

EXPERIENCE, FEMINISM, AND THE NEED FOR CHRISTIAN WITNESSES

• Margaret Harper McCarthy •

“Christian witness begins, if you will,
with a kind of *ocular* evidence of something *else*.”

Introduction

The category of experience, which was unleashed in a particular way by Christian revelation,¹ has not shown itself to be unproblematic. A particular case in point is the experience to which a dominant thread of feminism resorts: “women’s experience.” This “experience” shows with particular force the *subjectivism* toward which the category can tend (as it often comes back to haunt the very *objective* revelation on which it largely depends). It is understandable, therefore, that one might look suspiciously at the category itself and seek to curtail its relevance. Taking another direction, however, we propose to probe experience more deeply, especially on its “flip

¹On the “special nature of Christianity’s claim to truth” and its necessary relation to freedom, see Joseph Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 55–58. Note that the German word for experience is *Erfahrung* (from *fahren*, to travel), which implies movement (freedom) for the kind of knowing that experience grants. De Lubac, moreover, notes the important observation made first by St. Augustine that, in the credal formula “*credo in Deum*,” the choice of the accusative case implies “a search, an advance, a movement of the soul . . . a personal impulse and . . . adherence” (Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986], 35).

side,” that of the “witness,” so as to understand more clearly what is in play in the drama of experience for the subject who undergoes it (or resists it, as the case may be), as well as for the subject who conveys it (or not, as the case may be).

1. *A general remark on the theological category of “witness”*

When *Dei Verbum* revived the *event-character* of Christian revelation, pointing to the coincidence in Jesus Christ of Truth and Person and of its revelation *in history*,² the category of “witness” entered center stage (together with that of “experience”).³ No longer standing in the wings, so to speak, as a mere “source of

²Joseph Ratzinger, commenting on the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, said that *Dei Verbum* views revelation more christologically and understands it more as a “totality in which word and event make up one whole, a true dialogue which touches man in his totality, not only challenging his reason, but, as dialogue, addressing him as a partner, indeed giving him his true nature for the first time” (“*The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. H. Vorgrimler, vol. 3 [Montreal: Palm, 1968], 172). The understanding of truth (in both its supernatural *and natural* dimensions) is situated within a conception of being as *event*, that is, as a *presence to the “I”* and its freedom. Balthasar points to the child’s emergence into being within the horizon of the “mother’s smile” as revelatory of being as such, as “meta-anthropology” (“Movement Toward God,” *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 15–55 and *My Work: In Retrospect* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 114). In the same vein, Luigi Giussani writes: “Picture yourself being born, coming out of your mother’s womb at the age you are now at this very moment in terms of your development and consciousness. What would be the first, absolutely your initial reaction? If I were to open my eyes for the first time in this instant, emerging from my mother’s womb, I would be overpowered by the wonder and awe of things as a ‘presence.’ I would be bowled over and amazed by the stupefying repercussion of a presence which is expressed in current language by the word ‘thing.’ Things! That’s ‘something!’ ‘Thing,’ which is a concrete and, if you please, banal version of the word ‘being.’ . . . [I]f I were to be born with the consciousness that I now have, and my eyes were, for the first time, to fly open, then reality would disclose itself as the presence of something ‘other’ than myself” (*The Religious Sense* [Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997], 100–02).

³For a treatment of the category of experience in light of the character of revelation, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 219–425; Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 3–11; and Angelo Scola, *Questioni di Antropologia Teologica* (Rome: PUL, 1997), 199–213.

credibility” *disposing* people to hear the Word (Vatican I), showing forth the *good effects* of belief, or the *affective relevance* of it,⁴ or, more negatively, as a compensation for a deficit of real evidence, standing outside the truth (and its argumentation) as such,⁵ the witness was now tied to revelation itself, which had a *testifying* modality, beginning with Christ himself, the “testimony of God” (1 Jn 5:9). The witness was now seen to be *part of* revelation, *actualizing* it, as one (a *person*)⁶ standing at the intersection in history of the freedom of God (who reveals) and the freedom of man (to which that revelation is addressed), *making him present*.⁷

⁴DH, 3013. Here witness is identified with “witness of life”: actions, lifestyle, works of charity, etc., which *prepare* and *dispose* others to receive the Good News but which are not in themselves evident. The explicit preaching (with “words”) is *subsequent* to witness. This line predominates later in documents having to do with mission and intra-religious dialogue as, for example, in *Nostra aetate* (2), *Ad gentes* (11), Paul VI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelium nuntiandi* (41) and John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (42–43). Also see the *Relatio finalis* of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops (1985): “Evangelization is carried out through the witness, not only through words, but also through his own life.”

⁵Paul Ricoeur comments on Aristotle’s location of witness in the *Rhetoric* (1354a 1–7) among the techniques of persuasion that concern the probable (not the necessary), and as an “extra-technical” proof (1375a 23–4) exterior to argumentation as such (“L’herméneutique du Témoignage,” in *Le Témoignage. Actes du Colloque organisé par le Centre International d’Études Humanistes et par l’Institut d’Études Philosophiques de Rome, 5–11 Janvier 1972*, ed. Enrico Castelli [Paris: Aubier, 1972], 40–42).

⁶Pointing to the *person* of the witness as an intrinsic dimension of revelation properly understood, de Lubac wrote: “Now, for the Council . . . , the object of Revelation is God himself; but this living God intervened in the history of men and He gave us witnesses in history and these witnesses refer us to the one supreme Witness, to that true and faithful Witness who is His word made flesh. The first object of my faith does not consist in a list of *truths* that are intelligible or not If this object is *incomprehensible* to me in the etymological sense—and how could I ever wish that that were so!—if I cannot circumscribe it as I would if it were a creation of my own spirit, this is because it is . . . the embrace of a living Person. This is the essential fact: the object revealed is not conceived as a series of propositions . . . but recognized in its original unity as the mystery of Christ, the reality of a personal, living being” (*La Révélation divine et le sens de l’homme* [Paris: Cerf, 1983], 158–59; 164).

⁷The christological and “revelational” meaning of witness appears first in *Dei Verbum* where the witness is said to transmit revelation in an inseparable set of actions and words, first in Christ, but then also in the case of the apostles (3, 4, 17, 18, 19). Also in *Gaudium et spes* (21) the witness is invoked to “make God the

2. *Modernity's challenge to the witness: expression of the break*

Not unlike antiquity,⁸ modernity, though in a different way, found little place for the witness insofar as the witness was founded on, and was a “sacramental” continuation of, what modernity viewed as a *contradiction in terms*: a historical revelation of the Absolute (Spinoza). Given the opposition between truths of reason and truths of particular historical facts and events,⁹ the relevance of witnesses to those particular historical events and facts had to wane. Of particular note, Lessing thought Christianity would do better to make less of its witnesses to historical facts (beginning with its chief Witness) and rest its authority more on a doctrine that needed no such “external” justification.¹⁰ Needless to say, with the banishment of the Absolute from history (and its time, events, and particular persons), neither experience nor the witnesses to it could remain unchanged. Untethered from their origin, they would become the very expression of the break. “Experience” would tend toward the subjectivistic, either in the form of the reduction of the truth of things to the subject’s feeling (Schleiermacher), or in the form of his domination of the object, as in the controlled “experiment.”¹¹ The

Father and His Incarnate Son present and in a sense visible.” More recently, Benedict XVI has spoken of the witness as the one through whom (through his *actions, words, and way of being*) *Another is made present* (*Sacramentum caritatis*, 85). Noting the stronger sense of witness, J. Prades comments on these three sources: “here witness is not confined to provoking questions on the part of the interlocutor but makes the answers of divine Revelation visible and after a certain fashion present. A witness, with the set of his works and words, is he who connects the historically located freedom of man with the Infinite Freedom of God” (“Christianity and the Need for Witnesses,” *Oasis-al-Waha-Nakhlistan* 7 [2008], 4). Scola, on the grounds of a revelation understood as *Event* offered to finite freedom, conceives “witness” as a “*quasi-sacrament* of the gift of Christ to the act of freedom” (“Gesù Cristo, religioni e testimonianza,” in *L’attuale controversia sull’universalità di Gesù Cristo*, ed. M. Serretti [Rome: Lateran University Press, 2002], 5–13).

⁸Cf. n. 5 above.

⁹For a discussion of this opposition as the root of modernity’s opposition to witness, cf. X. Tilliette, “Témoignage et vérité. Valeur et limites d’une philosophie du témoignage,” in *Le Témoignage*, 89–100.

¹⁰See Tilliette’s discussion of Lessing’s embarrassment over witness (“Contingent historical truths can never be the proof of rational necessary truths” [*Über den Beweis des Geistes und der Kraft*]), and Kierkegaard’s rebuttal in “Témoignage et vérité,” 92–96.

¹¹As for the controlled experiment, Robert Spaemann observes that the

witness to this “experience,” for his part, could no longer be transparent to the mysterious depths of things. Instead he would become an auto-biographical and self-projecting “fictitious witness.”¹² “Women’s experience” is an illustration of this state of affairs.

3. “Women’s experience”

The feminist category of “women’s experience” begins precisely with, and is utterly dominated by, the “negative contrast experience”¹³ of male domination.¹⁴ (Exaggerations and one-sidedness in the accounting of this experience need not disqualify the obvious truth of some of these claims.)¹⁵ That experience is the

experiment of experimental science is the kind in which the experiencing subject (on whom few demands are placed) “remains at all times the ‘master of the situation,’ because he is the one who fixed the conditions of the experiment and formulated the questions, which allow only one of two possible answers: either ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (“Ende der Modernität?” in *Philosophische Essays* [Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994], 232–60; unpublished English translation by D. C. Schindler, “The End of Modernity?” 6).

¹²Giussani calls the “fictitious witness” the one who “would set out not to propose the Christian reality but to affirm a limited way of seeing things, a particular taste,” and who in sum, fails to call others back to an “objective Reality that transcends them” (*The Journey to Truth Is an Experience* [Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2006], 24, 89). E. Castelli calls the *non-witness* the one who instrumentalizes his neighbor in the solipsism of his monologue (“Les Significations du Témoignage,” in *Le Témoignage*, 25).

¹³Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 63.

¹⁴Susan Bordo offers a fascinating discussion of the association of Cartesian rationalism with (bad) patriarchy, consisting first in a flight from the feminine (through transcendence from the body and its passions), and then its domination and subjugation of them through an instrumental reason (*The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* [New York: State University of New York Press, 1987], 97–118). Hans Urs von Balthasar, too, identifies modernity’s rationalism as a bad “patriarchalism,” a flight from the feminine, where “natural things and conditions mean above all material for manufacturables” (*New Elucidations* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986], 188). As for the feminine version of domination, see n. 52, below.

¹⁵The feminist account of the conflict between the sexes is strikingly one-sided (not to mention entrenched in the old “stereotypes” with men acting offensively

trigger for the establishment of feminism's new source and norm, "women's experience."¹⁶ If the first (negative) experience does seem to be experiential in the straightforward sense of the word, insofar as it is an experience, a suffering, *of something*, of (bad) men in this case, with the accompanying judgment that "something is not right," what follows from it appears to be less so. What, then, is "women's experience"? I will make four points.

(i) In the first place, because the "negative contrast experience" that triggers "women's experience" is taken to be the *most original* or basic experience between the sexes, "women's experience" is not the fruit of a labor to *rediscover* a *more original* experience between the sexes (nor indeed an expectation of something new). It is true that the "negative experience" stands *in contrast* to something "underneath it"; but what stands underneath, namely the "dignity," or "*humanum*," of women,¹⁷ is little more than the condition by which each of the sexes would exist in a kind of "truce," leaving each other alone to fulfill themselves as they choose, and "interacting" only if they so choose. There is no reference back to what John Paul II calls the "original experiences" of "unity" or "innocence,"¹⁸ whereby the man and the woman are the gifts by which each is "helped" by the other in that most basic work of *existence itself*.¹⁹

in this case, and women suffering the offense and waiting millennia to organize any opposition). There is little equality when it comes to assessing what is wrong between the sexes, which has no small bearing on the solution offered. (Cf. my "Something not to be grasped": Notes on Equality on the Occasion of the Twentieth Anniversary of *Mulieris Dignitatem*," *Ave Maria Law Review* [2009]: 134–39). A recent document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith noted the problematic accounting of the state of affairs between men and women (in the dominant forms of feminism): "A first tendency is to emphasize strongly conditions of subordination in order to give rise to antagonism: women, in order to be themselves, must make themselves the adversaries of men" (*Letter on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World* [2004], 2).

¹⁶P. D. Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 49–69 ("Women's Experience as Source and Norm of Theology").

¹⁷Johnson, *She Who Is*, 63.

¹⁸*Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 7 November–19 December 1979.

¹⁹In articulating the "spousal" understanding of the body and of man in Genesis ("it is not good that the man should be alone"), John Paul II understands the "help" that each gives the other in terms nothing short of helping the other to realize completely the very essence of personhood (*Man and Woman He Created*

(ii) In the second place, the *humanum* lurking underneath the *negative* experience might seem to suggest some kind of normative, objective ground against which subsequent “women’s experience” would be weighed or evaluated. Some feminists do attempt to validate “women’s experience” on such a ground so as to avoid arbitrariness.²⁰ Ultimately, however, if this “ground” were to suggest a “universal” or a “nature,” it would do so only by providing a principle of empowering women everywhere to “appraise” and “name” themselves.²¹ (Words like “redefine,” “self-define,” or “construct” are often close companions to “women’s experience.”)²² The “*humanum*” then is no “original” or “elementary” experience²³ at the root of every particular “historical” experience, a kind of objective criterion for verifying the truth, or not, of that experience.²⁴ That this is the case is especially clear when one feminist faults Mary Daly for “essentialism” (on account of Daly’s implication of a female nature and its attendant “correspondence theory of truth”!)²⁵ and advocates, as a corrective, that “women’s experience” be detached altogether from any ontological grounding,

Them, 9 January 1980) in a way analogous to creation itself (*ibid.*, 2 January 1980).

²⁰Rosemary Radford-Reuther attempts just this when she writes: “Only by finding an alternative historical community and tradition more deeply rooted than those that have become corrupted can one feel sure that in criticizing the dominant tradition one is not just subjectively criticizing the dominant tradition but is, rather, touching a deeper bedrock of authentic Being upon which to ground the self. One cannot wield the lever of criticism without a place to stand” (*Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1983], 18). Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza looks for this in a divinity committed to those who seek liberation (*Bread Not Stone* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1984], xvi). Radford-Reuther would identify this “ground” with the “prophetic tradition” (*Sexism and God-Talk*, 20–33).

²¹Johnson, *She Who Is*, 75.

²²Cf. Young, *Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, 55 and Johnson, *She Who Is*, 64.

²³The terms are John Paul II’s and Giussani’s, respectively (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 12 December 1979, and *The Religious Sense*, 7–9).

²⁴For Giussani, a true experience is always weighed against (“compared to”) the “elementary experience” of the human heart, the *objective* criterion “with which nature thrusts man into a universal comparison” (*The Religious Sense*, 10).

²⁵Sheila Davaney, “The Limits of the Appeal to Women’s Experience,” in *Shaping New Vision: Gender and Values in American Culture*, ed. C. Atkinson (Ann Arbor: Research Press, 1987), 41.

thereby allowing it to toss to and fro on the waves of the “historical and often conflictual character of experience.”²⁶ “Women’s experience,” then, is and becomes ever more a thorough-going commitment to historical consciousness, to the “always changing history of women’s self-appraisal and self-naming,”²⁷ using as its trigger—indeed counting on it—the “negative contrast experience.” Needless to say, one would not expect “women’s experience” to entail a “conversion” in the traditional sense, involving the “loss of self” or a “giving up of oneself.”²⁸ Insofar as the “experience of God” is almost identical to the experience of the “ever-changing historical self,” conversion is now the realization that one has the ability to empower oneself and then the decision to tap into that power.²⁹

(iii) In the third place, “women’s experience” is not so much an experience *of something* as it is a *stance*, or position, held up as it is by an assortment of preferences or “pre-rational commitments that, as such, cannot be impartially evaluated according to universally recognized standards.”³⁰ This is why, especially once all ontological grounding is pulled out from under its feet, “women’s experience” appears to be more about “what women want,” and how *they* would order reality. Little stands above that criterion, not the Church,³¹ not Christianity,³² not even the prayer Jesus taught his disciples, which

²⁶Ibid., 48.

²⁷Johnson, *She Who Is*, 75.

²⁸Women have been doing this too much already, says Johnson (*She Who Is*, 64).

²⁹For this quasi-identity of the two experiences, Johnson relies on Karl Rahner’s article, “Experience of Self and Experience of God,” trans. D. Bourke, in *Theological Investigations* 13 (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 122–32 (*She Who Is*, 65–69). It is on the grounds of this quasi-identity that the always-changing historical (feminist) “self” can say no more of her “encounter” than “i found god in myself and i loved her, i loved her fiercely” (Johnson, *She Who Is*, 67).

³⁰Adrian J. Walker, “Love Alone: Hans Urs von Balthasar as a Master of Theological Renewal,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32 (Fall 2005): 518.

³¹See the collection edited by Johnson, and whose title is, tellingly, *The Church Women Want* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2002).

³²Daphne Hampson writes of Christianity that it “is a symbolic distortion of the relationships *which I would have*” (*Theology and Feminism* [Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990], 67).

Daphne Hampson says “is far from a feminist ordering of reality.”³³ This is why “women’s experience” might be called, more properly a *construct*.³⁴

(iv) Finally, “women’s experience” is, more specifically, a *defensive* stance or construct (against that which is taken to be the final word—the conflictual relation between the sexes). The contents of this “experience” are therefore an “assortment of preferences” listed in view of *calling into question any constitutive relation to (and dependence on) the other (the man)*, including the one with one’s own nature (“essentialism”), which offers many clues for just such a correlation. “Self-naming” is, after all, a *rejection* of the fact of having a name (“woman”) that indicates in no uncertain terms a *derivation* from the man (‘*issa* is “from ‘*is*”). And insofar as this derivation can only be read in terms of power (negatively conceived),³⁵ the new stance of empowerment (“I want to be called this,” “I want to do that,” “I want this”) is assumed so as to redistribute more democratically the power in question (and dare we say, fan its flames).

³³Daphne Hampson, *After Christianity* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996), 130.

³⁴Young writes that women’s feminist experience “constructs itself” in opposition to the experience of male domination (*Feminist Theology/Christian Theology*, 55).

³⁵Genesis 2 suggests to some feminists that the woman “from the rib” is an afterthought (K. Millet, *Sexual Politics* [New York: Avon Books, 1969], 52) and so a deficient version of the normative male (Johnson, *She Who Is*, 23–24), bearing the “lower elements” of a now “disintegrated,” divided, and alienated original whole (Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 128 and Daly, *Beyond God the Father. Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1973], 81). In a more post-modern vein, the woman who “comes from the man” suggests the effect of an “operation of power,” and who as such can never be truly other. The parallel, man from God/woman from man, is not lost on L. Irigaray: “As our tradition dictates, man originates from God, and woman from man. As long as the female generic—woman—is not determined as such, this will be true. Women will remain men’s or Man’s creatures” (*I Love to You* [New York: Routledge, 1006], 64). Thinking in these terms, J. Butler finds resonance in Foucault’s re-reading of the Aristotelian form/matter distinction where the (male) soul subjugates and “imprisons” the (female) body (“Bodies That Matter,” in *Engaging with Irigaray*, ed. C. Burke [New York: Columbia University Press, 1994], 146–49). In this spirit, C. Crammer asks: “if woman comes from man, is there really a woman?” (“One Sex or Two? Balthasar’s Theology of the Sexes,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. E. T. Oakes [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 103).

4. Post-lapsarian experience

Following John Paul II's intuition that the primordial misstep of original sin is "the key for interpreting reality,"³⁶ we could say that the history of experience itself (and the witness to it) is a reenactment of and participation in that tragic deed at the dawn of human time when the first man chose to "grasp equality with God," instead of being a *filial* sign and witness of the Father.³⁷ If reality in its deepest truth as originating in Another is resisted, which is the essential content of original sin, the experience and *interpretation of it* cannot but bear the mark of that resistance. Moreover, the "witness" to that "experience," through man's own non-transparency to the deepest truth of things, cannot but perpetuate in those he encounters what John Paul II called "historical experience,"³⁸ marked as it is by the vicious circle of domination in its various forms ("your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you")³⁹ and the "subjectivist" resistance to it (in its various forms).

J. P. Batut, probing the event of original sin, suggests that we may have a glimpse of it by looking at the only other temptation of a man without concupiscence: that of Jesus in the desert.⁴⁰ There, following the Fathers, Batut identifies the core of what the first man chose (and what Jesus did not choose): to attempt to be an "image" of God *without him*, circumventing his *filial* relation to the Father, to "stop desiring that what he possessed exist only in being given and received,"⁴¹ to take life "into his own hands," as it were, *pulling it*

³⁶*Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994), 227.

³⁷Cf. my article "Something not to be grasped," 139–43.

³⁸John Paul II refers to the "boundary experience" (of *shame*) of "historical" man who is burdened by the inheritance of sin, though not defined by it, rooted as he is in his "pre-history" and its "original experiences" (*Man and Woman He Created Them*, 26 September 1979; 12 December 1979).

³⁹John Paul II interprets "your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you" (Gn 3:16) as indicating the double effect of sin on the spouses: the tendency of the man to make woman an object of domination and possession and of the woman's particular tendency towards possessiveness through seduction (*Mulieris dignitatem*, 10).

⁴⁰"The Chastity of Jesus and the 'Refusal to Grasp,'" *Communio: International Catholic Review* 24 (Spring 1997): 5–13.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 10. J. Ratzinger contrasts Christ's attitude toward the Father with that of a thief who "holds on to his booty, as power captured at last that can be enjoyed

away from its source, “from every word that issues from the mouth of God.”⁴² Looking at this general anti-filial stance from the point of view of the *knowledge and experience of the Truth*, Balthasar locates it more specifically in the “*grasping* for the knowledge of good and evil,” that is, in the option for a “naked reason” (or “critical intellect”) *abstracted from the comprehensive meaning in which it had been enveloped and the all-embracing obedience in faith on which it had been dependent*, thus marking the true beginning of the “modern” separation of the Absolute from history, of its Truth from the (obedient) freedom of its witnesses.⁴³

One could, however, ask what Adam *and* Eve had to do with this anti-filial stance respectively. Catholic doctrine insists that the original sin was “*one in origin*” (all other original sin—*peccatum originatum*—having been transmitted by generation not imitation).⁴⁴ Yet, *both* Adam and Eve appear to be complicit in the one personal original sin. Was there something disordered *between the two* coincident with what the tradition sums up as “pride”? It was *Eve*, after all, who fell into temptation, “taking things into her own hands,” literally. Yet it was *Adam* who was held responsible (“in *Adam* all sinned”).⁴⁵ As for Adam, his complicity is not obvious at first glance until one asks how it was possible for the Tempter so easily and effectively to distort the goodness of God the *Father* by *re-wording* the command (“did he not say you shall not eat of *any* tree”), and effectively reconfiguring his image as a tyrant.⁴⁶ One could ask, in

to excess” (*A New Song for the Lord*, trans. Martha M. Matesich [New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997], 42).

⁴²Mt 4:3–4.

⁴³Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 91. On this point see also E. Castelli, “Les Significations du Témoignage,” in *Le Témoignage*, 30.

⁴⁴DS, 1513.

⁴⁵Romans 5.

⁴⁶John Paul II casts the *original temptation* precisely in terms of a disfigurement of the *Fatherhood* of God when he says: “Original sin attempts . . . to abolish fatherhood, destroying its rays which permeate the created world, placing in doubt the truth about God who is Love and leaving man only with a sense of the master-slave relationship. As a result, the Lord appears jealous of his power over the world and over man; and consequently, man feels goaded to do battle against God” (*Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 227–28).

other words, about the *first witness* to that Fatherhood (in the “*first sex*”), the one whose task it was to *radiate* the Fatherhood of God, *witnessing to it, in his sonship*.⁴⁷ In asking this we might begin to account for a “dual unity” (a *bad* one in this case), in the first sin (“one in origin”). The punishment itself (“he shall rule over you and her desire shall be for you”), with the ensuing exaggerations of both “patriarchalism” (in its tendency toward power) and matriarchalism (with its fertility cults,⁴⁸ full of the forgetfulness and rejection of an outside source of the world, a Creator Father⁴⁹),

⁴⁷For a discussion of patristic thought on the *conjugal* dimension of the first sin, which connects the preemptive grasp for the “knowledge of good and evil,” circumventing its *being given by the Father*, with a preemptive sexual union, see Antonio Orbe, “El pecado original y el matrimonio en la teología del s. II,” *Gregorianum* 45, no. 3 (1964): 449–500. Balthasar discusses the connection between the severance of the spiritual powers from the obedience of faith and that of the bodily drives from the fecundity of love (*The Christian State of Life*, 92–94).

⁴⁸Carol Christ, a post-Christian feminist, points to the work of the Lithuanian-born archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, who reconstructed an “Old Europe” (6500–3500 BC and as late as 1450 BC in Minoan Crete), which, in keeping with its goddess worship, would have been “matrifocal” (and, it is assumed, egalitarian and peaceful). See her “Feminist Theology as Post-Traditional Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85–86. See also Elizabeth Gould Davis, *The First Sex* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1971), 75–76.

⁴⁹There is some conjecture that the alleged early matriarchal cultures were so organized on the basis of a not-yet discovered paternal principle in conception (cf. Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 28). Whether or not this is the case, the absence of fatherhood, that is, of a source for the world outside of itself, is what is at stake in the pantheism of Goddess worship. “Goddess feminists” like Rosemary Radford-Reuther and Daphne Hampson know that in returning to the goddess *idea*—for no one actually wants a *real* one—they are rejecting the “dualistic” idea of a Creator (and his creation) (cf. Reuther’s *Sexism and God-Talk* and Hampson’s *After Christianity*, 165). Pope Benedict XVI makes this point in his exposition of the “Our Father”: “The mother-deities that completely surrounded the people of Israel and the New Testament Church create a picture of the relation between God and the world that is completely opposed to the biblical image of God. These deities always, and probably inevitably, imply some form of pantheism in which the difference between Creator and creature disappears By contrast, the image of the Father was and is apt for expressing the otherness of Creator and creature and the sovereignty of his creative act” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Adrian J. Walker [New York: Doubleday, 2007], 140).

Walter Ong suggests a psychological and biological source for the more original, pre-patriarchal, “matriarchal” tendency, namely, the initial “total control a mother exercises over her young child—the umbilical cord protracted postnatally

may provide a glimpse of the primordial missteps of the first *couple*. In this case the original sin would be, on the one hand, the failure to take responsibility for the “radiation” of God’s Fatherhood.⁵⁰ On the other hand, it would be the resistance to that Fatherhood for the reason that, absent the radiation of it and its life-giving, *generating* power (*potentia Dei ordinata*), the authority of God was easily perceived to be one of *sheer* power (*potentia Dei absoluta*), though, of course, not without the first woman’s complicity. The New Testament category of “headship” may provide yet another glimpse of original sin, by way of contrast, through what appears to be a correction of *both the man and the woman*.⁵¹ For with “headship” the man is exhorted to turn himself once again toward the woman by accepting his radiation of fatherhood, channeling his strength in the direction of *generation* and in service of it. The woman, for her part, is exhorted through “headship” to turn herself once again toward him, allowing him thereby to witness to the outside origin of life, on whom they *both* depend.⁵² We also begin to get a glimpse of a new possibility of witnesses to the truth, where the truth is known (experienced) and communicated in and through the freedom of love.

as the apron strings—a control extending now by express law in many places to the power to decide arbitrarily whether or not to allow the unborn child to live or have the child killed: more total power over another is unthinkable” (*Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981], 70).

⁵⁰I refer here to the language of Karol Wojtyła’s play *The Radiation of Fatherhood* (in *Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, trans. Bolesław Taborski [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987], 323–68).

⁵¹The problematic backdrop of matriarchal religion (especially in its Gnostic form) is the likely context for the various “headship texts” in the Pauline letters, as Richard and Catherine Clark Kroeger show in their *I Suffer Not a Woman* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992).

⁵²On the connection between the “headship doctrine” and the re-establishment through Christ of the disrupted order of creation, see Francis Martin, *The Feminist Question* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 350–53; 399–400. Less directly, Ong alludes to the necessary correction of the disorder in both the sexes: “As the female counters her possessive drive by surrendering to others her dearest, the male counters his tendency to violent dominance by placing any violence in him directly at the service of others (the knight errant)” (*Fighting for Life*, 102).

5. *A new witness*

It is here that the very thing that was censured in modernity (for the sake of the subject) might be proposed again precisely *for the sake of that (modern) subject*, as Pope Paul VI suggested when he said: “[m]odern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”⁵³ At the same time, by announcing a new “moment of Christian witness,” Christianity would be going to the very heart of Christian revelation itself, at the center of which stands a *New Witness*.⁵⁴

In Jesus Christ the essential traits of the “faithful witness” (Rev 1:5), which he bears in a unique and singular way, can be identified as follows. On the one hand, there is in him an *identity* between the content that he bears forth and his person⁵⁵ such that revelation, christologically speaking, is understood in the first instance as a “dialogue which touches man in his totality.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, the truth that the New Witness reveals *in his person* is that of a *difference*, a *being-from*: “If I bear witness to myself, my testimony is not true; there is another who bears witness to me, and I know that the testimony which he bears to me is true [M]y testimony is true, for I know whence I have come and whither I am going” (Jn 5:31–32; 8:14). The Truth of which Jesus is a witness is his *being a Son, generated by the Father*. It is also that of being *sent by the Father*: “These works which I am doing, bear me witness that the Father has sent me” (Jn 5:36). The witness, then, “looking back,” “looks forward,” as he bears forth the truth of his origin in another, so as to mediate that (new) generation to the world as a *generating* “third” (*testis, ters-tis*).⁵⁷

⁵³*Evangelii nuntiandi*, 41.

⁵⁴See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (New York: Newman Press, 1968).

⁵⁵See n. 6 above. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, trans. E. Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 234–35.

⁵⁶See n. 1, above.

⁵⁷Noting the relevance of the word “witness” in the male phenomenon of the contest, Ong notes the *generative* dimension of the word “testimony” (*testis*) in its plural form (*testes*) (*Fighting for Life*, 98).

Inside the dynamic of the New Witness, Christians too become witnesses, a “cloud of witnesses” (Heb 12:1). Like the Son, they give witness to *Another*. They are “eye witnesses” (1 Jn 1:1–3), having *seen* something. They give witness to the Son, whom they have seen, as he has given witness to the Father, whom he has seen. Christian witness begins, if you will, with a kind of *ocular* evidence of something *else*. At the same time, this “forensic” attribute of the evidence that the witness has does not indicate an occurrence (or a “piece of information”) that he has simply observed, as though he were a mere bystander. What he has seen was/is a *personal* event which he has *experienced* and which, therefore, he has begun to grasp (*logos*) through the engagement of the *totality of his person* (freedom/love), on account of the “co-original move of freedom together with reason” that experience entails.⁵⁸ As Ricoeur points out, noting the coincidence between the *apparition* of the resurrected Christ and *experience* of him for St. Paul on the road to Damascus: “between the ocular witnesses of the life of Jesus and the encounter with the Resurrected One, early Christianity never perceived a fundamental difference.”⁵⁹ Moreover, with Ricoeur’s further insight about the coincidence in the witness between the “exegesis” of the Absolute and the “exegesis” of himself⁶⁰ (echoing *Gaudium et spes*⁶¹), there can be no doubt about any “extrinsicism” in the Christian idea of witness. There is a kind of coincidence between the content of the witness and the person of the witness himself, as Rahner insists when he makes the content of the witness *the witness himself*, that is, *subjectivity in its truest form*.⁶² I would, however, register reservations about Rahner’s definition of that content *which the witness is*: “the act of self-determination where one positively and unconditionally

⁵⁸J. Prades, “Christianity and the Need for Witnesses,” 2.

⁵⁹“L’herméneutique du Témoignage,” 47.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 53–61.

⁶¹*Gaudium et spes*, 22.

⁶²For Rahner the witness is always communicating the truth of *himself* and this, insofar as “the truest form of subjectivity as realized in freedom still always consists in an encounter with a being outside oneself” implies that the very “decision to direct himself towards another” is the *content* of the witness, not a *subsequent* declaration (“Theological Observations on the Concept of Witness,” in *Theological Investigations* 13 [New York: The Seabury Press, 1975], 155).

accepts that which is within himself.”⁶³ I would return, without his embarrassment, to the “ocular” and “forensic” attribute of witness,⁶⁴ that is, to the witness’ having experienced something *else*, so as to uphold the dramatic and dialogical meaning of witness (and of experience).⁶⁵ The very real capacity to *refuse to receive* the testimony of Jesus (Jn 3:9–15) and of the apostles (Lk 12:54–56) underscores the necessity of standing *in relation* to that unique and singular Witness.⁶⁶ The *person* of the witness, therefore, *is* the evidence, but always as someone on whom something has been *bestowed*: a “*new creature*.”

The witness, in whose person is displayed a new content (*logos*), is also the embodiment of an objectively *good* and attractive (*beautiful*) content, of what has “caused him to grow.”⁶⁷ He communicates it to others (*unity*) in mission. Here we come to the *public* dimension of the witness, which puts him at risk of rejection even unto death (the “martyr” being the ultimate witness). Here again, the public witness becomes a martyr not merely because he puts on display the content of the “anonymous conversion,” namely, the “acceptance of his own death,” which he understands to be the threshold to the Infinite,⁶⁸ but also because he bears witness to the

⁶³Ibid., 157.

⁶⁴Ibid., 153.

⁶⁵Balthasar writes: “If experience . . . even in a worldly sense is not a *state* but an *event* (and the very form of the word points to this with the prefix *ex*) it follows that it is not man’s entry (*Einfahren*) into himself, into his best and highest possibilities, which can become an experience (*Erfahrung*), but, rather, it is his act of entering into the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who is naturally inaccessible to him, which becomes the experience that alone can claim for itself his undivided obedience” (*The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, 222).

⁶⁶Commenting on the famous text of *Gaudium et spes*, 22 (“Christ fully reveals man to himself”), John Paul II remarks that “the man who wishes to understand himself thoroughly—and not just in accordance with immediate, partial, often superficial, and even illusory standards and measures of his being—must with his unrest, uncertainty and even his weakness and sinfulness, with his life and death, draw near to Christ. He must, so to speak, enter into him with all his own self, he must ‘appropriate’ and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself” (*Redemptor hominis*, 10).

⁶⁷By saying that “experience means to live that which causes me to grow,” Giussani probes the depth of experience, rightly conceived, by looking to its finality in the true fulfilment of the subject (*The Risk of Education* [New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995], 98).

⁶⁸Rahner, “Theological Observations on the Concept of Witness,” 165.

death of *Another* (in whose death alone death is no longer definitive). As witness he is *in a relation* and puts others into that same relation by summoning the “bystander” to enter into it with him. The witness is ultimately a “martyr,” then, because he has *himself* died “in Christ” and is no longer “the autonomous subject standing in itself” (“it is no longer I”)⁶⁹; and he is now summoning others—many of whom will resist—to do the same. In sum, the witness publicly *attests* to the generating life of Another in him, thereby connecting others to the One of whom he is a (sacramental) witness.

Conclusion

The Christian witness, in his transparency to the Father through the Son, casts light on and recovers an *original* experience, *older* and more definitive than that of sin (and its subjectivist “experience”). That experience is the *positivity* of the Other at the origin of Being, of which the “you” of the man for the woman and of the woman for the man are the supreme witnesses (notwithstanding their post-lapsarian conflict).⁷⁰ But the *new* Christian witness also introduces a *surprising novelty* (“beauty so new”) to which the original experience (“beauty so ancient”) was open, but could never anticipate “anonymously,” namely, the generating *presence* of the Other (the Father) in history, in and through the incarnate Son. The Christian witness has been caught up in the life and death of that unique (*and therefore necessary*) Witness, and thereby attests to a humanity that is known truly and possessed fully not by “tapping into one’s own power,” “finding god in oneself,” “naming oneself,” and *getting what one wants*, so much as in living in the dramatic horizon of the “You” of the Son, and in the expectation of the surprising “hundredfold” that he promises. □

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⁶⁹Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, 51.

⁷⁰For Giussani, the “you” is the supreme sign, among all the other signs in reality, signifying the *inexhaustible Other* at the heart of things (*The Religious Sense*, 116).