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## Mercy Spirituality

# Catherine's Spirituality of the Cross

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The intractable fact of suffering in our world and the consequences of Christian discipleship require us as Christians and as Sisters of Mercy to reappropriate in a healthy way an energizing and hopeful spirituality of the cross. Feminist criticism of a mystique of suffering and our own assumptions that all suffering is to be avoided or overcome could deprive us of a necessary resource in Christian spirituality and in our mercy heritage. Catherine McAuley's experiences led her to develop a profound spirituality of the cross. This focus on the cross of Christ was integral to her experience of God as mercy and integral to her call to embody that same mercy in her world.

I first examine elements in Catherine's spirituality of the cross through the lens of Segundo Galilea's liberation theology to provide a new way of understanding the cross. I then suggest the questions we need to confront in order to develop a spirituality of the cross for today which avoids the negative pitfalls of the ones which most of us have rejected. This renewed spirituality of the cross can provide us with the spiritual resources we need to sustain the works of mercy in both our first world and third world contexts.

## An Earlier Spirituality of the Cross

To our late twentieth century ears, the language and assumptions of nineteenth-century piety, exemplified by the Devotion to the Passion of Christ, Devotion to the Sacred Heart and Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament may seem privatized, morose, or life-diminishing. This piety grew out of helplessness in the face of overwhelming suffering from illness, the omnipresence of death, the dehumanization of the very poor, and grindingly unjust social conditions.

From the late medieval period through the first half of this century, much popular piety has focused on the image of the suffering body of Jesus. First, painting and sculpture began to portray scenes from the passion such as the agony in the garden, the whipping, and the crowning with thorns. Francis of Assisi exemplified this trend when he initiated the Stations of the Cross as a popular devotion. Second, representations of the cross graphically emphasized the dead body, which had been avoided in earlier depictions of the triumphant cross. Third, a new image appeared, the Pieta — an archetype of female grief, a widow holding her only son's dead body.[1]

This piety expresses a profound sense of identification with Jesus in and through suffering. In Jesus, God's awareness of our brokenness and hardship and God's solidarity with suffering men and women are manifested. Gradually, this emphasis on how much Jesus suffered for us, and how we enter into relationship with Jesus through suffering and conflict became detached from the concrete circumstances of Jesus' own mission and ministry and the reasons why he suffered death as a criminal. This strand of piety focused instead on the virtues Jesus demonstrated in response to insult, persecution, and physical pain. Suffering, in a certain way, took on a salvific meaning in itself. Merely by suffering uncomplainingly, one could become holy and participate in a sacrificial love for others. The virtues cultivated were humility, patience, silence, obedience, and imperturbability. In order to participate in this mystique of suffering, one actively sought or welcomed opportunities to suffer.

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What are the benefits of a spirituality of the cross of this kind? First, all suffering is endowed with profound meaning. By uniting our suffering with the suffering of Christ, we can achieve forgiveness for our sins and win grace and blessing for others, both living and dead. Suffering becomes service in behalf of the neighbor.

Secondly, we discover a stance to take toward personal suffering. We become willing to embrace it and allow it to transform us into other Christs by our imitation of his virtues. By concentrating on Jesus in his humanity, we enter into a profound communion with Jesus that can be intimate, loving, and life-giving in the midst of hardship and death. We discover that we can experience peace and joy in the midst of pain. Those who suffer most from unjust social conditions can find religious meaning in their lot in life. Women may feel particularly identified with the physicality of Jesus's suffering because it resembled their pain and the frequent threat to their lives in childbirth, lactation, nurturing, care-taking, and sexual violence. Ordinary experience became religiously significant by the attitude one took toward it.[2]

Finally, the veil between this world and the next becomes transparent; hope for eternal life helps us endure the present hardship. Heaven is infinitely better than "this miserable world" or "this vale of tears". We can endure our limitations or powerlessness in the face of present suffering, including the loss of children, parents, spouse, or companions in community because we will all be reunited in heaven. To cling to a present relationship is to prevent the beloved's passage into a better life.

There were, however, some dangers in this form of piety. Some spiritualities of the cross resulted in submission to the status quo in church and society. The poor or oppressed were told to imitate Jesus in his humility and obedience rather than resist or revolt. The privileged benefitted from this piety of passivity because it rendered the poor more pliable to their exploiters.[3]

There was also great potential for deforming the divine image into a cruel or sadistic father who could be satisfied only by the agonizing death of his son. Such a God could become angry and vindictive, ready to punish or crush the non-repentant sinner. This spirituality can so erode self-esteem that people feel perpetually guilty and easily coerced into compliance by authority. This criticism of spiritualities of the cross has become familiar in our time, especially in liberation and feminist theologies. Finally, the creation itself, "this dear sweet world," could be so devalued that people felt little incentive to improve the quality of present life, to prevent or relieve suffering, or even to appreciate the good gifts of the creator God in natural beauty and relationships.[4]

## A Liberation Spirituality of the Cross

Segundo Galilea identifies three aspects of an authentic spirituality of the cross. (1) "We are limited and vulnerable; illness, frustration, suffering, and death are integral parts of our life." To place this experience in the context of our following of Jesus opens us to a release of spirit within us. In Christian faith, suffering and death do not have the last word, but are ultimately overcome in the mystery of God's mercy which meets us in Christ. (2) "The cross is the price and path of conversion. Because we are immersed in egoism and the tendency toward sin, the path of conversion to the following of Jesus is a path of repentance for sin and resistance against our own particular form of egoism."[5] (3) "The cross as suffering and contradiction, as persecution and even death, is a result of faithful commitment to Jesus and his Gospel of the Kingdom." This is the fullest meaning of participation in the paschal mystery because this is the primary form of Jesus' own suffering witness. Although martyrdom is its highest expression, "it includes fidelity to the Spirit in times of conflict."[6]

## Application to Catherine

Although Catherine's piety necessarily had many elements of the old piety, I propose we explore her writings in the light of these liberation themes. The first two are most characteristic of Catherine's spirituality. The third appears only in an implicit way.

Catherine was only too familiar with the suffering which is part of every human life. Catherine's early life was characterized by an alternation of scarcity and plenty, antagonism and harmony, insecurity and security. Although born into a comfortable family, her father's premature death, and her mother's inability to manage the family finances and her subsequently difficult death left Catherine and her siblings orphans in their teens.

Financial difficulties again required her to move from the more congenial Conway home to the economically comfortable but religiously hostile Armstrong household. From there she moved to the Callaghans who loved and respected her. They offered her a genuinely familial environment, religious tolerance, and eventually left her their fortune.

**(Catherine's) experience taught her that although suffering is part of . . . life, it is often reversed in sudden and unexpected ways.**

Catherine's formative experience was thus one of an alternation of difficulty and comfort which always somehow turned out all right. She learned to cope with this unpredictability in her experience by reliance on prayer, especially The Jesus Psalter. She read and meditated on the Scriptures and imitated the virtues of the suffering Christ proposed in the Devotion to the Sacred Heart. Catherine was so discrete about her inner life that we can only assume that this early hardship and bereavement deepened her intimacy with Christ. Her experience taught her that although suffering is part of every human life, it is often reversed in sudden and unexpected ways.

Even as her Devotion to the Passion gave meaning and significance to her suffering, she also grew to trust this Mystery which somehow encompassed her and cared for her in a most fundamental way. Her trust in providence was as strong as her attraction to the suffering Christ. And she discerned a loving and compassionate God in and through the events of her life.[7]

From her own relative security, she responded to the misery she encountered with the compassion that welled up in her from Christ. Neither Jesus nor his Father wanted such suffering; but they were both intimately present to those who suffered. Catherine discovered that "mere suffering through and for others does not have the power to separate us from God (Rom. 8:35-39). So that one can even know joy in suffering (Col. 1:24, Rom 5:2-5) . . . ."[8]

Her experience seemed to have taught her to place her trust more deeply in God's providential care for her than in her own plans. She developed in this way a genuine detachment, a certain equilibrium, that this alternation of circumstances could not disturb.

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compassion for poor young women in part because she herself had felt real insecurity after her mother's death. She, too, might have been threatened in the same ways as these women she befriended.

Catherine's compassionate response to the poor was deeply personal. As Mrs. Callaghan's proxy, Catherine was specifically charged with looking after the needs of the cottagers attached to the estate. This was a gender-specific role in the nineteenth century performed by the lady of the house. Catherine welcomed this task since she shared the Catholicism of the cottagers and could take care of their medical and material needs free of an anti-Catholic attitude. Two incidents from this period of her life appear to have been the catalyst for her commitment to a life of mercy with a particular concern for women.

As the Cork manuscript tells the story, a lady's maid with a respectable family in the village of Coolock sought Catherine's advice about how to resist the sexual advances of the employer's son. Catherine advised the girl to resign her position and offered her financial support. But the young man would not be so easily deterred and indicated he would force himself on the girl. Catherine tried to place the girl in a house of refuge in Dublin to remove her physically from this threat. Catherine discovered that admissions were made by a committee that only met every two weeks; and even though Catherine pleaded the girl's case in person, she was unable to secure a place. This frustrating experience of a charitable bureaucracy that was unresponsive to the actual needs of poor women drove Catherine to initiate the house of mercy which could respond immediately.[9]

Catherine's inability to help the girl seems to have haunted her to such a degree that it became a repeating theme in her dreams — almost a nightmare which finally resolved itself when she began to plan the house of mercy to address the particular needs of working class women. The Derry Manuscript portrays these dream scenes:

> *Night after night she would see herself in some very large place where a number of young women were employed as laundresses or at plain work, while she herself would be surrounded by a crowd of ragged children whom she was washing and dressing very busily. At another time, she would see herself surrounded by a band of destitute outcast females, some abandoned by their parents, some deserted by their friends, some deprived of their natural protectors, some flying with horror from the proposals of their libertine seducers. Alarmed and amazed at the wild revellings of her imagination, she often started from her slumbers and burst into tears.*[10]

As Catherine allowed herself to see and feel the lives of poor women and children, she came to discover the mission which Jesus was entrusting to her. In her meditation on the Gospels, she singled out Jesus' love for the poor and the sick as the quality which encompasses all others. She consistently encountered her God in the poor: "What you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, you do to me." She resolved to serve Christ in the poor and embody Christ in her works of mercy, resisting injustice and relieving misery with whatever means she had.

Catherine accomplished this only in union with Jesus. Although she often altered the actual situations of some people, she remained helpless in the face of illness and death. Unlike our own times, in which medical technology can often prolong life and alleviate pain for at least many people, nineteenth-century Ireland was a world in which illness and death was a fact of life. One's only choice was how one died — in great anxiety, pain, and resistance or in peaceful resignation, comforted by loving care. Catherine and the sisters had remarkable success as nurses: but they died young just as the people they cared for did.

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Great emphasis was placed on preparation for the next life since it came sooner rather than later for so many. Catherine's letters are full of this theme. To Miss Caroline White she wrote: "What is this poor miserable world but a place of sorrow and continual disappointment? God be praised it is not our fixed abode — only the weary road that leads to it."[11] And in another, "Each day is a step we take towards Eternity, and we shall continue thus to step from day to day until we take the last step which will bring us into the presence of God."[12] Life is definitely a pilgrimage to eternity. What most counts is the next life which makes it possible to confront so much present suffering.

Hope for eternal life helps a person be less overwhelmed by helplessness and less likely to look exclusively for evident, present success. One cannot prevent people from dying, but one can provide some comfort, dignity, order, and peace so that the dying can prepare themselves spiritually for this passage.

Catherine and her followers achieved a certain tranquility and peace in this constant confrontation with the sick and dying through the particular form of intimacy with Jesus that was fostered by the devotional life common to Catholics at that time. This spirituality was rooted in the *Devotio Moderna*, most familiar to us in *The Imitation of Christ*. This popular spiritual

classic encouraged practices and attitudes which imitated the virtues of Jesus in his passion. But even more than these qualities, it encouraged an intimacy with Jesus through his real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Catherine also favored the Jesus psalter, a favorite with Irish Catholics during Penal Times. Like the Rosary, one could count the petitions on beads while reciting the series of ten invocations to Jesus. Catherine is reported to have recited one of the fifteen segments of this prayers every hour of the day.[13] Reciting this petitionary prayer in harmony with the rhythm of breathing or walking can produce a profound contemplative awareness.

Catherine also used the 1820 edition of a prayer book called *Devotions to the Sacred Heart of Jesus: Containing Exercises for Confession, Communion, and Holy Mass*. These reflections emphasize union with Jesus, gratitude for Christ's suffering, and the cultivation of the virtues demonstrated in the passion. In this type of meditation on the passion, Jesus is confidant, friend, spouse, redeemer, and endless source of compassion, love, and reconciliation.

This constant contemplation of Christ suffering was the wellspring of compassion for Catherine. Entering into the mystery of the redeeming Jesus was an experience of the depths of God's own compassion. She received in this way love which filled her and impelled her to be love and compassion for others. She rejected an angry or sadistic image of God who wanted human suffering as the price of redemption. Although the cross entered her life continually, she never attributed its appearance to an angry God.[14]

## Suffering as Invitation to Conversion

How did Catherine adapt the piety of her age? From the days she lived with the Callaghans and throughout her religious life, she continued to read Scripture daily. Her image of Jesus was amplified by the Gospels beyond the content of the prayer books. She fully embraced and expressed the second theme that Galilea mentions — namely suffering as integral to conversion from sinfulness and egoism. She welcomed the suffering that came into her life, especially contradictions and set-backs as opportunities for personal conversion. She practiced self-denial so that she would have the capacity to accept freely and to respond creatively to the suffering that comes with discipleship of Jesus. The result was a capacity not to be controlled in decision-making by a fear of pain.

Catherine united Galilea's first and second themes by focusing her energies on the works of mercy rather than on physical asceticism. Nourished by the intimacy and union with Jesus in her devotional and apostolic life, she "practiced" the prescribed attitudes and virtues in the context of the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. To this end, the asceticism she practiced and taught was a means to strengthen herself and her sisters so they could discover God in the poor and embrace the risk, suffering, and hardship of their work as intimately connected to love from God.

Catherine never romanticized the poor. She knew contact with the poor could evoke physical repulsion and she understood the contracting effects on character that extreme poverty can have. She wanted her sisters to be capable of a genuine love and respect for poor people which required spiritual maturity and the capacity not to be overly wounded by ingratitude, lack of affirmation, or apparent failure.

**What mattered was that the poor were cared for — not the sisters' role in it.**

Catherine's mature spiritual development shows a marked difference from her earlier anxiety dreams about the needs of the poor. She gradually gave the poor back to God. The poor were God's not hers alone. She was able to accept the withdrawal from Kingstown precisely because she knew God did not depend upon her or the Sisters of Mercy alone. When the community reached an impasse, she realized they were simply partners in God's work. What mattered was that the poor were cared for — not the sisters' role in it. She wrote to the young superior Teresa White: "We have done all that justice and prudence demand to avert this affliction. If it must come, let us receive it as the Holy Will of God in our regard. It will mortify us and that will be salutary, please God. . . . Do not be afflicted for your poor: their Heavenly Father will provide comfort for them . . . ."[15]

With God, Catherine could do what God wanted of her. If she lost a sense of this partnership, she would have quickly been overwhelmed by the magnitude of the needs that opened before her. If she encountered obstacles she could not overcome, then God would have to manage some other way.

This attitude resulted in a careful balance of hard work, affectionate relationships, prayer and recreation. She encouraged the sisters to "dance every night" when circumstances were difficult. And her lively sense of humor was evidence of her capacity not to become self-absorbed or worn down by the immensity of need.

## Suffering as a Result of Discipleship

Galilea's third theme — the cross or suffering as a result of fidelity to discipleship is also clearly present in Catherine's spirituality although she does not often reflect on it explicitly. Galilea describes three different kinds of conflict which emerge in a disciple's following of Jesus in a particular social and historical context: (1) the kind of conflict Jesus evoked between

moral evil and divine goodness, (2) the kinds of inevitable conflicts that emerge between two fidelities, and (3) the conflicts we bring on ourselves because of our own egoism and human deficiencies. He suggests that the first type of conflict will inevitably emerge whenever followers of Jesus confront injustice. To enter into the reality of the life of the poor and to empower them to become subjects of their own liberation and participants in their struggle for justice will naturally result in conflict.

The second type of conflict, that between two fidelities, Galilea applies to conflicts within the ecclesial community. These are the types of conflicts we may ourselves experience within our own congregations, parishes, or other faith communities: good people differing about good things. And finally, we, unlike Jesus, are not free of sin. Our task is to recognize what we may ourselves contribute to any conflict situation with a readiness to meet conflict with love and to be open to our own need for reconciliation and healing.[16] Catherine attempted to avoid unnecessary conflict with consummate skill. She developed an irenic posture in the Armstrong household when she was under constant ridicule and attack for her Catholic beliefs. She responded with love and studied to acquire the doctrinal background she needed to represent her beliefs intelligently. She was consistently so loving that some of this family and both the Callaghans were eventually attracted to share her faith.

However, she did experience a certain amount of conflict and misunderstanding about her most essential calling which was to do the works of mercy. She departed from common expectations about how to treat the poor and how close to the wealthy they might live. She built her house of mercy in a fashionable neighborhood in order to bring employers and employees together and to create a market for needlework and laundry. The clergy and laity were not immediately enthusiastic about "the walking nuns" and their departure from cloistered religious life. Catherine, herself, agreed to become "a religious" — something initially repugnant to her — only because this decision insured the continuation of these works of mercy. Catherine's fidelity to her call provoked conflicts regardless of how muted they appear in her writings and how light she made of them.

The chaplaincy controversy is probably the best example of a conflict on all three levels. Catherine herself seemed to be quite stubborn in insisting that one priest should serve the house rather than accepting clerical rotation or dependency on the parish. She and the pastor differed strongly. Catherine seemed unwilling to yield to his proposals and insisted that services be held inside the house so as not to neglect the spiritual needs of the lay residents. She refused to give up what she felt were the actual needs of the ministry. She struggled for a long time with her inability to resolve this conflict; it caused her more personal distress than anything else she writes about. From our own perspective we would also see the gender and clerical issues involved in this dispute. However, in all of this conflict and distress, Catherine sought to be firm yet open and loving. She writes about the pain not causing a mean spirit, at least within the community. "We have just now indeed more than an ordinary portion of the Cross in this one particular, but . . . It has not the marks of an angry Cross, there is no disunion, no gloomy depression of spirits, no departure from charity proceeding from it."[17]

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Catherine's spirituality of the Cross challenges us in our own following of Jesus today. Confrontation with suffering and pain remains a difficult aspect of Christian life for women today. A liberation spirituality of the cross enables us to accept and transform the unavoidable suffering that inevitably enters our life. It invites us to continual conversion from sin and egoism. It offers us a valuable spiritual resource and vision that can sustain our commitment to the works of mercy and justice to which we are called by our community's tradition.

Today it is hard to know what kinds of suffering are inevitable. Many of us have been deeply affected by our culture's attitude toward suffering. We no longer expect to suffer for <u>any</u> reason and we seek either to avoid or to overcome the causes of suffering. Further, as women we are alert to the negative effects of passive resignation to the oppression that affects us as well as that which affects the poor with whom we work. Thus, our response requires discernment, distinguishing between the suffering we ought to resist, overcome and avoid and the suffering which invites us more deeply into the paschal mystery.

We will continue to experience differences among us in community and ministry. Ecclesial people disagree mightily with one another when they often espouse quite different visions of church. And finally, as we situate our works of mercy and justice in a global and ecological perspective, it could be easy to become overwhelmed by the depth and extent of poverty and need throughout the world as well as in our own country. Third world countries may, in fact, be more like nineteenth-century Ireland in the overwhelming need they experience.

We are aware of how clearly the wealthy in Latin

America, for instance, recognize the threat to their interests posed by pastoral workers who attack the injustice that maintains the poverty of the majority. To proclaim the liberating message of the gospel and celebrate the presence of Jesus in the struggle of the people is guaranteed to bring active persecution and perhaps even death. I am convinced that each of us needs to reflect on how we respond to suffering in our lives. Do we experience the love and companionship of Jesus in our struggles, our illnesses, and our personal and communal limitations? Do we have any sense of how to move from "mere passive endurance of suffering to productive suffering?"[18] Does our personal suffering become for us the means of becoming "compassionate as our God in heaven is compassionate?" Can we look beyond the present moment to the consolation that will surely come and which in a sense comes even now through the mystery of Christ risen in our midst? Can we share a vibrant hope that the reign of God is at work in our struggle and in our peace, in our joy and in our emptiness?

Secondly, we need to ask ourselves if we can allow the pain that comes from conflict and misunderstanding that is at least partially rooted in our own sinfulness and limitation thus to transform us? Can we adopt exercises or practices that "act against" our selfish or compulsive impulse so that we become capable of greater generosity and authentic presence to others?

And finally, can we identify within our mission and life in mercy, the larger causes, purposes, and loves for which we are willing to encounter the cross of persecution or hardship? This will not be because we are looking for opportunities for sacrifices but simply because we can do no less than suffer the consequences of our faithfulness. Do we trust that God is indeed the liberator, the ally of the poor, the oppressed victim, the man of sorrows? If so, "we become free to choose Jesus, who at the beginning of his work renounced both power and freedom from suffering..."[19]

As Carolyn Osiek urges, the symbol of "the cross can become for women a symbol not of victimization and self-hatred, but of creative suffering, actively embraced, which transforms and redeems."[20] There will be suffering in our lives whether it is the result of limitation and vulnerability, the result of our resistance to sexism, the result of our work for social change, the result of our own sinfulness, or the result of our choosing integrity and faithfulness. And it is in that suffering that we, like Catherine, can be sustained by clinging to the crucified and risen Christ whom we profess to follow.

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## Footnotes

1. Ewert Cousins, "The Humanity and the Passion of Christ," in *Christian Spirituality II: High Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. Jill Raitt, et al. (New York: Crossroad, 1987), p. 375-391.

2. See Caroline Bynum, "Religious Women in the Later Middle Ages" in *Christian Spirituality II*, p. 121-139.

3. "The qualities that Christianity idealizes, especially for women, are also those of a victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. Since these are qualities idealized in Jesus 'who died for our sins,' his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women." Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 77.

4. Margaret Miles argues this point repeatedly in *Practicing Christianity: Critical Perspectives for an Embodied Spirituality*. (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

5. Egoism for women differs from men. For many women, the fundamental problem is one of lack of autonomy. The "sin" of such women is that of not acquiring a self. A theology of the cross may over-emphasize self-sacrificial love, making it even harder for these women to develop a sense of self capable of self-transcendence. See Ann Carr, *Transforming Grace* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), p.119.

6. Segundo Galilea, *The Way of Living Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 142-3. According to Edward Schillebeeckx, this third type is not suffering one chooses or seeks oneself, but the result of fidelity to the cause which one chooses. *Christ*, p. 724-5.

7. As Angela Bolster puts it, "Union with the suffering Christ was . . . for Catherine an intimate personal relationship, a self-knowledge of her own sinfulness and of His compassionate love, a recognition of Mercy as reconciliation and healing. 'Let us fly to the foot of the Cross and repose in the wounds of Jesus.'" *Positio: Documentary Study for the Canonization Process of the Servant of God Catherine McAuley Founder of The Congregation of Sisters of Mercy, 1778-1841*. (Rome, 1985), p. 807.

8. Schillebeeckx, p. 696.

9. Cork MS. 1:11-14, reproduced in Bolster, *Positio*, p. 29

10. Ibid., p. 29.

11. *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, 1827-1841*, ed. Sister M. Angela Bolster (Hanley, Stoke-on Trent, England: Webberley, Ltd., 1989), p. 157; to Miss Caroline White, October 26, 1841.

12. Cited in Bolster, *Positio*, p. 814-815.

13. Ibid, London, MS, p. 15.

14. *Correspondence*, p. 126, To M. Elizabeth Moore, March 21, 1840.

15. Ibid., p. 71, November 1, 1838.

16. Galilea, p. 145-152.

17. *Correspondence*, p. 50, To Francis Warde, January 17, 1838.

18. Dorothy Soelle, *Beyond Mere Obedience* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), p. 29.

19. Ibid., p. 30.

20. Carolyn Osiek, *Beyond Anger: On Being a Feminist in the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 65.