

# Mother's Courage—Vatican Council II and the revolution of the mothering Spirit

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Nancy Sylvester's "Into the future: the journey of women religious since Vatican II"<sup>1</sup> is a pivotal document for discerning and interpreting the revolution inspired by the 20<sup>th</sup> century visionary, Pope John XXIII. A revolution driven by a quest for, and expressed through actions grounded in, the experience of a "greater understanding of God and who we are in this marvelous world." Today, Nancy's<sup>2</sup> witness sets the stage for once again encountering the Spirit of the People of God whose presence among us has been slowly blossoming in theological expression since the Council ended over five decades ago.<sup>3</sup> It is a Spirit still calling us to grasp that each and every human on the planet is one of the People of God. It is a Spirit that has never ceased to mother us.

## Why Nancy?

Nancy possesses a heartfelt intelligence that has personalized the journey so many have taken since the Spirit broke through at Vatican II. Her transformation has been motherly, born "like the pain of childbirth." Her personal identity has unchained its youthful moorings: "to let go of who we thought we were." In tandem her spiritual identity has matured in terms of "how we understand our God." She has experienced a "change in consciousness" that has "radically altered how we see ourselves, the Gospel, our Church and the world." All this has filled her with an "unspeakable awe." Why then is she—representative for so many of this mothering Spirit—in the papal docket?

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Sylvester, I.H.M., "Into the Future: The journey of women religious since Vatican II," *America* (online edition: July 16, 2012). Quotations from her statement are not individually footnoted.

[http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=13486](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=13486)

<sup>2</sup> I use "Nancy" to convey the personal testimony of her account. "Nancy" is inclusively representative of those of us who hear her story as our own. "Nancy" is a personification of all her Sister peers.

<sup>3</sup> "In this assembly, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we wish to inquire..." and "Yet, we lodge our trust in the power of God's Spirit..." from, "Message to Humanity" in *The Documents of Vatican II*, Ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. Trans. Msgr. Joseph Gallagher. (New York, Guild Press, 1966), pgs. 3 and 6.

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

## Prophetic distortion

Nancy is at the center of the storm because of the papal charges set forth in the “Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.”<sup>4</sup> She was president of this Conference from 1998-2001.

To understand the significance of the moment, look at it in terms of a “sign of the times,” that Nancy, in her person and spiritual character, embodies the revolution that the Council inspired. The source of her error was her understanding of Vatican II’s invitation:

But what is clear to me is that the renewal that followed in the wake of the Second Vatican Council invited women and men, vowed religious and lay, to experience our faith in ways that both permeated and was shaped by a modern, pluralistic, democratic society.

And,

The council document, *Gaudium et Spes*, invited the church to embrace the joys and hopes, the pain and suffering of the people of God and to be in the world and not stand apart.

Initially, the invitation required “an act of great obedience” as she had “envisioned wearing a habit my entire life, living in a convent with a daily routine.” As she divested her habit, so was she shedding the Old (wo)Man and putting on the New. This was traumatic enough, a radical departure from how she thought she’d live out her Earthly life. But even more upending was the realization that she was to respond to this invitation by working not just with other religious but shoulder to shoulder with lay people.<sup>5</sup> *Together*, they were to “not stand apart” but to “embrace.” As a religious to fulfill her mission required grasping that the People of God were on the streets and in the suites, not just in convents and cathedrals. This yoking of religious and lay is why

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<sup>4</sup> *Congregatio Pro Doctrina Fidei*, “Doctrinal Assessment on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious,” (April 18, 2012). <http://www.usccb.org/about/doctrine/doctrinal-assessment-for-lcwr.cfm> Quotations from this statement are not individually footnoted.

<sup>5</sup> Nuns are canonically classified as laity. “laity is opposed to clergy...{they} do not occupy the same rank....{laity} are not the depositaries of spiritual power.” “New Advent” Catholic Encyclopedia <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08748a.htm>

Nancy's present plight is one shared by so many. The charges laid against her, in the main, stem from this engagement with us, the laity.

However, another sign of the times is the set of papal accusations, themselves. Nancy is accused of making "problematic statements and serious theological, even doctrinal errors." As a personification of that Conference, Nancy is charged with having "serious doctrinal problems" which concern issues of "human sexuality," "commentaries on 'patriarchy'," and claiming that "dissent from the doctrine of the Church is justified as an exercise of the prophetic office." These are serious charges of "positive error," ones that evoke the specter of denunciation as a heretic. This assessment came after "several years of examination," and since they grasped that she was lost out there in the world—hearing her voice not as prophetic but as a "cry for help"—the Magisterium moved to "intervene" and initiate a reform.

The meaning of prophecy and the role of prophets is at the heart of papal concern. Understanding and interpreting this meaning and role speaks directly to whether Vatican II is perceived to be a reform or a revolution. That prophecy is pivotal to the papal charges is clearly expressed:

Some speakers claim that dissent from the doctrine of the Church is justified as an exercise of the prophetic office. But this is based upon a mistaken understanding of the dynamic of prophecy in the Church: it justifies dissent by positing the possibility of divergence between the Church's magisterium and a "legitimate" theological intuition of some of the faithful. "Prophecy," as a methodological principle, is here directed *at* the Magisterium and the Church's pastors, whereas true prophecy is a grace which accompanies the exercise of the responsibilities of the Christian life and ministries within the Church, regulated and verified by the Church's faith and teaching office. Some of the addresses at LCWR-sponsored events perpetuate a distorted ecclesiological vision, and have scant regard for the role of the Magisterium as the guarantor of the authentic interpretation of the Church's faith. ("At" italicized in the English text.)

By directing prophetic judgment “at the Magisterium and the Church’s pastors,” Nancy promotes an unacceptable “particular vision of religious life”

The stage is set then by 1) indicting Nancy for “a mistaken understanding of the dynamic of prophecy in the Church,” what can be termed *prophetic distortion*, and 2) defining what can be termed the *emotional dynamic* of the moment by calling for an “allegiance of mind and heart to the Magisterium of the Bishops.”

To more fully understand and value why Nancy was called forth requires a) assessing Vatican II both as a reform movement and a revolution, b) understanding the dynamic interplay between the individual believer and her faith community, and how the Council radically redefined that dynamic, and c) interpreting Nancy’s statement as a prophetic “sign of the times” and exploring in theological terms where the revolutionary Spirit is moving in terms of “how we understand our God.”

It is also necessary to recall the historical movements that led to Vatican II. In that history, the present Pope stands, himself, as a noted figure whose beliefs and actions evidenced the tensions of a reformer facing a revolution.<sup>6</sup> Here, in a provocative historical visualization, is this fated couple: Joseph Ratzinger moving from being a near-theological revolutionary entering Vatican II and exiting as a defensive reformer, and Nancy encountering the Council with obedient religious ears and after decades of struggling with its invitation, emerging to stand accused in 2012 as being a false prophet of the Council’s Spirit-filled revolution.

## **The emotional dynamic of Reform**

The Council described itself as concerned with pastoral issues in contrast to doctrinal heresies—which were the initiating causes for near all the preceding Councils.<sup>7</sup> Instead of condemning heretics and/or focusing on institutional discipline, not only did Pope John XXIII proclaim, “I want to throw open the windows of the Church so that we can see out and the people can see

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<sup>6</sup>Joseph Ratzinger, theologian, was associated with the controversial “Nouvelle Théologie” (“New Theology”) movement, including Henri de Lubac, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Étienne Gilson, Jean Daniélou. Several movement ideas and individuals were censured by the Vatican.

<sup>7</sup> Ecumenical Councils began with Nicaea in A.D. 325. “Catholicism.org” at <http://catholicism.org/the-ecumenical-councils-of-the-catholic-church.html#Twentieth> presents thumbnail information about all the Councils.

in,”<sup>8</sup> but the Council Fathers opened with a “Message to humanity” addressing “all men and nations,” and identified two urgent issues, that of peace and social justice.<sup>9</sup> For many this inclusive language clearly underscored their position that the Council had no intent of refashioning any traditional dogma or doctrine.<sup>10</sup> Rather, as pastoral Council it would address matters of extra-ecclesial, public behavior towards non-Christians and issue calls to action in the secular society.

Reform, in general, is a reactionary response, one grounded in a degree of heartfelt fear. Of the twenty-one Ecumenical Councils, the first eight were called by the Emperor and the ninth involved resolving conflicts between the Pope and the Emperor.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, in respect to the emotional dynamic of a reform Council, the role of the laity was to wait upon the Pope/Emperor’s decisions and obediently embrace their decrees. Notably, a doctrinal reform Council assumes a bedrock pastoral stance as the protector of the faithful—religiously and politically “Mother Church” broods upon the troubles raised and guards her nestlings.

## **Vatican II’s words and images**

Although “emotional dynamic” is a phrase not found in theological dictionaries, it is useful to explore how the pastoral language of the Documents emotionally impacted the faithful, such as Nancy.

At Vatican II the beginnings of a greater understanding of the Spirit stirred in many Catholic hearts, minds, and soul—clerical and lay—as they heard,

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the *entire* People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to *hear, distinguish* and *interpret* the many voices of our age, and to *judge* them in the light of the divine Word.

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<sup>8</sup> This adage, allegedly delivered in 1959 has come to convey the intent of John XXIII although documentation has proven elusive.

<sup>9</sup> “Message to Humanity,” *Documents*, pgs. 3 and 6.

<sup>10</sup> Pope John XXIII when opening the Council, “Principle Duty of the Council: The Defense and Advancement of Truth. The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more efficaciously.” *Opening Speech to the Vatican II Council* (October 11, 1962) [http://www.saint-mike.org/library/papal\\_library/johnxxiii/opening\\_speech\\_vaticanii.html](http://www.saint-mike.org/library/papal_library/johnxxiii/opening_speech_vaticanii.html)

<sup>11</sup> “Catholicism.org,” *loc. cit.*

In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.<sup>12</sup> (My italics.)

“Entire” meant her...and you and me. Shocking to the laity at the time, “pastoral” applied to their tasks and responsibilities. In one fell swoop, Nancy was part of the *entire* pastoral team. She was to hear, distinguish, interpret...and then judge. But *how could she?* The charge that it was the “task of the entire People of God” was a necessary phrase because, prior to the Council, only male clerics were called to these tasks. What stirred Nancy when she read these words? *Reform? Revolution?*

At the time many heard only “reform” and willingly adopted the lively imagery and shifted the liturgical scenery, e.g., pivoted the altar, having the priest face the People. But there was a snag in this call to action conveyed by “judge.” It is the one word that sums up the Council’s historical uniqueness, namely, that religious when yoked with the laity were both called to engage in actions that could and would be judged—by them “with the help of the Holy Spirit.”

In *judge* there were sounded calls to action, to responsibility, to dedication and commitment...to risk, because you can judge and be wrong! The unnerving personal challenge that the word conveyed was that for the Church to be present as the People of God and so be faithful to the Spirit—in its entirety as Nancy, you, me, pope, clerics, laity and religious—you had to lay your life on the line, go forth and engage “All men.”<sup>13</sup> *Judge* meant opening yourself to the Spirit’s prophetic voice—as it spoke through your words and actions. *Judge* was this pushing you beyond your comfort zone, unclogging your ears to hear the Gospel’s relevance to the moment, right now—Spirit was speaking and you had to act! As with Nancy you had to leave your “Catholic enclave” and venture into areas where to provide service meant risking your life. Note well: This is where the revolution started—in how the Gospel was to be witnessed to in the secular world and public arena.

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<sup>12</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* in *Documents*, par. 44, p. 246.

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>13</sup> *GS* in *Documents*, “Message to Humanity,” p.3. In fn. 2, “For the first time in the history of Ecumenical Councils, a Council addresses itself to all men, not just members of the Catholic Church.”

In our times, a *special obligation binds us* to make ourselves the neighbor of absolutely every person, and of *actively* helping him when he comes across our path, whether he be an old person abandoned by all, a foreign laborer unjustly looked down upon, a refugee, a child born of an unlawful union and wrongly suffering for a sin he did not commit, or a hungry person who disturbs our conscience by *recalling the voice of the Lord*: “As long as you did it for one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it for me.” (Matt. 25:40)<sup>14</sup> (My italics.)

The Spirit then “disturbs our conscience” as we are forced to recall “the voice of the Lord.” Herein lays the nub of the pastoral revolution. As part of the entire pastoral team, the goal of all—laity and clerics—is to accept that the voice of the Lord is heard on the streets and in the suites, so expanding upon what is heard in the cathedrals. There is an ecclesiological sub-text to all of this that was visually evoked by Nancy when she changed her religious habit for more secular dress—“clothes of our time.”<sup>15</sup> As she divested to put on the simple style of the poor and common people, simultaneously, the “Church” was pastorally redefined to physically encompass the public arena and secular spaces. She went forth because the Church as the People of God was to be found equally inside and outside religious institutions and structures.

Equally unnerving was the clarification that secular ideas and values were to be seen as a “sign of God’s grace.”

Thus, far from thinking that works produced by man's own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator, Christians are convinced that the *triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's grace and the flowering of His own mysterious design*. For the greater man's power becomes, the farther his individual and community responsibility extends. Hence it is clear that men are not deterred by the Christian message from *building up*

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<sup>14</sup> GS in *Documents*, “Reverence for the human person,” par. 27, p. 226.

<sup>15</sup> Sylvester, When things began to change “it was not an easy road for me.”

*the world*, or impelled to neglect the welfare of their fellows, but that they are rather more *stringently bound* to do these very things.”<sup>16</sup> (My italics.)

Nancy had to leave a world where “Catholic defined every aspect of my life—Catholic schools, Catholic funeral parlors, Catholic sports teams, Catholic spirituality, the list goes on.”

*They are mistaken* who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come, think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties, each according to his proper vocation.<sup>17</sup> (My italics.)

In brief, there was *no choice*. Building the Earth was integral to Gospel faithfulness.

Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide of the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations, and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs in such a way as to imply that these are altogether divorced from the religious life. This *split between the faith* which many profess and their daily lives deserves to be counted among the *more serious errors of our age*.

Continuing their clarification, here enters the prophetic calling.

Long since, the Prophets of the Old Testament *fought vehemently against this scandal* and even more so did Jesus Christ Himself in the New Testament threaten it with grave punishments. Therefore, let there be *no false opposition* between professional and social activities on the one part, and religious life on the other. The Christian who neglects his temporal duties, neglects his duties toward his neighbor and even God, and *jeopardizes his eternal salvation*. Christians should rather rejoice that,

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<sup>16</sup> GS in *Documents*, “The value of human activity,” par. 34, p. 232.

<sup>17</sup> GS in *Documents*, “The help which the church strives to give to human activity through Christians,” par. 43, p. 242. This and the next two paragraphs are part of one whole text.



following the example of Christ Who worked as an artisan, they are free to give proper exercise to all their earthly activities and to their humane, domestic, professional, social and technical enterprises by gathering them into one vital synthesis with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are harmonized unto God's glory.<sup>18</sup> (My italics.)

The prophets and Jesus “fought vehemently against this scandal” of creating a false dualism that separates the sacred and the secular. Confronting this scandal anchors the scriptural and historical heritage of Vatican II’s revolution. Another doctrinal sub-text: You are faithful to the prophets and Jesus when you take to the streets and care for the least. Not to so venture forth and serve was to “jeopardize” one’s salvation. That such a reformation would stir up the faithful was anticipated, and guidelines for proper dispute management seemed clearly articulated by the Council.

Often enough the Christian view of things will itself suggest some specific solution in certain circumstances. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that with equal sincerity some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter. Even against the intentions of their proponents, however, solutions proposed on one side or another may be easily confused by many people with the Gospel message. Hence it is necessary for people to remember that *no one is allowed* in the aforementioned situations *to appropriate the Church's authority for his opinion*. They should always try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good.<sup>19</sup> (My italics.)

With that, the reformer sees no change in the authority structure, the revolution lay in the emotional dynamic of how this authority is discerned and exercised. We must “try to enlighten one another through honest discussion.” The image is “one another” and the tone is “honest discussion.” The emotional dynamic is clear, “mutual charity” and “caring above all for the

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<sup>18</sup> GS in *Documents*, par. 43, p.243.

<sup>19</sup> *Loc. cit.*

common good.” *Honesty. Charity. Caring. Common good.* These are simple but dynamic words, launching a revolution of the mothering Spirit.

### **“Faith seeking understanding”**

Pre-Vatican II was theologically expressive of the medieval experience. “Faith seeking understanding” judged the human quest for knowledge in terms of its exultation of faithful truths. Society was divinely orderly, led by a kingly patriarch who could claim a divine right to his authority. Likewise, the pope was kingly and the realm was a Holy Roman Empire. Science was valid insofar as it manifested of God’s mystery and power. God looked upon creation and saw that God that it was *good!* There was a simple eloquence, an undeniable majesty, to medieval theology. It endowed the faithful with a restful heart, knowing that the simple act of faith protected and would eventually secure an entrance into heaven for the lowliest as well as for the mightiest of men.

### **“Understanding seeking faith”**

The “circumstances of the life of modern man” of the faithful that Vatican II engaged can be phrased, with a theological twist as, “Understanding seeking faith.”

At its core, Vatican II was a theological moment wherein the Catholic community attempted to catch up with the spiritual experiences of the ecumenically faithful, especially the laity. The secular world was bursting with new adventures of mind and body. At the center of the emotional dynamic of the modern age was a thrilling curiosity at every turn. People were being transformed by new understandings—and were seeking to discern what it meant to be faithful in this new age.

All the challenges the Spirit placed before Nancy were also challenges that Vatican II—and the young Joseph Ratzinger—faced as it opened. For her, the list included: i) “The insights from quantum physics and cosmology,” ii) “integrat(ing) democratic principles into our governing structures,” iii) “awaken(ing) to our identity as women,” iv) working within a “pluralistic, democratic, and secular,” world, and v) “greed, consumerism and selfish individualism and the

public policies that shaped them.” It is noteworthy that Nancy is going “Into the Future” standing on the broad shoulders of pre-Vatican II theological revolutionaries.

## **Broad shoulders**

Nancy readily responded to the People’s Spirit because she had been “Prepared in 1950 through the Sister Formation Movement” and so “women religious were poised to move quickly to prepare themselves academically following the Council.” Here she was like the young Joseph Ratzinger who associated himself with the leading edge theologians and ideas of his time. She, like Joseph had in the pre-Vatican II era, engaged thinkers and activists whose insights impacted traditional theological thought. They constituted a *curious lot* who, while scholars of medieval theology, let new understandings open their minds and hearts to the fires of the transforming Spirit. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.<sup>20</sup> was a world renown paleontologist who employed the insights into reality and human nature provided by evolutionary thought to the development of a world embracing, Christological vision. Like Nancy, Teilhard embodied the tension of reformer/revolutionary. He submitted to the Vatican’s *monitum*<sup>21</sup> in priestly obedience, but the revolution that churned through his mind and soul found fulfillment in the passionate embrace of the world that Pope John XXIII exuded. Teilhard’s vision of “building the Earth” and of living in a “Divine Milieu” prophetically permeated the *Documents of Vatican II*.

Ecumenically, Hans Kung embraced other Christians whose understandings led to a deepening of faith. John Courtney Murray, S.J. set the stage for a critical acceptance of democratic principles of governance and a deepened understanding of religious freedom. Dorothy Day’s “Catholic Worker” movement opened soup kitchens and spawned spiritual activists whose civil disobedience filled jail cells. Labor and working-class issues were kept on society’s and the Church’s front-burner through the efforts of Archbishop John Ireland , Msgrs. John Ryan and George Higgins. Liturgically, Godfrey Diekmann, O.S.B stirred the creative imagination.<sup>22</sup>

Vatican II opened concurrently with several social movements, notably, Civil Rights, Peace, and the Womens. Prophetic words and actions soon abounded in sacred and secular venues. Heeding

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<sup>20</sup> American Teilhard Association at <http://www.teilharddechardin.org/>

<sup>21</sup> A *monitum* is a warning issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to an errant cleric.

<sup>22</sup> Arguably, several different lists of pre-Vatican II revolutionaries could be drawn.

the call “to strain every muscle,” Daniel Berrigan, S.J., brought a vision of nonviolent action as an offset to the unquestioned use of violence by both imperial societies and faiths. The Peace Movement’s roots were deep in the thought and actions of the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, the Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, the self-immolating Buddhists monks, the Quaker “Speak truth to power!” witness, and the fiery dreams of a Southern Baptist, Martin Luther King.

Yet, most telling, were the women revolutionaries. Visualize nuns back then, like Nancy, in their black habits as kin with Muslim women wrapped in the *burqa*. Everywhere, in sacred and secular society, women were derivative beings, “ribs” of Adam.

Once outside her Catholic enclave, Nancy worked daily with men and women. Her just being there as a non-dependent, celibate, and avowedly religious woman sparked a revolutionary dynamic as activist men and theologians had to deal with her as an equal, even as a leader.<sup>23</sup> *Awake!* Here is the moment of prophecy. Nancy embodied this equality and was by her mere presence a manifestation of the mothering Spirit. We lay males, especially, experienced, through Nancy, the feminine as a way of making the Spirit present. She laid her body down in protests, spoke truth to power, knelt in prayer with the least among us, and simply mothered all as teacher, friend, and inspiration. Deep personal relationships were nurtured with Nancy and her Sisters. The divine was present through the mothering Spirit as together all experienced being the People of God as a holy family.

Soon, women theologians emerged who laid the Scriptural and theological groundwork that enabled Nancy to find powerful ways to express theologically what she was experiencing. Phyllis Trible’s studies<sup>24</sup> of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Old Testament and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s like scholarly New Testament work provided solid bedrock for the emergence of varied feminist theologies.<sup>25</sup> Notably, while secular society was shaken by Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and sacred society by theologian Mary Daly’s *Beyond*

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<sup>23</sup> Here, theological insights grew valuing the equal status account of “male and female” of *He created them*, over the Eve from Adam’s rib theme of woman as a derivative being.

<sup>24</sup> Phyllis Trible’s papers in Burke Theological Library at Columbia University, NY. <http://library.columbia.edu/indiv/burke/archives/awts/exhibit/tribble.html> Elisabeth Fiorenza at <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/people/faculty/elisabeth-sch%C3%BCssler-fiorenza>

<sup>25</sup> Contrary to the “Assessment,” *feminist theology* is not a simple cloth. A list of seminal feminist theologians would be lengthy. Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, “Controversies in Feminist Theology,” (London: SCM Press), 1988. Jane Schaberg personally inspired me.

*God the Father*,<sup>26</sup> it was Nancy walking among us, working pastorally with us, that was and remains the revolution of the mothering Spirit.

## Tenor of trial

In light of the foregoing, what is heard when the Assessment states:

In this way, we can hope that the secularized contemporary culture, with its *negative impact* on the very identity of Religious as Christians and members of the Church, on their religious practice and common life, and on their authentic Christian spirituality, moral life, and liturgical practice, can be *more readily overcome*. (My italics.)

While Nancy and other religious women responded to initial inquiries and ongoing requests, the Assessment has all the markings of an intentionally secretive, somewhat conspiratorial, investigation and trial. While citing Canon Law to justify the proceedings, one cannot but wonder why an investigation that focused on “problematic statements and serious theological, even doctrinal errors” was not handled with the transparency that public hearings and trials are in most free countries. The sheer educational value of such a public cross-examination of the charges and evidences forwarded would have proven invaluable. The Magisterium, at the least, lost a powerful teaching moment.

Critically, it is not crystal clear why Nancy’s “response is inadequate.” If there are transcripts of Assessment meetings, they are not open to public scrutiny. Certainly, Vatican II set the bar for how the People of God were to “enlighten one another.” This was to be “through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity and caring above all for the common good.” Such a description cannot be made of the Assessment’s procedures and seeming intent.

Underlying the Magisterium’s call to reform is an understanding and practice of patriarchy that is quite explicitly exposed by the language and emotional dynamic of the Assessment. How does the reformer and revolutionary react when the Magisterium claims that its examination led them

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<sup>26</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (W.W. Norton and Co., 1963/2001). Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Beacon Press, 1973/1993).

not only to see her views as “an erroneous vision” but also as “a cry for help.” Reformer: Only we *must* and only we *can* intervene and save this errant soul! Revolutionary: The emotional dynamic of the text is not just chastisement but belittlement. This “cry” positions Nancy in a child-like dependency, as someone who simply does not know what she has done. Note, significantly, that this is not her cry rather it is how the Magisterium emotionally reacts upon examining her faith convictions and life time of servanthood. This “cry,” I aver, would never be applied to a male religious or lay theologian. It is patriarchal in the worst sense of the term—patronizing and sounding like a parental *Tsk!* “Little one, you’ll understand why I have to do this when you grow up.”

The Spirit revealing question is, *Is the Magisterium authoritatively superior to the People of God’s authority?* When Vatican II asserted, “no one is allowed...to appropriate the Church’s authority for his opinion,” was the Magisterium included in this “no one”? Reformer: Absolutely not. Revolutionary: The People of God’s authority—to *judge*—includes the entirety of the faithful: lay and religious. That is why the Council articulated how the People should interact when one’s well-intentioned actions may easily confuse others about the Gospel message. How do the People of God know when such an “honest discussion” is being held? By the emotional tone of the proceedings where it is clearly evident that each side is trying “to enlighten one another” and it is clear that their discourse is “preserving mutual charity” and it is demonstrable that they are “caring above all for the common good.”

How does the Magisterium measure up? It positioned itself as the *regulator*, *verifier*, and *guarantor* of prophecy, and, most significantly, as never being a proper object of its criticism—never to be “directed *at*.” Operationally, although the Magisterium asserts that “true prophecy is a grace,” it quite clearly conveys that this is a gift of the Spirit which can only be claimed and exercised *after* approval by the administrative policies and procedures of the institutional Church as it functions as the Magisterium. There is a closed-loop circularity here—a “Catch 22”—where prophetic criticism can only be laid at the feet of the Magisterium if it, itself, assesses that this is true prophecy. Of course, any such scathing prophecy is *de facto* illegitimate—as the English translation underscores by italicizing “*at*.” To hold other than this view is to be snared by a “distorted ecclesiological vision.”

In brief, the Magisterium can accuse Nancy of prophetic distortion but she has no standing or procedural way to prophetically accuse the Magisterium of the same distortion. The core question raised, then, is whether prophecy is itself inherently reformatory and never revolutionary?

## Prophecy and Mother

The Assessment's "negative impact" paragraph is written in fearful ink. A sense of confusion overwhelms one because Vatican II's Church was theologically imaged as the "entire" People of God. Consider again:

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the *entire* People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to *hear, distinguish* and *interpret* the many voices of our age, and to *judge* them in the light of the divine Word. In this way, revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.<sup>27</sup>

If revealed truth is more deeply penetrated when the entire People judge, then is not *authority* derived from the actions of all faithful individuals?

Again, ponder this *entire*. Doing so caused a "change in consciousness that was not easy" in Nancy. Notably, the shift is that the group is to now discern that it is the mothering Spirit who is guiding the judgments made by lay people as they engage the world. For example, the opening call in the "Message to Humanity" states, "There is no one who does not hate war, no one who does not strive for peace with burning desire. But the Church desires it most of all, because she is the Mother of all."<sup>28</sup> Since the Church is the People of God, hearing this, Nancy would properly grasp that it was her obligation to "strive for peace with burning desire." Meaning, that this paragraph does not define "Church" as known before, as simply the administrative apparatus. Rather, "Church" is radically redefined as the People of God—the entire People, lay and religious. The *Documents* are not a handbook or a road map for the institutional Church rather it is such for the People of God. The institutional Church did not hit the streets and "strive for

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<sup>27</sup> GS in *Documents*, par. 44, p. 246.

<sup>28</sup> "Message," p. 5-6.

peace with burning desire,” quite the contrary, the worldwide Peace Movement was led by interfaith theologians in union with secular and religious activists. Here is where clarity is obtained by looking back, as Nancy has, as to what the Spirit moved her to do, namely, judge. Spirit-filled judgment was made as Nancy found her own authority and embodied it, that is, the Spirit speaking through her. Naturally, it is fitting that her authority and judgments be challenged and put to the test. Such requires, however, an honest discussion with the entire People of God in an atmosphere of mutual charity.

A bit ironically, the pastoral shift has led to where religious women, individually and collectively, have been publically reprimanded in a tone just shy of a “Burn them at the stake!” heretical denunciation, mainly, for their involvement in pastoral activities cited by Vatican II as “Two issues of special urgency,” that is, of peacemaking and social justice.<sup>29</sup>

Nancy, I hold, is embodying a revolutionary shift in the traditional theological “understanding of God.” She, most notably as a female People of God, in her person and through her pastoral concerns centered around peacemaking and promoting social justice, is unveiling the mothering Spirit who moved the Council Fathers to appropriate mother imagery when addressing their pastoral stance, that is, involvement in worldly affairs. “But the Church desires it {peace} most of all, because she is Mother of all.” Traditionally, the pronoun “she” references the Church. So, the form of patriarchy which the Magisterium values has a feminine voice and presence as evidenced in, “Through the voice of the Roman Pontiffs, she never ceases to make an open declaration of her love for peace, her desire for peace.” Pope John XXIII spoke of the People of God as “Mater et Magister,” “Mother and Teacher.” Teaching and mothering are intricately linked, here. Did this not redefine the *Magisterium* as “Mother teaching”? Clearly, when the mothering Spirit’s voice is spoken through the People of God, the embodied feminine voices of women religious and lay women theologians and activists should be listened to by the males to deepen and enrich their understanding of the feminine and of whom our teaching Mother is.

The triple accusation laid against Nancy of being in serious doctrinal error concerning human sexuality, patriarchy, and the prophetic office must be weighed in view of this shift towards an emerging and deeper understanding of the People as “Mother.”

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<sup>29</sup> *Documents*, pgs. 5-6.



## Imperial masculinity

The early reform Councils were called by the Emperor. He represented a certain understanding of masculinity, the role and meaning of Father, and how to exercise patriarchal authority. The Emperor was a military leader who expressed power through conquest and the exercise of absolute dominion over his people. When Constantine promoted Christianity to the rank of imperial religion, he did so to more effectively organize and control his people.<sup>30</sup> His alleged vision of a luminous Cross of Christ—"In this sign you shall conquer!"—set up an emotional dynamic where Christianity engaged others with warrior zest and zeal. There followed a shift in the spiritual style of teaching. Subsequent Emperors and many Popes taught using the sword—"Believe or die!" Knights shaped the hafts of their broad swords as crosses so that the kneeling, about to be slain enemy, upon confession and profession of Christian faith would have a Cross to kiss to seal his fate. *Convert or die!* Notably, Constantine's soldiers' shields bore an image of the Christian Cross. Pointedly, imagistically, soon Jesus appears in the military garb of the emperor as "Christus Imperator."<sup>31</sup> For centuries, He will be visualized as a universal sovereign or victorious hero.

The Constantinian Church not only adopted the administrative structure of the Empire but it also adapted to this singular emotional dynamic of a conquering, dominator, imperial masculinity.<sup>32</sup> "Onward Christian soldiers!" From that time forward, the Church as Mother became a subordinated image, and women were theologically taught to be submissive to men.<sup>33</sup> This was, likewise, the case in the secular patriarchal culture. One cannot historically understand the emotional dynamic of the Church through the ages until the interplay of the images of Mother and Teacher are understood as they developed under the control of this specific form of patriarchal authority and mode of interpretation.

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<sup>30</sup> Scholars remain in disagreement as to Constantine's motives. It was rumored that he was baptized on his death bed.

<sup>31</sup> A mosaic "Jesus of Nazareth as Christus Imperator" by an anonymous master. Circa 494-520, Cappella Arcivescovile, Ravenna, Italy <http://www.all-art.org/history136-2.html>

<sup>32</sup> Interpretations of research surrounding dominator, imperial masculinity are hotly contested, with a scholarly storm centered around Marija Gimbutas' seminal research and popularizers such as Riane Eisler.

<sup>33</sup> "But in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman: for man is the beginning and end of woman; as God is the beginning and end of every creature. So when the Apostle had said that "man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man," he adds his reason: "For man is not of woman, but woman of man; and man was not created for woman, but woman for man." Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols. Trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province. (Texas: Christian Classics, 1981), I, qu. 93, art. 4 ad 1.

A critical question is whether dominator patriarchy is a cultural artifact and/or a spiritual revelation?

## **Spiritual patriarchy?**

Nancy's "commentaries on patriarchy distort" and "even undermine the revealed doctrines." How best to discuss this controversial issue? First, reflect upon Vatican II's "The value of human activity."

Thus, far from thinking that works produced by man's own talent and energy are in opposition to God's power, and that the rational creature exists as a kind of rival to the Creator, Christians are convinced that the *triumphs of the human race* are a sign of God's grace and the flowering of His own mysterious design.<sup>34</sup> (My italics.)

Aren't the findings not only of the hard but the soft social sciences included as "triumphs"? If not, then there would be no grounds to examine and critique the patriarchy of the Magisterium. But if so, then the male religious—from Brothers to Papal Father—are obligated by Vatican II to discern the character of these triumphs. Are the findings of sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc., to be ignored? If not, then quite evidently the issue of women and the rise of feminist studies and feminist theology should be front and center. Tellingly, a defining characteristic of all feminist schools of thought is a valuing of a woman's personal experience, that is, how she embodies the world as it embodies her. To properly host an "honest discussion" about this world-wide, multi-cultural, and interfaith movement requires a venue that engages the issue in depth and breadth. If anything, the Magisterium should approach Nancy and say, "Teach us!"

If the Magisterium did ask, it would unleash a profound re-examination and re-imagining of what it means to be a faithful male at a time when the mothering Spirit has fired up our hearts and imaginations. What Nancy challenges most in me as a lay male theologian is who I am as a

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<sup>34</sup> GS in *Documents*, par. 34, p. 232.

male. She draws me out in ways my brothers simply cannot.<sup>35</sup> I believe that the Assessment clearly indicates that my challenge is also that of the Magisterium's Y chromosomes.

## **God the Mother**

For millennia, the spiritual seeker has been searching for a “greater understanding of God and who we are in this marvelous world.” It is a fit way to describe Jesus' quest. Likewise, the early Church wrestled with numerous and diverse ways of understanding God and the human endeavor. A topic, rife in the Patristic era, which has been suppressed in Catechetical and even advanced theological training questioned “God the Mother?”<sup>36</sup>

The rise of imperial masculinity drastically impacted theological interpretation. Augustine is representative of those who subordinated the role of the feminine and women. He enshrined imperial masculinity as interpretive tool when he opted to elevate the Rib account story of Genesis as primary for theological interpretation, selecting it over Genesis 1's account of equality.<sup>37</sup>

When the Pope references the Church as Mother of All and speaks with a feminine voice as She, it is in the context of this dominator culture where women are idealized and sentimentalized. While warrior males conquer, their women teach by example, nurture the knowledge of the heart, and act with compassion and caring. Notably, this dominator masculinity had roots in non-canonical literature. The Gospel of Thomas records,

“Simon Peter said to them [the disciples], ‘Let Mary be excluded from among us, for she is a woman, and not worthy of Life.’ Jesus said, ‘Behold I will take Mary, and make her a male, so that she may become a living spirit, resembling you males. For I tell you

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<sup>35</sup> Feminist of various stripes, secular and religious, have transformed my life since my Sixties anti-war activities to my current work through with an interfaith social justice coalition. Through engagements with Nancy and her Sisters, over the last fifty-years, I have discerned a presence of our Divine Mother and re-imagined what I sense when in the presence of a woman.

<sup>36</sup> Elaine H. Pagels, “What became of God the Mother? Conflicting images of God in early Christianity,” in *Womanspirit Rising*, eds. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, (Harper & Row, 19719), pp. 107-119.

<sup>37</sup> Two of Augustine's five books on Genesis are: *The Fathers of the Church. Vol. 84: St. Augustine on Genesis: Two books on Genesis against the Manichees and On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*. Trans. R.J. Teske, S.J. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991).

truly, that every female who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”

In contrast, a few texts that survived the rise of orthodoxy spoke of the Trinitarian God being masculine and feminine. One secret tradition, claiming the authority of Mary Magdalene “offer{ed} prayer to both the divine Father and Mother: ‘From Thee, Father, and through Thee, Mother, the two immortal names, Parents of the divine being, and thou, dweller in heaven, mankind of the mighty name.’”<sup>38</sup>

When women ventured to assume spiritual roles, orthodox Fathers put them in their place. Iraenaeus noted with dismay “that women in particular are attracted to heretical groups.” Tertullian was shocked, “These heretical women—how audacious they are! They have no modesty: they are bold enough to teach, to engage in arguments, to enact exorcisms, to undertake cures, and, it may be, even to baptize!”<sup>39</sup>

Yet despite the millennia of suppression of the mothering Spirit, spiritual writings of women religious have emerged. The medieval Julian of Norwich described Jesus in mothering terms.

It is a characteristic of God to overcome evil with good. Jesus Christ therefore, who himself overcame evil with good, is our true Mother. We received our ‘Being’ from Him and this is where His Maternity starts. And with it comes the gentle Protection and Guard of Love which will never cease to surround us. Just as God is our Father, so God is also our Mother.<sup>40</sup>

Are not biblical and theological studies that employ the insights of secular research “triumphs of the human race” to be humbly approached as “a sign of God’s grace and the flowering of His own mysterious design”? Is not the Magisterium called to critically reflect upon its own most striking characteristic? Namely, that it is an exclusively male dominated, Y chromosome, imperial masculinity driven organization? Such description is not an indictment as much as it is

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<sup>38</sup>Both non-canonical quotes from Pagels, “Mother?” pgs. 108-109.

<sup>39</sup> Pagels, “God the Mother,” p. 114 for both quotes.

<sup>40</sup> “Gods is our Mother” in Juliana of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love* (LIX, LXXXVI). She lived 1342-1416. [http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit\\_20010807\\_giuliana-norwich\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/spirit/documents/spirit_20010807_giuliana-norwich_en.html)

an invitation for the Magisterium to open itself to the movement that continues to rock the secular dominator world at its roots.<sup>41</sup>

## **Revolution: Mother's Courage**

Revolution rarely directly arises from intellectual analysis. Rather, it is an embodied response to the contradictions and sufferings that arise from service—here, Nancy's practice of servanthood.<sup>42</sup>

Half a century later, the mothering Spirit's call for *Revolution!* continues to resound from the Council's texts but more so through the ensuing experiences of those who embodied the Council's call to act "with burning desire." The Magisterium should emulate Nancy's servanthood as she met the heart-thumping challenge and anguish evoked when boldly "Surrendering to the Spirit, we awakened to new understandings that touched our deepest core." Most notably, to "let go of who we thought we were." *Awake!* Her words are an *adequate* response. Weigh them: *surrender, deepest core, let go*. Nancy should train the voice of the Magisterium, so freeing Her mothering teachings. Doing so the Magisterium males would encounter a mothering Spirit whose "change...is transformation." Joyfully, they would be consumed with a "burning desire" and share Nancy's experience of "a faith that has been tested in the crucible of our time and has emerged with new insights and new interpretations of how we can love one another as Jesus did."

Nancy's "Mother's Courage" is that she has embraced the entire People of God as Church. As such she continues to manifest the presence of "Mother of All." Through her magisterial words and actions, Nancy has been opening her mothering arms to embrace her brothers in the Magisterium. May these sons of Mother Church step forward and fall into her embrace and so inspired emulate her Mother's Courage "so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Male religious would benefit from The Mankind Project's training. "Men willing to step through fear and into the challenge of their lives." <http://mankindproject.org/>

<sup>42</sup> Many *read* the Christian Gospels over and over but have no change of heart. *Acting* as Jesus did, ultimately putting your life in harm's way for another proves to be the initiator of interior, personal revolution—"faith."

<sup>43</sup> GS, in *Documents*, par. 44, p. 246.