

Women and the Meaning of Suffering

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Abstract: This study proposes that the experience of suffering is an integral aspect of women's experience of being human. When women minister, it is frequently within the framework of the experience of personally dealing with birth- and death-related aspects of suffering, or in caring for those who are experiencing pain in one form or another.¹ Key understandings from women writers offer a means for the development of a contemporary Christian ministerial response to the experience of suffering. The essay concludes with reflections upon the place of suffering in relation to the mission of the Church.

HAS THERE BEEN A CULTURE THAT HAS NOT ADDRESSED the issue of suffering in some form or another? Regardless of historical period or geographical location, "the attempt to understand and manage (suffering) is itself one of (humankind's) most ubiquitous characteristics".² The experience of suffering is integral to the human condition because it is integrally linked to the inescapable realities of birth and death.³ Theo-

1. In this study I follow the distinction made by Rankka, "Suffering is different from pain in that suffering is the resulting condition of distress or disruption of the person arising from pain or discomfort.... Pain is frequently identified as the most common source of suffering while suffering can result from pain but also from other sources." She includes physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual trauma in her study. Kristine Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering: An Atonement Rowing Toward God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998) 24.

2. David Bakan, *Disease, Pain and Sacrifice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968)

3. Bakan addresses the issue of suffering from the perspective of psychology and points out that disease is one of the most conspicuous manifestations of suffering. Wendy Farley proposes that where classicist theology has been dedicated to showing that suffering is not unjust it is addressing the wrong question. "Instead of beginning with a logical conundrum, we must begin with the understanding that theodicy's initial subject matter is raw pain." Wendy Farley, "The Practice of Theodicy" in Margaret E. Mohrmann and Mark J. Hanson (eds.), *Pain Seeking Understanding: Suffering, Medicine and Faith* (Cleveland OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1999) 103-114; see p. 104.

3. See Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press 1973). Becker's Preface states his thesis: "the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity - activity designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for

logians from the major religious traditions, and philosophers throughout history have addressed the issue principally by developing theories about the problem of evil. Theodicy, the analysis of the existence of moral and physical evil, which causes misery and suffering in all its forms, in the context of the affirmation of a good, just, almighty and all-loving God, gives evidence of the continuing attempt to address this problem.⁴

My concern is to address this issue from a ministerial context. How can women as Christians speak to each other and to the world about the significance of suffering for their lives? What are some of the ways in which women writers are addressing the issue that sheds new light on the human understanding of pain and suffering? In what ways can the church proclaim the reign of God so that "raw pain" can be seen to have significance for the story of humanity? An example of one woman's style of listening and connectedness is reported in the recurrent memories of her childhood.

For many years I was...a listener as the older women talked and debated about everything from food to families to world affairs, to "women's problems". All the while there were the ubiquitous coffee cups, sometimes half-smoked cigarettes or a shot of whiskey, and always for me, a sense of being part of a bigger, transforming conversation – one that helped these women (and me) know themselves and their lives differently than if they had remained totally separate or silent.⁵

She remembers this experience as dwelling in "a house of suffering... and of hope".⁶ This is the structure of her own research on suffering

man" (p. ix). He describes the fear of death as a prominent part of our Western psychological makeup.

4. A variety of theodicies has developed to address this question of evil and suffering in the world. Feminist writers are developing new understandings of these. A contrast between mainstream approach and a feminist approach can be seen in the writings of Terence W. Tilley and Kristine Rankka Tilley ("Evil, Problem of" in J. A. Komonchak, M. Collins and D. Lane [eds.], *The New Dictionary of Theology* [Dublin: Gill & McMillan, 1987] 360-63) divides theodicies into three groups: i) retrospective: explaining evil in terms of its causes. Augustine and Aquinas argue that evil is not something in itself but the absence of good (p. 360); ii) prospective: explaining evil by showing what purposes it serves in the world. Irenaeus, Schleiermacher and the contemporary theologian Hick represent this group. "The realities of pain and suffering, temptation and sin, are necessary for humans to develop ultimately into people worthy to share life with God." (p. 361); iii) this group of theodicies "redefines key terms to eliminate the question". Representatives of this group are: Cobb, Ford and Plantinga (p. 362). Rankka however, using a different typology, describes seven responses to questions raised by suffering (*Women and the Value of Suffering*, 37-43). The seventh approach is described as "the faith solution": when no resolution to the mystery of evil and suffering can be found one "must come face to face with the ultimate mystery of evil and the incomprehensibility of God.... One surrenders in love to God's incomprehensibility" (p. 42).

5. Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering*, xv.

6. Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering*, xv, xvi.

and hope. It is important for contemporary theologians, aware of changing aspects of people's experiences in church and society, and also of the mission of the church today, to address the question of suffering in such a way that their word is accessible to, and inclusive of, those who are searching for an understanding of the significance of pain in their lives, and that it is not left to medical or social scientists to monopolise our understanding, to supplant the role of the church and its ministers, or to popularise an easy or over-simplified approach to suffering.⁷

RESPONSES TO SUFFERING

I have chosen to examine ways in which some women writers have addressed the issue, because I believe that they have something unique in their theological and ministerial approaches that can add an alternative dimension to both past and present scholarly and pastoral writing. I believe that what characterizes women's approach is that they recognise the universal as well as the particular aspects of suffering, particularly that of women's experience of suffering through their experiences of connectedness and separation in relationships.⁸ The omnipresence of pain and suffering in regard to the human condition, especially in regard to menstruation and childbirth, means that women experience suffering on a regular basis and respond to it concretely out of the circumstances of their lives, rather than try to define it rationally, or explain it abstractly.

An ever-present myth in humanity's story is the utopian dream of a life free from suffering.⁹ Perhaps one of the most outstanding charac-

7. Such an alternative approach is presented by Farley, "Theodicy's proper subject matter is the shock of permanent loss: the face that has been burned off, the beloved child whose beautiful little soul has flickered out, the discovery of an illness that promises to strip away one's mind before finally surrendering the body to death. Human capacities for understanding are radically undermined when we school ourselves to indifference to suffering's power. The proper work of theodicy is to help purge us of this temptation." ("The Practice of Theodicy", 104).

8. Connectedness can be experienced in unusual ways. Barbara Fiand describes an experience where a woman became violently ill while she was sitting with a terminally ill friend. Fiand comments that the visitor had "picked up" the pain of her friend. This idea is developed in a chapter, "Bearing the sufferings of others", in *Prayer and the Quest for Healing: Our Personal Transformation and Cosmic Responsibility* (New York: Crossroad, 1999) 95-101; see p. 95.

9. Some aspects of the pervasiveness of suffering may be seen in the following comment. "Personal and communal anguish are no strangers to those of any period in history while manifestations of suffering in our own time appear to have reached devastating proportions. According to the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel, more than 1.3 billion people (or about one-fifth of the world's population) suffer hunger and poverty today. Some 40,000,000 die per year from malnutrition and hunger, while 40,000 children under the age of five die *per day* due to lack of disease-preventing vaccines. The most conservative estimates reveal that 1.4 to 1.9 million children in the United States are the victims of physical abuse each year, while the toll that emotional trauma exacts in cases where children witness violence between their parents still cannot be fully determined"

teristics of the western world at the close of this century is its pervasive and continuing resistance to suffering. It is evasion rather than integration that is most prevalent in the contemporary western approach to suffering. Such evasion is not a characteristic of Lutheran theologian, Dorothee Sölle. In critiquing the banality of the religious behaviour around her, she quotes a contemporary German philosopher who argued that "one of the most important though rarely articulated characteristics of our civilisation is the total rejection of belief in the value of suffering".¹⁰ Sölle laments the fact that, in the western world of technology and consumerism, the escape from suffering appears to have become an attainable goal. Their environment of increasing medical expertise leads westerners to look to science rather than to religion for a contemporary response to the question of suffering in their lives. The western culture has been described as a "culture of analgesics", which is intent on total avoidance of suffering, a factor which limits the human potential for development.¹¹

We have inverted the relationship between love and suffering, turning upside down the hierarchical order in which they stand. Our highest goal, recognized as such by almost everyone, is to be free of suffering, to become free of it and remain free of it right up to the moment of death.¹²

For many people in the western world the primary goal is not to live life to its fullest, but to strive for relief from any sort of pain, physical or psychic. Stress-free living is the goal of such a life perspective; privatised living is one of its consequences. The Australian scene shows little evidence of being different in its priorities. Hugh Mackay, social researcher, comments on the dark side of the rising generation of young adults:

(Rankka, *Women and the Value of Suffering*, 1). Women's connectedness to suffering personally and through the death of family members is the basis of its thematic presence in so much of their writings.

10. Leszek Kolakowski in *The Presentness of Myth* (quoted in D. Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984) 24.

11. See D. Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak*, 24-30. A contemporary approach to the question of suffering that takes the greater complexity of technological context and clinical perspectives into account is given by Per Anderson: "Suffering is experience with a basic structure that takes countless actual forms; these forms are also the stuff of cultural systems. Humans never suffer radically alone. Moments of self-conflict and refusal are conditioned by the socially grounded interpretive apparatus we bring to experience. In this way, the 'problem of suffering', like the particular response it elicits, should be understood as a cultural form" ("To Change and to Accept in a Technological Society", in Mohrmann and Hanson *Pain Seeking Understanding*, 126-42; see p. 130). Bakan offers a contrasting approach to the issue of suffering from a psychological perspective and points out "...the ego needs pain in order to function. Yet its very functioning involves the attempt to rid itself of pain...by seeking to withdraw itself from the body, the ego seeks also to save itself from annihilation; yet this very withdrawal is itself a factor in its annihilation" (*Disease, Pain and Sacrifice*, 85).

12. Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak*, 28.

These young Australians have the highest suicide rate in our history, the highest rate of depression, the highest rate of drug abuse and the bleakest short-term job prospects of any generation since the Great Depression.... Above all, they are the products of constantly accelerating social, cultural, technological and economic change.¹³

The escapist response to such pressures of change through any form of addictive activity is inimical to the human community. The more incapable people become of bearing their own suffering, the easier it is for them to become isolated from and indifferent to the suffering of others.¹⁴ This has its consequences for the human interest in relating to others, and in people's awareness of their own inner lives.¹⁵ The tragedy of such a passive approach to life is the consequent isolation, which has an effect on both the local and global understanding of the human community and on the church's commitment to, and understanding of, mission.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING IN SUFFERING

The heritage of Christianity, with its affirmation of the paschal mystery of life, death and resurrection offers a different perspective on suffering, one which generates empathy and compassion rather than self-absorption and withdrawal. The Christian church has had the courage throughout its history to address the present experience of the suffering human condition, alongside its affirmation of a future peace and fullness of life. The task of the present church is no less significant than that of the past, although the circumstances are so radically different. Richard McCormick describes the significance of the present responsibility to continue to maintain a presence in this area. Although "Christianity has a rich if sometimes troubling tradition", many institutions of mercy and healing in the present time were the result of Christian response to suffering in both the Middle Ages and in the subsequent and still emerging world. Today "when citizens debate aspects of health care or medical ethics they bump into Christian declaration and practice".¹⁶ Taking this past Christian contribution into account, contemporary Christians have a responsibility to address the present circumstances and forms of suffering.

It is important that theologians continue to participate in and contribute to the ever-expanding world of natural and social sciences with

13. Hugh Mackay, *Turning Point: Australians Choosing their Future*, (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1999), quoted in the *Age* (Melbourne), 11/5/00. For other issues and references in relation to "turning points" in Australian society, see *Research Matters Newsletter*, Edition 12, December 1999 at <http://www.doi.vic.gov.au/research/rm-12.html>.

14. Kolakowski, in Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak*, 25.

15. See Sölle, *The Strength of the Weak*, 26.

16. Richard McCormick, *Health Care and Medicine in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), ix, x.

their multiplicity of disciplines and expertise. The Christian church must continue to address the inescapable questions of life and death, of the mystery and dignity of persons, from the perspective of Christian salvation, in dialogue with the scientific world which is engaged in its own attempts to unravel these mysteries and to articulate its own imminent horizons of salvation.¹⁷ The unremitting efforts of the medical clinical team to simply keep a patient alive can often be at the expense of the beliefs and hope of the person and her or his family. For medical scientists the death of a patient may represent professional failure, but this is not the way Christianity perceives death.

A characteristic of women's approach is seen in the concreteness of their writing on such issues as life and death. Their primary concern is not with suffering as an abstract phenomenon, or with the "problem" of evil as something that can be solved "by theories, by the explanation of theodicies or by defences of the coherence of Christian beliefs".¹⁸ Their theological reflection arises from the concrete experiences of those who suffer. In many ways theirs is a self taught theology because most contemporary women theologians have learned primarily from their own experience, and from their recognition of, and search for, an alternative point of view to that proposed in most mainstream theologising.¹⁹

Sölle argues that the religious question of suffering is not the one we so often hear: "How could God allow this to happen?", but rather the one we have yet to learn, "How does our pain become God's pain, and how does God's pain appear in our pain?"²⁰ The first question, "How

17. Such an intervention can be seen in Sölle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1999). She comments on the alienating aspects of intensive care units, and those professionals who work there. Machines keep family and friends at a distance at a most important time for all. "A normal death in a normal hospital in a Western country.... Dying is mechanized, and death has no social place any more.... When human beings are treated long enough as components of a machine, it affects not only death, but also life" (p. 80).

18. Tilley, "Evil: the Problem of", 363.

19. Some wonderful examples of such alternative perceptions and approaches have arisen through the meetings of the Women's Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World theologians. It is interesting to note that a number of alternative methodologies are being developed by women theologians. Some significant examples can be seen in P. D. Young, *Feminist Theology / Christian Theology: In Search of Method* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); S. D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); S. McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (London: SCM, 1987); E. Townes, *Troubling in My Soul* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999); S. Thistlethwaite and M. P. Engel, *Lift Every Voice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998).

20. D. Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain", in Marc Ellis and Otto Maduro (eds.), *The Future of Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) 326. See also D. Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975). Farley also sees these questions, not in the realm of logic, but as pleas for God's "redemptive power": "The possibility of experiencing redemptive power can be blocked when we forget who we are and forget the essential goodness of God.... We can forget that we have bodies, forget that we die, and instead expect that we should live somewhat like characters in situation comedies or models in toothpaste ads who seem both untouched by and untouchable by physical diminishment." ("The Practice of Theodicy", 106).

could God allow this to happen?" poses God as the almighty ruler of history and of each individual's life. In this instance the implicit image of God is one of the great ruler, omniscient being, the one responsible for everything that happens in the world of creation. Such a God is the one who can eliminate human pain if God so chooses. This is a God who could bring an end to the suffering of all innocent people, a God who could have prevented the holocaust. When such an image of God is used then people are innocent victims. Humanity is guiltless. No human beings who have ever suffered in life "deserved" their suffering. Rather it is an almighty God who inflicts suffering, who looks down at prison camps and torture chambers and allows human degradation to be perpetrated. Such a God is a sadist. A theology that constructs such a chief ruler, a mastermind of creation, reflects the sado-masochism of its authors. Such a theology cannot have a place in our contemporary post-holocaust world. Sölle rejects such an image of a detached and distanced God outright. She wants to correct such aberrant thinking. She speaks of,

"God's pain." The compassion of God has its source in God's sharing of pain with humankind. This pain is not something that God will avoid. Such an understanding of God evokes the image of a mother who weeps over the things that we do to each other and to our sisters and brothers, to living creatures and to plants. Such a God comforts us as mother. As such God cannot make the pain go away, but the sufferer experiences a sense of loving companionship and shared vulnerability. There is an evident connectedness between God and God's people that permeates the Judaeo-Christian scriptures.²¹

Such an image, arising from the feminine experience of life, enables people to be aware that God could not comfort them if God were not connected to them in their pain, if God did not have that extraordinary capacity - to feel another's pain in one's own being.²² This is of the essence of compassion: the capacity to suffer with, to be present with another in their experience.

In representing the compassion of God, the Gospels describe Jesus as one with such a quality of connectedness. Jesus is present to others in

21. See Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain", 326.

22. Another approach to this "companioning of God in suffering is seen in African-American womanist writing. "A theology of suffering in womanist perspective is *redemptive*. In their narratives, Black women invite God to partner them in the redemption of Black people. They make meaning of their suffering. Over and over again, Black women under chattel slavery endured pain, privation, and injury, risked their very lives for the sake of their lives and freedom of their children." M. Shawn Copeland, "Wading Through Many Sorrows", in E. Townes (ed.), *A Troubling in My Soul* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993) 124.

their pain. When those he loves are suffering he is deeply moved.²³ At the tomb of Lazarus he wept with Martha and Mary: "He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled, and he said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus wept." (John 11:33-35). The "deep emotional stirring" which Jesus experienced on this occasion "involved not only grief, but a powerful surge of anger as well."²⁴ In his exegesis of this text Brendan Byrne points out that Jesus shares the general grief:

Jesus genuinely feels an empathy with those who weep for Lazarus (He) weeps at their grief, but their very grief intensifies the pressure to restore Lazarus to them. At the same time as he feels this pressure he also knows that performing such a miracle will inevitably set in motion forces leading to death for himself. He is torn then, between love for his friend and sympathy for the bereaved, on the one hand, and the shrinking from death that is part of human nature, on the other. His anger arises out of the impossible situation he is in and out of conflict with the power of darkness now before him.²⁵

Women have known and experienced that complexity of juxtaposed grief and anger in their lives. For women to read of Jesus' anger at this time of his deeply felt grief is to experience a new level of self-acceptance. Many women have tried to repress their anger at what they see happening to people they love and care for in their families and in their society.²⁶ The recognition of the combined emotions of loss, pain and anger in Jesus can free women to allow themselves to engage with the complex range of their own emotional responses to the suffering and the injustice that they see all around them. Experiences of birthing and

23. Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain", 326.

24. Byrne also points out that "(t)he Greek verb used here, *embrimasthai*, means to make a sound in an outward show of anger – to snort or the like" (Brendan Byrne, *Lazarus: A Contemporary Reading of John 11:1-46* [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press; Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publications, 1991] 71).

25. Byrne, *Lazarus*, 73.

26. To understand something of the experiences of suffering and loss of women of non-First-World countries the infant mortality rates between countries can be compared: "Motherhood is a tragically risky business in sub-Saharan Africa. A woman of this poor region is more than thirteen times more likely than an American woman to see her child die in its first year. The 1997 infant mortality rate (IMR) in the sub-Saharan region is 93 first-year deaths per 1,000 live births, compared to 7.3 such deaths in the U.S. and 5 in Western Europe. The sub-Saharan IMR is by far the highest in any major developing region. By contrast, the IMR is 32 and 29 deaths per 1,000 births in the Caribbean and East Asia, respectively, and 59 per 1,000 worldwide. Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest maternal mortality ratio in the world, nearly 1,000 deaths per 100,000 live births. The North American maternal mortality ratio is 8. According to current data, 255,000 sub-Saharan women will die from pregnancy-related causes this year. World maternity deaths in 1997 are expected to total around 644,000, with 99 percent of them occurring in less developed countries". Source: 1997 Population Reference Bureau, Inc. Website: <http://www.measurecommunication.org/factsheets/africa1.html>.

burying loved ones, the many separations, the connecting and re-connecting aspects of family life and friendships, infuse women's consciousness with pain; suffering is their constant companion, particularly in the two-thirds world context.²⁷ The understanding of the pain and grief of Jesus throws light on the experience of all who are confronted with the complexity of the life-death nexus:

The Lazarus story, immediately preceding the Passion, powerfully enacts the truth that Jesus gives life at the cost of his own life ... the evangelist reminds us that Jesus puts his own life at mortal risk when he goes to Judea at the sisters' request. All comes to a climax in the scene where we find Jesus torn between two powerful emotions: the love which impels him to work the sign and the shrinking from the prospect of his own death, an outcome which he knows the raising of Lazarus will bring on. Nothing could underline so clearly the cost to Jesus that communicating life incurs. Nothing could bring out so forcefully the love that impels the gift.²⁸

Jesus' awareness of the imminent cost of his caring resonates with the concrete experience, complex affectivity and sense of connectedness that characterises so much of women's beliefs about God and God's relation to suffering humanity across diverse cultures.

SUFFERING AND THE TECHNOCRATIC ENVIRONMENT

The Christian image of God is not one of a detached clinical observer of God's people, but rather a grieving God. This image is a recurrent one throughout the scriptures. Sölle reflects on ways in which God *is* present in our sufferings, in our "injured vanity, each toothache, each frustration that life inflicts on us"²⁹ and she offers her affirmation of the life-generating relationship of compassion:

I am no longer alone with my grief: God's pain surrounds my pain, and the grief in which we live today becomes the power of solidarity that connects us. My power grows out of my grief. My entire endeavor is to transform "worldly grief".... Without soothing, dulling, or lying about the pain, I have been brought into a deep joy. It is as though I had touched the power of life that is also in pain, the

27. I use the term "Two-thirds World" deliberately to describe the two-thirds of the world's population who are usually given the socio-economic descriptive term "*Third World*". In relation to women's familial concerns it may be helpful to note that people *under 15* made up more than 40 percent of the populations of the Third World, as compared with between 20 and 30 percent in the industrialized world (my italics). Source: U. S. Census Bureau, International Data Base, Washington, DC. 20233-8860.

28. Byrne, *Lazarus*, 105-106.

29. Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain", 327.

pain that, after all, is biologically life's protest against illness and death.³⁰

It is the refusal to run away from suffering, and the determination to find meaning in it that enables Sölle to reach inner peace and joy. In contrast, it is the desire to escape from suffering and the failure to take ordinary bodily needs into account which results in the substance and process addictive diseases of affluence that are spreading through the First World: "Alcoholism, anorexia nervosa and workaholism". These diseases have their source in a materialistic, consumer culture, which avoids suffering and "ignores our non-material needs and manipulates them so that they are formed into addictions".³¹ Lifestyles generated by contemporary western culture are often characterised by individualism, self-absorption and isolation. Sölle describes the "deities" of such a world as privatised and non-intrusive, and the style of "heavenly beatitude" aspired to in such a culture as "a state of permanent satiety from which every lack and anxiety have been excluded – a kind of eternal television".³² Contemporary western culture is analgesic in its perception of any form of suffering as something to be resisted, to be done away with, and to be put out of sight. Alternatively, when suffering is seen in the Christian context of what human beings are, and what they are called to become, there is a new awareness of connectedness with others who are suffering. This involves a recognition that limitation is integral to the human condition. Connectedness with humankind and with creation, in the face of suffering, is in sharp contrast to privatized and self-absorbed grief experiences.³³

In the detached approach to life that characterises denial of pain, human beings are seen in terms that are more mechanistic in character than in their identity as living organisms.³⁴ Clinically, human beings

30. Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain", 330.

31. Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain", 330.

32. Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain", 330.

33. It is important to restore the importance of human bodiliness to theological reflection, but it is also important to realize that not only do we experience suffering and death, but also we are embodied beings with spirits. We are bodies that possess the untarnished image of God. Farley reminds her readers that there is another dimension to the question of human pain: "(S)uffering does not erode our most basic beauty as possessors of God's image. Theodicy requires us to deepen our capacity to see this beauty in ourselves and in all others and to respond to others in light of this beauty, however racked and defaced by pain it may be. ("The Practice of Theodicy", 108).

34. Per Anderson comments on the approach and values of technological society to the question of human suffering: "In opposition to presumed limits to the human condition, technology seeks to expand the realm of human possibility – in the body, in society, in nature. While all humans do this, modern technology is a unique form of the expansive impulse with unprecedented traits and implications. Beyond the perennial activity of creating artifacts (tools and methods), the modern way of being attempts to order all aspects of the world according to values of efficiency, ease, comfort and security ("To

function, they produce, they are efficient or they are broken, need new parts, or must be replaced completely. It can be argued that a technocratic machine model dominates contemporary western thinking. Sölle suggests that some theologians present God "as an indestructible giant machine which will continue to function even after a nuclear holocaust or the destruction of creation".³⁵ Such images of God as transcendent, detached and isolated observer portray an almighty and powerful God. But they give no evidence of God's connectedness to humanity. There is no evidence of the capacity to be engaged in reciprocal love in such a representation of God. Women, reacting to such remote images of God, are particularly concerned to reclaim the affective qualities of God's relationship with creation and bonding with humankind in their theological writings. This is the source of imagery and language such as the "passionate compassion" that is used in women's reflections on God and on the theological task.³⁶

WOMEN'S PASSION AND COMPASSION

The qualities of connectedness and concreteness are the source of women's passion and compassion as they reflect on the God who sees the brokenness of creation, and the people who suffer from human injustice, as a result of their abuses of the created world, and of each other. To share the pain of God, this Godly grief, people need to be aware of God's connectedness to the world and to its people under threat. The mission of the church is to energise its members in their personal and communal efforts at Christian conversion and evangelisation on behalf of the Reign of God. Such energizing and evangelizing efforts can come from the realization that we are part of a larger community, the Communion of Saints. Elizabeth Johnson reminds her readers that there is a "bond of companionship", a "profound relationship" between the living and the dead, and "among living persons themselves who, though widely separated geographically, form one church community".³⁷ From this perspective our personal and religious narratives have the potential to be transforming narratives of connectedness.

Woven into the story of Jesus are the stories of all those who throughout history have responded to the call of the Spirit in suffering and joy.... Solidarity is a type of communion in which

Change and to Accept in a Technological Society", in Mohrmann and Hanson, *Pain Seeking Understanding*, 136).

35. Sölle, "God's Pain and Our Pain", 328.

36. See Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

37. Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998) 7.

deep connection with others is forged in such a way that their sufferings and joys become part of one's own personal concern and a spur to transformative action. It entails a movement out of selfish seclusion and into relationship where people bear one another up in mutual giving and receiving. It is inseparable from liberating praxis for the common good.³⁸

The link between the communion of saints of the past and the present has an impact on our understanding of suffering in relation to life and death and to the world of creation. Life and death is a reality for all humanity, at the level of the created world, as well as at the human level. Christians in today's world are concerned for the quality of life and its maintenance. They are aware of the consequences of a lack of concern for themselves and for future generations in terms of nuclear catastrophe, ecological imbalance and destruction, and physical and psychic disease. Suffering touches the life of every person. Whether it leads people to a greater connectedness or to a more privatized individualism depends on their grasp of a God whose pain appears in human pain and who invites human beings to participate in the healing of creation.

Women have a sense of their connectedness through the present Christian community to the Christian community of the past and its collected wisdom and spirit through its heritage, "the accumulated action-reflection of the community of saints".³⁹ They are also deeply aware of their generative relationship with future generations. This awareness is also a source of their imagery. The classic image of bonding and of unconditional loving in the face of suffering is that of motherhood. Recurrent biblical images that represent God's pain in the world are derived from motherly love and from the experience of giving birth:

You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. When a woman is in travail she has sorrow, because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a child is born into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. (John 16:20b-22)

Passion and affectivity, derived from their own experience as women, are common characteristics of the writings of women theologians. They insist on the significance of emotion in the theological process. Maria Clara Bingemer writes from the Latin American perspective as she

38. Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 174, 175.

39. Letty Russell, "Beginning from the Other End", *Duke Divinity School Review* 45 (1980) p. 100.

affirms the place of emotion in the theologising process, which she describes as one of both distancing and approach:

The distancing means putting aside the more current interpretations.... It means recovering the capacity for awe and terror, to see new things never seen before in texts read and heard many times. The other side is an attempt to get closer to the Bible, linked to daily life, with its experiences of pain, joy, happiness, hope, hunger, repression, celebration, and lastly, struggle.⁴⁰

The emotional barrenness of the rational theologizing that characterized many Enlightenment minds in the effort to understand suffering is in contrast to the approach of those women whose theology is incarnated in their sense of their own humanity. The totality of their commitment results in a theology that represents an embodiment of commitment engaged in with affectivity as well as cognitive understanding.

Women do theology with passion: they passionately and wholeheartedly give of themselves, striving to fill their ideas with lived experience.... Women discover the importance of what their sisters have accomplished in the history of the people, showing through *passion* and *compassion* that they really have had an impact even though their presence has often been erased.⁴¹

As they write about the various birth and death, joy and pain experiences that are integral to the human condition, there is a richness of imagery and ritualization that takes their theological writing into non-cognitive spheres.⁴² Their style of writing tends to be dialogical and interrogatory rather than doctrinaire or dogmatic. This gives an open-endedness and a dynamic quality to their theological writing and restores the sense of mutual loving and mystery in the relationship between God and God's people.⁴³

40. Maria Clara Bingemer, "Women in the Future of the Theology of Liberation", in Ellis and Maduro (eds.), *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 478.

41. Ana Maria Tepedino, "The Fruit of Passion and Compassion", in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, 168.

42. It is interesting to note the number of occasions in which the writers resort to poetry or liturgical celebration in order to give depth to the experience described in their theologizing. See Luz Beatriz Arellano, "Women's Experience of God in Emerging Spirituality", in Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion* 139-150; Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Mujeristas: A Name of Our Own", in Ellis and Maduro, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 410-20.

43. This style can be seen clearly in the writings of the Amanecida Collective: *Revolutionary Forgiveness: Feminist Reflections on Nicaragua* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987). The theological dialogue is continued between First and Third World women through the inclusion of "Letters from Nicaraguan Mothers to Mothers in the United States" (pp. 131-132). It is also extended to all who read the book in the Appendix, "What You Can Do" (133-139). *Revolutionary Forgiveness* is not meant to offer a dispassionate analysis of suffering and evil, but it is an experiential call to radical conversion of heart. A visible reminder of this call to conversion and reconciliation can be seen in the Argentinian

WOMEN AND THE "TWO-THIRDS WORLD"

Women writers of both the First and the Two-Thirds Worlds refuse to let the abstraction of semantic debate divert them from their commitment to explore theological issues in their concrete contexts;⁴⁴ they have both an evocative quality in their theological language and a concern for its contemporary significance and accessibility. This is another reason why images of pregnancy, birth, nurturing and celebrating life permeate women's theological writings.⁴⁵ This imagery also brings an added depth and breadth of detail to the panorama of Christian life, death and resurrection in the human struggle for meaning.

By addressing the grief that many of our contemporaries feel when they experience their own finiteness in the face of suffering humanity, Latin American feminist theologians invite us to collaborate with them through transformative action based on Christian hope.

The poor who are discovering themselves as active makers of history and are organizing for liberation are experiencing God as the God of life, as embodying the very fullness of life, as the only source from which it is possible to derive hope and promise in the situation of death they live every day.... Once God is experienced, not only as Father, Lord, strong warrior, but also as Mother, protection, great love, struggle is tempered with festivity and celebration of life, permanent and gentle firmness ensures the ability "to be tough without losing tenderness", and uncompromising resistance can be carried on with joy, without excessive tension and sterile strain. God's compassion, flowing from female and maternal entrails, takes on itself the hurts and wounds of all the oppressed, and a woman who does theology is called to bear witness to this God with her body, her actions, her life.⁴⁶

Grandmothers of the "disappeared" (Abuelas de Plaza Mayo ["Grandmothers of May Square"]) whose ritual annual parade reminds the people of the 1976 coup by the Armed Forces who caused 30,000 persons of all ages, from diverse social backgrounds to "disappear". Among the disappeared there are hundreds of children. In order to locate the disappeared children, the Grandmothers work on four different levels: denunciations before national and foreign governments, and before the judiciary, as well as advertisements in the press directed to the general public and personal investigations. For further information on the Grandmothers see <http://www.wamani.apc.org/abuelas/ingles.html>.

44. Cf. Fabella and Oduyoye, *With Passion and Compassion*, ix.

45. Examples of this imagery can be seen in the "Final Statement: Latin American Conference, Buenos Aires, Argentina, Oct. 30 – Nov. 3, 1985", in Elsa Tamez (ed.), *Through Her Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989) p. 150. See also Maria Clara Bingemer: "It is women who possess in their bodilessness the physical possibility of performing the divine eucharistic action. In the whole process of gestation, childbirth, protection and nourishing of a new life, we have the sacrament of the eucharist, the divine act happening anew." (in Ellis and Maduro, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, p. 486).

46. Maria Clara Bingemer, in Ellis and Maduro, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 485.

The apparent powerlessness of these Latin American women does not isolate them, or render them passive and remote from their brothers and sisters. The approach taken by these women is another example of connectedness in the experience of suffering.

In this period when the systemic consequences of economic rational globalisation have come under question and resistance, women's concerns for the global aspects of suffering are linked with their sense of responsibility for their local and immediate circumstances of living. Dorothy Day expressed a concern for the local situation as well as that of the global. Aware of the fact that it is easy for public leaders to overlook the significance of the ordinary people and their immediate needs, for the sake of greater personal influence and reputation on the international scene, Day continued to emphasise the importance of the local rather than global and international concerns.

Why localism? I think my answer is that for some of us anything else is extravagant; it's unreal; it's not a life we want to live. There are plenty of others who want that life, living in corridors of power, influence, money, making big decisions that affect big numbers of people. We don't have to follow those people, though.⁴⁷

Day shared the concerns and interests of her sister Two-Third World liberationists in her intention to put her energies into the more immediate and particular areas of need. She was aware of the fact that it is easy to become caught up with the larger and more political issues, and the trappings of success that go with these, at the expense of the poor and needy.

The blend of both global and local perspectives, and the awareness of the ways in which suffering reaches across boundaries, when it is understood in the perspective of the reign of God, can be seen in the life and death of Penny Lernoux. She was a peace activist, journalist and writer in Latin America who had brought the plight of many oppressed people to the Western world. Her efforts on behalf of the marginalised were reflected in her multiple activities. She called the guilty to account, using the gospels for her critique, and she worked actively for change. Lernoux had a concern for the wholeness of creation, and denounced the plundering of the earth by those who had no sense of responsibility for future generations. The suffering that penetrated her writings was an expression of a spirituality of solidarity with those who are voiceless. She enabled others to be aware of ways in which "God's pain appears in our pain", the pain of the human condition. Hers was a spirituality that is characteristic of many women and men in our Christian church today, and it is the source of their energies in their response to its mission. At

47. In Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1987).

the height of her success in her work for the poor she was stricken with cancer. A few days before her death she wrote a final testimony to family and friends:

I feel like I'm walking down a new path. It's not physical fear or fear of death, because the courageous poor in Latin America have taught me a theology of life that, through solidarity and our common struggle transcends death. Rather, it is a sense of helplessness - that I who always wanted to be the champion of the poor am just as helpless, that I too, must hold out my begging bowl; that I must learn - am learning - the ultimate powerlessness of Christ. It is a cleansing experience. So many things seem less important, or not at all, especially the ambitions.

Peace and Love, Penny.⁴⁸

Her final reflection illustrated Lernoux's grasp of the ultimate issues of life and death at a time of utter powerlessness, and personal suffering. At the same time her readers saw vividly her sense of connectedness with all who are powerless and poor, and her ever-present awareness of her own mission as committed Christian in her own life and death.

PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION AND COMMUNAL COMMITMENT

The questions that result from such an experience are those that face many ministers of the Word in Christian churches today. While there are advances in medical science, people are still dying tragically and prematurely, in spite of all the progress that has taken place in the world of health care. The senseless loss of Penny Lernoux, dedicated church worker, a loving wife and mother in the prime of life is hard to understand; she had so much more to give her family, her nation and her world. Yet Lernoux's courage, her beliefs and values, her peace, her sense of solidarity with broken and suffering humanity in sickness and in death reflect the transformation that has taken place, not simply in herself, but in the lives of those who were bonded to her and touched by her. At no stage did she experience her personal situation in isolation from the rest of humanity. In fact the extremity of her need bonded her more deeply to others. This was at the root of her own testament, of her own theologising about her experience. This is a concrete example of the mission of the church in action.

Awareness of the mission of the church in our present times requires critical reflection, not simply on structural factors that are external to the self, but also on internal factors in regard to the self-in-relationship. The personal, local and global aspects of the Christian conversion process are integral elements of authentic mission:

48. Quoted in *National Catholic Reporter*, October 1989.

Freedom from selfishness and acquisitiveness is just as vital as liberation from all exploitative and unjust practices and structures, whether political, economic or social, whether based on gender, race or creed. Liberation leads to wholeness.⁴⁹

The dialectic between personal transformation and communal commitment to systemic structural analysis and strategy of action is one which can open people to some of the oppressive factors within themselves, and consequently allow them to hear the cries of those companions whose bondage arises from interpersonal circumstances rather than from structural issues alone. Without this connectedness husbands can fail to hear the suffering voices of wives and children because their focus may be on the macrocosm of society at the expense of the microcosm of family relationships. The dialectic enables us to be aware of our own solidarity with those who are suffering in the world, both personally and systemically.

Another effective contribution which women theologians are able to make to our understanding of suffering in today's world is by their affirmation of an inclusive, communal model of Christianity rather than an individualist, corporate model of Christian religion which has arisen out of the rational approaches of those theologians who write exclusively from an ideologically juridical or canonical perspective rather than a pastoral one. In her contrast of the "sacred canopy" approach that has characterized a great deal of First World theologizing with the "prophetic critique" of the liberationists, Rosemary Radford Ruether pointed out that ideological and nationalistic religions have arisen out of a model of Christianity that has its roots in corporate transactions rather than in communal interactions and inter-relationships. Women have suffered from the corporate overpowering of Christian communities and their subsequent restructuring into hierarchies of power and elitism.⁵⁰

Similar ideas have been addressed from a more specifically sociological perspective by Maria Augusta Neal.⁵¹ She highlighted both the tentativeness and the significance of the advances of liberation theology and its implications for society. As the poor, and particularly poor women, working in solidarity with each other, and with all who work to overcome injustice, begin to make their societal and ecclesial presence felt,

(t)he division into classes with distinct cultures as we have known them in the past will change. Beliefs, practices and lifestyles too will change. Hierarchy may yield to democracy, as capitalism, whether

49. Fabella and Oduyoye, Editorial in *With Passion and Compassion*, xii.

50. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Religion and Society: Sacred Canopy vs. Prophetic Critique", in Ellis and Maduro, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 172-76.

51. Maria Augusta Neal, "God and Society: A Response to Liberation Theology", in Ellis and Maduro, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, 287-310.

private or of the state yields to planning boards, which represent many interests. And what will happen to war? We do not know. All we know, at this juncture, is where God is. Even this is still a mystery, which, for some, is beyond belief.⁵²

To the extent that Christian churches succumb to a corporate administrative model, which fails to hear the prophetic critique of the Gospel, it will become a model of alienation rather than integration, a corporation rather than a community.

Bonding, solidarity and connectedness are recurring themes in the theological and pastoral writings of those women who propose an alternative vision of mission and ministry in the midst of the social and ecclesial environments in which they try to live out their Christian identity. In their worldview there is a sense of the unity between human beings, which transcends creedal differences, as well as established barriers and boundaries that set up marginalisation, alienation and elitism.

Our theology must speak of our struggles and the faith that empowers us. Our theology goes beyond the personal to encompass the community, and beyond gender to embrace humanity in its integrity.... Theologizing in the light of our Christian faith, we have learned to appreciate the insights and spirituality of other faiths and seek avenues for interfaith dialogue, not just to enrich Christian theology, but as a community responsibility owed to all people of faith.⁵³

This connectedness does not remain simply at the level of human interaction, but it touches the whole of creation.⁵⁴ It gives rise to the constancy of the Christian virtue of hope that characterizes the writings of so many women theologians.

It is this connectedness that enables women to recognise and face the universal character of suffering, and to address it concretely and with compassion, to place it in a larger context, and to address it from the perspective of the broader human community of the past, present and the future. In approaching suffering in this manner, these women writers invite us to explore new understandings of the mission of the church, and they encourage each of us, sisters and brothers in labour, to share the birth pains with our God, and with each other, that the new creation may come in all of its fullness of life.

52. Maria Augusta Neal, "God and Society", 298.

53. Fabella and Oduyoye, Editorial in *With Passion and Compassion*, xi.

54. For an example of this recurring theme see Aracely de Rocchietti, "Women and the People of God", in Tamez, *Through Her Eyes*, 96-117. The author acknowledges the destitution of the people but points out that in the midst of "profound wretchedness" there is "astounding hope". She gives concrete examples of this hope in people's lives.