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Mujeres-Iglesia Chile: evangelization, feminism, and faith in a Church in crisis

This article highlights the contribution to evangelization made by a women's movement in the Catholic Church in Chile. The members of the "Mujeres-Iglesia" give testimonies of their faith and share their stories about the double vulnerability women experience who are less privileged both in the church and society and as Christians in the Catholic Church, which is currently struggling for credibility.

Welchen Beitrag zur Evangelisierung die Frauenbewegung in der katholischen Kirche in Chile leistet, zeigt der vorliegende Beitrag auf. Eine doppelte Verwundbarkeit, als kirchlich und gesellschaftlich minderprivilegierte Frauen und als Christinnen in der katholischen Kirche, die aktuell um ihre Glaubwürdigkeit ringt, geben die Mitglieder von "Mujeres-Iglesia" Zeugnis von ihrem Glauben und teilen ihre Geschichten.

The following paper wants to offer an ecclesiological interpretation of a women's movement within the Catholic Church in Chile: Mujeres – Iglesia Chile. This movement, inspired both by Christian faith and feminism, was born in 2016 after a series of meetings of a small group of lay and religious women working full-time in different institutions of the Catholic Church in Santiago. Our starting point was the paradoxical experience of grace and woundedness derived from our Church belonging. We felt graced by our common call to be disciples of Jesus as women, by the particular gifts that each of us brought to the Church, and for the opportunity to be full-time ministers for our communities. But at the same time, we felt wounded and estranged by a Church that not always recognized our dignity and worth, and that had become a space in which we all had experienced some kind of abuse and discrimination. Thus, we felt the need to create a space of our own, in which we could reflect and pray, starting from our particular experience of being women and Christians within a Church that we loved, but too frequently also resented. Since those seminal meetings, the small group of women from Santiago has grown into a nation-wide movement, joined by women of all ages, spiritualities, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds. We are united under the common call to promote women's dignity in Church and society, denounce patriarchal abuse as un-Christian, and rediscover our faith through feminist lenses.

I speak about "we" because I have been part of Mujeres-Iglesia since the beginning, even though due to my studies in the United States, I've mostly participated from a distance. However, during my travels to Chile, I have been able to join in crucial moments, such as our first feminist retreat in 2019, and give several workshops in different parts of the country, bringing feminist theology to discussions groups organized by M-I and by other Church groups interested in theology made by women. Thus, I

write this paper both as an M-I member and as a feminist theologian, trying to offer a discerned and thoughtful narrative of what we have experienced together.

This essay is not an exercise of self-promotion but rather a way of practicing gratitude. The proportions and impact that M-I has had within the Chilean Church have surprised us all. We did not plan to become a national movement or to be heard by so many people. The fact that our organization and message has become such a Good News for so many women, and also some men, have been received by us as a gratuitous gift from the *Ruah*. It is the Spirit bringing us new life in the midst of one of the worst crises that the Chilean Catholic Church has experienced. It is also the Spirit, connecting us with the “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties”¹ of all Chilean women, and especially with those who are poor and afflicted amongst us, engaging with them in solidarity, and bringing their struggles and gifts to the attention of the whole Christian community. Mujeres-Iglesia has been a space in which we have been able to move from silence and weeping to proclamation and witness. I hope that this paper expressed at least in part, the joy that has filled this particular group of women who, from the fringes of the world and their own Church, have rediscovered the joy of the Gospel, that is not different from the joy of being sisters, “friends of God and prophets,” and graced women, called from within a wounded Church, and a wounded world, to actualize the Good News of healing, salvation, and new life, and strive for another possible world, and another possible Church.

M-I as a response to the wounds of sexual violence and discrimination.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” (Jn. 20: 13)

Theology can be defined as a response to a wound. It is precisely there, in our social, ecclesial, and personal wounds, where God encounters us, challenges us, and offers us new hope.² Expanding on that idea, Nancy Pineda-Madrid affirms that “like a wound, the work of constructing theology begins with an experience so compelling that it demands a response.”³ The pain of our wounds, and the wounds that we encounter in society and the Church, force us to rethink the way we imagine God’s salvific action in history and points us to places where liberation is desperately needed and strived for, places that are often relegated to the very margins of our human and social experience, but that are at the same time the humble places where integral human liberation is born. Just like the Good News of Jesus’ resurrection arose from

¹ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1. Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations: A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language, Minnesota 2014.

² Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church*, Oxford 2010, 12–18.

³ Nancy Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juarez*, Minneapolis 2011, 3.

the wound of his violent and unjust death, the Good News of women's liberation and salvation emerges from their own experience of the cross, that is, their own experiences of gendered violence and discrimination that they inevitably encounter, sooner or later in life. When acknowledged in the community, those wounds can become places that open new paths towards salvation and new life.

The urgent need to create a space such as *Mujeres-Iglesia* was born from the depths of two connected wounds that shape our social and ecclesial present. First, the deep wound of power and sexual abuse by clergy members has redounded a profound crisis within the Chilean Catholic Church. The first public scandal in Chile arose in 2010 when a group of men denounced the priest Fernando Karadima for sexual abuse. This scandal was followed by several allegations against other members of the clergy, allegations that grew enormously in volume after pope Francis' visit in 2018. What initially appeared to be an issue only amongst the more conservative Church sectors revealed itself as a problem present in all groups of clergy, diocesan and religious, conservative and progressively minded. As a consequence of these scandals, the institutional Church's trust has dramatically diminished, and the country's secularization process has accelerated.⁴ The clergy's moral authority, which was the main card that the Church played in the public debate for decades, fell to the grounds.⁵ Therefore, the bishops and priests' voice, which was so dominant in the past, is hardly heard anymore, and the different groups of organized laity have serious problems to find their place in the ecclesial and national culture.

Second, the wound of sexual violence and discrimination towards women that has accompanied women's life and death for centuries reemerged as a cry of protest in the Chilean *Mayo Feminista* in 2018.⁶ Influenced by the *#MeToo* movement and in solidarity with several women who openly spoke about their abuse experiences, college students from all over the country organized strikes and sit-ins to denounce sexual violence within higher education institutions. The student's initiative derived into a massive protest movement that united women of all ages and social backgrounds, shaping Chile's political life till the present day. This movement has put the injustices that women experience daily into the forefront of political discussion, making the

⁴ As a reference, one can consult the "Encuesta Bicentenario" that has been tracking the changes in religious affiliation and belief in the past decade. "Encuesta Bicentenario," accessed December 19, 2019, <https://encuestabicentenario.uc.cl/>.

⁵ Two interesting texts that discuss the moral authority of the Catholic Church in Chile during the recent dictatorship and the transition to democracy can be found in: Pamela Lowden, *Moral Opposition to Authoritarian Rule in Chile, 1973-90*, 1996, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230378933>; Marcela Soto Reyes, "De La Defensa de Los Derechos Humanos a La 'Crisis Moral'. El Discurso Publico de La Iglesia Catolica Romana Chilena En La Post-Dictadura Militar", *Religión e Incidencia Pública* 2 (2014), 47–72.

⁶ There has been an explosion of publications around the feminist movement in Chile. For an introduction, I recommend the articles compiled in: Faride Zerán, ed., *Mayo feminista. La rebelión contra el patriarcado*, Santiago de Chile 2019.

hidden and silenced wounds of women a matter of public debate. It also connected young generations of women with their older peers, creating a bond of solidarity between different age-groups, and grafting the present movement into a long story of feminism struggle with Chilean roots.

While the sexual abuse crisis in the Church and the reemergence of the feminist movement in Chile can seem disconnected, they have much in common. They are examples of the public surfacing of voices of victims that were silenced and ignored for decades. Their brave voices have made us aware of spaces within the Church and society where human dignity is being trampled and abused. The truth of victims of clerical abuse and of women who have experienced sexual violence and discrimination left the repressed shadows of social existence, moving into the light of public truth-telling and discussion, putting an end to decades of silence and solitary sufferings. Thus, the silence and fear of abused women, children, and young adults have turned into a scandal. And the scandal has given rise to protest. And protest has become a productive space where new forms of solidarity among women and victims have emerged and where urgent demands of institutional and cultural change have surfaced.

Both the sexual abuse crisis in the Church and the feminist movement give witness to the perverse ways in which toxic masculinity, power, and sexuality intersect, to the detriment of the dignity of women, children, and other groups of marginalized and oppressed people. According to Damiela Eltit, Chile is undergoing a male leadership crisis with expression in the different systems where male power is allocated.⁷ For her, the ecclesial scandals were one of the first symptoms of a society that no longer wanted to suffer from abusive power dynamics in silence. The scandals “automatically generated a certain inability to continue leading with the customary censorship that permeated and exercised a sexual pedagogy against women throughout the entire social spectrum.”⁸ Both the crisis in the Church and the feminist movement generated a space that allowed women to reflect and organize on their own terms, recognizing that abuse of power is an acute and unresolved problem present in all spheres of Chilean society.⁹

Finally, what the sexual abuse crisis in the Church and the new wave of feminist in Chilean society also have in common that they represent local expressions of global trends. Clerical sexual and power abuse is not a particularity of the Chilean Church, but a widespread phenomenon within the Catholic community with global proportions. Conversely, sexual violence and discrimination against women are not a peculiarity of Chilean culture and institutions, but something that women worldwide experi-

⁷ Damiela Eltit, “No hay plazo que no se cumpla,” in: *Mayo feminista. La rebelión contra el patriarcado*, ed. Faride Zerán, Santiago de Chile 2019, 60.

⁸ Eltit, 60.

⁹ Eltit, 60.

ence in similar and yet particular ways. Thus, the Chilean *Mayo Feminista* and its aftermath cannot be understood without referring to similar movements such as *#Me-Too* in the United States, *#NiUnaMenos* in Argentina and Mexico, and other forms of protest that have emerged all over the globe. This is also true about the emergence of feminist movements among women of faith. Situated in the same intersection as Chilean women, groups such as *La Revuelta de las Mujeres* in Spain,¹⁰ *Maria 2.0* in Germany¹¹ have emerged from within the Catholic Church to give a response to the double wound of the sexual abuse crisis and their own experiences of sexual violence and gender discrimination inside and outside the Church.

As many of these groups, *Mujeres Iglesia* has been a response of the *Ruah* to women's wounded reality within the Church and society. It has been a creative space opened by the Spirit, amid a Church in crisis and within a country reckoning with the pervasiveness of sexual abuse, discrimination, and violence. Hence, M-I's first nationwide encounter started with a moment of sincere and open acknowledgment of our wounds as catholic women. The first moment of communal discussion and reflection was accompanied by the question that the resurrected Jesus addressed to Mary Magdalene outside of the tomb: "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" (Lk. 20: 13). The organizers of the encounter recognized that women of the Church have plenty of reasons to cry. They share several negative experiences that repeat themselves, regardless of the diverse ecclesial contexts in which women find themselves.¹² Amongst those reasons, the women who participated in the first encounter named the pervasiveness of authoritarianism and *machismo* within pastoral councils and communities; the distorted image of Mary, that is idealized as a subservient and passive woman, always occupying a secondary place, just as women within the Church; the male control over female bodies; the problematic inhibition of women's pleasure and sexuality; the inequality that raises in families when the children are born; and the sin of clericalism, that redounds on an experience of being unheard, reduced to roles of service, and excluded in all the spaces where vital decisions are made.¹³

The sexual abuse crisis in the Church profoundly affected catholic women. First, because many of them are amongst the abused. While most of the allegations against priests involve children and young men, clerical abuse against women is also pervasive. Nevertheless, according to Carolina Del Río, there is still now a strong reluctance to make their experiences public. A mix of fear, shame, lack of hope in Church institu-

¹⁰ Asociación de Teólogas Españolas, "Revuelta de las mujeres en la Iglesia: '¡Basta ya!,'" Religión Digital, February 9, 2020, https://www.religiondigital.org/espana/Revueltad-mujeres-Iglesia-igualdad-costumbre_0_2202679740.html (21.6.2021).

¹¹ Deutsche Welle, "Germany's Catholic Church: Women Are Pushing for Equality," DW.COM, accessed November 27, 2020, <http://go.wwu.de/aeu5m> (21.6.2021).

¹² Bernardita Zambrano et al., "Primer encuentro mujeres-Iglesia: Ruah, aliento de Dios en Nosotras," Revista Mensaje (blog), 2017, <http://go.wwu.de/x1gyx> (21.6.2021).

¹³ Zambrano et al.

tions, and extreme woundedness have prevented women from openly speak about the abuses they have experienced in Church contexts.

Furthermore, the ingrained notion that women are guilty of men's sexual advances, particularly of priests, has often prevented them from speaking out.¹⁴ Women of M-I acknowledged this problem in their second national encounter, when they expressed “the urge to verbalize, name, and speak about what has been silenced during all these years.” For them, “it is imperative to name and dare to talk about the different forms of abuse that we have experienced.”¹⁵ M-I meetings have become safe spaces where we can share their abuse experiences without fear of being shamed or ignored. Within those spaces, women’s stories’ sacredness has been respected, without forcing anyone to speak publicly if they don’t want to.

M-I has also become a place of articulation that has allowed us to express our solidarity with the few women-victims from within the Church who have made their cases public. An illustration of this solidarity was the public manifestation that M-I and members of the *Red de Sobrevivientes de Abuso Eclesiástico* organized outside a Jesuit residence in Santiago when the allegations of the theologian Marcela Aranda against the priest Renato Poblete SJ were made public.¹⁶ On that occasion, we composed a prayer inspired by a text by Rose-Mary Radford-Reuther, that has accompanied us ever since:

“We love and affirm our sister (*name*), who has been hurt.

Although she has been injured, she is not destroyed.

Although she has been demeaned, yet she has not lost her integrity.

Although she has been subjected to ugliness, yet she is still beautiful.

Although evil has gripped her, yet she is still good.

Although lies may seek to impugn her, yet she is still truthful.

We affirm her wholeness, her goodness, her truthfulness, her integrity, her beauty.

We ask our God – Mother and Father – to dispel the forces of destruction, ugliness, violence and lies that seek to make so many women their victims.

¹⁴ Carolina Del Río, “Las Invisibles,” in: *Vergüenza: Abusos En La Iglesia Católica*, Santiago de Chile 2020, Kindle Edition.

¹⁵ Bernardita Zambrano, “Mujeres-Iglesia ... La Historia.” (Unpublished, October 2020). The translations from Spanish to English are mine.

¹⁶ A video about the manifestation in: Meganoticias, “[VIDEO] Realizan manifestación en apoyo a Marcela Aranda en colegio San Ignacio,” *meganoticias.cl*, April 30, 2019, <http://go.wvu.de/q4cxr> (21.6.2021); About Marcela Aranda's and the other 22 women who where abused by Renato Poblete: “Un conocido jesuita chileno abusó de 22 mujeres en un período de 48 años,” *Religión Digital*, July 31, 2019, <http://go.wvu.de/c4c9-> (21.6.2021); And a letter by the women of the Red de Sobrevivientes, “El tesoro y el secreto que el corazón roto guardó por desgastados años”, *Red de Sobreviviente*, April 30, 2019, <http://go.wvu.de/ch0p7> (21.6.2021).

We ask you, Jesus our brother, to defend our sister, as you defended the woman who was going to be stoned, the woman with a blood-flood, the hunched woman in the temple, the pagan woman and so many women who followed you and trusted you.

We ask you, *Ruah*, Wisdom, Spirit of God, the feminine face of God, that you encourage women to break the cycle of silence, abuse, and violence; that you feed our anger and our compassion in the face of all kinds of injustices; that you open our eyes and ears, so the pain of women are heard in our churches and communities. Amen.”¹⁷

After the *Mayo Feminista*, M-I has also provided spaces to lament, pray, and stand in solidarity with women abused in all contexts, going beyond our ecclesial boundaries. The women of M-I had added their voices and bodies to several public manifestations of feminist women all over the country, including the yearly commemorations of the International Women’s Day on March 8th, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25th, and several rallies and artistic interventions that have been organized by members of the broader feminist movement all over the country. The wounds of other women have been an occasion of lament, solidarity, and sisterhood with women worldwide, who are finally breaking their silence.

Finally, it is essential to mention that we are not the first Christian women to engage with other women in actions of prophetic witness and solidarity. Many of the M-I members have previously been involved in practices of service and promotion of women’s dignity amongst immigrant and indigenous women, imprisoned women, women who experience domestic violence, and women who experience poverty.¹⁸ This work was publicly recognized by Pope Francis when he chose to visit the San Joaquín women’s jail, where one of our members, Sister Nelly León, is a chaplain.¹⁹ Belonging to M-I has allowed many of us to read our previous efforts of solidarity with new eyes and continue to be engaged with them with renewed enthusiasm. It has also made us value and celebrate the diverse ways in which catholic women have bravely practiced

¹⁷ The first part of the prayer was taken from Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities*, San Francisco 1986, 159.

¹⁸ A few books that narrate recent stories of catholic women engaged in solidarity with other women, striving together in causes of social justice and dignity towards women are: Hillary Hiner, *Violencia de Género, Pobladores y Feminismo Popular*: Casa Yela, Talca (1964–2010), Santiago de Chile 2019; María Soledad Del Villar Tagle, *Las asistentes sociales de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad: Una historia profesional*, 2018; Virginia R. Azcuy et al., eds., *Espacios de Paz: Lectura Intercultural de Un Signo de Estos Tiempos*, 1a edición, Colección Escritos Teológicos-Pastorales 24 (Congreso de Teólogas Latinoamericanas y Alemanas, Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Agape Libros, 2018); Members of *Mujeres-Iglesia* work actively with marginalized women in many spaces. I only want to name two notable examples: Fundación Margen, <https://www.fundacionmargen.cl/>, that works with women who are sexual workers. (2) Fundación Mujer Levantate, <http://mujerlevantate.cl/>, who works with imprisoned women.

¹⁹ Meganoticias, *Papa Francisco En Centro Penitenciario de Mujeres*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QphhYZLv5qk> (21.6.2021).

solidarity and sisterhood with other women, even in the darkest periods of our country's history and in spaces that are often invisible to the public eye.

Creating space for healing and prophetic witness:

Mujeres-Iglesia as a liminal space

“..and she saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.” (Jn. 20, 1)

Starting from the double wound described in the previous section, M-I has attempted to create a space within the Church that women can claim as their own. Most M-I members already participate in other ecclesial spaces, such as parishes, lay movements, and vowed religious communities. Some work full-time as pastoral ministers, teachers, and theologians within the Church's institutions, and many offer their time as volunteers in their own ecclesial settings. Women who participate in M-I don't usually leave their previous spaces of ecclesial belonging but find new energies to continue in them in more fruitful and empowering ways. However, for some of them, M-I has become the only space within the Church that they feel they can belong. Thus, M-I has also appealed to the experiences and sensitivities of those catholic women who still have profound faith but feel alienated from the Church as an institution.

Mujeres-Iglesia has become a liminal space that stands between the denunciation of the forces of death and the celebration of the strength of life that shapes women's existence. It has been born from the empty tomb's creative space, where women mourned and cried, but also encounter the Good News of the justice of God, that raised the crucified Jesus into a new life. As Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has argued, there are several structural similarities between feminist liberationists and early Christian “naming” of the experience of Jesus's death and resurrection.²⁰ They both begin with “the historical fact of unjust oppressions, the experience of struggle for a different world, and an encounter with victimization and death of a dehumanized person.”²¹ And they both “insist that the resurrection is a symbolic yet real justification for Jesus and all those little ones or nobodies who struggle for survival, human dignity, and liberation from oppression.”

Furthermore, both discourses allow us to understand that the resurrection is not a private religious event, exclusively related to the survival of the soul, but that it has political and bodily consequences because it is “a real vindication of the struggle for a world free from hunger, abuse, and injustice” and “requires the transformation of the world as we know it.”²² The liminal space of the empty tomb also reminds us of the

²⁰ Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, London 2015, 130.

²¹ Schüssler-Fiorenza, 130.

²² Schüssler-Fiorenza, 131.

centrality that women disciples had in the movement of Jesus and how they contributed to shape the early Christian tradition. The fact that women-disciples, who appear to be secondary and even unnamed in much of the Gospels, became the central witnesses of Jesus death, and the first to receive the Easter message in the empty tomb, clearly indicates that women were prominent within Jesus' movement, and contributed to give shape to early Christian proclamation.²³

Mujeres-Iglesia is also a liminal space, both within the Church and amongst the broader feminist movement, because it rejects the caricatures that oppose Christian faith and feminism as incompatible and situates itself in the productive intersection between the two. While women are clearly the majority in the Church, and most of the evangelization task is in our hands, our voices are marginal and often silenced. We live through the paradox of being unavoidably present and, at the same time, invisible. Many times idealized as servants and mothers, but at the same time marginalized, excluded, and silenced, especially from spaces of power, and very visibly in much of our liturgies. Women are invited to pray and serve, but not to lead. They are invited to listen, but not to preach. The open rejection and prophetic denunciation of women's unequal status within the Church situate M-I members many times in positions of conflict with Church structures and institutions and the patriarchal views that many of the Church's members hold. Thus, we have to walk through the fine line of critical belonging, situated at the borders of the Church, that as María Cristina Inogés says, is a position in which nobody pays us much attention, but that allows us to be where Jesus moves with ease and the Spirit blows with cleansing freedom.²⁴

Being peripheral to the Church, M-I is also engaged in going forth into spaces where the Church is peripheric, entering into dialogue with the broader feminist movement. Amongst feminists, we are also liminal because, for many of them, the Church is irredeemable patriarchal. Instead of being a space of liberation, empowerment, and celebration of women's dignity, the Church and its faith are perceived as an added source of oppression for women, and not without good reasons. Still, many of the women of M-I, as many Christian women who have embraced feminist views before us, argue that they are feminist precisely because they are Christian. In the words of Virginia Azcuy, "in fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom there is no longer male or female (cf. Gal 3:30), we choose to be feminists to reject sexism as contrary to the plan of God and to reciprocal human relationships."²⁵ We encounter, at the core of our Christian tradition, enough reasons to and inspiration to embrace the cause of women's human dignity and join in the struggle for equality and respect within the

²³ Schüssler-Fiorenza, 134–39.

²⁴ María Cristina Inogés Sanz, *No quiero ser sacerdote: Mujeres al borde de la Iglesia*, 2020, 52.

²⁵ Virginia R. Azcuy, "Teologías Feministas En/Desde América Latina y El Caribe. Entre El Florecimiento, La Diversificación, y El Reto de La Recepción," in *Desafíos de Una Teología Iberoamericana Inculturada En Tiempos de Globalización, Interculturalidad, y Exclusión Social.*, ed. Luis Aranguren and Felix Palazzi (Miami, EE.UU.: Convivium Press, 2017), 385.

Church and the wider society. Thus, we have also claimed our space amongst the great diversity that has filled the streets of Chilean streets under the common call of feminism, reminding our sisters that the Church is not only composed of priest and bishops, that we exist, that we want to be the voiced of all women who have been silenced and abused by the Church in the past, and that we are also engaged in the struggle for women's dignity in all spaces of society, including our own Christian communities.²⁶

The Church's magisterium has acknowledged the irruption of women in public life and their fight for equal rights and dignity as a "sign of the times" since the times of Vatican II. In other words, the Church has recognized the fight for women's equality in civil society is a privileged place where the Spirit seems to be at work in the contemporary world.²⁷ *Gaudium et Spes* even affirms that "every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent" and particularly regrets discrimination against women, who in many parts of the world are "denied the right to choose a husband freely, to embrace a state of life or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men."²⁸ Since then, magisterial words around the dignity of women abound. Still, the Church has been much slower in recognizing and validating the irruption of women's movements for equality and dignity within its structures. Pope Francis has acknowledged this problem only recently, calling for the creation of "broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church" and for their inclusion in places "where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures."²⁹

These paradoxes have not been left unnoticed by women of M-I, who push to make real the principles of non-discrimination and equal dignity of men and women within the Church. We continue to feel like "guests in our own house," belonging to a predominantly female space but dominated by males.³⁰ Still, there are no complete agreements on what is the more productive path to overcome these inequalities. Most agree with Pope Francis: it is central that women gain access to places where decisions are being made. It is a topic that has been discussed in several of M-I's encounters, and that is a part of many of the letters and declarations that the coordination

²⁶ Mujeres-Iglesia, "Nuestra verdad: Mujeres-Iglesia Chile con el 8-M", March 8, 2019. The document was printed and handed to other women during the public manifestations organized for International Women's Day. Zambrano, "Mujeres-Iglesia ... La Historia."

²⁷ Magrit Eckholt, "La Cuestión de Las Mujeres Como Signo Permanente de Los Tiempos. Legado y Misión Del Concilio Vaticano II," *Proyecto*, no. 63–64 (2013): 11–28.

²⁸ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 29. Flannery, *Vatican Council II*.

²⁹ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium* (Washington, DC: Vatican City, 2013), #103.

³⁰ Carmel E. McEnroy, *Guests in Their Own House: The Women of Vatican II* (Eugene, Oregon, 2011), 5.

team of M-I has sent to the Chilean bishops and the wider Church. In a public letter sent to Pope Francis, which also men were invited to sign, they wrote:

“Many of the women signatories of this letter – and also men – want a more active role of women in our Church, more participation in decisions, more responsibilities, and more leadership. We want to have in the Church the same spaces that we have already won in civil society. Otherwise, the exodus of the women from the ‘boat of Peter’ will be bigger and bigger and more inevitable.”³¹

Part of the problem that catholic women face today is the intense contrast between their experiences inside and outside the Church. While there are still several problems of discrimination and lack of access to power for women in politics, economics, and other spheres, the feminist movement's gains outside the Church are unparalleled within it. Thus, the cultural rift keeps getting bigger, alienating many, to the point of provoking a silent but consistent exodus of women from the Catholic Church.

The exclusion of women from spaces of decision making is deeply tied to the problem of clericalism. Clericalism is a problem not only because women are excluded from the clergy and cannot yet be ordained. It is also a problem because it perpetuates abusive and arbitrary forms of using power that had created the conditions for conscience and sexual abuses.³² In practice, it has created members of first and second class within the people of God, denying the fundamental equality that we all share by our baptism, and allowing a sense of elitism within the Church that is necessary to eradicate. For some women from M-I, ordaining women will be an essential step towards a solution. For others, including women in the clergy ranks will only perpetuate clericalism, reinforcing the power structures they reject.

In any case, *Mujeres-Iglesia* has constituted itself as a space that remains communion with the wider Church and the clergy, but that has defended its autonomy, as a space free from any clerical and male supervision. It has become an *ekklesia of women*, or a Women-Church, as described by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Rose-Mary Radford Ruether, respectively. A space where women can practice radical forms of democratic sisterhood, modeled in the vision of the first Christian communities, and in Jesus's movement, who promoted discipleship of equals.³³ Having our own space has allowed us to speak freely and boldly about the challenges we face as Christian women. It has allowed us to renew our liturgical language and practice, allowing for creativity and exploration. It has been a space to explore our spirituality and engage in the study of feminist theology. Reserving many of our activities only to women has allowed us to

³¹ «Mujeres Iglesia» a Francisco: «No volveremos a callar», *Kairós News* (blog), May 29, 2019, <http://go.wuu.de/3qoj0> (21.6.2021).

³² Zambrano, “Mujeres-Iglesia ... La Historia.”

³³ Azcuy, “Teologías Feministas En/Desde América Latina y El Caribe. Entre El Florecimiento, La Diversificación, y El Reto de La Recepción,” 183; Ruether, *Women-Church*; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York, 1993).

experience tremendous freedom and create deep relationships based on mutual trust, friendship, and love. Still, we dream of a Church where women and men can sit at the same table as equals, sharing the same responsibilities, and acknowledging each other's gifts. Having our own space is only a necessary step towards achieving the dream of a Church that resembles in a better way the fact that we are all a pilgrim people, united by our common hope, that is the Kingdom of God.

Reclaiming our voice: from silence to proclamation

“... and she told them that he had said these things to her.” (Jn. 20:18)

One of the significant gifts that we have received by participating in Mujeres-Iglesia has been the gift of finding our voice. Empowered by the Spirit, we recognize that even amid a Church in crisis, the Gospel continues to be good news for humanity, and particularly to women. Creating a space of our own has allowed us to freely explore the gospels and read them with new eyes, starting from our particular and diverse experiences as women. Thus, M-I had made possible a renovated encounter with the Word, mediated by feminist and liberationist hermeneutical lenses that we inherited from other Christian women who before us dared to read the Bible and share their exegetical insight, spiritual wisdom, and theological reflections, starting from their experiences as women. Amongst the diversity of approaches that feminist theology offers, M-I has felt most at home with authors that can be considered Christian reconstructivists. According to Virginia Azcuy, feminist theologians from this current aspire to find a theological nucleus of liberation for women within the Christian tradition. They also visualize a profound transformation, and a real reconstruction, not only of ecclesial structures but also of the whole of society.³⁴

Therefore, in our renewed encounter with our Christian heritage, and with the gospel narratives, in particular, we have followed the three hermeneutical steps proposed by Elisabeth Johnson in *She Who Is*. Starting from the foundational experience of “protest against the suffering caused by sexism and a turning to the flourishing of women in all their concrete femaleness,” feminist theology recognizes three interrelated tasks or steps. First, we need to critically analyze inherited oppressions and the hidden dynamics of domination present in Christian tradition's language. Consequently, we need to expose the “ruling-male-centered partiality” of what has been considered universal and disinterested approaches to our faith, denouncing the sexist bias present in the Christian tradition.³⁵ Second, we need to “search for alternative wisdom and suppressed history” and collect the bits and pieces inside and outside

³⁴ Azcuy, “Teologías Feministas En/Desde América Latina y El Caribe. Entre El Florecimiento, La Diversificación, y El Reto de La Recepción,” 386.

³⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York, 2017), 27.

mainstream theology that “hint to untold stories” of women's contribution to the tradition. Although women’s voices have been many times ignored, censored, or suppressed, “women have nevertheless always been there, in fidelity and struggle, in loving and caring, in outlawed movements, in prophecy and visions.”³⁶ Finally, we need to risk new interpretations of our Christian heritage, providing new articulations of theology and symbols “that would do justice to the full humanity of women as a key to a new whole.”³⁷

The animating insight that underlies this method is that whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts women's dignity is not truly redemptive, and what promotes the full humanity of women is authentically Holy.³⁸ In this, feminist and liberation theology converge because they situate the flourishing of human beings, and particularly of the oppressed, as one of the central goals of Jesus’ ministry and proclamation, and as an unavoidable dimension of the evangelization task of the Church. This convergence has been very evident, especially for those women within Mujeres-Iglesia that have participated for years in Christian Base Communities and are versed in the practice of popular reading of the Bible. The See-Judge-Act methodology - that starts from the experiences of oppression and poverty that shape the lives of popular Christian communities in Latin-America, to confront that experiences with the message of hope, joy, and liberation found in Scripture, and to act accordingly, engaging in actions of justice and solidarity within the community and the wider society – continues to be central to how we engage with the Bible and the social reality around us.³⁹

However, the convergence between feminist and liberationist hermeneutics is not absolute because feminism brings a new lens that focuses particularly on women’s oppression and liberation. Consequently, women will tend to read the Bible and the tradition in a much more critical way because they find in Scripture and Tradition not only its liberationist core but also the pervasiveness of patriarchal forms of oppression that are very much embedded within them. In our efforts to re-read our tradition and encounter the Gospel with fresh eyes, Mujeres-Iglesia members have become very much aware that “it is time to keep in mind that, in the Church, it is not enough to announce the Gospel. The Church also needs itself to be evangelized and become aware of what is of the Gospel and what is of the anti-Gospel in Her own life.”⁴⁰ Thus, if the Church is going to become the Church of the poor and for the poor, as Pope John XXIII and Pope Francis envisioned,⁴¹ she needs to let be evangelized by those amongst

³⁶ Johnson, 29.

³⁷ Johnson, 30.

³⁸ Johnson, 30.

³⁹ Leonardo Boff, *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church*, trans. John W. Diercksmeier, 2012, 127.

⁴⁰ Inogés Sanz, *No quiero ser sacerdote*, 207.

⁴¹ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel: Evangelii Gaudium*, #198. (Washington, DC : Vatican City, 2013).

the poor who share the burden of the double oppression of economic exclusion and gendered violence and discrimination. Even amidst liberationist circles, women's voices continue to be frequently marginalized. Thus, our prophetic task is needed in all Church sectors – including the Christian Base communities – because everywhere we go, we are exposed to those who want to silence us or to relegate us to a secondary status.

To help women find their theological voice and provide a platform where they can share their spiritual insight with the rest of the Church, M-I has been offering weekly reflections on Sunday readings through its internet platforms. The idea of providing these reflections was born in 2018, during our Second National Encounter, in which we specifically reflected on our particular role as women in the task of evangelization. Gathered under the motto *El Evangelio que anunciamos las mujeres*⁴², women from the different corners of the country reflected on our particular mission as women in proclaiming the Good News amid a Church in crisis. Since then, each Sunday, a different woman is invited to share her reflection on the readings proposed by the Lectionary through a written text. These texts are shared with the whole ecclesial community through our internet platforms, and through other friendly webpages, such as the Jesuit magazine *Mensaje*, each Sunday publishes our reflections in the “Church” section of their site.⁴³ The reflections are not written only by those who have formal theological studies, or only by active members of M-I, but by women from different educational, social, and ecclesial backgrounds, mainly from Chile and other Spanish-speaking countries with whom we are connected.

In a Church where women are not yet allowed to preach in liturgical celebrations, *El Evangelio que anunciamos las Mujeres* has become a creative and productive space to make our voices heard and has allowed us to preach the good news of the Gospel. In words on one of the founder members of M-I, Bernardita Zambrano, through these reflections,

“The voice of women makes itself heard indirectly in the Sunday Eucharists, and most importantly, people in the Church is starting to become aware that the contribution of women can have a wider reach, and go beyond the private experience of faith in the family, or in the small base community where life is shared, or in the delivery of catechesis that involves just repeating traditional doctrine (written by men). The voice and spirituality of women is the seed of the Kingdom that is made public for the sake of evangelization.”⁴⁴

As women, we are allowing space for the unpredictable power of the Word of God, that according to Pope Francis, “accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our

⁴² The gospel that women proclaim.

⁴³ <https://www.mensaje.cl/category/noticias/iglesia/> (21.6.2021).

⁴⁴ Zambrano, “Mujeres-Iglesia ... La Historia.”

calculations and ways of thinking.”⁴⁵ We recognize that “the experience of Jesus liberates us, but hierarchal and traditional exegesis enslaves us again,” and that many times our “our view of the biblical texts is colored by the interpretation of men.”⁴⁶ Thus, reinterpreting the Gospel in a way that makes sense to us and other women is central in developing an adult and active belonging to the Church that takes our female humanity seriously, valuing their deeds, but also their words. As a consequence, the seed of the Gospel that grew unnoticed for so long within the silent and silenced hearts of women is now budding into fruitful and public reflections, bringing fresh interpretations and insights that fill us again with the joy of sharing the Gospel “to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance, or fear.”⁴⁷ Overcoming fear, hundreds of women have shared their reflections. Inspired by their words, some communities and priests have even invited M-I members to preach in their Sunday eucharist. While it is a very humble start, and our voices will continue to remain marginal, they are not invisible anymore, and they cannot continue to be ignored. If everyone in the Church is called to live as missionary-disciples, as the Latin-American bishops gathered in *Aparecida* and Pope Francis have suggested,⁴⁸ the laity voices, and especially of women, cannot remain silenced any longer.

In this path of proclaiming the Good News, we have found inspiration in our sisters, friends, and mothers who preceded us in faith. We recognize that we have received a distorted image of women's role in the Church based on distorted stories about many women-disciples' lives through history. Thus, we found ourselves in need to rediscover the female figures of our tradition and reflect particularly on the role that women had in the movement of Jesus. Recognizing how the Spirit has worked through women and with women along history has reminded us of our blessedness and sacredness as women. As Elizabeth Johnson says, when women remember that they are also created in the image of God, they can celebrate the sacredness of other women and feel empowered to name them, “breaking the patriarchal silence about the vast heritage of female witnesses.”⁴⁹

We have celebrated women's discipleship stories, remembering their names on our encounters, going back to the Scripture passages where their stories are told, and creatively reinterpreting and reimagining their roles within their communities. Among the many figures that we have rediscovered together, Mary Magdalene, who has become M-I's patron saint, is most prominent. The fact that the first witness of the

⁴⁵ Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, #22.

⁴⁶ Zambrano et al., “Primer encuentro mujeres-Iglesia.”

⁴⁷ Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, #23.

⁴⁸ Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericana CELAM, *Aparecida. V Conferencia General Del Episcopado Latinoamericano y Del Caribe: Documento Conclusivo*. (Bogotá, Colombia: Centro de Publicaciones del CELAM, 2008); Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, #120.

⁴⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading Of The Communion Of Saints* (New York, NY, 1999), 169.

resurrection was precisely a women and that she was in charge of sharing the Good News with the other disciples has empowered us, providing us with an alternative model of sanctity that is distanced from the more passive and subservient forms of femininity that we were formed into considering saintly. We have celebrated her feast with local liturgical celebrations (2018), our first feminist retreat (2019), and a novena that was done online due to the pandemic (2020). Thus, Mary Magdalene's solemnity has become an occasion to celebrate our gifts as women in the Church and promote renovated visions of how female sanctity can look like.

The good news of the Gospel cannot be divorced from the good news of women's liberation because they are intrinsically connected. We are convinced that when women announce the Gospel, it becomes good news not only for us but for the Church as a whole. Catholics desperately need to value the multiple services and ministries that women practice, including the ministry of the Word. We are convinced that the Spirit's gifts are given to everyone and that we are also Priests, Prophets, and Queens, through our baptism.⁵⁰ We feel the need to remind our Church that "in the People of God there is no first, second, or third category Christians." And that our active participation "is not a matter of concessions of goodwill, but is constitutive of the ecclesial nature."⁵¹ Thus, we have dared to take the Pope's Word to heart and to offer our active and adult contribution to the life of the Church, offering our voices and the richness of our diverse talents and gifts to the vast ecclesial community.

Conclusions

Inspired by Mary Magdalene and the Resurrected Jesus encounter, I had divided my essay into three parts. First, I tried to answer Jesus' question to the Magdalene: "Woman, why are you weeping?" (Jn. 20: 13) For M-I, the cross of women is also the cross of Jesus. Acknowledging how patriarchy's evils had wounded us and our sisters became one of our movement's central starting points. Thus I dealt with the pain that women experience both in the Church and society, expanding on the double wound that gave rise to M-I: the wound of sexual and power abuse in the Church, and the wound of sexual violence and discrimination of women in all spaces of society.

Then, inspired by the image of the empty tomb, I explored M-I as a liminal space that situates itself between the pain of the multiple forms of death that women experience and the promises us new life that emerges from our woundedness. The empty tomb is not only a space of lament and weeping, but also the intimate space of encounter with the divine, and with our own graced nature as women. It is also a peri-

⁵⁰ Zambrano, "Mujeres-Iglesia... La Historia."

⁵¹ "Carta Del Santo Padre al Pueblo de Dios Que Peregrina En Chile (31 de Mayo de 2018) | Francisco," accessed December 1, 2020, <http://go.wvu.de/q01ev> (21.6.2021).

pheral space, both within the Church and amongst the feminist movement, and because of that, it is a creative space, where the Spirit of Life can bring about novelty and abundant life. And it is a prophetic space in which women can articulate an ecclesial response to the sin of patriarchy and clericalism and offer a self-critical voice that moves the whole Church towards conversion.

Finally, I dealt with how this movement of catholic women has engaged in the task of evangelization. Like Mary Magdalene and the women of the empty tomb, we have felt commissioned to share the Good News of the resurrection to our brothers and sisters. And we have started to do it, creating a space in which women can interpret Scripture and share their particular views on the Gospels with the rest of the Church and society. This has been done under the conviction that the Good News of Jesus is still a Good News for women and that the Church desperately needs to look at old truths with the diverse and graced eyes of catholic women.

Women have always been part of the Church. Their presence is not something new. What is new is that women are not only building the Church, but they are reflecting on the Church, opening new avenues for ecclesiology, critically reflecting about their own membership to the People of God. As Virginia Azcuy says, what is really unique is not that the women are Church, but that women are starting to name the Church.⁵² *Mujeres- Iglesia* has been a space for such a naming, a community that continues to feed me as a scholar, as a Latin-American Catholic, and as a woman. I hope that these ecclesiological reflections contribute to the task of naming the Church with female voices, in ways that continue to open avenues for the renewal for a Church in crisis, allowing the Spirit to do Her work amongst us.

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⁵² Virginia R. Azcuy, Nancy E. Bedford, and Mercedes L. Bachmann, *Teología feminista a tres voces*, 1 edition (Santiago de Chile: Ediciones Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2017), 172.