

WOMEN BREAKING BOUNDARIES

The Grail and Feminism

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What happens in a women's group, struggling for almost seventy years for the empowerment of women within the structures of the patriarchal Roman Catholic Church? In this study, I examine some of the stages, strategies and costs of that struggle from the perspective of a 48 year personal involvement in the Grail.¹

The Grail began in the Netherlands in 1921 as "a society of unmarried Roman Catholic lay women . . . at the disposal of the Church to help with the spreading of the Kingdom of God over the whole world" by working with Catholic women and girls, with non-Catholics and with women in mission countries.²

In 1988, the Grail exists on all six continents, in some twenty countries

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GA in the notes refers to the Grailville Archives, 932 O'Bannonville Rd., Loveland, Ohio 45140.

¹ In preparing this article I have, of course, used my personal recollections which go back to May of 1940 when Bishop Sheil told the Catholic club at the University of Chicago about the remarkable Dutch women of the Grail he was bringing to the archdiocese. I have supplemented and corrected my memory by going through my own files of letters, memos, notes, reports and articles. I have also made use of the extensive materials in the Grailville archives on international as well as national developments. Of particular importance are the thirty-two talks on women's contributions through the ages, given in 1932 in Holland by the founder, Jacques van Ginneken, S. J., Ph.D.; statutes, guidelines and structure documents from 1921 to the present; reports of national and international meetings; a variety of Grail publications, international and national; books and articles about the Grail by non-members, particularly a thesis by Alden Brown, presented for the Ph.D. degree at Union Theological Seminary in 1982; and *Faith and Feminism* by Sally Kennedy, a study of Catholic women's struggles for self-determination in the church in Australia.

On the specific question of Grail attitudes toward feminism, the archives and my personal files yield a good deal of data: reports of the Women Task Force to national meetings; articles in Grail newsletters; many programs on feminist ideas; the 1979 guidelines on women as builders of new societies; at least four attempts to poll the movement on critical issues. However, all this material falls short of a fully representative

"as an international movement of women, rooted in Christian faith . . . and striving for the integration of living faith, the full potential of women, and work for transformation to build a universal society of justice, peace and love." (Vision Statement, Grail International General Assembly, July 1979.) In some countries the Grail is fully established, with its membership drawn chiefly from women native to that country, and with a fairly substantial presence: anything from thirty to two-hundred members, training centers, educational, cultural, medical and social programs, e.g. in the United States, Portugal, Germany, Holland, Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Australia. In other countries, Kenya, for instance, the numbers are smaller: a group in a rural area with a program of education and counselling for teen-age girls; a team using the Freire method³ to train local women as health workers for the remote villages. In still other places—Malaysia, Cape Verde, Jordan—a lone Grail member works to realize the vision through her profession and her daily contacts, but without intending to establish the Grail as an organized movement.

In the United States (and this study is concerned with the United States Grail, referring to the European background only insofar as it is necessary to understand the movement in this country), the Grail has a reputation as a feminist movement. Thus, Mary Jo Weaver writes in *New Catholic Women*:

. . . the Grail is a strongly feminist group. . . . Their commitment to women has resulted in some stunning and influential programs. . . . The Seminary Quarter broke new ground for women and supported an emerging feminist theology that begins, not with God, but with a theological reflection on women's experience.⁴

Ann Patrick Ware makes a similar judgment: "Grailville and the Grail are known throughout the United States as a place and a group that has fostered the growth of feminism among religious women and indeed among all women."⁵

In a series on the future of feminist theology for *Christianity and Crisis*, both Rosemary Ruether and Diane Tennis referred to the importance of Grailville as an autonomous space for women, one where, in Ruether's words, "feminist theology is normative rather than marginal, where the immediate struggle against patriarchy does not define the context of the

consensus. In this study, I have given my own analysis, documenting it where possible with the above materials, and aware that other Grail members may or may not agree with my interpretations.

² The Rule of the Society of the Women in Nazareth. Unpublished manuscript, English translation from the Dutch original (Chicago, 1940), GA.

³ The Freire method is a model of action/reflection/action in which the Spirit is to be found in each phase of the cycle and no spiritual value can be regarded as firmly grounded until it has been tested in action.

⁴ Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 119, 127.

⁵ Personal conversation with author.

discussion, where the agenda of feminist theology can be more fully and freely developed."⁶

How has it been possible for a women's group to develop a feminist stance within a tradition as sexist, misogynist and patriarchal as Roman Catholicism? My thesis is that there were elements of empowerment in the original vision which, over time, have fostered an evolution in beliefs, structures and values, an evolution uneven and imperfect, but nonetheless proceeding in an increasingly feminist direction. Empowerment always involves breaking out of the boundaries, external or internal, that limit and constrain our lives. I propose to analyze three aspects of the growth of feminism in the Grail:

1. breaking the boundaries of church structures to secure a sphere of relative autonomy for the movement;
2. breaking the boundaries of the Grail's internal structures for the sake of greater inclusivity and participation by all the members;
3. breaking the internalized boundaries of patriarchal concepts and values.

The Origins of The Grail

The Grail today traces its origins to the Vrouwen van Nazareth, Women of Nazareth (hereinafter referred to as WON), founded in Holland in 1921 "to work for the conversion of the world" as lay women committed in celibacy and totally available for that all-encompassing task. The WON founded and led a youth movement called "De Graal," which flourished among Dutch girls and young women in the 1930s. When the movement spread to Britain (in 1933) and to the United States (in 1940), Vrouwen van Nazareth was translated as "Ladies of the Grail." In the United States, this term was soon shortened simply to "The Grail." By 1951, when the first Americans made a formal commitment in celibacy, the name "Vrouwen van Nazareth" had been replaced in Holland by the phrase "the nucleus of the Grail," and individuals were referred to as "nucleus members."

The Grail originated in a boundless faith in the potential of women as shapers of culture, able to change the world. Formulated by a Dutch Jesuit, Professor Jacques van Ginneken, this affirmation of women's capacity for leadership was supported both by his survey of women's contributions through the ages and by his conviction that time was ripe for a women's movement. A man of amazing intuitions, he foresaw the struggle of the superpowers, the United States with its capitalism, Russia with its communism. He placed his hope for "the conversion of the world" in a third force, Christianity, making use of "the rising tide of feminism," the young women

⁶ Rosemary Ruether, "Feminist Theology in the Academy," *Christianity and Crisis* (March 4, 1985): 62. Diane Tennis, "Of Space and Power," *Christianity and Crisis* (April 29, 1985): 162.

freed from time-consuming household tasks by industry, earning wages through that same industry, awaiting a vision and a goal to direct their capacities for love and self-sacrifice.⁷

He intended the WON to be a catalyst to marshal the energies of young women for the great task: bringing the modern world to God. They were to be the leaven in the mass, not shut up behind convent walls but moving freely in the world, able to take any kind of job, travel anywhere, seek contact with young women wherever they were to be found—in factories or offices, department stores or domestic service, universities or film studios. He had no patience with “fear Catholicism,” that constructed Catholic institutions as safe havens from the dangers of the world. He sought young women who would radiate a fervent Christian spirit in the midst of the world and who would not hesitate to make use of the means that modern technology could provide.

How to assure that the WON would be able to bring into all these environments a glowing Christian spirit? Father van Ginneken fell back on the only means he knew, the traditional Christian asceticism of poverty, virginity and obedience. The WON as “the quasi-religious nucleus of the lay apostolate” were to lead a broad movement, infusing the spirit and filling the major functional roles. Organized in a pyramid structure, with the international president at the top of the chain of command, members were to be prepared by a novitiate of three to five years for a life of total surrender to God and total availability for the work of the movement. Central to the training was obedience, understood in the Ignation sense of conforming not only one’s actions but also one’s mind and will to the directives of the leader.⁸ At the same time, nothing was to be done out of routine or as a pure formality. Rather, the WON were urged to use their initiative and resourcefulness in carrying out directives and in discovering new ways of prayer and mortification.⁹

Securing a Sphere of Relative Autonomy

The desire to carve out a sphere of relative freedom in which the WON would be able to develop their own work led Father van Ginneken to pragmatic solutions: an insistence on lay status as a major strategy; and a practical approach to dealing with clerical structures.

In the Catholic vocabulary, *lay* has two distinct meanings: (1) not or-

⁷ Jacques van Ginneken, Conferences given at “De Tiltenberg,” Vogelenzang, The Netherlands, August 1932. Unpublished. GA. See esp. I, XVIII, XXIV.

⁸ In his rule for the Jesuits and his “Letter on Obedience,” Ignatius of Loyola went further than other religious founders, requiring that the ideal subject obey not only promptly and cheerfully but also by conforming will and even judgment to that of the leader.

⁹ J. van Ginneken, XX.

dained; (2) not a member of a religious community. All women, in the official Catholic view, are lay in the first sense, i.e. not ordained (and indeed, not ordainable); all women who are not nuns are lay in the second sense, the sense adopted for the WON. Father van Ginneken defined the WON—as well as the Grail youth movement in Holland—as a *pia unio*, a pious union like a sodality, the lowest possible category in canon law and hence not under the control of the Vatican Congregation for Religious with its rules for enclosure, special dress, regular community prayer, etc. Of course, it must be remembered that in the 1940s—and still more in the 1920s—a group needed episcopal approval to use the name Catholic and to work in any organized way in a diocese. Ordinarily, episcopal oversight was exercised through the appointment of a priest moderator or director for any lay group. While the statutes of the WON state clearly that “the WON work under the leadership of the bishops,” Father van Ginneken’s pragmatic approach was strongly reflected in the oral tradition as that was passed on to me by Lydwine van Kersbergen and Joan Overboss. The WON were to do their utmost to deal directly with the bishop, thus avoiding the appointment of a priest spiritual director. Moreover, we were to avoid inviting the same retreat master two years in a row; in fact, so far as possible, we were to lead our own retreats and courses, a radical idea in the 1930s and even in the 1940s.¹⁰ In short, although he never questioned the patriarchal framework, his pragmatism did enable the Grail to remain, to a great extent, free of clerical (and therefore male) control.

Throughout its history, the Grail has maintained the autonomy to define its own work, sometimes at great cost. An example from the early Grail days in Chicago is a case in point. After their arrival in Chicago in May 1940, Lydwine van Kersbergen and Joan Overboss accepted an assignment from the bishop to organize summer camps for inner-city girls, aged six to sixteen, as a condition of their occupancy of Doddridge Farm, an estate north of the city. They saw this assignment as a means to their main goal, to establish the WON in the United States by providing a three-year “noviciate for the laity,” training young women who would make a lifetime dedication in celibacy and be prepared to go anywhere and assume any task for “the conversion of the world.” Having the year-round use of Doddridge, with its hundred and twenty acres, its accommodations for a hundred people, its attractive grounds, enabled them to begin their long-term training program. In the summers of 1941 and 1942, they recruited young women to serve as counsellors in the camp program and used that program as a means of training for the counsellors. However, in the spring of 1943, when the bishop announced that in addition to the girls’ camp he wanted the property to serve also as a recreation center for the armed forces, Lydwine van Kersbergen flatly refused to take responsibility for the camp under these conditions. The bishop

¹⁰ Ibid., XIV.

then asked the Grail to find its own property. As a result, the growing group was literally homeless from May of 1943 until February of 1944. The six summer courses, now freed from the burden of the camp program, were given successfully to some three hundred young women at Childerley, the country place of the Catholic student club of the University of Chicago. In the fall, the Sisters of the Holy Ghost generously took in our homeless band, while we prayed, fasted and looked for a suitable location. I do not remember anyone expressing the least doubt about Lydwine's decision. Homelessness was preferable to an unacceptable directive. Our homeless phase came to an end when Archbishop McNicholas early in 1944 invited Lydwine to establish the Grail in the Cincinnati archdiocese. On February 1, 1944, the Grail was chartered as an Ohio nonprofit corporation and shortly thereafter purchased the 180 acre farm on the edge of Loveland, Ohio, which became the centerpiece of Grailville. Later purchases of adjoining properties enlarged Grailville to its present 350 acres.

With the changes brought about by Vatican II there was less and less need for episcopal endorsement. While some individual Grail members work as professionals in church structures, the Grail as a whole has not maintained strong ties with official Catholic structures. Mary Jo Weaver is correct when she writes, "Dominated in its early years by concerns of the institutional church, [the Grail] has deliberately moved away from hierarchical control in order to take an explicitly lay direction and later a strong feminist orientation."¹¹

Elements of Feminism in the Original Vision

Before proceeding further with a discussion of the Grail and feminism, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by feminism, for there are many "feminisms." For the purpose of this article, I suggest as a working definition that feminism is the affirmation of women as fully adult human beings with all the rights and responsibilities thereof. From this statement, I would draw out the following characteristics:

1. an understanding of *women as self-defining persons*, subjects shaping their own lives, makers of culture and society;
2. *trust in women's own perceptions* and experience, finding the source of authority in that experience rather than in some external standard;
3. *a searching critique of the sexism*, misogyny and patriarchy which permeate all of Western culture, religious and secular;
4. an understanding of feminism not as a set of "women's issues" but rather as *a new consciousness*, a new perspective on reality;
5. as central to this new consciousness, *the rejection of dualisms*, hierarchy

¹¹ Weaver, 122.

and domination or "power over" in favor of wholeness, connectedness, and mutuality or "power with and among."

Are there elements of feminism in the original vision of the WON? As I raise this question I am aware that I am using distinctions and applying criteria which were not articulated in the 1920s. In the van Ginneken lectures on "Women through the Ages," "feminism" refers on the one hand to women's entry into public life in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and on the other hand, to the movement for "women's rights," a movement which Father van Ginneken dismissed as hostile to men and misdirecting women into a slavish imitation of men.¹² It is perhaps more just to refer to the WON as pre-feminist, by which I mean that they embraced values and undertook actions that would now be regarded as feminist, but they did so without a feminist consciousness and while firmly rejecting the label.

In terms of the criteria above, the original vision certainly affirmed women as responsible adults, leaders capable of shaping culture and society. This affirmation of women's potential led rather quickly to my second criterion, a trust in women's perceptions and experience. However, there was no critique of sexism, nor any awareness of feminism as more than a set of "women's rights." How could there be? These concepts had not yet been formulated. Rather there was an acceptance of the existing Catholic framework with its dualisms and hierarchies. But at the same time, there was a strong effort to safeguard the autonomy of the group vis-a-vis the Church authorities. In this endeavor, we certainly did not seek confrontation with the hierarchy. Rather by dealing directly with the bishop and keeping him regularly informed of our initiatives, we managed de facto to enjoy a large measure of autonomy. We defined our own work, earned our own way, owned our own property, and exercised our resourcefulness to maintain ourselves as a lay group under lay—and female—leadership.

Major Developments in the United States Grail

There were many significant developments in the United States Grail between its beginnings in 1940 and 1969, when the second wave of feminism burst upon the country and raised issues that could not be ignored. Among the developments: the year's school of formation at Grailville with its practical working out of a pattern of integrated Christian living; the building up of Grailville as a self-sufficient homestead for an average of sixty-five people year-round; lay participation in the liturgy; a publications center; an art production program, creating and distributing works of contemporary religious art; a series of recordings by the Grail Singers; the opening of eight Grail city centers across the country; the training and sending of American

¹² J. van Ginneken, XVIII.

women overseas to join international Grail teams in Basutoland, Uganda, South Africa, Egypt, Indonesia, Brazil; a program for international students; modern catechetical approaches, linking psychological and spiritual health; the study of personalism; ventures into ecumenism; the entry of Grail members into professions; the concern with community development and social action; the updating of Grail guidelines and structures following Vatican II and the move toward more inclusive and participative structures.

Many of these activities broke new ground, either for the laity, or for Catholic women, or for women generally, and all of them embodied elements that would today be called feminist. I find two aspects particularly significant: the emphasis on integrating faith into daily life through a Christian culture and Christian social action, and the radical change of internal Grail structures from a pyramid to a participative model. Space does not permit me to elaborate on these aspects, both of which seem to me to be pre-feminist. The search for an integrated Christian life was, in fact, a rejection of dualism, phrased in theological terms as incarnating Christian values in social structures as well as personal life. The work on Grail structures was a de facto rejection of elitism and hierarchy. It broke the boundary between the nucleus and other women by defining the Grail not as a group of unmarried lay women but as a movement of women of all life choices. It broke the boundaries of the old pyramid structures by enabling all members—whatever their life choices—to share as peers in policy and decision-making and to be eligible for any leadership position. However, the ideas that moved us toward these changes were not explicitly feminist. Rather we spoke of collegiality, shared responsibility, respect for the person and her growth toward maturity, and we endeavored to frame structures “to free the spirit.”

Evolution of a Feminist Consciousness

How far have feminist ideas permeated the Grail today? The affirmation of women as self-determining subjects and the trust in women's experience have been present from the beginning. And, as discussed above, development of the Grail in the United States has embodied a de facto rejection of dualism, elitism and hierarchy. With respect to the other elements in my definition, I can trace a gradual spread of the critique of patriarchy and the understanding of feminism as a new consciousness.

Let me begin with the development of my own feminist consciousness. In my college years at the University of Chicago (1930–35), I certainly rejected the notion that women were inferior intellectually, but at the same time, I felt uncomfortable as an intellectual woman. I knew, without anyone ever stating it explicitly, that as a woman I would have to be at least two or three times as good as my nearest competitor to make it in academe. There were no role models. The only woman faculty member I can remember from my college years was Sophonisba P. Breckenridge, who was already professor

emeritus when I was a freshman. There were no works by women on our list of great books. The women characters who occasionally appeared on the scene—Helen of Troy, Medea, Antigone, Dido, Monica, Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina—did not appeal to me. In the light of Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics*, I sometimes argued with my male friends and professors over whether a woman could be a philosopher. I loved philosophy, but my personal aspirations did not rise beyond being a good student and a competent assistant. It did not occur to me to think of myself as a creative, independent thinker.

When I met the Grail in the persons of Lydwine van Kersbergen and Joan Overboss at Doddridge Farm in November of 1940, I was enthralled. My first impression was one of vitality and self-confidence. Here were women who could tackle anything! The very first message I received from the Grail was that women *count*: together we can influence the course of history.

Moreover, Lydwine and Joan were intellectual women (Lydwine had a Ph.D. in philology from the University of Nijmegen), who combined a comprehensive analysis of secularism with a holistic educational approach that had a far deeper impact on students than anything I had seen in my university years. I resonated to their presentation of a positive view of women in the context of an anthropology of complementarity: men and women are equal but different; if only men would be manly and women would be womanly, society would achieve a harmonious balance. In 1945, I wrote a pamphlet, "The Task of Woman in the Modern World" (with which I now heartily disagree), elaborating Father van Ginneken's ideas of complementarity as I had learned them from Lydwine and Joan with a little help from Gina Lombroso, G. K. Chesterton, and Jacques Leclercq. Maker and lover, theory and practice, abstract and concrete, head and heart, initiative and response, ruler and supporter, self-assertion and self-surrender—I made a case for all the stereotypes as rooted both in woman's nature and in her spiritual mission. "Woman's essential mission in the world," I wrote confidently, "is to be for mankind a living example of the spirit of total dedication to God." Women were to fulfill this mission either in religious life, in marriage, or in single life in the world. Whatever their specific destiny, they were meant to be spiritual mothers, redeeming the depersonalization and bureaucratic rigidity of the modern world by their loving nurturance and self-sacrifice. Bemoaning the loss of the concept of true womanhood, I condemned feminism as a fallacy. "Their whole struggle for women's rights has simply helped to destroy the difference between the sexes and has worked to make the woman a slavish imitation of the man."¹³

In the forties and fifties I taught complementarity in Grail courses with great conviction, quoting happily from papal encyclicals and from writers like

¹³ Janet Kalven, *The Task of Woman in the Modern World*, pamphlet (Des Moines, Iowa: National Catholic Rural Life Conference, 1946).

John Fitzsimons: "For human society the tension between the dominant male and the actively submissive female must be rediscovered and made operative."¹⁴ Experience in the sixties, particularly with married couples who tried to live out this head/heart version of complementarity and to organize their family life around obedience to the husband and father as "head," gradually brought me to question this teaching. I remember one Grail member telling me that when she had a few days of rest in the hospital after the birth of her ninth child, she awoke one morning with the thought, "God *can't* want anyone to live like this." I began to see that this view of masculine and feminine "natures" only served to justify the faults of both sexes: husbands tended to become insensitive and domineering; the wives either retreated into passivity and depression or became manipulative. I began to see that gender roles are largely, if not entirely, a matter of cultural conditioning. Individuals come in all shapes and sizes, with all possible combinations of personal qualities and talents. To label either psychological qualities or particular occupations as masculine or feminine is crippling for the individual and impoverishes the society. Why should a male dancer be regarded as effeminate or a female scientist as masculinized? The challenge is rather to educate both men and women for wholeness, for the human birthright of power and love, competence and compassion, cool objectivity and warm support.

In many ways I owe my feminism to the Grail, not least to the crucial insights I received at a Grail course entitled, "The Cooperation of Men and Women in Church and Society," held in 1969 at the international Grail Center near Amsterdam. The significant point for me was the presentation of an existentialist view of women as human subjects able to define themselves from within. "I am the subject of my existence, freely shaping my situation," declared philosopher Yvonne Pellé-Douël. "The subject can never be reduced to or identified with his [*sic*] vocations, roles, or functions. . . . It is important not to freeze the woman in a feminine essence or vocation or role . . . the subject surpasses role, functions, vocations, by taking on successive roles, by fulfilling many roles at the same time, by renouncing or changing roles."¹⁵

Gradually, I began to work out the implications of this key insight. No more talk of woman's nature, destiny or God-given vocation. No more searching outside oneself for a task in life or attempting to conform to some external standard, predetermined destiny or idealized role. The source of authority shifted from external to internal. I began to examine my own perceptions, feelings and experiences, and to believe that the Spirit could speak from within my own consciousness. I began to see the immense importance of enabling women to speak of their experience in their own

¹⁴ John Fitzsimons, *Woman Today* (New York: Sheed, 1952).

¹⁵ Yvonne Pellé-Douël, *Etre femme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1967), 13, 229.

words, first in consciousness-raising groups, "hearing each other into speech," in Nelle Morton's phrase; then in groups of women making their first tentative attempts to theologize out of their own experiences. If being a feminist meant affirming women as adults, as self-defining subjects of their own existence, then by the summer of 1970, I was ready to call myself a feminist, even though I had butterflies in my stomach as I spoke the word.

Another crucial experience, one which gave me insight into feminist pedagogy, occurred for me during the Semester at Grailville, a four-month residential program which we described as "a living-learning community of staff and students." We shared decision-making authority over the program with the students through a weekly "town-meeting." I have a vivid memory of the young woman who voiced the accusation, "Janet is *teaching* us!" That remark was the beginning for me of a long study of the difference between teaching and facilitating learning which led me to investigate group dynamics, Malcolm Knowles's practice of adult education, the Freire method, and the theories of women's studies. I became aware of the power dynamics involved in teaching and learning and struggled to change my own style to a "power with" rather than "power over" model.

Experience in consciousness-raising groups together with immersing myself in the burgeoning feminist literature led me quickly to a feminist critique of society and church. Clearly, Western civilization—and probably most other civilizations—was patriarchal, valuing males over females, taking the male as the norm of the human, defining women as relative, dependent and inferior. It was also sexist, embodying the preeminence of the male in an interlocking set of structures, legal, governmental, economic, educational, scientific, religious. And it was misogynist, permeated with a deep, ancient mistrust of women and their bodily functions, leading to fear, hatred, and violence against women, and a mythic blaming of women for the evils of the world.

A turning point for me came in applying this analysis not only to society at large but to Christianity, to the Catholic church. In 1972, the Grail and Church Women United co-sponsored a week at Grailville, "Women Exploring Theology." Again, I can remember the shiver down my spine when I heard the title. It was a fantastic week for the seventy-five of us—theologians, seminarians, professionals working in church structures, active lay women. We told our stories in small groups, defined our issues, experimented with new language, imagery and forms of worship, sparked moments of insight for each other which we labelled "Aha" and "Yeah, yeah" experiences. In this supportive environment, I found that my views on Scripture, God, sexuality and church had undergone a radical change. No longer could I meditate on scripture as the word of God without examining what the patriarchs—writers, editors, translators of the Bible—and their assumptions had done with the message.

In this atmosphere of shared search, a search that continued through

Seminary Quarter (1974–78) and other courses at Grailville, I joined with those beginning to articulate previously unthinkable questions: Since God transcends sex, should we not use female language and imagery to get “beyond God the Father”? How does imaging God as male reinforce male dominance in church and society? How is sexism related to racism and class oppression? Can a theology that is predominantly the work of white, upper-class Western males be adequate for the whole people of God? What would theology look like if the experiences of the excluded—people of color, the poor, women, the dispossessed—were taken seriously as loci for theological reflection? Does not the traditional Catholic teaching on sexual behavior—indissoluble marriage, no birth control except rhythm, the marriage debt, no abortion—sacrifice the individual woman to the species? Is it just that celibate males should make the rules and insist that all others abide by them under pain of sin? In the community of believers, how should authority and decision-making be shared? Has not the ideal which the church has held up to women—that of selfless sacrifice and service of others—prevented them from becoming mature adults and achieving authentic spiritual growth? Is homosexuality a disorder to be condemned or can it be an authentic form of human love? If women cannot represent Christ, does Christ represent women? Is Christianity irredeemably patriarchal or does it offer liberating insights for women?

When I now look back on my thinking of the forties and fifties, I find it hard to understand how I could have remained blind for so long to the sexism in the Church, the misogyny in the Scriptures, and the oppressive character of patriarchal structures generally. In part, I suppose, it was because I was living in a women’s place, owned and run by women who made all the decisions and took the risks as we saw fit. Even in our worship, I did not feel a sense of oppression, perhaps because we created and led our own, sometimes elaborate, prayer hours, and when it came to the celebration of the Eucharist, as a staff member at Grailville, I shared in the planning, working with priests who were in sympathy with our approach. In lectures, readings and meditations, the female imagery in Christianity was often emphasized: the church and the individual soul as bride, Mary as the strong woman “terrible as an army in battle array,” and the scattered references in theology to the Holy Spirit as the feminine aspect of the Godhead.

My personal journey goes on, with support from the Grail, particularly the Women Task Force, and until my retirement in 1986, from the Women’s Studies Committee at the University of Dayton. Since 1984, I have been actively involved with Women-Church Convergence, as a representative of the Grail Women Task Force. My best efforts no longer suffice to keep up with the new books, but I find great hope both in the work of feminist activists around the world and in the quantity and quality of the work that women scholars are doing in deepening the critique of patriarchy and envisioning alternatives. Surely the next generation will not have to start from scratch!

So much for my personal journey. What about the Grail as a movement? To the end of the 1960s, the Grail, in my opinion, remained prefeminist. In our lectures and discussions we elaborated on complementarity and surrender, but in actual practice we challenged individuals by giving them real responsibilities and encouraging them to use their initiative and creativity to the utmost. A woman who was at Grailville in the 1950s is, I think, fairly representative of the way that Grail training served to empower many women:

What I got out of Grailville was the conviction that you had to live up to your greatest potential. People really believed in you—it wasn't just a trick. . . . I got a chance to do all sorts of things—from cooking for a hundred people to directing the choir and receiving important visitors. I found I was capable of a lot more than I ever thought.

By 1969 the Women's Liberation Movement was front page news. In the context of the black and student movements, utilizing some of their tactics, helped by media attention to their guerilla theater and other forms of protest demonstrations, a grass roots movement spread across the country with amazing rapidity, awakening women to the discriminations under which they were laboring. The Grail found itself in the midst of the second wave of American feminism, confronted by a host of difficult questions. In my files I find a memo I wrote in November 1969 to the Grail national coordinating team about the response Church Women United were making to the new movement. They were providing consciousness-raising groups, planning actions to challenge sexism, and developing support groups for women moving into action. My memo ends: "Where are we as Grail in all this? Do we want to develop a thrust in this area?"

In the early seventies we adopted both internationally and nationally, three foci for our Grail work:

- living faith in a world to be redeemed
- women as builders of new societies
- joined action for liberation leading to a new world order

An international network was set up for each of these foci and in the United States, a national task force for each.

In 1974, a report to the Grail Council addressed the question of women's liberation more sharply:

What are the implications of being a fifty-year old women's movement, maintaining a women's space, recognizing that being a woman is a political issue today? Do we see the Grail as part of the Women's Liberation Movement? as separate but sympathetic? as actively supportive on some issues and opposed on others? or as totally dissociated?¹⁶

¹⁶ Report of the Grail Women Task Force to the Grail National Council, Loveland, Ohio, 1974, personal files.

Grail members did not wait for formal approval to plunge into programming around the new ideas. Already Semester at Grailville (SAG), begun in the spring of 1968, had brought to Grailville college women who were raising feminist questions. In 1969 SAG students developed a multi-media presentation, entitled "XX—or Woman in Man's America," combining slides which reproduced images of women found in advertising with songs, dance, and skits, critiquing sexism in history, the churches, law, education, marriage, work and family. The summer of 1970 saw a weekend on "Women: New Lifestyles for the Seventies" with Mary Austin Doherty and Charlotte Bunch as speakers. In rapid succession there followed "Mobilizing Womanpower," with trainers from the Alinsky Institute; "Women's Lifestyles across the Generations," with Mary Daly; "Women Exploring Theology," and "Seminary Quarter," a six-week residential program for women in graduate theological study, offered every summer from 1974–78.

Formal approval from Grail structures was not long in coming. In 1972 an ad hoc group on women was set up and in 1974 it was formally established as the Grail Women Task Force. The task force immediately set about educating Grail members on feminist issues: consciousness-raising sessions were held for the Grail Council in the spring of 1974; an urgent message went out to Grail members to take part in one of the six programs on women offered during the summer of 1974 (44 of the 165 participants in these programs were Grail members); a questionnaire on the relation of the Grail to feminism was circulated as preparation for a weekend in May 1975 with Anne Wilson Schaefer, which in turn was planned as part of the preparation for the General Assembly in August 1975.

The responses to the 1975 questionnaire reflect mixed reactions to this turbulent new movement, its impassioned rhetoric and its sometimes threatening acronyms (e.g. WITCH, Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell). Sent to some three hundred Grail members and alumnae, the questionnaire drew forty-four responses, a third of which included pages of thoughtful qualifying statements in addition to the checklist answers. Sixty-two percent of the respondents voiced some criticism of Christianity as sexist, oppressive to women, needing to be reformed by feminism. Forty-six percent unhesitatingly identified the Grail as part of the women's liberation movement. The other fifty-four percent, however, saw the Grail as a separate entity, sympathetic on some issues, opposed on others. Most of those who wrote at length stressed that the Grail was primarily a religious movement, that feminism was only one issue among many, not central either to their personal lives or to their understanding of the Grail.

Further insight into the way Grail members perceived the tension between feminism and Christianity is to be found in the materials produced by a group of sixteen active Grail members who continued to deal with this question for two full days after the weekend with Anne Schaefer. This group covered reams of newsprint with their personal perceptions: "We're divided

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on the most important things—God, religion, women . . . some call themselves feminists . . . several people are anxious to see the Grail moving on feminism . . . push to promote abortion and lesbianism . . . one, perhaps more, saying no to that.” “Spectrum in Grail on Christianity, on feminism . . . a few cautious, most in middle, a few are convinced it is right.” “Tension between traditional values under examination and new values and threats.” “The Grail is a resource for strength, support, vision, permission for women . . . strongest feminist movement in this area . . . feminism does not equal lesbianism and abortion.” “Grail hasn’t taken a stand on abortion, lesbianism, birth control.”¹⁷

For the Grail as a group committed to living out their Catholic faith as fully as possible, it was especially painful to discover how deeply we were divided on precisely those elements—faith and womanhood—that had previously been our most profound sources of unity. The pain of this discovery is expressed over and over again in the transcripts: “Religion painful, yet need it for nourishment . . . pain in diversity, fear of dealing with it . . . refusal to deal with diversity on any real issues . . . most pain around whether religion is OK, whether feminism is OK . . .”¹⁸

Moreover, the pain was intensified because of the general Grail commitment to openness and to personalism, that is, to sharing on more than a superficial level, and affirming the individual’s freedom to make her own decisions. Individuals spoke of pluralism, of the need to respect each others’ options, but it was difficult to realize this ideal in practice. As one participant said in 1975, “Some people in the Grail know my real thoughts, others do not.” And another, “defensiveness around diversity . . . fear of name feminism . . . fear of anger . . . fear of lesbianism . . . division on religious questions . . . division on socialism . . . support individuality, yet the person fears to speak her individuality . . . fear of women not like ourselves.”¹⁹

The report on the meeting identifies five points of tension for the Grail as a movement empowering women and at the same time working in the context of Catholic values and structures:

1. trust in one’s own experience versus obedience to “shoulds” set forth by the Church;
2. sexuality: its meaning in human life, a new sexual ethic;
3. individual versus community needs: the feminist insistence on taking responsibility to meet one’s own needs versus the Christian demand to sacrifice oneself for the other and the community;
4. the feminist emphasis on the need to express anger and value it as a driving force versus the Christian view of anger as evil and to be repressed;

¹⁷ Transcript of notes of study days, May 1975, Loveland, Ohio, personal files.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

5. the feminist affirmation of individuals as peers versus the Christian view of reality as a hierarchy with a male at the head. (The group did not explore whether hierarchy is of the essence of Christianity or whether it flows from the institutional structures of the Church.)²⁰

Three years later, in 1978, the WTF conducted another survey, one which does not lend itself to statistical summary, but is better conveyed in quotations from individual respondents. On the whole the tone is positive; there is a large area of agreement on feminism as a source of freedom, energy, and direction. A few respondents confess to being scared by dogmatism and polarization in feminism, also by separatism and anti-male attitudes. One person sees "the official Grail position on feminism as aloof," i.e., refusing to take stands on women's issues. Many of the respondents, while recognizing the sexism of the church, express their hopes for an integration of feminism and Christianity.

In the next ten years, the Women Task Force, other program entities at Grailville, the Grail centers at Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York, and San Jose, California, offered a variety of feminist programs. The WTF alone sponsored sixteen programs on aspects of feminist theology, spirituality, ritual and ethics; eight on personal growth, assertiveness and conflict resolution; four on feminism in the family and child rearing; and others on approaches to economics, nuclear power, health, aging. In the late seventies the Grailville Women's Project developed a series of weekend programs on themes of empowerment for women, and inaugurated a series of dinner and performance evenings, "Wine, Women and Song," which showcased talents of local women artists—singers, dancers, theater groups, story tellers, writers, painters. From 1980–82, the New Directions for Women program, funded by the Women's Educational Equity Act and offering employment to CETA trainees, adapted feminist approaches to the needs of rural women for personal growth and career development.

As one indication of the extent to which feminist ideas have found acceptance in the Grail as a whole, I quote from the consensus reached by thirty Grail members, meeting before the 1984 General Assembly and reflecting on their experiences of feminism in the Grail:

- There is a growing commitment to feminism and feminist theology in the Grail.
- We are integrating into our worship elements from other traditions, e.g., the elements from Wicca and from American Indian traditions in the Holy Week celebrations.
- Work on issues of sexuality is slow and painful, but in eleven years we have moved from reactions of fear and shock to a U.S. General Assembly

²⁰ Report of the Grail Women Task Force to the General Assembly, Loveland, Ohio, 1975, personal files.

decision that lesbianism should not be considered an obstacle to Grail membership.

—There is a growing understanding of the oppression of women in our lives, in our culture, in other cultures.

—To be Catholic and feminist is conflictual but not impossible.

How Feminist Is The Grail Today?

In 1988, it seems to me that we have made considerable progress, both in dispelling fears and in dealing openly with diversity, but the progress is slow and proceeds at different rates on different issues. The issues have not changed much since the early seventies.

Feminism as a true liberation issue. Given the original Grail emphasis on total surrender, availability and self-sacrifice as the heart of women's vocation, I perceived Grail members initially responding more readily to racism and to third world liberation struggles than to feminism. As one woman put it in 1975, "Being women is taken for granted by many. It's not as conscious a focus as religious search and social change." And another, "Catholic tradition . . . social justice for others, not for me." I remember my emphasis on feminism being met with the rejoinder, "Shouldn't we as Grail put the stress on human liberation rather than women's liberation?" I also remember, after working in the civil rights movement, how good it felt to be working directly on my own issue, reflecting on oppression as I had experienced it myself and deciding what I wanted to do about it, rather than trying to empathize with another's oppression and be supportive of their decisions and actions.

As the Women Task Force and the Liberation Task Force developed their work during the seventies, we were nourished by different experiences and elaborated different analyses. The LTF based its reflections on the involvement of Grail members in social action in inner city Cincinnati and Harlem, in the farm worker struggles in California, in the effort of disenfranchised and unemployed black people in Louisiana to improve their situation. They were influenced, too, by international experiences with the poor in Mexico, in Brazil, in Portugal. And they did extensive study of Marxist analysis in their search for more humane economic and political structures. Members of the WTF were involved in consciousness-raising groups among suburban women, among college students, among women in seminary; one helped to organize the first battered women's shelter; another developed a counselling program for victims of rape and incest. We studied the work of feminist theologians, philosophers, historians, anthropologists and began to elaborate an analysis of sexism, misogyny and patriarchy. Coming out of these different experiences, the LTF tended to regard class as the primary oppression, while the WTF pointed to patriarchy as fundamental.

In this area, I think the Grail has made great progress. The task forces have devoted much energy to exploring the tensions between feminism,

socialism and Christianity (there was a brilliant weekend in 1977 where some sixty Grail members addressed these issues with the assistance of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Ruether and Dorothee Soelle). I think the fears about socialism have pretty well disappeared. I believe there is general acceptance of the view that sexism, racism, and classism are independent but intimately interlocked sources of oppression that need to be addressed together. Current Grail programming efforts are centered on this theme. "Women Breaking Boundaries—Making Global Connections" deals with breaking out of the limitations set by race, class, gender, nationality, education and culture.

Dealing with anger, confrontation and conflict. As women's anger at victimization first erupted in the early days of the movement, there was a good deal of fear of this anger among Grail members. It was often labelled "unchristian." Some thought the women's movement was too aggressive, too selfish in fighting for women's rights. Here the Grail affirmation of the person helped us come to clarity. The ideal "to give all that you have laughing" gave way to recognition of the legitimacy of personal needs. There has been a gradual recognition that giving is a choice, that it is all right to recognize one's limits and to say no upon occasion. To quote again from the May 1975 meeting: "We are getting out of always being a giver, there is support for this."²¹ The WTF has done a good deal of work on assertiveness training and creative conflict resolution, both within and outside of the Grail. I think it is fair to say that while not everyone is comfortable with expressions of anger and with conflict, the Grail as a whole has gained more skill at working through conflicts.

Sexuality. This remains a thorny issue. I think that most Grail members see clearly the inadequacies of traditional Catholic teaching and take direct responsibility for the decisions in their own lives. I would guess from the warm support I have seen Grail groups give divorced members or those considering divorce, that, while we value committed relationships, we also recognize that relationships can die, and that calling an end to them may be the only viable alternative. With respect to methods of birth control, I note that the married daughters of women who had eight or ten children in the 1940s settle for one or two and start their childbearing at a much later age. Difficulties with pre-marital sexual activity first surfaced in Semester at Grailville (SAG). When difficulties arose over where male friends of our students should stay on their weekend visits, at least one staff member wanted to exclude sexual activity on the Grailville property. In the end, the staff arranged for visitors' quarters in a separate building, with no surveillance to determine where individuals were spending the night. A few years later, no eyebrows were lifted when an unmarried Grail member let it be known that she was going on a week-long vacation with a male friend.

²¹ See note 17.

Lesbianism surfaced as an issue both in the Grail and in the Semester at Grailville at about the same time, the late sixties. It was hard for a group, most of whom had had a traditional Catholic upbringing, to deal with this issue. On the one hand, the emphasis on the person and on respecting personal choices meant that those who "came out" were not rejected as Grail members. On the other hand, individual members were ambivalent about the presence of lesbians in the Grail, an ambivalence that contributed to painful tensions. The policy questions centered on the influence that lesbians in leadership roles might have on younger women; and on whether women who had come out would be welcomed as Grail members. A series of processes—meetings, surveys, input from experts, study weekends, careful listening to each other in small and large groups—led to what one participant called "a civil rights for lesbians guide line for Grail membership." In the 1981 General Assembly the following statement was approved: "We affirm that participation in the Grail is determined by an individual's commitment to accept and live out the Grail's vision . . . Sexual preference and lifestyle choices are not determining factors in Grail participation . . ." ²² There is still discomfort around this issue—I suspect that some members do not feel safe in "coming out" to all their Grail sisters. The homophobia in the society at large and in the Catholic church in particular make it hard for a group, some of whose members work in official church structures, to deal with certain specific questions, e.g., the request of a church-related lesbian group to use Grailville's facilities. The consultation by mail which resolved the issue in favor of the group was a model of a participative decision-making process, involving all two hundred members and endeavoring to take into account all points of view and assessments of probable consequences.

The abortion issue is still more difficult. While feminists are working toward a new ethic of reproduction, it is not yet fully developed. I believe that in the Grail there is more support for the right to dissent from church teaching on abortion and for the call for open dialogue than on the substantive issue. On the question of public support as Grail for the twenty-four sister signers of the 1984 New York Times ad on pluralism and abortion, 56 percent of the Grail membership responded to a survey by mail. Eighty percent of the respondents agreed with the idea of public support. The other 20 percent had various objections to the process for reaching a decision on this issue. In our 1984 General Assembly we had been able to reach a consensus on taking public stands as Grail on a list of liberation issues. Some people argued that this decision applied only to public stands vis-à-vis the government and that we would need separate guidelines for taking stands vis-à-vis the church. A task force is working on this question and will present a procedure at the next General Assembly. In the meantime, I note that

²² *Report of the 1981 General Assembly*, Loveland, Ohio, 1981. Mimeographed for Grail circulation, GA.

quite a few Grail members signed the "Declaration of Solidarity with Catholics Whose Right To Free Speech is Under Attack," which appeared in the New York Times on March 2, 1986.

Directly religious questions. For a group which had a long tradition of creative, participative, communal celebrations, celebrations that were both unifying and inspiring, the directly religious questions have been especially painful. How could the deepest source of our unity turn so quickly into the source of serious difficulties? Some of the earliest questions arose around matters of ecumenical practice, e.g. intercommunion. We boast a long Grail tradition of ecumenical outreach: a concern for Christians of other traditions was one of the original goals of the WON, and in the United States, various forms of collaboration with Protestants had begun in the late 1940s through the rural life movement. Later, exchanges developed with Protestant women's groups. In the 1960s some Protestants sought membership in the Grail. After a brief period of experimentation, in 1969 the U.S. Grail passed a resolution admitting women of other Christian traditions to membership, and in 1975 several Jewish women were admitted.

Strengthened by our awareness of being on similar spiritual journeys, we puzzled over how best to pray together. The ecumenical stream fed into other efforts in the Grail to deal with issues of language and imagery and to use materials from other traditions as part of our worship. We experimented with new language and symbols, rewrote the words to old songs and inspired new ones. In 1975, Marian Ronan edited a Grail prayer book which attempted to provide inclusive language for the psalms and which incorporated materials from American Indian and Eastern traditions along with original materials written by Grail members.

The most difficult issues have to do with the sacramental life of the church, particularly the Eucharist, the meaning of ordination, and the place of Jesus. Must an ordained person be present to have "a real Eucharist"? If so, must that person be ordained within Roman Catholic structures? Or, if the Spirit is present in the community, can a group of women celebrate a real Eucharist? Experientially, we found it difficult in our programs at Grailville to introduce a priest into a group that had formed into a cohesive community through a shared weekend experience. Some Grail members, rejecting the theology of the 1977 *Vatican Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, found it too painful to attend Mass in the parish church. Others continued to find in the parish services a central source of nourishment for their own spiritual journeys. In our search for authentic ways to celebrate together, we have tried to be sensitive to and respectful of each other's views. In our national gatherings, we have used a combination of prayer experiences and Eucharists, celebrated either by an ordained woman or an ordained man or both. We no longer use the doxology when we pray the psalms, although I do not know whether this change in practice stems from feminism or from biblical studies and sensitivities

awakened through Jewish-Christian dialogue. We search for fresh language and images for the transcendent, and we continue to devise new forms for our celebrations.

For women whose spiritual lives were centered in a personal relation to Christ, questions of Christology become acute. Can a male savior save women? Is there no other name in which we may be saved? What do we mean by salvation? Is Christianity irredeemably patriarchal or does it offer truly liberating elements to women? Hard questions all. We live with them; we work with them; and in the meantime, many of us participate enthusiastically in Women-Church.

A few final reflections, my personal musings as I have worked on this article.

First, I see the Grail as a transitional form, a solution to the age-old problem of autonomy for women's communities within the Roman Catholic Church. It was a revelation to me when in the study days in May of 1975 we named explicitly the tension between being an autonomous women's community and existing within Roman Catholic structures. Later, I learned from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Sandra Schneiders a great deal about this tension in its historic and present-day expressions.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza traced the patriarchalizing tendencies already evident in the household codes in the New Testament, through the gradual restriction of women's ministries, to the medieval rule that the "dangerous sex" must be restrained either by a husband or a cloister wall. Groups that tried to establish an active apostolate for women—the Beguines, Angela de Merici and the Ursulines, the sisters of the Visitation—were either suppressed as heretics or confined to strict enclosure. Not until Vincent de Paul and Louise de Merillac hit upon the idea of the annual vow did it become possible for the Sisters of Charity to break out of the cloister to serve the poor, the sick, the ignorant, wherever they were to be found. Sandra Schneiders, in a talk given at the "Women in the Church" conference in 1986 demonstrated that the new code of canon law and the document on the essentials of the religious life represent the latest, and perhaps the most extreme, form of the patriarchal tendency to exert tight control over women's groups. Not only do these documents reserve to the hierarchy the right to interpret the vows and define the charism of each institute, but they prescribe the pattern of daily life in detail, and cap the whole by the insistence that individual members are bound to obey the pope as their highest superior, surely a new interpretation of the vow of obedience.²³

In seeking for the WON a sphere of relative freedom from clerical domination, Father van Ginneken defined the group as lay women, a mere

²³ Sandra Schneiders, IHM, "Self-Direction and Self-Determination Among American Women Religious," *Miriam's Song* (W. Hyattsville, Md.: Priests for Equality, no date), 20-27.

"pious union," thus formally placing them outside the sphere of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. He achieved this result by a device similar to that used by Vincent de Paul, but instead of an annual vow, he opted for a civil oath, a legalism which put the group in the lay category. However, being lay was more than a legalism—it became a *raison d'être*, a deeply internalized value.

The insistence on autonomy and self-determination has had its costs. The sacrifice of canonical status has meant official invisibility or at least marginality so far as ecclesiastical structures are concerned. But it has also meant the freedom to explore challenges, to raise new questions, to experiment with sometimes drastic changes—all activities which are easier to carry out on the margins of officialdom and which are nonetheless influential for being "unofficial."

Self-determination is strong meat. Trust in women's initiatives, resourcefulness and leadership could not be limited simply to protecting the autonomy of the group as group in relation to church structures. Once a group or an individual has tasted autonomy in one sphere, they will be moved sooner or later to extend that autonomy to other spheres. In the Grail, the valuing of autonomy and the respect for the individual led to the long struggle, which I have mentioned above, to devise participative structures, structures to free the individual and honor her autonomy.

The Grail has embodied another theme: the search for wholeness, breaking boundaries that keep individuals and groups apart; breaking the interior boundaries that divide the person within herself. The traditional spirituality through which we attempted to live out our commitment to "intensity of spirit in the world," was both dualistic and hierarchical. It divided spirit from matter, soul from body, reason from emotion, contemplation from action, church from world, always valuing the first member of each pair above the second. In this perspective, action, even apostolic action, was seen as a dangerous distraction from the pursuit of holiness. As one young woman put it, rather inelegantly, "You have to withdraw (into silence, prayer, penance) to tank up and then you spend it all in your action," a view she acquired from mediating on the *Imitation of Christ* and Dom Chautard's *Soul of the Apostolate*, both often used in the early 1940s.

I cannot begin to list all the factors that contributed to an evolution away from this tradition toward a more holistic and creation-centered spirituality, but among them are: the profound conviction that holiness is for everybody, not just for clergy and religious; the willingness as a group of women to be guided by our experience of what in practice made for healing and wholeness; the vision of Teilhard de Chardin; the insights of various forms of contemporary psychology into human development, authenticity and healthy integration of personality; experiences with a variety of spiritual approaches—psychosynthesis, yoga, zen, the intensive journal. Through these and other factors, we moved from a model in which action was

regarded as an inevitable depletion of spiritual energies to the Paulo Freire model in which no spiritual value can be regarded as firmly grounded until it has been tested in action.

Dualism leads to hierarchy, as differences are ranked, one higher than the other. If spirit is superior to matter, then those who renounce the world are clearly a spiritual elite. Hence the traditional view of virginity as "a higher state of life." In the Grail, a core group in virginity was seen as essential to safeguard the spirit as well as to be free for the work. However, the message of the lay apostolate, a message that was a powerful attraction, was precisely that holiness is for everyone, that there is more than one way to God, that every way is good. Although in the Grail, virginity was not regarded as a superior state, it was not easy to dispel the cultural overtones of the traditional view. I see the structural changes in the Grail as breaking the boundaries of old concepts: breaking the boundaries of membership to include women of different vocations and orientations as peers; and breaking away from the notion of virginity as essential for depth of commitment to a notion that women of different life styles might share the same depth of commitment.

I can remember being taught that there were two vocations for a woman: marriage or virginity (the single life in the world was passed over hastily as an anomaly), and that one's commitment to either path automatically decided one's priorities. I can also remember the beautiful simplicity of life lived on this pattern in my first years in the Grail. It was almost always quite clear where I should be putting my energies at any given moment.

Under the conditions of modern life that simplicity seems to have disappeared. Rather everyone seems to be involved in juggling multiple commitments: to family, friends, community, profession, to oneself and one's own needs, to one's spiritual journey. There are no guidelines that automatically set priorities in a particular situation, even though one has an overall set of priorities. Rather individuals are involved in processes of discernment under a given set of circumstances. In fact, I think that maturity is precisely the willingness to take responsibility for deciding how to honor one's diverse commitments. This requires self-awareness and awareness of the world around one: where are my energies welling up? to what am I being called?

As we approach the twenty-first century, I see the Grail as part of a worldwide women's movement, contributing its own small but significant modes of building international solidarity among women. I see us contributing to the search for a spirituality that is holistic and creation-centered, that affirms women as participants in the community of believers and in the society at large.

Like every feminist group, the Grail is faced with the tension between diversity and solidarity. The affirmation of the right of individuals to make their own choices has led to increasing maturity and to a sometimes bewildering diversity both of spiritual paths and of concrete commitments. At

the same time, we have pledged ourselves as firmly as ever to work for joint action for liberation, for that society where relationships of mutuality will replace relations of domination and submission in all spheres. As we strive to be an inclusive community, we are challenged to see differences in a new way, as strengths rather than as threatening or divisive, as a source of vitality rather than an occasion for rank ordering and put downs. In the words of Audre Lorde:

Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic . . . Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world, generate as well the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.²⁴

As we move into a world "where there are no charters," in the Grail we are finding in our struggles to embrace both diversity and solidarity the hope and energy for building that world in which all can flourish.

²⁴ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), 111.