

Deconstructing and Expanding Gender Roles: Theological Reflections on Women and Local Disaster Response

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Abstract

The situation of women during and after local disasters may, at first, seem unrelated to feminist theology, but this article argues that a critical reflection on the matter helps the Church further understand the relationship between men, women, and the rest of creation. In the context of two Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) documents entitled "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?" (1988) and "Upholding the Sanctity of Life" (2008), this article will analyze and articulate the gender ideologies that seem to underpin how women and nature are understood, using the reflections on the situation of women in disasters as well as a reconstructionist feminist liberationist framework. From there, recommendations will also be given as to what the Church can do further for everyone, given this article's analysis and reflection.

Key terms *feminist theology, women and local disasters, liberation theology, ecofeminism, gender*

In an interview in September 2013, Pope Francis said, “It is necessary to broaden the opportunities for a stronger presence of women in the Church. . . . We must therefore investigate further the role of women in the Church. We have to work harder to develop a profound theology of the woman.”¹ The Pope’s challenge to the Church to strengthen the role of women in the Catholic Church and to deepen its theological reflection about women enjoins us in the Philippines to study and reflect on the situation of women in our country and encourages women to voice their perspectives on many social issues today.

In the context of preparations for the Synod on the Family in 2014 and 2015, the Theology Department of the Ateneo de Manila University held a symposium on the family from Catholic and women’s perspectives on September 13, 2014. This activity provided a venue for discussing from various angles and disciplines the particular concerns of women and new trends in the experiences undergone by women and Filipino families. Speakers from theology and sociology and anthropology sought to bridge gaps and intensify present connections between religious beliefs and the wealth of knowledge from secular disciplines and domains of experience.

The lectures of Eleanor Dionisio, Mary Racelis, and Agnes Brazal all presented challenges to the essentialist gender ideology that underlies official Catholic teaching on women and the family. Eleanor Dionisio most clearly identified the gender ideology behind the Catholic Church’s conception of the natural order, which it

¹ Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God,” *America Magazine*, September 30, 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

claims to be “sacred,” “given” or “universal.”² Mary Racelis presented data about the changing situations being undergone by Filipino women and families in urban poor communities, which provide a basis for calling into question traditional claims about gender roles and family structures.³ Agnes Brazal, a theologian, provided an historical survey of papal teachings on women, showing that although these teachings have adjusted to historical conditions over time, they still maintain a traditional and rigid construction of gender identity.⁴

Emma Porio linked the preceding discussions on gender roles/ideology to a pressing issue, which begs for attention in light of present events in the Philippines. Based on her study of climate change, vulnerability, and adaptation to natural disasters in Metro Manila, she noted that poor women are often the most affected when disasters strike. Precisely because they are often particularly vulnerable in times of disasters, they nevertheless take on the responsibility of caring for home, husband, and children, as well as engaging in civic activities.⁵ In the aftermath of Typhoon Ondoy, Porio noted that female-headed households experienced a greater

² Eleanor Dionisio, “The Catholic Church in the Philippines: Some Perspectives on Gender and Public Policies on the Family” (paper presented at the Symposium on the Filipino Family: Catholic and Women’s Perspectives, Leong Hall, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, September 13, 2014).

³ Mary Racelis, “Women, Family and the Church in a Changing Society: An Introduction to the Socio-Cultural Issues” (paper presented at the Symposium on the Filipino Family: Catholic and Women’s Perspectives, Leong Hall, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, September 13, 2014).

⁴ Agnes Brazal, “Gender Roles in the Context of Feminization of Migration: Challenge to Papal Teachings?” (paper presented at the Symposium on the Filipino Family: Catholic and Women’s Perspectives, Leong Hall, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, September 13, 2014).

⁵ Emma Porio, “Gender and Family Dynamics: Building Climate Resilience Among the Urban Poor” (paper presented at the Symposium on the Filipino Family: Catholic and Women’s Perspectives, Leong Hall, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, September 13, 2014).

increase in expenditures for medicine, sanitation, and healthcare compared to male-headed households, indicating that “women bear a heavier burden in times of disaster in terms of taking care of the sick and cleaning their homes.”⁶

Although the symposium foregrounded the question of gender ideology in Church teaching and the situation of women in relation to environment and situated these within the Filipino context, two gaps remain to be addressed. First, the connection between gender ideology and the conceptualization of the relationship between “woman” and “nature,” that can become manifest in times of disaster, needs to be articulated and examined. Second, while all speakers located their concerns within the Filipino context, the Church teachings that the speakers, mainly Brazal and Dionisio, adverted to were mainly papal teachings and not those of the local Magisterium in the Philippines.

To fill these lacunae, we shall focus on two pastoral letters of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) specifically about the environment, namely, “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?” (1988) and “Upholding the Sanctity of Life” (2008). Women as mothers are particularly mentioned in the first pastoral letter in the context of ecological conservation initiatives:

The vitality of our Filipino family is also a sign of hope. Parents share their life with their children. They protect them and care for them and are particularly solicitous when any member of the family is sick. This is especially true of mothers; they are the heartbeat of the family, working quietly in the home to create an

⁶ Emma Porio, “Climate Change Vulnerability and Adaptation in Metro Manila: Challenging Governance and Human Security Needs of Urban Poor Communities,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42 (2014): 92.

atmosphere where everyone is accepted and loved. No sacrifice is too demanding when it comes to caring for a sick member of the family. The values we see in our families of patient toil, concern for all and a willingness to sacrifice for the good of others are the very values which we must now transfer to the wider sphere in our efforts to conserve, heal and love our land. It is not a mere coincidence that women have been at the forefront of the ecological movement in many countries. The tree planting program of the Chipko in India, popularly known as the “hug a tree” movement and the Greenbelt movement in Kenya spring to mind.⁷

While this excerpt seems to be laudable in its intention to promote women as signs of hope and as inspiration for caring for creation, the document presupposes two notions about women that are expressive of an essentialist gender ideology: first, that women as mothers are the silent workers who are the source of a gratuitous “labor” of love, sacrifice, concern, and welcome in their homes; and second, that from women’s qualities as mothers are derived their presumed closeness to nature, which enables them to be exemplary ecological advocates.

Through the juxtaposition of the CBCP’s pastoral letters and women’s experiences in disasters, we seek to appraise how women are seen and treated as mothers in Philippine culture and by the predominant Catholic tradition, and how they are conceived as

⁷ Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), “What Is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?” (pastoral letter, Tagaytay City, Philippines, January 29, 1988), <http://www.cbcponline.net/documents/1980s/1988-ecology.html>.

being close to nature, and then draw the implications and consequences of these two perspectives upon our relationship with God, with one another, and with the Earth. This is to be done using a reconstructionist feminist liberationist framework for doing theology as articulated by Anne Clifford in the context of CBCP's pastoral letters and women's experiences in natural disasters. Our approach is feminist because our inquiry is to be carried out explicitly from a women's perspective that takes the narratives of women seriously and is critical of gender ideology and unjust practices resulting from this. We are engaging in reconstructionist theology because we seek to place feminist consciousness in dialogue with Church teaching or claims by Church authority with the aim of reimagining our Christian faith without rejecting it. Because a liberationist approach necessitates not only a theoretical exercise but also praxis, we plan to identify pragmatic and pastoral implications of our faith reflection. The essay unfolds through the following structure: (1) a narrative and analysis of women's experiences, (2) a critical reading of Church teaching in light of women's experiences and studies regarding these experiences, and (3) a formulation of strategies for liberating transformative action.⁸

Narrative and Analysis of Women's Experiences During Disasters

While Porio's talk focused on vulnerability and adaptation to climate change alone, without any reference to theological issues, this paper would argue that the effect of natural disasters upon women and women's roles in response to such disasters are related to how women and nature are perceived. The current way of

⁸ Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 34–35.

understanding women in society is inadequate; there is a need for a deconstruction of gender dynamics and a reimagination of how women in families are understood, especially in the context of emerging trends in culture and changing family and social dynamics in the Philippines.

Porio pointed that compared to male-headed households, women-headed households had higher expenditures in the face of natural disasters. Other organizations have observed that gender inequality makes women more vulnerable in post-disaster situations for various reasons: for instance, women may have no access to warning systems through radio or television.⁹ In many developing countries hit by disasters, disaster response on the local level is not gender sensitive, as reported by the United Nations Development Program Bureau for Crisis Prevention and recovery.¹⁰ In India, for example, a large number of those who died due to the tsunami in December 2004 were women—with the percentage being around 77 percent, and even rising as high as 80 percent in the worst hit village. This large number was due to factors such as women being the ones at home and near the shore, while men were away working, and women being less likely to know how to swim, since it is usually the men who are fishing while the women wait at the shore for the catch.¹¹ Something similar is seen in the wake of Typhoon Yolanda in November 2013 and the earthquakes in the Visayas region in February 2012 and October 2013. According to Dr. Shyam Pathak of Save the Children, a non-governmental organization that

⁹ United Nations Development Programme, “Gender and Disasters,” *UNDP.org*, October 2010, <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/crisis%20prevention/disaster/7Disaster%20Risk%20Reduction%20-%20Gender.pdf>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Oxfam International, “The Tsunami’s Impact on Women,” *Prevention Web*, March 2005, http://www.preventionweb.net/files/1502_bn050326tsunamiwomen.pdf.

provides relief and aid for children in developing countries, aside from the usual risks brought about by natural disasters, women in particular face unique risks due to their sexual and reproductive health needs, socioeconomic situation, and the culture of the Philippines.¹² Field workers noted that many women giving birth a couple of days after Typhoon Yolanda did so under unhygienic conditions, thus increasing risks of death due to infection, malnutrition, and illness.¹³ Some women have even suffered from mental instability. Sadly, human trafficking and prostitution have also become issues in the aftermath of the typhoon.¹⁴ A Yolanda survivor reports the following:

Many women who were widowed by Yolanda are young—they're in their mid-20s to early 30s. With their husbands dead and two, three young mouths to feed, can anyone blame them if they sell their bodies in exchange for some cash or even relief goods? No one is happy about this, and there's an attitude of acceptance that some mothers have done or are doing this. It's for their children; besides, it's not a full-time job; just so they get enough food for a few meals.¹⁵

While this paints a very pessimistic and distressing image of women as victims in the face of local disasters, women also play an active

¹² "Facing Unique Risks, Female Survivors of Yolanda Need Help," *Rappler.com*, March 8, 2014, <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/disasters/typhoon-yolanda/52435-risks-female-survivors-haiyan>.

¹³ Agence France-Presse, "Yolanda' Mothers Struggle for Survival," *Inquirer.net*, November 5, 2014, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/648754/perilous-year-for-yolanda-mothers>; Ana P. Santos, "After the Storm: Pregnant Women Need Urgent Care and Attention," *Rappler.com*, November 20, 2013, <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/44052-after-storm-pregnant-women-urgent-care-attention>.

¹⁴ Ina Alleco Silverio, "Hush-Hush on Prostitution in Tacloban," *Pinoy Weekly*, November 8, 2014, <http://pinoyweekly.org/new/2014/11/hush-hush-on-prostitution-in-tacloban>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

role, both negative and positive, in local disaster response, especially in their communities or even in the Church.

On the one hand, women have had a role not just in contributing to the disorder after a disaster but also in harming nature. Development economics notes that environmental degradation continues due to lack of clean water and sanitation facilities, and that many of the poor, a majority of which—due to gender inequality when it comes to access to opportunities such as education and healthcare—are women, continue to use biomass fuels such as wood, straw, or manure, as fuels for cooking,¹⁶ thus contributing to land, water, and air pollution, and posing health hazards for the community. In Tanzania, women are known to dig up tubers without replacing them; they gather branches of berries and honey without leaving anything for the bees to repopulate in.¹⁷ In the Philippines, there were stories of women looting broken down warehouses out of necessity and desperation, taking rice, water, sardines, and other commodities and even teaching their children to do the same after Typhoon Yolanda barreled through Tacloban.¹⁸ Women, just as men, can and do take advantage of the devastation in the wake of natural disasters. In the United States, a woman in Philadelphia, defrauded the Federal Emergency Management

¹⁶Michael Todaro, *Economic Development* (Singapore: Pearson Education Asia Pte Ltd, 2001), 415-417; Rosario Batung et al., “Towards an Asian Principle of Interpretation: A Filipino Women’s Experience,” in *To Be Fully Human . . . EATWOT Women’s Theologies*, ed. Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (Manila, Philippines: Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, 1998), 43.

¹⁷Matt Nuenke, “How Humans Have Been Killing, Starving, and Despoiling Their Environment for Millions of Years,” *Majorityrights.com*, March 22, 2005, http://majorityrights.com/weblog/comments/how_humans_have_been_killing_starving_and_despoiling_their_environment_for.

¹⁸Patricia Evangelista, “The Women Who Stole,” *Rappler.com*, November 18, 2013, <http://www.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/disasters/typhoon-yolanda/43645-women-who-stole-yolanda>.

Agency of money she was not entitled to, by claiming that she was displaced by Hurricane Irene when in truth she was not.¹⁹

On the other hand, stories of women holding their own and taking care of their children amidst the destruction and rubble in the aftermath of disasters are common. A woman named Rose Imperial was able to use her beauty salon and beautician skills to help others, especially women, cope with their losses and move on from the disaster, while she herself felt encouraged through her customer's demands for her services.²⁰ Besides women who themselves were struck by disaster, groups such as Gabriela help victims secure their human rights to basics needs in the wake of disasters.²¹ In the Della Strada parish in the Diocese of Cubao, for example, the committee that mobilized and coordinated their parish's response to those devastated by Typhoon Yolanda was formed mostly by women. These women headed the project of adopting a parish in Palo, Leyte, and funding and organizing the rebuilding efforts of not just the church and chapels, but also of the homes of the community.²² In India, an NGO called Swayam Shikshan Prayog, whose focus is to build the capacities of rural women, taught groups of women basic construction techniques to help strengthen their houses in the wake of earthquakes. They were the ones who made sure local

¹⁹ Alex Wigglesworth, "Feds: Philly Woman Stole \$18K in FEMA Disaster Assistance Funds," *Philly.com*, June 19, 2014, http://www.philly.com/philly/news/Feds_Philly_woman_stole_18K_in_FEMA_.html?c=r.

²⁰ Chun Han Wong, "In Philippine City, Salon's Revival Signals Hope after Haiyan," *Divasoria*, March 2, 2014, <http://www.divasoria.ph/2014/03/02/glossy-girls-unite>.

²¹ "The Victims of Typhoon #YolandaPH Need Our Help," *Gabriela*, November 14, 2013, <http://www.gabrielaph.com/2013/11/14/the-victims-of-typhoon-yolandaph-need-our-help>. They have also released a statement on rape: "On Rape Incidents in Areas Ravaged by Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan)," *Gabriela*, November 14, 2013, <http://www.gabrielaph.com/2013/11/14/on-rape-incidents-in-areas-ravaged-by-typhoon-yolanda-haiyan>.

²² Interview by Stephanie Ann Y. Puen, Della Strada Parish, Quezon City, November 18, 2014.

homeowners knew of these techniques and could apply them to their own homes, especially in the aftermath of the Bhuj Gujrat earthquake in 2001.²³ Findings in a study done in 1996 suggest that “women offer more sustainable emotional support to disaster victims (e.g. as volunteers and within the family), [are] more likely to warn others and assist in long term recovery (e.g. as crisis workers and human service professionals), and volunteer more for local preparedness programs.”²⁴ The “women’s grassroots organizations” are also the ones who are “engaged in disaster mitigation, preparedness, relief, and reconstruction efforts,” often being the first responders, both for their own personal families, keeping them together, as well as their local communities, gathering funds and resources needed to rebuild the area.²⁵ Longstanding biases against women participating in the political and socio-economic sphere can be challenged when the community sees the roles women can take and have taken in providing for the community when the need arises.

The role that women take in response to disasters can add new insights to the “theology of women” that the Church needs to envision. Traditionally, women have been seen by the Church as either mothers who care for the family, or virgins who consecrate themselves to God, perhaps by joining a convent or congregation. However, as Eleanor Dionisio points out:

²³ Vasudha Gokhale, “Role of Women in Disaster Management: An Analytical Study with Reference to Indian Society” (paper presented at the 14th World Conference on Earthquake Engineering, Beijing China, October 12–17, 2008).

²⁴ Elaine Enarson, “SWS Fact Sheet: Women and Disaster,” *Natural Hazard Mitigation Association*, June 2006, <http://nhma.info/uploads/resources/gender/SWS%20G&D%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf>; adapted from Alice Fothergill, “Gender, Risk, and Disaster,” *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 14, no. 1 (1996): 33–56.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

In real life, many Filipino women do participate in social production: working in factories, plantations or offices; taking on income earning work within the home; or rendering unpaid work in family fields or enterprises. Women do 40–60 percent of agricultural work in the Philippines, and constitute more than 40 percent of the work force in all sectors. But various studies have found that they, their families, and their communities often view such work as supplementary and secondary to the main task of housekeeping and child rearing, even when the income they earn is greater than that of the men in their families.²⁶

In the Philippines, gender systems, as Dionisio pointed out, are still characterized by a dichotomy between the women assigned to being homemakers and the men who are the breadwinners of the family. While the gender divide in the Philippines is not as sharp as in other Asian countries, reproduction and all related tasks such as child rearing are still assigned to the women's sphere, while working, creating, and producing goods and services in exchange for income and other goods and services are still thought to belong to the men's sphere. Times have changed and gender roles need to be reviewed. The kinds of roles that women now take are far more than just the traditional housewife and mother, or virgin and nun. Women now enter the realm of politics, business, media, the arts, and the sciences, and are thus breaking free of the traditional roles cast for them by traditional gender systems. Globalization and migration

²⁶ Eleanor Dionisio, *Sex and Gender* (Manila, Philippines: National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, 1997), 6.

have reshaped the roles that women and mothers take, with mothers becoming overseas contract workers and fathers becoming caretakers of the children, or even both mother and father working abroad and having extended family care for the children. These new configurations of roles within the family ought to challenge traditional gender identities. An attachment to rigid stereotypes causes further difficulties, such as, women having to take up the double burden work while being solely responsible with domestic work as well, women migrants compensating for their absence by being supermoms who micromanage their children's lives and other aspects of the household through the internet, or men finding themselves struggling with insecurities because poverty has made it difficult for many of them to fulfill the role of being the provider of their families.²⁷ Roles have to be recast more fluidly and dynamically. In today's culture and society, there are definitely many women today who are neither mothers, nor virgins, and to refuse to acknowledge these women—such as those who are unable to procreate, or do not desire to be mothers, those who are single, and those who are lesbian—would mean marginalizing them. This emphasizes even further the need to understand, analyze, and critique underlying gender ideologies of society. As Agnes Brazal wrote regarding the deconstruction of conceptions about gender:

In the past, in the context of changing patterns of family life, the Roman Catholic Church has revised its teachings to adapt itself to new situations. From

²⁷ Batung et al., "Towards an Asian Principle of Interpretation," 43; Agnes Brazal, "Harmonizing Power-Beauty: Gender Fluidity in the Migration Context," *Asian Christian Review* 4, no. 2 (2010): 34–46, https://www.academia.edu/2561878/Harmonizing_Power_Beauty_Gender_Fluidity_in_the_Migration_Context.

categorically stating women's nature as fitted for housework, the Church now recognizes women's contribution in many other fields and disciplines. From idealizing the one-income family the Church has now accepted the double-income family as a reality, not only because of force of circumstance (financial reasons) but also in recognition of the contributions women can make in all spheres of life. John Paul's social recognition of work in the house as labor has important implications for legislation on domestic work. As any other kind of work, domestic work or caregiving should be regulated as well by the State. Lastly, John Paul II rightly advocated the restructuring of labor to meet the demands of childcare in the family. Childcare is not only a private or family concern but should be a concern by the economic and political institutions as well.²⁸

If the Church is to take seriously its teachings in *Gaudium et Spes* on reading the "signs of the times,"²⁹ and to continue what it has started in adapting and revamping its teachings on gender dynamics and the family, then it is time to once again reflect on and renew the theology of women that the Church espouses. This requires that the Church continue to de-absolutize the rigid gender ideologies and anthropology that it is currently upholding.

²⁸ Brazal, "Gender Roles," 39.

²⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, December 7, 1965, sec. 4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

CBCP's Understanding of Women in "What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?" and "Upholding the Sanctity of Life"

The association of women with motherhood and with nature expressed in CBCP's pastoral letters is present in older Christian traditions. Agnes Brazal and Karen Enriquez have pointed out that despite their different emphases and nuances, various papal and Vatican teachings, such as *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Pacem in Terris*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Octogesima Adviniens*, and *Mulieris Dignitatem*, consistently associate women with domestic and maternal roles.³⁰ The association of women with nature can be traced further back to early attempts to understand the world. The Babylonian creation story, the primal dualism of Plato, and the Hebrew story of a powerful Creator God who fashions the cosmic order with man at the center all reflect and ratify a world where one kind of being is superior to another.³¹ Christianity, which was influenced by Platonic dualism and Aristotelean social hierarchy, as well as institutionalized patriarchy in the context of the Roman political order,³² elaborated conceptions of "the soul in relation to the body as male controlling power over female-identified body" and of mankind's dominance over nature.³³ Nature is often characterized as "mother," as

³⁰ Karen Enriquez, "From *Hija* to *Dangal*: A Critique of John Paul II's Theological Anthropology in Light of the Experience of Filipino Women," *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2012): 55–56; Brazal, "Gender Roles," 36–38.

³¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ecofeminism: The Challenge to Theology" (PDF copy, *Ca'Foscari University of Venice Online*), 23, http://www.unive.it/media/allegato/dep/n20-2012/Ricerche/Riflessione/4_Ruether_Ecofeminism.pdf; in *Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 97–112. Citations refer to the PDF copy.

³² *Ibid.*, 26; Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, 19.

³³ Ruether, "Ecofeminism," 24.c

evidenced by the commonly used term “mother nature,” which associates nature with the feminine, and familiar tropes—in media, for example—personifying nature as a woman in robes with leaves in her hair.³⁴ Women are often perceived as being more intimately linked to nature than are men.

The CBCP, in its pastoral letters, builds on existing notions of women as mothers, women as related to nature, and nature as Mother Nature to encourage Filipino Catholics to exercise stewardship towards the environment.³⁵ Despite its immediate appeal, this view which reduces both women and nature—by relegating women to motherhood and nature to being subordinate to humanity just as women are subordinate to men—is indicative of an anthropocentric worldview that ultimately severs relationships among men and women, as well as humanity and the Earth, rather than provide hope and healing. Catherine Roach questions how well the metaphor of mother applies to earth and nature, as well as how the characterization of mother affects how people understand nature.³⁶ As Roach puts it:

As Elizabeth Dodson Gray (1989) insists, we must withdraw our weighty projections and try to see clearly the Earth as Earth and not as the mother or female we have imagined the Earth to be. Instead of leading us to

³⁴ An example of which is Julia Roberts playing mother nature in the Nature is Speaking Initiative: Damian Carrington, “Julia Roberts Plays Mother Earth and Harrison Ford Stars as the Ocean as Hollywood A-List ‘Speaks out for Nature,’” *The Guardian*, October 6, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/damian-carrington-blog/2014/oct/06/julia-roberts-plays-mother-earth-and-harrison-ford-stars-as-the-ocean-as-hollywood-a-list-speaks-out-for-nature>.

A Google search of the words “mother nature” will lead to countless images of a woman in green with leaves and flowers in her hair, and only one or two of a “father nature.”

³⁵ CBCP, “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?”; CBCP, “Upholding the Sanctity of Life” (pastoral letter, Jaro City, Iloilo, Philippines, November 5, 2008), <http://cbeponline.net/v2/?p=556>.

³⁶ Catherine Roach, “Loving Your Mother: On the Woman-Nature Relation,” *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (April 1, 1991): 46–59.

greater environmental soundness, the strategy of picturing the Earth as our mother could have the exact opposite effect. Mother in patriarchal culture is she who provides all of our sustenance and who makes disappear all of our waste products, she who satisfies all of our wants and needs endlessly and without any cost to us. Mother is she who loves us and will take care of us no matter what (Gray 1982, 102–5). The last thing the environmental movement should do is encourage us to think of the environment in these terms. Our ecological breakdown has arisen, in part, precisely from our attitude that nature is a storehouse of riches which will never empty and which we may use at will for any purpose we desire, without incurring any debt or obligation of replacement.³⁷

The mother is often understood as a persona that loves unconditionally, takes care of others, makes sure everything is taken care of, without people having to lift a finger. Roach makes it clear that this is not the way to understand nature, as understanding nature as mother leads to a personification of nature as something that will never run out or leave us—similar to how a mother is seen as someone who unconditionally loves her children, who will always stick by their side through thick or thin and always in their favor and for their benefit, which thus opens up the possibility of abusing maternal generosity (and nature's abundance and fecundity) and a feeling of entitlement for such privileges.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

A similar conflation between motherhood and nature is seen in the pastoral letter of the CBCP entitled “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?” which ascribes caring and nurturing characteristics to mothers and concludes from this that it is “not a mere coincidence that women have been at the forefront of the ecological movement in many countries.”³⁸ While this statement does enjoin everyone—whether male or female, whether mothers or not—to espouse a caring and nurturing attitude, it seems to assume that it is women who essentially have it, and thus women are more connected to nature, since nature also has the same characteristics of caring and nurturing people.

Roach also points out that “in patriarchal culture, when women are seen as closer to nature, women are inevitably seen as less fully human than men.”³⁹ It is not only nature that is degraded by its identification with women, but also women who are affected by their identification with nature. The way people view the differences or dynamics between male and female is similar to the way people view the dynamics between humanity and nature. Women were—and some places are—treated as second-class citizens because of people’s dualistic, hierarchical, and patriarchal tendencies, which today also tend to support an anthropocentric way of perceiving and dealing with nature. Roach quotes Dorothy Dinnerstein, who shows how women, similar to nature, are seen as natural resources to be used for men’s gain, with no need for or any right to conservation or care.⁴⁰

³⁸ CBCP, “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?”

³⁹ Roach, “Loving Your Mother,” 51.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

The portrayal in Genesis of God enjoining humanity to “subdue and have dominion” over creation, interpreted in a superficial way, has been used to justify the exploitation and abuse of the environment. In a similar fashion, most people subscribe to the idea that man is the ruler and controller, while woman—as with nature—ought to be tamed and controlled. Since gender hierarchy is implicated in the (patriarchal) conception of the relation between humanity and nature, and vice versa, to reimagine the dynamics between male and female is not only to envision and make possible a just relationship between, but also to reframe humanity’s relationship with the Earth in a just way. Rather than treating nature as something to be tamed and controlled and exploited, humanity is called to be in harmony with nature and all of the created order. In light of this understanding of the implicit gender ideology that underpins the exploitative interpretation of Genesis, it is possible to consider an alternative reading of the divine injunction: Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that the doctrine of stewardship was not an original command, but a corrective to the presumption of dominant males that they could own the world.⁴¹

Alternative non-binary and non-hierarchical worldviews are needed to push our theological imagination beyond anthropocentrism. The witness of women in disasters leads us to also reflect on our relationship with the Earth. All this also calls for an expansion of the understanding of women in the family and society. As we have seen in the many roles that women have begun taking up in society, women are not limited to the caring and nurturing roles in which society often seeks to confine them. “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?” is on the right track when it says that caring and

⁴¹ Ruether, “Ecofeminism,” 28.

nurturing roles—be it for the family, society, or the environment—are not and should not be limited to women.

Freeing ourselves from the rigid dualist and essentialist complementary gender ideology, wherein a particular set of roles are assigned to either men or women on the basis of gender, not only makes just relationships among men and women possible, but also enables us to conceive our relationship with the Earth in new ways. Instead of seeing nature as an object to be tamed or controlled, a non-dualist and non-complementary view allows us to see nature as a world we are part of and ourselves as having an intrinsic spiritual relationship with all creation.

There is another but subtle strand of understanding our relationship with nature that can be perceived in “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?” that is not found in “Upholding the Sanctity of Life.” While the latter focuses on human life as expressed in the conclusion, “Human life does not have a price,”⁴² the former does not only emphasize the human being’s responsibility over nature, but also mentions a belief in the importance of the life of non-humans and the harmony of all creatures.⁴³ This is consistent with Per Binde’s observation that while mainstream Western Catholic theology saw nature as material, an alternative strand within the same tradition saw nature as divine.⁴⁴

Despite the openness expressed by the CBCP through its expanded understanding of who should possess caring roles and its emphasis on the balance between the promotion of justice and the integrity of creation, it nevertheless accepts and fails to critique the elements of tradition that are burdensome for women. On the one

⁴² CBCP, “Upholding the Sanctity of Life.”

⁴³ CBCP, “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?”

⁴⁴ Per Binde, “Nature in Roman Catholic Tradition,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 74, no. 1 (January 1, 2001): 19–21.

hand, it recognizes the urgency of preventing or, when unavoidable, minimizing environmental destruction, but on the other hand, it falls short of prophetically denouncing the deeper philosophical root causes of environmental degradation and merely puts the blame on a false sense of progress that brings about destruction.⁴⁵ However, consumerism and the myth of progress are merely symptoms of the problem of an anthropocentric and androcentric worldview.⁴⁶ What is cultural and symbolic expresses and confirms social and economic realities.⁴⁷ For a very long time, stories about the “nature of things” and the “will of God/the gods” have been spun to validate present norms while a social order structured by domination prevails.⁴⁸ Some ecofeminists have proposed alternative views by which the prevailing religio-symbolic view can be corrected.

A possible way to consider our relationship with nature differently has been proposed by Donna Haraway, an ecofeminist who pioneers the “cyborg theory.” A cyborg is a hybrid that refuses classification among dualist categories. Based on feminist postmodernism, Haraway deconstructs patriarchy and patriarchal language which frames reality as a hierarchical structure wherein man has power over nature.⁴⁹ The distinction between the natural world and humanity is not as clear cut as modernity has understood it.⁵⁰ Haraway’s research on “natureculture” focuses on the blurring

⁴⁵ CBCP, “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?”

⁴⁶ Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, “The Sacrament of Creation: Toward an Environmental Theology,” in *Readings in Ecology and Feminist Theology*, ed. Mary Heather MacKinnon and Moni McIntyre (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1995), 43.

⁴⁷ Ruether, “Ecofeminism,” 22; Binde, “Nature in Roman Catholic Tradition,” 16–18. While Per Binde agrees that such views have been characteristic of mainstream Christianity, there nevertheless exist alternative strands of viewing nature within Western Christian tradition.

⁴⁸ Ruether, “Ecofeminism,” 23.

⁴⁹ Kevin O’Brien, “An Ethics of Nature Culture and Creation: Donna Haraway’s Cyborg Ethics as a Resource for Ecotheology,” *Ecotheology* 9, no. 3 (2004): 299.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

of boundaries between the two. Human beings, as part of the dynamic dialogue between nature and culture, are both naturally and culturally-technologically constructed. For this reason, Haraway calls human beings cyborgs.⁵¹

Ecofeminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether also challenges theological anthropology by arguing that human consciousness, which we have long used as a basis to set ourselves apart from other life forms, is part of the ongoing progression of life on earth. She even asserts that the human being's primal sin is the unwillingness to accept our finiteness and vulnerability. Our insistence on eternal life for ourselves beyond the cosmos is a denial of our belongingness with the Earth.⁵²

In addition to this critique of the dualistic and hierarchical worldview, and as a necessary counterpoint to its potential shortcomings, another ecofeminist perspective should be taken into account in the converging critique of patriarchy and environmental degradation. Kwok Pui-lan, who also writes on ecofeminist theology, notes that whereas White feminist theologies start with a deconstruction of dualism and a proposal for harmony, she invites Third World women to recognize the complexity and multifacetedness of the experiences of real women, who have undergone difficulties under conquest, modernization, and green imperialism, as a starting point reflection so as to avoid romanticizing harmony, valorizing nature, and falling into the trap of another kind of essentialism—that of essentializing indigenous cultures.⁵³ Hence, while remaining critical of the tradition other feminists have sought

⁵¹ Ibid., 299.

⁵² Ruether, "Ecofeminism," 28–29.

⁵³ Kwok Pui-lan, "Mending Creation: Women, Nature, and Hope," in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 226–27.

to reject, in this essay, we have also taken our cue from Kwok Pui-lan and thus began with accounts and analyses of women's actual experience.

The experiences of women in disasters provide us with counter-narratives that show how, from new world views, women can still be recognized as signs of hope in new ways. The role women take in response to disasters can certainly add new insights about how the Church speaks with and of women, and these insight help de-absolutize current gender roles. Disasters have the tendency to bring out the best—as seen in how many people help out in various relief operations—and the worst in people—as seen in the looting and sometimes callous remarks of people regarding the victims of disaster. Amidst all these positive and negative responses, it seems that in responding to local disasters, women play a key role in holding everyone together and keeping the family alive. While the empirical approach allows us to appreciate the profoundly constructive role of women in disaster response, attending to the actual experiences of Filipino women in disasters also prevents us from romanticizing women's relationship with nature. A serious consideration of their stories demands that we give due consideration to the ambivalence that is present in their struggle to survive. We also hear stories of women participating in activities that are harmful to human beings and nature in order to survive. Kwok Pui-lan points out that from a Third World perspective . . .

Dire poverty and the struggle for survival impose heavy burdens on many women in the Third World, who are responsible for putting food on the table and fetching clean water for the family. Ironically, while some poor women are creative managers of the environment, others have been forced to abuse the environment for the sake of their own survival and that of their own

children Although we should not blame the victims of our global economy who have to struggle to obtain even basic necessities, we also should not close our eyes to poor women's capacity to destroy nature.⁵⁴

In the context of ordinary and poor women's experiences and Kwok's theological insight, women as a sign of hope can still be affirmed in new ways. This paper will outline three ways. The first way is to understand that the foundation of women's hope is their on-going struggle to resist, survive, and live.⁵⁵ According to the United Nations Development Programme, disasters are opportunities for women to change longstanding biases and views on women when they are involved in planning for disaster response and risk reduction, especially when the community sees that the women can rise to the occasion, and when communities realize through experiences, data, and research, that "gender asymmetry in vulnerability to disaster risk is rooted primarily in geographic, economic, social, educational/informational, and political power imbalances across all levels."⁵⁶

The second is to acknowledge that despite the exploitation many women have undergone, women still continue to strive to work in solidarity with others who have benefited from their exploitation.⁵⁷ This is seen in the case in India, where the grassroots movement for disaster relief, response, and mitigation began from the women's initiatives for the community, working alongside the government and other organizations, who also at times would ignore the needs

⁵⁴ Ibid., 227.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 228.

⁵⁶ Senay Habtezion et al., "Gender and Disaster Risk Reduction." *UNDP.org*, 2013, <http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/gender/Gender%20and%20Environment/PB3-AP-Gender-and-disaster-risk-reduction.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Kwok Pui-lan, "Mending Creation," 226–27.

of the women and simply use them for their livelihood programs. This can also be seen in the actions of the women's group Gabriela, cited earlier in this paper, as they continued to help after Typhoon Yolanda hit the Philippines.

The third is to emphasize that women continue to believe that they are not alone in their struggle, because “the tender web of life still holds.”⁵⁸ An example of this also happened in the relief efforts for Typhoon Yolanda victims—as seen in the experience of Rose, her beauty salon, and how it helped others move on and deal with the disaster. Women such as Rose continue to hope and to believe in encouraging and being encouraged by others, both men and women, in their cause.

Strategies for Transformative Action in Response to Women's Concerns and Environmental Degradation

“What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?” ends with some suggestions from the CBCP about what individuals, churches, and the government can do. While we appreciate the concrete strategies the local hierarchy has offered, two important elements in light of the analysis and reflection above can nevertheless be considered for improvement.

First, although we recognize that the pastoral letter gives some attention to what the Church can do, it gives more emphasis to what lay people can do, whereas there is still much that the hierarchy can do. This reflects a patriarchal attitude which revolves around prescribing or enjoining “shoulds” and “should nots” to the flock.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 229.

The document betrays a patriarchal mindset, wherein authorities see themselves as a guide for their followers without necessarily having to account for what they have done or to justify what they have to do, instead of seeking to learn from women, the laity, ecological advocates, and people of other religious traditions. Instead of a patriarchal leadership style wherein norms are established by males in power over other men, women, and creation, a partnership style of leadership wherein mutual learning is espoused can be explored.⁵⁹ To have those in authority be part of the community rather than apart from and above the community requires more lasting and radical changes in Church practices and in how the Church understands the relationship among men, women, and nature, reflected in the institutionalization of participation women and other voices from the margins.

Second, the pastoral letter emphasizes hope, but hope is futile without memory. The CBCP acknowledges that “denial, cover-up or selective memory soothe our consciences. One sure way of killing hope and the new life ushered by the resurrection experience is by painting a rosy picture as if nothing bad had happened. As if there were no victims, no death.”⁶⁰ Hence, the emphasis on environmental advocacy found in CBCP’s recommendations for action should be coupled with repentance and an acknowledgment of how the Church has contributed to disasters, and have wronged many women and indigenous peoples. Rather than idealizing “mother nature,” and elevating women and indigenous peoples as signs of hope, while sweeping controversies involving the Church regarding these issues under a rug, the Church should recognize that

⁵⁹ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster J. Knox Press, 1993), 56–57.

⁶⁰ Luis Antonio Tagle, *Easter People: Living Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 19.

victims of oppression and land-grabbing, many of whom are indigenous people and women, deserve just restitution. Similarly, the story of creation sounds less triumphalistic when we remember that it is the story of a nation in exile remembering God saving them from slavery in Exodus. A practical consequence of remembering is that memory enables us to take the situation of the Earth and of women more seriously, and enables us thus to understand how it is everyone's responsibility to make reparation.

While most of the CBCP's suggestions center on disaster prevention, acknowledgement has to be made that disasters have already happened and that we cannot revert back to a time before these disasters. PCP II #321 acknowledges that "Destruction can be irreparable and irreversible."⁶¹ Hence, disaster mitigation must also be coupled with disaster response. As outlined above, women are disproportionately affected by disasters. Thus, the approach toward disaster response should be more gender sensitive. It needs to seek alternative ways of understanding gender relations, and has to be grounded on a good understanding of current patterns and trends of the family and the community, rather than on a limited understanding of the nuclear family (as mother-father-child).⁶² The United Nations Development Programme also emphasizes that sustainable livelihood aid should be equally available for both men and women, and that risk assessment and livelihood opportunities should take into account women's roles in the community as well as their capacities and skills, rather than simply see them as "mothers" and as simply passive objects.⁶³

⁶¹ Catholic Church, Catholic Church Plenary Council of the Philippines, and Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, eds., *Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines: Held at the Holy Apostles Seminary, Makati, Metro Manila from 20 January-17 February 1991* (Manila, Philippines: Pauline's Pub. House, 2004), sec. 321.

⁶² Oxfam International, "The Tsunami's Impact on Women."

⁶³ United Nations Development Programme, "Gender and Disasters."

Conclusion

Much attention has already been given to the link between gender and disasters, as well as the link between gender and the environment. The CBCP documents “What is Happening to Our Beautiful Land?” and “Upholding the Sanctity of Life,” especially in the wake of Pope Francis’s staunch support for ecological advocacies and initiatives, constitute a first step toward a new way of imagining the relationship between man and nature. However, one needs to go further and also reimagine how women are understood in relation to man and nature. This paper has shown that there is a need to distinguish women from nature, that women are not necessarily either mothers or virgins, that nature, too, should not be simply understood as mother, and that these shifts in understanding help Christians have a more nuanced and contextualized way of understanding and responding to the environmental crisis and natural disasters happening today. Moving forward, this crucial understanding of how women, men, and nature relate to each other will hopefully guide people in making more sustainable and responsive solutions to the environmental degradation and disasters being experienced today.

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