EVIL AND HOPE:
FOUNDATIONAL MORAL PERSPECTIVES

In April of this year, the *New York Times* reported the following story:

A mother who said her 7-year-old daughter had been abducted from a flea
market and pleaded tearfully on television for the girl's safe return was convicted
of murder today in her beating death. The mother, Pauline Zile, 24, lowered her
head and fought back tears as the guilty verdicts on charges of murder and child
abuse were read. Prosecutors said they would seek the death penalty. No
immediate date was set for the jury to return to consider the sentence. Mrs. Zile
was accused of abusing her daughter, Christina Holt, and causing her death last
Sept. 16 by not protecting the girl from her stepfather, John Zile. The couple kept
the girl's body in a closet for several days before Mr. Zile buried it. . . .

The Ziles' former next-door neighbor . . . testified that she had overheard
the fatal beating . . . Christina was being punished for defecating on the floor,
[the neighbor] said, adding that it sounded as if a man struck the screaming child
over and over until she fell silent. [The neighbor] then testified [that] she heard
a woman say, "John, that's enough."

The prosecutor . . . said that in the final moments of her life, Christina was
not heard calling to her mother. "Christina already knew at that point: Mommy
didn't care," [the prosecutor] said in his closing argument. "She did nothing. She
watched her die."[1]

Only two days later, the *Chicago Tribune* carried a story of a mother who
pushed her sixteen-month-old child through an eighth-story window to his death.
The child, the story said, would not stop crying.[2] Months earlier, the nation
watched as Susan Smith first claimed that her two young children had been ab-
ducted by a black male assailant, and then admitted to pushing the car carrying
them into a lake, where they drowned.

"If the sufferings of children," Fyodor Dostoyevsky writes in the voice of
Ivan Karamazov, "go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay
for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price."[3] Wendy Farley
writes of Dostoyevsky that the suffering of children is an example of "an evil so
intense, so vile that it destroys the possibility even of future harmony."[4] Further,

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[1] *New York Times*, 12 April 1995, national edition, A16.

[2] *Chicago Tribune*, 14 April 1995, Chicagoland edition, 1.

[3] *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: New American
Library Signet Classics, n.d.) 226.

[4] *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: West-
minster/John Knox Press, 1990) 30.

she writes, "no explanation, no act of atonement, no consolation, can heal the wound of radical evil."[5]

The stories with which I have chosen to begin could be multiplied hundreds of times over, and as I speak they are repeated over and over, in this city, and around the world.[6] How, in the midst of these immense evils, can we find hope? What message of hope can our faith in Jesus Christ offer to these children, to these mothers, to ourselves?

My task here, as I understand it, is not to solve intellectually the ultimately insoluble question of evil, or even to explore its every dimension, but to provide some avenues for thought about evil and hope through the lens of moral theology. I choose to begin with, and pay close attention to, the experiences of women, especially mothers, in relation to evil. Why mothers? First, their experiences have not been a primary resource for moral theology for a number of reasons, some of which I will explore. While Catholic moral theology has paid considerable attention to the biological dimensions of motherhood, its social and historical dimensions have lacked such close scrutiny. Yet all of us have been children; all of us have been raised to maturity, if not by mothers, by those who have taken on the task of mothering. Some of those among us are mothers. The experiences of mothers and children thus provide an important, one might say foundational, resource for understanding moral formation and development, the nature of human agency, and the social context of human life.

Second, there is something about the "evil" done by mothers to their children that seems—at least, in the public imagination—to be particularly heinous, a judgment reflected in the news accounts I mentioned. I want to explore this perception and consider the assumptions underlying and the consequences of such thinking.

Third, our responses to evil cannot prescind from our broken and tragic lives. It is in the narratives of evil that whatever hope there is will arise. By focusing especially on the concrete reality of mothers, my intent is to raise questions about the adequacy of our moral language concerning evil and its consequences and to explore possibilities for response.

It goes without saying that I cannot possibly do justice to such an immense and difficult topic, nor is it likely that I will say anything that is entirely new. I only hope that I can help to raise some questions that will keep our awareness of evil from deteriorating into despair and hopelessness, or worse, indifference,

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[5] Farley, *Tragic Vision*, 65.

[6] Susan Mezey, in "An Overview of Law and the Child Welfare System" and in "Limited Options and Conflicting Values: A Preliminary Exploration," unpublished papers for the Loyola University Center for Ethics Across the University, April 1995, notes that juvenile court judges in Cook County, Illinois, currently have 3,500 to 4,000 cases on their dockets.

and that may prompt us to act, in hope, with faith and love, to resist the evil that we are able. My comments will be organized around the following three themes:

    I. The naming of evil as a moral act;

    II. Human agency: voice, relation and mothers;

    III. Fragments of hope.

I. NAMING EVIL AS A MORAL ACT

While evil has a fundamentally mysterious character, in that it cannot be fully explained or justified, and can only be described in fragmentary ways, definitions of evil attempt to provide insight into its source, to diagnose it, as it were, and thus provide some possibility of response. In recent years, evil has been the focus of a number of works in theology, many of them authored by women, who seek to add their voices to the long history of this discussion. The recognition of so many evils that women and children have suffered has, in part, prompted this focus. But this interest on the part of women is also due to a concern that these particular evils be addressed at their roots. By raising the question of how evil is experienced and defined by women, feminist perspectives on evil thus raise questions that go to the heart of our tradition.

Naming evil also necessarily involves issues of terminology, and the problem is further complicated by the global ways in which the term evil can be used: for example, as the intentional or the tragic cause of suffering, as sin, as the experience of suffering itself.[7] While I will be using the term evil to refer both to its source (that is, what makes something evil) and to its consequences (that is, suffering), I will endeavor to qualify its use where appropriate.

In what follows, I will briefly outline what I understand to be some of the major features of the perspectives of Roman Catholic moral theology on evil. I will then do the same for feminist theology, although at somewhat greater length. The purpose of such an exercise is to draw out possible connections between the two, as well as to raise questions regarding the adequacy of our moral language for evil.

The context for Roman Catholic moral theology is the human person in relation to God. Drawing on the Augustinian and Thomistic traditions, Catholic moral theology understands human persons teleologically: as rational beings oriented towards God. Informed as well by the natural law tradition, moral theology provides guidance in enabling human beings to fulfill themselves, personally and socially, and to provide formal and material norms for human action, in the

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[7]John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 1987) comments on the difficulties in using the term "evil" in moral theology (the translation of the Latin *malum*) and suggests that idiomatic English terms might be better used to give "welcome precision and richness to moral discourse and reflection" (323).

light of revelation. Catholic moral theology is especially concerned with the con-
crete ways in which human lives are lived, seeing in material reality, in human
relationships, and in social and ecclesial structures, the presence of God.

With regard to evil, Catholic moral theology makes a distinction between
ontic (or premoral) and moral evil. Ontic evil connotes a way of accounting for
the "natural consequence of our limitation"—the finite and ambiguous conditions
of space, time, and society in which human life is lived.[8] Moral evil is embedded
in human actions and their consequences. It takes many forms, all of them
various manifestations of sin.

In the classic Christian formulations, evil is understood as the absence, or
privation, of the good, persisting in spite of the goodness of the Creator and of
creation. Augustine's formulation of evil as privation remains a powerful one,
finding more recent articulations in such observers of evil as Hannah Arendt and
Jean Bethke Elshtain. Rather than the monstrosity that we would have evil
be—personified in such figures as Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin and Pol Pot—Arendt
argues that evil is far more subtle and dangerous when found in the "good
bureaucrat" who possesses no moral core at all.[9] Evil, according to Arendt, is
thus a void, incapable of generating anything substantive, possessing what
Elshtain calls "the unbearable lightness of nonbeing."[10]

Related to this notion is the idea of evil as idolatry, and thus its connection
with sin. For Thomas Aquinas, idolatry can be understood as a violation of the
creature's own teleology, as a way of worshipping a "false god" by way of
affirming a "false self." Insofar as the human being has its ultimate end in God,
finding its end in anything less than God is sin. And the root of every sin,
according to Thomas, is "inordinate love of self."[11] Most recently, Edward Farley
has lent his eloquent voice to this perspective, terming sin "a skewed passion for
the eternal, in other words, idolatry."[12] We humans, in our restless anxiety, seek
to ground ourselves firmly where it is impossible to do so. And in this attempt,
in failing to secure ourselves in God, we clutch ephemeral reality and thus distort
it, squeezing it into mangled shapes that harm and sometimes destroy ourselves
and others.[13]

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[8]Louis Janssens, "Ontic Evil and Moral Evil," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 1:
Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick
(New York: Paulist, 1979) 40-93.

[9]Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New
York: Viking, 1963).

[10]Jean Bethke Elshtain, "Augustine's Evil, Arendt's Eichmann," Frank M. Covey
Lecture, Loyola University, Chicago, 23 March 1995.

[11]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, q.77. a.4.

[12]Edward Farley, *Good and Evil: Interpreting a Human Condition* (Philadelphia:
Fortress Press, 1990) 126.

[13]This is related to the formulation of Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Nature and Destiny
of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1964) against which early feminist theology argued.

Such conceptions of sin as privation and idolatry are examples of the distortion of the orientation of the human being toward God, and thus have received much deserved attention as manifestations of human evil. But they hardly encompass the entire realm of moral theology's concerns. For alongside this teleological orientation, Catholic moral theology maintains a solid basis in the material world, and a corresponding concern with sin as it is manifested concretely.[14]

For feminist ethics, the context of moral reflection is the human situation, with special attention to the experiences of women. Feminist ethics does not approach the question of evil abstractly, but rather begins with naming and condemning the evils of sexism as well as related evils as they are found in specific historical situations.[15] In particular, feminist ethics is concerned with issues of *relationship*, and understands the human person as constituted by his or her relationships. Like Catholic moral theology, feminist ethics also acknowledges dimensions of evil that are not directly attributable to human action, or a lack of action, but are consequences of the finite dimensions of life. While in many ways these conceptions are similar to the category of "ontic evil," the use of the term "evil" here is problematic because of the concerns of feminist ethicists that the "natural" realm (that is, the nonhuman realm) be seen as intrinsically valuable, and that its materiality be seen as good.[16]

The basic concern, however, of feminist ethicists, is to name evil, and to resist it. Nel Noddings, for example, terms evil the deliberate infliction of pain, separation, and helplessness, thus giving it a decidedly *moral* tone.[17] By focusing on the ways in which evil strikes at the heart of human relationality, Noddings's intent is to argue for the substantive *reality* of evil—she rejects the conception of evil as privation or void—and to work against evil by developing new forms of moral education.[18]

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[14]Indeed, this is one of the major concerns of liberation theology, which has been critical of Catholic moral theology for maintaining too great a distinction between the transcendent and the concrete dimensions. See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*, rev. ed., trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1988).

[15]One of the major concerns of feminist ethics, especially since the early 1980s, is the way in which social location plays a crucial role in the understanding of particular evils. See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Feminist Ethics and the Challenge of Cultures," CTSA *Proceedings* 48 (1993) 65-83.

[16]This would be true especially for Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992) as well as a number of other ecofeminists. See *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol J. Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993).

[17]Nel Noddings, *Women and Evil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 113, 221-22.

[18]See Noddings, *Women and Evil*, chap. 9 "Educating for a Morality of Evil") 229-45.

Similarly, womanist theologians advance a vision of evil as "outrage," both against God and humanity, and argue, as does Emilie Townes, for "a praxis for the elimination of suffering."[19] Less concerned with naming the source of evil in its ontological essence, womanist, *mujerista*, and other liberation theologians seek to identify the various manifestations of evil so that they can be resisted, here and now, in the concrete. Evil is thus fundamentally a violation of the principles of justice and right relation. Narratives of resistance against evil, both successful and not, provide inspiration and example for the continuing struggle. That evil *is* resisted, time and again, provides hope that it will *continue* to be resisted.[20]

Taking this relational concern to cosmic and evolutionary dimensions, Rosemary Ruether and Marjorie Suchocki also see evil as a violation of right relation. For Ruether, sin is "the misuse of freedom to exploit other humans and the earth and thus to violate the basic relations that sustain life."[21] For Suchocki, sin is "the unnecessary violation of the well-being of any aspect of creation, arising from the human tendency toward aggression, and found especially in violence directed against other human beings and nature.[22] Suchocki suggests that this propensity to violence is rooted in the very structures that have made human physical and social evolution possible. "It may be," she says, "that violence itself is root as well as effect of sin."[23] While this suggestion does not deny the existence of sin, the source of evil is not so easily comprehended or addressed. Indeed, as Wendy Farley puts it, the most adequate language for the pervasive presence of evil in human existence is tragedy. For her, "tragedy is the price paid for existence."[24] Tied up with the very struggle to survive, the violence and tragedy of sin is less "fall" than "fact."

From these latter perspectives, the existence of evil cannot be traced to sin alone. The inevitability of evil in existence is due not so much to life's inherent limitations, as some conceptions of ontic evil would have it, but in its inextricable linkage with all that makes the good possible. Seen through such lenses, human existence must then seek to find whatever good is salvageable, finding in the fragments of existence some possibilities of response.

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[19]Emilie M. Townes, "Living in the New Jerusalem: The Rhetoric and Movement of Liberation in the House of Evil," *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1993) 78.

[20]See, e.g., Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990); and Kathleen Sands, *Escape from Paradise: Evil and Tragedy in Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), all of whom draw upon literary works, especially including African-American women's fiction.

[21]Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 141.

[22]Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1994) 48.

[23]Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 29.

[24]Farley, *Tragic Vision*, 61.

Feminist ethics thus finds some very real connections with the Catholic moral tradition: in the acknowledgement of forms of evil in existence that cannot be avoided; in a concern for the concrete dimensions of human life as having serious moral relevance; in human action as being the locus of God's presence in the world. But there are also some differences, especially with the ways in which evil is named, and I would like to sketch out some of these in the hope that they can be expanded in later conversations.

First, some feminist ethicists—I would include Noddings and Ruether—are uneasy with conceptions of evil as privation and idolatry, since such conceptions tend to abstract evil from its concrete manifestations. While I am not convinced that construing evil as privation or idolatry is wholly inadequate for describing women's experiences, the point made is worth consideration. When evil is conceptually tied to an overestimation of created reality (as in idolatry) or to a lack of reality (as in privation) the relation of both good and evil to material reality is made problematic. In the case of idolatry, the ultimate good is too easily removed from the material, in the transcendent; and in privation, evil seems disconnected from the material world. Describing the evil of child sexual abuse or the torture of political prisoners as a "lack" of the good strikes many, rightly or wrongly, as failing to encompass the immense and substantive damage that is done. And evil seen as idolatry may unwittingly, and falsely, separate the attitudinal from the material dimensions of evil. Neither idolatry nor privation, these ethicists argue, is wholly adequate to women's experiences of evil or of good, both of which are inextricably linked to the concrete and material dimensions of life. Nor can such conceptions make sense of the suffering of children, for whom the category of experience is even more problematic.

Second, the feminist ethical emphasis on right relation is, in some ways, clearly compatible with the emphasis of the Catholic moral tradition on the goodness of human life in its concrete dimensions. But in the naming of these relationships, and the moral value they are given, feminist ethics asks whether these foundations sufficiently recognize the agency and capacities of women, and whether they adequately account for the complexity of relationships in their concrete social and historical contexts.

To illustrate this point, let me return to my opening, the story of a mother who watched as her child was beaten to death, and of the child who did not cry out for a mother who did not respond. On any account, it would seem, this child's death is objectively evil.[25] And her mother's failure to respond, to resist the evil of this beating, is evil as well. This is the conclusion of the justice system of West Palm Beach, Florida, which convicted Pauline Zile of "not

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[25]See, e.g., Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1989) 294, for "virtually exceptionless material norms." Gula cites Josef Fuchs who "cannot conceive of any kind of exception to the norm which would prohibit the 'cruel treatment of a child which is of no benefit to the child'."

protecting the girl from her stepfather," even, let us note, *before* the child's stepfather—the one who actually beat her to death—went to trial. Some of the names for evil that I have mentioned may help in understanding this event: the lack of moral action on the part of the mother; the inappropriate deferral to the child's stepfather as a form of idolatry. But the story's sad conclusion tells what seemed, at least to the prosecutors, to be its most evil dimension: the mother who did not care.

It is easy to find moral fault in Pauline Zile; indeed, it is easy to demonize her (as did the prosecution), given the archetypally sacred relationship between mother and child. She is the Wicked Mother who fails to protect her child from the forces of evil in the world. Here, the complexity of evil is unfortunately simplified, as is the assumption about what is good. What were her choices? What situation was behind her inability to speak, until it was too late? This same oversimplification can be found in what I would call the demonization of poor single minority women (especially mothers on welfare) as a major source of evil in contemporary American society. That is, they are the mothers of those whom white society fears most—young black males. Such demonization fails to account for the social, racial, economic, and gender-based issues that are interwoven within these tragic situations.[26] Evil is thus hidden and overlaid with evil.

Moreover, scapegoating—with the Wicked Mother assuming the role of scapegoat—obscures the multitude of evils, of which this is but one miserable example, and misdirects moral responses. It is worthwhile asking at this point to what extent the structure and historical concerns of Roman Catholic moral theology encourage such scapegoating and therefore fail to pursue critical questions about contributing circumstances. That is, by identifying each person's moral failure, albeit with an acknowledgement of other related factors, we are not *required* to understand those contributing factors in our moral deliberations.

Evil is complex and insidious; while a single event may strike us full force with its massive awfulness, drawing the line neatly—between moral actors, between kinds of evil—may obscure hidden evils, or make the monstrosity so un-recognizable, so *other*, that we fail to see its faint reflections in ourselves. Yet if we fail to identify evil clearly, we also fail to respond to it appropriately. Thus our naming the evil in human existence is itself a moral task. The failure to name evil is a moral matter, too. What we identify as evil we are morally obligated to respond to; what we fail to identify will continue, unanswered, unopposed. One of the great charisms of the Roman Catholic tradition of moral theology is its effort to identify clearly the many manifestations of, and human complicity in,

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[26]It is worthwhile noting here that the majority of women on welfare are white, and that welfare payments are not ordinarily available to married couples. The perpetuation of false perceptions about recipients of welfare contributes to the difficulties of sorting out important questions about welfare reform.

evil.[27] But this is also a tradition which has not been free of bias, inevitably influencing the underlying global moral stances it has taken.[28]

Thus, naming evil is a complex moral business. But we should not let the complexity of this task obscure its urgency. Women's power to name and thus to respond to evil is essential to any adequate conception of moral agency, and it is to this topic I now turn.

II. HUMAN AGENCY, AUTONOMY, AND MOTHERHOOD

The evil that we term sin is a consequence of human agency, knitted, as it were, within the bulky wrap of our historical, social, and physical existence. Our capacity as moral agents is what empowers us to respond to evil, whatever its form. The earliest writings of feminist theology questioned conceptions of sin as pride and will-to-power as adequate descriptions of women's experiences of sin.[29] Since then, feminist theologians and ethicists have articulated a number of new foundational categories which guide ethical deliberation.[30] I will focus on just two of these: autonomy and mutuality.

While a notion of autonomy is basic to a feminist ethical perspective on the person, it is critical to approach this term with caution, given its history. The free, rational, and autonomous agent of the Enlightenment tradition has helped to inspire and inform the movement for women's equality over the last two centuries, but it has also suggested a notion of the person that feminist theologians and ethicists have criticized: a disembodied and isolated individual who can be considered apart from "his" emotions and social context. The capacity of women to act as moral agents is thus a primary concern, but so also is the consideration of the context of moral action, as I have suggested above. This concern, it is worth saying, is behind much of the stress of contemporary religious and secular feminism on women's say in ethical questions relating to reproductive issues.[31]

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[27]See James M. Gustafson, *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics: Prospects for Rapprochement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) for a helpful overview of the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of both traditions.

[28]See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978) 107.

[29]Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," *Journal of Religion* 40 (April 1960) 100-12; repr. in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) 25-42.

[30]See the essays in *Feminist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994) esp. Eleanor Humes Haney, "What Is Feminist Ethics? A Proposal for Continuing Discussion," 3-12; Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s," 77-87; and Toinette Eugene, "Moral Values and Black Womanists," 160-71.

[31]See Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Theology and Morality of Procreative Choice," in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon, 1985).

I will term this capacity "voice"—that is, the human ability to articulate both an assessment of a moral situation and to act in response to it.[32] I choose it for another reason: it grounds this capacity in the embodied person, suggesting that it is both spoken and heard. "Voice" is thus not an abstract reality; it requires a situation in which one can speak and can reasonably expect to be heard. It also suggests a capacity to listen and to hear the voice of the other.

The other principle intrinsic to feminist ethics is relationality as mutuality. I use this term to refer both to the social context in which moral action takes place, and as a normative principle that undergirds moral decision making. Mutuality is not meant to be purely dyadic, in a polar sense, but rather suggests the principles of responsiveness and justice in relationship. Similar ways of approaching this issue might be classified under the broad category of "the ethics of care." I would, however, prefer to see "caring" as but one *dimension* of what it means to be in a just relationship. I have chosen the term "mutuality" since it both assumes a relation and describes a(n ideal) mode of relating.[33]

Feminist theological ethics grounds its understanding of voice and mutuality in a critical interpretation of the Christian tradition, as well as the wisdom of human experience. The "voice" of the moral person is grounded theologically in a number of places. In the Roman Catholic tradition, it is found, for instance, in the importance of individual conscience in moral decision making.[34] Similarly, mutuality as an ethical norm is grounded in a vision of Christian community as one of justice, in which inclusive and nonhierarchical relationships are the ideal.[35] Here it may be helpful to recall the Second Vatican Council's call to universal

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[32]See, e.g., Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Nelle Morton, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 99, for the phrase "hearing one another into speech."

[33]See Margaret Farley, "Feminist Consciousness and the Interpretation of Scripture," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 41-51; idem, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986) esp. chap. 7: "Discerning Obligation: A Just Love," 80-109. My point here is not to deny the relationality of more traditional theories of moral agency, but to emphasize that feminist relationality is also a theory of justice. See also Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989).

[34]See Timothy O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) esp. chap. 9. See also Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha (In the Struggle): A Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) esp. chap. 5 ("Conscience, Conscientization, and Moral Theology in *Mujerista* Theology") on conscience among Hispanic women.

[35]See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); see also Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 45-57, for her interpretation of the Christian paradigm as destabilizing, inclusive, and nonhierarchical.

holiness and the recognition that the clergy "will not always be so expert as to have a ready answer to every problem . . . it is rather up to the laity [laymen] to shoulder their responsibilities."[36]

Some feminist thinkers, in conscious opposition to prevailing models of moral reasoning, have turned to the experiences of mothers in relation to children, for a more adequate model of the moral agent.[37] The reasons for this "turn to the mother" arise from a concern that the conception of the person that has prevailed in ethical discourse is inadequate: it is abstracted from physical and social context, it draws largely on the experiences of men and has failed to incorporate women's experiences, and it privileges the rational over the affective.[38] In some ways, of course, this "turn to the mother" has a long history in religious thinking, with a consideration of the mother's role as first moral teacher.[39] In challenging the more traditional associations of mothers with domestic morality, some feminist ethicists have argued that wider society would benefit from greater attention to the mother's voice.[40] Other feminists, however, while recognizing the moral importance of such activities as nurturing and caring, point out that as long as caring is seen primarily in gendered terms—for example, of caring as a particularly "feminine" virtue—it will have little impact on wider social issues.[41]

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[36]*Gaudium et Spes*, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1975) #43, p. 944. Voice and mutuality are by no means sufficient to encompass all of the principles necessary for moral action, but they are necessary ones, at least in a feminist perspective.

[37]Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989); Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Virginia Held, *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethics of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1994). The literature on "caring" is more characteristic of feminist ethicists in philosophy than in theology, although it is not entirely absent in theology. See Cynthia Crysdale's helpful survey "Gilligan and the Ethics of Care: An Update," in *Religious Studies Review* 20/1 (January 1994) 21-28. Some feminist theologians approach the mother-child relation with caution precisely because it has been used as a model by men for women. See, e.g., Christine Gudorf, "Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice," in *Women's Consciousness, Women's Conscience*, ed. Barbara Andolsen, Christine Gudorf, and Mary Pellauer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 175-91.

[38]For overviews of feminist perspectives on moral discourse, see Lois Daly, *Feminist Theological Ethics*; for philosophical perspectives, see Alison Jaggar, ed., *Living with Contradictions: Controversies in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boulder CO: Westview, 1994).

[39]Especially as the parental roles are treated in the traditional manuals of marriage: see, e.g., Susan A. Ross, "The Bride of Christ and the Body Politic: Body and Gender in Pre-Vatican II Marriage Manuals," *Journal of Religion* 71 (July 1991) 345-61.

[40]See, e.g., Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach*.

[41]See esp. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

They propose that caring be grounded in a more adequate conception of the person through socioeconomic and philosophical analysis.

Do such conceptions of the moral life constitute an adequate response to the multidimensional evils encountered in human life? Does moral agency constituted as voice and mutual relation both account for evil and respond to it? I would like to suggest that a *critical* use of the categories derived from moral thinking by and about mothers can suggest valuable insights into both naming and responding to evil.

Motherhood is clearly central in the magisterial vision of the role of women. As Pope John Paul II writes in *Mulieris Dignitatem*: "the true role of women . . . is in no way diminished, but is in fact enhanced by being related in a special way to motherhood—the source of new life—both physical and spiritual."[42] Women in their role as mothers thus have something "distinctive" to offer the Church, which must find ways of using these "specific charisms."[43] But what are these "specific charisms"?

In large part, they are defined by the capacity to *give*: to give life, to give of self. Motherhood as conceived altruistically suggests that such giving is women's particular "gift."[44] But this image of the mother as giver does not always attribute autonomous voice to the mother. Far more accurate, as well as more helpful for thinking about agency, are those conceptions of mothering that are characterized by complexity and even ambiguity.[45] By complexity, I mean to emphasize those dimensions of the "practice" of mothering that recognize how interwoven are the rational, the affective, and the physical. And by ambiguity, I mean those rational and affective dimensions in which, for example, love, resentment, altruism, anger, and patience are all present. Moreover, the experience of moral agency by those who are mothers is not only one of caring for the other. Caring is not a "special charism" of women, but a task, often menial (and poorly paid, if at all), usually relegated to those without the means to have others care for them.[46] The more appropriate picture is that of the person who must balance autonomy and relationship *both* in response to the needs of the

[42]Pope John Paul II, "Mulieris Dignitatem," *Origins* 18 (6 October 1988) 261. Note that John Paul II departs from the Thomistic tradition that saw the source of new life in the male as active principle while the female was the passive principle. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q.98, a.2.

[43]Ibid.

[44]See Janice Raymond, "Reproductive Gifts and Gift Giving: The Altruistic Woman," in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed. Daly, 233-43.

[45]Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976) is one such treatment of motherhood.

[46]This is a point developed at length by Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, and by Rita C. Manning, *Speaking from the Heart: A Feminist Perspective on Ethics* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992).

self and those with whom the self is in relation.[47] The bodily dimension of rela-
tionship—both in the sense of the biological mother, and the mother who must
care for the biological needs of the child—is an intrinsic part of relation. But so
is the social dimension, to the extent that our "private" lives cannot be
completely separated from the social forces that have helped to construct them.

Let us return for a moment to the sad story of Pauline Zile, and of her
daughter Christina Holt. In this situation, evil is rooted, at least in part, in the
silence of Pauline Zile. When she did speak, it was too late. There is a moral
dimension to silence, and one need only consider what has been written about
the Nazi Holocaust, and the complicity of millions of "good citizens," to be con-
vinced of its moral import. But I worry about the silence of Pauline Zile (until
she could no longer keep silent) and its connection to any sense of her own
moral agency. If a conception of the moral dimension of motherhood does not
include serious attention to the significance and authority of the mother's voice,
and the context in which it speaks, then it will unwittingly condone a silence that
prevents her voice from being spoken or heard. The evil of Pauline Zile's silence
is, on the surface, located in her failure to be defined by her relationship to her
child. But there may be more to the story than this.

Let me give a brief example of the problem involved in considering the
mother and the moral voice. In his recent Holy Thursday letter to priests, Pope
John Paul II considers the significance of women in the life of the priest. He
writes:

> Behind this mission [that of the priest] there is the vocation received from God
> but there is also hidden the great love of our mothers, just as behind the sacrifice
> of Christ in the Upper Room there was hidden the ineffable love of his mother.
> O how truly and yet how discreetly is motherhood and thus womanhood present
> in the sacrament of holy orders which we celebrate anew each year on Holy
> Thursday![48]

Along with the role of the mother, the Pope identifies the sister as the other
relation which women have with priests. In describing sisterhood, the Pope em-
phasizes selflessness, which is a form, he says, of "spiritual motherhood."[49] Later
in the letter, the Pope discusses women's share in the prophetic office of Jesus
Christ, and mentions a number of women to whom the Gospel message was
given, who were "fearless witnesses of Jesus' agony," and who were the first to
proclaim the truth of the resurrection.[50] What strikes me about the images that
are used here—women as sharers in the prophetic office, and women as mothers

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[47]See Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological
Dilemma* (Nashville: Abringdon, 1994).

[48]Holy Thursday letter "Women in the Life of the Priest," *Origins* 24/44 (20 April
1995) 752.

[49]Ibid., 754.

[50]Ibid.

and sisters—is that the prophetic office involves voice above all, a voice of proclamation and conversion. And yet the language describing mothers and sisters terms them hidden, discreet, selfless.

There is, then, a troubling lack of clarity in the Catholic moral tradition on the moral agency and voices of women. Here it may be helpful to recall that voice develops in relationship: the profound truth expressed by "maternal thinking" is that we are all (ideally) nurtured to maturity in relationship to parents, siblings, friends, the wider society. Our capacity to speak, to name and to act is a process developed in a context of multiple relationships.

But recognizing and responding to evil requires a voice and requires a context of relationships in which this voice can be heard. In addition, it is important to say that speaking can be selfless when speaking is dangerous. What is the extent of the moral obligation to speak and possibly risk one's life for one's child? Is there a special obligation that mothers in particular have to their children that does not pertain to other relationships? If we are to engage in a critique, as I think we ought, of the moral dimensions of motherhood, how ought we to balance ideals of motherly self-sacrificial love with the obligation to love oneself? How, then, do we understand the moral status of Mrs. Zile's silence? What does this silence say about her relationship with herself, her husband, and her child? The evil of the silence of Pauline Zile is, I suggest, not quite as simple as it appeared to the jury at her trial. It does, however, raise the question of what hope there is for those who are silenced or for whom silence means death.

III. FRAGMENTS OF HOPE

In this last section, I turn to fragmentary dimensions of hope as they are found in those very experiences which bring us awareness of evil. And in doing so, I begin by bringing to mind the image of another mother who watched as her child was tortured to death.

The symbol of the cross presents profound theological problems for many contemporary theologians, who are critical of the traditional doctrines of atonement and redemption.[51] The glorification of self-sacrifice, the passive and silent acceptance of suffering, the image of a heavenly but abusive Father who requires the death of his son, are evidence, some feminist theologians argue, of the impossibility of the Christian message of the cross being of value and import for women.[52] Womanist theology has also been critical of the ways in which black

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[51]See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994) esp. chap. 4, for a thorough survey of these objections. See also Elizabeth Johnson, "Jesus and Salvation," CTSA *Proceedings* 49 (1994) 1-18.

[52]The best-known of these critics is Mary Daly, who argues that Christianity is "necrophilic"; see her *Gyn/Ecology: A Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press,

liberation theology has found a positive value in the cross through an identifica-
tion with the suffering of Jesus. Delores Williams puts it bluntly when she says:
"Black women should never be encouraged to believe that they can be united
with God through this kind of suffering."[53] Others argue that it is the life and
message of Jesus, more than his death, that is of significance for contemporary
theology. Sallie McFague, for example, argues that it is the destabilizing, inclu-
sive, and nonhierarchical vision of Jesus that is of value for the present.[54] This
vision overturns the expectations of his own society, and of all societies which
take his message seriously. Such a message can, and does, lead to death. But it
is the *message*, and not the death, that is most important.

But I suspect that the disturbing message of the cross is precisely where con-
temporary theology needs to look if we are not simply to impose our own
present understandings upon the tradition, especially when we consider the ques-
tion of evil. In addition, it is simply not the case that the message of the cross
is without import for many, including the poorest of the poor, even today. Elisa-
beth Schüssler Fiorenza observes that "Latin American, African, and especially
Asian feminist liberation theologies . . . stress that suffering and death is the fate
of those who have committed their lives to struggles for justice and liberation."[55]
Thus identification with the suffering Jesus and his mother provides real hope.

While it is beyond my task to develop a full theology of the cross and/or of
the resurrection, the "stumbling block" that the theology of the cross continues
to present to Christian theology cannot be sidestepped. Nor are the issues of
voice and mutual relationship irrelevant to the cross. In his last suffering, Jesus
experienced God as absent. He cried out for a Father who did not respond. But
in that experience of abandonment, of profound evil, in that crying out, there
were fragments of hope that are suggested in the passion narratives. These
fragments offer hope for moral responses that are both cognizant of the
ambiguity of all of human efforts in the face of evil yet refuse to let evil have
the final say. Further, it may be that it is in the absence of these responses that
we find evil manifest in its most insidious ways. In what follows I will sketch
out three such responses. Each of these responses involves some explicit
acknowledgement of relation—between the one who suffers evil and the one who
inflicts it, between those who are suffering and those who are not. And each
involves some naming of the relation. They are, of necessity, in abbreviated
form, and I leave it to my respondents to question their moral valence or to
develop their implications.

First, evil calls for a moral response of *presence and witness*. Pope John
Paul mentions the "fearless witness" of the women who were present at Jesus'

1978); see also Daphne Hampson, *Theology and Feminism* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990).

[53]*Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll NY:
Orbis, 1993) 169.

[54]See McFague, *Models of God*.

[55]Schüssler Fiorenza, *Miriam's Child*, 102.

death.[56] This presence is not simply a physical presence but one that embodies solidarity with those who suffer the outrages of evil. Other examples come to mind: the witness of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, whose presence is at the same time a condemnation of those who participated in the "dirty war," or stood by, as thousands met their deaths; the women who witness at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem for peace; the witnesses of Greenham Common. Presence and witness involve, first of all, a physical presence, a willingness to stand in the presence of evil. But even when voices are silenced, presence itself is a voice, speaking wordlessly for those who are absent, and thus for those who have no voice.

Such presence and witness are surely a sign of hope to those who suffer unjustly. But I suggest that the witness at the cross is also a witness to evildoers and to the condemned. Presence and witness in the face of evil imply a willingness to live within the muddy waters of guilt, sin, and innocence. I have in mind here the witness of persons like Helen Prejean to the condemned on Death Row, about whom she writes in *Dead Man Walking*.[57] Such a presence does not mean that judgments of guilt or innocence cannot be made; it is rather to say that the hope of God's presence accompanies the guilty as well as the innocent.

For women, such presence and witness mean a refusal to stand in the background. The presence at the cross was not at all hidden, but was front and center; apart from Jesus, they were the most visible at his death. Such presence also works against the isolation of those who suffer and stands as judgment of the oppressor.

Second, evil calls for a commitment to *struggle and resistance*. The cry of agony in the garden needs to be heard as a cry of resistance to evil, but also a willingness to undertake the struggle if it cannot be avoided. Delores Williams provides a helpful perspective in her reflection on the story of Hagar. When God speaks to Hagar in the wilderness, Williams says, God's word comes to Hagar not so much as one of liberation, but rather as one providing "survival strategies." In grappling with the day-to-day realities of oppression, God is a presence enabling one to "make a way out of no way."[58]

Struggle and resistance involve an emotional dimension on the part of those who undertake such work. Anger is necessary as an element of the moral passion: anger at the evil of injustice provides the embodied energy to commit oneself to struggle and resistance.[59] This passion is supported as well by the Catholic tradition. Thomas Aquinas says that "virtuous persons should employ both anger

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[56] John Paul II, "Women in the Life," 754.

[57] *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the U.S.* (New York: Random House, 1993).

[58] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, xii.

[59] See Beverly W. Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

and the other passions of the soul, modified according to the dictates of reason."[60] Perhaps, as Wendy Farley suggests, we can come to an understanding of the wrath of God that does not put it in perpetual opposition to God's mercy.[61]

In addition, struggle and resistance have clear social implications, in that they involve challenging and transforming both persons and institutions that themselves perpetuate suffering and evil. Resistance and struggle require a community and a context within which to work. The long and rich tradition of Catholic social teaching offers resources here, both for an understanding of the communal dimension of human life and of the social dimensions of Christian teaching.

The third fragment of hope in the passion narrative is *forgiveness*. This term is easily misunderstood, and can be thought to mean a passivity in the face of the one who does evil, a premature "wiping away" of every tear. The words, "forgive them, for they know not what they do," sound hollow or even cruel to those who suffer by the hands of those who know all too well what they do. But according to Marjorie Suchocki, "forgiveness is an alternative response to violence that has the power to break this cycle."[62] Suchocki describes forgiveness as having three dimensions: (1) willing the well-being of the victim and the violator; (2) acknowledging the relation of victim and violator; and (3) knowing and remembering. The willing of well-being is, she says, an act of intellect and will rather than of one of emotion. Forgiveness does not necessarily involve acceptance. It does, however, involve "the de-absolutization of the self and therefore the transcendence of the self by knowing the self as one center among many centers."[63] This process breaks the pattern of retributive violence, and has the possibility of removing the psychological presence of the violator from the victim.

Transforming one's memory to the past and "opening one to a new present" completes the act of forgiveness.[64] Such a transformation entails a profound act of courage, and a willingness to put the evil act in the past. As Suchocki puts it, "In the case of forgiveness, one remembers in order to transform; in the case of vengeance, one remembers in order to destroy. Transformation involves hope for a new future."[65] Thus forgiveness is a refusal to deny relation, even between evil-doer and victim. It is difficult to see how ongoing systemic evils can be forgiven, when they are present not only in the memory and imagination of the victim of violence, but in one's ongoing lived experience. I suspect that the hope that there will be an end to such systemic evil may defer this process to the future, but it

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[60]*Summa theologiae* II, II, q.123, 1.10.

[61]*Tragic Vision*, 123.

[62]Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 144; for a similar but briefer treatment of forgiveness, see Carolyn Osiek, *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church* (Mahwah NJ: Paulist, 1986) 76.

[63]Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 147.

[64]Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 150.

[65]Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence*, 151.

ought not to be ruled out. Forgiveness is a radically countercultural act; it arises both from a knowledge of evil as well as hope that evil will be overcome.[66] It is also a way of naming evil so that its power no longer belongs to the evildoer.

Resurrection hope, Edward Schillebeeckx writes, was born in the experience of forgiveness:

> The experience of having [the apostles'] cowardice and want of faith forgiven them, an experience further illuminated by what they were able to remember of the general tenor of Jesus' life on earth, thus became the matrix in which faith in Jesus as the risen One was brought to birth.[67]

Such forgiveness is an experience of grace, both as received and as given.

These three elements of hope are not necessarily sequential, but they are present, if only in fragmentary ways, in the evil of the cross. Such fragments offer hope that they may be found as well in the unspeakable evils that are occurring in the world as we meet today.

In closing, I return to the story of Pauline Zile and her daughter Christina. The *New York Times* recounts that "[t]he defense called no witnesses" on her behalf. Her attorney, however, called the verdict "an outrage," and said that he would ask for a new trial.[68] Pauline Zile left her trial in tears, convicted of murder, her daughter dead, and her husband awaiting his own trial. The evils of innocent children's deaths, the scapegoating of a woman who was probably a victim herself, and the ongoing abuse and torture of children, women, and men, continue.

If the Christian tradition can offer hope to those who suffer and even perpetuate such evils, it will be in facing squarely their reality and understanding their complexity. My contribution this morning has been to suggest that such a task can benefit from a consideration of the experiences of women and mothers. I leave it to you to assess the worth of this endeavor.*

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[66]On this point, see Karen Lebacqz, "Love Your Enemies: Sex, Power, and Christian Ethics," in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed. Daly, 244-61.

[67]*Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Crossroad, 1979) 391.

[68]*New York Times*, 12 April 1995, national edition, A16.

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