

Bodiliness and the Good News – I

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This paper was originally written for the Glencar Summer School, the theme of which for that year was Liberation. The space for this contribution was entitled 'Liberation in the Family'. As a Christian feminist, my own concern in the area of family is how women can serve in the family of God; this latter I take to be as different from The Family (of popular and sociological imagination) as the Kingdom of God is different from say, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In the two parts of this article, I hope to explore the experience of a group of women so as to demonstrate the meaning that is fully entailed by 'Liberation in the Family'. That is, I believe, that it necessarily involves us in a reappraisal of our whole theological understanding of the Body and the Spirit.

Recently there have been several attempts to introduce Latin American liberation theology into this country. These attempts can usually be recognized by their chief catchphrase – 'doing theology'. 'Doing theology' is represented as being a practical and political affair which everyone can take part in, and which is the opposite and alternative to academic theology, which is believed to be remote, abstract and oriented to the elite. But the problem with this approach to 'doing theology' is that it tends to leave us with another abstraction. What in Latin America was the result of a historical and political process, and the naming a new reality as a result of this process, becomes in translation to our historical reality simply a new abstraction. For most people, the idea of doing theology Latin American-style is likely to seem just as remote to their daily concerns as they assume Thomism to be.

So how can 'doing theology' be effectively translated for this society? I shall begin at what most British supporters of the idea would consider to be the wrong end – with an abstract theological proposition, thus: – that the liberating work of the Holy Spirit is a bodily work, bodily in two senses:

- i) it takes place in and through our individual physical bodies
- ii) and through the body that is the community of Christians, their common life of the sacramental body.

Now, if the work of the Spirit is bodily, it must therefore be historical. And this has major implications for the way we speak of it. If we are to speak truly of the work of the Spirit, we must speak historically.

For this reason, then, I shall present what I have to say in (micro-) historical form – in this case the story of a group of women I've been associated with over the last few years, the Oxford Catholic Women's Group. This group has been a primary context in which I've been enabled to do theology, and through which I've come to the understanding of the Spirit which I attempt to express in the proposition. Though a member of this group, I do not speak for it officially here. My version of its history is necessarily a personal interpretation of our collective experience.

In 1978, I began to study theology in a more or less regular manner at Blackfriars in Oxford. There I met two young women from Tübingen, who were also enrolled in the Dominican Studium. The three of us soon found we had an interest in common – that of women and theology and in some of the insights and challenges that were coming from feminist theology that was being developed in the US. Not surprisingly perhaps, we didn't find this interest catered for in the syllabus, so we decided to set up a small seminar on the subject with the help of a sympathetic Dominican. So far the set-up was fairly classic – women pursuing their studies under male direction. The only slight deviation from the patriarchal norm lay in the fact that the subject of our studies was not completely male-defined.

In the summer of 1979, the two Germans had returned to Tübingen as their year was up. But the idea of a women's theology group had been born, and in the meantime I had been introduced to several other women who were interested in matters theological and had already been concerned on their own account with the question of women's position in the Church. We began meeting as a group in one of our houses. At first these meetings retained some features of a theology seminar. We worked on a presentation and discussion basis and men still participated. But as the group developed, more fundamental needs emerged to shape the form of our exchange. We were an extraordinarily diverse group: between the six or seven of us who formed the core, we had combined experience of a remarkable range of the problems that go to make up the social experience of women. These included: divorce, desertion, widowhood, marital violence, unmarried motherhood and single parenthood, mentally handicapped children, problems of sexual identity, contraceptive dilemmas, depression, anorexia and incapacitating physical illness. Soon the need to communicate and share what had been our experience as women in all this became uppermost. Without a formal decision being reached on the matter, the group became a women's group, no longer open to men. In retrospect it is clear that had we sought to arrive at this decision by explicit consensus, it is likely we would have been divided over

the issue. This failure to operate through acknowledged consensus left us with a legacy of unresolved problems in the matter of our relations with men which only recently have we been able to face up to in a constructive way.

However, although the way this decision came about was very questionable, the closing of the group led to some important results that might not otherwise have come about. It gave us the opportunity to explore these experiences of bodily humiliation undergone in the course of childhood and education, child-bearing and rearing, marriage and sexual relations in a situation where we could evaluate them free from the pressure of patriarchal moral and religious norms which had hitherto dominated those experiences. Men, whoever they are, are bearers of these norms in a way that women are not. For us therefore, at that stage, excluding the physical presence of men was a liberating step. Closing the group was a way of opening ourselves to a new basis for ethical evaluation – the way of tracing the workings of the Spirit in our own bodies. It enabled us to make discoveries – the discovery that moral choice does not exist for most people in the way that moral philosophers are wont to assume that it does. One of our number was doing a post-graduate course in ethics at the time, and as we learned from her of moral questions being approached by attempts to calculate degrees of probability of ethical correctness, we were forced to reflect that the meaning and experience of moral choice for these men was fundamentally at variance with ours. Our experience as women made us aware that most women live under conditions that admit of very little choice at all; and that many women (and men) suffer a lifetime of consequences for things which have very little to do with any individual choice of theirs. These moral philosophers, like the moral theologians who had been responsible for the ethical prescriptions that impinged on us through Catholic moral teaching, clearly had never experienced, for example, what it means to belong to a society that makes child-bearing women into a category of disabled persons. For our purposes, their whole scheme of moral choice was inadequate. We emerged from our group experience at this time with the conviction that we needed a new starting point for ethical issues – one that was rooted in the realities of our own bodily experience. It became clear to us that the whole notion of individual moral responsibility makes no sense unless it is joined to a fundamental commitment to justice for those in society who are without power to effect individual choice.

About this time the National Pastoral Congress was being planned, and the bishops took the uncharacteristic step of inviting the faithful to express their opinions on matters concerning the life of the Church. Our group, in the first flush of its new faith in

sisterhood, decided to take them at their word. So we produced a leaflet entitled, 'Women and Justice' in which we stated: 'All the rights and dignity of man that Catholic Social teaching has repeatedly affirmed are the rights and dignity of women also'. We pointed out how, at their recent conference at Puebla, the Latin American bishops had declared, 'The Church is summoned to contribute to the human and Christian advancement of women . . . equipping them for their mission in the ecclesial community and the world'. This important aim seemed to us no less applicable to Catholic women in England and Wales. We reminded people that, in the words of *Populorum Progressio*: 'Self-fulfilment is not something optional – human fulfilment constitutes as it were a summary of our duties'. And we went on to ask: 'Is human fulfilment possible for women in our society?' The Church stresses the importance of women's role as mothers, yet our society frequently fails to protect and support mothers. British maternity grants are the meanest in Europe, single mothers are afforded pitiful state support, and the government has shown great reluctance to increase child benefit or lighten the tax burden on those with children. Added to this there have been many cutbacks in such areas as school meals, nursery education and other support services. What this means for the Church's ideal of family life, we pointed out, is that it is possible only for those who are relatively well-off and economically secure. Blessed are those who have.

We went on to observe that woman as a person in her own right receives minimal support and encouragement in our society. Women still occupy the lowest paid jobs and working women are most likely to be hit by recent government legislation. New immigration laws, as well as being blatantly racist are also sexist. And under the Social Security system as it currently operates, women continue to suffer disadvantage and humiliation.

In conclusion, we observed how women in their struggle for personalisation have found themselves to be linked to the fate of the weakest and least self-sufficient sectors of the community – the very young, the old, the disabled and handicapped and the sick. This is because it is almost invariably women who have the main responsibility for caring for these groups. It wasn't our intention, we said, that women should seek advancement at the expense of these groups; rather we saw it as women's 'proper vocation' to raise questions about the wisdom and justice of national policies that were steadily widening the gap between the rich and powerful and the poor and the oppressed. Women's mission in the Church, we said, was to remind the Church of her preferential option for the poor, and to recall her to her own proper vocation – the transformation of society in favour of those whom Christ favoured in his

ministry. We concluded that the human advancement of women is radically and inextricably linked to the creation of a just society.

The production of this leaflet was a co-operative venture in which everyone in the group participated in one way or another. In giving ourselves a voice in this manner, we found we also had to give ourselves a name – so we decided to call ourselves ‘The Oxford Women’s Theology Group’. So with this name and our message we converged on the National Pastoral Congress in Liverpool. But the NPC was not the sort of gathering at which anyone was welcome to come along and put across their views. None of us had been delegated to the congress and we found it literally and symbolically difficult to find a way in – since the sessions were only open to those who had an official place in them. Those few people we managed to make contact with seemed to find any connection between women and the idea of justice to be a complete non-sequitur. The assumption seemed to be that if women were raising their voices it must be something to do with abortion (or conceivably women’s ordination). Women could only be ‘properly heard’ on matters to do with the family – and any link between women and justice was clearly so unfamiliar as to be offensive and vaguely menacing – as we noted when we found our leaflets removed from the bookstalls.

All in all, our sortie to Liverpool could not be reckoned as having been a great success – we hadn’t exactly managed to take the NPC by storm. It was not that our case had been refuted but rather that we had never managed to get heard. We remained convinced that what we had to say deserved to be heard; so we sent a copy of ‘Women and Justice’ to each of the bishops, with a covering letter asking them to take account of it in the report that was to be their response to the NPC.

The following reply from one of the bishops was not untypical of the sort of response we got (if we got any at all). It said: “Unfortunately I did not receive your letter until my return from the bishops’ meeting in London. Even now I have not had the opportunity of reading the enclosed literature. But I think I can be fairly certain that others have made to me the points which you consider to be important”. A few months later *The Easter People* appeared. It was with a certain sense of irony that we read passages like these:

Perhaps the most striking expression of Christian love which emerged from the NPC was that we trusted each other and listened to each other as each having something valuable to contribute, each with a unique witness to give.

We weren’t conscious that any bishop had listened to our expressions of what we felt to be our unique witness. But the bishops had their own views about what women’s unique witness might be –

which they expounded a bit further on. It included “bringing femininity as a positive gift to your mission” (i.e. don’t try to be like men) and “being characteristically patient and sensitive” (i.e. your role is to make us feel good in ours) and of being “capable of giving yourselves without counting the cost” (i.e. we want you to remain sufficiently stupid not to notice when you’re being put upon). They went on to say that they recognized with regret “that you have often been permitted to play a mainly limited and inferior part in the Church” (they omitted to mention that the all-male hierarchy in the Church has also played a necessarily limited and often inferior part in the Church). They even admitted that “traditional and unquestioned attitudes to women and your role may have to be changed” (while at the same time blocking all practical moves towards developing women’s ministry and recognizing their autonomy). But said the bishops, “we ourselves and our clergy may well have to be persuaded gently of our insensitivity and our assumptions of male dominance”. But having had a fair sample of the latter, some of us felt by this time that applying gentle persuasion to bishops would occupy rather a lot of valuable time which might be better spent elsewhere.

Despite the failure of our endeavours, there was a real sense in which our experience with ‘Women and Justice’ and the NPC had been a turning point for us. Even if the bishops had not listened to us, we had learned to listen to each other and believe in the value of what we said. In a society where women are not generally encouraged to listen and learn from each other’s experiences – except where these are mediated through male-dominated meanings – this represented a real stage in liberation. It gave us a great sense of exhilaration – even of power. For we had, as it were, tasted for ourselves the Good News – that in the freedom of Jesus is the freedom of all women, and for all of humiliated humankind. And we had begun to disbelieve the bad news that had been hammered into us for so long – that women’s concerns were just ‘women’s issues’ whereas men’s concerns were the issues of the whole Church.

It was in this way that we stumbled upon the discovery of the gospel as message – a message whose power is to turn unlikely people into evangelists. Through our experience we found ourselves, as it were, entrusted with a message – one that had to be delivered at all costs if we were not to evade our most fundamental Christian obligation – as we had begun to perceive it. In retrospect, it’s perhaps not surprising that we began to turn our attention to preaching – though no such obvious connections existed in our minds at the time. Fortunately, though the Church has declared priesthood to be an exclusively male privilege, it has been less emphatic on the subject of women preaching. We decided to hold a

Mass, with the help of our contacts among the local Dominicans, at which we would take on ourselves the task of preaching.

Two years later, the history of the Women's Mass – as it's come to be known – can be rated as a modest success story. The monthly Masses are organised by women and attended by 20-30 people, including some women and men from other denominations. The Masses have given several women (including Catholics, Anglicans and Quakers), the opportunity to preach for the first time in their lives. Some have started to train as preachers and to be involved in preaching outside the community of the Women's Mass.

This then was the point at which we moved from being a consciousness-raising group to becoming a Eucharistic community – participators in the Body of Christ as a new community. To an outsider, this transition may not seem unduly momentous. To myself, recalling all the anxiety, pain and struggle that attended its coming into being, its very existence seems to be little short of a miracle and its future very fragile. These are feelings probably familiar to anyone who has been closely associated with the birth of a new body. This struggle has served to deepen enormously my understanding of the nature of the community that is the body of Christ. Theological study in the traditional sense has illuminated that experience and helped me to articulate it; but it could not have provided the raw material out of which the understanding has developed. Part of this has been a confirmation of the fact that knowledge of Christ cannot be gained outside of participation in the body of Christ. And participation, as I now understand it, means something rather more than regular attendance at weekly Mass in the company of a collection of loosely related individuals.

It is another part of traditional theological knowledge that we cannot participate in the body of Christ unless we first recognize that we are enslaved to sin. But what the traditional teaching usually does not make clear is that we are enslaved to sin in very specific and historical ways. And it is only when, in the power of the Spirit, we embark on the hazardous process of identifying and liberating ourselves from the particular cast of sin in which we are personally and socially located, that we begin to be able to perceive its real nature and the full extent of its power over us.

To make this point in the context of our history – in the early days of the group when gathered in our upper room, we revelled in exhilaration at some of the absurd moral distortions we had shaken off, and rocked the house with explosive laughter that seemed strong enough to crumble the citadel of patriarchy itself – as Joshua's trump brought down the walls of Jericho. But like the ancient Israelites, we too were destined to discover that the pro-

cess of the conquest of the Promised Land was in reality a long, slow struggle with many reverses and defeats. In our brush with the bishops, we had come up against the sort of resistance and indifference that as women we had been conditioned to expect from men in the Church. It was possible to see this as external to ourselves and to allow it to fuel our indignation and enhance our solidarity. But when we started to hold the Women's Masses and were welcomed by some of the Dominicans as, in effect, fellow ministers of the Word and co-celebrators of the Eucharist, we received a nasty shock. As we attempted to move out of our allotted female sphere and take on these new roles, we came across some deep-seated and unexpected resistance within ourselves. It was as if our souls were peopled with reactionary bishops and repressive clergy all conspiring to keep women in their place.

It might be helpful for the analysis to observe here that the situation in the Roman Catholic Church is a rather more polarized and less disguised version of the situation of women in society at large. Women are seen as belonging to the private and domestic sphere – she is the help-mate to man who acts out his part on the wider public stage of social affairs and human history. Unlike woman, he is able to free himself from contamination with nature and the flesh. She is subject to nature while he is the culture creator. Society's model of manhood is in some sense epitomized in the extreme by the figure of the celibate Catholic priest, who is segregated institutionally from women and children and separated as much as humanly possible from all messy connections with Mother Nature to be set apart for Father God. For the sacrifice of this separation he is rewarded by a special sacral power – the power to say the consecration – to do the magic bit. Thus the social power that is the prerogative of all males in our culture is here given religious validation and expression.

Although our group firmly supported the ordination of women, we had not intended to make the question of women's ministry a central focus in our setting up of the Women's Mass. Our original purpose was simply to give women the opportunity to preach. But the Dominicans whom we asked to officiate encouraged us to take as much responsibility for the Mass as possible, including the prayers, reading, music and blessing, and the welcoming and informing of those who were invited. Thus through our initial willingness to take on the ministry of the Word i.e. preaching, we found we had become involved with the eucharistic ministry as a whole.

Despite the small-scale nature of the operation, we found moving into the public realm of religious activity a most alarming experience. Preaching, saying the prayers, organising the Mass – all these required us to be in some sense authoritative. For us, con-

ditioned as women to defer to and support male authority, this act of assuming authority ourselves filled us with severe anxiety. We felt quite naked – not knowing where to find the source of our own authority. We knew, or partly knew that we had not come this far simply to imitate male patterns of hierarchical authority. But confronted with the real demands of the situation, our commitment to the community of sisterhood and the gospel we had received was really put to the test. It was as if we had been asked, “By whose authority do you do these things?” We realised we weren’t quite sure. Paradoxically, the existence of clerical encouragement for our activities this time made it more rather than less difficult for us in some ways. Faced with the bishops’ opposition, we’d felt united in solidarity. But the fact of supportive male authority nearly undermined us completely. The demands laid on our sisterly co-operation by the new situation exacerbated tensions that already existed in the group. There was fear that both old loyalties to male friends and clergy would have to be radically revised, and new and future friendships with them come under scrutiny. So great was the anxiety generated by this fear that we failed to deal with the issue in any explicit and coherent way – and so suffered the ill effects on the life of our community. Deep-seated insecurities about our roles as women, lack of confidence in our ability to take action independently of men afflicted most of us to some extent; its pressure began to tear gaping holes in the fabric of our co-operation and solidarity. It took several forms – competition and suspicion in particular relationships, tension between women who were ‘more academic’ and those who were not, between those who were apparently at ease in the public male domain and those whose skills and identity had been primarily formed in a domestic and child-rearing context: all these were forcibly present at times yet rarely admitted. So the conflict ran like a deadly undercurrent through all our efforts, jeopardizing our unity for common action and threatening to subvert all we were trying to do,

Such was the extraordinary force of conditioning whose operation we experienced in this context, that it seems relevant to digress at this point to inquire more closely into its possible sources: For this purpose, I want to make use of the work of Dorothy Dinnerstein who has made a remarkable study of the problem in her book, *The Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World*. Dinnerstein believes that there is a basic pathology shaping our species’ stance towards itself and nature – and it is visible in the pernicious prevailing forms of collaboration between the sexes. This, she says, constitutes a neurotic symbiosis which we must ultimately renounce if we are to become human. The reasons for its existence are understandable: our species’ capacity for memory

and foresight and building social structures make possible our sense of vulnerability, loneliness and consciousness of mortality. And the sexual status quo – where women rock the cradle and men rule the world – embodies the emotional techniques we have worked out to make it bearable. But, she says, we cannot take refuge in calling these arrangements natural. They are, of course, part of nature, but if, as seems likely at present, they contribute to our ultimate extinction as a species, that too will be part of nature. Human nature is a self-creating nature, and contrary to the Freud-derived dictum, she asserts that destiny, consciously chosen, shapes anatomy as far as the human species is concerned. Biological factors have been responsible for women being the baby-tending sex almost exclusively to date. But other biological factors operate to subvert these arrangements – factors such as our capacity for invention, which contrary to the dominant myth, has never belonged exclusively to the male side of the species. Thus technological changes have made it no longer a biological necessity for women's whole life energies to be poured into the business of reproducing the race. It becomes a new possibility for the species that women can become culture creators on a scale hitherto impossible and for the first time take a major part in shaping human history.

So the question we need to ask is: what is it that continues to keep women out of the public domain of history? In an overpopulated world there is no logical premium on producing more children. But the forces at work are more fundamental than logic. Our species, she says, has painful misgivings about human enterprise. And both sexes have conspired to lock this ambivalence up with women, so that the present pattern of history is not disrupted. Women remain universally in charge of child-care, and this has enormous effects on the later emotional predilections of the child. Human infancy has up till now been lived out under female auspices. This means that woman is the child's first parent, first boss and representative of the flesh. The mother is imperfectly benevolent and imperfectly reliable – and thus her tie to the infant is a prototype of the tie to life itself – where the pain of life and the fear of death is akin to the unbearable stress experienced by the infant in relation to being cut off from the mother. Her body is the one in relation to which the child develops the sense of its own body, and along with it the dominating need to overthrow the magical and utterly all-embracing power of the mother.

Hence male rule has its roots in early childhood, and male world-making has its origin in the child's struggle to carve out and fence around a realm for the exercise of sober self-reliance. Both sexes experience the need for this realm – and a corresponding abhorrence of female authority. Female power is experienced as a force

that must be overthrown and kept alive only in captivity. Out of this, then, comes the neurotic symbiosis of man and woman, whereby man has a history-making monopoly and woman functions to give blessing to his project of public male achievement – which he performs as counterbalance to her infinite private female authority. She is immune to the risks and exertions of history making, and occupies herself with what both sexes in some sense feel is the more impressive contribution to the species – the taxing, dangerous and dramatic role of child-bearing that provides for the physical renewal of communal life. Woman is set up outside the fray – as privileged judge and concerned spectator. Her job, says Dinnerstein, is “the resigned ventilation of everybody’s intuition that history is murderously crazy”. But the price of her continued immunity is that she must not act on this intuition. Dinnerstein’s conclusion is that if women do not break out of this immunity and enter history and attempt to divert it from its fatal course, then the ‘mad mega-machine’ as she calls it, will shortly destroy us all.

Dinnerstein’s analysis parallels in many respects the conviction we experienced in the group of the utter urgency of our responsibility as women and as Christians for preaching the gospel. For the Good News as we had come to know it was the only good news capable of standing in the face of the imminent nuclear destruction brought about by the failure of the just society to which we had pointed in our first public venture. Our group has continued to spear-head action on the nuclear issue in everything from badgering bishops to preaching at Peace Masses; and a consciousness of it as an absolute priority, and of living in relation to the judgment of our times has been one of the most characteristic features of the eucharistic community that the Women’s Mass represents. Dinnerstein’s analysis helps to throw light on the extraordinary intensity of inhibition that we experienced in relation to moving into the symbolic male space of the liturgy and the exercise of authority as women. It also shows up the nature of the underlying imperative which has sustained us in the face of the crushing psychological forces of the sexual status quo.

What remains is to try and understand these experiences more fully from a theological point of view, which I hope to do in the next article.