

## FEMINIST THEOLOGY FOR LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN

This workshop consisted of an extremely informative paper presented by María Pilar Aquino (University of San Diego), newly elected President of ACHTUS. Aquino pointed out that although Latin American liberation theology finds its starting point in the struggles of the oppressed to create more just social structures, it has only recently begun to incorporate explicitly the experience of women in its social analysis and theological reflection. Women not only suffer from economic, racial, and social oppression but are also marginalized by sexist structures in society, Church, and theology.

It has been largely the emergence of the voices of women in Latin American theology that has called attention to this situation. It had been assumed that women's liberation would follow from societal and ecclesial liberation and was thus a secondary agenda. The evolving nature of Latin American liberation theology has, however, allowed space for the advent of new voices. Women from Latin America and the Caribbean are now making a significant contribution, both critiquing androcentric tendencies in Latin American liberation theology and constructively developing it by including the experience of women struggling against all forms of oppression.

The colonial history of Latin America has indelibly marked its political and religious reality. The conquerors practiced racism toward the indigenous people, and adopted a sexist attitude toward women. The patriarchal presuppositions of European Christianity led to a suppression of the indigenous religious culture, including suppression of cults of the mother goddesses. Aquino stressed the connection between the conquest mentality and the Church's missionary activity and noted that the Church's activity often legitimated the atrocities of the conquistadors. On the other hand, she said, women played an important role in the emergence of another model of understanding the Church as a defender of the cause of the indigenous people and as a Church of the people. These two models have continued to be in conflict in the Church's self-understanding of its presence in Latin America.

During the period of the conquest, and following it, indigenous women continued to be subjected to the cruelist social and sexual exploitation. This led to the division of labor into public and private spheres according to masculine and feminine stereotypes. In spite of this history of oppression, however, Aquino suggested that it was women who "*selected and kept* what was best in the Gospel message together with the best elements in their own cultural symbolic world."

This subversive memory, she suggested, explains the potential of women today to be the bearers of the liberating message of the Gospel in a sexist and racist society.

This history of women in Latin America makes it all the more essential that any liberation theology emerging from this culture include the experiences of women. "Otherwise, Latin American liberation theology was running the risk of becoming merely rhetorical by abstracting itself from the concrete faces of the people it was about, especially women." The newly raised voices of women theologians, bringing this marginalized dimension of human experience to the foreground, have truly brought Latin American liberation theology to a new phase of its existence.

It has been a clear weakness on the part of well-known male liberation theologians that they have overlooked the reality of women in their social and ecclesial analysis. Without imputing blame for this omission or suggesting that it was done consciously, Aquino declared that the time has come for male, and particularly clerical, liberation theologians to free themselves from the androcentric presuppositions which have allowed them to overlook such an important dimension of human life. Liberation theology's origins in the struggles of peoples to free themselves from oppression should provide a compelling impetus to include explicitly the experience of those who are the poorest and most oppressed in any society. In light of this history, Aquino issued a strong call for Latin American women to speak out and define themselves as women, Latin American and Christian.

Aquino ended her paper with a reflection on traditional androcentric theology in light of theology done by women. First, she said, androcentric theology is *logocentric* as compared with theology done by women, which concentrates more on practice and context. Second, this theology is impositional, that is, part of the colonial imposition first of Europe and now of North America. It thus accepts sexual and racial stereotypes. This will only be overcome by the voices of the poor and marginalized, especially women in developing theology. Third, androcentric theology has displayed a conquering and colonial logic. This has substituted theories of evil based on a theoretical understanding of human being for recognition of the real evil suffered by poor and oppressed peoples. Fourth, this theology adopts a one-sided male and patriarchal perspective which does not recognize the validity of other viewpoints. Women question the self-evidence of this perspective by opening theology to the sphere of daily life in transformation. They offer an imagination about the future lacking in the closed system of androcentric theology. Fifth, androcentric theology is univocal. While purporting to speak in a universal voice, it has reflected androcentric European thought and experience and effectively excluded the possibility that the Latin American experience, the experience of the poor, and particularly the experience of women could be a locus of revelation. Sixth, and finally, traditional androcentric theology has been dualistic, perpetuating conflicts between body and soul,

women and men, and understanding the world hierarchically as composed of superiors and inferiors.

Aquino concluded with the hope that by contributing their expertise and experience, the voices of Latin American women theologians will help liberation theology overcome the limitations imposed by its uncritical adoption of the presuppositions of traditional androcentric theology.

Following the presentation there was a spirited discussion in which Aquino spoke strongly of the need to remain connected to the people in doing the theological task so that theology will not become detached from the everyday reality of peoples' lives.

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