

This is a summary of the main points of Ann Gilroy's speaking notes from her address to the WATAC Conference 2007.

Mothers and Daughters & Church: Let there be Hope!

Ann Gilroy

First let me outline two different feminist analyses of mothers and daughters in western society. The first is from the perspective of psychotherapy and has been constructed by Luce Irigaray critiquing the work of Freud and other philosophers because she maintains in their conceptions of the world there are no real women. They see everything so much from their own perspective that women to them are a little extra – and not a particularly beneficial extra – to men.

Irigaray maintains that the western psyche and the symbolic system that supports the psyche, - everything that helps us interpret our lives in this earth as well as death and after death – is constructed according to the male imagination and thought. Herein the male is the norm, the rule is the father's, the father's language is the mode of communication and men's desires are normative. You may well recognise my inadequacy in portraying her thinking but it is broad brushed enough for us to proceed.

So if the western psyche is completely colonised by the male, where do women and their daughters fit in? Irigaray says that women are part of the male economy in that they are necessary as mothers of sons to keep the system going, but they have no identity of their own. There is no real sexual difference or reciprocity in the system where men learn to inhabit women's world as much as women, men's. Irigaray would say that there is no 'women's world' because there are no *real* women. Women are the constructions of men. As an aside, I now realise how the five women's names planted among the dozens of fathers in the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel must have caused a stir in times past - before we lost hold of their significance!

Living under the 'rule of the father' women function for men and according to their desires. Irigaray says that this state of living sucks the spirit out of women and out of their relationships with each other. That women are in desolation spirituality because they cannot find their image in the Divine. It particularly damages the relationship between mothers and their daughters because basically it makes them competitors for men.

This theoretical portrayal has been around for some years, and the challenge for women is to construct a symbolic system of women. It's a huge task – and probably would only be effective if everyone went through psychotherapy. [Imagine even starting on the hierarchy in the Catholic Church for a start!] However, women are not without resources and it's through the language of art that the identity of real women is emerging.

Mother-Daughter relationships in Scripture

Let's now turn to another source of theology, to scripture for insight into mothers and daughters in relationship with the Divine. There are very few stories in the scriptures where mothers and daughters appear as the main characters and where the mother-daughter relationship is significant. One reason for this is that in the worlds and cultures of the biblical texts women's relationships were not of value. Today I am going to concentrate on two mother-daughter stories that appear in the gospel of Matthew and follow each other. The first is in chapter 14 and the second in chapter 15 so both are embedded in the middle section of Matthew's gospel and so it seems to me can give us some insight into the way the relationship between mothers and daughters can reveal the mystery of the Divine in a way that other human relationships do not. Remember that Luce Irigaray's claim is that women will not know themselves without knowing their relationship as women with Divinity. And Schussler Fiorenza's graced ceiling illustrates women's separation from access to Divinity. Are there other ways to approach Divinity through this relationship?

Mothers and Daughters and Church

So as women of the church what images of the Divine will give ourselves and our daughters life?

- The God of the dead head of women comfortable in patriarchy?
- Or a Divine to be discovered anew by the Canaanite woman and by the Matthean Jesus and by each new generation?
- The God who is as predictable as a man giving an oath in a shame culture?
- Or a Divine of generosity feeding those at the table, under the table, sheep and dogs, inside and out side, formal and terribly messy?
- The God who limits healing?
- Or a Divine of healing?
- The Lord and Master of kyriarchy?
- Or the Divine creating ongoing life?
- The God in the image of people like us?
- Or the Divine revealed in Canaanite & Jew, half caste and full blood, white Australia & aboriginal peoples, Maori and pakeha, women and men?

Who is the Divine in whom we live and breathe and have our being, and as women give life to our children?

How do we express our deep relationship with the Divine as Church so that we give life bodily and spiritually to the next generation?

1. Irigaray decided that a way of highlighting and celebrating the love between women is to display images of mothers and daughters in public places. So I recommend this to you. [How many of our churches and chapels have images like Margaret Akland's *Last Supper* where a mother suckling her daughter is shown unashamedly as is a participant in the Last Supper, and as a real example of giving her body for the life of the world? For sure we might have to cover the mother's breast with a handkerchief for a while until people learn to read the language of women rather than mistake it for pornography or impurity.]
2. And let's image women we admire in the company of their companions. For example, in the keenness to promote Mary MacKillop as a holy women and an iconic Australian, let's not always portray her alone, as a hero. Let's portray her with some of her companions on the journey and if we wish with ourselves.
3. Let's refuse to address God in only male terms! We can continue to use other language for God in our own thoughts, prayers, the songs we use for worship, in all the prayers of children's liturgies, - and if you have a sympathetic & courageous priests - all the prayers of the Mass. I'm not pretending that this is an easy practice or even possible in every situation. Let us have hope and then work to bring it into the concrete.
4. It is clear in my country and in yours that the kyriarchal church is unable to give life to priests. As this lifeless situation develops the kyriarchal attitude is to refuse to engage with women around questions of how to breathe new life into the church. It seems to me that mothers and daughters knowing they to have a part of the truth, need to compost the 'ceiling of grace' to promote full participation in the Church. We can:
 - a. Continue to ritualise our lives as well as participate in the more formal rituals thus including others in our spirituality and keeping ourselves open to change.
 - b. Look for good examples in those around us of who does it better than us and draw on the wisdom available to us - through our indigenous peoples.
 - c. Begin all this before we are ready because the right time is always 'now'

**Women, mothers and daughters – the Church – Let us have hope!
And they all say – Amen!**