

The Underground Feminism of Dolores Mission Parish in East Los Angeles

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In her first book, *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America*, sociologist María Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles explores the notion of underground feminisms first introduced in the work of Chicana feminist scholar Aída Hurtado. Scholars still lack a complex and nuanced understanding of how underground feminisms function in grassroots communities of Chicana and Latina women, however, and these communities remain largely understudied.¹ In this essay, I use the concept of underground feminisms to analyze the specific forms of laywomen's leadership in a Latinx parish in East Los Angeles. My study takes place in a Roman Catholic parish, but my observations are relevant to thinking about the shape that Latina women's leadership can take and how that leadership may be supported in other denominational settings, including The Episcopal Church.

As a result of my studies in Chicana feminist literature, I readied myself to encounter women devoted to *la Virgen de Guadalupe* at Dolores Mission Parish, where I did my field work. Chicana feminist scholar Consuelo Nieto claims that Mexican-American women who are devoted to *la Virgen* are

praised as they emulate the sanctified example set by Mary.
The woman par excellence is mother and wife. She is to
love and support her husband and to nurture and teach her

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¹ Aída Hurtado, "Underground Feminisms: Inocencia's Story," in *Chicana Feminisms: A Critical Reader*, ed. Gabriela F. Arredondo, Aída Hurtado, Norma Klahn, Olga Najera-Ramirez, and Patricia Zavella (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 260; María del Socorro Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10.

children. Thus may she gain fulfillment as a woman. For a Chicana bent upon fulfillment of her personhood, this restricted perspective of her role as a woman is not only inadequate but crippling.²

Nieto describes a middle way in which Chicana women “try to establish their identity as women on their own, yet choose not to break with Church mandates.”³ While the laywomen leaders of Dolores Mission do not challenge the authority of Catholic teaching in direct ways, they lead by example in crafting a collaborative approach to ministry that paves the way for more egalitarian practices in Christian churches that kyriarchy most intimately affects. To that end, neither of the categories Nieto outlines adequately describes the women I met at Dolores Mission.

Instead, I suggest that the lay Latina women of the parish, most of whom are mothers and grandmothers, practice a type of underground feminism through their involvement in faith-based community organizing and their engagement with the Anglo priests assigned to their parish. They are part of what Ana María Díaz-Stevens and Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo have called the “matriarchal core” of their Latinx parish. As such, they belong to a long tradition of Latina women who exercise their agency and their leadership in the ecclesial communities to which they belong, in spite of the ways the kyriarchal structures of the church circumscribe that agency and leadership.⁴ While Díaz-Stevens and Stevens-Arroyo use this concept to describe Latina Catholic women, I observe that the kyriarchal circumscription of the power of Latina women in local church life is common across Christian denominations. Latina laywomen’s modes of leadership and

² Consuelo Nieto, “The Chicana and the Women’s Rights Movement,” in *Chicana Feminist Thought: The Basic Historical Writings*, ed. Alma M. García (New York: Routledge, 1997), 208.

³ Consuelo Nieto, “The Chicana and the Women’s Rights Movement,” 208.

⁴ Ana María Díaz-Stevens and Anthony M. Stevens-Arroyo, *Recognizing the Latino Resurgence in US Religion: The Emmaus Paradigm* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 79–81. I use the term *Latinx* to refer to the parish and neighborhood and *Latina* to refer to women with Latinx roots who identify as female. *Latinx* was introduced to honor the lived experiences of those members of our communities who do not identify with the gender binary of Latina or Latino, as well as those who identify as lesbian, gay, transgender, or queer. For more on the roots of the term *Latinx*, see Cristobal Salinas Jr. and Adele Lozano, “Mapping and Recontextualizing the Term Latinx: An Environmental Scanning in Higher Education,” *Journal of Latinos and Education* (November 2017).

strategies for self and community empowerment in the parish or congregational setting are also often similarly comparable or analogous across denominations. This essay aims to en flesh the underground feminism at work at Dolores Mission, as it is expressed in the context of parish leadership and faith-based community organizing.

The Parish Context and Research Method

My reflections are based on my experience doing fieldwork among Latina women at Dolores Mission Parish, a Roman Catholic parish in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. The neighborhood is young, with the majority of its residents ranging in age from eighteen to thirty-five. It is one of the poorest neighborhoods in the greater Los Angeles area, and is also predominantly Latinx, with residents primarily tracing their roots to Mexico and to El Salvador. The parish very much reflects the sociological reality of the neighborhood.

This essay draws on research I completed for my comprehensive exams and dissertation during my doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Union.⁵ Over the course of two winters in 2015 and 2016, I engaged in approximately 140–45 hours of participant observation, and I conducted a total of thirty-two interviews, interviewing some participants more than once. I relied on twenty interviews in particular, collected from fourteen people—ten women and four men. Interviewees were given an option between interviewing in English or in Spanish. Eight of them chose English, and twelve of them chose Spanish. Twelve of the interviewees are Latinx, and two are Anglo. Nine of the fourteen interviewees were married; all of those who were married are also Latina women, three of whom are mothers and six of whom are now grandmothers, as well. Of the women interviewed, one is not married; she is divorced and does not have children. In terms of relationship to parish leadership, eight are parishioners, three are lay ecclesial ministers (two are women and one is a man), and three are priests (two are Anglo and one is Latino). At the time of their interviews, ten of these interviewees lived in the neighborhood surrounding the parish, and four did not.

⁵ The dissertation, titled “‘She Walks with Us’: Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mariology, and Ministry,” is currently in revision.

Underground Feminism at Dolores Mission

The underground feminism the women, mothers, and grandmothers of Dolores Mission practice has some defining characteristics related to their experiences as longtime members of that parish community; having gained practical wisdom from those experiences, they, in turn, share it with the priests of the parish. When I spoke with Rita, a member of that core group of women leaders, about the laywomen's process of working with priests, she described the delicate balance of power between laywomen's leadership and the non-Latino parish clergy:

I think it goes both ways because of the support that we feel with them [the parish priests]. When something's going on, it's easy for us to let him know and tell him how things are affecting us as women, or as mothers, or as wives. These people are asking us to talk to them because they understand what we're doing. It's not that we're teaching them, it's just that we, we are in a kind of marriage. . . . They're learning as much as we are learning, because they support us in our struggles. So we're not alone, and they're not alone.

Because [the priests are aware] of what happens in the community, they can relate the Gospel to whatever's going on with us. That's the most unique and important labor of love that we feel as community members. It's not that we are teaching them how to be priests, but the more they know what's going on in our lives, the more they can relate the Gospel with whatever struggles we have in the community. Because [the Gospel] didn't only happen two hundred [*sic*] years ago, it's happening right now. How do we look for a solution together? It's the accompaniment. It's not that we're teaching them, I know they say that, it's just that both of us accompany each other.⁶

In the excerpt quoted above, several themes emerge. First, Rita acknowledges the support that she receives from the Jesuit priests on staff. Next, she notes the mutual learning that such support makes possible. She recognizes the ongoing-ness of the gospel story and

⁶ Structured interview, January 18, 2017, emphasis added.

appreciates the connections between the gospel and daily life she sees the parish priests making. Further, she describes the marriage-like relationship between laywomen leaders and the parish priests as one of accompaniment. Finally, and most significantly, Rita asserts the centrality of women's stories and lives—her own and that of other lay Latina women in her community—to transformative parish ministry. In this vision, economically poor and working-class Latinas have a right, and even an obligation, to share their stories to help priests understand their daily struggles and the struggles of their community. So powerful is the women's witness in the parish that the priests recognize that they are being “taught” or, one could say, “schooled,” even as the women themselves tactfully dismiss the priests' suggestion.

The priests affirmed this perception of support for laywomen's leadership in the parish. During the second winter I spent at Dolores Mission, I interviewed Father Mike, the associate pastor at the parish. “In interviews last year,” I said, “priests expressed support for the leadership of laywomen in the community. Does that resonate with your experience?”⁷ Father Mike responded affirmatively, “Yeah, I would say, in fact, that's maybe a little light. I'd say more, it's advocacy of core leadership of women and the confidence that encouraged that.”⁸ Here, this parish priest strongly articulated the clergy's support of and even deference to the laywomen's leadership in the parish. This respect and deference may not be typical in most parishes, but it definitely created an opening for women to assume a leadership role.

Prominent Latino Catholic theologian Roberto Goizueta has written extensively on a theology of accompaniment, in which he builds on Peruvian liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez's notion of the preferential option for the poor. Goizueta writes,

Thus the preferential option for the poor must include an option for the home as a privileged *locus theologicus*. This is not to idealize home life or to suggest that women “belong in the home” any more than to suggest that we theologians should place ourselves among the poor is to idealize the urban barrio or to suggest that the poor “belong in the barrio.” The home and . . . the urban barrio and the ghetto are privileged places for theology because these are the principal

⁷ Structured interview, January 30, 2017.

⁸ Structured interview, January 30, 2017.

places where the poor—especially women, children, the elderly, and the economically poor—live, die, and struggle for survival.⁹

While the women of Dolores Mission may not have read closely the words of theologians like Goizueta and Gutiérrez, they offer a prime example of the good fruit that can be born of the kind of accompaniment they experience alongside the priests of their parish.

Practicing their underground feminism places the women in positions of public leadership of the parish and in the neighborhood. Significantly, they lead *las caminatas por la paz*, neighborhood peace walks. Initiated by the mothers and grandmothers of the parish in 2000 in response to deaths due to gang violence, *esas caminatas* often begin at the parish plaza. That women would initiate and participate in the peace walks is, in part, a strategic decision: if their husbands or male children were to participate, it could stoke the flames of an already tense situation after someone has died as a result of gang or police violence. These women play on traditional understandings of gender at work in the neighborhood, even as they challenge them. They process through the streets at dusk, carrying banners and candles and singing hymns of peace. The walks stop at the place where a neighbor has been killed as a result of gang violence, or more recently, police violence. A priest from the parish celebrates Mass there, as a means of “reclaiming that space as holy ground.”¹⁰

These Masses, called *Misas del barrio* (neighborhood Masses), are another form of nonviolent resistance practiced by the parish. Ellie, the Pastoral Associate and a lay ecclesial minister largely responsible for the administrative aspects of the parish, explained to me that these Masses are a way that the parish invites their young people into something “more” for their lives. The parishioners who participate aim to communicate to those who are carrying out violence in their neighborhood that they can move into other ways of being in the world that have a positive impact on their neighborhoods and on themselves. In these ways, *las caminatas por la paz* and *las Misas del barrio* are nonviolent expressions of popular Catholicism oriented toward justice for both the parish and the neighborhood. These two

⁹ Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995), 193.

¹⁰ In-depth interview, December 18, 2016.

public practices characterize the approach Latina parishioners take to faith-based community organizing.

Further, the underground feminism of Dolores Mission is intimately connected to the women's experiences as members of a community who desire to protect not only their children and grandchildren, but also the children in the neighborhood surrounding their parish. Delmira, one of the mothers of Dolores Mission, was one of the founders of *Camino Seguro*/Safe Passage. In the 1990s, when gang violence was at its height, Safe Passage placed women, especially mothers and grandmothers, on street corners and at intersections in the neighborhood that were on the way to the schools the children of parishioners attended. Through tears, Sabrina described the connection between the peace walks, the neighborhood Masses, and Safe Passage:

In that time we had to get on the floor to sleep. When you would hear the gunshots, we would get down on the floor, it was better to sleep and be there on the floor. . . . With the struggle that we worked here, we changed everything: with so many peace walks, so many Masses, so many programs, and Safe Passage. We were the founders of Safe Passage because [of what happened that day]. . . . There had been a retreat, and that day the people returned from the retreat, and as they were arriving, [gang members] killed a little girl from a family in the parish right here [on a street that is near the parish]. You could see a big shootout, and they killed two people: a young man and the little girl. She was riding her bike. Later on, we made our green t-shirts [for Safe Passage] and then every day the people were on the corners in different areas. I didn't go to the corner sometimes but I walked my daughters to school, and I went with my t-shirt, with my green jacket from Safe Passage, and yes, we saw many things.¹¹

The underground feminism at work among the women at Dolores Mission functions in interrelated ways. It provides support for a racially marginalized community that values extended networks of *familia*. Regardless of whether or not they are willing to recognize

¹¹ Translated from Spanish, in-depth interview, January 4, 2016.

or name their roles as such, it also enables laywomen to share their stories and their practical wisdom as a means of supporting the development of non-Latino priests serving primarily Spanish-speaking parishioners of Mexican and Salvadoran descent.¹² As one of the priests there described it to me, “I’ve learned more from the *abuelas* in this parish about ministry than I did in all my years of seminary.”¹³ The community and parish leadership performed by the women of Dolores Mission challenges one iteration of expected traditional family roles for women and mothers of Mexican descent. Chicana feminist Bernice Rincón describes these norms as encouraging

subordination. She is expected to be submissive, faithful, devoted, and respectful to her husband and to take responsibility for rearing the children. A good wife is not expected to find fault with her husband or to be curious or jealous of what he does outside the home, nor is she supposed to share in his political, economic, or social activities unless they are centered around the home.¹⁴

These wives, who have become mothers and grandmothers since the time that Rincón wrote her essay, subvert the paradigm Rincón describes by building on their roles as wives, mothers, and grandmothers to do powerful political and community work outside the home. They do not en flesh an understanding of feminism that emphasizes individual liberation: the underground feminist practices of the women, mothers, and grandmothers of Dolores Mission are much more communal in nature. These women, mothers, and grandmothers subvert gendered norms in ways that enable them to build on their private roles to participate collectively in the public sphere.

¹² Brett Hoover calls parish communities that aim to meet “the pastoral, spiritual, and . . . social needs of Hispanic Catholics” and in which Hispanic Catholics make up the majority of the parish population “national parishes.” See Brett Hoover and Hosffman Ospino, “Hispanic Ministry and Parish Life,” in *Hispanic Ministry in the 21st Century: Urgent Matters*, ed. Hosffman Ospino, Elsie Miranda, and Brett Hoover (Miami: Convivium Press, 2016), 36.

¹³ Field notes, January 6, 2016.

¹⁴ Bernice Rincón, “La Chicana: Her Role in the Past and Her Search for a New Role in the Future,” in García, *Chicana Feminist Thought*, 25.

Conclusion

The underground feminism at work at Dolores Mission challenges perceptions of Latina women and mothers, even as some Chicana feminist scholars have outlined them. Further, the underground feminist practices in which the women, mothers, and grandmothers of Dolores Mission engage make way for a fuller image of women's parish leadership to emerge, even as existing practices of women's leadership at Dolores Mission continue to be circumscribed by kyriarchal structures within the church.

I have made two, interrelated arguments here about the nature of the underground feminism of Dolores Mission. First, these working-class Latina women practice effective and empowering parish leadership. Second, when clergy make space for and respect this capacity, grassroots Latina women can step into transformative modes of parish partnership that lead to liberating practice and effective community action. When women's leadership is respected at the parish level, they gain capacity to intervene effectively in the wider community.