

Catholic Theological Society of America  
Ottawa conference, June 1998  
Sacramental and Liturgical Theology Group  
Panel presentation

## **Blessing the Apple: a Rite of Transformation**

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Over the past two decades an explosion of symbolic and ritual creativity emerging from faith-groups of women has been reported and analyzed in both scholarly and popular literature. (1) For some women these liturgies provide an alternative to often stifling and androcentrically lopsided parish worship, for others they may be the last thread linking them to a recognizably Christian community. For many, these liberative spaces in ritual practice may offer a way to articulate both joyful and painful realities of their lives in a uniquely personal supportive setting. On a broader ecclesial scale women's experimental worship aims at both resistance to entrenched injustice in the structure and underlying presuppositions of official worship, and effecting transformation of these structures toward greater authenticity, inclusivity and justice. (2) These ritual events may be construed as part of a powerful inculturation process taking place across a broad geographical spectrum at the margins of the church, potentially a source of long term liturgical renewal.

Whether these new creative ritual and prayer forms originated in small local groups or at major conferences, a number of common characteristics showed up from the start:

--leadership and planning is generally shared and participative roles distributed among those present. Rarely does an individual act as sole presider or mastermind planner: planning takes place as far as possible by several participants according to a consensus model.

--the worship space and configuration of the assembly is generally round or grouped so as to permit maximal participation. Flexible or movable seating is preferred to allow rearrangement or bodily movement in the course of the ritual.

--the use of freshly inventive symbolism particularly using natural elements and earth symbols predominates, often with brilliant original layers of meaning or newly thought-out, strikingly eloquent expressions of particular realities in the lives of the participants.

--new uses of text are developed: drumbeat-like litanies, a broader choice of readings from a rich variety of sources, the spoken or written testimony from women of various cultures particularly concerning structural oppression or hidden suffering.

--new music is composed by and for women: tender and poetic, or strong and assertive, singable by an assembly.

--new ritual occasions never remotely foreseen in the sacramentary -- rites of passage such as crowning (the recognition of the wisdom and 'elder' status of an older woman), rites of healing from trauma such as incest or rape, seasonal or cosmic rites -- are planned and celebrated in a particular local community.

--similarly, one significant characteristic of new women's rituals is their contextual nature. Such rites do not pretend to universal applicability and by their nature are unrepeatable.

--part of the renewed symbolic sensitivity is an expanded use of shared food in ritual, the subject of this paper.

Food gathering and growing, preparation, serving and cleaning up forms a rhythmic daily time structuring in the lives of countless women in many cultures, whether the woman begins by gathering sticks for firewood or peering into the freezer. Sharing food is an routine form of

intimate daily life-giving: one hopes the cook will select good, not rotten or moldy food and prepare it adequately, cooking it well enough or keeping it chilled enough to prevent the growth of toxic microbes. Giving and taking food is a fundamental act of trust.

Several documented examples of experimental women's liturgy using particular foodstuffs include:

--feminist Seder meals, often in an ecumenical or interreligious context (3). The traditional meal embodying the liberation of the Hebrew slaves from servitude in Egypt is constructed as the sharing of wisdom and memory between mothers and daughters, the naming of women leaders throughout history and a testimony to hope that all may someday be free.

--rites which retrieve the ancient use of milk and honey as a fundamental initiatory element, as noted in the early church. (4)

--bread of course as a fundamental yet multivalent foodstuff: a variety of breads representing different global ethnic groups, bread as associated with the sharing of power and strength, or as the catalyst for naming and repudiating evils in contemporary society and by contrast recognizing the presence of Christ in the breaking of bread. (5) Significantly the sharing of bread as a symbolic element here denotes a positive sense of power as the power to overcome evil and effect peaceful and just relations. Whereas ten years ago one more often heard of 'tablesharing' rites, more recent research has been done on the proliferation of women's eucharist groups. Here the term 'eucharist' is used advisedly since there is virtually no trace of a classical theological formulation such as the 'Holy Sacrifice of the Mass,' but rather a relatively informal blessing and breaking of bread and sharing of wine in a small likeminded community of women. (6)

The apple, however, is a more powerfully 'charged' symbolic food due to the role it plays in the second creation account, Genesis 2:4-3:24, in which the first man and the first woman eat the forbidden fruit from the 'tree of the knowledge of good and evil,' suffering banishment from the garden as a result. The man when questioned by God blames the woman for giving him the fruit to eat, and the woman in turn blames the serpent. A long history of misogynist interpretation and application of the story focuses opprobrium upon the woman for causing the loss of paradise for all humankind, all mothers' pain in childbearing, and the irruption of sin into the world in a causal chain reaching down through every generation.

The inspiration for a brief but eloquent ritual to bless the apple came from a short passage in Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Women-Church*:

...this innocent and good fruit has been absurdly turned into a symbol of evil and an assault against women as the source of evil. ...

**Blessing the Apple** This is the apple of consciousness-raising. Let the scales of false consciousness fall from our eyes, so that we can rightly name truth and falsehood, good and evil. (7)

The setting of the specific ritual we shall examine was the 1993 biennial conference of the European Society of Women in Theological Research, an interreligious organization of women scholars and researchers founded in 1985 by several distinguished women theologians who had worked together in the World Council of Churches. The Society's purposes include the formation of an international academic theological community of women, and the promotion of women's studies in religion as well as opportunities for scholarly dialogue and exchange across a spectrum of European cultures and faiths. The August 1993 conference in Louvain, Belgium, attracted 130 participants from 25 countries to explore the theme, "Voicing Identity. Women and Religious Traditions in Europe."

Planning a few optional liturgical celebrations for such a diverse group brought with it some daunting pitfalls: the number of different languages spoken, of which at a minimum the three official languages of the Society, German, English and French must be used; the wide variation not only in religious affiliation but in the degree of affiliation by participants, ranging from regular involvement in a worshiping community, to alternative worship, to none at all; the very discomfort some scholars experienced with 'worship' which implies interaction with an ultimate being, or with 'ritual' which seemed to some an artificial and arbitrary coded behavior with no meaning; the

complex overlap of meaning-fields in texts and symbols which could vary greatly among cultures and faiths, together with the danger that what one group perceived as innocuous could be interpreted as antagonistic to women's dignity by another; plus the hazard of any densely-packed conference schedule, that of blocking out additional time-segments without overloading the participants.

The apple ritual was offered as morning prayer on the second full day of the conference. The gathering space was chosen to permit a circular formation: although a conventional chapel with fixed pews was available, this ritual was held in a high-ceilinged second-floor conference room with tables removed and chairs moved back against the walls. Most participants entered and sat on the carpet forming an oval two or three people deep around the room which permitted a great deal of eye-contact and minimized the physical distance, while those who preferred the chairs sat around the periphery.

The planning and direction had been undertaken by three doctoral students in theology at Louvain: Marta Sañudo from Mexico, Agnes Brazal from the Philippines, and Susan Roll from the United States. The overarching theme was that of Wisdom, chosen to reflect the conference theme of 'voicing identity' while creating a reflective space and time to meditate on the peculiar character of women theologians' search for wisdom, in their work and in their lives. The ritual structure was kept relatively simple:

1. a brief introductory word of welcome;
2. a reading from the Book of Wisdom 7:7-8 and 23:30, broken into one section each read by separate speakers in French, German and English
3. a responsory recitation and movement: all stood and formed two concentric circles, then took one step to the right while repeating in unison a phrase from the reading and looking into the eyes of the person facing them in the parallel circle. This was repeated eight times or so.
4. the apple ritual
5. a closing prayer
6. unison singing of a new version of "Will the Circle Be Unbroken."

The center of the oval was empty until the group sat down again following the responsory movement. Two women entered and silently set down two baskets of shiny, red apples in the center of the assembly. After a moment of silence, another read the following meditation in English:

The apple.  
Eve, and the snake, in the Garden of Eden.  
The ancient story of how evil entered the world.  
Through an apple, and a snake, and a woman. ....  
In the Christian tradition, Mary the mother of Jesus was called "the second Eve."  
Mary's childbearing cancelled the universal death sentence, the condemnation of humanity as punishment for the sin of Eve.  
Early church fathers such as Tertullian claimed that all women are Eve: "You are the gate by which sin entered the world..."  
What was the sin of Eve?  
Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.  
Eve desired knowledge.  
The knowledge of good and evil.  
Eve desired wisdom.  
Here we are today, this morning, together.  
Professional academic women, aspiring students, theologians, researchers, teachers.  
Women seeking knowledge.  
The knowledge of good and evil.

Women seeking *wisdom*.

Then the apples were blessed by the assembly, divided with knives and passed around in silence so that everyone could eat a slice. (8)

The contextual nature of women's experimental rituals forms a powerful substratum of meaning here. In this example not only are the participants by means of ritual reversing the curse on the apple, by extension reversing the curse on Eve, and by further extension the curse on all women which served to legitimate misogyny in the Christian tradition over centuries-- but at that moment in that setting, women scholars claimed full legitimacy for their own work in the search for knowledge, ultimately the quest for wisdom. If less than a century ago male scholars could argue that the female mind was constitutionally incapable of learning Greek or of making the political decisions necessary to exercise the vote, women themselves had now gripped and shattered such oppressive and abusive myths. The power of ritual to act upon and to call forth a response from multiple dimensions of the person as well as from the web of persons in a particular community in a specific point of place and time, concretized and amplified the cognitive content of the conference plenary presentations, subject-group papers and workshops. One very modest sequence of ritual acts condensed a timescape extending from primordial mythical time through the ancient church to the present moment, and spatially united women from a wide geographic, national, linguistic and cultural scope in a simple act of turning a fundamental injustice upside-down.

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1. Important examples include Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church. Theology and Practice* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985); Diann Neu, "Our Name is Church: The Experience of Catholic Christian Feminist Liturgies," *Concilium* 152/2 (1982): 75-84; Teresa Berger, "The Women's Movement as a Liturgical Movement: A Form of Inculturation?," *Studia Liturgica* 19 (1989): 55-64; Mary Collins, "Principles of Feminist Liturgy," in Marjorie Procter-Smith and Janet Walton eds. *Women at Worship. Interpretations of North American Diversity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993): 9-26; Diann L. Neu, "Womenchurch-Church Transforming Liturgy," in Procter-Smith and Walton, *Women at Worship*, 163-178; Marjorie Procter-Smith, *In Her Own Rite. Constructing Feminist Liturgical Tradition*. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990); Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Praying With Our Eyes Open. Engendering Feminist Liturgical Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995). See also Susan K. Roll, "Traditional Elements in New Women's Liturgies," *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy* 72/1 (1991): 43-59; and Susan K. Roll, "Women's Liturgy: Dancing at the Margins," *Doctrine and Life* 44/7 (September 1994): 387-396.

2. Procter-Smith, *Praying With Our Eyes Open*, 14.

3. See for example three Passover Seder Haggadahs published by W.A.T.E.R., Silver Spring, MD: *A Seder of the Sisters of Sarah*, 1986; *Miriam's Sisters Rejoice. A Holy Thursday and Passover Feminist Seder*, 1988; *Together at Freedom's Table*, 1991;

4. An ancient source is Paul F. Bradshaw and Carol Bebawi eds, *The Canons of Hippolytus*, Alcuin/GROW Liturgical Study 2, Grove Liturgical Study 50 (Nottingham: Grove, 1987): 24. One suggestion for contemporary use is given in Ruether, *Women-Church*, 130.

5. Neu, "Our Name is Church," 80-82.

6. Sheila Durkin Dierks, *WomenEucharist* (Boulder CO: WovenWord Press, 1997).
7. Ruether, *Women-Church*, 145.
8. This ritual as well as the more extensive evening prayer of the following day are described in Susan K. Roll, "Liturgy in the Company of Women: the ESWTR Conference," *Questions Liturgiques/ Studies in Liturgy*, 74/3-4 (1993), 231-234.