

# IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY AND CHRISTIAN FEMINISM

Maria McCoy

**I**N HIS YEARS OF INITIAL CONVERSION, Ignatius realised the foundational need for listening to the movements of Spirit as they were experienced interiorly and exteriorly. This practice was fertile soil for formulating the Spiritual Exercises. Of utmost importance were personal prayer, action and reflection upon interior movements within himself, and in his conversations with his early companions and with the women of Alcalá, who responded to Ignatius' teaching and supported him in his ministry.

It is in the spirit of Ignatius, then, that the work described here was begun fourteen years ago. After three years of ministry at the Jesuit Center in Wernersville, Pennsylvania, I began to experience both the personal desire and the communal need to explore the ways in which Ignatian spirituality could be enhanced by Christian feminist scholarship. This desire and need led me to apply to Lancaster Theological Seminary to pursue a doctor of ministry degree. An essential part of receiving this degree is to develop a project to enrich and expand one's ministry. As I thought and prayed about the women and men I companioned in retreats and spiritual direction I wondered how to integrate what I was learning into ministry at the Jesuit Center. The experience of a Mennonite woman gives voice to what I saw happening in a number of directees. She describes her prayer as follows:

*More than fifteen years ago I began to desire new images of the Holy, since the exclusive male images felt worn out and no longer held life energy for me.*

Another woman notes her encounter with spiritual darkness, which extended over some years:

*I experienced confusion around my identity as a member of a religious community as well as being a Catholic and a Christian. I had difficulties with the rituals of the Catholic Church. Through this time, I began to bridge my confusion through a growing understanding of women's spirituality and a deepening realisation of the feminine within the Christian tradition.*

The experience of these women and others led me to consider what effect praying with female images of God, along with sharing contemporary feminist scholarship in theology, sacred scripture and psychology, would have upon men and women who made Ignatian retreats. Studying recent developments in feminist learning can shed light on our understanding of God. However, as Ignatius guides us, there is so much more to experience when we ask for an intimate knowledge of the Divine through prayer.

Several years ago, I was approached by a woman who expressed a strong desire to journey through the Spiritual Exercises. She noted, however, that she would want to pray through them using female images of God. She asked, 'Can you do that with me?' Remembering Ignatius' wisdom in reverencing how the Spirit moves uniquely in the heart and soul of each individual, I responded, 'Yes. We can do that.' Since then, a number of other women have made the same request. My belief in the fruits of the union between Ignatian spirituality and Christian feminism has been confirmed by many women and men whom I have companioned. A graduate student who made the Spiritual Exercises expresses what others have experienced.

*Ignatian spirituality is about the direct encounter with God, which is always healing, and ultimately empowering. Feminism is about the full empowerment of the human person, which is healing. These two approaches are complementary and, when taken together, lead to greater healing and a richer experience of the Holy One.*

Beginning in 2002, I have been offering silent guided retreats and directed retreats annually, in which retreatants are presented with suggestions for both personal and communal prayer interweaving significant feminist scholarship and Ignatian spirituality. Retreatants have been of varying ages from young adults to senior citizens, and of faith denominations including Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Mennonite and Presbyterian. They have been married, religious, ordained and single: mothers, fathers, housewives, deacons, priests, lawyers, doctors, grandmothers, social-workers, leaders in religious communities, politicians, campus ministers, businesswomen and men, spiritual directors, teachers, musicians, professors, and a judge. While a number of men do seek to experience God in this way, retreatants have been predominantly women. My goal was, and is, neither to denigrate men nor to minimise the abundant blessings experienced through praying with male and other images of God. Rather, my efforts aim at a sense of the dignity of women and reverence

for the feminine energy found in every human person, male and female, and in our cosmic community.

### **Three Guided Weekend Retreats**

#### *Guided Retreat A*

On this retreat, each gathering begins with communal prayer. Retreatants are taught simple gestures that give expression to hymns related to the theme presented. The inclusion of gesture in prayer highlights Ignatius' awareness of the body in the *Spiritual Exercises* as well as Christian feminists' affirmation of its holiness and their call to reverence the body in every way. Retreatants are invited to listen for the wisdom offered by the body. Because our body tissue stores memories, feelings and thoughts we can use focusing, breathing, movement and sound to access images and feelings.<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of the body in an explicit way honours the whole person and the sacredness of the body, which for so many women and men goes unrecognised.

Friday night introduces the retreatants to the Ignatian belief that God can be found and encountered in everything and everywhere. Retreatants are shown how to pray with their experiences, and then are invited to reflect on a positive experience of a female who in some way reflects the Divine.

Saturday morning's presentation responds to four questions:

- Why does language about God matter?
- Why is it vital to be aware of our images of God?
- Why is it important to be open to our images of God growing or changing?
- Why is it significant to pray with female images of God?

Retreatants are then asked to pray with a selected work of art that illustrates various female images of God.

The rest of the weekend presentations introduce retreatants to female images of God found in the Hebrew scriptures, with the help of Christian feminist scripture scholarship. The afternoon prayer focuses on God as our *Mother* and Her love for us, which comes from the deepest part of Her Being. The Divine Womb is experienced as a place of protection, where

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Fischer, *Transforming Fire: Women Using Anger Creatively* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1999), 29.

we are intimately known, nurtured and nourished in divine life and *Rehem* / Divine Womb love.<sup>2</sup> One retreatant notes the healing grace she received as she prayed within the womb of God and experienced Her divine love and mercy.

*My mother, Rita, had suffered the same sins against womankind that I had suffered and that most women have suffered throughout time. However, my mother did not have the insight to realise this and to stop the vicious cycle. As I focused on the womb of God, I started to sob, as I felt my mother's pain—the pain she suffered just for having been born female. I felt her pain not as her daughter but as her sister; and I placed her in Sophia's womb, where she, too, could experience God's divine mercy and love and protection.*

Praying with Mother God continues to be a source of grace for a selfless diocesan priest, who came to his retreat exhausted and weary from the demands of an inner-city ministry. He described his experience by making wide circles around himself with his arms to show how he sensed God's presence and love all around him. He felt known, protected and cared for. This priest had not intended to pray with female images of God, but came to an interior knowledge of being in the Womb of Mother God. Here, his own personal wounds and the suffering of the people to whom he ministered could be healed. As the retreat was ending he realised that he was not someone who simply worked for God: Mother God would go forth with him as they laboured together for others.

Saturday evening expands retreatants' experience as they pray with the Spirit through the images of *ruah* and *shekinah*. As Elizabeth A. Johnson explains:

The Hebrew word for spirit, *ruah*, is of grammatically feminine gender. This point is itself inconclusive .... Imagery that accrues around the Spirit, however, as well as the Spirit's functions, hint at the appropriateness of speaking about Spirit in analogy with women's historical reality .... In the Hebrew scriptures *ruah's* activities include creating new life, working to sustain it in myriad ways, renewing what has been damaged, grieving over destruction, teaching people to be wise, and inspiring critique and enthusiasm, all of which have engaged the energies of generation after generation of women ....<sup>3</sup>

*Shekinah* is also grammatically feminine; as Johnson continues:

<sup>2</sup> *Rehem* is the Hebrew word for womb.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 83.

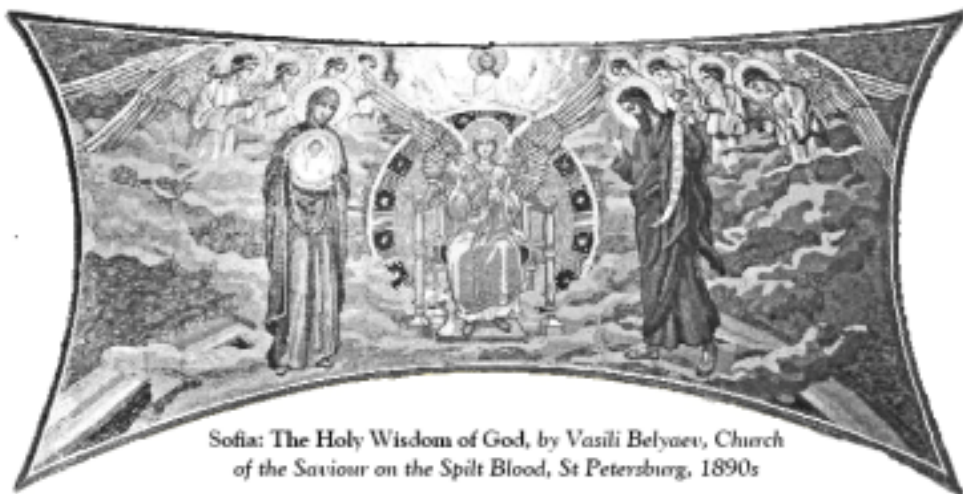
In the Jewish trajectory that developed after the close of the biblical canon, the Spirit of God typically came to be spoken of in the female symbol of the *shekinah* ... which is used in numerous texts that speak of God's dwelling among the people.<sup>4</sup>

Whenever and wherever God's people journey through life's realities, *shekinah* is their companion with her intimate, protective presence assuring them of Her 'fidelity to the promise of shalom'. A woman ministering in the inner city shares her encounter with *shekinah*:

*Making my first weekend retreat, I had very limited understanding of God revealed through female images and I believe I came almost closed to the possibility. The retreat challenged my preconceptions, by giving me the needed learning and space to grow more open. On that retreat, I intentionally prayed to Shekinah and experienced support and understanding, feeling a real sense of God. Ultimately, this encounter and my experiences in prayer with the feminine have helped me gain a deeper awareness of how big God is and how much God wants to meet us where we are with all we have and all we need.*

On Sunday morning, retreatants approach the Divine through the Hebrew figure of *Wisdom*, in Greek *Sophia*.

Wisdom ... is the most developed personification of God's presence and activity in the Hebrew Scriptures .... The biblical depiction of Wisdom is consistently female, casting her as sister, mother, female



<sup>4</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 85.

beloved, chef and hostess, preacher, judge, liberator, establisher of justice, and a myriad of other female roles wherein she symbolizes the transcendent power ordering and delighting in the world.<sup>5</sup>

A male retreatant expresses his gratitude for Sophia's guidance:

*On my retreat, I felt an urge to research Wisdom, but I held back, wanting to get to know her first before encountering her through scholars. Not long after the retreat I took a course on feminist theology. I thank Wisdom for returning me to God when I was in my thirties. 'She makes them into God's friends.' (Wisdom 7:27) Wisdom got me to say 'yes' when my wife asked me if I wanted to find a church.*

This man, an artist and teacher, continues to express his relationship with Sophia through stained glass icons. Most recently, he has designed a colouring book imaging her qualities as depicted through Wisdom 7.

The weekend concludes with a communal ritual in which retreatants are invited to share a grace they received. They are also asked to respond to questions for reflection. After experiencing this retreat, one retreatant, an 85-year-old grandfather and retired businessman, shared the following with me.

*I have been thinking about my retreat experience and all the children in our world who have had bad experiences of being fathered. How can they relate to God as Father?*

He received a graced insight, echoed by another retreatant, who is a social worker:

*As a woman who is a victim and survivor of incest at the hands of my father, I found it difficult to relate with God as Father. The image of Father God made me more than uncomfortable, it made me angry. I felt Father God betrayed me. I gave up on God and became an agnostic for seven years. Yearning for something deep within me drew me back to a need for a spiritual dimension in my life .... However, I continued to struggle with God as Father. The thought of God as Father made me sad. It hurt too much to go there. I just stayed with Jesus. Then, through the guided retreat, I was introduced to Sophia, the God of Wisdom, nurturing, compassionate and unwavering, in her love for me and for all of creation. A block was removed, a door opened as vast as the eye could see and deep enough to reach the recesses of my heart. She with Jesus nurtured me,*

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 87.

*gave me courage to enter into the depth of my pain and gradually begin the healing process.*

The fruits of praying with female images of God are also seen in the words of this male doctor:

*I am more aware of my need to love and to accept myself and to do so less conditionally. My image of the Holy One is growing and changing. I have a greater sense of God's love and creativity as in birthing and nurturing versus mighty and powerful. It is a new way of seeing God. All ways are of a loving God. But, this shows me a side that to me emphasizes unconditional love.*

### *Guided Retreat B*

This retreat follows the same rhythm as Guided Retreat A, but builds upon what retreatants have experienced in the previous retreat. Here, the Trinity is introduced through the Wisdom tradition. The ideas of *Spirit Sophia*, *Jesus Sophia* and *Mother Sophia* are presented in the light of feminist scholarship in theology.<sup>6</sup> Retreatants come to see how the presence or absence of the Spirit is mediated through the natural world, personal and interpersonal experience, and within the human community.<sup>7</sup> They also come to see how, at least in the West,

Despite the pervasiveness of the dialectic experience of Spirit, theological articulation about the Spirit has traditionally lagged behind reflection on God unoriginate source of all and God incarnate, classically named Father and Son respectively.<sup>8</sup>

Although he did not make this second retreat, the 85-year-old sensed this through his personal reflection.

*I want to talk with you about the Holy Spirit. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit has been brushed aside. You hear so much about the Father and Son and so little about the Spirit.*

As he faced the ageing process he found strong consolation in the mantra: *The Holy Spirit is in charge of my life. She is with me and within me.*

Saturday afternoon focuses on Jesus as the *Child of Sophia*. In Jesus of Nazareth, Spirit Sophia becomes flesh. He lives her wisdom. As we

<sup>6</sup> See Johnson, *She Who Is*, chapters 7, 8 and 9.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 125–126.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 128.

consider Jesus' maleness and its significance for the Christian community, Elizabeth Johnson states:

Amid a multiplicity of differences Jesus' maleness is appreciated as intrinsically important for his own personal historical identity and the historical challenge of his ministry, but not theologically determinative of his identity as the Christ nor normative for the identity of the Christian community.<sup>9</sup>

One retreatant spoke of a significant grace while praying with Jesus through the lens of Wisdom:

*The single most powerful encounter with Her as Christ was on an eight-day retreat. I had done a thirty-day retreat the year before, and during that I faced up to an experience of childhood sexual abuse .... I experienced Jesus as being between me and the abusers, taking the abuse himself in order to protect me from the full brunt of what was happening. The next year on retreat I experienced the same scene, only this time the Christ was my sister and the experience was even more powerful—that She would choose to suffer for me, to willingly accept such abuse for love of me. The love and sense of intimacy were overwhelming, and stay with me still.*

Saturday evening centres on *Mother Sophia*. Here, relieved from patriarchal and androcentric influences, retreatants pray with the image of *Mother* through the Wisdom tradition. As a result of her prayer, one retreatant shared how her relationship with the Divine Mother affects the way she relates to others and to our world:

*With a stronger sense of my own self and my own dignity and worth, I am in a better position to turn outward and offer myself to others. Experiencing God as Mother has allowed me to claim my own identity as mother and really claim a strong, determined, even fierce love for our Church and world. It has shown me that love, which can be fierce and nurturing, does not preclude strength and courage. This is particularly important for standing up to injustice of all sorts. I believe feminism and Ignatian spirituality working together have led to a greater sensitivity to injustice and an increased ability to feel and respond to the pain and suffering of others. Since the call from God has always been 'Love my people', this increased sensitivity and awareness is invaluable.*

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 156.



The weekend concludes with a DVD by Elizabeth Johnson entitled 'Trinitarian Relations'.<sup>10</sup> Her work expands retreatants' theology of the Trinity by helping them to experience and live the divine attributes of inclusivity, relationality and mutuality. After praying with this message, a retreatant describes her prayer in the following way:

*Wow! I feel like my understanding of the Trinity was being expanded and brought alive. A door was flung open. I can relate to this. My heart soared ... it was like a door flung wide open ....*



Trinità, by Margaret Thompson

My friend the artist Margaret Thompson expressed her relationship with our Triune God by naming an artwork *Trinità*. She also conveyed the dynamic energy and creative love of the Trinity through another piece, entitled *Dance of the Trinity*.

A hospital administrator noted:

*Sophia draws me to be immersed in the love of the Triune God. She leads me to Jesus in a new way. She awakens me in the call to discipleship. I am drawn to the counter-cultural life of Jesus. I am called to discover anew the paschal mystery. The unconditional love of Sophia centres my life. I continue to be drawn to integrate her presence within all that I do and to grow in my relationship with her. I believe she is with*



Dance of the Trinity, by Margaret Thompson

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, broadcast, 'Trinitarian Relations: A Model for Human Community', 26 January 1995, recorded by permission of Episcopal Cathedral Teleconferencing Network.

*me as I go about my day. I am trying to be more conscious of her presence; this is a process of mindfulness and of oneness. This relationship impacts all of my relationships. I am called to see the bigger picture in relationship with others, I am most comfortable in collaborative relationships; I struggle with the impact of competition on those involved. My approach is circular rather than hierarchical.*

### *Guided Retreat C*

Guided Retreat C begins on the Friday night by offering points for prayer which invite openness to Spirit in the retreat and beyond. Again, prayer centres on the Spirit's presence and activity in sacred scripture and in the early Christian centuries when 'in Syriac Christianity the Spirit's image was consistently that of the brooding or hovering mother bird'.<sup>11</sup>

Saturday begins with teaching participants the difference between Ignatian meditation and contemplation. Then, gatherings on Saturday and Sunday introduce retreatants to various sections of the New Testament where the Divine is portrayed through female metaphors. Blending contemporary feminist scripture scholarship with Ignatian meditation and contemplation, retreatants pray with various parables of Jesus such as those of the leaven (Luke 13:20–21), the lost coin (Luke 15:8–10) and the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). The fruits of this prayer not only promote the healing and dignity of women and men, but validate their desire to experience the Divine in more capacious and intimate ways.

### ***Retreatants' Feedback***

To find out more about the impact of these retreats, I sent a questionnaire to men and women who participated. In addition to seeking their experience of prayer, I also wanted to see how praying with female images of God affected their relationship with self, Jesus, others, our world and the cosmic community. I have already quoted from some of these responses, but would like to include some others here.

A 74-year-old Roman Catholic deacon said:

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *She Who Is*, 86.

*I am fully aware of Sophia's nearness to me in my prayer and I constantly address the Holy One with Her name; even publicly .... My relationships with others and the world have also been affected by Sophia. Before my relationship with Her, I would be at times very judgmental of others and I wanted to be in control and very clerical! Most of the time, these behaviours (sins) would be done unaware of their effect on others. After prayer and reflection in the presence of Sophia (and discussions with my wife) I have changed and know I am more accepting of where others are in their spiritual journey and hopefully I am a supporter of others and not a barrier.*

*Some images and qualities of Sophia that I have experienced in my spiritual journey so far are: friend, enabler, concerned for the other, compassionate, holy, calm, always forgiving, unconditionally loving, always present, always revealing. These images and qualities are a great consolation to me in the continuing struggle I have with our institutional Church that still protects those who have seriously broken down the Body of Christ.*

Another retreatant shared how Sophia influences her relationship with our world and the cosmic community:

*I see Sophia reflected in all of nature. She draws me through the vastness of the sea and the simplicity of a stream. The ebb and flow of water speaks to the constant motion of life. The delight of the evening sky envelops me in love and a sense of being at one with all .... Sophia teaches me through nature. I believe I am one with our cosmic community. I delight in the gifts of nature. I am pained by the abuse of our resources, and the impact that this has on all people.*

For those who made the full Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, two other questions were added to the questionnaire.

***If you made the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, are there any sections which, when integrated with some aspect of Christian feminism, affected your experience of the Trinity in prayer? If so, please describe your experience.***

Responses to this question include the following:

*Without an aspect of Christian feminism, I don't believe I would have been able to gain the richness of the gifts the Trinity offered me and or continues to offer. At the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, I had an extreme difficulty entering into them due to the masculine imaging of God as Father*



*The Trinity with the Holy Spirit represented as a woman, fresco, Urschalling, Bavaria, ninth century*

and/or male. I tried to go beyond my resistance but was unable to because of my father sexually abusing me for years.

I still find it unfathomable that God, Creator of the Universe and all things that are good, adapted to my need to enter into a deeper relationship with our Triune God through Sophia, Mother God, Holy Spirit and Jesus. I needed this adaptation within the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius to receive the depths of the gifts our Triune God wanted to offer me. Once the adaptation was made, I was able to enter into the Exercises more fully and be more open to the graces being offered.

In making the Triple Colloquy, one retreatant experienced significant grace as she approached this prayer, envisioning the Trinity as an inclusive community of relationship and mutuality.

I found that I mattered to the Trinity much more than ever before—partly, I believe, because I included the concept of ‘Holy Community’ (Mary, Jesus, Spirit, Sophia/Father, saints, parents, grandparents) as suggested by my spiritual director. I am so glad there is time and love for me. This expanded what I have loved about the Trinity—the love-relationship within the Trinity that flows out to us and the whole cosmos. Somehow praying to Sophia and Father took away much of the hurtful distance I have experienced with trying to live up to being good enough for God.

The second question relates to retreatants’ experience of Jesus as they journeyed through the Spiritual Exercises.

*If you made the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius, are there any sections which, when integrated with some aspect of Christian feminism, affected your experience of Jesus in prayer? If so, please describe your experience.*

One woman noted:

*Sophia was especially significant in the Ignatian Exercises as She companioned my renewed commitment to Jesus. Her patience, her persistence, her passion moved in me! My relationship with Sophia greatly expands my partnership and co-creative energies with the Divine! I am completely committed to a journey of faith that always keeps focused on how to live Love for the sake of the world. I have joined the Christ Project and with Sophia I live this calling with great desire for Her Wisdom, Her Heart, Her Passion.*

While praying through the Spiritual Exercises, the Call of the King held little attraction for a Mennonite woman. In her prayer, the image of Jesus as king on his throne was transformed. She shared that Jesus got off the throne and put on an apron and asked her to serve others with him. This made his call extremely attractive.

Moved by Yusef Komunyakaa's poem, 'Rock Me, Mercy: A Poem Written in Mourning', his response to the heartbreaking loss of life at the 2012 school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, this same retreatant shared her experience of the Third Week:

*I want to be united with the suffering body of Christ. There is a place deep within where I am united with their agony. Yet, I am not depressed. Deeper, I/we are being held, cradled, rocked in mercy by Jesus and Sophia. I am thinking Jesus is dead or should be dead. But, it's also like he can't stay away from me. He is very much there with Sophia rocking me in love that comes from the womb, the deepest part of Jesus and Sophia.*

The social-worker who had been abused by her father shared some of the graces of the Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises. After experiencing the anguish and joy of Sophia as She experienced Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, she stated:

*Within this I experienced the deep love and an awareness of Jesus' desire to forgive all my sins and the sins of all people, offering us the forgiveness for our sins and the gift of eternal life with him. Once again, tears flowed down my face, but this time they were tears of joy.*

Over a number of years of prayer, retreats and personal work, these graces rooted themselves with healing love into the wounds of her abuse. She noted the movement of grace:

*Because of my experience of seeing a portrait of my father as a toddler, my heart ached. I only wanted to comfort him, hold him and let him know that Jesus, Sophia, the Father and myself loved him and abhorred the abuse he suffered. We were sorry there was no one to protect him and that his response to the abuse was understandable. While still heinous, it was still forgivable. Recently, I am coming to know Father God and while there is still some resistance on my part, I feel drawn to gain a deeper knowledge of Him, to allow Him to show me the riches He has to offer me to deepen my faith and to share the many gifts he has given me with others.*

One retreatant was drawn to pray with Sophia in the Contemplation to Attain Love. Notice the movement of grace as she expresses her prayer:

*I find myself echoing, 'What return can I make to Sophia for all of her goodness to me?'. The only gift I can offer to you is the gift of myself with all of my strengths, limitations and weaknesses, all has been gift from you .... As I recall such wonderful experiences with Sophia and her creation, my heart seems to grow large and full in remembrance .... All of the beauty I've seen and the good people I've encountered allow me to know and love you. You are with me, Sophia, and I am meant to have an active part in this journey of faith. Each day there is always something new and lovely in creation that captures my heart. I desire to walk into the future with courage, with confidence and a desire to serve you with joy. Your gifts, Sophia, as your love, will endure ....*

Another shared the following religious experience.

*A specific encounter with Sophia happened while I was on an eight-day Ignatian retreat. At early morning, just as dawn was breaking, a female image hovered over the ocean, a pinkish cloud formation embracing our world. I heard the words, 'I am Jesus, the Sophia of God'. This image continues to revisit my spirit and Her spirit.*

Yet another was asked if Sophia affected her relationship with others and our world. She responded:

*It really does change everything. Knowing how much I am loved by Her, and believing in that love, creates a desire to love others in return. It motivates me for ministry, gives meaning and purpose to my life. It makes me want to be a*

*good person, to be generous, caring, loving and just, to use my energy to make a difference in the world to that others may come to know the goodness of God's love as well.*

### **Female Images of God and Christian Unity**

The experience of praying with female images of God, whether within or outside the setting of a retreat, has much to offer in promoting the greater wholeness of individuals and stronger union within and among the community of Christians. I would like to conclude by suggesting some significant steps that individuals and institutions can make towards Christian unity on the basis of this experience:

1. Find ways to address the lack of inclusivity with regard to language and the sole use of male images for God in most Catholic liturgies, prayers and hymns, which leave many women feeling 'second-class' and lacking in dignity. Many theologians believe that the images a community chooses in liturgical worship communicate what they hold up as the highest value.
2. Choose to pray with female images of God in personal prayer asking for the grace of an intimate knowledge of Her Spirit.
3. Make efforts to expand our understanding of Christian feminist scholarship in theology, sacred scripture and spirituality. Significant authors include Elizabeth A. Johnson, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Anne E. Carr, Sallie McFague, Barbara Reid, Rita Nakashima Brock, Sandra Schneiders, Alice Bach, Esther Fuchs, Kathleen Fischer and Joan Chittister.
4. Support the inclusion of women in decision-making and encourage their perspective to be heard.
5. Speak out for the full inclusion of women in various church ministries and vocations.
6. Honour the feminine within every person, male and female.

Finally, I share the reflections of the Mennonite woman who asked me if I could companion her through the Spiritual Exercises using female images of God.

*Some years ago when I contemplated 'the women who stayed' at the cross, I prayed with Sophia and these women who stayed and had a profound sense of joining the 'great feminine heart' that could choose to be up close to the suffering ... of Jesus ... and the world. I continue to feel Sophia's energy to STAY, to engage the sorrow of the world, to feel empowered and not paralyzed.*

May we, too, experience Sophia's energy and continue to stand close to those who suffer because of exclusion. May we all experience the grace of God's unioning love. Let us strengthen our commitment to make choices for communion—body with spirit, heart with head, feminine with masculine—and use our energies to create unity within and among peoples of every faith, culture, gender, age, orientation and way of life.

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