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Fermenting Impasse: Women's Critical Communities and Ecclesial Transformation

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Abstract

Introduction (And Abstract)

My reflections are rooted in the spiritual suffering of impasse experienced by women in today's Church. Against the background of Constance Fitzgerald's seminal article, "Impasse and Dark Night,"[1] I will engage Edward Schillebeeckx's category of negative contrast experience in conjunction with what Beverly Lanzetta has named the *via feminina*[2] to begin to envision what may be fermenting in this dark night. Then, moving from individual to communal contemplation, I will discuss the role of Critical Christian communities in Schillebeeckx's theology, with attention to his analysis of the cross-grained nature of Church history in which genuine tradition includes "breaks." Finally, drawing on the experiences of "Circles of Women Seeking Wisdom" with which I am involved, I will examine how critical communities of women in the Church constitute a mysticism of resistance with potential for ecclesial transformation.

Setting the Stage: Women Suffering Impasse

Over the last four decades, countless works of transformative feminist theology have been penned by Roman Catholic theologians in North America alone. During that time, women in the church have undertaken a myriad of creative ministries with local and global impact. The ministry of women theologians sustains many of these women

[1] Constance FitzGerald's description of the spiritual and social dynamics of impasse in the context of mysticism has become the paradigmatic feminist articulation of women's reality in the Church today. See "Impasse and Dark Night," in *Women's Spirituality: Resources for Christian Development,* ed. Joann Wolski Conn (New York: Paulist, 1986), 287–311.

[2] Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005.)

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in mission, even as it is informed and challenged by their grassroots commitments. In diverse ways, women ministers and theologians have been shaping a feminist Catholic landscape that consistently places the poorest and most vulnerable at the center of theological reflection and action for justice. And yet, I remain dismayed at the lack of impact this inclusive feminist and ecofeminist theological vision has had on the Church’s ordinary parochial life. That is why my focus here is on the experience of women in the North American ecclesial context. I am concerned with their wellbeing, and with the wellbeing and viability of the Church. In fact, I argue that the Church’s viability into the future depends upon women’s spiritual wellbeing, which entails their full liberation and equality in ecclesial structures. There are some among us who have glimpsed, even tasted fleetingly what such liberation and equality might look and feel like. But even in those places where experiments in inclusive liturgy, preaching, and pastoral leadership once began to flower, the clock is being turned back as bishops and pastors conform to the Church’s deepening retrenchment, a retrenchment fuelled by a growing and increasingly youthful movement in neo-orthodox theology. And the effect of this retrenchment is suffering, most notably the perennial suffering of women who sustain the Church in its life and ministry, yet cannot find their own faces mirrored in the symbols and rituals by which the Church officially images and proclaims God in our midst.

Women in the Catholic Church have long been in an impasse[3] situation. However, this impasse is not static, and what the hidden ferment will brew remains to be seen. I believe it is worth contemplating this hidden ferment and speculating about how we might harness the creative potential of its dark energies. By dark energies I mean the anger and pain that mark the experience of so many thinking women in today’s Church. The key is to identify these emotions as energies arising from the primordial passion of a love and age-old commitment that has been thwarted. As Constance Fitzgerald notes, “we are affected by darkness . . . where we are most deeply involved and committed. Love makes us vulnerable, and it is love itself that precipitates darkness in oneself and in the ‘other.’ Only when love has grown to a certain point of depth and commitment can its limitations be experienced.”[4]

Who are these women in love with the Church who have reached their limits and are suffering impasse? Well, I could talk about congregations of women religious in the United States who have been scrutinized by the Vatican Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated

[3] “By impasse, I mean that there is no way out of, no way around, no rational escape from, what imprisons one, no possibilities in the situation.” Fitzgerald, 288.

[4] Ibid., 292.

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Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, or I could talk about the Leadership Conference of Women Religious along with the theologians who have addressed them, investigated and censored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. But I prefer to talk about women whose existence often goes unnoticed in official quarters—ordinary Catholic laywomen in North America. A number of years ago, a woman in my parish approached me and asked if I would accompany a community of women who had gathered for faith sharing and whose questions led them to seek guidance in the study of women's theology. (Our first exploration was Elizabeth Johnson's *Truly Our Sister*.[5]) The experience and growth in leadership of these women eventually gave rise to additional "Circles of Women Seeking Wisdom." Let me introduce you to a few representative members:

Marilyn

Marilyn is a smart, savy, youthfully stylish 70 year old grandmother. She loves the Church, goes to Eucharist daily, and questions everything. Her story? When she was pregnant with her youngest child her husband walked out on her. She completed an engineering degree and raised her five children on her own. One of her children was killed in a car accident some years ago, and that dark tragedy triggered the most authentic spiritual journey of her life. She attributes the depth and fruitfulness of that journey to her Twelve Step Program. The wisdom gained there enriches her understanding of her Catholic faith, increases her self-esteem, and makes her outspokenly intolerant of manifestations of patriarchy in language, symbols, and relationships within our parish community.

Emily

Emily is a self-effacing, fifty-something pediatric nurse and mother of four grown children. She and her husband are quiet, faithful servants of our local church, and their family has been formed by long practice of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Yet, Emily is plagued by spiritual restlessness and questioning. As a child of divorce with a harsh homelife, she was judged and marginalized by the sisters and priests in her Catholic school and parish, and she bears the scars. Is it any wonder that this woman struggles to believe she is worthy of God's love? Emily still searches painfully for an experience of God

[5] Johnson, Elizabeth A. *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints.* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

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that the Church, for all of her faithfulness, has never been able to give her.

Angela

Angela is a mystic and healer. A convert from Lutheranism, her Catholic faith is an intentional, contemplated adult choice. A long-time hospice nurse intimate with the mystery of death, Angela is possessed of an unusual understanding of the Church’s sacramental tradition, and the sacramentality of all of life. She has cultivated a holistic spirituality through such resources as Anam Cara workshops, Richard Rohr retreats, and her Centering Prayer group. Recently, in an agonizing decision, Angela cut herself off from the Eucharist she loves because her finely attuned spirit can no longer sustain the violence of institutionalized patriarchy.

Laura

A life-long Catholic, Laura has a daughter who long ago became Episcopalian with the intent of one day pursuing ordination. M.Div. studies led her into doctoral studies in Early Christianity, with particular focus on the history of women. A professor now, she no longer wants to be alligned with any ecclesial institution, let alone be bound to one by ordination. Laura herself is not pained by this. She understands her daughter deeply, and learns a great deal from her in ways that fuel her own questioning. All the while, she remains intensely committed to her Roman Catholic community – a bulwark in our parish, and a leader in the wider ecumenical justice community. Laura’s passion is for the poor and the homeless, and she pioneered an ecumenical shelter in our area. She works tirelessly, both in direct ministry to the poor, and in painstaking strategizing for systemic change in society. Where the Church is concerned, she’s often the first to forward me the latest ‘scandalous’ pronouncement of the hierarchy regarding women, and we commisserate mightily in our indignation. Yet, this woman is overflowing with love, and she constantly exudes joy. Many times, when neither love nor joy accompanied my indignation at such a pronouncement, or at its local, often liturgical, incarnation, I have sought her company and counsel. How does she do it? How does she see so clearly the reality of oppression, and yet remain so energized, ebullient, and joyful?

The experiences of these and countless other women, along with my own experience, move my reflection beyond women’s ministerial roles to women’s spirituality. Women theologians and professional

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ecclesial ministers have tools and resources for analysis and revisioning. We know we have the truest streams of the Christian theological tradition on our side. In many cases, we also have at least some lived experience of genuine collaboration with members of the clergy and hierarchy, and so we have positive touchstones for imagining a possible future. Women without this background and the community of dialogue that accompanies it are becoming increasingly bereft of hope. The only source of spiritual nourishment for most of these is the Church as they experience it in their local parishes, and this reality of Church is structurally impoverished in its capacity to nourish women. These women need places where they can freely and safely voice their questions and critical concerns. They instinctively know that the way things are is not working for them, and it will not work for their children. Moreover, they sense deeply the disjuncture between the way things are in the church and the gospel that Jesus proclaimed and embodied. When such women gather together in intentional communities, they experience the beginnings of liberation in knowing they are not alone. In the act of sharing their own stories and reflecting together on scripture, on the lives of women like Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena, and on the writings of contemporary feminist theologians, their questions—indeed, their very lives—are validated and affirmed.

I contend that this critical solidarity in which women find hope for themselves promises also to be a font of hope for the Church's transformation. Women need each other. And the Church, if it is to have a relevant future in the world, needs women who gather together in critical communities of resistance and hope. Together, women discover that the way out of impasse is downward—downward through the depths of darkness and negativity to the divine ground of hope whence arises the contrasting reality of God's reign. It is a journey at once intensely solitary and inextricably relational. Reflecting on how the negative situation constitutes an "imaginative shock" that throws the intuitive, unconscious self into gear, Constance Fitzgerald notes:

> Paradoxically, a situation of no potential is loaded with potential, and impasse becomes the place for the reconstitution of the intuitive self . . . .While nothing seems to be moving forward, one is, in fact, on a homeward exile—if one can yield in the right way, responding with *full consciousness* of one's suffering in the impasse yet daring to believe that new possibilities, beyond immediate vision, can be given . . . .(T)he unexpected, the alternative, the new vision, is not given on demand but is beyond conscious, rational control. It is the fruit of unconscious processes in which the situation of impasse itself becomes the focus of contemplative reflection.[6]

[6] Ibid., 289–90.

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Experiences of Negative Contrast: Dark Light Illumining a Way Forward

Central to Edward Schillebeeckx's theological method is the dynamic of negative contrast, which refers to those experiences of evil and suffering that evoke protest and transformative action. Such experiences are also an occasion for imaging and articulating a vision of salvation in counterpoint to what should not be.[7] The instinctive moral impulse to resist conditions of suffering and injustice is the expression of a deeper, if inchoate, knowing of what *should* be. Schillebeeckx calls this "the critical and productive epistemic power of suffering." Thus, to name the evil and suffering of women's spiritual oppression is to begin, by contrast, to name the positive spiritual path by which women attain their own transformation.[8] It is increasingly clear that the interior and relational work of their own spiritual transformation *is w*omen's vital ministry in today's Church. And by "vital" here I mean indispensable. Women's full spiritual flourishing is essential to their own well-being and salvation, and, despite all messages to the contrary, it is indispensable for the Church. That is, any possibility of the Church's future relevance for the salvation of the world, which is, after all, its mission, is dependent upon the spiritual emancipation of women. The cultivation of a truly feminist and Catholic spirituality is the way God is calling women both to sustain themselves, and to minister to the Church. It is a divine imperative.

Negative Contrast and the *Via Feminina*

Women's divine imperative arises from their own unnamed divine depths. The inchoate knowing of what *should* be is God's own power dwelling in women beneath all forms, images, and structures to the contrary. Nevertheless, women's painful diminishment by the ubiquity of a male God in a patriarchal structure inhibits their ability to claim the fullness of their own feminine divine power. Our religious rituals and sacramental celebrations are meant to nurture the divine life within us, increase our holiness, and advance God's reign of justice and love. Instead, many women experience most liturgy as alienating and debilitating.

At this point, someone might ask, "What about all the women who do *not* experience patriarchal symbol and language as alienating?" My response is twofold. First, many more women feel secretly

[7] See Edward Schillebeeckx, "Church, Magisterium, and Politics," in *God the Future of Man*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 155–56.

[8] Reflecting on Dark Night in John of the Cross, Fitzgerald notes: "... (I)f we could see the underside of death, we would see that it is already resurrection." Fitzgerald, 291.

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alienated than anyone (their pastors, for instance) might imagine. Many faithful women are living in a kind of limbo. They have not had access to the resources and relationships that could help them name their experience of spiritual malaise, but they are instinctively aware that something is wrong, and much is missing. Among these women are some, like Emily, who can tell stories of past pain at the hands of the Church, but who have not had anyone to help them see the connections between those denigrating experiences and the exclusionary symbols that continue to engulf them. And there are those who do see the connections, who decry the injustice of patriarchy, but feel powerless to effect change. In the case of women like Angela, the overwhelming pain of that knowing powerlessness forces severance from the institution and its sacramental expressions.

Second, in every oppressed group there exist persons who do not know that they are oppressed. The pseudo-contentment of such women in the Church is a danger to them as well as to the Church at large, because it distorts their own spiritual lives even as it feeds and sustains the sinful status quo.

Women who are critically aware have a responsibility gently to awaken the consciousness of their uncritical but colonized sisters. Yes, it is a divine imperative, part and parcel of proclaiming Truth for the salvation of the world. It is a ministry of uncovering wounds in order that they might be healed.[9] These wounds do not belong to women alone, conscious or unconscious. The whole Church bears these wounds; the whole Church is crippled by them. In seeking their own healing and transformation, women seek the healing and transformation of the Church, a Church that has, after all, publically declared itself *semper purificanda*, always in process of purification and reform.

The success of the Church's ongoing dynamic of self-reform depends today on women's faithfulness to the *via feminina. Via feminina* is a phrase coined by Beverly Lanzetta and developed in her book, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology.* Lanzetta conceived the phrase in relation to the ancient mystical paths of union with God known as the *via positiva* and the *via negativa.* After decades of teaching and research in the spirituality of the mystics and extensive experience in the spiritual direction of women, Lanzetta found herself articulating a third path or road to union with the divine—the way of the feminine. Here it is worth quoting extensively from Lanzetta's definition:

> *Via feminina* is a linguistic expression that affirms the revelatory and prophetic in women's experience. It is revelatory because it is that

[9] "It is precisely as broken, poor, and powerless that one opens oneself to the dark mystery of God in loving, peaceful waiting." Ibid., 297.

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> period when the Feminine Divine breaks into history and calls us to listen to women’s prophetic voice and gaze again on Wisdom’s suffering face. It is feminist revelation because it is Her gift of unveiling what women have longed for and dared not hope: the feminine heart of divinity and the spiritual equality of women. It is feminist prophecy because it emerges from an unrelieved distress over the violation of women and of the feminine in our world. Undertaking a feminist reading of women’s mystical theology, *via feminina* represents the contemplative paths and processes that break through and transform the historical denigration of women encoded in patriarchal cultures. As a new spiritual path with ancient roots in women’s experience, it experiments with a particular type of mystical experience—the apophatic or negative—to find the tools women need to pull up the sources of misogyny imbedded in their souls . . . . Further, this feminist mystical process has efficacy not only for women, but also for men who have been wounded by an excessive masculinity, are marginalized as ‘outsider’ males, or desire to mend in their own hearts the painful suppression of their feminine nature.[10]

Lanzetta identifies the spiritual path of feminist mysticism as a transition from affirmation to negation which involves the whole person. It leads into the dark night of the soul, which entails the unsaying of the false self, in order to find the true self. Lanzetta articulates this phase of dark night as “the unsaying of woman.” That is, the *via feminina* begins in the deconstruction of the “false self” that patriarchy has constructed for women and reinforced with its sacred symbols.[11]

We cannot do justice to Lanzetta’s original and prophetic construction here, but we will engage the strands of her work that resonate with Schillebeeckx’s concept of negative contrast experience in ways that further our own contemplation of what might be fermenting within the impasse characterizing women’s experience in the Church today.

Spiritual Suffering as Ferment in Impasse

Edward Schillebeeckx regards negative experiences of contrast as basic human experiences—that is, pre-religious experiences – of a fundamental ‘no’ to the world as it is. Human reality is ambiguous, and full of contradictions. While the world is indeed full of beauty and goodness, these experiences are fragmentary, and, Schillebeeckx says, “constantly contradicted and crushed by evil and hatred, by suffering, whether blatant or dull, by the misuse of power and terror.”[12]

[10] Lanzetta, 13.
[11] Ibid., 16.
[12] Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (N.Y.: Crossroad, 1990), 5.

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Nevertheless, the positive element in this experience is indignation, the refusal to give in to the situation. This instinctive resistance to what should not be "discloses an openness to another situation which has the right to our affirmative 'yes'. One can call it a consensus with 'the unknown', the content of which cannot even be defined in a positive way: a better, other world, which in fact does not yet exist anywhere."[13]

The indignation women experience amidst Church structures and symbols constitutes a resistant 'no' to the Church as it is, and discloses a yet unfulfilled but open 'yes' to a better, other Church, which in fact does not exist anywhere—at least not in wholeness, not in communion, and not with sanction. The origin of this 'open yes' is the divine life grounding our being and drawing us into the unknown mystery, a mystery which requires feminine expression for women to experience the fullness of their identity in God.[14] While Schillebeeckx engages the concept of negative contrast experience in relation to evil, suffering, and the misuse of power in the world, I engage it here to address the evil of sexism enshrined and perpetuated in the ecclesial sin of patriarchy.

Women's suffering at the hands of patriarchy is often ambiguous, veiled, and mixed with fragmentary experiences of grace and truth. Yes, grace and truth are present, and those of us who are able to find its streams in the desert – strugglingly – remain. Women like Marilyn, Emily, and Laura, with all of their questioning and indignation, remain. They participate in liturgical ministries, remain faithful to Eucharist and serve the needs of the poor in the name of the Church—all the while experiencing a certain crucifixion. Now, "crucifixion" might seem too dramatic a word when one considers the violations of women undergoing poverty, violence, and torture around the globe. Women's bodies are handed over in multiple forms of slavery, and the most pervasive of these is the slavery by which so many women silently expend their lives in the service of men.[15] While women in the Church in North America may not be subject

[13] Ibid., 6.

[14] Fitzgerald cautions against the danger of getting stuck in an ideological and merely superficial altering of God images in terms of gender, when what is required is genuine conversion wrought by the mystical experience of dark night. See Fitzgerald, 302: "... (O)nly women's *experience* of God can alter or renew our God images and perhaps our doctrine of God." Writing of the doctrine of God, Elizabeth A. Johnson highlights the limitations we place on God, and thereby, on women made in God's image, when we create Divine constructs out of narrowly defined "dimensions" or "traits" of either gender: "Image-breaking is a part of religious traditions, because focussing on a fixed image not only compromises the transcendence of God, but petrifies and stultifies human beings into the image worshiped...." (See Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female" in Wolski Conn, *Women's Spirituality* 243–260 at 257.)

[15] Iris Marion Young notes that "women's oppression consists partly in a systematic and unreciprocated transfer of powers from women to men....The freedom, status, and

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to blatant torture, we know well the pain of subtle diminishment, of forced invisibility in ritual, symbol and law.[16] We suffer, and our suffering has a direct bearing on the blatant torture of other women. To the degree that we bear this suffering in silence, to the degree that we remain invisible in word and sacrament, we perpetuate the crucifixion of the Divine Image of the Feminine in the world. To the degree that we fail to acknowledge our wounds and testify to their cause, we justify global systems of dominance responsible for all the visible and abhorrent forms of violence against women that we cannot begin to name here. Those systems are reinforced by the reign of an exclusively masculine Divinity propped up by our silence.

We need holy indignation, and we need to cultivate and focus the indignation lying just under the surface in other women. How can we do this in ways that nurture the interior flourishing of each one of us in the midst of a Church that gives no sign of positive change in the foreseeable future? I have contended that women's spiritual transformation is their ministry to the Church, it is what will bring about the Church's own transformation. But I do not propose that women merely endure in the meantime. Rather, with Beverly Lanzetta, I propose the spiritual practice of contemplative feminism, which is "alert to naming, healing, and eliminating spiritual oppression in its many forms."[17] Similarly, Constance Fitzgerald submits that "the feminine expression of dark night, if we read it, interpret it, and live through it, is in itself a critique of religious consciousness and, therefore, ultimately of Christianity, with its roots in a sexist, patriarchal cultlure."[18]

It has been my own experience that when women begin for the first time explicitly to question external Church practices, many of them simultaneously begin to express a personal spiritual longing that cannot be answered by the structures and resources with which they are familiar and to which they have been faithful. As they probe that unanswered longing, they come gradually to realize the depth of their alienation. It is not only an alienation from the Church that has been their home; it is also an alienation from the self that has identified with that spiritual home. It is a profound and excruciating division within the soul. The *via feminina* that Lanzetta

self-realization of men is possible precisely because women work for them." Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 50.

[16] Schillebeeckx discusses this point in *The Church with a Human Face: A New and Expanded Theology of Ministry,* (New York: Crossroad, 1990; Baarn: Nelissen, 1985), 62; he further states, "If the law reduces people to despair, it forfeits all authority." Ibid., 117.

[17] Lanzetta, 71.

[18] Fitzgerald, 301.

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articulates is the path by which women enter into that soul-fracture. I turn here to Lanzetta's own eloquent analysis:

> Elusive and difficult to grasp, spiritual violence invades the integrity of a woman's psyche and soul at such a primary level that most women cannot recognize or name what has harmed them. Unable to identify the source of their pain, women often blame themselves and develop strategies to protect their oppressors. . . . Often unspoken, denied, and ridiculed, or dismissed as unimportant and emotional, women's soul wounds must be brought to consciousness to avoid the trivialization of their experience and for healing to occur. It is in their anguish and despair, sorrow and betrayal, rage and tears that women discover the freedom that comes from the feminine heart of divinity. This process of bringing to consciousness the violation of women's spiritual rights moves women beyond fragmentation and false passivity to wholeness and empowerment.[19]

This is the *via feminina*, moving through the dark night of the feminine. It is the journey from impassioned indignation at 'what should not be' through the depths of "unsaying," undoing, deconstructing the negative reality that has given rise to the fundamental 'no.' Ultimately, the *via feminina* uncovers the divine depths of a woman's true self underlying that negative reality. In Schillebeeckx's construct, this is the positive, divine ground of being. It is the condition of the possibility for that unknown but longed-for world (Church?) worthy of our "open 'yes'." It is God, experienced as mercy at the heart of all reality. For women, this mercy is the liberating realization that we are not bound by any structures that diminish or negate our own divine feminine being, no matter how sacred or revered those structures may be. For women, this divine mercy at the heart of our own reality is a healing restoration. The journey to these healing depths is intimately personal, and ultimately unique for each individual. In practice, it takes a long time and involves many detours. I see this, for instance, in the story of Emily who, despite the whisper of truth within, continues to chastise herself for her anger and indignation. In the case of Marilyn, I see a woman capable of articulating the unsaying of the false self created by patriarchy who has begun to claim her true self, but still straddles the line of her own existential freedom. And then there's Laura, who has crossed that line. She does, indeed, live from the freeing ground of her own feminine, divine being. She cultivates that being in her contemplative practice of Centering Prayer, often shared with others in a praying community. And, while her spirituality takes flesh in her work for justice, her relationships

[19] Lanzetta, 72. See Fitzgerald, 306: "(W)omen need to realize that the experience of anger, rage, depression, and abandonment is a constitutive part of the transformation and purification of the dark night. This very rage and anger purify the 'abused consciousness' of women in the sexism they have internalized."

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of solidarity with the vulnerable persons she houses and feeds and cares for constitute a key source of her spiritual nourishment and wisdom. Thus sustained by alternative communities, she is able also to remain serenely faithful to our mainstream parish community.

The *via feminina*, in each case uniquely lived, yet requires companionship in solidarity with other women. And it requires a willingness to remain in the tension of impasse. Now, in Angela's case, the pain of this tension with the institutional Church is no longer bearable. She now has to seek her sustenance in alternative communities, including our own alternative "Circles of Women Seeking Wisdom." She has asked us movingly to "be church for her," and we will.

Some women paraphrase Ghandi: "How can we become the change we wish to see in the Church?" Implicit in the question is a commitment to remaining in the Church.[20] Hence, impasse. Equally clear is the commitment to personal transformation. Hence, the ferment, and the hope for the Church's transformation. Mingled with hope, the ferment will continue to harbor pain, but this pain is now a catalyst for action.

Critical Communities of Resistance and Hope

The question remains: how do women sustain themselves in life while negotiating this journey? For women like Marilyn, Emily, Angela, and Laura, the answer cannot come from the institutional Church. The answer comes from other women, from communities of women united in fermenting impasse. The indignation that refuses to give in to the Church as it is can only catalyze change through the tension of relationship with that same Church. Women who gather in intentional communities are companioned by one another as well as by women throughout the Church's tradition. Together, we uncover the 'dangerous memory' of our historical sisters who similarly struggled to claim their spiritual rights. Institutionally repressed, the deep currents of these women's lives and stories harbor potent resources for our contemporary journey. They are a part of what Edward Schillebeeckx has called "the cross-grained" nature of Church history, threads woven against the grain of the Church's official tradition. Officially deemed as "breaks" in the tradition, the dynamism of such cross-grained movements in fact insures a more genuine continuity with authentic tradition. Schillebeeckx asserts:

[20] Some may ask, "Why?" Schillebeeckx notes the necessity of the Church for the historical mediation of Christian meaning. Here he means "Church" as "community"—as a living embodiment of the Story of Jesus, which is our Christian story. The *whole* of the living Church community is now the subject of this mediation. *Church: The Human Story of God*, 110; cf. 99.

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> The deepest experiences which direct and support our life are, therefore, experiences of conversion, crucifying experiences which lead us to metanoia, lead us to change our mind, our action, our being. Such experiences break off, but do so in order to lead to a new integration."[21]

Schillebeeckx's method of negative contrast experience is profoundly related to his experience of critical communities in the Church, especially critical Christian communities in the Netherlands on the cusp of the Second Vatican Council. Here in North America, such critical communities of resistance, standing within the Church while remaining on its institutional edges, may constitute the Church's only real hope of relevant continuity into the future. In particular, as I have argued here, critical communities of women can be a font of such hope.

Critical Women's Communities, the Mysticism of Resistance, and Ecclesial Transformation

Clearly, there lies a cavernous distance between the Church women experience and "The Church Women Want."[22] The long view demands emancipatory acceptance of women into ecclesial ministries of leadership with decision-making authority, preaching authority, and sacramental authority. The short view demands the personal transformation by which women own their spiritual right to these dimensions of authority in increasingly vocal ways. Finally, a mysticism of resistance fermenting impasse must negotiate a complex web of relationships with infinite grace:[23] relationships within communities of women whose individual experiences are uniquely diverse; relationships between individual women and the multiple manifestations of institutional patriarchy that each encounters; relationships between critical communities of women and the local Church community to which they belong; and relationships with women in poverty around the globe whose plight renders us accountable. All of these relationships presume other human persons whom we are called to love while standing firmly in the truth discerned in suffering and contemplation. Moreover, the entire web inheres in women's fundamental relationship with a living God who sustains all of us, including those

[21] Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*, 29.

[22] Title of a collection of essays which reveals the diversity of women's experience and perspectives within the Catholic Church. See Elizabeth A. Johnson, ed., *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue.* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2002).

[23] Edward Schillebeeckx observes that the kingdom of God both approaches and entails *metanoia*—a changed new relationship of men and women to God—the visible side of which is a new type of liberating relationship between men and women within a reconciling society . . . .Schillebeeckx, *Church*, 111ff.

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who might seem to be our adversaries, in existence. This, ultimately, is the unifying reality beneath all our struggle and conflict. Faith in this divine ground fuels our resistance even as it gives us cause to remain in relationship with the Church we want to transform. For faithful women in the reality of impasse, fidelity to the fermenting process entails personally becoming the change they wish to see long before they ever see it mirrored in the institution. It entails extending the ferment to other women—and men, including those who are ordained—in seeding a consensus of the faithful through which the authentic gospel poses a question to the official Church.

My original ending included this hopeful question: When the mysticism of resistance gains critical mass, how can the Church not answer? However, more and more I fear that the official Church *is* answering—but not in a way that nourishes women's divine becoming. I have spoken here of contemplative feminism as a form of mysticism that can nourish women and transform the Church. Schillebeeckx has observed that mysticism has peak periods, and often arises due to a historical or social crisis.[24] Surely, we are in such a crisis now. Over and over again, Schillebeeckx speaks of the authority of suffering as having a revelatory significance *par excellence*. When women give voice to their ecclesial suffering, it can bring them into conflict with the magisterial authority of the Church, yet the saving revelation of God is at work in this historical moment, in this very dialectic. Schillebeeckx cautions us to not split up the living mystery of the Church:

> (This mystery) is to be found in the meetings of base communities, of some house communities, of men and women, who come together in the name of Jesus, confessed by them as the Christ. Among them are many people who suffer from and over the present-day world and their own church and oppose the suffering which God does not will. They too are part of the mystery of the church, they too celebrate and bear witness to that mystery, and they do not allow themselves to be banned from this mystery by a church government with a short-sighted policy."[25]

I have no doubt that we will continue to be faithful to the living mystery of the Church in the fermenting of this impasse. But the dark night is deepening, and if we are to live from the divine ground of our being, our first order of business is to attend to the suffering experience of women like Angela. I do fear that the official Church at present is constitutionally unable to answer the authentic question posed by her contemplative feminist life. So how do we answer her?

[24] *Church,* 66.
[25] Ibid., 213.

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We theologians—women—and men—who are increasingly charged to be interpreters, mediators, and yes—even healers in this "dark night."

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