

THE PROMISE OF FEMINIST LIBERATION THEOLOGY TO ADDRESS
WOMEN'S OPPRESSION IN LATIN AMERICA

By

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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In this paper, I will explore the importance of the rise of ideologies like Liberation Theology which brought attention to the injustices suffered by the poor and their need for liberation. I will discuss how they inspired other movements of liberation around the world, such as Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology, a feminist theology dedicated to the liberation of women in the Caribbean, Central, South and South America.

Through scholarly research, I will analyze the complexity of women's oppression in the continent as the combination of the patriarchal ideology imposed by the Catholic Church, *machismo*, and *marianismo*, a unique phenomenon developed in the continent since the conquest.

My research will also demonstrate how the complexity of women's situation in Latin America demands the implementation of different methodologies and ideologies in order to succeed: the implementation of Base Ecclesial Communities or CEBs which allow women to become active participants in their communities. The need of teaching a new image of Mary supported by a new interpretation of the Bible will allow Mary to become a positive model for women. It will help them escape the negative aspects of

marianismo which have made them active participants in their own oppression throughout the centuries.

Finally, the implementation of those methodologies and ideologies combined with the principles of Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology under the guidance of Latin American Feminist theologians may constitute the best answer to make the liberation of women from oppression in Latin American' societies a reality.

Dedication

Yo dedico este proyecto culminante o capstone en el programa de Estudios Liberales a mi padre, Fabio Hernán Pasmín Gonzalez quien siempre sembró en mí la sed por el conocimiento y la pasión por el aprendizaje. Gracias por enseñarme el poder que el conocimiento trae a una persona y por inculcar mí la convicción de que como mujer dentro de mí tengo la fuerza, la inteligencia y la pasión necesarias para ser y alcanzar cualquier meta que me proponga.

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The Promise of Feminist Liberation Theology to Address Women's Oppression in Latin America

Introduction

The Catholic Church as a patriarchal institution has influenced the socio-political structure and ideology of Latin American societies. However, patriarchy is not the only factor contributing to the status of women's oppression in Latin America. Theologians agree that to patriarchy it is necessary to add *machismo* and *marianismo*. *Machismo* or the males' conviction of their superiority over women and their right to dominate society is defined by the Real Academia Española (RAE) in the Web as men's attitude of arrogance in relation to women. According to the Academia, *machismo* involves a set of practices and behaviors that are insulting to women. *Marianismo*, was first defined by political scientist Evelyn P. Stevens as ideal women who "are submissive, understanding, patient, and virginal" in an essay she wrote in 1973: *Marianismo: La otra cara del machismo en Latino América*. *Marianismo* complements and strengthens the patriarchal tradition in Latin American societies as "women contributed to, helped create and eternalize their own reality" (Stevens, 171). According to Stevens, *marianismo* is a phenomenon exclusive to Latin America, an ideology created by women for women. Patriarchy, *machismo* and *marianismo* have determined the position of women in the continent for centuries.

Liberation Theology arose in 1960s, among them Liberation Theology, became the inspiration for the development of other liberation movements. Feminist theologians drew upon these ideas to develop Latin American Feminist Liberation theology. This group of theologians believes that Latin American women need to identify their

marginalization, accept their need for change, take action to achieve their own potential, and respond to the expectations of modern life. Without a doubt, change will be complex and challenging. The deep devotion of the people to the Holy Mother is one of the most important aspects of Catholicism in Latin America. It is also a fact that underprivileged women, the great majority of Latin America's population.¹ Although the stratification of the population in the continent may vary from country to country, the reality of women's situation in reference to oppression is very similar. Women have used *marianismo* as a tool to survive the abuse they have endured throughout centuries. In *marianismo*, Mary is the representation of the ideal woman for the Catholic Church and its patriarchal ideology. *Marianismo* teaches women to be virginal, pure, humble, kind, understanding, patient, etc. (Stevens 172). Those characteristics also contribute to the identification of women's pain with Mary's pain and make them believe that the more they suffer, the closer they are to Mary. According to Maurice Hamington and Evelyn Steven, *marianismo* has contributed to the subjugation of women, specifically "poor women", on the continent through their own actions and their own attitude.

The importance of Mary in Latin American women's lives makes her an invaluable element in the process of liberation. Mary can be the tool that allows women to become aware of their self-worth. This goal may be accomplished by giving a new interpretation to Mary or New *Marianismo*.

I have divided this study in three parts: In part one I will explain the origin, role and consequence of *machismo* and *marianismo* in the Latin American societies,

¹ For the purpose of this investigation, Latin America includes to the Caribbean, Central and South America.

specifically in women's roles. I will also discuss the interaction and dependability of *machismo* and *marianismo* in those societies. In part two I will present the need of giving Mary a new interpretation with the implementation of a New *marianismo*. In part three I will discuss the role of Liberation Theology in the development of Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology. I will also discuss the role of CEBs or *Comunidades Eclesiasticas de Base* as vehicles of liberation for women on the continent as well as the principles and importance of the work that is being done in the continent by Latin American Feminist Liberation theologians. Finally, in part four, I will conclude that women's oppression in Latin America requires the combination of several elements and methodologies working together in order for Latin American women to achieve liberation. Therefore, there is hope that combining the principles of Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology, using CEBs or Base Ecclesial Communities, providing women with a new interpretation of Mary the liberation of Latin American women can become a reality in the future.

Part I. CAUSES OF THE LATIN AMERICAN CULTURAL CRADLE OF OPPRESSION AND SUBJUGATION

Inter-relation of *Machismo* and *Marianismo* and its Effects in the Condition of Women in the Continent

Discrimination against women in Latin America did not begin when the continent was discovered. However, the European ideology made it stronger. Before the Spaniards and Portuguese conquered the continent, women in the new land were active members of their societies, especially in the southern cone of the continent. Even though those societies had a patriarchal structure, “women participated in military affairs, government, administration and ownership of property, and they had authority over their own bodies” (Aquino, 14). Their maternal role gave them respect in their communities.

Immediately after its discovery in 1492, Pope Alexander VI divided the new continent between Spain and Portugal and gave to “their monarch the right and duty to propagate the Catholic faith” (Hillar 35). Hillar also states how the rigorous impositions of the Catholic Church over the colonies shatter any possibility for innovation, social mobility, spontaneous thinking or the installment of democratic institutions as they resemble the feudal structure (35).

The conquest of the land and the conquest of the soul became tasks of equal importance for the Spaniards in the new world. Spanish missionaries were brought in to take care of the religious aspect of the new subjects of the crown soon after its discovery (Kiefer). As a consequence of Pope Alexander’s mandate, most of Latin America’s population today is Catholic.

The Spaniards were conquering the land in the name of Mary. The Spanish explorers believed they were protected by her from the savage inhabitants of the new land. The indigenous resistance was not taken easily; the *conquistadores* were fighting a holy war. The missionaries introduced the adoration of the Virgin Mary as they brought with them statues and pictures of her. The visual representation of the Virgin as a mother, carrying her child, was associated by the Amerindians with their goddess Earth in the beginning of the evangelization process and by the *mestizos*² during the early colonial days. Mary was associated with the natives' mother-earth goddesses who assimilated the Virgin Mary more easily and faster than the rigid image of the unmerciful Christian God. Soon she earned the trust, love and devotion of the people.

As the European conquerors considered themselves superior, that superiority gave them the "right" to dominate and mistreat the natives and women in particular. As a group, women were considered even less by the conquistadors. The conquerors' actions reduced women to sex objects without a voice until the early 1800s when several women, members of the privileged social group, who had an education and had a liberal vision in the future of their countries, played important roles in the process of independence of each Latin American country.

As time passed, Catholicism in Latin America became unique and different from Catholicism anywhere else in the world due to its profound and strong devotion to the Virgin Mary. Aside from the hope that Mary gives women across the continent, they also can identify their reality with Mary's reality. According to Sister Elizabeth Johnson, C.S.J., women in Latin America can identify their pain with the pain Mary experienced

² mestizos: children of a Spaniard and an indigenous woman

during her life. She was victim of discrimination for living under a military regime. She gave birth to her baby under dehumanizing conditions. She witnessed the unjust assassination of her son by the hands of the government. Although not every women in Latin America lives all the experiences that Mary lived through her life; it is not uncommon for the marginalized to experience similar situations during their lives. It is also the norm for mothers to see their children live their lives without any hope for a better future as they are incapable to change their situation.

Today, gender dynamics in Latin America are determined, in a great part, by the principles of *machismo* and *marianismo*. (Mendoza 2009). Both ideologies are considered extreme conceptions of femininity and masculinity. According to feminist Evelyn Steven, *Marianismo* and *machismo* are codependent on each other. Together they have contributed to the reaffirmation of the patriarchal ideology of the Catholic Church in Latin America. Although *marianismo* is at the heart of this investigation, in order to understand it, it is necessary to understand *machismo* and its role in Latin American societies today.

1. *Machismo*

Machismo was inherited by the Latin American colonies from the Ibero-Portuguese empires. In Latin America, *machismo* has been transmitted from generation to generation since its colonization until the present. Ideally it refers to a man who is courageous, valorous, physically fit, self-confident, has high sexual power, is aggressive, and possesses gender pride. *Machos* are attributed with bravery, strength, wisdom, leadership, and responsibility. *Machos* are also expected to be providers, protectors and

defenders. In Latin America, those last three characteristics, taken to the extreme have relegated women to the home, denying their participation in the public sphere as well as their access to education. Those are also the reasons why being *machista* has taken a negative connotation in Latin America.

There are four archetypes of a *macho*; there may be characteristics of more than one archetype present in one individual alone. The archetypes are: the conqueror, the playboy, the masked, and the authentic *macho*. Pertinent to this study are the conqueror *macho* and the playboy *macho*. The first demands power, the second is sexually aggressive and displays physical, mental and sexual abuse toward the female. He will chase women and be disloyal to them. Sadly, the authentic *macho* who is responsible, honorable, protects and provides for the family, does not represent the typical *macho* found in Latin America. If that were the case, Latin American women would not have to find refuge in *marianismo* to be able to endure the hardships brought to their lives by *machismo*.

The responsibility that men have as providers, and the pride with which they take that responsibility, has contributed to the exclusion of women from public life, without any possibilities or opportunities to develop any skills. They are only allowed to develop skills that are associated with the care of the house of the upbringing of the children thus isolating them from the rest of society.

María Pilar Aquino, known feminist theologian and pioneer in Latin American and U.S. Latina feminist theologies of liberation argues that women's biological role in reproduction is the cause in the creation of social roles based on gender (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology from Latin America* 33). From a male's point of view, nature has

determined that women should be mothers. Therefore, all women's lives should be dedicated to motherhood and to all it entails. This view supports the interests of patriarchy and *machismo* but truncates the possibilities of women because motherhood and women's biology have been used by patriarchy and *machismo* to justify the present social hierarchy that dominates Latin American societies. Biological differences have been used to justify the superiority of men over women. In the words of Aquino:

Gender is the social form adopted by the sexes whenever they are ascribed specific values, functions, and norms, or what are also rather clumsily called social roles... The relationship between the sexes becomes hierarchical and unequal because women a priori have a subordinate role... An unequal system maintains stereotypes and demands ways of behaving prescribed by the culture, religion, and society for each sex according to gender identity (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology from Latin America* 33-35).

The hierarchical structure of these societies contributes to the maintenance of the sociopolitical system; therefore, there are not possibilities of change or chances of equality between the sexes.

Experts believed that the aggressiveness of men's behavior is based on men's false belief that their "superiority" over women gives them the right to exert control over them using physical force. This behavior explains why the physical abuse of women is not uncommon in Latin American countries. Statistics reveal that although there is a variation of degree in the level of violence against women in the continent, abuse against women characterizes Latin American societies. Husbands believe they have the right to inflict physical punishment over their wives and in many cases over their daughters. The same occurs between brothers and sisters as physical abuse between siblings is common.

According to Dr. Rondon professor at the *Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia and Hospital Nacional Edgardo Rebagliati Martins*, in Lima Peru, "Although

not all episodes of violence are an expression of gender inequality, one cannot deny that domestic violence, highly prevalent in the region, is best understood by taking into account its roots in gender inequalities” (Rondon 158-159). The women’s reaction or lack of it to physical abuse is a response that usually causes the escalation of violent physical and mental abuse. This violence responds to cultural roots caused by patriarchal familial principles that encourage passivity and dependence in women. Those traditional beliefs are based on the Virgin Mary as a role model for women in which motherhood, self-denial and the servitude to others are encouraged. It is common that the degree of abuse result in serious physical, emotional and psychological consequences for women.

2. *Marianismo*

By perpetuating *marianismo*, women play a role in their own oppression. Women, specifically those who are part of the lower strata of society, personify and act upon the characteristics and moral attributes defined by this social phenomenon. Although not all acts of violence are caused by gender inequality it is a fact that patriarchal violence has been established in the continent for centuries. According to Rondon, the dynamics that controls the violence in the patriarchal home facilitates and contributes to its perpetuation from the men as well as from the women’s attitude. In the case of men: first, men control women as a response to their own insecurities. Second, controlling women is a social norm. Third, men use violence to communicate. In the case of women: first, violence is viewed as “normal” in women’s life. Second, women’s attitude is passive. Third, women do not react against violence. Fourth, women are committed to the relationship as they do not see any other possibility (158- 159). No matter how bad the situation is for the

women, their lack of education and survival skills in society do not give them the courage and opportunity to escape their situation.

Under the principles of *marianismo*, women have convinced themselves that they are “the queens of the house” and the “ones on command” (Fuller 2). They believe that through this position they have the ability to influence the men with their opinions as men make public decisions. Women believe that they can influence men because, in response to a combination of *machos*’ archetypes, men are “irresponsible, impulsive, wild, romantic, ‘Don Juan’ like, the ‘eternal boy’ who will always need the guidance of a mother figure or in the case of a grown man, a wife (Fuller 2-3). In other words, in compliance with the *marianista* ideology, women feel that they need to take care of men in the same way that Mary always takes care of all those in need.

The gender roles assigned to women in patriarchal societies have placed them in a social inferior position in relation to men. According to Sarah Hamilton a sociocultural anthropologist states in her book *The Two Headed Household: Gender and Rural Development in the Ecuadorian Andes* that “women themselves, in the *Marianista ideology believe that their morality is stronger than the morality of men*” (Stevens 171). According to Stevens, that statement alone contradicts everything the Church and patriarchy have ever believed in and have ever taught in reference to women as it contradicts the patriarchal belief that women are in “every sense” inferior to men.

In the mind of the women, *marianismo* has contributed to the strengthening of their moral conduct through the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Considering that Mary is the representation of the ideal woman for the Catholic Church as well as for the patriarchal ideology, it is not difficult to understand the reasoning behind the Church’s

interest in maintaining “the great reverence for Mary and the *machista* tendency in Latin American tradition” (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology from Latin America* 172).

However, Latin American women have never question what lies behind Mary as a symbol of adoration for women. Traditionally, two images of Mary have contributed to the ideal model Latin American women want to imitate, in the words of Aquino,

First, the image of Mary as obedient and passive, resigned and suffering, humbly dedicated to domestic tasks in accordance with the role that is naturally hers in the private sphere. This figure of weakness and submission, of all the “typically feminine” virtues, becomes a symbol of the subordinate position women should occupy in the church and society. Second, there is an exalted and idealized image of Mary as the supreme symbol of purity and virginity, which neutralizes her human integrity and her sexuality as a woman. This timeless image represents the values patriarchal view ascribes to women (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology from Latin America* 273).

Those two idealized images of Mary, those specific characteristics wrongly attributed to Mary are accepted and encouraged by the Church, patriarchy and men.

However, women may never achieve lives of purity and virginity. Therefore, they become mothers and identify as mothers facing hardships like those of the biblical Mary. Although that identification with Mary is unhealthy for Latin American women, their relationship to Mary is of great importance to the Catholic Church and its interests in Latin America because *marianismo* supports the principles of patriarchy in the continent.

The strong bond Latin American women have created between them and Mary as they believe that their suffering defines them and at the same time brings them closer to the virgin, explains why through the centuries Latin American women have been able to face, on a daily basis, persecution, rape, mutilation, and torture on their persona and on the persona of their loved ones. These women have “forged the courage that allows them to continue going in spite of poverty and suffering” (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology*

from Latin America 157). Mary has been their inspiration as well as their spiritual support when facing their daily pain. “Mary is the paradigm of faith, prayer, and solidarity among women in Latin America...” (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology from Latin America* 159). According to Aquino, women’s spiritual strength has allowed them to survive the mental and physical abuse they have been subjected to. In other words, she also believes that through their experiences, women have developed the strength and resistance needed while relying on their faith and devotion to Mary. Their strength and their faith in her have become the reasons why women themselves have become the principal cause of their own oppression as they do not resist or react to it.

Even though this is a dangerous relationship, this relationship is important to them because as they identify themselves with the Mother of God they also feel close to her and their faith and devotion brings them hope that they will be rewarded in the next life. This feeling of hope cannot be felt any other way based on their life experience. This toxic relationship makes women vulnerable as it produces a perfect setting that allows, encourages, facilitates and justifies women’s oppression. In the words of Aquino, *marianismo* combined with patriarchy and *machismo*, has been throughout history, and is still in today’s Latin American reality, the perfect setting for the oppression of women in the continent as women do not recognize the precarious condition of their situation nor they recognize the fact that there are possibilities for a better life and that they deserve to have and enjoy a better future.

Changing the mentality of women about their situation and about their need for change are two of the biggest obstacles in the battle against oppression in Latin America. In order to do so, there are several obstacles to resolve. First, women in Latin

America have little or no access to education. Second, women are trying to break away from traditions supported by time and by societies in Latin America and the rest of the world. Third, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the majority of the continent forms the lowest stratum of society, and that women are considered the poorest of the poor (“Rural Poverty”). Fourth, the Church has a great interest in maintaining its *status quo* which subjugates women. Therefore, change in the reality of women on the continent has no possibility of success unless women in particular and society in general receive education, support and guidance (“Chronic Poverty”). Most importantly, women’s education must include a new approach to Mary in order to counteract the belief that their suffering brings them closer to the Virgin Mother. Education is also a priority because the only access they have to education is the education the Church offers, education that has maintained its interest.

It is necessary to consider the fact that the adoration of Mary will never change; Mary will always be an important figure, a priority in the lives of Latin American women. After all, she has always been and will always be a symbol of support, guidance, and hope for them. Education however, must be extended to all members of society. In this way, everybody would understand and support each other’s needs, hopes and goals. By introducing a new image of Mary, women can learn positive attributes of the Virgin Mother and through her example better their situation. In addition, women need to learn and develop skills that will allow them to work outside the household and collaborate in the family’s economy, helping them to become productive and to build their self-esteem. As they develop their own potential engaging in activities outside the household and producing “material goods,” they will be able bettering the financial

reality of the family. Women may begin to work together to help themselves, their families, and their communities.

Educating the poor is a process that will take time, organization, and the continuous support of society as a whole. Oppression will only end if all members of society are educated and learn to value a new reality for women as a social group; as well as the contributions women are capable to offer. Men need to change their vision and begin to value women and the contributions they can make to their families, their communities and their societies.

This change will be very challenging for men as they would not want to lose their privileged position over the women, the families and the society in Latin America. Most of all, they will be reluctant to allow the women to perform in the public sphere, a sphere that has been their domain from the beginning of time. However, as they see a new Mary emerge, they will learn and they will be able to accept the women's new role based on their faith and adoration for the Holy Mother.

However, the Church will be apprehensive and resistant to the changes that New *marianismo* will bring, changes that would challenge its interests and the interests that patriarchy has in maintaining their *status quo*, which subjugates women. Changes in the Church's moral ideology will result in the permanent disability of traditional Marian theology, a theology that was built with the purpose to control women through Mary. In societies where traditions and customs are so deeply rooted, change has to come from its members. In the case of women's oppression, women are the ones who need to initiate change into their own lives. They need to accept their realities, realize that there are opportunities to better their lives, understand the need to seek education, become

supportive of each other in their communities and work together for justice. Once change begins, men will follow and a domino effect will bring social change to Latin American societies.

3. *Marianismo* and Its Implications

Until now, all of the characteristics and moral attributes that Latin American women personified and acted upon were those defined by the principles prescribed by *marianismo*. Those principles represent the virtues of the Holy Mother. Unfortunately, in order to adopt a new image of Mary or New *marianismo* it is necessary to accept the fact that Latin American religion is “old”. The values of patriarchy, *machismo* and *marianismo* do not correspond to what modern society values: equality, freedom, autonomy, independence, etc. In the words of Hamington,

The conservative male hierarchy of the Roman Catholicism has a vested interest in maintaining the traditional imagery that permeates the Cult of Mary. A radical change in the traditional portrayal of Mary could have implications for change in Catholic theology, moral teaching, and the structure of the Church (Hamington 1).

Values like self-sacrifice, self-denial, contempt, submission, obedience, etc., are values that the Catholic Church has no interest in changing because they support its existence as we know it today. They have defined what “women” and “womanhood” should be throughout the history of the Catholic Church and throughout the history of Latin American societies.

Feminist theologians and Hamington among other scholars agree on the need for a change in the interpretation of religion based on patriarchal principles as the Catholic Church has always done. In order to accomplish this, they agree that a new Mary needs to

emerge. However, there has not been an agreement on how Mary should be re-invented. There is no doubt that women will learn to find solace and to glorify Mary as mother, as they can identify with her and her suffering as she stood by her Son through His Passion until He died. After all, it is not uncommon for Latin American women to witness the loss of their children to acts of violence. (“La Violencia”). In other words, this New Mary will personify a new ideal for women to look up to. The reality is that scholars in general and theologians in particular are aware of the importance and relevance of Mary. Latin American theologians know that it is impossible to ignore the value Mary has not only for women, but also for men in the continent. Therefore, according to them, Mary cannot simply disappear; she must be reconsidered, recreated. She must evolve. The evolution of the image of Mary needs to be the product of a new analysis of Mary, emphasizing the lessons conveyed about her in the Scriptures. This will allow Latin American women to see how Jesus related to women in the Bible and the manner He defended their dignity against the laws and customs of the time.

PART II

Solutions to Women's Subjugation and Oppression in Latin America

1. New *Marianism*: Re-examining the New Testament and a New Interpretation of Mary

To reinvent Mary, it is important to analyze her as she becomes a controversial figure for the Catholic Church, for the faithful, and for women everywhere. Mary is considered a central protagonist in the explanation and justification for the subjugation of Latin American women today. However, getting to know who Mary was is not going to be an easy task because there is not much extra-biblical information about her. Experts and historians question the veracity of the information we have about Mary today.

Maurice Hamington, an ethicist and political theorist, among other scholars, questions the veracity of the facts presented in the New Testament about Mary as he states: "She only appears in a handful of passages of the Second Testament, and only in the Annunciation does she have a protagonist role. Any other passages that mention Mary are of questionable historical origin. The Mary portrayed on those stories, is a mythologized Mary" (13). Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether states how the New Testament concentrates mostly in her virginal state as she gives birth to Jesus (1). In reality, the New Testament only refers to Mary in a protagonist role in the story of the Annunciation, and she is only named in the Book of Acts and in the Gospels by Matthew and Luke.

Although there is much controversy in the veracity of the information the Scriptures present of Mary, Luke's representation of Mary in his gospel is important to

this study because in his narrations Mary takes central stage. Luke in his Gospel presents Mary as a real, independent and capable woman. Mary sense of service to others and her social conscience is shown in Luke's as well as in John's Gospels. Most importantly, through Luke's writings, the reader can interpret Mary as a woman who makes decisions on her own, a woman who takes action. Luke also allows the reader to appreciate different aspects of a woman who faces very difficult moments in her life.

Through his Gospel we learn how Mary accepts God's proposal to become the mother of God. Mary gives her *Fiat*. *Fiat* means "let it be" or "let it happen" in Latin. Mary's decision demonstrates her autonomy and independence. Her lack of hesitation, need of a man's support, opinion, permission or approval allows us to see her as an independent and strong woman. Just by this action, Mary becomes "a theological agent in her own right" (Radford Ruether 33). Her *Fiat* seals the most significant decision of her life; a decision that will affect the future of all mankind in the Catholic tradition, forever.

It is not necessary to "invent" or "design" another Mary. The values that Latin American women are lacking in order to achieve liberation and end centuries of oppression and subjugation are already present in the biblical stories narrated in the Bible. Most importantly, the New Mary and what she represents can be used today to create different gender roles for women in Latin American societies. Therefore, Latin American theologians agree that the answer must be a new interpretation of Mary emphasizing the lessons conveyed about her in the Scriptures. This will allow Latin American women to see Mary with new eyes, maintaining the stories that are familiar to them.

2. A New Mary Comes Alive in the Scriptures

The New Testament does not dedicate much space to narrate stories that include Mary. Luke includes Mary in his Gospel more than anybody else in the New Testament, although, there are references about her by other authors. The first story, as narrated by Luke 1:39-56, Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth when she learns that she is pregnant. Once more, in opposition to the customs of the time, Mary makes her own decision, she never hesitates about visiting her cousin, and there is never an insinuation of her need for Joseph's permission or approval. Mary's action reflects the attitude of a confident and independent woman. In this story, Mary shows solidarity and support for another woman in need. This teaches women the importance to support, rely and be there for each other.

At the wedding in Cana, Mary demanded that her son Jesus change water into wine. This is Jesus' first known miracle as narrated by John 2:1-11. Although Mary is not the main character in John's tale, the story demonstrates Mary's influence over her son and, most importantly, her interest in the well-being of other members of her community. Mary demonstrates her interest in the wellbeing of her friends, representing a small community. She shows initiative as she takes action to help solve her friends' problem.

Luke also allows the reader to sense her as a mother in different opportunities throughout Jesus' life experiences as he narrated stories like Jesus lost in the temple Luke 2:41-52, and wrote "Mary kept all these things pondering them in her heart" (*Biblia.com*, Luke, 2:19 and 2:51). Luke's narrative allows the reader to feel Mary's anguish as a mother who loses her child. Any mother will be able to identify with Mary's experience.

Those stories present Mary as a positive influence for women. According to them, Mary is a woman with a great sense of independence, a woman with a social responsibility who does not hesitate, reacts and acts accordingly when someone needs

help and a woman who does not need the opinion, consent or authorization of a man. In Luke's stories, Mary is a woman with great capability to love, a mother who dedicates her life to her son, and who does everything in her power to help him fulfill his mission. Luke's gospel also teaches positive characteristics all women should possess and exercise, and characteristics and values that are especially important in the modern societies: independence, self-reliance, ambition, assertiveness, focus, self-confidence, etc. ("Mujer Latinoamericana"). Through those readings women can learn the importance of becoming independent, to be decision makers while at the same time continuing to be loving mothers always supportive of their children. Without a doubt, this comprehensive approach to Mary should be the role model to be followed by every woman in Latin America today.

The new Mary presented in Luke's gospel will help Latin American women to become independent members of society. Women will have a social conscience working together for their communities. Mary will not be seen as a negative influence or the cause of suffering of women on the continent. However, the lessons women could have learned from the Mary described by Luke and the lessons women have learned through the Church are different. Unfortunately, the image of Mary adored in Latin America is the Mary 'persona' who has evolved and developed as an answer to the Church's specific needs and interests at specific times during history.

The Church's "use of women (in the case of the cult of Mary) and feminine symbols to further legitimize patriarchal religion have been a historical process used to further oppress women... Religion has been the most powerful agency of alienation" (Hamington 26). This wrongful interpretation of Mary and what it represents for women

are the cause of the subordinate status of women in the Christian world in general and Latin American societies in particular.

This new approach will also allow them to see how Jesus supported, related, respected and valued women in the Bible through the relationships He developed with them as they are narrated in different stories, such as in Matthew 19:3-12 when Jesus talks about marriage and divorce, or John 8:2-12 when a woman is accused of adultery, and He asks the one who is without sin to cast a stone at her. Women will be able to understand and see how Jesus took action by challenging the gender roles of His time valuing women, their capabilities and their realities. Women will also see how he defended their dignity against the laws and customs of the time.

By re-reading the stories found in the Bible and interpreting both Mary and Jesus in a different way, Latin American women will be able to see Mary's strength and Jesus as a supportive, non-judgmental, acceptant of anyone, including those considered sinners, as it is exemplified through the relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene as it is stated in the New Testament was born in sin (parents unknown) and it is also insinuated that she was a prostitute. Mary Magdalene became a loyal companion of Jesus and his disciples and was present with Mary at the moment of his death. She is also the first person He appeared to after His Resurrection. By learning of how Jesus accepted Mary Magdalene and forgive her sins as the Church has portrayed her, women will see that Jesus never demanded or expected perfection and purity. Lastly, they will feel worthy of the love of Jesus.

The New Mary and the new and modern values that she represents can be used today to create different gender roles for women in Latin American countries as these

new values differ from the values of *marianismo* and contradict the ideology that assigned women an inferior position as well as the private sphere in society. The New Mary contradicts the idea that women belong in the household. As new Latin American women identify the New Mary, as they read the Bible, they will see Mary as a decision maker, a community leader, and a strong mother who stood by her Son until the end no matter the circumstances. A New Mary: a strong woman, a woman with hope, faith, and especially, with the strength for change.

With this new image of Mary, women will believe in their right and the importance of becoming active participants in the Kingdom of God. Their new attitude and actions will allow them to become active participants in their own realities. They will also begin to understand that they are worthy of the love of God here on earth. Those feelings will give women enough security and confidence to believe in themselves. Their new self-esteem and self-image will give them the courage to make external changes to their reality and the reality of others around them. Those actions will let others know God wants them to be happy and have a better life here on earth. At last, women will become true participants in their own liberation. That is when a new cycle will begin.

However, as the ideology of New *marianismo* began to spread in Latin America, scholars in general and theologians in particular have encountered obstacles in the transition from the old school to the new school: First, it is necessary to accept the fact that the new image of Mary, the Mary who is a symbol of the Church, who has been created and recreated many times to fulfill the Church's different interests at different moments in history, contradicts everything women have learned about Mary and about themselves for centuries. Scholars agreed on the impossibility to predict or assess

the acceptance of Mary's new image by millions of Latin American oppressed women and her role in their liberation. According to Hamington, it is impossible to predict the success of a New Mary in the life of women because this success depends on the change between women and the relationships of power and society.

Second, only time will be able to tell the possibilities of success of new *marianismo* in relation to the power of patriarchy and the Church's ideology, as well as the centuries of dominance and control they have over women and societies in Latin America. Patriarchy, the Church's ideology, and *machismo* all are interconnected, and their relationship is interdependent. Unfortunately, with those interrelationships in mind, the reality of the success in time of New *Marianismo* is unpredictable. Therefore, the success of New *marianismo* is uncertain.

Third, the geographical characteristics of the continent become a challenge in two different ways: some areas would be difficult or almost impossible to reach and theologians and sociologists expect the possibility of finding regions on the continent where the people will be more resilient to change. In addition, the distribution and concentration of the population can also constitute a challenge on its own. In some cases, there is also the fear that people; women in particular, will go back to the old traditions, incapable of facing the pressures of their communities.

Fourth, there is discrepancy between *marianismo* and New *marianismo*, which creates a moral conflict for women between traditional religious beliefs and the reality those women experience every day.

Marianismo's ideology does not respond to the needs and expectations of today's modern societies. Modernity and its expectations contradict

everything women have learned since the Spanish and Portuguese indoctrinated the natives and *mestizos* into Catholicism. However, change is needed in order for Latin American women to liberate themselves from oppression and to be able to better their situation and the reality of their communities. The partial acceptance of a new representation of Mary will be certainly a great step in the journey to women's equality in Latin America, a victory on its own. The identification of Latin American women with a New Mary will support the development of a sense of community and a need to ease and comfort others' pain. After all, it is a fact that women in Latin America experience their pain and their own oppression as well as the pain and oppression of those around them. They experience the oppression of their community. Liberation theologians in general and Latin American liberation theologians in particular believe that New *marianismo* will give women the strength they need to become active participants in the change needed in their lives and in the lives of those in their communities. "Women's spirituality is one of solidarity and community" (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology from Latin America* 158) as women see Mary as "the paradigm of faith, prayer, and solidarity with all the oppressed" (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology from Latin America* 159). Mary can be "contemplated as a new woman, the liberated woman, prophetess of the God of the poor" (*Our Cry for Life Feminist Theology from Latin America* 159). The awareness of community in women can be interpreted as a sign of success of New *marianismo* as women see that Mary has a new image: a woman of action, a woman committed to change.

Part III

New Theologies in Favor of the Oppressed

1. Liberation Theology: A New Ideology in Favor of the Latin American Poor

According to Ron Rhodes, a systematic theologian, from Dallas Theological Seminary and president of Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries, an apologetics organization in Texas, today traditional theology "supports and legitimizes a political and economic system - democratic capitalism - which is responsible for exploiting and impoverishing the Third World" (Rhodes 8). In the case of Latin America, "social scientists emphasized that underdevelopment is structurally conditioned by the exploitation by foreign economic powers maintaining Latin America in a system of dependency on hegemonic centers" (Hillar 37). Liberation Theology critiques the religious ideologies and the different political structures framing modern societies. Gustavo Gutierrez, Peruvian Catholic Dominican priest, was the progenitor of Liberation Theology.

As early as the late 1960s, the oppression of the majority of Latin America and other Third World regions resulted in the theologians' questioning the involvement of the Church in oppressive social political systems around the world. Those with power in the hierarchy of the Church did not find any problem with the social order of Latin American societies. According to the journal *Latin American Research Review*, the questions came from Catholic or Protestant priests, nuns or pastors who had the opportunity to work

directly with the poor in Brazil, Peru, Nicaragua, Guatemala and other countries in Latin America. The injustice and suffering they witnessed made them wonder what could and should the Church do to alleviate and liberate the poor from their current situation. This situation, not new to the poor, has been sustained since the discovery of the continent as many historians agree with the fact that the Catholic Church has sided with those in positions of power and authority since the discovery of the continent.

The ideas of Gustavo Gutierrez, were published in *“Teorías de la Liberación”* in 1971. Gutierrez recognized the need for a theology of liberation in the dependency, poverty, and injustice suffered by millions of poor in Latin America. Dependency resulted from the majority of the population relying depending on the “opportunities” given to them by the rich. On the other hand, the rich always see themselves as generous providers of opportunities for the least fortunate. They do not feel any responsibility or remorse as they observe the conditions of living of the poor, as it is their land the poor work and live on. The people’s dependency because their financial gains depend on the expectations mandated by the landlords and by the government policies which do not give them the opportunity to sell their products in a fair market. Finally, the poor’s total dependency as they do not have any representation, any voice in the making of agropecuaria or market policies. This exploitation results in the unjust poverty conditions of exploitation they live without any possibilities of change creating a vicious cycle for the poor in Latin America.

In his book, Gutierrez defines Liberation Theology as a theological reflection based on the Gospel and the experiences of men and women in the process of liberation in Latin America. The objective of this theology is to address issues of injustice

and subjugation affecting millions of people who represent the lowest stratum of Latin American society. Gutierrez believes that the Church can transform the social order in Latin America.

Father Gutierrez defines Liberation Theology as a methodology not limited to the re-reading of the Scriptures from the point of view of the poor, but also as a practical training of the people in the way they work the land, manage their cattle, and organize their everyday home finances to allow them to improve their lives and to save for the future. As a result, the praxis of Liberation Theology is the vehicle in which a New Church teaches the people a new interpretation of the Scriptures. In it the people have two roles: they are agents who spread the Gospel, and also they are the most important agents of change in their own lives. According to his ideology, in order to achieve total social transformation all members of society must be involved. All people must understand and act upon the interests and the needs of the poor in order to help them to become productive members of society for the well-being of that society.

Gutierrez understood that in the case of Latin America, there was a need to give priority to the political and socio-economic situation of the oppressed. Based on the fact that the Church needed to become more involved in the needs of the poor, it was also necessary to reinterpret the answers offered by the Gospel to the poor. At this point, the ideas of Liberation Theology were followed by a small number of Catholic and Protestant clergy who worked directly with the poor and who advised community leaders, women and men to actively participate in their own liberation from oppressive political and economic systems.

Gutierrez worked with Leonardo Boff, a Brazilian ex-Franciscan priest who worked directly with the poor and who is considered one of the most influential progenitors of Liberation theology. The time he spent with the poor gave him and his followers the basis to hope for a society of freedom. Boff began to advocate for the poor after his experiences as a priest. Working in the slums of Petropolis he witnessed how the people had to scavenge through the garbage for food. Later on, in Acre-Purus in the Amazon jungle, he observed the daily battle of people for survival; as he witnessed the people selling their crops for pennies to the government and losing their land to large powerful corporations.

His experiences and observations allowed him to develop a sense of community as he helped the people to developed cooperation among each other. As the people began to cooperate with each other, he began to see Jesus as a liberator of the soul, as He forgives sins. He also began to see Jesus as a liberator of material oppression as He was the inspiration to bring the people to work together with and for each other. As people experienced the advantages of working with each other for the good of all, he observed an invigoration of faith as their hope in in the possibility of a better future grew.

Boff believes that Marxist principles have much to offer to the social restructuring in Latin America. Gutierrez who agrees with Boff states “in the confrontation between Christianity and Marxism, there is fertile ground” (Muskus 31). Gutierrez never went against the Church’s direct orders. However, the Church did not accept their ideas as it was already stated in the *Divini Redemptoris*, an anti-communist encyclical published in 1937 by Pope Pius XI, which maintained that Marxist ideology would destroy the foundations of society, obligate women to leave the private sphere of their homes and

interrupt the natural order of society ("Divini-redemptoris"). On the contrary, Boff maintained his position and was silenced by the Church (Agnew, Ann). He resigned from the Franciscan order and continued working with the poor. Liberation Theology is considered by many scholars to be a humanistic doctrine because it gives the poor the opportunity to "learn to read the scripture in a way that affirms their dignity, self-worth and their right to struggle together for a more decent life" (Hillar 35-36). As they understand their importance and value in the eyes of God, they will also understand that it is their right to expand their opportunities and to better their lives here on earth.

The beginning of the spread of Liberation Theology in Latin America goes back to the first plenary meeting of CELAM – Latin American Bishops Conference- which took place in R o de Janeiro, Brazil in 1955 (Hillar 36). There, the Catholic Church main points of interest and concern were the rise of Protestant missionary activity on the continent, the decrease in the number of Catholic clergy to serve the needs of the people especially in rural and remote areas, and the undeniable complicity of the Church within the social hierarchy. This interest was a response to the revolutionary movements that were taking place in different countries in Latin America, as well as the loss of the Catholic supremacy in the faith of the people in the continent.

According to Hillar, revolutionary movements had already taken place in Cuba, in the Caribbean, Peru and Venezuela in South America and Guatemala in Central America (36). Those revolutions were creating more social and political instability on the continent and raising awareness for the need of a deep and significant change in the social, and political structure of the society.

In 1968, as a second CELAM meeting took place in Medellin, Colombia, the Church took a different approach in its stand on the social problems faced by the countries in the continent. At this meeting the discussion was centered on “the role played by the Catholic Church in the social situation of the poor in Latin America” (Hyun Jo 107). Roman Catholic priest Phillip Berryman, stated that “for the first time a responsibility was given to the laymen across the continent to become involved in the transformation of society” (Hyun Jo 107). His statement is supported by Hillar who also recognizes the CELAM for calling “Christians to be involved in the transformation of society and the defense of human rights” (37). As a consequence of the discussions taken place at the Medellin CELAM, a group of Catholic priests and the people decided to work together for the good of all in society. The poor were not only supported by the clergy, but also by laymen and women belonging especially to the middle class.

A. Consequences of Liberation Theology for the Catholic Church in Latin America

The bishops at the CELAM conference in Medellin, Colombia in 1968 concluded that the “violence of daily life, unemployment, economic inequality, poor health, low life expectancy and social injustice” (Levine 132) needed the prompt attention of the Church in response to the lack and inability of the governments to solve the problems. According to Levine, those findings were not new to the Catholic Church, neither was the epidemic level of violence due to alcoholism, drug use, domestic violence and physical abuse that affected , poor children and women in particular (134). Sadly, according to Burdick, the majority of governmental entities across the continent as well as the Catholic Church

were not capable or interested in taking action, solving or helping the victims of such violence.

In few countries, such as Brazil, El Salvador, Paraguay, Chile, Guatemala and Peru, the Church became a mediator, a negotiator and a peacemaker as the followers of Liberation Theology broke their liaisons with the political and social powers (Levine 135). The social and political situations in different countries in Latin America changed the objective of the Church by making it take a stand in favor of the poor. For instance, the Bishops meeting in Medellin, Colombia in 1968, the Church suggested to “distribute apostolic personnel giving preference to the poor in needy sectors; they agreed to speak to the poor and to make the problems of the poor their own” in their reflexion sobre Medellín (“Figari, Luis Fernando). However, it was not until the Third General Conference of Bishops at Puebla in 1979 in Mexico, that the Latin American Church officially endorsed the Church’s preferential option for the poor.

Preferential option for the poor is a concept coined in 1968 by the Jesuits’ superior general, Father Pedro Arrupe in a letter he wrote to his order. Preferential option for the poor refers to the need to help relieve the suffering and injustices experienced by the poor. It is the moral obligation of Christians to help those in need as Jesus taught his followers. According to Padre Gutierrez, as stated by Father John Dear, aside from the concern and actions taken by Christians against poverty and injustice, preferential option for the poor also includes a spiritual and mystical element, and act upon the faith in Jesus through actions and example.

The Church lost its supremacy on the continent as Protestant and Pentecostal churches grew massively during the 1980s and 1990s (Levine 133) by the time it changed

its position and the interests that had maintained as a priority for decades. The people began to lose their faith in the Church because in many, if not most Latin American countries, the Church could not protect them from harm. For instance, the Church had no power over the governmental policies that did not consider the needs of the poor, maintained the few rights they had or gave any rights to them. Aside from the Church's inability to fight the government, the Church was also incapable to stop the big corporations that expropriated land from the farmers and that have no problem taking the land away from them.

The Church took two different positions in response to the violence in different countries. For example, in Brazil, Chile, Peru and El Salvador, the Church entered into solidarity with victims of violence. The poor could identify themselves with Jesus just as He was victimized by violence during his life. This identification made their faith grow stronger. By the Church using this new approach the followers who remained faithful to it, grew in faith and strength. In these countries, the Church was able to create and support human rights organizations. The Church also became an intermediary in peace processes and the recovery of public historical memories. On the other hand, specifically in Argentina, the Church supported the military dictatorships during 1976 and 1983. This was a period of terrible violence and social unrest which resulted in the disappearance and assassination of thousands of people. According to Levine, until today, the Church abstains from cooperating with the recovery of historical memory (133-

134).

For the first time in the history of the continent, countries that had always been Catholic became "religiously pluralistic" (Levine 133) as diverse Protestant communities began to grow in the continent from the 1970s on. As a result, the

number of Catholics has dropped steadily for the last four decades, while the number of Protestants now makes up 15 to 25 percent of the population of the continent. In order to spread their message, religious institutions began to use and take advantage of technology such as radio, television, and as it became available, the Internet.

Fifty years ago sociologists and ethnologists would have never questioned the “monopoly” that the Catholic Church had in Latin America since the conquest. For the first time since the Spaniards imposed Catholicism in Latin America, the Catholic religion must compete with other religions for followers. The reality of this trend makes us wonder what the consequences of this shift are for the Catholic Church in Latin America. Most importantly, in the case of this study, it makes us wonder what the consequences of this shift are for Latin American women in particular.

As the practice of Liberation Theology spread through the continent, the Vatican condemned its Communist ideological base, and it also rejected its identification of the Church’s hierarchy as a privileged class. In the 1980s, Catholic authorities starting with Pope John Paul II, accused “liberation theologians of supporting violent revolutions and outright Marxist class struggle” (Sunsets and Liberation). Working in opposition to the Catholic Church, several religious leaders, including some Catholic bishops and many priests, supported the new trend of ideas and became active participants in the social change taking place in Latin American countries. In the beginning, the Catholic Church on the continent, promoted the formation of “movements such as Young Christian Students, Young Christian Workers, Young Christian Agriculturalists, and the Movement for Basic Education, groups that set up educational radio programs and the first Base Ecclesial Communities” (Rhodes 8). For the purpose of this study, Base Ecclesial

Communities or *Comunidades Eclesiásticas Básicas* (CEBs) are of special interest. CEBs are defined by Hillar as lay-led groups of Christians as basic organic units of society and pastoral activity which after being introduced (37) have played, for many years, an important role as a tool for women to become active participants in their communities. These ecclesial communities are “important agents of re-socialization of women” (Drogus 2) as they offer different opportunities for them to become active participants in the lives of their communities.

Finally, according to Moskus, aside from the changes that Liberation Theology brought to the makeup of religion on the continent, it also brought hope, education, new possibilities and the new attitude of the people. New doors opened to women through CEBs. It also became the inspiration for the development of other liberation theologies around the world: Black Liberation Theology, Feminist Liberation Theology, Jewish Liberation Theology, Asian Liberation Theology and Irish Liberation Theology (32) among others.

B. An Opportunity for Women to Enter the Public Sphere: *Comunidades Eclesiásticas Básicas* (Base Ecclesial Communities, CBS)

Scholars define CEBs as groups of 15 to 20 Christian families who come from the lowest strata of society and meet regularly to read and discuss the Scriptures giving an interpretation based on their experiences in their daily lives. They give women the opportunity to participate in discussions and become active members of the Catholic Church. Women’s participation in CEBs is important because there they have the opportunity to learn and to practice different skills they cannot practice at home; skills that allow them to actively participate in their communities.

It is necessary to clarify that there is a big difference between the CEBs directed by the Catholic Church and the CEBs directed by the Pentecostal churches. Both groups help liberate and empower women just by the fact that women are able to support each other and have the opportunity to express their own ideas. Aquino and Guevara state that in many cases, women discuss issues that are not of religious nature. They discuss the problems that affect their daily lives: from where will the next meal come and how will they provide clothing, health services and education for their children. In many cases women feel safe to speak about the abuse they suffer at home. In any case, women are empowered to discuss issues that are important to them.

Although both the Catholic and the Pentecostal CEBs gave women the opportunity to work in the public sphere, in the Catholic CEBs women had to maintain the traditional Catholic gender roles. As a result, women never experienced “liberation”. In opposition, the Pentecostal churches offered alternatives to the traditional Catholic gender roles and have become “important agents of resocialization for women, who are the majority of participants in Pentecostal CEBs” (Drogus 4). In these new interpretations of CEBs, a reevaluation of women’s roles as mothers and wives and their involvement in the active participation of social communities is emphasized.

According to scholars like Elizabeth Brusco, professor of anthropology at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA, Pentecostal Churches in Latin America emphasize not only the importance of valuing the role of women in the private sphere, but also the equality of men and women in the eyes of God, says Drogus. By doing this, they deny any insinuation of female subordination to men. This equality, according to the

Pentecostals' interpretation of scriptures, gives women a greater voice in the small communal groups, within the church and in the private sphere within the family.

The Pentecostal doctrine demands that both men and women “must submit to the will of God as interpreted through the Church” (Drogus 4) the Church can also impose tremendous pressure, if needed, on typical *machista* male behavior such as excessive drinking, infidelity, and domestic abuse. In this setting, women have the support of the church in dealing with these matters and in establishing a more balanced division of responsibilities in the home. As Drogus states,

The legitimizing context of religion may provide a bridge to expanding roles by offering leadership opportunities and skill, as well as a potential justification for greater equality for women in the form of new beliefs about women's worth and roles as Christians (5).

In Catholic CEBs and in groups formed within Pentecostal churches as women discuss and interpret the Scriptures, they become preachers in their discussion groups, acquiring experience, status, and engaging in leadership roles that were never within their reach in the past. The new learned skills are important to help others in the community, validate the women's abilities, and in certain cases, offer them the possibility to bring extra income to the household. Through those experiences, women began to reject the submissiveness, characteristic of the culture, while continuing to value their role at home as they were empowered to participate in the religious sphere.

CEBs have proven to be a direct cause of women seeking more education and entering the workforce. In many cases, women have the chance to help each other without the opposition of their husbands who generally do not question activities outside the home as long as they are related to the church as a response to their *machista* traditions.

In the last several years, scholars have observed a decline in the CEBs' membership which they believed it is the result of several factors. First, the women cannot balance their responsibilities inside and outside the home. Second, men do not support women's endeavors. Third, men have difficulty relinquishing the privileges they were accustomed to through *machismo*: their authority over the household and over women.

Ironically, in Latin America, the responsibility that men have as providers is a factor that has contributed to the exclusion of women from public life. (Herrera, Ricardo). As a consequence, they do not have any possibilities or are denied opportunities to develop any skills to allow them to be active outside the home. They can only develop skills that are associated with the care of the house or the upbringing of the children isolating them from the rest of society. As a result, Latin American theologians state that women feel trapped as they have a sense of despair and hopelessness. The reality is that women lose all sense of purpose as they see the impossibility to reach their goals as their families and loved ones live in misery.

The actions of Pentecostal churches, the Catholic Church and vehicles of transformation such as CEBs in the continent, may be seen as the answers for women in Latin America to begin their quest for social justice. However, the primary goal of Liberation Theology is to liberate the poor. In its eagerness to achieve this goal, Liberation Theology relegated women to a second place.

The eagerness to liberate the poor in Latin America, Liberation Theology made the development of a Feminist Liberation Theology possible. Latin American Feminist theologians took advantage of the ideas, methodologies and strategies developed by

Liberation Theology to develop a theology in an effort to transform society in order to save and liberate women and the poor in Latin American societies.

Historically, the seed of Latin American Feminist Liberation Theory goes back to the 1970s when women's movements contributed to social and political changes around the world as women became active participants in different areas of their societies. Women's liberation movement contributed to the development of feminist Christian organizations. The main goal of those movements was to organize women to challenge patriarchal principles, actions, and authority as well as to help the women achieve their potential and better their lives and that of their communities. The actions of those organizations resulted in the questioning of religious authority and its validity in Latin American.

C. The Birth of a New Theology: Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology, Roots and Beginnings

Latin American feminist theologian María Pilar Aquino states that starting in the late 1950s, feminist theologians around the world studied and analyzed the situation of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy, especially women. These feminist theorists were focused on understanding women and men and their experiences with God in their daily lives. Their objective according to Dr. Aquino was to develop new social models "free of patriarchal domination, exploitation, inhumanity and violence...as well as creating a profound reconceptualization of religions" (Aquino, 1998: 89-90). In the case of Latin America, the creation of new social models included the understanding of the dynamics of the social structure, the role of the Church in it, and its interactions.

Many scholars, including Aquino, agree that the social

construction of gender “places women in positions of disadvantage and subordination” (Aquino 1998: 90). In Latin America, the poor are identified as the majority of the population; within that group, women constitute a separate and unique entity because the “women’s problem” is not limited to a socio-economic stratification. The women’s problem is directly affected by relationships of power. Those relationships have been established by the social value given to gender and gender power. In the case of Latin American women, the disadvantage and subordination that Aquino refers to is not limited to the public sphere. It also extends to the private sphere as the *machismo* typical of the continent’s societies cannot be ignored.

Peruvian sociologist and political scientist Virginia Vargas states that “the social relations of gender are relationships that involve all persons (men and women), are relationships of dominance or subordination that support a rigid sexual division of labor, and are expressed in specific forms of oppression in the private and public spheres” (Vargas, Valente 75). The severe oppression present in Latin America affects women’s lives every day.

1. Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology: A Hope for the Future

According to Maria Pilar Aquino, Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology (LAFLT) evolved from Liberation Theology, which is considered a male theology. It was not until the late 1970s to mid-1980s that a theology from the women’s perspective became a reality on the continent. Latin American Feminist Theology was born as a result of a series of meetings in which groups of Latin American women theologians met in different cities across the continent over several decades. The “Initial Encounter” took place in Puebla, Mexico in 1979, followed by another encounter in Lima, Peru in 1983,

and the “Expansion Encounter” in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1985. In this last meeting, twenty eight women theologians representing nine Latin American and Caribbean countries were present and the basic framework for LAFLT was developed. Later in 1986 the “Liaison Encounter took place in Mexico and finally in 1993 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, the “Consolidation and Advancement Encounter” took place. In this last encounter, the principles of LAFLT were expanded to include Black and Indigenous Feminist Theologies (Aquino, 1998: 99-101). LAFLT is not static nor is it exclusive.

Through continuous meetings, Latin American feminist theologians have been able to unite women across borders in their mission to support those seeking justice. LAFLT includes men because in their ideology, Latin American women theologians understand that true change only comes from changing “all” members of society. “While this theology is from a woman’s perspective, it is not only for women; it aims to fulfill both men and women, in accordance with the gospel of equality” (Aquino 1993: 67). LAFLT intends to understand and ratify individually and collectively women as well as men’s experiences of God.

When Gustavo Gutierrez defined Liberation Theology as “critical reflection upon praxis” in 1971, he also developed the idea to give “the people ownership over their own lives.” In his definition he gave importance to the practice of theology and not to the theory behind the theology as it has been taught by the Church for centuries. Theology was defined by the Church as a rational discipline emphasizing it as wisdom and rational knowledge alienating women from it. Knowledge was exclusively reserved to men as women were always considered inferior and incapable of understanding the complexity of theology. However, Liberation Theology and Latin American Feminist Liberation

theology placed their attention and interest on praxis over theory. In addition, Maria Pilar Aquino states that in these types of theology, the people become active participants in their own reality. In the case of LAFLT: women become the owners of their reality.

LAFLT's most important contribution to the praxis of theology is the introduction of "*la vida cotidiana*". A woman's daily life is a "fundamental factor in the reflection of faith experience and also as a central analytical category" (Aquino 104:1998). However, aside from *la vida cotidiana*, LAFLT applies several analytical factors to help the people understand and achieve a higher degree of liberation. Those analytical factors are: the Experience of Women, The Body of Power and Wisdom, Feminist Hermeneutics, The Logic of Concrete and Integral Life, One's Own Subjectivity, Historical Memory, The Practice of *Cariño*, and Ecumenism from Below. They are considered unique when compared to other theologies of liberation. Although some of them seem self-explanatory, they all take a different meaning in LAFLT.

2. Components and Analytical Factors of Latin American Feminist Liberation

Theology

A. *La vida cotidiana*

According to Latin American Feminist theologians, the concept *la vida cotidiana* is important as a means to consider women's experiences an intrinsic part of faith. No other theology of liberation has valued women's everyday experiences. *La vida cotidiana* is fundamental in the process of understanding and analyzing the situation of women in Latin America. After all, women suffer the effects of "asymmetrical social relations" in their daily lives every day as a result of the gender division of power.

The analysis of women's daily lives is made from two different perspectives: their

personal experience and their experience in relation to the community. Latin American Feminists theologians agree that the social relations subjugating women are out of their control as they have been established by society in response to gender stereotypes. This social division has relegated women to the household and has assigned men to the public sphere. As a result, the job market has not only been divided, in most cases women's entrance to it has been denied. In order to validate women's reality and their right to participate in the public sphere, LAFLT takes into consideration the use of a hermeneutical interpretation of the Bible and the experiences of women in a patriarchal society. Aquino believes that "in order to redeem the past, transform the present, and prepare for the future" (118) it is necessary to consider *la vida cotidiana* as the setting in which unequal social relations of power take place and act as an agent of oppression against women.

All member of society must accept responsibility for the subjugation and oppression they suffer or they inflict on others. Women are responsible for their own subjugation as they act under the principles of *marianismo*. Men are responsible as they continue acting like *machos* under the principles of *machismo*. Both men and women are responsible for maintaining unequal social relationships of power allowing gender to be one of the major factors that determines the division of labor in society.

Although Aquino believes that the rest of the analytical factors used in LAFLT are considered less innovative than *la vida cotidiana*, it is important to state their nature as they are essential components in the analysis of the situation of the majority of women and men living in precarious conditions in Latin

America. Equally they must be considered and are necessary in the quest for solutions to inequality, suppression, and subordination existing on the continent.

B. The Experience of Women

This concept refers to and takes into consideration the “historical, physical, bodily, and geographic factors that interact in the symbolic and political construction of our experience” (Aquino 104: 1998). Although, in general, the parameters that characterize Latin American women’s experiences are very similar, LAFLT takes into consideration variations including space, the present and past, as well as women’s everyday experiences to validate each one of them.

C. The Body of Power and Wisdom

In opposition to traditional Christianity, LAFLT gives importance to women’s bodies, making the understanding and interpretation of their experience possible “as women” of God. A woman’s body is valued for its ability to procreate. Women are given the possibility to understand their own sexuality as a gift from God not as a sin. They are encouraged to value it, to pursue sexual education and family planning, other than abstinence as it was and still is taught by the Church. LAFL theologians are using CEBs not associated with the Church to teach women about their sexuality, birth control, pre and post-natal-care, their right to procreate, and even their right to abortion.

Women are educated by traveling nurses, midwives or by older women. Aside from being educating about their own bodies and their right to enjoy their sexuality, the idea is that once women’s bodies are seen in a different manner by men, it becomes easier and more natural to condemn and reject all forms of violence and abuse perpetrated against women on regular basis in Latin American societies.

The need for sexual education for women in Latin American countries is not new and was inspired in part by the work and effort of Ivone Guevara, a Brazilian nun, who witnessed the hardships of the poor, especially women, during the early 1970s. Guevara worked directly with the poor and as she accompanied a healthcare team in the *sertão pernambucano* (a semi-arid region in Northeastern Brazil). Where she assisted a midwife delivering babies and witnessed how instead of the happiness that a new life should bring to the new mothers, they were feeling despair and hopelessness caused by the awareness in their incapability to offer a future for their newborn babies.

After realizing that those experiences were the norm, Guevara expressed her view and support for abortion on the Brazilian national magazine *Veja*. As a result, she was silenced by the Catholic Church for two years in 1993. However, the Church's strategy did not work as Guevara continued to be one of the few liberation theologians and the first one who proclaimed her views against the Church teachings in reference to women's sexuality, specifically, her belief that abortion is not a sin. According to her, "a woman who is not emotionally or psychologically prepared to bear a child should have the right to end her pregnancy" (Nogueira-Godsey 9). Her position originated new discourses on women's sexuality for feminist liberation theologians who began to challenge the views of the Catholic Church and its ideology with more valid and strong arguments. Guevara's arguments justified the need for women's sexual pre and post-natal education as a response to the lack of education, information, and health centers for women not just in Brazil but in most countries in Latin America.

D. Feminist Hermeneutics:

LAFLET values the point of view of women in the interpretation of the Bible as

well as all Christian traditions and rituals. As women help create new interpretations, the input made by the women will help them understand the dynamics in the relationships of power in the modern world. They will also be more aware of the roles they play in their communities. Without a doubt, a feminist hermeneutics will allow them to understand that the interpretation of the Scriptures as we know it today, responds to the interest of a patriarchal ideology that has an interest in maintaining control over women.

E. The Logic of Concrete and Integral Life:

LAFLT promotes the use of “social powers in the context of new cultures free of hierarchical socio-ecclesial relationships” (Aquino 105: 1998). The model offered by LAFLT contradicts the social model that governs the world today. The patriarchal model that governs Latin American societies divides and antagonizes women at personal and social dimensions. The Logic of Concrete and Integral Life seeks a life in which, as Boff stated in the theory of Liberation Theology, men should be able to cover their basic material necessities for food, shelter, healthcare, education and safety in addition to freedom of political participation (Boff: 1982). Once those needs are covered, dignity, health and happiness should be achieved by men at an individual and social level. LAFLT is set apart from Liberation Theology because it seeks the participation and inclusion of all mankind, men and women, in the principles that define justice in society and in the Church.

F. One’s Own Subjectivity:

European colonization left the continent under the control of social and religious institutions; those institutions still control every aspect of the poor today. Feminist theologians seek to liberate their minds. Once each individual becomes able to value their

subjectivity, he or she will be able to take a stand on his/her own with the purpose of achieving justice and validation for him/herself and for all members of society.

G. Historical Memory

LAFLT uses historical memory in two different ways. In the first place, historical memory helps women remember and value the contributions made by other women throughout the history of the continent. Second, it is also used to study the strategies past generations used in order to cope and survive abuse and subjugation. By analyzing the injustices of the past, women can alter the course of the future.

H. The Practice of *Cariño*

The Practice of *Cariño* is valued as the love that women spread to the members of their families and through their communities. LAFLT recognizes and values the contradiction that some may see in a woman as she is tender and delicate when expressing and spreading *cariño* to those she cares for while at the same time she shows her strength as she faces her everyday experiences, some of them unjust and violent.

I. Ecumenism from Below:

Women have organized themselves to demand being taken seriously and included by Church authorities. This unity is reflected in the way LAFLT developed as a series of conferences and dialogues between women theologians. Although, LAFLT theologians believe that change is possible, several changes need to take place. The Spanish conquerors instilled in the American aborigines the image of a God “warrior, judge, patriarchal lord” (Aquino 131). The God that the people, men and women need to love and believe in is a “God whose essence is love, a God who freely conceives and creates, whose peculiar mode of being is compassion and mercy” (Aquino, 131). It is important

that women feel that God accepts and loves them in order to be able to transform their lives. Most importantly, the image of a New Mary needs to be actively incorporated in the Liberation of Latin American women as a positive role model for women in today's modern societies.

Finally, Latin American Feminist Liberation theologians insist on the importance of men to take responsibility for their actions and to recognize the oppression they practice every day. Men must eliminate those behaviors so they can also begin to liberate themselves from their everyday *machista* prejudices that produce actions that negatively affect the lives of women. Men and women also need to educate the new generation, giving their sons an opportunity to grow up and become responsible, fair and empathetic adults. After all, it is the responsibility of all members of society to break the vicious cycle of women's oppression in Latin America.

PART IV

Conclusions

This investigation has been an exploration of the causes, the understanding of their complexity, and the identification of possible solutions to the complexity of women's oppression in Latin America. Throughout this investigation, it was possible to identify the damage done by the trifecta caused by the imposition of the Catholic Church's patriarchal ideology, in combination with the *machista* and *marianista*, ideologies, unique phenomena to Latin American cultures. The damage caused by this trifecta became an impossible barrier for women to overcome on their own as the societal hierarchy of Latin American countries is based on those three principles. In addition, those ideologies became actively responsible for the perpetuation of women's placement at the bottom of the socio-political structure in the continent.

This study also revealed how the principles instilled by *marianismo*, in women as well as in men, contributed to the subjugation of women by men throughout the history of the continent as it became an intrinsic characteristic of Latin American societies. The problem became intensified as women and their attitude supported this abusive system as they accepted their oppressed role without resistance. It is a fact that "women contributed

to and helped to create and to eternalize their own reality” (Stevens 171). *Marianismo* contributes to the externalization of a dangerous and negative reality for women in the lower socio-economic status. *Marianismo* supports patriarchy and *machismo* as it values an image of a woman who is “contemplative, lonely, self-denying, submissive and self-sufficient” (Rondon, 158). The attributes of *marianismo* have been instilled in women over centuries, supporting patriarchy’s interests and maintaining women in an inferior position in society.

Fortunately, as a consequence of the social awareness that intellectuals brought to Latin America in the second half of the 1900s, the social injustice suffered by the lower strata of society, the great majority of the continent’s population, gained attention. The poor benefited, to some extent, as different ideologies, among them Liberation Theology tried to bring relief to their living conditions. The development of Liberation Theology brought to Latin America a new vision and a new hope with the implementation of different methodologies and techniques among them the implementation of CEBs and the hermeneutical interpretation of the Bible. Even though women were ignored by Liberation Theology, they did benefit from the new ideology and from its organized structures and methodologies. They allowed women to discover their own abilities and develop skills outside the home for the good of the community, bringing their self-esteem and with it their self-worth to a higher level.

Aside from the fact that some experts consider CEBs a failure as their numbers diminished over time, there is no doubt that women directly benefitted from the CEBs as their participation in these groups gave them the opportunity to demonstrate and prove their potential to their husbands, their communities and most importantly to themselves.

More importantly, CEBs gave women a voice and the opportunity to participate in the public sphere.

Together, women can and need to spread their voice and their actions into their community breaking the barriers instituted by social class and hierarchy. Women across all strata of society need to be aware of the fact that their situation is not unique to them. It is necessary that they realize that most women in Latin America are suffering the same subjugation and the same oppression. Once women become active participants in their liberation process they also need to be aware that a difficult and long journey awaits them. They need to understand that there will be many obstacles, and that in many cases women themselves will be their own obstacle. Although it is undeniable that there has been progress and that women have achieved some success, women's oppression in Latin America is a problem that needs to be solved by women; women must bring change into their own lives by supporting each other and changing their own attitude. Once this change begins, they can change the attitude of men.

Although the fight against *machismo* and patriarchy has begun, it is far from over. The development of new *marianismo*, combined with a hermeneutical approach to the Bible from women's point of view constitute a nice combination of methodologies in the process of educating women in their search for liberation. Women's liberation in Latin America is in the first stage of development. The only victory right now is the fact that women are making history. Women are making their voices heard. Most importantly, women have become aware of their situation. The assimilation and adoption of methodologies and structures from Liberation Theology, as they have been adapted by Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology, are just the beginning steps in women's

fight against patriarchy, *machismo* and *marianismo*. They are the main characters in developing a women's Liberation Theology. The development of Latin American Feminist Liberation Theology has entered an area of investigation and theory formulation that was never within women's reach. With it, Latin American women have become their own object of investigation. Women's liberation in Latin America is not just about the education of women. It is about the education of entire societies, the change in their value systems, and the change in how each man and woman perceives his or her role, as well as the role of the "other" in a new society.

Therefore, the answer to the liberation of Latin American women requires education, a new interpretation and meaning of Mary to women and men, and the establishment of a just society and political systems. The liberation of Latin American women requires a profound and complete change in the social, political, financial, cultural and religious realms of an entire continent. The crude reality is that Latin Feminist Liberation Theology, the methodologies and techniques applied by Latin American Feminist theologians learned and borrowed from Liberation Theology in conjunction with New *marianismo*, and a new interpretation of the Scriptures, is just the seed planted in the consciousness of the people, of women and men, to begin a radical social change in Latin American societies. Hopefully that seed will grow and influence those who hold the power and allow real change to take place and end the oppression of women in Latin America.

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