"WITH MY WHOLE LIVING": CHRISTIAN WOMEN'S WAYS OF WORSHIP

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1. Introduction

> I am giving Thee worship with my whole living;
> I am giving Thee consent with my whole willing.
> O God of all Gods, I am giving Thee my soul.[1]

The words of this ancient prayer suggest that Christian worship is not simply a matter of ritual; rather it involves offering all of oneself. Thus, most of this essay is concerned with some of the ways in which over the centuries Christian women have consecrated their lives to God.[2] A final section will consider their participation in ritual, a significant but not exhaustive aspect of their worship.

Histories of the consecrated life for Christians have most often assumed monasticism, especially Benedictine monasticism as the norm. Moreover, the written sources, both descriptive and normative, are overwhelmingly the work of men and reflect the perspective of men, even when their subject is women's lives. Recently scholars have been attempting to recover the experience of women by means of imaginative reconstruction, based on a rereading of the source. Their work reveals that consideration of consecrated life for women necessitates attention to many groups of women outside what can properly be called monasticism, beginning with the "orders" of virgins and widows in the early church.

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[1]"Oblation", adapted from a Celtic prayer in the *Carmina Gadelica,* Vol. III. Set to music by Kathleen Deignan in *Bride Spirit: Songs of the Beloved* (Schola Ministries, Inc., 1999)

[2]Most of my research has focused on forms of consecration within Roman Catholicism, even though I have attempted to make reference to those within other Christian denominations. Much of what is said here is also applicable to men, especially non-ordained men, but to explore those similarities would be the topic of another essay.

2. Pre-monastic Women

There has been much scholarly debate concerning the roles played by women in the church of New Testament times. This is hardly surprising, given the diversity of attitudes apparent in the scriptural texts themselves, even within the letters of the single author Paul[3]. At present, there is an emerging consensus that women shared in the tasks of missionary preaching, care for the poor, and leadership of some house churches.[4] However, the early Christians did not equate the exercise of such roles with the self-giving that constitutes worship. Rather, Paul exhorts all his listeners to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rm 13.14), and Mark's gospel explains that this involves patterning their lives on that of Christ, the "servant of all", who "gave his life as a ransom for many". (Mk 10.35,45)

Although Christians' "whole living" was understood as an act of worship, those who died for the sake of Christ were perceived to be offering a particularly Christ-like sacrifice. This is apparent as early as the description of Stephen's martyrdom in Acts 7, but this form of worship was not limited to men, as is clear in the second-century account of the martyrs of Lyons, in which the servant woman Blandina is described as another Christ. During the same period, as a way to greater purity of heart, women and men began dedicating themselves to God through a promise of chastity. As early as the second century, Justin insists that the large number of Christian virgins demonstrates Christianity's rationality and benefit to the Roman state, since many who had been living intemperate lives adopted that lifestyle upon conversion. In addition, his *First Apology* offers life-long virginity as proof of the holiness of the Church; one might say that it occupied a central role in the Church's worship. Although both men and women lived dedicated lives of chastity, the fact that Justin and others mentioned women so much more other than men suggests that in

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[3]Cf. 1Cor 11.3, in which Christ as the head of humanity is seen as analogous to man as the head of woman, and Gal 3.28, which proclaims that "in Christ Jesus" there is no more distinction between male and female.

[4]Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza's ground-breaking study, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1985), has been particularly influential in his regard.

pre-monastic times female virgins were far more numerous than their male counterparts.

The earliest recognized group of consecrated women were the "official" widows, women whose husbands had died and who then committed themselves not to marry again. Virgins were a variant of the class of widows, i.e., widows who had never been married. In some places the group of widows even included married women who left their husbands to commit themselves to a life of chastity. (The early third-century martyr Perpetua appears to be in this category.) Later, virgins came to be considered a class and an "order" in their own right, and widows began to be considered "second-class" virgins, because their promise of celibacy had not been lifelong.

A variety of sources suggest that the widows/virgins engaged in a particular way in the prayer offered by all Christian. Sometimes, especially when they were ordained as deaconesses, they participated in the baptismal ceremony and taught and otherwise cared for women.[5] That they were a vital part of the worshipping and social life of the larger Church is shown by the fact that there were designated places for them in the churches and in church processions. Ironically, their insertion into the hierarchical ecclesial structure had the potential of distancing them from the rest of the worshipping community. On this issues, recent debate concerning the lay or clerical status of virgins, widows and deaconesses in a scholarly *cul-de-sac* which reveals more about contemporary understanding of orders than it does about the lifestyle of the persons in question. The most that can be said is that sometimes deaconesses and even widows and virgins who were not deaconesses were considered part of the clergy, and sometimes not.

All these women lived within the cities or towns of their church community, but their choice of a life of celibacy had repercussions on what could be considered "appropriate" space for them.

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[5]The relationship of the order of widows to the deaconesses is problematical; the latter institution was by no means universal, and where it did exist, its membership was sometimes but not always limited to widows and virgins. What is significant is that the various ministries of these widows/deaconesses were considered appropriate for women who were in some way consecrated to God.

> By adopting celibacy as an integral part of the ascetic life, women became participants with men in striving toward perfection. In so doing, they acquired a position of equality that mandated the creation of a space for women other than that allotted to wife, mother, and courtesan.[6]

It is not always clear what the definition of that space entailed. Largely because there is little evidence to the contrary, it has often been concluded that during the first three centuries Christian virgins lived in their parents' homes, for the most part. But the argument for silence is always unconvincing with regard to the details of women's lives. Moreover, provisions in the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions*, which seek to curtail the activities of virgins, suggest that they found ways of associating with one another. In some instances they may well have formed communities, especially when they began to be prevented from exercising roles of leadership in the local churches, as women had done in the early charismatic period of the Church.[7]

According to the third chapter of Athanasius' *Life of Anthony*, before commencing his life as a solitary ascetic in the late third century and thus inaugurating the monastic movement, Anthony took care to place his sister in a community or virgins. This implies that such communities antedated monasticism. Certainly by the fourth century, there were highly developed networks of ascetic widows and virgins in such places as Rome and Cappadocia, and many of these women lived together in community. By then, there were numerous monastic experiments in the Egyptian desert, and these surely influenced the development of the women's communities. However it is likely that others were more strongly affected by the tradition of "*otium*" in Roman aristocratic and intellectual circles, which also influenced Augustine, and were thus a native phenomenon. Although

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[6]Rosemary Rader, "Early Christian Forms of Communal Solidarity: Women's Communities," in *The Continuing Quest for God: Monastic Spirituality in Tradition and Transmission*, ed. William Skudlarek, O.S.B. (Collegaville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1982), P. 89.

[7]This is Stevan L. Davie's position in *The Revolt of the Widows* (So. Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 101.

the legalization of Christianity in the fourth century permitted these groups to expand and flourish, it is inaccurate to suggest that they began only at that time.

Many of these consecrated women chose to express their devotion by pilgrimage to holy places. Apparently they understood this sort of mobility as supporting contemplative prayer, rather than taking from it. Ecclesiastical authorities did not agree, however, and moved to curb the freedom of consecrated women to move about, even for the sake of devotion, leaving it to their married sisters to continue the tradition of pilgrimage. The women who in an earlier period served the local church in the cities as members of the "orders" of virgins and widows now followed Anthony and his cenobitic contemporary Pachomius literally or figuratively into the desert.

3. Monasticism

It is often argued that the remarkable popularity of monasticism in the fourth century can be attributed to the adoption of Christianity as the empire's official religion. One result of that decision was to eliminate martyrdom as a vehicle for testing Christian's heroism. Those inclined to that sort of heroism, it is said, repaired to the desert, which also provided a refuge from the increasingly lax urban churches. While hagiographical source of the period and subsequent Christian accounts stress the importance of solitude and discipline, a careful reading of the *Sayings* of the desert ascetics themselves reveals the importance they placed on charity, both in providing bread for the hungry and offering spiritual advice.

The source reveal that among the solitary ascetics were a number of women. Given the fiercely heroic image which was most admired in these accounts, it is not surprising that what was praised in these women was their virile virtue and their ability at times to "pass" as men. But what is significant for this study is the fact that they were there at all. Given no evidence to the contrary, one must assume that they lived in ways essentially the same as the male ascetics, which means a solitude penetrated at least occasionally by the visits of other seekers after God.

This tradition continues to the present among hermits and recluses, some of whom live in close proximity to churches.

Significant though the eremitical settlements were, it appears that far more women and men took part in communal expression of desert monasticism. Here the desire for God was expressed not by a largely solitary life, but by a life in common, marked by prayer and manual labor, and following a prescribed rule.[8] Although there were numerous variations, most of the rules called for strict separation of the sexes and often separation from "the world" by the practice of enclosure; this latter provision was almost always seen as far more important for women than for men. Not only did this eliminate any possibility of pilgrimage, but it also severely limited the options for women's monasteries to be self-supporting, thus placing such a life out of reach for all but quite wealthy women.

From Egypt monasticism spread throughout the Christian world of the time among both women and men, with considerable local variation. In the Eastern part of the Empire many began to follow some form of the fourth- century Rule of Basil, with its emphasis on caring for the poor and sick who came to the monastery. In the West, regardless of the tradition they had been following, in the eighth century all monastic groups, male and female, were required to adopt the Rule of Benedict. Within women's monasteries, women exercised most tasks of leadership, including leadership of common prayer, except when a priest was available to celebrate the Eucharist. In fact, for a time the abbesses of wealthier monasteries became quite powerful, sometimes exercising the prerogatives of a bishop, and ranking between bishops and priests for ecclesiastical functions.[9]

Ranging in size from very small to several hundred persons, the monasteries were somewhat removed from the life of the cities, but there

[8]Among these were some who lived in separate dwellings and came together at intervals for common prayer and meals. Some of these hermitages are still extant today.

[9]In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, monastic leaders have served as spiritual directors and confessors to many outside as well as within the monasteries. One contemporary scholar recalls having confessed to an abbess when he was a child.

was still regular contact with local people. Manual labor and the communal chanting of the psalms were compulsory particularly for those in the Benedictine tradition. Moreover, during the high Middle Ages, may cloistered women became renowned for their mystical prayer. As a result, their physical separation from the worldly church came to symbolize a psychological separation, by which those within the monasteries were perceived as the true Christians, upon whose prayers "ordinary" Christians needed to rely. While the lives of the former could be seen to be worship, the same could not be said of most of their lay brothers and sisters.

Their monasteries thus provided the framework for many women's lives of worship. But what of the ministry of teaching and praying with women, especially those who were sick, which had been exercised by widows and virgins during the first centuries? By their vows monastic women consecrated the whole of their lives to God, and not simply the time devoted to prayer. The call to service always remained important in the monasteries, whether it was caring for members of the community, or responding to the material or spiritual needs of those who came to the monastery for help. But the fullness of the ministries exercised by the widows and virgins was radically curtailed by the need to maintain cloister. In the twelfth century such male reformers as Francis of Assisi and Dominic extended the ministries of their followers beyond monastery walls and into the city streets, but like-minded women's efforts to follow their example were not accepted by church authorities. Indeed, Clare of Assisi was permitted to follow Francis' ideal of absolute poverty only on the condition that the community she founded vow the strictest form of cloister.

4. Alternatives to the Monastery

The Middle Ages did acknowledge and celebrate the sanctity of some lay women, particularly such aristocratic women as Elizabeth of Hungary, who led heroic lives of charity, as well as the wisdom of some mystics who lived outside the cloister. Most of these, like Hadewijch and Catherine of Sienna, belonged to communities outside the officially sanctioned form of religious life for women. In northern Europe the Beguines, of which Hadewijch was a member, engaged in manual work, especially the production of textiles, and were largely self-governing.

Similar groups in southern Europe seem to have originated from the desire to engage in a variety of charitable works. Known as "third" orders, they were loosely connected to the male first and cloistered female second orders of mendicant groups like the Franciscan and the Dominicans. Catherine was a Dominican tertiary. Both types came to include women who would have been unable to afford admission to monasteries. However, as a result of concerns about their doctrinal orthodoxy and the relative freedom of their lifestyles, these groups were pressured to take on a more monastic form; in many cases they were suppressed altogether. The same concerns were not directed at the fourteenth-century Sisters of the Common Life, but they too moved from their original simple pattern of prayer and work to become Augustinian nuns.

It was only in sixteenth-century Europe that communities of women specifically dedicated to service began to be recognized by the Church. Ironically, the same Council of Trent which required all communities of women to be cloistered also set in motion a reform which demanded widespread education, and this in turn necessitated a large number of women and men trained for that work and available to go where the need was greatest. Moreover, poverty, lawlessness and illness were rampant in early modern Europe, and many communities of women were established explicitly in response to these as well as education needs. Although they often considered themselves and were considered "secular," members of these new groups shared with their cloistered monastic sisters the desire to grow in holiness, following "the way of perfection." In general, however, they differed from them in being identified as "women of the parish", participating regularly in the public worship of the local church. Eventually they came to be recognized in Church law and practice as both "apostle" and "religious", but in the process they were required to incorporate many monastic elements into their way of life.

The official church's reluctance to accept this and earlier innovations is due in part to an identification of holiness with separation from the activities and concerns of worldly society. Thus, these secular communities were understood to be inherently inferior to cloistered monasteries, their way of life a less sure path to holiness. This is apparent in the advice given to the newly created *Congregation de Notre-Dame* of Montreal in the seventeenth century; their members were urged to make a

vow of stability to remain in the group for the whole of the their lives, so that they

> not be deprived of the merit which a full sacrifice of their person can provide to all that they do afterwards in their holy community, nor deprived of any of the grace which they could have received if they had embraced some other more perfect institute.[10]

During the same era, the spiritual director of the *French Filles de Ste-Genevieve* insisted that the sisters' service itself was the path to holiness, arguing that since they "engage in works of charity, these will take the place of continual prayer."[11]

In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation seriously challenged the notion that the monastic life was a higher calling than marriage. Indeed, as a result of his insistence on the impossibility of earning salvation, Martin Luther, formerly an Augustinian monk, eventually rejected monasticism altogether and proclaimed marriage to be the ideal setting for the Christian life.[12] Later generations of Protestants revived the notion of the family as a little church which was first articulated by John Chrysostom in the fourth century.[13] This opened a new avenue for women to experience their lives as worship, as long as they remained subordinate to their husbands within their home.[14] In the

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[10]"Responses qui sont a core des articles extraits de la lettre que la Superieure des filles de la Congregation de Ville-Marie a ecrit a M. Troncon touchant leuts regles," (1697) Archives of S.-Sulpice, Paris, translation mine. These comments appear to be the work of Charles de Glandelet, Vicar of the Bishop of Quebec, Jean de S-Vallier.

[11]M. Marquot, *Directoire Spitituel Des Exercices de Piete, Emplois & Actions marquees dans les Constitutions de la Communaute des Filles de Ste Genevieve* (Paris: Urbain Constelier, 1696), p. 35, translation mine.

[12]In spite of Luther's eventual stance on monasticism, a tradition of celibate vowed life exists within Lutheran and other Protestant traditions.

[13]My article "Toward an Ecclesiology of the 'Domestic Church'" *Eglise et Theologie* 27 (1996): 351-73, traces the history of this concept up to the present.

[14]See Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, Mass/London: Harvard University Press, 1983).

nineteenth century official Roman Catholic teaching began to stress the sanctifying role of families, in particular that of mothers of families.[15]

5. Participation in Ritual

While many Christian women have sought to make the whole of their lives an act of worship, they have also engaged in the rituals of worship common to the followers of Christ. For the first Jewish Christians, the central ritual was the commemoration of the Lord's Supper, celebrated as a meal in homes, and juxtaposed to their continued public worship in temple. The custom of separating women and men in the latter practice did not extend to the "house churches." In fact, women seem to have hosted these gatherings when the community met at homes which they headed.[16] Quite soon, however, as Christianity became separate from Judaism and concerns about heterodoxy increased, the role of bishop grew in importance, and it became customary for him or presbyters appointed by him to preside at these Eucharists, as well as at the initiation ritual of baptism. As has already been noted, women had specified roles in the baptismal ceremony, and it is likely that this was true of Eucharist as well, since some women had designated place in liturgical processions.

In addition to these central forms of devotion, Christian women engaged in such personal practices as pilgrimage, originally to Jerusalem and other sites where Jesus had lived and died, but later including sites throughout the Christian world made holy by the presence of saints. The diary of the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria, which provides valuable information about the liturgies being celebrated in Jerusalem at the time, demonstrates that the popularity of this practice among women began quite early; it has continued among non-monastic women up to the present day.

Monasticism influenced women's ways of worship in a number of ways. In he first place, the primary place for monastic women and men to engage in formal worship moved from the local church to the monastery

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[15]See, e.g., Pope Leo XIII, *Inscrutabili* (On the Evils affecting Modern Society: Their Causes and Remedies) April 21, 1878, par. 15, in *The Church Speaks to the Modern World: The Social Teachings of Leo XIII*, edited by Etienne Gilson (coll. Image Books; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1954), p. 286

[16]See Schussler Fiorenza, pp. 175-84

itself. For women bound to remain within the enclosure this became the only venue for worship. However, sometimes people from outside came to join in worship within the monasteries, so that the liturgy there became quasi-public. Secondly, the ordered life of the monasteries permitted greater focus on reverent celebration of the liturgy, including celebration of the Divine Office, which consists largely in the chanting of psalms. In addition, monasticism encouraged the development of a variety of devotional practices, both ascetical and contemplative, outside the more public worship of liturgy. Finally, as has been noted, it provided the opportunity for women to teach and lead most forms of worship within their monasteries and sometimes beyond them.

The main exception to monastic women's leadership of prayer was the Eucharist, which became more and more central to monastic life, and which required the presence of an ordained priest. One scholar has speculated that the mysticism which flowered among medieval women, especially mystical experiences related to the bread and wine of the Eucharist, "offered a devotional alternative to consecrated women denied the right to celebrate the sacraments, a right becoming more broadly defined as hierarchical power tightened in the thirteenth century."[17] While it seems unlikely that these women consciously chose mystical experience as a "devotional alternative" it is significant that far more women than ordained men were reported to have had profound mystical experiences related to the Eucharist.

In spite of the benefits which monasticism brought to the worship of the whole church, it remains true that it separated nuns from the lives and worship of most Christians. In contrast, the service-oriented communities of women which emerged in the Roman Catholic Church after the Council of Trent initially participated regularly in the worship of the local parish, but many of them were pressured to adopt monastic practices. Even when they did remain involved in the local church, worship in the post-

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[17]Jo Ann Kay McNamara. *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, paperback edition, 1998); p.343. A more nuanced interpretation is provided in Carolyn Walker Bynum's study, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1987).

Tridentine church was tightly regulated, and the role of the priest stressed, so that women were not able to play active roles in public worship up to the time of the Second Vatican Council. They did, however, play significant roles in private, unofficial devotions, especially those based on apparitions of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

The Protestant insistence on the centrality of the family, coupled with their stress on Scripture, provided a new venue for worship: family prayer centered on bible reading. However, because the patriarchal structures of the family was retained, in most instance this change did not provide new opportunities for women to exercise leadership even in family worship. Moreover, with the exception of some Radical Reform groups like the Shakes, most Protestant groups maintained male leadership of public worship until quite recently.

6. Contemporary Women and Worship

The last few decades have witnessed dramatic changes in women's lives in general and in their ways of worshipping in particular. Many have entered occupations, including religious positions, which formerly were open only to men; a number of traditions have begun ordaining women to all possible roles, including that of bishop. In some quarters serious consideration is being given to reviving the role of ordained deaconess, a role which some Protestant groups have retained, as well. While within Roman Catholicism, the tradition of an all-male priesthood has been maintained, in many parts of the world a decline in the number of priest has created the need for more pastoral workers and parish administrators. A significant number of women from both within and outside religious communities have taken on these roles without being ordained.[18]

These sociological shifts are closely related to the new theological emphases ushered in by the Second Vatican Council's consideration of the nature on the church. Particularly significant was its treatment of the call

[18]During the same period, the number of sisters, too, has fallen sharply, particularly in the so-called active communities. It would be a mistake, however, to view the presence of other women in these ministries as resulting only from a lack of sisters.

to holiness. During a discussion of that topic, Cardinal Leger of Montreal commented:

> The life of lay people is so different from that of monks and religious that sanctity has seemed to them to be unattainable. Many of the faithful have searched in vain for a life according to the Gospel suited to their needs; a great loss of spiritual forces in the Church has resulted.[19]

The Council's response to this concern was to issue *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which insists unequivocally that all Christians are called to holiness, which is to say, to a life of worship. Recognizing that most Christians live in a family, the Council retrieved the notion of family as a "domestic church" which had been explored in some Protestant traditions, as we have seen. Since then, efforts have been made to discover the implications of this concept for all family members, and this could help some women to recognize ways in which their lives are worship.[20]

Many women have taken seriously the invitation to search "for a life according to Gospel suited to their needs" and discovered in that search a desire to pursue theological education; this also accounts for the influx of women into pastoral ministry in base communities and in diocesan as well as parish structures, and into the ministry of spiritual direction in a variety of settings. Women have also approached women's religious communities in large numbers, asking to become associated with them in some way, because of the spirituality they find there and in order to be empowered for what they feel called to do for God and God's people.

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[19]Paul-Emile-Leger, "Holiness of All in the Church" in Hans Kung, Yves Congar Daniel O'Hanlon, eds., *Council Speeches of Vatican II* (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist Press 1964), p. 89.

[20]*In Familiaris Consortio,* Origins, 11/28-29 (December 24, 1981), pp. 437-68, Pope John Paul II summarizes the insights derived from the 1980 Synod on the Family, which explored the notion of "domestic church" in some depth. The document makes an effort to underline the significant of the role women play in families.

The Second Vatican Council also promoted renewal of worship rituals, mandating numerous changes to make formal worship more accessible to all worshippers and to encourage their participation. Women have responded with enthusiasm and in large numbers, have taken on a variety of liturgical roles. This experience and a renewed theology of ministry as rooted in baptism, in addition to the shortage of priests available to celebrate Eucharist, have led many women to challenge the firm tradition against the ordination of women in Roman Catholicism, but the offical church does not hold out any promise for a change in this regard. In some places women are choosing to lead non-Eucharistic gatherings for prayer and reflection, or alternative celebrations of the Lord's Supper. If things continue as they are, it would seem that the centrality of the Eucharist to Roman Catholic piety in many parts of the world will be jeopardized.

7. Conclusion

This brief historical survey has revealed the importance that Christian women have placed on worship, both as ritual and as a gesture made by their "whole living." At various times some women have taken on leadership roles in the church's official worship, but even then they were permitted no public roles except that of spectator. But they managed to be nourished by that participation and to find creative outlets for their spiritual energy outside formal liturgy.

Attempting to project how Christian women's ways of worship will evolve into the third millennium would be foolhardy indeed, but recent developments suggest that increasingly women are coming to recognize that whatever their situation, the whole of the lives can become worship. If that conviction is to be sustained, they will need to engage in rituals which reflect, support, and celebrate that understanding. I hope that their worship in both senses of the term will lead to the building up of the whole Christian community and in turn will help to nourish our world.