

St. Stephen's University

M.A. in Theology and Culture

Voices of Dissent:

The Prophetic Spirituality of Divine Love

Spoken Through Martyred Mothers in Liminal Space

Marisa J. Lapish

Module 1: Ancient Insights for Today (1st – 6th Century)

Dr. Peter Fitch

December 18, 2020

Voices of Dissent:

The Prophetic Spirituality of Divine Love Spoken Through Martyred Mothers in Liminal Space

I. Introduction

- A. Brueggemann quote
- B. Thesis: Perpetua and Felicitas as dissenting prophetic voices of spirituality of divine love in liminal space of martyrdom observed in the *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* in Greco-Roman context

II. Background: Culture, Class and Space

- A. Women and social class categories - Corley
- B. Public versus Private Space – Rosaldo, Torjesen, Swan
 - 1. Male/Female
 - 2. Honor/Shame
- C. Liminal Space – Turner, Neumann

III. Martyred Mothers: Perpetua and Felicitas

- A. *The Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* – Kirby, Dronke, Gonzalez, Rea and Clarke
- B. Spirituality of martyrs - Sittser
- C. Power and Gender – Rea and Clarke
- D. Felicitas – Kirby, Dronke, Gonzalez, Penner
 - 1. Slavery to freedom
 - 2. Co-suffering divine love
- E. Perpetua – Kirby, Dronke, Gonzalez, Sittser, Torjesen, Rea and Clarke
 - 1. Prominence to prison advocate
 - 2. Dreams and visions
 - 3. Prophet of resistance, advocate, encourager of a beloved “new humanity”
 - 4. Social transformation of space

IV. Concluding Thoughts

- A. Prophetic voice as witness to Greco-Roman society – Olson, Stark
- B. Prophetic voice of spirituality to Church - Pennington, Swan, Brueggemann

Introduction

The prophet is engaged in a battle for language, in an effort to create a different epistemology out of which another community might emerge. The prophet is not addressing behavioral problems. He is not even pressing for repentance. He has only the hope that the *ache* of God could penetrate the *numbness* of history.¹

Perhaps the ache was even deeper for the prophets whose language was rarely heard as they lived marginally in patriarchal Roman society and Church in the first five centuries of Christianity. We strain to hear female voices even today in textbooks and primary sources, their voices still scant and hushed, still silenced by lack of bold print. But the minority human voice, says Brueggemann, is one that while suffering and marginalized, prophetically reveals the transcendent voice of God.² These voices penetrate the “numbness of history” with an honesty articulating the negativity of fear, shame, and pain through lament, and with a hopefulness punctuating the subversive yearning that refuses to accept the majority experience as reality.³ As we read stories from the margins we hear God’s voice of co-suffering love.

In this paper, I will accentuate the female voices of Perpetua and Felicitas as prophetic language of divine love in the context of their story of martyrdom. To do this, I will examine their voices as dissent in the liminal spaces their stories of spirituality occupied in the Greco-Roman context through the hagiographic literary work, *The Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 55.

² *Ibid.*, 36.

³ *Ibid.*, 65.

Background: Culture, Class, and Space

The apparent scarcity of recorded female stories during the first centuries of Christianity mirrors the socio-cultural milieu of the Roman Empire of that era, specifically reflecting the prevailing attitudes toward women and their position in a patriarchal society. In Greco-Roman society during this era, there existed several social class categories for women: aristocratic women, freedwomen, free women, and slave women. The one major contrast governing a woman's place in Greco-Roman society, whatever her income or social class, was the distinction between "public" and "private" space.⁴

In Greco-Roman society, men freely occupied open, public space of law courts, marketplace, and the arts, whereas respectable women were limited to the domestic, private space to handle household affairs. Women who had freer access to the "public" sphere were slaves, prostitutes, and courtesans.⁵ These categories of public and private space determined characterization of females in society. Ideally, a virtuous woman was a "private" woman, characterized by domestic activity and her love for her husband and children. Contrarily, the "public" woman was characterized by the vices of prostitutes, slaves, and courtesans.⁶ Culturally, maleness itself functioned as the symbol for honor whereas a woman's honorability was demonstrated by shame. "In this sexual division of moral labor, honor was considered an aspect of male nature expressed in a natural desire for precedence and an aggressive sexuality. Shame, the defining quality of womanhood, was indicated by passivity, subordination, and seclusion in the

⁴ Kathleen E. Corley, *Private Women, Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 11-15.

⁵ Michelle Z. Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism in Cross-Cultural Understanding", *Signs* 5, (1980): 389-417.

⁶ Corley, 17.

household.”⁷ For almost two hundred years, Christianity had functioned as an “egalitarian family culture” within the private space of household, but gradually by the third century it was shifting into a public religion.⁸ How were Christian women who were called to be countercultural prophetic witnesses of Jesus Christ to respond as they came into conflict with the Greco-Roman gender-based ideology of space with its distinct male and female virtues? In the words of symbolic anthropologist, Victor Turner, one might say that these Christian women existed “betwixt and between”—occupying liminal space.⁹

Neumann explains liminal space as “a condition of being betwixt and between socially established categories... a condition of being suspended or even trapped between two different sets of role expectations.”¹⁰ Often unnoticed by the majority or privileged class of society, liminal space—and who occupies that space—puts the marginalized at center stage to sensitize people to “glitches” left by structures, highlighting how the marginalized person must occupy liminal life amidst the categories prescribed to them by others. “Any social order has its marginalized groups. What liminality as a category can do for us, is focus our gaze on these groups.”¹¹ Clearly, Christian women in the first centuries of the Roman Empire occupied this liminal space to which we now focus our gaze specifically on two female martyrs and their prophetic witness as described in the primary source, *The Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas*.¹²

⁷ Karen J. Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women’s Leadership in the Early Church and The Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 137.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 37-38; and see also Laura Swan, *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 7-11.

⁹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge Publishers, 1995). Quoted in Iver B. Neumann, “Introduction to the Forum on Liminality”, *Review of International Studies* 38, no.2 (2012): 473-479.

¹⁰ Neumann, 473-474.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 477.

¹² Peter Kirby, “The Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas”, *Early Christian Writings*, accessed December 15, 2020; and see also Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete* (Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2-4.

Martyred Mothers: Perpetua and Felicitas

The *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* is a primary source of ancient Christian literature, originally penned in Latin; the redactor might have been Tertullian.¹³ As the first extant diary authored by a Christian woman, the genre is considered a hagiographic *passio*, a martyr story, which includes Perpetua's diary (sections 3-10), giving her account of the days leading up to her martyrdom.¹⁴ As a historical literary work, ancient readers and listeners understood the *passio* to be a story of faith intended to strengthen believers and to bear witness to unbelievers.¹⁵ The *Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* was the most famous martyrdom story of the first centuries of Christianity; it was preserved, translated, read, and transmitted from generation to generation.¹⁶

In his history of spirituality book, Gerald Sittser begins with Christian martyrs as examples of what it means to “seek, know, and experience God, which captures the essential meaning of ‘spirituality.’”¹⁷ The female martyrs, Perpetua and Felicitas, demonstrate this spirituality in the midst of the early third century persecution for conversion to Christianity which broke out in Carthage, North Africa under emperor Septimius Severus. “Witness and martyrdom became, over time, virtually synonymous, for Christian witness often led to death, which in turn allowed for greater witness.”¹⁸ The witness of martyrdom, like no other, poignantly reveals the liminal space between life and death—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—betwixt and between heaven and earth.

¹³ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to Present Day* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2001), 83.

¹⁴ Dronke, 2-4.

¹⁵ Jennifer A. Clarke and Liz Clarke, preface to *Perpetua's Journey: Faith, Gender, and Power in the Roman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), xi-xiii.

¹⁶ Gonzalez, 83.

¹⁷ Gerald L. Sittser, *Water From a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality From Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 18.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

Rea and Clarke illuminate that “What makes this work unique and worthy of consideration is that it offers us insight into the female perspective on the complex relationship between power and gender in antiquity.”¹⁹ As women in Greco-Roman society, female martyrs pushed the boundaries of honor from their private domestic lives to the public spectacle of shame in the amphitheater. United by their Christian faith, these two Roman African women also pushed the liminal categories of class: Perpetua was a “well-to-do woman” of nobility, and Felicitas was a slave, according to Gonzalez.²⁰ Theirs is a story of resistance, advocacy, and civil disobedience.²¹

The words of Felicitas capture the spirituality in which martyrdom was interpreted in the early third century. Being pregnant at the time of her arrest, Felicitas prayed that her life would not be spared so that she would join Perpetua and three others in martyrdom together as “fellow travelers on the same road of hope.”²² Their prayers were answered in her eighth month of pregnancy as she travailed in prison, groaning with pain in childbirth. The jailers mockingly asked how she expected to face wild beasts in the arena. Felicitas replied: “Now my sufferings are only mine. But when I face the beasts there will be another who will live in me and will suffer for me since I shall be suffering for him.”²³ Felicitas’ words are not those of a submissive slave woman, but powerful ones spoken to men communicating her identity with Christ’s suffering as her identity shifts from pregnant mother to prophetic witness in this liminal space. In contrast with the natural suffering women face in childbirth, she related that the one *in* her would suffer *for* her as *she* suffered for him in unitive love. She honorably suffered in this space

¹⁹ Rea and Clarke, xi.

²⁰ Gonzalez, 83.

²¹ Rea and Clarke, xi.

²² Kirby, 15.

²³ Gonzalez, 84.

leading from death to life transformed from a slave woman in Roman society to a woman forever free in heaven. Rejoicing, Felicitas occupied the transitional rituals of liminal space in birth, childbearing, and death as she “came now from blood to blood, from the midwife to the gladiator to wash after her travail in a second baptism.”²⁴ The prophetic dissenting voice of Felicitas revealed the transcendent voice of a co-suffering God. Ironically over two hundred years later, during the formation of Christian orthodoxy, the patriarchal Church void of female collaboration “declared the idea that the divine nature could suffer as ‘vain babblings’ and condemned those who believed it” at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451.²⁵

Perpetua was a 22-year-old, nobly born, honorably wed, woman of wealth who was nursing her infant son at the time of her martyrdom in 203 A.D.²⁶ Her recent conversion directly violated the imperial edict of Septimius Severus given the year before which resulted in increased local persecution aimed at new converts. From the start, Perpetua advocates for her right to be a Christian, and later she used rational arguments for better conditions on behalf of her fellow Christian inmates, something illegal for Roman women to do; this earned her the respect of the male authorities.²⁷

Perpetua’s conversion as a prominent woman threatened the public honorability of her family.²⁸ *The Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas* records the tears of fatherly love imploring her to recant her faith and consider their family and her infant son to no effect. Perpetua’s voice is

²⁴ Kirby, 18.

²⁵ Glen M. Penner, *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship* (Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004), 88.

²⁶ Dronke, 1.

²⁷ Rea and Clarke, xi.

²⁸ Gonzalez, 83; see also Sittser, 37.

authentic. She freely lamented her baby's loss, her father's pain, and her family's shame, yet she was steadfast in her faith.²⁹

Perpetua records several mystic experiences in the days preceding her martyrdom. One vision she received was a ladder leading to a garden with a shepherd welcoming her which she interpreted as death, having "no hope any longer in this world."³⁰ She relates several other dreams and visions of "gulfs", "edges", "doors", and "rugged and winding places"—all liminal spaces—which drove her to pray and brought comfort in this period of waiting for death. As the day of the "games" neared, her words reflected joy, grace, and confident peace. Interestingly, in her final vision before her death, Perpetua is preparing to fight in a wrestling match with an Egyptian gladiator, and she states, "And I was stripped naked, and I became a man."³¹ Perpetua's continual resistance to male authority even in this statement seems to push the social boundaries of gender, transcending ancient ideas about women's minds and bodies, and perhaps a defiance of shame-based norms of honor for women.³² Perpetua's last words spoken as she awoke from this final vision sound resolute and courageous: "I understood that I should fight, not with beasts but against the devil; but I knew mine was the victory."³³

The narrative of the martyrdom continues through the voice of eyewitnesses who attest to Perpetua's steadfastness, expressing that she advocated with boldness that this group of believers could share in a last meal together: a final "Love-Feast" of this band of men and women, slave and free, mentor and catechumens. In this hagiographical account, the narrator describes their ascent to death like a wedding:

²⁹ Kirby, 3.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³² Rea and Clarke, xiv.

³³ Kirby, 10.

Now dawned the day of their victory, and they went forth from the prison into the amphitheater as it were into heaven, cheerful and bright of countenance; if they trembled at all, it was for joy not for fear. Perpetua followed behind, glorious of presence, as a true spouse of Christ, and darling of God; at whose piercing look all cast down their eyes.³⁴

Perpetua and Felicitas were stripped naked and attacked by beasts and lastly, a savage cow. After Perpetua was hit and thrown into the air, she was reported to have encouraged her brother and catechumen, “Stand fast in the faith, and love you all one another, and be not offended because of our passion.”³⁵ Perpetua sang a psalm, rejoicing in the honor of sharing in the Lord’s sufferings.³⁶ Bleeding, Perpetua and Felicitas stood together with solidarity in the arena, shared a final kiss of peace, and died by the sword.³⁷

“The story of Perpetua’s martyrdom, perhaps the most famous of all early martyr stories, illustrates how firmly Christians resisted the encroachment of Roman culture.”³⁸ Perpetua’s resistance was subversive, challenging the majority perspective of patriarchal society that honorability in public space was male space, that virtues of strength, courage and justice characterized only men.³⁹ She freely and prophetically exhorted her brothers in Christ to love and steadfastness in that public space. Singing a psalm, Perpetua gives speech to the reality of her experience as the common theme of her prophetic spiritual forerunners in their struggle toward justice as the psalms “insist upon equity, power, and freedom enough to live one’s life humanely” in the context of the present culture.⁴⁰ Perpetua’s witness was a way of turning

³⁴ Ibid., 18.

³⁵ Ibid., 20.

³⁶ Sittser, 38.

³⁷ Gonzalez, 84.

³⁸ Sittser, 37.

³⁹ Torjesen, 116.

⁴⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *The Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 73.

Roman cultural values upside down. Her resistance shamed what was considered honorable in patriarchal society while she was honored to endure the shame which Jesus suffered in death. Since she was a matron, her defiance confronted the aristocratic class with a visual witness of the beloved community as Felicitas, a slave woman, and Perpetua shared the Christian “kiss of peace” in the center stage of amphitheater, even as “the people shuddered, seeing one a tender girl, the other her breasts yet dripping from her late childbearing.”⁴¹ This emotional effect on the crowd was an unusual sentiment, given the recreational purpose of the “games”, to be spectators of torturous death. Perpetua and Felicitas, along with their small band of brothers that day, beautifully represented the new humanity, the household of faith, where “there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁴² They did so amidst the cloud of witnesses in the Roman amphitheater in 203 A.D.

Concluding Thoughts

Glimpses into the liminal space of the martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicitas reveal a prophetic public witness which served both to strengthen persecuted followers of Jesus and to grow the Church so much so that Tertullian claimed that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed [of the church].”⁴³ Rodney Stark asserts that what contributed most to the rise of Christianity was not its teachings or behavioral demands since pagan teachings also required sacrifice and worship, but rather, it was how these doctrines incarnated the flesh of its followers, as they loved one another, motivated by the God who loves them.⁴⁴ In Roman society, a deity of love was an entirely new concept since classical philosophers “regarded mercy and pity as pathological

⁴¹ Kirby, 20.

⁴² Galatians 3:28 NIV.

⁴³ Olson, 83.

⁴⁴ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 211.

emotions—defects of character to be avoided by all rational men.”⁴⁵ In a culturally and religiously diverse Greco-Roman world, these female martyrs upended it, prophetically witnessing to an alternative kingdom culture of love where all were welcome regardless of gender, ethnicity, and social class. Barton relates, “Above all, Christianity brought a new conception of humanity to a world saturated with capricious cruelty and the vicarious love of death.”⁴⁶ Perpetua and Felicitas displayed their humanity subversively, thereby condemning both the cruelties of the Roman games and the spectators. Through martyrdom, these female voices birthed a radical vision for a new humanity of love, mercy, and justice, a virtuous spirituality, emotionally enfleshing divine love for all people, defying the numbness of the Greco-Roman world with the heartache of God.

No doubt the stories of Perpetua and Felicitas later inspired the ensuing generations of women fleeing the compromising patriarchal Church for freedom in liminal space of desert,⁴⁷ as a protesting agape countermovement of bloodless martyrs outnumbering the desert fathers two to one.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, few of their stories are told either, even now. In the battle for language and voice today, we must amplify the stories of our Christian foremothers so that, as Brueggemann says, “a new community may arise” that will penetrate the numbness of church history.⁴⁹ Our female stories, like theirs, are the prophetic dissenting voices which cry out the ache of God in this present desert space, thirsting for a spirituality of divine love.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 211-212.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 214.

⁴⁷ Basil Pennington, preface to *The Desert Fathers*, trans. Helen Waddell (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xvi-xvii.

⁴⁸ Swan, 3.

⁴⁹ Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 55.

Bibliography

- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Spirituality of the Psalms*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.
- Corley, Kathleen E. *Private Women , Public Meals: Social Conflict in the Synoptic Tradition*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.
- Dronke, Peter. *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua to Marguerite Porete*. Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Gonzalez, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to Present Day*. Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 2001.
- Kirby, Peter. "Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas." *Early Christian Writings*. 2020. Accessed December 15, 2020. [Acts of Perpetua and Felicitas \(earlychristianwritings.com\)](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com).
- Neumann, Iver B. "Introduction to the Forum on Liminality." *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 2, 2012, pp. 473-479, www.jstor.org/stable/41485558. Accessed December 9, 2020.
- Penner, Glenn M. *In the Shadow of the Cross: A Biblical Theology of Persecution and Discipleship*. Bartlesville, OK: Living Sacrifice Books, 2004.
- Pennington, M. Basil, preface to *The Desert Fathers*. Trans. Helen Waddell. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.

Rea, Jennifer A. and Clarke, Liz. *Perpetua's Journey: Faith, Gender, and Power in the Roman Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Rosaldo, Michelle Z. "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism in Cross-Cultural Understanding," *Signs* 5 (1980): 389-417.

Sittser, Gerald L. *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality From Early Martyrs to Modern Missionaries*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007.

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became The Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Swan, Laura. *The Forgotten Desert Mothers: Sayings, Lives, and Stories of Early Christian Women*. New York: Paulist Press, 2001.

Torjesen, Karen J. *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and The Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.