

My Abuelita's Theology

by Cecilia González-Andrieu

REMEMBER the day when I told my grandmother that I was starting graduate studies in theology. She smiled and said softly, “We’re going to have to say about you what they used to say about Santa Teresa of Avila: *Es mucho hombre esa mujer* (That woman is a whole lot of man).”

My *abuelita* was born in 1895, so even though her comment was hopelessly out of step with the times, it was very insightful: theology had always been the purview of men, while those few women who entered the world of theology, such as Santa Teresa, were admired for their courage. Yet what my *abuelita* could not have known was that as I advanced in my theological studies, I discovered what an outstanding theologian *she* was, if by theologian one means a person with an intimate familiarity with the ways of God. For many people, certainly Latinas/os, it has been a singular blessing to count our mothers and grandmothers as our first catechists. Indeed, it has been the women in our families who have passed on Christianity’s gift of faith from generation to generation. In light of this reality, an overarching question arises in my mind: More than a century after my grandmother’s birth, what is the place of women in Roman Catholic theology?

Knowing that this is not a question one can answer alone, and not wanting merely to quote statistics, during my doctoral studies I gathered with a group of women students at the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley (JSTB) to pursue the matter by conversing about our respective journeys in higher theological education. It is with their consent that I share what follows.

The first thing that was apparent to

me was the diversity among the women at JSTB. For instance, the silver-haired visionaries of my mother’s generation were mainly women religious who inspired awe by their unwavering commitment to ministry and to actively caring for God’s

pursue intellectually rigorous and often exhausting theological studies. First and foremost in this regard, the women theologians spoke of their conviction that there is an urgent thirst for spirituality in our world that needs to be quenched, and that it is precisely through a theological education that women can fill their own vessels enough to be able to go out into the world and, trusting in God’s abundant grace, help to fill the vessels of others.

Another common thread among the circle of women was the challenge posed by doing something unexpected. They recounted how sometimes the relationship between studying theology and working with the poor did not seem readily apparent, at least not to some members of their families and faith communities. Yet most of those present felt that it was precisely because of their work with and for the poor that they were studying. “Don’t the poor deserve the best learning, the best we can give them?” Yes! reverberated the response, and the stories poured out.

One religious sister recounted her work with catechists in Cameroon, where she understood her responsibility as that of undergirding the awakening of a commitment to social justice with a solid foundation in Scripture, Church doctrine, and history. A young laywoman described her ministry in the jungles of Panama, where she realized the power a robust Christian theology could have in helping the poor regain a sense of dignity. For her it was important to learn as much as she could and to become adept at teaching and spiritual direction, thereby equipping her to assist in guiding a Christian community, wherever she was ultimately needed.



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children. For their part, the younger women represented a new generation living their call to serve the Church as laypersons. On the whole, we represented a world community of women from many continents, as evidenced by lilting Asian accents, Irish brogues, and sprinklings of Spanish—in sum, a beautiful and vibrant universal Church.

In the course of the conversation, I listened closely for clues that would reveal the common factors that motivated us to

As we passed around a sponge cake, one of our elders commented that when she was younger so much of ministry seemed to be about *doing*. She spent her time rushing from place to place trying to help wherever she could. Now she was more focused on *being*, on having the kind of presence within the community of faith that makes it possible for anyone to approach her with the deepest spiritual questions. To be women who speak with authority about religious issues is indeed a gift we need to give our Church.

This theological enterprise has not been without its challenges, though. For instance, all of us knew well the difficulties posed by being the only woman in a class and of not having access to enough women's voices in the books we read and in the history we learned. Yet, on the positive side, we often felt the sincere appreciation of our male classmates to the way women's perspectives could challenge prejudices and add insights to our joint learning.

As our conversation gained momentum and openness, it seemed clear to me that women in higher theological education have several roles to play in and for our Church. To name a few: the role of nourishing our communities with solid religious formation; the role of publicly serving the universal Church by contributing to ongoing dialogue on important issues; and the role of studying and working alongside men in order to widen all of our horizons, thereby manifesting the reign of God in equality and dignity.

As the discussion wound down, the women in the talking circle shared embraces and expressions of gratitude. This group of very learned women finally knew that they were working together "*para la mayor gloria de Dios*" (to the greater glory of God), as my grandmother, the crypto-Jesuit, always said. As graduations came and new journeys began, it was this *gloria de Dios* that we were committed to manifesting.

Yet the future is ambiguous, open, and full of unexpected and simmering con-

traditions, and today I often think back on that afternoon of women theologians-in-the-making in Berkeley. I know that when a student walks down the halls in the theology department where I now teach, the future promise of new and fresh commitments to working for God's glory is literally "under construction." That student *is* the future of the Church, our present will form her, and our past has already bequeathed her traditions to be cherished as well as obstacles to be overcome.

In our theology department there are small name plates next to office doors, and our present student probably pays little attention to what they say. Man, woman, priest, lay person, these designations of identity very likely matter little to her. This student has grown up in a world where "professor" can finally encompass all of the diversity of man, woman, priest, layperson. It was not always so, and remembering is part of becoming. It has only been three decades since Loyola Marymount University hired its very first full-time professor of theology who was also a woman. For about a third of the next 30 years Marie Anne Mayeski was the only woman in the department. She encountered full support from her colleagues, but outside of the university people would sometimes be incredulous that she was a theology professor, and even more when she became the chairperson of the department. It was an experience, she recounted to me, of "universal shock."

It was Professor Mayeski who took me aside one day after class in these same halls where I now teach and told me, "You should think about studying for the PhD." My abuelita had prepared me to encounter that invitation through her unflinching respect for the great and courageous women of our Church's history. Professor Mayeski was for me an instance of that determination and grace I had also seen

in my grandmother, and her presence among the ranks of theologians made that rigorous journey seem plausible. Today, from her office next to mine she smiles as she thinks of the five women who have now joined her in the department.

"Numbers make a difference," she tells me. "When you are the only one who brings the priorities of women, everything is much more difficult . . . one voice is an *anomaly*, many voices joining in a new perspective become an *alternative*." She thinks about her new women colleagues for a moment and adds, "They're everything I hoped for."

Yet there is still a long road ahead of us. On another professor's bookshelf there is a picture. I notice the brightly smiling faces, a man holding a medal and a framed certificate, next to him a cardinal dressed in all his finery. "What is this?" I ask my colleague. "The presentation of an important award to a theologian," my friend answers. I peer at the picture. They are all men, most of them priests. "Can't wait until I see a woman in a picture like this one," I tell him. "Don't hold your breath," is his sobering and very truthful answer. My student walks down halls full of promise, yet the journey to a picture where we are all smiling together still awaits us.

Abuelita is gone now, living in the presence of that God she loved so deeply. But I think she would have liked this new world of women doing theology *para la mayor gloria de Dios*. **C**

Cecilia González-Andrieu, with a doctorate from the Graduate Theological Union, is assistant professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University. Parts of this essay were first published in *The Tidings*, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles's paper, for which Cecilia received an award from the Catholic Press Association.

