

PREFACE

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We understand “frontiers” to mean the inviting horizon of ideas emerging organically from previous ones. Catholic feminist theologians have long been at the leading edges of creative and life-giving thought in Catholic theology, courageously blazing new understandings of being Catholic and of being in community with Church and world. We can only encounter horizons by venturing out. Our ventures were led by able and far-seeing guides and mothers who have led us this far. Therefore, the title of this volume recognizes both the ongoing efforts of Catholic feminist theologians to wrestle with the ever-changing landscape of twenty-first-century Catholicism and the debt the current authors owe to our foremothers in theology. We stand shoulder to shoulder with the feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologians who have gone before us and who stand beside us, forging new paths today.

We offer this book as an introduction to contemporary Catholic feminist theology. Catholic feminism has changed dramatically since Mary Daly’s groundbreaking *Beyond God the Father* in 1973. In teaching undergraduates, we find that students (women and men) resist and reject the word *feminism* itself—often with little understanding of what it means. The time is right for a new introduction

to Catholic feminist theology. Yet we make no pretensions, as is the general principle of feminist theology, to be the first or last word on the current state of Catholic feminism. We have attempted to delineate a horizon of ideas for a younger generation by being both bold and faithful to our Catholic and feminist heritage.

At the outset of this collaborative work, we consciously avoided two traps. We rejected the perceived need to represent all voices. Not only would that have been an artificial representation of our group, but the attempt to do so would have fallen short; inevitably, some voices would have been neglected. Also, we avoided the trap of trying to address every area of traditional systematic theology and the boundless possibilities of contemporary constructive theology. We realized that a concentrated exploration of key theological foci in the Catholic tradition would serve the reader better than a series of discrete essays.

Consequently, we have chosen to explore theological anthropology, Christology, and ecclesiology as the heart, head, and feet of theology. If God's glory is in living human persons (see Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV.20.7), then theological anthropology is at the heart of a theological enterprise in a new millennium characterized by radical diversity in a global community, which is dependent for its survival on boundary-crossing cooperation. Deep reflection on being human in relationship to each other and to God is a necessary part of a global conversation that wishes to avoid ecological, economic, and military catastrophe. Bending St. Paul's metaphor of the body of Christ, Christology is at the head of feminist theology for better or for worse. Catholic feminists still need to come to terms with the figure of Christ and how Jesus is used or misused by the tradition to support the full humanity of all persons, or to deny full humanity to some. Ecclesiology supplies feet to the theological enterprise. The practice of Catholicism and the efforts of theologians, feminist or otherwise, lack value if individuals do not coalesce into community as the body of Christ and walk in the

world as a healing presence. Catholic feminists, however, critique Church structures that do not promote the full flourishing of all human beings, just as much as they demand that social and political structures in our societies work for healing in the world.

The reader deserves a definition of “Catholic feminist theology” at the outset. Briefly defining Christian feminist theology, though, presents a formidable task that is fraught with dangers, given the volume and diversity of Christian feminist theologies that now exist. Nor, as this volume will demonstrate, is there one mode of Catholic feminist theology. Transparency requires that we identify the use of the term in this book as referring, in general, to a stream of feminist thought, which is often referred to as “second wave feminism,” and within that wave a type of feminist theology called “reconstructionist.”¹ An understanding of the traditional emphases of this type of Christian feminist theology, especially as articulated through Catholic feminist theologians, provides an initial background against which the reader can approach the chapters. Individual authors indicate where they diverge from or add to this approach.

Roughly, over the past forty years, through a variety of voices, feminist theology has summarized the basic themes of feminism in terms of mutual relation/relationality, radical equality, and community in diversity.² Identity emerges not in isolation, but from a network of relationships. Relationality “is a way of being in the world.”³ Radical equality affirms the dignity of each human being regardless of one’s particularity in terms of ethnicity, race, sex, or religion. Radical equality does not assume an essentialist anthropology, and it rejects theories of complementarity between the sexes. Equality among persons assumes that each person comes to the relationship as a complete human being. Community in diversity is a value that recognizes and celebrates the creativity that arises when equal persons exist in mutual relation.

Christian feminist theology has long recognized a methodology that involves three steps: criticism, recovery, and reconstruction.⁴

The theologian first needs to assess the prevailing situation in which she finds herself. The feminist theological critique yields the position that structures within Christianity have historically been patriarchal, hierarchical, and damaging for women's full flourishing. To address the situation, feminist theologians scour the tradition to recover elements of the tradition that have been suppressed that are beneficial to women. With a more complete view of the Christian tradition in hand (for good or ill), the feminist theologian reconstructs a Christian narrative that demonstrates the inclusivity of mutuality, equality, and diversity.

Thousands of pages have been written to explore the ideas in these two paragraphs. The reader is invited to recognize these themes and methods in the pages that follow. We offer the reader one more interpretive rule for Catholic feminism. Elegant in its simplicity, wisdom, and brevity, Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether provides a powerful criterion for pursuing feminist analysis in theology: if something promotes one's full humanity, then it is of God; conversely, if something is destructive of one's full humanity, then it is not of God.⁵

With these principles in hand, the reader can navigate the pages of this book, while also recognizing that theological anthropology, Christology, and ecclesiology are not distinct enterprises functioning separately from one another. To use traditional language, reflections on grace, salvation, and praxis cannot be analyzed as separate categories. There is a surfeit of wisdom that overflows and overlaps each theological category—each illuminating and enriching the other. In this regard, Catholic feminists firmly stand in continuity with the theological tradition. Theological roundtables at the end of each section demonstrate the fluid and necessary interchange among the three theological foci. The roundtables are written by the authors of the preceding section to exemplify further the fruitful interchange among theological categories and the collaborative nature of feminist theology. Questions at the end

of each section and suggestions for further reading offer additional guides to the essays.

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