

4. The Feminist Genius of Asian Catholic Women Preaching: Reclaiming an Uncommon Priesthood

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As I write this chapter for the Ecclesia of Women in Asia's eleventh biennial conference, I am transported to my younger days as a twenty-something angry, feminist, Catholic layperson, who aspired towards priesthood (or imagined I did). The anger, much dissipated having encountered the Ecclesia of Women in Asia (EWA) twenty years ago, was the consequence of realizing that priestly ordination was only reserved for biologically-determined men within the faith tradition. The male privilege that was accorded to boys and men outside the church (e.g., son preference in families) seemed to me not only paralleled within the church but also augmented, as one is taught that priestly ordination for men is divinely ordained and therefore incontestable. It would not be an exaggeration to say that EWA, over the span of ten biennial conferences, sustained my faith as witnessing women gathering, theologizing and in particular, breaking bread together, laughing, crying, singing, and dancing, manifests to me the full dignity of women as persons created *imago Dei*.

As a fifty-something, less angry, feminist, Catholic scholar in gender, sexuality, and religious studies today, I have moved on from that priestly ambition in the like manner that feminist theologians have moved on in reclaiming other ecclesiastical spaces to realise their abundant gifts. One of these online spaces is Catholic Women Preach (CWP), an innovative platform for diverse and theologically-trained Catholic women to preach to a global audience, addressing contemporary challenges based on biblical readings over the liturgical year.¹ Catholic women preaching constitutes an ecclesia of women and prides itself on delivering "better homilies" in

¹ Catholic Women Preach, "About," *Catholic Women Preach*, catholicwomenpreach.org/about.

response to Pope Francis's "off-the-cuff remarks calling homilies at Catholic churches 'a disaster.'" ² CWP as a women-inspired, women-centered, and women-powered collaborative project "is a deeply faithful, hopeful, and joyful initiative intended to build up the Church," ³ with the following aims:

- to serve as an inspirational, theologically-based resource for ordained priests, deacons, catechists, and all involved in the ministry of the word in the Catholic Church,
- to encourage Catholics, especially younger adult Catholics, with messages of hope that renew faith, strengthen us, and encourage active engagement in the life of the church for our work in the world,
- to provide a global platform for women's voices and faith reflections so that the fullness of our Catholics giftedness can be accessed by all Catholics.

Catholic Women Preach embodies the conference theme, as it also constitutes an "ecclesia of women as synodal third space" which EWA defines as "synodality from below and from the perspective of the excluded . . . an in-between space for those who seem to fall into the cracks of mainstream or officially recognized spaces." ⁴ CWP's mission—succinctly captured in its tagline, "raising voices, renewing the church" ⁵—is apt as it is imbued with a critical gender lens. A gender lens firstly entails according

² Heidi Schlumpf, "Pope Francis Wants Better Homilies. Find Them at Catholic Women Preach," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 26, 2023, ncronline.org/opinion/ncr-voices/pope-francis-wants-better-homilies-find-them-catholic-women-preach.

³ Catholic Women Preach, "About."

⁴ "EWA XI Call for Papers: Ecclesia of Women as Synodal Third Space," *Ecclesia of Women in Asia*, ecclesiaofwomenblog.wordpress.com/2022/09/01/ewa-xi-call-for-papers/.

⁵ Catholic Women Preach, "About."

epistemic privilege to women “traditionally omitted or misrepresented” in the church’s lectionary (e.g., Mary Magdalene) which, in turn, gives life to “the Scripture texts to deepen our understanding of God’s saving presence in the world.”⁶ A gender lens secondly entails a critique of structural inequalities and inequities from within and beyond the church that detract from experiencing “God’s saving presence in the world.”⁷ Deploying a critical gender lens by women preachers (e.g., through videos, transcripts of what is preached, Scripture readings referred to), potentially engenders a ground-up transformation of the church and, by extension, online and offline faith communities, beyond Catholic ones.

A faith community that walks the talk of synodality in turn, revitalises the church as “listening, dialogical, and service-oriented . . . [comprising] a non-hierarchical communion of a ‘discipleship of equals,’ marked by mutuality, relationality, and inclusivity.”⁸ This chapter aims to accord epistemic privilege to seven Asian theologians from EWA featured in Catholic Women Preach as women who inhabit an uncommon home as pilgrims, prophets, and priests. They are Antoinette Gutzler, Shalini Mulackal, Agnes Brazal, Kochurani Abraham, Kristine C. Meneses, Pauline Chakkalakkal, DSP, and Virginia Saldanha. I contend that they embody an uncommon priesthood as faithful religious and laywomen of the Catholic Church who are invested in opening up spaces of belonging for themselves and others. In doing so, they manifest what I term as a “feminist genius”—a counterpoint to the church’s construct of “feminine genius.”

The next section of the chapter expounds on this counterpoint and how it relates to synodality. The feminist framing of the interpretation of homilies by seven EWA women theologians thematically structures the chapter into the ways in which they radicalize feminist theology and praxis within a decolonial framework of Homi Bhabha’s “Third Space”⁹: “A

⁶ Catholic Women Preach, “About.”

⁷ Catholic Women Preach, “About.”

⁸ “EWA XI Call for Papers.”

⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 2004).

birthing mission” that recognizes women as co-creators; “A priestly mission” that honors women’s call to leadership in the church; and “A prophetic mission” that foregrounds women’s vision and praxis for interconnectedness, social justice, and inclusivity. The analysis has wider implications for the relevance of Catholic social teaching through the litmus test of women’s lived realities and the synodal call for greater discipleship in a deeply hierarchical church and fractured world today.

What Has a “Feminist Genius” Got to Do With It?

I first came across the term “feminine genius” (in my twenty-something angry feminist phase) when I was preparing for the NGO Forum that was held in conjunction with the 1995 Fourth (and final) United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, aimed at advancing the rights of women. In his *Letter to Women* written for this august occasion, Saint John Paul II begins by conveying cordial greetings to women of the world—“*women who are mothers,*” “*women who are wives,*” “*women who are daughters,*” “*women who work,*” “*consecrated women,*” and “*every woman*”¹⁰—for their selfless service and dedication of gifts to their families, faith communities, society at large, and the poor. He reiterates that the “highest expression of the ‘feminine genius’” is embodied in Mary and exhorts women to emulate her piety and obedience as the quintessential “handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38).¹¹ He (self)references *Mulieris Dignitatem* to remind all women of their place—in relation to men—given the unchanging “complementarity of male and female roles” that draws on the gendered dualism of “the ‘Marian’ principle [which is subordinate to] . . . the Apostolic-Petrine principle.”¹² When one delves into *Mulieris Dignitatem* that specifically addresses “the dignity and vocation of women,” we find a startling vilification of “women’s rights”

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, June 29, 1995, no. 2, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women.html.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, no. 10.

¹² John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, no. 11. See also John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988).

because, from the standpoint of the church, they potentially unsettle the hallowed principle of gender complementarity. In defense of “*the truth about the ‘unity’ of the ‘two,’*” that is to say, that dignity and vocation that result from the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman” (no. 10), he stresses that: “Consequently, even the rightful opposition of women to what is expressed in the biblical words ‘He shall rule over you’ (Genesis 3:16) must not under any condition lead to the ‘masculinization’ of women. In the name of liberation from male ‘domination,’ women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine ‘originality’” (no. 10).

The qualifier “feminine” in “feminine genius” thus essentializes womanhood for women with assigned and fixed (as God-ordained) attributes such as selflessness and subordination not only to God but also men. Women’s rights (as secularized) that can potentially lead to the “‘masculinization’ of women”—which finds expression in standing up and speaking out, especially in abusive situations both within and without the church—is deemed as problematic. There is, as such, a need to call into question the church’s insistence on “feminine genius” through the decades, which seemingly valorizes women’s “feminine ‘originality’” but in truth, negates their personhood. Gender complementarity that arguably rests on a continuum with sexism is similarly apparent in Pope Francis’s *Amoris Laetitia* that celebrates love in the family, where he says:

I certainly value feminism, but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood. For the grandeur of women includes all the rights derived from their inalienable human dignity but also from their feminine genius, which is essential to society. Their specifically feminine abilities—motherhood in particular—also grant duties because womanhood also entails a specific mission in this world, a mission that society needs to protect and preserve for the good of all. (no. 173)

Contrary to the Pope’s position, feminisms (rather than in the singular) that “demand uniformity” (i.e., women as equal as men) are valued as they expose the gendered dualisms (e.g., the lesser valued second terms in

male/female, mind/body, rationality/irrationality, subject/handmaid) that undergird “the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 10). The “value [of] feminism[s]” to most self-identifying feminists (which is not a homogenous group), certainly lies in upholding “the grandeur of women” as well as their ordinariness; their (in light of diverse genders, sexes, and sexualities) “inalienable human dignity” as well as their inalienable women’s rights as human rights; their so-called “feminine abilities” which flow from the uniqueness of “motherhood” but are not reducible to it; and their so-called “masculine” abilities (if one were to fall back on the use of narrower sex/gender categories) to not be silent, to speak up and stand up for themselves and others.

It is from this standpoint of resistance as a means to engendering gender justice and inclusivity that inspired me to coin the term *feminist genius*. A “feminist genius” is, as I have argued more fully elsewhere, a “counterpoint to the equal-but-not-quite standpoint of ‘feminine genius,’ as it unequivocally deems their personhood as *imago Dei*; different but equal.”¹³ A “feminist genius,” that other F-word, makes visible the false choice between either being a mother or becoming a feminist. It demystifies essentialist terms that ontologically subjugate women in the name of piety, such as “feminine ‘originality,’” “*the truth about the ‘unity’ of the ‘two,’*” and reclaims the personhood of women vis-a-vis the “‘masculinization’ of women [in] the name of liberation from male ‘domination’” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 10), which includes clericalism.

A “feminist genius” thus draws from “gender ideology,” which continues to be cancelled out by Pope Francis, who describes it as “the ugliest danger of our time.”¹⁴ Women who preach draw from the wellspring of feminisms as “gender ideology” that seeks to affirm women’s

¹³ Sharon A. Bong, “Women Opening Up Spaces of Belonging for Women in the Church,” *Concilium* 5 (2022): 71.

¹⁴ Lisa Zengarini, “Pope Francis: Gender Ideology is The Ugliest Danger of Our Time,” *Vatican News*, March 1, 2024, [vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-03/pope-francis-gender-ideology-is-the-ugliest-danger-of-our-time.html](https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-03/pope-francis-gender-ideology-is-the-ugliest-danger-of-our-time.html).

inherent dignity, her manifold gifts, and fundamental rights to fully realize her personhood and to live an abundant life. It inadvertently challenges the church's resolute "no" on (the "non-issue" of) women's ordination to priesthood and female diaconate despite the clarion and protracted call to synodality.¹⁵

The Ecclesia of Women of Asia within an ecclesia of women—Catholic Women Preach—is not unlike an Occupy movement¹⁶ that stakes their claim as *imago Dei* and works at celebrating diversity, inclusivity, and justice for all. In planetary solidarity, in the Age of the Anthropocene and COVID-19, this transnational and transformative agency of Asian Catholic women preaching heralds the good news founded on women's pilgrimage (in going beyond closed doors to open corridors of cyberspace), prophetic vision, and priestly vocation that liberates theology.¹⁷ The following homilies showcase the theology and praxis of a "feminist genius" for an uncommon priesthood.

A Birthing Mission

The Feast of the Assumption invites us then, to birth a new vision like the apocalyptic woman and like Mary, by becoming persons, a community, a church who can intervene prophetically in this world. This new vision that we call the Reign of God would be realized where people share, where they love the earth and all its creatures, where they take a stance to include the excluded ones of this world into the table fellowship of life. For this to happen, we need to be impregnated by the Spirit—Sophia, the Wisdom of God, who would make us friends of God and the prophets. Then, we will give birth to God as Mary did and share in her assumption in the "already-

¹⁵ Loup Besmond de Senneville, "Pope Francis Rules Out Female Diaconate," *La Croix International*, May 21, 2024, international.la-croix.com/religion/pope-francis-rules-out-female-diaconate.

¹⁶ Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-Lan, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012).

¹⁷ Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster, *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women's Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Fortress Press, 2017).

not yet” dialectic, till we merge fully with the source of life. Are we ready for this birthing mission?¹⁸

Kochurani Abraham, former coordinator of EWA, is a self-identified feminist theologian, gender researcher, and trainer from Kerala, India, as well as a social activist, academician, and spiritual seeker. The excerpt of her sermon on the Feast of the Assumption is pregnant with meaning. The ambivalence of the “‘already-not yet’ dialectic” affords a “Third Space” between, on the one hand, the veneration of Mary not only as “handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38)¹⁹ but also “the source of life” in “[giving] birth to God” and, on the other, the vilification of women whose “bodies,” as she says elsewhere in her sermon, “are still seen through the lens of purity–pollution set by religious patriarchy.” She alludes to, among other gender-based discriminations and violence, the prohibition of women at her home parish, the Syro-Malabar Church, from entering “the *Madbaha* or the ‘holy of holies,’” a practice that she finds “exceedingly offensive.”²⁰ As the eminent postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha opines:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past.²¹

The “Third Space of enunciation” according to Bhabha, straddles the temporal-spatial shifts in cultural meanings between the colonizer’s imposition of a “sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past” and

¹⁸ Kochurani Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary,” *Catholic Women Preach*, August 15, 2018, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/08152018.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*, no. 10.

²⁰ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

²¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

the (former) colonized people's refusal to be immobilized in such an "homogenizing (in imitation of the colonizer's culture and) . . . originary Past." This refusal precipitates "an ambivalent process," and necessitates a decolonizing process which "destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code."²² A "Third Space" is therefore imbued with subversive potential to deconstruct and reconstruct cultural meanings. "It is only after entering more deeply into feminist theology," adds Abraham, "that I found the imagery of the embodied Mary in heaven subversively fascinating, as it offers scope for challenging the gender politics of Christianity as a religion."²³

Abraham's vision sees woman, becoming this "integrated, open, expanding code":²⁴ as Mary, "the source of life,"²⁵ who shares with all women (with a womb) leaky bodies that have been culturally maligned and repudiated as unclean. Woman also signifies "the apocalyptic woman,"²⁶ who "invites us then, to birth a new vision" where women become persons, and faith communities and the church repent to "intervene prophetically in this world," recognising that we as humans are not just interconnected but are one with the "earth and all its creatures."²⁷ This implies embracing the personhood of "earth and all its creatures" as legal entities.²⁸ This "new vision" radically births "the table fellowship of life" that celebrates diversity, (social, gender, environmental) justice, and inclusivity, as it "include[s] the excluded ones of this world," beginning with women with all her (dis)abilities and (dis)figurations. Woman finally, signifies "the

²² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

²³ Abraham, "Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary."

²⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

²⁵ Abraham, "Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary."

²⁶ Abraham, "Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary."

²⁷ Abraham, "Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary."

²⁸ Viktoria Kahui, "Granting Legal 'Personhood' To Nature is a Growing Movement—Can It Stem Biodiversity Loss?" *The Conversation*, April 25, 2024, theconversation.com/granting-legal-personhood-to-nature-is-a-growing-movement-can-it-stem-biodiversity-loss-227336.

Spirit—Sophia, the Wisdom of God” that permeates all of creation.²⁹ The created becomes a creator.

Reclaiming the “lost . . . values of compassion (*karuna*) and love” that is the seed of birthing a “new vision” is exhorted by Pauline Chakkalakal of the Daughters of St. Paul, a distinguished theologian from India who is actively engaged in women’s empowerment programmes and interreligious and ecumenical ministries. The ontological proximity of women in birthing a “new vision” and a new world lies in the etymology of compassion which, as Chakkalakal notes, draws on the “Hebrew word for compassion *rahmim* [that] expresses the feminine aspect of God.”³⁰ The recuperation of the womb as the seat of compassion inverts the age-old historicisation of the womb as the locus of hysteria, “the Greek word for uterus, *hystera*, which derives in turn from the Sanskrit word for stomach or belly.”³¹ The sacralization of the womb as expressing “the feminine aspect of God” is a noteworthy counterpoint firstly to the pathologization of the womb, as a “free floating organism . . . [which] gave rise to a battery of bizarre physical and mental symptoms.”³² Secondly, it subverts the demonization of the womb, as hysterical convulsions were once viewed as “*stigmata diaboli*” or marks of the devil.³³ Medicalization of the womb was then “replaced by supernatural invocations . . . [that resulted in] official manuals for the detection of witches, often virulently misogynistic, supplied instructions for the detection, torture, and, at times, execution of the witch/hysteric.”³⁴ Bearers of a womb (which includes but is not limited to women, e.g., trans men) historically, medically, physiologically, and theologically misunderstood, maligned, and murdered are now sacralized,

²⁹ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

³⁰ Pauline Chakkalakal, “Second Sunday of Easter,” *Catholic Women Preach*, April 8, 2018, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/04082018.

³¹ Mark S. Micale, *Approaching Hysteria: Disease and Its Interpretations* (Princeton University Press, 2019), 19, doi.org/10.1515/9780691194486.

³² Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 19.

³³ Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 20.

³⁴ Micale, *Approaching Hysteria*, 20–21.

become an “integrated, open, expanding code,”³⁵ as hysterical co-creators in radically engendering a “new vision” and new world for all.

A “new vision” and new world in turn become a “Third Space” of creation that bearers of wombs have come to occupy that is imbued with subversive potential to deconstruct and reconstruct not just cultural but also historical, medical, physiological, and theological meanings. A feminist and decolonial reading of the “bent woman,” there and then, offered by Chakkalakal, extends the spatial-temporal relevance of the “Third Space” for all women, men and nonbinary persons, here and now. Chakkalakal celebrates the “bent woman” in Luke’s Gospel (Luke 13:10–17) “as a paradigm for women’s liberation from all forms of bondage.”³⁶ She adds that:

In the first part of the story, set in the context of Jesus’s synagogue teaching, his compassionate gesture towards the bent woman brings her from the periphery to the center. Upon seeing her, Jesus calls her over and says, “Woman you are set free from your ailment” (v. 12). Instantly the crippled woman stands up straight and glorifies God. This nameless woman’s eighteen years of suffering have become symbolic of the suffering of women down the ages under patriarchy and its sexist ideologies and practices.³⁷

According epistemic privilege to the “bent woman,” as Chakkalakal does, transports her “from the periphery to the center,” as her narrative “has largely been ignored in the scholarly literature.”³⁸ So “getting the story of the bent woman straight”³⁹ not only foregrounds but also centers her narrative by carving out a discursive space, a “Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent

³⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

³⁶ Chakkalakal, “Second Sunday of Easter.”

³⁷ Chakkalakal, “Second Sunday of Easter.”

³⁸ Mikeal Carl Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts: The Subversion of Physiognomy in Early Christianity* (Baylor University Press, 2011), 83.

³⁹ Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 83.

process.”⁴⁰ The ambivalence of meaning attributed to the “bent woman” encapsulates the shift from a “physiognomic misogyny”⁴¹ to her physiological and spiritual healing by Jesus. It was typical of the Greco-Roman world that linked “physical features with inner moral characteristics”⁴²—a moral lack, a feminized “*spirit* of weakness even evil disposition”⁴³—that are consonant with her crookedness. The significance of Jesus’s announcement, “Woman you are set free from your ailment” is manifold: physiological (she “stands up straight”), spiritual (she “glorifies God”), and enunciatory. The “Third Space of enunciation”⁴⁴ afforded by Chakkalakal’s feminist-decolonial reading of the “bent woman” undermines invisibility (in “scholarly literature”), misrepresentation through “physiognomic misogyny,” and in so doing, liberates her and by extension, those who identify with her, in *our* varied forms of disabilities, depravities, and diseases, “from all forms of bondage.” In liberating the “bent woman” who is “nameless,”⁴⁵ thereby signifying the least, the last and the lost, we hold ourselves accountable to the ways in which we relegate the “disabled,” “depraved,” and “diseased” other to “the periphery.” In liberating ourselves from the bondage of gender and racial inequities that relegate the other to the margins, we manifest *feminist genius*; we extend the “ambivalent process”⁴⁶ in seeing a “new vision”⁴⁷ and partaking in the birthing of a new world.

A Priestly Mission

Abraham’s “‘already-not yet’ dialectic”⁴⁸ finds expression in the contested signification of woman as a category, at once elevated and valued

⁴⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

⁴¹ Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 85.

⁴² Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 85.

⁴³ Parsons, *Body and Character in Luke and Acts*, 86.

⁴⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

⁴⁵ Chakkalakal, “Second Sunday of Easter.”

⁴⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

⁴⁷ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

⁴⁸ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

differently within the “gender politics of Christianity as a religion.” Her sermonising under the auspices of CWP affords a “Third Space” that “though unrepresentable in itself . . . constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.”⁴⁹ The church fathers of course maintain the “primordial unity or fixity,” the complementarity of sex/gender in “*the truth about the ‘unity’ of the ‘two,’* that is to say, that dignity and vocation that result from the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 10). In contrast, women’s ministry in the church manifests “signs [that] can [and should] be . . . rehistoricized and read anew.”⁵⁰ CWP in the here-and-now affords “the discursive conditions of enunciation” that enable us to envision the “already-not yet” dialectic in the there-and-then. To illustrate this, we now turn to Virginia Saldanha, who preaches on Holy Thursday in 2020, the first year of COVID-19. Saldanha served as the first Executive Secretary of the Women’s Desk in the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (1996–2010), has held leadership positions in the coordinating team of EWA, and tirelessly advocates for women survivors of sex abuse in the church in India, as well as the recognition of the rights and dignity of LGBTI+ persons. On responding to God’s call to ordained ministry, she says:

Many of us women feel strongly our exclusion from responding to the stirring within us to answer God’s call to serve people through ordained ministry. Jesus did not institute a priesthood, he did not give names to ministries within the community. The Pauline churches seem to have been charismatic communities operating under Paul, without any clear structured organization. Ministry belonged to all, for each member had a charism (Romans 12:4–8). Jesus only asked his followers to do what he had done. Jesus handed his disciples a challenging servanthood. It

⁴⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.

⁵⁰ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.

involves humility in service and sacrifice even to the extent of breaking one's body and shedding one's blood. Holy Thursday places before us the challenges involved in following Jesus' model of service among the People of God.⁵¹

The church's official theology, largely promulgated through male theologians, would likely classify women's call to a priestly vocation—that “stirring within [them] to answer God's call to serve people through ordained ministry”—as “*sensus fidei fidelis*” which is feminized (thus trivialized) as a “natural, immediate, and spontaneous reaction.”⁵² A “*sensus fidei fidelis*” contrasts with “theology” or “*scientia fidei*,” which is masculinized as “reflective knowledge of the mysteries of faith which deploys concepts and uses rational procedures to reach its conclusions.”⁵³ Though it is acknowledged that “*sensus fidei fidelis* flows from the theological virtue of faith . . . [which is] prompted by love, to adhere without reserve to the whole truth revealed by God,”⁵⁴ women's deep “stirring . . . to . . . ordained ministry” is negated as out of sync with the “whole truth revealed by God. Besides, ‘ministerial priesthood’ that is reserved only for (biological) men, as systematically rationalized in the doctrines of the church, draws on gendered dualisms of Christ as the “*Bridegroom*” and the gift of the church as its bride, invested with a “royal priesthood.”⁵⁵

The application of the “Third Space of enunciation”⁵⁶ in this instance lies in women's indefatigable insistence on working the hyphen, the space in-between a “*sensus fidei fidelis*” and “*scientia fidei*.” Saldanha references

⁵¹ Virginia Saldanha, “Holy Thursday,” *Catholic Women Preach*, April 9, 2020, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/04092020.

⁵² International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church,” June 10, 2014, no. 54, vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html.

⁵³ International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei*,” no. 54.

⁵⁴ International Theological Commission, “*Sensus Fidei*,” no. 56.

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

⁵⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 54.

early Christianity, the “charismatic communities” of the “Pauline churches” that embraced Jesus’s rebranding of leadership as “servanthood . . . [that] involves humility in service and sacrifice even to the extent of breaking one’s body and shedding one’s blood.”⁵⁷ We are reminded of women’s experiential proximity to “shedding [their] blood” in birthing missions as discussed in the previous section. Women’s insistence is also reflected in their inhabiting the space in-between exclusion-inclusion, not fully excluded as invested with a “royal priesthood” yet not fully included as divested from a “ministerial priesthood.”⁵⁸ This space in-between, not romanticised as the anguish of “exclusion from responding to the stirring within us to answer God’s call to serve people through ordained ministry,”⁵⁹ is intergenerationally borne.

Why, then, do women of faith choose this anguished path (of standing and knocking on a closed door) through the ages, even now when contrary to the spirit of synodality, the door is yet again closed to reinstituting the female diaconate?⁶⁰ On responding to God’s call to serve people, Saldanha adds that:

Women are living this model of priesthood and are being true to their baptismal anointing as “priest, prophet and leader.” In various milieus, where you may not find a sacramentally ordained priest, many women around the world are living the priesthood of Jesus in servant leadership, being the presence of Jesus to people. The women in Amazonia are doing this! Sisters in India live and work among the indigenous and poor people of India, and in fact two sisters lost their lives standing for the rights of their people. Women show the least and the last the loving and

⁵⁷ Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁵⁸ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 27.

⁵⁹ Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁶⁰ See Besmond de Senneville, “Pope Francis Rules Out Female Diaconate”; Susan Rakoczy, “The Ordination of Catholic Women as Deacons: The State of the Question,” *Hervormde Theologiese Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020): 1–10, doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5965; and Phyllis Zagano, “Women Deacons and Service at the Altar,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (2018): 590–609, doi.org/10.1177/0040563918784766.

compassionate face of God. Women live their priesthood where they are planted and demonstrate to the sacramentally ordained ministers what the priesthood of Jesus truly means.⁶¹

The hyphenated category of “servant leadership” (seemingly a contradiction in terms) as lived out by women globally “where they are planted” reflects to the least, the last, and the lost, “the loving and compassionate face of God.” In doing so, they “create a non-clerical and non-hierarchical Church . . . [in the like manner of the early Christians, and we] only need courage to think local and impact the global Church.”⁶² Women “[living] their priesthood where they are planted” manifest What Bhabha terms as “the productive capacities of this Third Space”:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory—where I have led you—may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. To that end, we should remember that it is the “inter”—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the “people.” And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.⁶³

Women’s courage and steadfastness in inhabiting “that alien territory” of not closing the door, to “stirring[s]” deep within their hearts, transforms this hostile space to a “productive” one in fashioning new visions and praxis. Although Bhabha theorizes within the milieu of “colonial or

⁶¹ Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁶² Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁶³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

postcolonial provenance,” one could soundly apply this to the context of the clerical and hierarchical church. Women’s refusal to self-silence the promptings of their hearts, women who like Saldanha unashamedly speak out about it, women who stubbornly remain out of place (not unlike anti-colonialists) bear the mark of the “split-space of enunciation,” “the ‘inter’—the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space—that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.”⁶⁴ CWP thus becomes that “in-between space” for “cutting edge” theologizing that recuperates and proliferates the category ‘woman’ as more than a tag-on to the male subject and in doing so, liberates theology and decolonises the clericalism and hierarchy of the church.⁶⁵

A Prophetic Mission

A “feminist genius” manifests so far, in the above sections, “a birthing mission” and “a priestly mission,” which contests the gendered dualisms of the church that feed the complementarity of sex/gender. Self-identified feminists such as Abraham, Chakkalakal, and Saldanha do this by inhabiting the “in-between space”⁶⁶ of being an outsider-insider within their faith communities. Participating in God’s redemptive plan for humanity requires a rethinking of not only the church’s theology of the body but also its ecotheology that is anthropomorphic and androcentric which centres the human and man in creation.⁶⁷ Abraham speaks of a “new vision that we call the Reign of God [that] would be realized where people share, where they love the earth and all its creatures, where they take a stance to include the excluded ones of this world into the table fellowship of life.”⁶⁸ She goes on to assert, “For this to happen, we need to be

⁶⁴ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁶⁵ Saldanha, “Holy Thursday.”

⁶⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁶⁷ Sharon A. Bong, “Not Only for the Sake of Man: Asian Feminist Theological Response to *Laudato Si’*,” in *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice*, ed. Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Hilda P. Koster (Fortress Press, 2017), 81–96, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwt42b.

⁶⁸ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

impregnated by the Spirit—Sophia, the Wisdom of God.”⁶⁹ Agnes M. Brazal, a full professor and eminent feminist-postcolonial theologian with De La Salle University in the Philippines as well as a founding “mother” of EWA, speaks of “Jesus’ inclusive table fellowship”:

Jesus clarified to Pilate that his “kingdom does not belong in this world” (John 18:36). The reign of God for Jesus is not the restoration of the Kingdom of David which is what many Jews were hoping for. While not directly political and military, nevertheless Jesus’ notion of God’s reign has strong political implications. In Jesus’ inclusive table fellowship, his rejection of rituals and beliefs that unnecessarily burden the poor and the excluded, and his destabilizing parables that bring down the mighty or honourable from their thrones, Jesus gave us a glimpse of what it is like in God’s reign. This vision posed a big threat to the guardians of the Jewish tradition as well as to the Roman authorities.⁷⁰

Ultimately, “the productive capacities of this Third Space”⁷¹ lie in our inhabiting the earth, and charged as faithful disciples of Christ, subverting social orders that are unjust, exclusionary, and oppressive. The “already-not yet dialectic” that Abraham envisions⁷² is echoed when Brazal alludes to “a glimpse of what it is like in God’s reign.”⁷³ Systemic discrimination and violence will be dismantled, for instance, the “rejection of rituals and beliefs that unnecessarily burden the poor and the excluded, and [Jesus’s] destabilizing parables that bring down the mighty or honourable from their thrones.”⁷⁴ Abraham adds, in celebration of diversity that, “In this new social order, whoever is devalued for their color, gender, sexual

⁶⁹ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

⁷⁰ Agnes M. Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King,” *Catholic Women Preach*, November 25, 2018, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/11252018.

⁷¹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁷² Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

⁷³ Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King.”

⁷⁴ Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King.”

orientation, social status and the like, regain their dignity and personhood.”⁷⁵

The “productive capacities of this Third Space”⁷⁶ also find expression in what Antoinette Gutzler terms as “liminal spaces.”⁷⁷ Gutzler, former consultant to EWA, is a Maryknoll Sister from Queens, New York, and has served in mission both in Tanzania and East Africa and taught at Fu Jen University in Taipei. She says:

We, then, need to hear—and we need to listen. And so, the question: do I/you/we hear and listen to the voices of the oppressed and marginalized calling our names from the liminal spaces where they struggle for life and understanding? There is no running away from the indifference that Pope Francis calls the scourge of our times—the evils of racism, gun violence, wars, xenophobia, destruction from climate change and the powerlessness felt by so many that they “don’t matter.”⁷⁸

When we deem the polyphony of “voices of the oppressed and marginalized” that call out to us, as voices that matter and resist the “sin” of “indifference,” we engender “liminal spaces”—a heaven on earth. In doing so, we begin to bear the mark of what Bhabha terms as the “split-space of enunciation,” where, in constant reflexivity and humility, we ask the question: “do I/you/we hear and listen to the voices of the oppressed and marginalized?”⁷⁹ The inter-relationality of “I/you/we” bears the mark of interconnectedness and inclusivity that we lose sight of when we are complicit in the “powerlessness felt by so many that they ‘don’t matter.’”⁸⁰ Whilst the “the evils of racism, gun violence, wars, xenophobia,

⁷⁵ Abraham, “Solemnity of the Assumption of Mary.”

⁷⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁷⁷ Antoinette Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene,” *Catholic Women Preach*, July 22, 2023, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/07222023.

⁷⁸ Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

⁷⁹ Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

⁸⁰ Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

destruction from climate change”⁸¹ are monumental scourges of humanity today that are likely to exacerbate in our increasingly divisive world of global politics, a feminist genius praxis stands in faithful solidarity with the “powerlessness felt by so many.”⁸² A feminist praxis that explores the “in-between space,”⁸³ that carries the hope of the future in the present from lessons in the past, evinces “Jesus’ inclusive table fellowship”⁸⁴ that is premised on respect and celebration of equity, social justice, and inclusivity for all and at all times and spaces.

Bringing to fruition such an out-of-the-world-yet-imaginable vision entails a “reversal of values,” as Shalini Mulackal, former professor of systematic theology at Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi, posits. The lowly birth of a king, born of a woman, and witnessed by humble shepherds, heralds a “new world order,” as Mulackal adds:

Jesus’ birth reveals a new world order, a world not under Caesar but under the direction of God’s design for the redemption of all peoples. In this world, God’s Word is heard by the humble. There is place even for the shepherds. There is hope for the oppressed. God has not forgotten us or abandoned us to the brokenness we have created. The story of Christmas is both an announcement of hope and a call to humility.⁸⁵

As we continue God’s salvific plan, in a world that is fraught by divisiveness, strife, and violence, the temporal-spatial liminality that we find ourselves inhabiting, rests on “hope for the oppressed,” and the conviction that “God has not forgotten us or abandoned us to the brokenness we have created.”⁸⁶ This liminal space is akin to an “alien

⁸¹ Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

⁸² Gutzler, “Feast of St. Mary Magdalene.”

⁸³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁸⁴ Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King.”

⁸⁵ Shalini Mulackal, “Christmas,” *Catholic Women Preach*, December 25, 2017, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/12252017.

⁸⁶ Mulackal, “Christmas.”

territory”⁸⁷ where the fragility of hope and precarity of resolve serve as our way of answering and fulfilling (or at least, attempting to fulfil) “God’s design for the redemption of all peoples.”⁸⁸ The “productive capacities of this Third Space”⁸⁹ are evident when “God’s Word is heard by the humble” (redemption is within reach of the least, the last and the lost) and where there” is place even for the shepherds (a ‘despised occupation’ then)”⁹⁰ that is analogous to the “disabled,” “depraved,” and “diseased” today.

These feminist visions render one of the questions for discernment in the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the realization of a “synodal church” as somewhat hypocritical: “How can the Church of our time better fulfil its mission through greater recognition and promotion of the baptismal dignity of women?”⁹¹ The answers are apparent, but the church continues to not listen and disregards the intergenerational wisdom and gifts of women as pilgrims, priests, and prophets. Kristine C. Meneses, who is a Deaf and Disability advocate and associate professor with the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines, exhorts us to “‘be open,’ *ephpaphatha*,” in according epistemic privilege to the Deaf as knowers so that we, with our differentiated (dis)abilities, may come to learn that “deafness [is] not a deformity or defect, but a way of life and see the Deaf not as an object to cure or repair, but someone diverse.”⁹²

Conclusion

“The best way to conclude our reflections,” opines Pauline Chakkalakal of the Daughters of St. Paul, “is to recall the words of Jesus, ‘Woman you are set free’ (Luke 10:12).”⁹³ A “feminist genius” thus fights the good fight against clericalism and hierarchy which includes the Pope’s cancel culture

⁸⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁸⁸ Mulackal, “Christmas.”

⁸⁹ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

⁹⁰ Mulackal, “Christmas.”

⁹¹ General Secretariat of the Synod, *Instrumentum Laboris*, 41.

⁹² Kristine C. Meneses, “Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time,” *Catholic Women Preach*, September 9, 2018, catholicwomenpreach.org/preaching/09092018.

⁹³ Chakkalakal, “Second Sunday of Easter.”

and denunciation of “gender ideology.” A “feminist genius” finishes the race by not taking no at face value (on the question of women’s leadership in church) and staying the course of valuing her gifts as pilgrim, priest, and prophet to any who care to listen and learn. A “feminist genius” keeps the faith rather than disavows the church, much to the chagrin of those who see in her an annoyance and threat. Catholic Women Preach is a safe space for the Ecclesia of Women in Asia within an ecclesia of women. It offers them a “Third Space” to realize God’s “kingdom [that] does not belong in this world (John 18:36).”⁹⁴ This is the empowering theology and praxis of a “feminist genius” for an uncommon priesthood.

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⁹⁴ Brazal, “Solemnity of Christ the King.”