

WOMEN HELPING TO GIVE THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

Variations on a Theme

Nerea Alzola

THERE ARE SEVERAL PROBLEMS when writing on this subject. First, there is considerable cultural variation in what it signifies to be a man or a woman. Amparo Tusón, in an article on sexual difference and linguistic diversities, writes:

To be male or female is the result of the complex conjunction of two variables, at times in tension, which seem to be pulling in different directions: a universal biological factor and cultural diversity.¹

In other words, our understanding of masculine and feminine characteristics does not place them mechanistically in discrete areas, but sees them rather as tendencies which are likely to be more frequent in one sexual group than in the other. Moreover, we recognise that we are working within the language and thought patterns of a Western culture. Consequently in this article we do not attempt to speak on behalf of women in general, or claim that those from different countries and cultures will necessarily acknowledge the same traits that we would call feminine. Here we can only try to express the thoughts and feelings *we* have experienced. And in doing so, we are aware of the debt of gratitude that we owe to Ignatius of Loyola for the gift that he gave to both men and women.

Another problem is that the bibliography available on this topic is very limited. We cannot, therefore, base our reflections on earlier

¹ Amparo Tusón, 'Diferencia sexual y diversidad lingüística' [Sexual Difference and Linguistic Diversity], in *¿Iguales o diferentes? Género, diferencia sexual, lenguaje y educación*, edited by C. Lomas (Barcelona: Paidós Ibérica, 1999), 86.

findings, but have to rely very largely on our own experience. As writer of this article, I have tried, to the best of my ability, to bring together the statements of a number of women who have accompanied those making the Exercises. However, the final text, though representing the views of several people, is signed by only one, and so may be subjective. As far as possible, I have opted for inclusive language. I should add that many of the points of view expressed are intended to be not so much conclusions as starting-points for further study and reflection.

The article consists of two parts: there is an introductory section which outlines some general criteria in our approach; then follow a series of reflections that have occurred to women involved in retreat accompaniment² and which are intended as guidelines for further reflection.

Some Generalities in Our Approach

Our readers need to know that as a group, we share a number of preliminary viewpoints. For instance, although we do not wish to be seen as either theologians or feminists (even though some of us could claim one or other of these titles) we are all indebted to the work of women philosophers and feminist theologians. Their writings have clearly influenced the way we look at life, and it may be true to say that we are only able to reflect as we do thanks to that perspective.

Similarly, as is the case with so many women, we have become convinced of the importance of the small things in our daily lives, of our patient and unobtrusive work. This conviction helps us to live creatively in a society and a Church largely dominated by men. There is a saying about Amma Sara, a hermit of the desert, that she was quite simply a strenuous and tenacious woman, founded in Christ. That is how we see the role of so many women who, by their daily tenacity, give meaning to the parable of the grain of mustard (Matthew 13:31): in itself it is minuscule, but it holds the promise of great fruit to come.

Evidence for these qualities is to be found in the lives of great women teachers of the past, even if their achievements are often not recorded in the official history books. Despite the obstacles they encountered as

² This article was made possible thanks to help from the following: Gloria Andrés (Barcelona), Amaia Arzamendi (Donostia / San Sebastián), Eli Arrandonea (Ataun, Guipúzcoa), María Jesús Esnal (Andoain, Guipúzcoa), M^a Mar Magallón (Bilbao), Isabel Muruzábal (Zaragoza), Dolors Oller (Barcelona).

women, they had the intelligence, the skill and the prudence to contribute to the march of history. Very often it is the women who realise that certain things will only be done if they themselves do them!

Again it is frequently among women that one finds a special capacity for entering into relationships and forming friendships. This is a gift that allows women to work fearlessly with others, even when they will remain unknown. There is a saying of Simone Weil that appeals deeply to us: 'to work for cooperation brings to birth a friendship that creates peace'.³ As women, we are interested in the project's success, not in self-promotion. And we are convinced that, thanks to many centuries of gratuitous contribution, we have much to offer in today's world that will run counter to the violence of power.

It should also be understood that all those who have contributed to this article have had personal experience of the Spiritual Exercises: each of us has been accompanied on her own, and we in turn have been invited to accompany others, both men and women, as they follow the path. Consequently, we are able to envisage something of the depths to be found in the proposal of Ignatius of Loyola.

Women Accompanists: Reflections and Proposals

The following intuitions and lines of thought will, we hope, add richness to the way that the Exercises of St Ignatius are put into practice, and this in turn will add to the sum of human happiness, whether spiritual, social or political.

The Experience of Working with Others

Usually what happens is that we women are *invited* to work alongside Jesuits⁴ and, though this may appear strange, there are great advantages for us in this relationship. It means that we proceed with great caution and respect, since this brings home to us—in reality and not just in theory—that neither St Ignatius nor his Exercises can be regarded as belonging to us. We remain to some extent 'on the

³ Simone Pétrement, *La vita di Simone Weil* (Milan: Adelphi, 1994), 78.

⁴ The questions raised by lay people (men and women) working alongside Jesuits and, more generally, those concerning females (lay or religious) involved in the whole ecclesial community, are far too complicated to be treated in the present article.



Christ in the House of Martha and Mary, by Velázquez

margins',⁵ and this helps us to accompany on tiptoe, as it were, without making a noise and in a non-possessive way. There is little that we can teach and much that we can learn. We have never been 'directors' of the Exercises and so we have begun our practice of accompaniment as women who walk alongside others on the road. Perhaps everything that leads us to fulfil our mission humbly is a gift and a salutary warning against wanting to possess and control.

Our task in accompanying allows us to bear witness to the building up of the community and to be a sign that there are no wise or ignorant, no teachers or pupils, in what is known as the spiritual life, the life of following; but we can all, men and women, accompany one another mutually, as the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us (Hebrews 3:13, 'Exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today"'). We advance in the footsteps of the Beloved, the Friend and Lover.

Language and Communication

The importance of language in mutual understanding is recognised everywhere. As Hans-Georg Gadamer has noted, we cannot escape 'the sphere of influence of our education which is linguistic, of our

⁵ Christine Firer-Hinze, 'Identity in the Feminist Theology Debate', *Concilium*, 285/2 (2000), 113–120, at 115.

socialization which is linguistic, and of our thought which is transmitted through language'; and also the interconnection between linguistic diversity and sexual difference is a vast field of research.⁶ Without pretending to enter at any depth into such a complex area, we would like to raise a few points relevant to the present theme.

The whole book of the *Exercises* is written in a male register (leaving to one side those images that are particularly difficult to understand according to the cultural standards of our own day). It is written by a man for men. As women, especially those accompanying women, we have to modify the text. It is not possible here fully to debate the disputed question of adapting the text of the *Exercises*, but as women dealing with women we certainly try to adapt the language. The challenge for us (and this point will recur later) is to find a language that will be inclusive.

As for the style of communication, two aspects are worth underlining: recognition of the speaker; and clear acknowledgement that one is listening. Many women in their daily lives and their professional work tend to give a deliberate sign of recognition to the person addressing them or whom they are addressing through a preamble prior to the conversation or the business to be dealt with. One asks after the family, or the person's health, for instance, or makes some remark about what the other is wearing, etc. For many women, such a prelude is needed to make the contact more human.⁷

In the case of the *Exercises*, when we start an interview with someone we always have a short introduction in which we show our interest in the person ('How is the car running now?', 'Did you sleep well?', 'Did you get some exercise?', 'Yesterday you said you had felt the cold ...'); in this way the exercitant feels recognised and welcomed. As far as our listening is concerned, many women are skilful in adopting the right tone to show that they are truly interested and not cold or detached. They deliberately introduce variations of tone. Within a male-orientated code of conduct, this would denote too intimate a rapport and insufficient distance. But as women, we are also ready, if we think it appropriate, to introduce 'interruptions' (questions, remarks,

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 546. Cf. Tusón, 'Diferencia sexual y diversidad lingüística'.

⁷ Mercedes Bengoechea, 'La comunicación femenina y el mundo laboral' [Female Communication and the Workplace], *Emakunde*, 52 (2003), 15.

interjections, etc.), as these can help to encourage the exercitant to speak out and they also indicate that one is listening with attention.

However, we are careful to observe the crucial advice (cf. Annotation 2 [Exx 2]) that anyone who accompanies the Exercises must always bear in mind: the type of verbal input must always be prudent, discreet and brief.

According to one investigation, men talk much more than women when there is a public audience to hear them, but much less in the intimacy of the home.⁸ And we have certainly noticed that whenever there is a public conference, the first voice that one normally hears is that of a man; and not infrequently, his questions are extended commentaries that make his own knowledge abundantly clear. Women, on the other hand, tend to focus on one question and are much more brief. As a general rule, a woman, following the norms of female culture, does not strive to maintain her own status in what she is saying, nor to make an exhibition of her knowledge—though, of course, there are women who have adopted the masculine style.

Given this overall tendency on the part of women, it is quite likely that with respect to Annotation 2 we begin with a certain advantage. We are more likely to be guided by it, and as a rule we do not have a great desire to lecture. With regard to the body-language involved—and this is a topic that deserves much more study—men who give the Exercises quite often sit with their legs stretched out in front, whereas women tend to curl up on themselves. Some studies have suggested that the more open bodily postures are more persuasive (again we have Annotation 2 in mind). Again, quite often, the men sit behind a desk or table, putting distance and separation between them and the exercitant. Women, however, even if a desk is available, prefer an open space in between, which is more risky, though care is taken about the distance and the orientation of the two chairs. Various interpretations could be made about these differences, but our supposition is that we women are less wary about relationships and bodily nearness.

The Image—or the Images—of God

This theme is also concerned with language, and the way it can both evoke images and transform them.

⁸ See Deborah Tannen, *Tú no me entiendes* (Madrid: Círculo de Lectores, 1992).

For centuries the depth of vision found in some women mystics has been overlooked: for example, that of Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), who wrote about God being our Mother. Fortunately in more recent times there has been a remarkable transformation of the image of God. With a new openness to different religious and spiritual traditions, we have become more cautious and prudent, and we no longer presume to concentrate on a



Julian of Norwich

single image of God. God is not a man; God does not have male gender. God is Otherness, a God of mercy, of compassion indeed, like a loving mother. We know that God transcends any representation that we can imagine and no image can encapsulate the mystery of God. Little need be said here, as much has been written on this theme, and there are notable specialist studies. The one point we should note is that we find the search for new images of great interest. They add fresh richness to any talk about God; they break down the man-centred character of so much previous discourse; and they draw attention to the world of nature and to images linked, not only with the animal world, but also with water as the source of life, with light, wind and so on. These images allow renewed contact with ancient mystical traditions already dear to Christians (such as the gentle silence of Elijah or the echoing solitude of John of the Cross).

It is worth quoting the words of María Clara Lucchetti:

Women have introduced something new, and brought 'novelty' into the understanding of mysticism by explicitly making reference to their distinctive 'other' corporality in talking of the experience of the Mystery of God. And that very Mystery of God, by altering, affecting and configuring the creaturely and sexual corporality of

the woman has revealed other aspects of Itself, which otherwise could not have become present to the People of God.⁹

There are, of course, some very beautiful images in the *Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola that point one to the closeness, friendship, love and fragility of God (for example in the colloquy of the First Week, 'speaking as one friend speaks to another' [Exx 54]; in the Third Week 'how the divine nature goes into hiding' [Exx 196]; and in the Contemplation to Attain Love, 'the lover gives and communicates to the loved one' [Exx 231]). These images are greatly valued in the theology of today, in particular in feminist theology.

Given the numerous recent advances in this area, many of them richly suggestive, what really interests us most, as already made clear, is their inclusive character: the Loving Mystery, caring for and holding to the breast all creatures—men, women, trees, seas, heavens, waters, vines, birds, tortoises, wind and the whole universe, weeping and laughing with all created things. This Loving Mystery has to be the constant point of reference for us women.

An Introduction to the Language of Love

The language of Ignatius is very sparse. Even when he speaks of consolation or of happiness, he is succinct. From our point of view, this is a great advantage when we want to universalise his text. Among the phrases that invoke affection, one finds him speaking of the soul as 'still aglow' (Exx 336), of asking 'to feel gladness and to rejoice intensely' (Exx 221), of 'deliberately wanting to be moved and to rejoice in the great joy and gladness of Christ' (Exx 229), of sensing 'the infinite gentleness and sweetness' (Exx 124), of 'embracing and kissing' (Exx 125), of 'the lover and the loved one' (Exx 231). It is true that we Basques, men and women, tend to be restrained in our greetings and in expressions of tenderness, and Ignatius is no exception. However, despite such sobriety Ignatius does speak of the experience of God as being what one feels with a friend and lover, and as having a sense of gentleness, sweetness, warmth and joy.

As women we are familiar with a language that is sensual, symbolic and poetic; and as women who accompany other women in the

⁹ María Clara Lucchetti, 'La mujer: protagonista de la evangelización', *Spiritus* (Quito), 162 (2001), 107–119.

Exercises we are happy at times to suggest a language of love. Following St Teresa of Jesus in her commentary on the Song of Songs we encourage others to speak lovingly with the Lord. We feel that many women find themselves at ease with this sort of language in moments of intimate loving contact with the Beloved. Mystical language is a language of love; and our duty is to familiarise the exercitant with this way of speaking and also to discover such a form of communication, in the experience of Ignatius himself, the fruit of deep mystical experience.

It should be noted that we are more cautious about suggesting such a form of speech when we are accompanying male exercitants. Perhaps the problem here is one of diffidence on our part, rather than on theirs. However we do stress with the men also that the language of God is full of love, as made clear by the images used by Ignatius and found in other traditional writings (for example, Isaiah 43, Deuteronomy 7:7, Hosea 11, etc.).

In this area we rely on the findings of the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who was convinced that a person's past history is reflected in language and linguistic expressions. Drawing on Jakobson and Bakhtin, he proposed that language is generative: it has a productive function that affects consciousness. Thus it is a modifying agent providing the mental faculties with new ways of explicating the world, and then finding the words into which these new modes of thought can be deposited. Language transforms the past into a generative present, thanks to which we proceed towards the future. Vygotsky was seeking a way to integrate emotional experiences and other aspects of consciousness. He believed firmly that a person's emotional life could not be separated from overall cognitive development, and that the development of the cognitive processes (especially language) transformed the emotional life.

Generating Life and Helping to Give Birth

Women have an exceptional role in life's mystery, because they possess the means to bear and to give birth.

Because of her open corporality the woman can evoke and transmit spiritual experiences with which a man frequently has more difficulty. For example ... such a central experience as that of being

impregnated by the Spirit of God, giving a new body to God's Word, and mediating yet again the incarnation right within the world.¹⁰

The person who accompanies assists the one accompanied to grow. The woman, who is herself capable of conceiving, helps the exercitant to become the womb of the Mystery and to give birth. We are the midwives who help the birth process; we are witnesses of the first vital cry because we have been there many times to help Mary as she gave birth (contemplating the Nativity [Exx 114]). We can claim that we women are wide open to the surprises of life, and possess a flexibility that in many cases is quite astonishing. But, just as we have been given this remit of being open to life we are also given the privilege of being open to the surprises of the Spirit. It is the Spirit, above and beyond all humdrum, down-to-earth explanations, that engenders life. A clear sign of life is that God continues to take flesh (becomes 'newly incarnate' [Exx 109]), as one gains 'interior knowledge of all the good I have received, so that acknowledging this with gratitude, I may be able to love and serve his Divine Majesty in everything' (Exx 233).

Repetition: The Female Cycle

We believe that the passing of time is felt in a different way by men and women, and this may have an effect on how a man or a woman will accompany another during a retreat. An active waiting forms part of our biological rhythm and also of our spiritual rhythm. It is possibly a matter of upbringing or it may have deeper roots; we are not certain. However, the maternity for which all women are by nature prepared and the menstrual cycle seem to adapt us so that we are aware that a process can be slow and has to be borne. The repetition, each time new, that takes place in our bodies, has a deepening effect on us as women and on our capacity for life.

In our present day, when more than ever we yearn for justice, peace and utopia, patience has become indispensable, along with good supplies of tenacity, contemplation and love. Patience is the water and

¹⁰ See Lucchetti, 'La mujer: protagonista de la evangelización'. It is worth looking at what St Ignatius recommends to the exercitant in the final colloquy of the Contemplation on the Incarnation; he seems to suggest that in the exercitant the Word becomes incarnate anew ('thus newly incarnate' [Exx 109]).

the fertilizer for all that, and teaches us to be attentive to the maturing processes and the right moment. Patience can be said to create life.¹¹

In other words, we learn patience by close attention to the living rhythm of things, by observing nature, by listening to the parables of Jesus in the Gospels, by contemplating God's rhythm, by attending to our own bodies.

Consequently, repetition is appreciated by us women as a very important factor in the Ignatian method, because we live it out in our bodies and in our lives. It is a proficiency we can acquire by knowing how to listen to our own inner depth, a wisdom born of fruitful patience and waiting. When we put repetition into practice, following the guidelines suggested by Ignatius, our hearts patiently acquire fresh



The Newborn, by Georges de la Tour

¹¹ Cipriano Díaz Marcos, 'La paciencia, ¿una virtud ausente?' [Patience: An Absent Virtue?] *Sal Terrae*, 90/1060 (2002), 139–148.

light and luminosity, even if we may not know¹² at this stage how to give even a stuttering expression to the new hopes that are being gestated.

The Feminine Traits of the Daily Round: The Experiential and the Narrated

Certain traits are feminine but desirable for all—such as living day by day, paying attention to minor details, and needing to ‘narrate’ what is being felt.

One summer we spent a day celebrating the Eucharist in the house of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart; from time to time we enjoy contacts with these valiant women who have spent their lives in remote corners of the world and are now retired and sometimes infirm. The mass was celebrated in conventional fashion with benches facing one way and with all the women seated, as some of them were unable to stand or move around. Only the priest, the sole male present, was standing. The fact that that everyone was seated—apart from being the most appropriate position for a person dining—illustrated their care and attention to detail. This little story may be insignificant, but so often we women pay attention to such things and take care of the details in a practical way, as our daily chores accustom us to do. We can spot what is minor and apparently useless and unimportant, and see in it the hidden God, the One who is small and the least of all.

Patriarchal attitudes have tended to undervalue lived experience and passing impressions.¹³ This point has been made with reference to the work of Primo Levi:

When we speak of the truth, we think in terms of objectivity, at a distance from the subject. Nothing would disfigure the truthful exposition of some historical event more than personal testimony and memories. Truth is supposed to be more present in proportion to the absence of the subjective However, if we want to understand the truth of our world ... we have to turn to something as subjective as personal testimony, the experiences of real people.¹⁴

¹² Cf. Ivone Gebara, ‘Feminist Spirituality: Risk and Resistance’, *Concilium*, 288/5 (2000), 33–42.

¹³ This was brought out in a conference paper given by Mercedes Navarro, ‘Psicología y mística: Teresa de Jesús’ [Psychology and Mysticism: Teresa of Jesus] at the International Congress held in Avila on ‘La trama de la vida: textos sagrados de la humanidad’ [The Web of Life: Humanity’s Sacred Texts], 2008.

¹⁴ Reyes Mate, ‘Primo Levi, el testigo. Una semblanza en el XX aniversario de su desaparición’ [Primo Levi, the Witness: A Sketch on the Twentieth Anniversary of His Disappearance], in *El perdón, virtud política. En torno a Primo Levi* [Pardon, a Political Virtue: On Primo Levi] (Barcelona: Anthropos, 2008).

This reminds us of the distinction made by Jerome Bruner¹⁵ between ‘propositional thinking’ and ‘narrative thinking’. The latter needs imagination, an understanding of human intention, and an appreciation of the particular situations of time and place. For Bruner narrative is an important instrument in human knowledge, and he contrasts it with the scientific mode of thought. He proposes the existence of two types of cognitive function, or ways of thinking. Each offers distinctive ways of putting experience into order, of constructing reality: one is paradigmatic (logico-scientific) and the other is narrative. The first deals with general causes and is ruled by hypothetical first principles, using a language requiring coherence and non-contradiction, formal connections and verifiable references. The second—narrative thinking—deals with intentions and human actions. To neglect or eliminate one or other of these two modes of thought would involve losing the rich diversity proper to human thinking.

In this context we believe that women are open to the multiplicity of meanings, to the insignificant and complex aspects of reality, which can be appreciated with both feelings and reason, making use of the narrative, the imaginative and the rational. With this advantage, we can enter more easily into what Ignatius is saying in his *Spiritual Exercises* and in his reference to ‘the inner feeling and relish of things’ (Exx 2): composition of place; Gospel narratives; contemplations (to see, hear, taste, feel ...); the application of the senses; the additions that ask us to pay attention to the small details—such as the space, the time, the body, one’s gaze in discerning—that can be so important when coming to minor decisions that guide us in one way or another, in the small touches that are hardly seen. Ignatius wants us to notice the concrete details, to touch and to feel, so that through our mystical experience we may enter into those hidden depths that are to be found in the simple commonplace reality of every day.

Listening to the Silence

We women have many years’ experience of silently reading the hearts of men and women, scrutinising without words, listening and gazing, recognising the inner pains and joys in the eyes of those we watch.

¹⁵ Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning: Four Lectures on Mind and Culture* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1992).

We can very well understand the Seventh Annotation¹⁶ or the resistance that is not expressed in words but felt by the exercitant at certain delicate moments in the retreat process. Here our intuitive powers can be a great help: a listening with *sympathy*, a perceptiveness that becomes empathy, where one enters, with delicacy and with a sacred respect, into understanding the other, male or female.

On several occasions, women have told us about their happiness at being accompanied by a woman, as they feel freer and better understood when speaking of their past experiences, stories and reactions. In general, we think that if a woman is accompanied by another woman, the communication becomes more relaxed, with a greater intimacy, though this experience should also make us wary of a dependence that may be created.

Generally speaking, this capability for compassionate attention is a great help to a woman in feeling along with Jesus, as flesh of his flesh and blood of his blood, and thus, for example, in sharing the conditions of his birth (Exx 115, 116), seeing him on the cross (Exx53), feeling 'how God is looking at me' (Exx 75), suffering with his grief (Exx 193), and 'rejoicing intensely over the great glory and joy of Christ our Lord' (Exx 221).

In this way we are led to that education of the sensibility which is necessary for an ethical system that searches for justice and the dignity of the human being. Then the motivation is not something that comes solely from reason and from an ideology, but arises from a heart that has been transformed, now that the neighbour is present for us and we are moved by the suffering and joy of the world. In this way the silent listening, the *sympathy* with the other, is converted into a decision that is moral and political.

Self-love and Self-esteem

'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Matthew 22:39)

Our experience in accompanying people in the Exercises has been that many women, even the young, and some men, lack any love for

¹⁶ 'If the giver of the Exercises sees that the exercitant is desolate and tempted, it is important not to be hard or curt with such a person but gentle and kind ...' (Exx 7).

themselves, any sense of self-worth, not recognising themselves as creatures loved by God, each with a unique personality.

Now the fruit of the 'Principle and Foundation' (Exx 23) and of the First Week in general should be a certain self-esteem, the humble acknowledgement that one is loved, recognised, esteemed, created and nurtured. There should be an awareness of one's own capacity, of the gift one is given to live upright with dignity.

As women we have a long road to travel from this point of view; we have to pay a high price for self-esteem. One need only glance into the many dark corners of our society to discover how women continue to be exploited, abused and their rights violated. Many UNICEF reports establish that violence against women and girls is the most common breach of human rights.

As one writer has commented:

I discovered that 'love your neighbour' was just one pole of love: I needed to discover 'as yourself'. This pole was frequently denied in women's education, including mine. 'Loving yourself', as love for the woman I am, as struggle for my autonomy, as affirmation of my capacity to think, to live and be, cost me a painful process of resistance in order to be true to myself within a patriarchal institution that humiliates anyone who thinks and destroys anyone who does bend before its absolute truths 'Love yourself' and 'love your neighbour' derive from the same source and one cannot be practised to the detriment of the other.¹⁷

Individual women have an important role in this development, because, as members of the collective 'women', we know what is at stake. A woman accompanied by another feels recognised, for we are sisters and we form part of a network of sisterhood.

A final reflection on 'self-esteem', in case what has been said is not sufficiently clear: when we speak of 'self-esteem' we are not referring to something which is now fashionable, and which often masks its character: the promotion of a sort of spiritual self-appreciation and individual self-satisfaction which ignores the transformation of our world and the living conditions of both women and men. Quite the contrary: by self-esteem we mean the love that is necessary to take a

¹⁷ Gebara, 'Feminist Spirituality: Risk and Resistance', 36.

proper care of the world and to make it a more loveable place; in other words, as the *Spiritual Exercises* suggest, 'to love and serve' (Exx 233).

By Way of Conclusion

The conclusion to these short reflections is that there is no real conclusion. When we were asked to contribute these pages, we decided to comply not because we had very much to say (rather the contrary), but because it was a challenge for us to reflect, to learn and to communicate something. Our offering has turned out as we expected and the readers will realise that we are just at the beginning of a reflection that still needs to take systematic form. However, we are grateful to have had this opportunity, which has helped us to open a path and which we hope will encourage readers to see many meanings in what has been written. Moreover, we invite any women who happen to read these lines to write and share with us their own reflections, questions and findings, so that we may learn more in our apprenticeship.

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