a man of letters, I found mostly the historian, the scholar, rather than the believer. Hence, I had to gather my courage and I ask him bluntly if he believed or not in God. He answered me: "There are people who begin with the notion of God as a great certitude in their life, and others who, in contrast, lacking that certitude, being torn by doubts, search for Him not as a starting point, but as a finish line." It was just then when another of the last pieces of my understanding fitted in and consequently I went straight

ahead, searching openly, instead of surreptitiously as I had been doing until then, and I decided to carry out my own and specific search.

THE SEARCH

And I shall walk freely in an open space
because I am seeking thy precepts.

Psalm 119, 45.

From that moment on, I started my open and private search of God. I picked up the teachings of my grandmother who, in the manner of Plato, taught me that ideas come first: “thinking is creating”. After many readings, after granting magical thinking its own space, after reading the authors recommended by my mother, such as Eliade or Jung, after reading the Russians, the French, the Latin Americans, after investigating everywhere, I decided that I had to enroll in one single tradition because I couldn’t keep pecking everywhere. I had to limit myself to a satisfactory and consistent speech, so to speak; I had to search for clear codes and clues to interpret them and avoid fall into a syncretism or an anarchy distracting me from my most fervent desire: my encounter with God.

I started by the most elementary aspects, those that are easier to decode for people brought up in the Catholic faith, those elements, those symbols proper of the Judeo-Christian language, of the preponderance of the Western world.

Each discovery was a new learning: the sacraments, the commandments, the vows, the sins and the virtues. I liked all of that for tasting like new, for bringing me closer to a language not yet flawed or biased and, above all, something fresh and different.

At first, my intellectual curiosity prevailed, but after some time it really became a vital need, an urgent need to “understand” with the eyes of soul, with one’s hand on one’s heart. Which was the point for acquiring the faith? How could I be worth and how could I continue alone on this path without any guidance, without being in the Church as a formal institution and, most of all, was this valid or wasn’t? The only thing that remained consistent was the word, the word as divine revelation.

It was through another reading of philosopher Maria Zambrano texts that I found the first fundamental premise, the *logos* of the Greeks, which means word, reason and creation; the logos where is what is said, where is the essence of being and, above all, where is my refuge, my reconciliation and the answer to my existential distress. Once more, poetry, as a creative act, led me to clear my doubts.

It was through the reading of another philosopher, Heidegger, that I could see with some clarity that word gives us the ability to speak, to say; that it entails the ability to speak and to communicate with “others”, to dialogue; that the power of word allows us to hear and to be heard, it leads us to the origin, just like the incarnate word also takes us towards the higher Being and towards a monologue.

Word is the magic formula, the language, the cultural tool par excellence that allows us to ask ourselves the fundamental and foundational question of human being: who am I? But we know that in the basic philosophical field, sometimes this discipline rather than provide us with answers it leaves us with more doubts. That’s why I had to continue on the path I was already on, the one of poetic intuition, the one of the possible mystique that would take me faster to the so awaited encounter.

Through word, poetry, mysticism, which even in what was not said or in the ineffable, in

the invisible or metaphysical, this path was providing my life with a course and a meaning. Then I “realized”—beyond my own understanding—that my thing was not only to live off word as a professional human trade, but that for me word itself was a path, a path to reach the most sacred, and that if I followed the tracks, the constant hints, someday I would reach it.

Then I got rid of arrogance and I realized that I really wanted to devote myself to one single and unique language of the sacred and that such language was coined in Christian forms, at least in the initial Creed, in its language and in its pastoral forms, despite my great ignorance and my scarce knowledge of faith.

And thus I undertook the one-way trip. Here I feel welcome, here my astonishment and my excitement come to life; here Sister Juana and Saint Teresa are my inspiration and my motivation, beyond the school lesson. I’m looking for the identification and the brotherhood. Beyond the ecclesiastical institution, its administration, its protocols and its ministries, I have decided to submit myself to one single creed, the one I want to belong to despite my somewhat secular origin. I have decided to identify myself with Christ’s semantics and take up His call, freely and spontaneously.

As I had lacked every access to Catechism, as I wasn’t baptized nor I had received any of the sacraments, it would seem crazy to want to delve into a dogma, but, despite not having received any of the pastoral services, there had been always in me some kind of vocation that at some point I kept silent, in some other moment I distracted, but that, having reached maturity, I couldn’t help but listen to it. I listened to my inner voice and I paid attention to those so clear and obvious signs that led me by the hand to that call so boasted by so many: the call of faith.

THE CALL

Tell me to come to you on the water.
And Christ said: Come.

Matthew 14, 28-29.

After thinking the matter over, after bashing my head up analyzing and questioning my faith, I acknowledged that my thing was a call, i.e., that my will was ancillary and that I’d better pay attention to all those elements that life had been providing me during the years to find the meaning that I needed, to get rid of such an excruciating anguish, and to be able, at last, to listen to that inner voice that was calling me endlessly. It is that voice that drives you to follow a specific course, guided by intuition and not by reason; it is a superior intelligence which guides you, which puts things at your reach so you don’t sidetrack. And although this “call” never stopped to be there, many times I remained deaf and many others blind to those signals that now are very clear.

First there were revelations of supernatural type in which I had visions, foretastes of facts that allowed me to control many things, unlike the others. I also witnessed several miracles among my family and friends. I had the certainty of being close to real Angels who protected my life at crucial moments. I banished demons and beliefs that caused us harm. I approached images and people who, on the contrary, lightened everything in my step.

The Virgin in flames from the sanctuary of Ocotlan in the state of Tlaxcala and Saint Anthony of Padua came into my life and helped me at all times and on every entreaty, in periods of prosperity and in periods of scarcity. A huge cross also arrived at home; it was an artistic work made with glass, as a monumental stained glass window displaying on one side the Crucifixion and on the other the Ascension. Of course, I hadn’t asked for it; although now I real-

ize that if things are for you, they simply come and settle in. What matters is to know how to read their deep meaning, their symbology and the message they intend to communicate. My grandmother Carmen had died not long ago, thus the acceptance of the cross at home and the assembly of a small personal altar were to recall her, but also to reconcile my creed, to recall permanently that Christ came to the world to give us an example, and that if I accepted Him in my heart I was already sharing in His faith, His pain and that destiny that leads to religion, that is, to link yourself with the Superior Being once again.

THE ENCOUNTER

God committed unto us
the word of reconciliation.

2. Cor 5,19.

How can somebody imagine his/her encounter with God? Would he/she be capable of identifying that moment? Would it be unique, special and different? I really don't know. What I do know is that the most direct path towards Him is pain. Pain redeems, and when, as it's commonly said, "you hit rock bottom", you start humbly to find that special significance which lets you recognize your mistakes, take off your mask and close somewhat your eyes to the world.

Although it is true that God gave us the word specifically to reconcile us with that world which beleaguers us, which brings us temptations or alienates us, before I could get reconciled I had first to withdraw, shrink and get away from this world, although eventually we have to reach it and confront it, to recognize that we must translate it into specific societies waiting for us, that await for us in the dialogue and the communication as long as we are in this existence. But to do all of that, first we must recoup the verb, the word incarnated in a new speech of love and reconciliation; we must focus beyond that cavern Plato used to talk about; we must heal ourselves, in some way or another.

And once more the word sprang up like a spring invigorating me: it was in writing, in the way I got rid of my "literary" side, of everything I had learned, in the way I retraced an easy path, I abandoned convenience and I stopped repeating myself, where I found the breakup of my paradigms to recognize something very simple: that God was in me, waiting for me to identify Him, unadorned, without arrogances, the simplest and most honest way; expressing everything that I feel and think, without prejudices or artifices.

And so, once again I found Him through the word, through poetry; in brief moments of happiness I found Him, in mystical moments I found Him, in small hints I found Him, in the ineffable, in all the texts that I wrote under His guidance was the divine word that has been borrowed to me to attempt to relieve pain, to praise God, to seek peace and what's righteous.

Word is made available to me and made available to you with a purpose. That's why word is not ours: we are only the emissaries who come to bring the good news. And there I am, facing an experience that might allow me to find in the Judeo-Christian language the universal language, the pity and the mercy; that might allow me to be authentic and, hopefully, to be as the Scriptures say: Christ disciples were given the community with the cross through the call to follow Him. In this visible community they are blessed.

THE CONFESSION

When I exhort to confession, the only thing

I do is exhorting to be a Christian.

Luther

Unfortunately, anyone who knows my case will think that I cannot have access to a conversion from the pagan world to the Catholic religion because I don't meet the requirements. I'm not even baptized.

Those who know say that, to become a member of the Church, the sinner must be exhorted and punished so that he neither condemn himself nor make improper use of the Gospel, and hence only those who do penance and confess their faith in Jesus Christ receive the grace of baptism.

Likewise, only those who know how to distinguish the true body and the true blood of Christ, which are provided for the forgiveness of sins, receive the grace of the Eucharist

They also say that the applicant must perform a self-examination in matters of faith and a confession through which he/she seeks to be forgiven. All of this is very difficult for me because despite knowing for sure that I have committed many errors and bad acts, I don't have ingrained in me the concept of sin. So, I confess that perhaps it's only a language issue. Thus, I face a big contradiction: on the one hand I confess that I have been seduced by the language of Christianity, that I have been enthralled by the symbolic burden inherent to and represented by the universe of a moral philosophy which allows the human being, among other things, to coexist in the world and have access to the other world, the spiritual and intangible one.

I admit that in my confusion there's a desire to reach the end; that—as Manuel Galvez would say—I suffer from a “metaphysical disease”; that my nostalgia and my romantic taste for sacred things have sparked my desire, increasingly stronger, to become a convert, to become a Catholic and to belong, as if the lack of that sense of belonging might put me in a position of foreigner, alien to my myself.

I confess that this need to belong was first the desire to be like all others, of fitting in and, as a chameleon, of becoming involved in the social context to which, I thought so, I belonged. Then I sought to join different circles, of initiates, of artists, of philosophers, in short, until I realized that the only thing that matters is the integration with oneself and with the Deity, beyond the person and the mask, beyond the mirror and the life history.

That's how I decided it would be in the Bible and in the Western cultural tradition where I would look for answers, as those were the media I best understood in terms of a common language, although I don't know if this will be enough; I don't know if I will keep being just a pagan with strange and fanciful aspirations.

Far from the “confessional” liturgical forms, Maria Zambrano defines confession very well as that “desperation of yourself, that escape from yourself in the hope of finding yourself; desperation due to feel yourself obscure and incomplete, and eagerness to find unity; hope of finding that unity which impels you to exit yourself in search of something that could collect you, something where you could recognize yourself, find yourself. That's why Confession implies a hope: that of something beyond the individual life, something like the belief.”³⁰

Another mandatory quote on this subject comes from the words of Saint Augustine, who said that man is the only being who's not satisfied with his reality. We feel like detached beings, half born and half integrated in a foreshadowed reality that we are looking for. That foreboding, that melancholy so mentioned by many theologians and philosophers, is that call to unity that I have already felt. Therefore, Confession is the first step towards yourself; to tell yourself that there is this huge need to leave behind a pain of the soul, an eagerness to find the long-awaited peace, to find the inner transformation as of a soul-searching but, as everything in life, when you don't have a specific method, that is, when you lack the way—although you

make your way as you walk, say the poets—it's harder to identify the horizon, the destination of man.

For me, literature and philosophy became the way, a way that I discovered through the influence of my parents who, despite not having provided me with a specific dogma, they let me search for it, and they let me be convinced and persuaded by interlocutors as beloved as the books, in the thousands of pages that paved the way of my existential quest.

I learned the language of artistic forms, of symbols, of harmony, in my mother's eyes; I learned from my father the literary language, which in turn lies inside another one, the common one, that meta-language, the fiction, the metaphor and its musical sound. Thus I live within the walls of a bookish culture and there, in that universe of splendid Madonnas such as those of Leonardo da Vinci, there, surrounded by Umberto Eco's highly erudite linguistic analysis about human communication, lies my dominant wish for a language which comprises everything, which gives me the exact answers to my feelings.

Poetry led me by the hand to philosophy, and this, non-stop, to the religious feeling, to the search of the essence, as the German philosopher Martin Heidegger did it so brilliantly when he stated that it is given in the origin of the work of art, when the artwork is conceived as a symbol. Allegory and symbol make up the frame of reference of representations in which art is typified, anticipated or described within a language, a discourse disclosing, symbolically, new and multiple realities beyond its immediate references in the historical reality.

Poetic and philosophical subjects, which restrain me professionally and personally, share this symbolic universe together with very important concerns that have been the inspiration of poets and artists, themes of reflection, such as the divine, sacred, profane, and erotic concepts. All these languages created by the human being are, from Heidegger's perspective, "figments of truth expressed through form"; in short, he says that truth is not only a characteristic of the knowledge that is stated, but a characteristic of the being itself.³¹

That same thing happens in poetic creation and in religious sentiment: there's an absence and a presence, prior silence and expression of the word, a sort of incarnate verb, a power of word which brings closer this need to contrast these two "sublime" processes, in the manner of a mirror: ecstasy and climax, religious, erotic, poetic and philosophical sentiments. All this is what generates the power of word, because the world is not, to tell the truth, a set of things, but of signs; the world is to the extent that it is named, as Adriana Yanez says: "The power of the word is something that we have forgotten, as we have also forgotten the strength of word and reflection. Word, language are magic, they change reality."³² Thus, the religious word is the basis and the foundation of reality itself; and that word is the one aspired to by the poet and the man who seeks faith, who searches transcendence and fulfillment behind banal and dull things. Would it be acceptable to approach God through these paths? Is there a potential follower of God in each artist? By means of different formulas, by means of different devotions?

THE MIRACLE

And the more Saint Anthony preached,
greater was the number of fishes...

A. Salvini

Then, seeing in the fishes so many reverences towards God, their creator, Saint Anthony rejoiced in body and spirit, and said in a loud voice: "Blessed be the eternal God, who is more revered by fishes than by men, and His words are better heard by the irrational animals than by

the unfaithful men.” And the more Saint Anthony preached, greater was the shoal of fishes and none of them left the place it had occupied.³³

This is a quote that refers to one of the thousands of miracles attributed to Saint Anthony, who—incidentally—was canonized not as much for his supernatural miracles as for his ability to persuade with his speech the infidels or the heretics to embrace Christianity. He was very famous for his extraordinary talent to convince them to embrace the word of the Gospel. His charisma led him also to be much loved among the parish. According to this experience, a miracle can be from something absolutely out of this world, to something that, within the human possibilities, gives cause for some transformation, as it was the case of Saint Anthony’s word and eloquence. For me, this Saint has been a revelation that has produced in my life the miracle, because his speech has “convinced and converted” me.

When I discovered that my grandmother Carmen had a special devotion to Saint Anthony, among other things because he was the patron saint of her home town and because he also had saved her father from death by a fire squad during the Mexican Revolution, things changed. I went to the dictionary and, indeed, a miracle is that event which occurs against the laws of nature, of logic, and is performed by the intervention of a deity.

To consolidate their faith, many people seek a miracle, but when you realize that you’re not even looking for that extraordinary fact and even so you are already part and result of a miracle, how can’t you bolster your belief and your faith? Likewise, I resort to Wittgenstein’s words: “Believing in God means to understand which the meaning of life is. Believing in God means to recognize that the facts of the world don’t explain everything. Believing in God means to realize that life has a meaning.”³⁴ From these simple premises and the fact that the field in which I get on is a space of a symbolic nature—that is, that I work through a universe inserted in a pre-logical, intuitive and magical thinking—I can’t but identify myself with this sacred atmosphere.

When I studied the fantastic literature and the romantic literature, I discovered that unusual aspect which carries in its root the belief in miracles. In fact, anything fantastic is encrypted in something extraordinary that breaks up with logic, with reason, and, as it doesn’t have an acceptable or scientific response and it remains within hesitation or ambiguity, it becomes a fantastic fact. When this same thing happens in the field of psychology it is called delirium or madness, and miracle if it happens in the religious field.

A miracle has more to do with a way of reading reality than with the challenging view of facts; for me it is valid when it is directly proportional to your faith and your trust. Sought or not, with my acceptance, with my fervent desire, can I validate a miracle? So many questions remain in the air that, instead of making me feel discouraged, they involve me even more, they motivate me to find some purification allowing me to unlearn vices and prejudices, and to acquire and assess so many virtues not considered in my ethics training.

Being a devotee of Saint Anthony vindicates and liberates me; it provides me a destiny, because, like him, persuasion and eloquence are at the same time the end and the means of my life. My writing, then, will have a dual purpose: the pursuit of beauty and of healing. I don’t know if I’ll be successful, but the intentionality, the religiosity with which I do it will be doubly worthwhile.

If everything that’s sacred, as defined by Rudolf Otto, is a tremendous mystery causing stupefaction because reason cannot decipher it, then the religious attitude will be impossible to be reduced to rational or logical thought. Somehow, it meets the literary attitude, especially when it tries to recreate this mysterious universe where it get close to the same searches of a religious being, i.e. is liable of driving to the field of feeling, of the experience of the “God sensitive to the heart”, as Pascal used to say, the mystery that frightens as much as it fasci-

nates.

The nearness of sacred elements makes the man tremble, shiver, but at the same time they attract him, seduce him and captivate him. Any of these emotions are creative and differently developed motivations; while the religious one establishes a kind of communion based of a divine substance, for its part the artistic one assumes to establish a communion with the forms of language.

Just as the sentiments promoted by fear, what's untouchable (or taboo), what at certain moment could trigger the most terrible evils, likewise the unknown or the unexplained causes similar effects in those who undertake an aesthetic or mystical search. These sentiments caused by witchcraft, ghosts or even miracles, shoved fantastic, romantic or artistic expressions, but while religion claims to give over to a superior being or to a ultimate cause the effects of its strangeness, for its part literature—especially the fantastic one—limits itself to puzzle and to leave a potential answer to the reader, involving him in a fact with religious nuances in a profane context.

Thus, we can say that the symbolic-type elements are ingredients contributing to the search of profane origins in the case of art and literature, and of sacred origins regarding religion or belief.

Finally, we see how, since very ancient times, the need to express a cult gave cause for reconciling religion and literature; suffice it to recall the Scriptures, the Bible, the Qur'an, the Tao-Te-King.

In this process, for me the road to divinity derives from a bookish culture, from literature and from art; however, it was the path of intuition, of the magic guide, that allowed me to recognize that in the rational discourse not everything has been said, that science cannot do everything, that the human being is an integral being who depends on all aspects, and that the spiritual one is as important as any other. We must live under the consciousness of a being superior to man, we must stop being so anthropocentric, we must look a little beyond the human creation and give the benefit of the doubt to nature and to the great divine creation, which is and will keep being a mystery.

EPILOGUE

After such a long time in this somewhat confused personal search and after walking my own Way of the Cross—if I can call it so—I've concluded several points. On the one hand, I am grateful for my destiny, for what I have been and for how it has been, because these and not others were the conditions that my history has had and that I have been able to face to be who I am. This, in turn, imbues me with healthy resignation to avoid speculating on what might have been and was not. I am glad for my ancestors and my origin, to the best of my individual acceptance. Likewise, I recognize that my search paths are different and particular, that they don't make me neither better nor worse than others, only different. I accept that my desire to find God comes by the hand of a great vocation that I found very early in my life, that is a blessing: to communicate through the word and with the split hairs and the double edge of metaphor, which is a whole responsibility, beyond the pride of men and their society, a responsibility of a sacred nature and which, hereafter, I will be more careful when exercising it. I acknowledge that such a mission implies a burden that modifies my concepts of life, of the world, of art and of poetry.

Regarding my conversion, perhaps my will might not be enough, perhaps it's not yet ready, but when I heard the call to Catholic women of my country, I decided to organize these

thoughts which, although they never tormented me, they kept me busy and that, at mature age, call for these possible responses that were latent within me.

The inner struggle between the sacred and the profane is not news to anyone, neither the desire to be part of an ecclesiastic community—I don't know how to describe it—, but in any case that's not the important thing. Perhaps that's why I cannot answer the question: Why continue being Catholic? Nonetheless, I want to think aloud and share my feelings in this regard as a freethinker woman. Of course, I disagree with the vision of women that is infused in the laws and regulations of the Catholic Church. Perhaps I understand the historical process and the reasons for holding power and control which gave cause for installing the patriarchy and the predominant Western thought, but facing that monster which means to recodify the vertical and authoritarian line that, without doubt, represents the papacy and its male hierarchy, I want to share this final thought.

Thus, freely and perhaps romantically, I think that, like Plato at some point in time despised the poets and banished them from his Republic not because he disqualified them completely, but because, in essence, they frightened him; he feared that with their magical and poetic wisdom, with the strength of words and their power, they might disorganize his universe. Thus, poets are relegated not because they're not worth, but because they represent a power that cannot be restrained in an organization that manipulates the world. Likewise, I consider that within the scope of the Catholic and Christian religion, women play the role poets used to play in Plato's Republic; this means that the power of women in the creation of nature is such that in a manipulative and powerful organization as the structure of this Church, all the female force, their nature, their intuition, their ways and means of confronting life, giving it, conceiving it and living it, transcends all political, social and religious organization. This, of course, doesn't intend to justify an injustice, but rather to describe it. Suffice it to recall that in cosmogonies and mythologies history the female spirit is fully identified with the Moon and all its powers, and that behind the symbolic representation of Virgin Mary lies, among others, the goddess Isis or the Greek and Roman goddesses who symbolize everything related with fertility and, of course, with wisdom.

In *The White Goddess*, at the end of his long study of the symbolic character of woman, Robert Graves asserts: "the real poet distinguishes between the goddess as she manifests in the supreme power, the glory, the wisdom and the love of women, and the individual woman who the goddess can convert into her instrument."³⁵

Hence, you might wonder why a woman who was born free wants to be Catholic. Perhaps because the word Catholic implies what's universal, to integrate oneself in that whole, in that common language that has allowed, beyond the Babel Tower of languages, some communion between a great part of humanity. As I already explained, there's within me a call and a vocation that I would like to see turning into devotion and return to the first speculations of my youth, when I thought with great strength and conviction that the spiritual being that lives in people, the very soul of humans, is asexual, or neutral, to call it somehow; that the battle of genders belongs to us all in the society and in a specific historical context; that we must defend human rights, and in particular those of women, because history owes us many of them. But in the field of spirituality, the aspects that come into play are different.

I think that the religious life of each of us is our most intimate aspect and hence there's no reason to disclose it to anyone, because this action of rejoining God is individual, indivisible, non-transferable, and is one of the most reserved experiences. For that reason, going around 'preaching the Gospel' to people is not entirely correct. Sooner or later, every person finds the entrance gate to that sacred and transcendent intimacy. This doesn't mean that we have to exhibit some kind of ambiguity or a double face. For me it's very clear that there's one do-

main for our public aspects and another one for our private ones. In the first one we must strive to an ethical attitude, to the common good, the social and the collective; and in the private one we can look for, individually, if so wishes everyone, that superior Being who has no place even in the psychological, who is beyond the personal ego, who is due to a completely impersonal life that only exists in the sacred and religious domain, and that here I try to share, much to my regret, as it is like bare my soul completely. And only on this occasion I open my heart, ignoring my fears and my feeling vulnerable, to expose myself as I am, without any disguise and, most of all, without any intellectual mask.

The rules of the Roman Catholic Church are one thing, and another thing is the possibility of sharing the “offer” of its faith, a faith that has gotten into the bones of our society, of our lives, for the last two thousand years, after codifying and re-codifying a series of symbols that mark us, that we carry on our skin as a tattoo hardly erasable, a scourge that marks those who are inside, from its tradition, and a stigma for those who are outside.

Somehow, there are people who are born with the certainty that God exists; others who, even so, reject him claiming that he is dead, and some others, almost the majority, who are looking for him. Among the latter there’s me, and I only dare to share part of this course, of this path with some stretches lighted, as it happens in a life, a story like mine, and maybe in these verses I express more clearly what I feel:

I Am

In the mettle of my heart
dwells a sleeping Ego
who’s impersonal but not absent
who’s in me though I can’t yet be in Him

I Am from the other bank
and neither name nor identity matters
only the house of the Being
in the verb incarnated

The word: the origin and the well
universal memory
that is not history
that doesn’t belong to me
exclusively and wholly
The One and the Whole in whom I get confused
is not a time
much less the void in the vacuum
it is to the contrary
what I Am and what I own
the always facing the never
beyond the horizon
the other existence
beyond the cell which persists

I-sand predictable
in me, God
the true life
that blends otherwise
in the stigmas of flesh
in the wound that’s recalled

Beyond you and me

I Am when I am light
when I'm a limitless continent
and the sea is land
and the deluge the desperation of stars

I AM A CATHOLIC BECAUSE FAITH IN THIS RELIGION IS THE ONLY THING MY PARENTS GAVE ME

LOURDES RAYMUNDO SABINO

Indeed, “the Catholic Church does not recognize us, women, any moral authority to make decisions [practically in any area of life], nor allows us to be priests...” or priestesses. Then, why do I keep being Catholic? The intent to answer this question seems an insightful and complicated process in itself, but I will try to explain the reasons which led me to consider myself a Catholic based on my life story, because it is only in it where I can find my own answer. Likewise, I will expose my personal reasons regarding what keeps me in the Church, as trying to answer this issue is even more complex and I do not intend that my experience is considered as a generalization.



Why I’m still Catholic? It is a very interesting question that, I must confess it, has stalked me in many occasions and due to several confusions more than reasons I had avoided answering it or, at least, take some time to mull over it. Nevertheless, despite all the intricacies and fears that answering this question imply for me, I want to try it.



Ana Fernanda is a name that I would have liked to have, although I don’t dislike my real name. I am a twenty-seven years old woman from a Tlahuica indigenous community of the State of Mexico, and I am looking for a job after having finished a master’s degree that I started because I couldn’t find a job although I had already completed my bachelor’s degree studies. I consider myself a Catholic due to the principles that my family instilled in me since I was born, and I also assume myself as a feminist. Are those positions contradictory? Certainly, but, what isn’t? I consider that the questions outlining the objective of the call that I am addressing today crop up as a sign of the contradictions that we face in our daily life, and I will devise my answers based on those general conditions.



I consider myself a Catholic due to the principles and values that my family tried to instill in me since my childhood, and which are not too different from the rules under which I grew up or I must have grown up in my community. Being born female and living with my family in my community led me to abide by certain ways of behavior, inside and outside my father’s house.

I am the daughter number six of a total of eleven offspring of my mother and my father, but not all of them are still alive: two of my brothers who would be older than me and a sister that would be younger than me, are already dead. I don’t remember having met or lived with my grandparents, but my mom has told me that they were not yet dead when I was born.

Since I was a child, I remember that my father forbade my mother to leave the house and also us, his daughters. He didn’t let my brothers leave the house much, but they left behind his back. What I can’t forget either is that my father used to shout, scold, insult and hit my mom, my sisters, my brothers and me all the time. I have scarce memories of my father sober. I don’t know where he used to go, but I didn’t see him all the time, and when he was at home, his home, as he used to rub it into us, most of the time he was drunk and he took advantage of those moments to humiliate us.

Today I can understand that behind the bans, the scolding, the blows and, to a lesser extent, the

advises, especially from my father, there was an implicit religious discourse which required me to be always “a good daughter”, “a good sister” and “a good woman”, and whose background content, considering my female context, required me to be always available to serve others. However, despite this service and company function that I was obliged to perform—not only during my childhood, but for the rest of my life—ten years ago I ceased living with my family and I left my village. That wasn’t a reason for me to stop practicing certain rituals concerning the Catholic religion, as going to mass.

I’m still a Catholic not because I accept without questioning the Catholic religion and principles with which I grew up, but because, despite the harm my father and others caused me—and that I accepted due to their threats, presumably substantiated, that I had to be good with everyone and thus be agreeable in the sight of God,—I have faith in something which I consider higher and has helped me to live. Therefore, I don’t believe in the Catholic Church or in what it professes, and I believe even less in its self-proclaimed “representatives”. My faith—that I can term as Catholic—hinges on God, a deity surpassing whatever can be considered human. I believe in God, who I consider a deity in the abstract, but that doesn’t mean that I venerate a God of the masculine gender, as it is thought on Earth.

Thus, I consider myself a believer in a God and saints swathed in Catholicism, but that doesn’t mean that I have a blind and submissive faith in the Catholic religion or their so-called representatives.



On more than one occasion, since my childhood, alone in my father’s house, I’ve questioned God for the infinite goodness he is awarded. I’ve told him with muffled screams, I’ve asked him in my mind and even in my dreams, that if he is so good and powerful, why he didn’t turn my father into a good person? Why my dad hurt us? Why we couldn’t live in peace and have always something to eat? Why my father forbade us to play and why my mother couldn’t leave the house? Why my father didn’t allow us to us to study? Why he never remembered our birthday and why he didn’t congratulate us? Why, when we fell, my father used to come to us not to comfort us, but to beat us more, “so that you stop being so dumbass”.

I’ve asked God about these and many other issues. Especially during several years, for me it became a kind of constant torment to think why my mom or my dad never told me “I love you”. Most of all, I expected to hear those words from my father, because for him it was obvious that “I wasn’t worth a damn” and, as I was a woman, I was “a shit”, as he repeated to me so many times. To date, neither she nor he has ever told me “I love you”, although I don’t expect it from him anymore, and although my mother doesn’t tell it to me but at least she shows it to me.

Although God hasn’t given me express or specific answers—or perhaps I haven’t seen them—I keep questioning Him, although I don’t think that, maliciously, He has doomed me to live under these and other types of violence. I think there is a chance that my father’s behavior and the one he demanded my mother, my sisters, my brothers and me, have some relation with the Catholic religion assumptions, but I don’t blame God for that; on the contrary, I think that thanks to my faith in Him I’ve been able to move forward and not, as they say, “turning the other cheek” but thinking and trying to make sense to what happens.

It is very difficult to explain the ways in which my faith in God and in some Saints has helped me to get ahead and I don’t think I could do it, but let me bring up some specific experiences in which I felt supported by this faith.

In my opinion, my father’s house has neither a great aesthetic nor a big logic in its construction. It has two rooms in a row and a kitchen on one side, forming a right angle. Over those rooms there are two other rooms; in one of them slept my mother, my father and the baby if there was one at that time. In the other one slept one of my sisters. Downstairs, in the room next to the kitchen, we slept one of my sisters, one of my brothers and me. In the courtyard there was a small basin to keep water, a bathroom and a toilet, and at the end of the courtyard there were two more rooms, in one of which slept another of my brothers. If we try to keep count of all my sisters and my brothers alive, we won’t get the total amount because not all of them lived there always.

In the remaining room at the end of the courtyard, my dad and my mom had set up an altar which practically took up a whole wall, full of religious pictures and images they used to buy at fairs or that some of their neighbors gave them. Unless they hadn’t money, both my mom and my dad took care

that every day one of us went to buy a candle that was lighted every night at the altar. Sometimes we had to go to light it late at night; others, mom or dad accompanied us. While we were there, sometimes they prayed an Our Father or a Hail Mary in a low voice; some other times they just watched in silence and with care at one of the images, they sighed, and at the end they crossed themselves and asked us to do the same. That's how I learned to cross myself, to pray and, I suppose, to be Catholic, to believe in God and the Saints.

Why my mom and dad had so many religious images and pictures? In my opinion they were more than enough, mainly because I had to clean each image, picture or holy card at least once every weekend, and it annoyed me to do so, not only because of the fact itself but because I couldn't play and I emphasize this because I started doing that task since I was very little, perhaps since I was six years old. It annoyed me that they were so many images because I took me a lot of time to dust and clean them. Sometimes I felt fear for being there among so many saints, and some others, I felt happy. Nowadays that may be laughable, but at the time I imagined a lot of things and I feared that the images could come to life. All of that was due to the fact that each year, religiously (forgive the expression), during Holy Week we saw the movies *The Passion of Christ* and *Marcelino, Bread and Wine*. Sometimes, even recently, I've dreamed myself hiding in the shadows, in dark streets with ruined houses and buildings, and from some place I can see some Saints walking down those streets.

Regarding the number of images, my mom and dad had collected them because, since they were young, both of them had headed stewardships many times, especially for the Lord of Tepalcingo, patron saint of Tepalcingo, Morelos, but that was a thing of the past. During the last years, my mom almost didn't go out because my father would not let her, and, on his part, he didn't mingle much with other men, except to get drunk.

Several years in a row, the whole family we went to Tepalcingo and there we used to sleep on palm mats on the courtyard earthen floor of a lodge. Before we left, my mom and my dad had to find a couple of "keepers" who they assigned to keep a watch on the house while we came back from what we always call the fair or feast of Tepalcingo or Tepalcinguito. Those "keepers" had to take care of the house, but they were also in charge of making the preparations for our return, which consisted in coordinate the women and men with whom my mom and dad had previously put in charge of preparing food and arranging the tables and chairs at home, so that when we came back, both those who had gone to the feast at Tepalcingo and those who had stayed in the community could join us to eat and drink.

The "keepers" had to check that everything would be ready in time and to make some ornaments to decorate the altar I already mentioned, and another one at Los Fresnos. Los Fresnos is a small mound of scrub land between my village and the neighboring village, where my dad, along with his "arms", ordered to put a shingle to cover some kind of cement bar with three niches containing three images of the Lord of Tepalcingo, each one topped with a wooden cross. Los Fresnos is usually covered with grass and trees, so it was the "keepers" task to weed it so we could walk out there.

The "arms" also perform as stewards, but they have a lower social rank and they spend less money than the real ones. As a steward, my father had to organize the trip to Tepalcingo, setting the dates for the outward and the inward journeys; in many occasions he also took some other persons besides us and the "arms". Before leaving, and according to the gender and social division of work, my mother was responsible to check that all the things necessary for the "keepers" to fulfill their duties were bought and stored at home. At Tepalcingo, she set up a few small stoves with embers for cooking in the courtyard of the lodge, a large blue pot (I remember it very well), and she prepared black coffee for all those who travelled with us, but also for those who wanted to have breakfast with us although they didn't belong to our community. Meanwhile, my dad, by himself or with one my sisters or brothers, used to go to the bakery to buy one or more large bags of "cocolos"—rhombus-shaped sweet breads—to share with everyone who was there. My mom and her "arms" were responsible for preparing breakfast, but also the two other daily meals during our stay at Tepalcingo.

That experience—in whose recounting I have abounded a little—makes me feel nostalgia, not only because it allowed us to get out of the house, but because—although to date I still don't understand the cause—during those days my father used to behave affably with us: he didn't shout at us, he didn't hit us and he didn't tell us that he loved us, but I remember that he used to take us by the hand and to buy

us some candies or a toy, things that didn't happen when we were at home. For her part and despite all the work she had, and with which we had to help her, my mother looked calmer, simply because she didn't feel the stress that at any time my father could hit her.

Such experiences confer meaning on my past and allow me to locate myself in the present and to project myself into the future based on my faith, because if I hadn't been born in my community and if my mother and my father hadn't been stewards, and if they hadn't educated me under those precepts typical of the Catholic practice in my context, I wouldn't have had even the knowledge of those events, but neither I would have lived those moments with my father, nor I would have seen the tranquility in my mother's eyes; and today I wouldn't be able to rescue those moments and save them for me, forever. That's why I keep being Catholic.

My mother used to feel calmer because during those days her stress wasn't emotional but rather functional. The problem was that, upon returning, my father always resumed his usual behavior, that is, violent. Nonetheless, I cherish those moments of my past that would have not happened if I hadn't grown up with her and with him in my community.

In addition to all of that, during those festivities my father used to be somewhat affectionate and he stopped drinking alcohol. In fact, as almost no man used to drink, there were not only moments of family cohesion, but of social cohesion that would have been impossible without the unity and organization required by the Lord of Tepalcingo stewardship.

Another issue that I want to bring up—in contrast to the “advantages” of being the daughter of the leading stewards—is that my life was marred by my father's violence towards my family. In this respect, and in relation to Catholicism, many times I feared that my father could hit me when I heard him coming back home, and I knew beforehand that he was going to hit my mother. Many were the occasions in which I hid under the stairs or the table, or that I stayed in the kitchen without making any noise. There were times when he wanted to see all of us, personally, in the kitchen, because he said that it was there where we should be for being women. However, many times I was able to escape from that and from my powerlessness to defend myself physically by running to my brother's bedroom next to the altar, where my father would never look for me. The fact is that in that room there was a clock which framed a large image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and there I stood up in front of Him, and I told Him how I felt. I looked at Him in the eyes and, at the right time, I could swear that He listened to me and that He even spoke to me. I don't know what happened, but after a few minutes in front of Him, and despite things had not changed with my father, I felt calmer and with the courage to, at least, yell at him to leave us alone.

As a result of those daily “scenes of violence”, when I was about to graduate from junior high school, one day my father beat up my mother. When I came back from school, she wasn't at home. Only he was there, drunk, cursing her and repeating that she had to come back because without her he was nothing. I just wanted to run away from there. I felt that I hated him and I couldn't stand seeing him or listening to him anymore.

I found out that my mother had sought refuge at a neighbor's house. The next day, and although my father enjoined me to drop out of school because, as I was a woman, my studies were a “bad investment” for him, I went to classes. During the recess, I picked my brother up at the primary school and we both went to see mom at the municipal seat, given that one of my brothers had already told me where she was staying.

There I saw my mother as I had never seen her before: her face was disfigured, bruised and bloated due to my father's wild beats. I didn't know what to do. I felt a strong tightness on the chest and at that moment I hated my father more than ever. From my heart I asked God why He didn't took him away and hence let us live in peace. So great was my impression that I couldn't even cry. I didn't want to hug my mother either, for fear of causing her more pain even if I caressed her gently.

I felt so ashamed to be the daughter of that man (my father), and I felt equally embarrassed that my younger brother could see mother in such a state, that I quailed completely and I froze up. As a matter of fact, I never asked him what he felt on that occasion, nor I've asked him if he remembers that day.

There was my mother, sitting on the edge of a bed in the house of her godparents, the only people she could resort to with confidence enough. She was sitting with my youngest sister in her arms, and

despite the pain I felt seeing her in such a state, pain that certainly was crueler in her, I asked her how she felt. “Better”, she said, and I just felt like running away from that place and scream. “Oh Lord, how can she feel better if she’s so battered?” I asked Him once again. Why He allowed that to happen?

I just went close to her. I asked her about my little sister and, finally, I hugged her with care. I could notice some joy in her eyes when she saw us. However, we didn’t stay too long over there because, although supposedly my father didn’t know where she was, the truth is that he was spying us, and according to me, to avoid putting her more at risk, I told my brother that we had to leave so that we could arrive at home within the schedule established at the school.

Even so, I went to see the school counselor who asked me if there was something I would like to talk about. I told him no and he said: “If you do not want to talk, it’s alright, but one of these days you will explode because you’re keeping too many things for yourself.” I thanked him for giving me permission to leave school during the class schedule. I walked fast and stressed up to my father’s house.

I was outraged, but I also felt lost. On the one hand, I didn’t want my mother to return to my father’s, who at that time I considered a monster; but on the other hand I didn’t know how would I go to classes the next day and I was worried about the way my schoolmates would receive me. It is absurd, I know, to feel worried about that; it was the last thing to do. My mother’s life was in danger and I was stupidly thinking about people’s potential gossips. I felt ashamed for that and I still feel so. However, the next day I went to classes and I never looked down nor I hesitated before anyone.

I don’t remember where was my father, but when I came back home I locked myself in the bathroom and there I cried for hours alone. I questioned God why he was doing us such things; what had we done for having to bear that situation. Hadn’t my mother suffered enough already? Why she had to keep suffering that? I got angry and I told Him: “It is due to this kind of things that so many people stop believing in you. Let me understand and find a way out.”

In fact, crying and complaining to God about what was happening didn’t improve a thing, but it was a relief for me. Some days later, I found out that my mother had sued my father and that he had been summoned by the court. I thought that we would all stay with my mother and leave my father, but I was wrong. The judge on duty had already said that there was no legal impediment for all of us to live with her, but the day of the trial he told my mother that if she wanted to leave she could leave, but alone. If she wanted to see us again, she would have to go back and live with my father. What had happened? My father had bribed the judge to change his verdict. Since then, I found out that we must be much more careful with the pretentious rational lawyers, than with God.

A terrible indignation overwhelmed me. My poor mother had to return with the ridiculous of my father who, when he went to pick her at her godparent’s house, he brought her a bouquet of roses, he asked for her forgiveness, and he promised her that he would never hit her again. My mother came back, not because she didn’t know that he was lying, but because she didn’t want to leave us alone with him, and because she had no economic support.

We lived more or less peaceful for several days, but afterwards things got bad one again. Some years later, my father told my mother a rudeness, indeed offensive, though not “as much” as on previous occasions. She just broke out, took the vegetables cutting board and hit my dad in the head. She left him somewhat unconscious; she took my youngest sister in her arms and my younger brother’s hand and rushed out of the house. She sought refuge at my oldest brother’s house and she didn’t come out from there. Since then she has not returned with my father. She reported him once again and he had to sign a separation agreement, but he refused.

What has to do with all of this the Catholic religion? The violence exerted by men against women is an awful act that has become naturalized as a normal behavior, partly because the idea that women are owned by men has become internalized. Women we are not the property of anyone, but of ourselves, so we must not accept blindly what people tell us about what is good or evil before God. The fact that my mom could question herself about it is what has enabled her—as well as my sisters and my brothers—to go on, instilling in our past a different meaning, one not marked by my father’s violence but by each of us.

I don’t think that God predestined my father to harm us. The decision to abuse us lay in my father, not in God. Sometimes it is necessary to separate things, people and beliefs, because not always everything is related or depends on everything; making these separations has helped me to understand why,

instead of getting angry with God or reject the Catholic religion, now I can rather meet God again from myself.

I want to conclude this section on my experiences with something a bit more pleasant, at least to close a cycle in my memory. I am Catholic because, although my family is poor and therefore me too, my belief in God is something that my mother and my father instilled in me. They didn't give me the least material goods to live, they didn't hug me when I needed it, they didn't tell me 'I love you', but they gave me experiences wherein I now draw the necessary elements to live, to defend myself and to position myself in life. Due to all of this I am still Catholic, because based on the religious values instilled in me I keep in touch with my mom and my dad. I keep being Catholic and I want to keep being so because I want to keep for myself and forever something unique from her and from him; something that no one else could have given me and that no one else will ever give me, because from those values, willingly or unwillingly, she and him taught me to set up in life.

Closely related to the features I've found in the Catholic religion instilled with and practiced by my family, there are some forms that I understand as reunion and celebration, and I can do it so not only due to the Catholicism, but due to what, in anthropological terms, it's called religious syncretism, that is, the blend between the Catholic religion imposed by the Spaniards and the beliefs "typical" of my indigenous ancestors. The result of this combination is that being Catholic makes sense for me not only due to the experiences that I lived personally within my family, but due to those situations I have no certainty about, but which I feel.

I refer specifically to All Saints Days and the Days of the Dead, when, just as it happened during our trip to the Tepalcingo fair, my father used to behave well and, deceptively, we were all happy. Moreover, as a result of the indigenous tradition in which I grew up, those were moments in which I felt that I could meet again with my two brothers and my sister, and gather with my grandparents, all of them already dead. I recall that during those days the family organization was simply beautiful, because while mom and dad were buying things for the offering, my sister or I used to go to the corn mill and we prepared *memelas*³⁶.

We used to help mother to prepare the food, while me or the youngest children at home were in charge of going to cut flowers in the countryside to signal the "path" from the lodge courtyard door to the offering. I keep being Catholic because believing in this religion and in the customs of my community allows me to feel connected with all my family, alive or dead. I keep being Catholic because, if I wasn't, everything I have written would lose its meaning, therefore I need those two traditions because ultimately I owe myself to both of them.

Therefore, based on the memories stemming from my family experiences I find myself and I can declare myself Catholic; that's how I learned to be so, and from those experiences I realize that I embraced Catholicism as a part of me. In agreement and in disagreement with this, I keep being Catholic because, despite the numerous reflections that I make on this point, I cannot get rid of religion because it is the metaphysical foundation on which my family based my life.

This belief is, indeed, what allows me to own and live according to a tradition that is not only full of dominance and subordination, but that also gives me hope. Perceive the Catholic religion in linear and, perhaps, in superficial terms won't do much good if what we want is to question it and, most of all, renovate it. Rather, we must try to find the root-cause the Catholic religion or its representatives on Earth recurred to dislodge women and place men in a position with authority and power over everybody else. I think that trying to discover the root of the exaltation of men over women can help us, if not to change the world, at least to live more tranquil with ourselves from the vanishing points in this that can only be considered as imposition, dominance, control, and even possession of women, but that can also confer us possibilities.

Thus, I consider that this Catholic tradition, within which I have lived, has not entailed for me any kind of subordination because its nature entails to subordinate women, but because those who have assumed its control so have established, standardized, naturalized and legitimized it. These mortal individuals are those who discriminate, oppress, and take advantage not only of women but of other groups, as they did during the Colonial period, when the Spaniards, making the most of the beliefs of the natives, not only looted their wealth but they evangelized them extolling a Catholic God over their own gods. Besides stealing their material goods, they also strived to uproot their faith in those gods so

that they placed it in a Catholic God. Nonetheless, despite their evangelist attempts and the multiple killings and persecutions they carried out in God's name, they failed to erase that pre-Columbian faith of which I consider myself an heiress.

In any case, those liable for these killings, those who ordered and executed them, were men and not God. This is my viewpoint which, of course, I can't substantiate; but neither them can prove that God ordered them to kill, pursue and convict women and men on His behalf.

The subordination that can be linked to the Catholic religion is of such a nature that it can be considered a consequence of the way the representatives of the Catholic religious institution exercise the power they hold unlawfully. But, on the other hand, once confirmed that, indeed, there's a subordination stemming from the Catholic religion, we cannot remain passive before that, we must seek a way to root it out.

With the previous point I want to emphasize that the Catholic religion has been morally conceived considering social, cultural, political and economic aspects, "typical" of each society at certain times. Thus, the Catholic religion and the way of professing that faith are consistent with the way they were conceived by persons, both male and female. Therefore, we are those persons who interpret it, who live it and, very often, who need it, and we are those who have built and continue to build diverse ways of practicing our faith in the Catholic religion.

However, we all have our personal mode of believing in God. Despite being diverse persons living in different places and moments in history, there are issues that remain intact, such as the subordination, the exclusion, the reification and, even, the demonizing of women; and we have to look at those situations and ask ourselves why they persist, whose interests are they, and so on.

What history lets us see clearly is that the Catholic religious institution has been built with a patriarchal code which represents and demands women's submission, service and company for men's enjoyment. It is not a question of putting an end to Catholicism or eliminating male control, but rather of dismantling the patriarchal structure that remains as the social construction foundation of the Catholics' practice of their faith, not only for the well-being of women, but to define and practice this faith in a different way, so that living it is more fair for everyone and that their gender, social class, ethnic group, age, sexual orientation or preference, education or place of residence, among other elements, stop being considered as the social conditions to resolve if someone is or can consider him/herself Catholic. Besides, who would be authorized to tell us which is the correct way to be Catholic?

Hence, I keep being Catholic not only because that assures me to have a better life in heaven after my death, but because I deem that being Catholic is not synonymous with submission or nonsense. Every person can fill with content its own way of believing and single out those elements giving some meaning to his/her life, excluding that being Catholic implies having existential problems. I don't see myself or any other Catholic as victims of the oppression that has been created. Being victims entails to stay without doing anything and accept whatever happens to us without even questioning it. That's why I prefer to think about us as persons with an agency ability to live our daily lives, and specially to decide about our faith and how to practice it. Being Catholic is not the issue, but rather the attitude and the stance that we adopt: Are there ways to confer it a personal meaning that doesn't get unlinked from the Catholic spirituality?

If I were convinced that being Catholic implies accepting the subordination over me just for being woman, native and poor, I wouldn't be such. But under the circumstances that I have lived, being Catholic may be somehow different from what is traditionally enforced. Thus, to live this 'being Catholic' it is crucial to eliminate those subordinations due to their consequences detrimental not only to women but also to poor people, whose oppression, social inequality, and often condemnation, were intended to be established and be naturalized as requisites of a suffering compulsory to enter heaven, be happy and live forever.

This is not to say that everyone can believe in anything crossing his/her mind in terms of the Catholic religion. There must be a common point, and it can be from the creation and conservation of a spirituality with God inside of us. Moreover, we couldn't fail to have a confluence point, since we are beings living in a society and, therefore, not detached from it, but in constant interaction and, hence, we represent its synthesis.

So, I can say that what keeps me within the Catholic religion (although not in the Church) is my

faith and, based on it, the connection that I find with my family.

TOWARDS A WOMAN'S LIBERATION THEOLOGY

SONIA CORRAL VILLAR

I have confirmed it. It is unlikely that a nun gets in a long-haul bus or train on which I travel, but when one of them crosses the automatic door, unerringly, unfailingly, she ends sitting by my side or in front of me.

I already feel her inquisitive gaze... It is obvious that she wants to talk to me... I play dumb, but it's inevitable: I've already fallen into her clutches. A guilt feeling already forgotten comes back to me and I can't avoid it. Jesus, what a cross!

In my head, memories of my childhood and adolescence start to pile up. My feet hurt inside my Sunday shoes during those endless and incomprehensible masses, while the cold cuts through to my bones. The catechist's repertoire is running out of mechanical responses, so I'd better stop asking so many questions and keep quiet if I want to dress for my communion.

And the gloomier stage, the one that made me reject and even hate religion: the boarding school and its five daily prayers, the unbearable sessions of reflection on abortion and sexuality and, especially, my fear that a nun could come into my room at night... If that happened, there was no turning back.

Today, it is obvious that I am not going to mass. Of course, I didn't have a church wedding and my son is not baptized. Obviously, I've breached the Catholic precepts that I was instilled and, to make matters worse, I declare myself publicly agnostic..., but the guilty feeling remains there: What extraordinary power they have upon me?

It's now when I ask myself if a person who has been raised within a culture and with religious values can lay them aside out of pure conviction. Of course not! That's what I suffer in my own flesh, especially when I see a nun. That's my burden for being a bad girl: although I don't consider myself Catholic, my moral is!

That past condemns me to have a Christian, Catholic, Apostolic and Roman conscience. Moreover, I'm part of the Church census by the mere fact of having been baptized. This is a trick used by the Catholic institution to increase the number of its followers. From now on, I will call "entity" this obsolete institution.

However, statistics do not lie: our religion is declining. There are close to 1.2 billion Catholics in the world, and almost 40% of them live in Latin America. Despite these so overwhelming data, the Catholic religion shrank 13% between 1995 and 2014 in Latin America, its stronghold. The drop in the number of believers is a worldwide phenomenon.

Spain numbers are brutal, they're beaten up. Although three out of every four Spaniards consider themselves Catholics, 65% of them don't go to mass almost ever: they consider themselves non-churchgoers Catholics. Moreover, we must keep in mind that the population who practices this religion is mainly integrated by women, older people, from small towns, from the working class and with primary or secondary education.

Indeed, in Latin America many people declare themselves Catholics by a mere pose, by tradition or because they haven't even stop to think rationally on the reach of their beliefs. Mostly we are women, many devout of a patriarchal entity that has imposed on us unequal guidelines in comparison with men, and that has assigned us a role based on our gender. Being Catholic by designation doesn't entail major commitments, but believing and serving the entity does create us a serious problem and prevents us from having a minimum feminist consciousness.

A society declaring itself civilized should be more critical regarding an institution that discrimi-

nates against women by allocating them a merely passive role. But, can anyone be Catholic and expect to change an entity that boasts of not being democratic? "If you don't like it, leave it," say many. Others challenge: "Let them create their own religion." They suggest us to *rob Peter to pay Paul*, but it's not that easy, at the risk of being accused of lack of self-control. Here our education, the family pressure and cultural values that have stood the test of two thousand years carry a lot of weight. Besides, is there a better way to change things than from inside?

The entity, the so-called best organized institution in the world, has it quite clear. From the gilded columns of the Vatican, the Catholic Church clears its image with a more "progressive" Pope, but on the other hand it insists in not getting attuned to the new times and it maintains the submissive role of the "fair sex".

In a paragraph of his *Letter to women*, John Paul II explains that "if Christ entrusted only to men the task of being an icon of his countenance as shepherd and bridegroom of the Church through the exercise of the ministerial priesthood, this in no way detracts from the role of women." No, come off it! The so-called "traveller Pope" asserts that "these role distinctions should not be viewed in accordance with the criteria of functionality typical in human societies. Rather they must be understood according to the particular criteria of the *sacramental economy*, i.e. the economy of 'signs' which God freely chooses in order to become present in the midst of humanity."

The Polish Pope considered that "the life of the Church in the Third Millennium will certainly not be lacking in new and surprising manifestations of 'the feminine genius'", alluding to the "great line of women martyrs, saints and famous mystics" and the "many women, inspired by faith, who were responsible for initiatives of extraordinary social importance, especially in serving the poorest of the poor." And, to make matters worse, he points out that women "see man in its greatness and limits", and try to "help them". We must help the men because so tells us God, and serve the poorest: such is the vision of a Pope who has been sold to us as a pioneer of the human rights of women.

Benedict XVI went almost unnoticed through the papal ministry and he reinforced the "feminist interpretation" of its predecessor. He warned of the risk of individualism, given that "when man or woman intend to be autonomous and fully self-sufficient, they run the risk of locking themselves in a self-realization which considers as a freedom conquest the overcoming of any natural, social or religious link, but which in fact boils down to an oppressive loneliness".

The current Pope Emeritus, from his past in the Hitlerian Youth and his fierce criticism to homosexuality, stated that "today there's still a macho mentality, which ignores the novelty of Christianity, which recognizes and proclaims the equal dignity and responsibility of women with respect to men". The same responsibility and dignity? We already know your intentions, Ratzinger, it couldn't be otherwise, with that little rascal face of yours: God helps those who help themselves.

And as a culmination, the great hope of Latin America, despite the fact that the Matthew's Gospel warns that "no one is a prophet in one's own land": Pope Francis. In a few months his charisma has made him one of the most influential leaders in the world and he warns that one of the dangers which humiliates woman is "to promote a kind of emancipation that, to occupy the spaces taken up by the masculine, abandons the feminine, and the precious features characterizing it". I don't understand why they fear positive concepts such as emancipation or liberty.

"I suffer, and I tell you the truth, when I see in the Church or in some ecclesial institutions that the role of women is tossed aside to a role of servitude and not of service," so regrets the Argentine Supreme Pontiff. He proposes us to be servers and not servants, a euphemism in order for those of us who live in the third millennium.

During the election ceremony of the first Jesuit Pope, while the chapel chimney emitted the white *fumata* after the third voting, in St. Peter's square was also released a symbolic pink *fumata*. That's just our luck: the last relay, although with better ways, has frustrated the expectations of the Catholic Women's and feminist movements.

Wojtyla, Ratzinger, and Bergoglio so far, didn't take any significant step to meet the claims of women's religious groups, increasingly well organized. Besides having unpronounceable surnames, the last Saint Peter's successors heading the entity are 'whiter than white': to justify the inequality of women they refer to the will of God, to His word stated in the Bible, and to the theologians of the Christian history.

In its “Letter to the Corinthians” (14 34), the best-selling book of all time orders: “As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.”

In the “Epistles to Timothy”, the Bible insists on women’s silence and their whole submission: “I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. But women will be saved through childbearing—if they continue in faith, love and holiness with propriety.”

“It’s Eve, the temptress, who we must guard ourselves against in every woman... I can’t see what worth a woman can be for a man if one excludes the function of conceiving children”, highlights Saint Augustine of Hippo. Considered the maximum thinker of the first millennium Christianity, this saint proposes that women “should not be illuminated or educated in any way. In fact, they should be segregated, as they are insidious and involuntary cause of erections in the holy men”.

Already in the 13th century, Saint Thomas Aquinas, doctor of the Church for his metaphysical contributions to theology, thus refers to woman: “She is defective and poorly born, because the active power of the male seed tends to the production of a perfect resemblance in the male gender, while the production of a woman comes from a lack of active power”.

Martin Luther’s Reform in the 16th century neither brings good news for women. “Thus you see how weak and barely healthy are sterile women; while those blessed with many children are more healthy, clean and cheerful. But if they become tired or even die, it does not matter. Let them die in childbirth: that is why they are there”, states the German theologian. The forerunner of Lutheranism asserts that girls begin to walk and talk before the boys do, “because weeds always grow faster than the good seeds”.

The derogatory vision about women by the men of the entity didn’t change much in the 20th century, as Federico Arvesu confirms it in *Virility and its sexual basics*. In his analysis, this Jesuit physician concludes that women organism “is set up for servicing a womb; the body of man is set up for servicing a brain”.

These words are a whole “treasure” of our Christian tradition, but let’s stop touching a sore spot. Neither the Bible nor the past thinkers knew that at the end of the 19th century, a social movement, vindicating the equality of rights between men and women, achieved and is still seeking a fairer world.

It is unconceivable that the Pontiffs haven’t perceived that feminism coincides in its objectives. Even so, I understand that the Pope position implies the continuism of a patriarchal body and does not have to trail behind anything imposed by the new times, but if they want the entity to last another two thousand years, things will have to change.

We must acknowledge the entity a historical evolution, if not in favor of women, at least not against them. Gone are the dark times of the Inquisition, which vented its rage on witches (i.e. women), who were heretics due to their medical knowledge or to the simple expression of their femininity, and millions of them were sentenced to aberrant tortures or to the purifying death at the stake.

Throughout history, the entity has also maintained a privileged position in the economic, political and social scenarios. Evil tongues say that it possesses the second largest gold treasure in the world, only behind the United States. It has adapted to the new times with banking investments and stocks in international corporations to such an extent that on Wall Street it is considered the largest broker in the world. And this despite the fact that Timothy said: “Money is the root of all evil.”

While it is true that today in Latin America only Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic are Catholic confessional States in keeping with their Constitution, the political representatives on duty, and therefore their countries, are in collusion with the Catholic structure. In every solemn act, the entity must be present and the Latin-American heads of state are dying to appear in a photo with the Pope.

These same political leaders look the other way when it comes to collect taxes on entity’s real estate: thousands of churches, convents, schools, and other properties that are treasured by the Holy See, which is not only the holder of the Vatican State, but of one of every three buildings in the city of Rome.

The entity is still very present in Latin America and thus it will remain for some generations more,

because it dominates the asset which defines the culture and the values of our society: education. Who hasn't attended a Catholic school or collaborated with a close-related association? Who hasn't participated in solidarity actions led by the entity?

Catholic education provides moral and civic principles, good manners and respect, and we must acknowledge that it has turned many of us into strong, independent and prestigious professionals. However, it also indoctrinates us from childhood to secure the greatest number of followers, instead of waiting for each one to decide by himself/herself his/her religious ideas.

We, women, who drag an intrinsic ignominy, who are guilty of the original sin, have been educated to perform the role of servants, sorry, of servers. The female role in the entity is thus special: as passive and submissive beings that we are, we have to exercise charity and humility, in silence.

First, humility is not at odds with intelligence and power, and second, I can't stand the concept of charity, which has more to do with compassion or pity, than with solidarity or social justice. May Caritas forgive me—although it was the first Spanish international organization to have a woman as its president—but I would change its name.

I know that around those worlds of God, in many other religions women are treated like cattle, but that's no reason for not recognizing that women carry out most of the work performed by the entity. That recognition should be compensated economically, because men, although they are much less, usually are paid for their work, almost always based on making decisions. No one will deny that unpaid work is invisible and doesn't grant any prestige.

Women's believing experience is especially affected by the entity's stance on issues as sexually feminine as the use of contraceptives and abortion. This is where, in my opinion, there is an irreconcilable rupture not only with women, but with society in general, and logic in particular.

The best contraceptive method is to avoid every premarital intercourse and, afterwards, let's procreate without limits, suggests the entity. That seems a great idea, but tell it to the millions of Africans who have died of AIDS. And so it goes on, astray, not only against birth control measures but, indirectly, favoring the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, despite the campaigns of many humanitarian organizations, including the UN.

Now, if we talk about abortion, then my flesh crawls, but the all-mighty entity gets even more upset, as it punishes it with the very same excommunication. In Mexico, women are fortunate because Cardinal Norberto Rivera empowered all the priests of the country to absolve those who committed this serious sin but, sure thing, only during Lent.

The therapeutic abortion, when the woman's life is in danger during the gestation period or the fetus is unviable, and the so-called "sentimental" abortion, when the pregnancy is due to a rape and brings about a huge psychological and physical burden for the woman, are rejected by the entity which, championing the right to life, puts us at risk of death or breaks our life in two. Is it or isn't it enough to be outraged?

Many women we want and we need to live our sexuality before or outside marriage, but it takes all sorts to make a world. Without going any further, a few months ago, on some news programs and newspapers the last news was the best seller book written by Constaza Miriano with the unambiguous title *Get Married and be submissive*, where she proposes that we give up the logic of emancipation because the role of men is "to personify the guide, the standard, the authority", and that of women "to receive life".

But if this submissive Italian author is in the news because her vision is surprising or inhospitable, no less extraordinary are the tireless efforts of feminine or feminist associations that, within the entity, dare to break the imposed silence. They are capable of defending the equality of women within a misogynist institution and they draw their strength from where there isn't any to keep fighting for their rights in a very hostile environment.

In the New Testament, God is the father of Jesus Christ who only summons men to be his representatives, and that fact is used as an excuse by the patriarchal vision and as the origin of the pictorial representations of the Creator. For their part, many feminist theologians refer to the Genesis—in which God created Adam and Eve "in his image and likeness"—as a vision in which the gender of the Lord is not defined. If the mere idea of a goddess is a blasphemy, then let's agree that God has no sex and, therefore, no gender either.

The feminist theology looks for a fair role for women in history and their contribution to the religion, not only by known holy women but also by Christian women who contribute splendid things. The female theorists consider that although the entity is mostly feminine in its paintings, the absence of women in its decision-making process and their low visibility greatly impoverishes the institution.

But this is not an easy task. Some argue that feminists want to resemble men to take away their power; they deride women contributions to delegitimize their work, as they already did against the suffragettes, the women who fought to obtain the right to vote. Although many years of denied claims have already passed, there are many examples of very active associations and groups with very clear ideas.

That's the case of the Latin American Network of Catholic Women for the Right to Decide, present in several countries, which reclaims the sexual and reproductive rights of women. "Without the rights of women, the rights are not human," "Mary was consulted to be the mother of God," "Freedom of conscience is a Catholic value," are some of the messages appearing intermittently in their web page.

If Latin American women went on strike, the churches would look almost empty. To get an idea, let's remember the film *A day without Mexicans*, because just like Latin Americans are extremely important for the US economy, women are the mainstay of the entity. What a paradox!

In the old Europe, a group of Catalan Catholic women goes a little further. The Group of Women in the Church (*Collectiu de Dones en l'Esglesia*) has denounced that the entity doesn't respect the human rights that it proclaims so much for others. These deeply Catholic women want to "live their faith in an adult and responsible manner, with a free, critical and constructive spirit", and they reclaim "a change in the negative attitude of the Church, especially its hierarchy, towards women". They feel entitled to ask for parity within the Catholic institution; they request a new language and a renewed evangelization, and they even demand the entity to put an end to its discrimination against women and, therefore, to grant them the access to priesthood. One of the group leaders, Dolors Figueras, says that she is ashamed "because our Church is making a fool of itself. It must be the only institution in the world, at least in the western hemisphere, still marginalizing women".

One has to praise the merit of the International Union of General Mothers Superiors, a body integrated by leaders of congregations whose purpose is to promote the knowledge of religious life. Although nuns give me the creeps due to my traumatic adolescence, certainly we must recognize their courage for sending a letter recently to his Holiness.

In their missive, they suggest Pope Francisco to appoint women to hold high-level decision-making positions within the specialized bodies of the papal curia, to participate in the synods and other critical dialogue meetings, and even to take part in the formation of seminarians, "so that future priests may have a better understanding of women psychology and also of the female religious life".

We must utter a "wow" for the work carried out by the international movement Women's Ordination Worldwide. This important group of nuns, led by the Americans, advocates "the equality and the ordination of women in the Catholic Church", notwithstanding that the entity has officially banned this last point.

The movement has integrated an ecumenical network of organizations around the world that even dares to "challenge the global discrimination against women in the Roman Catholic Church". They are following the example of Anglican Christians who not only have women priests but also, since last year, their first woman bishop, and they disregard the naysayers who advertise that their fight will be the end of the entity.

Their confrontation is direct with the vision of the Chief Pontiffs and the 1917 Canon Law Code, still prevailing in this aspect, which stipulates that to be a Cardinal, the person "must be male and at least priest". In his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, Pope John Paul II asserts that it is not admissible to ordain women to priesthood using the stale argument of the Holy Scriptures: "In keeping with God's Plan for His Church". Benedict emphasizes that his predecessor's letter "has an infallibility quality" and the Latin American Pope concludes that "the door is closed".

In view of such answer, the Women's Ordination Worldwide movement replies with a new challenge. At these days, close to the famous *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* twentieth anniversary commemoration, they invite both men and women to take action by writing a letter to Pope Francis.

In conclusion, and in view of the Catholicism decline in Latin America, the Catholic women, whether by conviction or by appointment, we must play a more active role in the entity, in keeping with the times we are living. These are times in which any woman has a minimum feminist conscience and our religion must not be an obstacle to our development as persons.

The Holy Scriptures or the Catholic theologian's anachronistic arguments are already meaningless for us. The highest representatives of the entity in this world say that they have no authority to change God's word, but women we have another interpretation of that word.

The insistence on a chauvinist tradition that God himself would consider enemy of His message is an insult to the intelligence of every Catholic woman. The entity has never wanted to settle this issue because its evolution has not been parallel to that of society, and its attitude can be defined with one word: fear.

They fear change, they fear evolution and they fear women. They fear that we decide to have or not have children. They fear that we revitalize and renew Catholicism. They fear that we could be ordained as priests, although the Anglican Church has proven that the world doesn't sink for that; in fact, it is currently ordaining more women than men.

However, I think this change has to be carried out from within and by those who are involved. Revolutions or external impositions are out of the question. For years, the Catholic feminist collectives have been asking the entity to respect the human rights of women believers. And more and more male and female theologians are adhering to this trend.

If the theology of liberation had to break the Vatican chains to understand Latin America and live with poverty and fight against oppression, don't we need now a theological current supportive of the dignity of women and their liberation within the Catholic structures?

In this theory of women's Liberation, the entity would have to let go that encumbrance and even become a sign of liberation for women, because many of us have already been forced to choose; we have preferred to be faithful to ourselves as women and put aside the Catholic beliefs, instead of adapting ourselves to the established but without being satisfied with our own way of life.

If this movement gets the reconciliation of the entity with women, I'm sure that its strength will not lie on power, tradition, culture or education, but on the credibility of the institution, as well as in convincing new practicing Catholics.

“Where woman reigns, the devil is prime minister”.

Proverb

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¹ Documentation and Studies of Women, Nonprofit Organization

² Catholic Women for the Right to Decide, Nonprofit Organization

³ Latin American Network of Catholic Women for the Right to Decide

⁴ April full moon

⁵ The female disciple of Jesus

⁶ Mary the Egyptian

⁷ Assembly of Young Poets

⁸ National Institute of Fine Arts Bibliographic Dictionary of Mexican Writers

⁹ The Tlahuicas were an Aztec group living in the area that is now the State of Morelos in the central part of Mexico prior to the Spanish conquest (1521 A.d.).

¹⁰ Explanatory note: as much as possible, in my writing I will expressly use the female gender to be inclusive when using collective terms. However, in keeping with the principle of economy of words, sometimes I will resort to the common use of plurals like “us”, “Christians”, to refer both to men and women who belong to those groups.

¹¹ Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy

¹² Explanatory note: as much as possible, in my writing I will expressly use the female gender to be inclusive when using collective terms. However, in keeping with the principle of economy of words, sometimes I will resort to the common use of plurals like “us”, “Christians”, to refer both to men and women who belong to those groups.

¹³ Mt 13, 24-30.

¹⁴ God’s blow or spirit, Gen 1, 2.

¹⁵ Mc 4, 26-34.

¹⁶ *Mater et Magistra* is the encyclical written by Pope John XXIII on the topic of “Christianity and Social Progress”, promulgated on 15 May 1961.

¹⁷ Ga 4, 4-5.

¹⁸ Lc 8, 1-2.

¹⁹ Mt 27, 55.

²⁰ Mt 26, 56

²¹ Mc 16, 1-8.

²² Lc 2, 35

²³ “Women’s Suffrage in The United States”, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia”.

²⁴ I Tim 2, 1-4.

²⁵ Lc 12, 49.

²⁶ Mt 13, 54-58.

²⁷ Walt Whitman, *Hojas de hierba*, Mexico, Novaro, 1979, p. 517.

²⁸ Octavio Paz, *El arco y la lira*, Mexico, FCE, 1972.

²⁹ Raymundo Ramos, *Deíctico de poesía religiosa mexicana*, Mexico, Lumen, 2003.

³⁰ María Zambrano, *La confesión: género literario*, Madrid, Siruela, 2004, p. 35.

³¹ Martin Heidegger, *Arte y poesía*, Mexico, FCE, 1973, p. 6.

³² Adriana Yáñez, *Los románticos: nuestros contemporáneos*, Mexico, Alianza, 1993, p. 17.

³³ Alfonso Salvini, *San Antonio de Padua*, San Pablo, 2001, p. 109.

³⁴ Ramón Xirau, *Cinco filósofos y lo sagrado*, Mexico, Colmex, 1999, p. 74.

³⁵ Robert Graves, *La diosa blanca. Historia comparada del mito poético*, Buenos Aires, Losada, 1970, pp. 639-640.

³⁶ The *memelas* are oval and thick hand-made corn tortillas well spread with lard and filled with grounded boiled black beans. They are browned on low heat, covered with a green or red chili hot sauce, and dusted with cheese.