

Causes of Relational Suffering between Persons According to the Tradition of the Church Mothers

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When we examine the stories of women leaders in the early church—especially the stories of their actions for alleviating suffering—their teaching on the causes of suffering comes into focus: ignorance and fear which are the root of alienation, isolation, and divisions among people and from the earth. Ignorance and fear also manifest in patterns of social injustice and in organized systems of oppression, persecution, and violence (I hear similarities here with Buddha’s three “roots of evil”: greed, aversion, and delusion). The antidote/response to the causes of suffering modeled by the women leaders in the early church is

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always love-based action. Their love-based action makes the gospel message, the “good news” of Jesus, visible in their time.

The historical context of the early church is significant: The Roman Empire occupied the territory of the Middle East and, with the collusion of some local Jewish leaders, instituted a harsh system of oppression that included exploiting the resources of the land and extracting onerous taxes from the occupied peoples to feed the greed of Roman rulers and to pay for Roman military expansion. Roman domination was cemented in place by the practice of public executions, including the crucifixion of anyone who hinted at resistance. This is context for the early followers of Jesus, especially for the first three women leaders we will consider.

St. Mary of Magdala: First Century (Jerusalem and Rome)

Mary Magdalene is referenced in all four Gospels as a disciple of Jesus and as present at his crucifixion and death—an act that carried the risk of a similar sentence. She was also the first witness to Jesus’s resurrection. In Matthew’s and John’s Gospels she sees the risen Christ. In all four, she was charged with proclaiming Christ’s resurrection to the apostles, hence her title, “Apostle to the Apostles.” Years later, as the apostles traveled far beyond Jerusalem preaching the good news, Mary of Magdala did as well. She is reported to have gone to Rome and had an audience with the Emperor Tiberias (14–37 CE) where she proclaimed Christ’s resurrection. According to tradition, she brought him a red egg—or an egg she held in her hand that turned red—as sign of Jesus’s Resurrection and new life (this is the origin of colorful eggs at Easter). In addition to proclaiming the gospel, Mary reported the actions of Tiberius’s procurator, Pontius Pilate, in ordering the death of Jesus. The greed and ignorance of the Emperor Tiberius

were causes of the system of injustice and persecution that killed Jesus and many others. Mary's rebuke and preaching to the powerful leader was a love-based action aimed at protecting others and to ending the persecution.

Saints Perpetua and Felicity (died in 203 CE): Carthage (present-day Tunisia)

The writing, *The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicity*, by Perpetua, is thought to be the earliest written record we have by a Christian woman. An editor added a beginning and an ending to the story of the martyrdom of these two women at the hands of the Roman Empire. Perpetua was a young mother still nursing her baby boy. She decided to become a Christian even though she knew it meant persecution and perhaps death. Her father pleaded with her several times, trying everything to dissuade her. She was arrested with four other Christians, tried, sentenced, and scheduled to be executed as part of the games for a Roman festival. Some things stand out in her story: for a time, her infant son was able to be with her in prison—which gave her great joy; and she was unafraid and un-moved by pleading from the judge, who was more reluctant to kill a noblewoman than to kill her companions who were poor.

The beautiful relationship between Perpetua and Felicity is instructive for us. Felicity, a slave woman, was eight months pregnant. Because in Rome a pregnant woman could not be hurt, Felicity would be held in prison until she delivered her baby and then she would be killed during a later festival. Felicity wanted to die with her companion in faith. On the day before the executions, Felicity went into labor and, with much hardship, delivered a baby girl in prison. The baby was entrusted to another Christian

to raise, and Felicity could now proceed with the rest. Felicity and Perpetua, given the norms of their society, should not have been close friends or equals. Felicity was a servant; Perpetua from a wealthy family. Felicity's role, no matter her own condition, would have been to care for Perpetua. Instead, Perpetua comforts and cares for Felicity during her labor and delivery.

The following day, before a large crowd, the four Christians were all beaten. Then the two women were exposed to a wild cow that wounds them. Before finally being slain by an executioner's sword, they embrace. Their love is evident before all. Felicity and Perpetua move beyond the social norm of inequality and oppression that would have separated them and isolated them from each other. Instead, they support each other as equals and embrace as sisters in death, as they had in life. Their lives demonstrate to people of their time, and ours, that deep unity can end social divisions which cause suffering.

Macrina, (330–379 CE): Cappadocia (present-day Turkey)

Macrina was a monastic founder from an influential Christian family that included her younger brothers Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, her biographer. When her father died, Macrina convinced her mother to sell their estate and move to a place in the country, cutting their ties to the benefits of Roman citizenship. She and her mother created a monastic community in their home, freeing their slaves and welcoming them to share in community if they chose. Macrina structured her monastery so that the relationships of former slaves and former owners were truly equal and did not replicate in the monastery the injustice of her society. As leader, she took on the work of slaves—baking bread, a hot, heavy, and difficult task. She baked bread for her community and for the hungry

in the area. During times of famine and disease, when orphans were isolated, abandoned, and wandering homeless, she and her sisters gathered them up and cared for them in their monastery.

In other words, Macrina and her community address the immediate causes of suffering—hunger and homelessness—of the vulnerable who were “thrown away” by her society. Macrina creates an alternative structure to that of the society around her. By her actions, she teaches and critiques her society and addresses the causes of suffering: ignorance and fear that lead to social injustice and divisions among people.

Brigid of Kildare (451–532 CE): Ireland

Brigid was the first monastic founder in Ireland, living at a time when the Celtic people were learning about and accepting Christianity and bringing it into their matriarchal, goddess-based world view. Similar to Macrina and the others, Brigid of Kildare is associated with healing and with care for the poor and oppressed: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, freeing prisoners, admonishing those who oppressed the poor. In several stories, Brigid provides what the community needs not just to survive but to celebrate with joy. For example, one year, during a time of great hunger, she realized that the seventeen churches in her area had no beer to celebrate the great religious season of Easter—which lasts fifty days. Through a miracle, she provided beer for all the parishes in her region.

In a system of a wide division between rich and poor that resulted in great alienation and suffering for the poor, she took land from rich landowners and created a large monastic community where nuns and monks and laity and families all lived and thrived and cared for each other. All shared the bounty of the land. All

cared for the earth. Like Macrina, she created a gospel-based community that exposed and addressed the injustice of her society. But it is important to note that her compassion even went beyond the society to embrace the earth. St. Brigid respected the cycles of the earth. Her miracles include the cooperation of wild animals and the care for animals. Stories and traditions connect Brigid with the abundance of the earth, with the return of spring and the fertility of crops.

Finally, Brigid might have a message especially for us in our interreligious dialogue of action. The life and stories of St. Brigid are almost impossible to separate from the stories of the Celtic goddess Brih, or Brigid, for whom she is named. They are both compassionate healers; they both represent springtime and new birth. Both herald the beginning of lambing season, for example. Both tend an eternal flame and share it with others. St. Brigid of Kildare respected, honored, and continued many traditions of the goddess, Brigid. But she does so from a different foundation. She taught that the eternal flame is the light of Christ and she shares that light of Christ with her people. In other words, while there are differences in foundational teachings, there is a common and deep respect for our environment, an underlying unity with humanity, and similar actions to alleviate suffering.

I propose that these women leaders of the early church, and many others like them, make the causes of suffering evident to us even today: ignorance and fear, which are the root of alienation, isolation, and divisions among people and from the earth. Ignorance and fear are the basis of injustice and systemic oppression. In the midst of this suffering and as an alternative to it, these women created community. They willingly moved closer together and together entered into the suffering of others. They “leaned-in” to the

suffering, and were able to respond in ways that made the gospel message of Jesus visible in their time and place.

Cardinal Tauran, in his Keynote Address, charged us to be *out-spoken* in response to social ills. These women spoke out against oppression and injustice in their times and created gospel-based, love-based communities that relieved suffering in their societies. They brought love into the midst of fear and show us even today that we are all deeply connected, and that we can live in love with all people and with the earth.

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