

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Catholic Intellectual Tradition: A Gloriously Rich but Difficult Inheritance

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The Catholic community worldwide possesses a tremendous history and tradition of intellectual life. It is an impressive heritage of which we can be truly proud. It is a tradition marked by a great richness of ideas, by an intellectual endeavor and audacity which have often moved people and history into new fields. The Catholic intellectual tradition is linked to a chain of great teachers, a fervent dedication to learning and the transmission of knowledge to others. Such a precious inheritance is a great responsibility, for it must be cherished and handed down to future generations. But such handing down does not consist of passing on something closed, complete, and static. On the contrary, the transmission of a living tradition is always a dynamic process in which we actively participate through further intellectual reflection and production.

The rich inheritance of the past provides many resources for being a Catholic intellectual today, but it is also an ambiguous and often difficult heritage which can only be passed on and appropriated with discernment. Intellectual life cannot flourish without literacy, learning, and higher education, once provided by monasteries and the Church, which laid the foundations for the early medieval European universities.¹ Slowly these were able to work out an increasing realm of intellectual independence and autonomy, leading after many centuries of growth to the modern

secular universities we know today. Much of the Catholic intellectual tradition was originally created in the medieval universities which taught and developed theology, philosophy, rhetoric, medicine, and law.

But this great intellectual world was clearly a world without women, a Christian clerical culture that laid the foundations for the quasi-monastic and patriarchal framework that characterized the rise of Western science in the modern era.² Women of the late twentieth century have, therefore, considerable difficulty in identifying with many aspects of the intellectual life as previously conceived. Until very recently, Catholic intellectual life, and especially theology, have been understood in an entirely androcentric way because most of this life, throughout most of the history of the Church, has been deeply embedded in a rigidly patriarchal framework.

When I consulted out of curiosity an old, but classic work on *The Intellectual Life* written many years ago by Père Sertillanges, the shocking tone of a one-sided, exclusive gender perspective was only too clear.³ The intellectual, as defined by Sertillanges, was

a man of wide and varied knowledge complementary to a special study thoroughly pursued; he loves the arts and natural beauty; his mind shows itself to be one in everyday occupations and in meditation: he is the same man in the presence of God, of his fellows, and of his maid, carrying within him a world of ideas and feelings that are not only written down in books and in discourses, but flow into his conversation with his friends, and guide his life.

At bottom, everything is connected and everything is the same thing. Intellectuality admits of no compartments. All the objects of our thought are so many doors into the "secret garden," the "wine cellar" which is the goal of ardent research. Thoughts and activities, realities and their reflections, all have one and the same Father. Philosophy, art, travel, domestic cares, finance, poetry, and tennis can be allied with one another, and conflict only through lack of harmony.⁴

Women are certainly not included in this vision of the intellectual life. Contemporary men and women may still share the same goal as the writer of this passage in seeking the harmony and balance of intellectual life with life as a whole, but we today can no longer speak the same language and remain credible. We have to use different images and words to describe the practice of intellectual life, and this is particularly true for women.

Sharing My Personal Story

As a Catholic woman academic, who probably missed getting two university posts because of being a Catholic, I can now only approach the Catholic intellectual tradition, initially such a strong component in the making of my personal identity, with a thoroughly questioning attitude, but also an attitude tinged with humility and still filled with love. After great intimacy and familiarity with this tradition, it is rather like the experience with one's own parents when one wants to affirm the close, loving bonds but is all too aware of the gaps, the shortcomings, the narrowness of vision and limitations of achievement of another generation. How then was I led to the intellectual life, and what stages marked my journey?

In reflecting here on my intellectual growth, I must make clear that I am writing as a West European, white woman who has been studying, teaching, researching, and writing in the fields of theology and religious studies for forty years now, but originally did not come from an intellectual family at all. I cannot think of a single person in my extended family who was a teacher or pursued any other intellectual occupation. Everyone was either a small businessman, a farmer, a skilled worker, or a tradesman. Note that the occupations listed here are only those of men, for the women in our family were all housewives, and there was no tradition of learning or higher education for either women or men.

I was brought up in a traditionally Catholic rural area of Germany near to where my parents had originally come from. They had settled in the city of Cologne, with a great Catholic tradition, but during the Second World War, we were evacuated to a village, where I spent most of my childhood. I went to the local village school, and then from the age of nine to fifteen, I received my

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secondary education in a Catholic girls' school run by women religious. This small provincial school laid the foundations for my attraction to the intellectual life. It gave me everything not experienced at home. Suddenly windows to a wider world were opened, and I discovered a larger horizon—a world of ideas; of history and politics; of current affairs in postwar Europe with its deep scars and deprivations, and its search for a new identity; classic and modern literature, languages, the sciences, mathematics and music; and the beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church. All of it stirred in me a deep intellectual hunger, a desire to seek and find knowledge, a determination to pursue higher education. Furthermore, some of the women religious and laywomen who taught us provided me with strong female models, personalities in whom learning and intellectual independence were blended with empathy, wisdom, and compassion. This very positive experience of a world I deeply loved gave me a very strong foundation for all subsequent learning in my life. I ascribe much of its strength to the strong Catholic faith which impregnated the entire milieu of the school.

Yet today I can also see that I grew up in quite a narrow Catholic milieu, almost a kind of *Kulturkatholizismus*, where Catholicism was simply a way of life in the region where we lived. Like millions of others in the world, I was brought up in the Catholic faith whose teachings I simply took for granted at that time, especially as I knew no other. Today I am a very different person and see many things very differently, but I am still a member of the Catholic Church—a church I still love, although this love now deeply hurts and even feels absurd at times. Yet I still feel part of the worldwide web of Catholics, and I admire the rich intellectual and historical traditions of this Church. As a child, I simply took its beliefs on trust, without doubt or questioning. This came much later when, through studying and travelling, I realized how different the Catholic Church is in each European country, and how much its community life differs in the different countries and cultures of the world, and how its theologies are deeply embedded in very different socio-economic and historical contexts.

As a young woman, I experienced a genuine vocation, a deep desire and attraction to study theology, an attraction first

conveyed to me by some Dominican fathers who taught me in my last years in a school in Cologne. Together with a dear philosophy teacher, they inspired a restless sense of philosophical and theological enquiry, and first led me to read St. Thomas of Aquinas. I then became determined to study theology at university, against all odds and opposition, for I was drawn by an intellectual vision and calling which proved stronger than all personal and financial obstacles. It really was a struggle, in more senses than one, but I had the freedom and luck to study theology in Germany and France, where I was taught by some outstanding theology professors of international renown—all men—and over the years, I became a trained theologian. I followed what was then the traditional theological and philosophical curriculum, which included courses from biblical languages to scriptural exegesis and hermeneutics, the history of doctrine and the church, systematic and practical theology as well as some philosophy of religion, comparative study of religions, and phenomenology. A strong tradition of dogmatic theology and many details of early, medieval, and Reformation church history were transmitted to us, but I also had the good fortune of experiencing more rarely taught courses, such as the history of Christian liturgy and art, of Christian spirituality, including Orthodox spirituality, and most unusual of all for 1962, at the Institut Catholique in Paris where I was studying then, a course of lectures on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin which sparked an intellectual fire that was to have much influence on my future research activities. But I was not to know that then.

Another determining aspect of my experience, an essential one as I see it now, was the fact that as a woman I was forever in a minority, often a minority of one, among an exclusive majority of men. Thus I learned early what it means to live at the margin, first socially and geographically in the village, then intellectually in the university where I studied something very different from what other women were studying, and where I was the permanent outsider among a large group of men studying theology and preparing for the priesthood. I simply lived in this milieu and absorbed as much as I could, and progressed with my studies successfully, and sometimes with acclaim. My critical faculties

were not yet sufficiently developed to articulate in any explicit way the aim of becoming a Catholic woman intellectual or to see how this might be practically possible. Nor was I critical enough to discern the oppressive structures of the educational system or question the male exclusiveness of the Catholic Church and its teaching authority. Yet I clearly remember the exhilarating sense of liberation when I experienced at a *Semaine des Intellectuels Catholiques* in Paris the authoritative lecture of a well-known woman professor of sociology. Suddenly I realized that women could be intellectuals too, that they could speak out in public, were listened to and taken seriously. It was an important psychological experience for me, for after years of listening to male professors, I suddenly saw a woman with whom I could identify, who unknowingly affirmed me in my own powers and determination to be a female teacher passionately concerned with intellectual issues. It was like tearing down an invisible wall of silence, piercing through an incapacitating muteness, and calling me into speech with words only found years later.

In the meantime, there were many instances of non-recognition, refusal, and exclusion on the way. How well do I remember in my early student years being refused admission to join the courses on Thomas Aquinas in a German college of Dominicans, only because I was a woman. How disappointing was the answer of an eminent British Jesuit whom I consulted about job and research opportunities when I first arrived as a young theology graduate in London; he simply said to me "I am afraid there is no place for you in England." A remark never forgotten, and a prediction proved entirely wrong when I later chaired a department of theology and religious studies for many years.

Women and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Yet my personal experience is less important than the scale of refusal and exclusion experienced by all women in the Catholic Church today, every day. Will Catholic women ever be fully recognized? Will they be encouraged to make their full contribution to the intellectual life of the Church or, more important still, will women become real co-equals and co-partners in shaping

the Catholic intellectual tradition? Will they make any difference in the way the institutional and structural levels of the Church will be organized in the future? Will women theologians and philosophers acquire the same reputation and influence as only men held in the past? That is what will count in the end.

Yet at present we women still suffer deep pain when we experience again and again the narrowness with which Christian beliefs and practices are applied to women. How often are women treated as second-class citizens by the Church? Now that an increasing number of women are taking up theology professionally and studying up to the highest levels of academic qualification, women have acquired the necessary theological tools to engage critically and constructively with the tradition. Increasingly more and more Catholic women experience not only personal doubt about practicing their faith in a feminist and postmodern world, but they also doubt collectively and call into question many aspects of the Church's practices and teachings when examined from a critical gender perspective. From such an angle, many traditions of the Catholic Church, hitherto unquestioningly taken for granted, can be seen to possess a profoundly ambiguous nature so that serious shortcomings in the acclaimed universality of the tradition are coming to light. Women question the way in which the institutional Church developed and was shaped by alien philosophical, political, and legal ideas, incorporating teachings which considered women as less than human, as never able to speak for themselves and take on the same responsibilities as men. Women now challenge the way power has been exercised and abused in the history of the Church, power over women and children, the poor, the conquered, and the colonized, who have been exploited and abused rather than been enabled to grow and develop.

We women doubt the justice of the exclusive maleness of the institutional Church and challenge the hierarchy of its offices and functions which has enabled men to exercise their lordship over others rather than practice the ministry of service of which the Gospel speaks. We women also doubt the traditional image of God, or rather the ambiguous and one-sided way in which it has been preached and transmitted so that it has often performed an

oppressive rather than a liberating function in the growth of human beings. Most of all, we doubt whether Christian beliefs and the Church, as so often presented today, can remain credible in the light of contemporary experience, especially when one becomes aware of the frequently oppressive, exploitative, or paternalistic treatment of women.

Given the pervasive “hermeneutics of suspicion” with which educated Catholic women steeped in a feminist consciousness now approach the Catholic tradition, all aspects of it are open to re-examination. It is overwhelmingly evident that in the past we women did have little part in shaping the Catholic intellectual tradition. We, therefore, now become painfully aware of the narrowness of this tradition, punctuated by women’s silences and symbolic absences. And today we consider this situation as profoundly inhuman and unjust. But I do not wish to say this with reference to the Catholic tradition alone. The powers of patriarchy have been almost universally dominant and so pervasive in human societies, history, and culture that no religion is exempt from them. And no religion has explicitly promoted the literacy, learning, and higher education of women. These cultural activities, so closely connected with the areas of mind and spirit, have remained the prerogative of men everywhere until modern times. Apart from a few exceptions, women did not have access to education and higher learning, including the study of theology, until the mid-nineteenth century. The general education of women and the possibility of their access to the intellectual life is a *novum* in human history, a true change in human consciousness whose full effect we are only beginning to experience now.

Having been excluded for so long from intellectual activities does not mean that we women cannot find vital resources in the Catholic tradition to nourish. In fact, a multitude of resources exist in the tradition, which include above all the countercultural traditions provided by women themselves—by women writers, saints, and mystics in the Church. Moreover, we can also foster the intellectual strength of women today and promote their full participation in the future shaping of the Catholic intellectual tradition. There is no reason why women cannot take up and reinterpret traditional works and teachings, feel inspired by them,

and adapt them to their own needs and ways of seeing the world. To return to Sertillanges quoted earlier, one can also extract nuggets of wisdom from his book and thereby feed a life utterly different in practice from the one envisaged in his work, as when he writes:

Responsiveness of the soul to the ineffable spring, its filial and loving dispositions, lay it open to receive light after light, and ever-increasing fervor and rectitude. Truth, when loved and realized as a life, shows itself to be a first principle; one's vision is according to what one is; one participates in truth by participating in the Spirit through whom it exists . . .

There is no question now of proving one's skill, of showing off the brilliance of one's power, as of a jewel; one desires to get into communion with the radiant center of light and life; one approaches this center in its unity, as it is; one adores it, and renounces what is opposed to it in order to be flooded with its glory. Is not all that something like the meaning of the famous words: "Great thoughts come from the heart"?⁵

It is this "communion with the radiant center of light and life," the participation in the Spirit and its glory which women seek as much as men. Just as some women are re-visioning the Christian spiritual tradition to provide resources for the development of Christian women's spirituality today,⁶ we also need people to undertake a re-visioning of the Catholic intellectual tradition in order to provide more adequate resources for women's full intellectual development. If asked whether this is being done, I cannot think of a concerted effort anywhere in the Church to address this need in a larger, institutional setting. Of course there is much research and writing being undertaken by Christian women—there is feminist, womanist, contextual, and liberation theology; there are women philosophers and feminist philosophies of religion; there are women active in interfaith dialogue, but there is no institutional setting or initiative as such to develop Catholic women intellectuals, besides perhaps in traditional

religious congregations and orders. But by and large, it has been my experience that Church personnel, whether male or female, are very little conscientized as regards the feminist turn of contemporary thought and language. The Church still preaches much too much a rather traditional image and role of women without encouraging women to be intellectuals in their own right, as is now possible in the secular sphere.

Today women are gaining a new self-understanding of their own strengths and possibilities. They are claiming a new, equal place in society and Church as full members in their own right with the opportunity to develop their full potential in every sphere of human life, and this includes the celebration of the powers of the intellect. For this, women need encouragement, but also concrete resources—time, space, money, access to education and training, job opportunities. To develop to the full also includes their potential as Christians and a clear recognition of the contribution Christian women can make to today's Church and society. To assist and promote women's stronger self-definition, I suggest we need a full acceptance in terms of equal value and treatment of all girls from childhood and school years onwards, an encouragement of the independence and self-reliance of young women, and the development of a strongly self-reflective Christian commitment. We also need to recognize the existence of a great diversity of roles for women today in order to get away from the traditional, exclusive social roles of wife and mother which the Church seems to advocate more than any others.

From the perspective of my own professional discipline—that of the study of theology and religions which is closely connected for me with the ministry of teaching, with enlarging and inspiring the critical minds of the young, and in particular with drawing out the strength of women—I also advocate strongly that equal opportunities are needed for women not only to study theology, but also to teach it at all levels. Here great inequality reigns, and in a few cases institutional violence is exercised toward women, at least in Europe, by keeping them explicitly out of university positions. This is a very unjust, and also very unhelpful, situation if one wants to encourage the self-definition of women and their full participation in intellectual life.

A Modern Catholic Intellectual

Ours is not an intellectual age in the traditional sense, but one dominated by popular culture where the role of the intellectual is often one of isolation and alienation. The figure of the intellectual is often cast as someone living in almost inner emigration or, at best, performing the function of a countercultural critic. Looking at the past, one realizes that it too possessed many social and intellectual limitations, and that the place of the intellectual was not always an unambiguous or easy one. The past is marked by oppressive patriarchal structures, frequently linked to an intellectual elitism based on social class.

If one acknowledges the ambiguity of all intellectual traditions and recognizes their power both to lead, inspire, and transform as well as to dominate and destroy, it follows that it is far from unproblematic to speak of a Catholic intellectual or give the Catholic intellectual tradition unreserved praise. The celebration of its rich inheritance notwithstanding, a discerning mind is forced to admit that the treasures of the Catholic intellectual tradition require close scrutiny and evaluation, and some of that can prove rather difficult. When I was studying at university, we were always told in our modern church history courses that Catholics in Germany had not been culturally and intellectually as productive and influential as German Protestants. It was especially the families of Protestant pastors who nurtured many of the German philosophers and writers, at least in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a similar cultural fecundity is evident in many Anglican clergy families in England. Given the celibate nature of the Catholic priesthood, the situation among Catholics is quite different, and the Catholic intellectual influence has been largely exercised through education in schools and colleges.

If one asks who is an intellectual today, it is no longer the monk or theologian of medieval times, but with the onset of modernity and now even more so with the exponential diversity of postmodernity, we can think of a variety of figures. The intellectual may be a scientist, a novelist or poet, an academic or journalist, a philosopher, psychologist, political scientist, or economist—there are so many possibilities and different

professional locations. The twentieth century knows of a number of outstanding Catholic intellectuals, some of them highly regarded in the wider world while more critically assessed within the Catholic Church itself. The person who comes most to my mind here, mainly because I know his work best, is the French Jesuit and palaeontologist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955). He was an outstanding intellectual and scientist, a person of deep faith with a dynamic mystical spirituality. I cannot think of anyone better suited to the words of Sertillanges that "Study is itself a divine office, an indirect divine office; it seeks out and honors the traces of the Creator, or His images, according as it investigates nature or humanity."

For Teilhard, all his research was ultimately linked to worship, to the adoration of the living presence of God and of the vivifying power of the Spirit. In fact, the very last paper he wrote before his death is a short essay entitled "Research, Work and Worship."⁸ It is concerned with the relationship between science and religion, the training of "scientist-priests" and "worker-priests," and the awareness that the notion of Christian life and holiness has to be revised: "We need a new theology . . . and a new approach to perfection, which must gradually be worked out in our houses of study and retreat houses, in order to meet the new needs and aspirations of the 'workers' we live among." I think these "workers" are in many ways the new intellectuals who drive the world forward, but Teilhard, the priest, could still only envisage them in an ascetic and all male mode. Yet his own daring vision of the evolutionary development of what he described as the "noosphere," the living layer of knowledge, insight, wisdom, and active love, redefines the unity of body, mind and spirit, of science and religion, of the masculine and feminine modes of being in the world.

Teilhard was a great intellectual, for he had faith in the fire of the spirit, faith in the transformative power of consciousness and its effect on the world. He was deeply convinced that the human desire for knowledge was a sacred quest, given to us by God. Ultimately, the quest for knowledge, embodied in the development of science and culture, converges with the quest for the Divine, for love and union with God. Teilhard's work brings

together religion, science, and mysticism, and in his person we find the integration of faith with a lifestyle of intellectual enquiry and research which I understand as truly catholic in an inclusive, universal sense. Teilhard's world-affirming and world-transforming attitude is grounded in a powerful spiritual vision which has its life-giving roots in the deepest sources of the Catholic faith, in a profoundly incarnational and sacramental understanding of the world and of all of life. But his intellectual catholicity went far beyond the narrow orthodoxies of both traditional believers and traditional scientists. That is why he caused so much controversy, but also why his ideas influenced so many people, in many parts of the Catholic Church around the world, as well as many people who are neither Christians nor believers. It is the extraordinary breadth and depth of his intellectual synthesis, its complexity and audacity, its concern for renewal and transformation here and now, its ethical insistence on our responsibility for the planet, for life on earth and its future directions, that makes Teilhard's vision so attractive to so many.

The catholicity of Teilhard's synthesis is deeply rooted in some of the best heritage of the intellectual traditions of the Catholic Church, especially of the Jesuit order. Here we have an example of Catholic education, religious formation, and cultural creativity at its best and most fertile. His intellectual *oeuvre* consists of a large corpus of scientific, religious, and spiritual writings permeated by ideas steeped in Catholic imagination, culture, worldview, and lived practice.¹⁰ Yet Teilhard, the global traveller and citizen, forever engaged in scientific research and philosophical debate, meeting individuals from many different lands and cultures, and making friends with people from many faiths and none, developed an amazing openness and catholicity which made him far transcend the narrow frontiers of his family and cultural background.¹¹

But is such catholicity not welcomed in the Catholic Church? Why was Teilhard so maligned by the Church during his lifetime, and so little recognized after his death? Why does the Church not hold him up as an example of the strength and power of the Catholic faith in the modern world? Many have retold the trials and vicissitudes of his life, but the lack of recognition among

Catholics is poignantly summed up by a little anecdote told in Julian Huxley's autobiography.¹² As a great twentieth-century scientific thinker, Huxley was himself an intellectual giant who exercised an immense influence on his contemporaries. When he was director of UNESCO in Paris, he met Teilhard on several occasions and was much taken by him. He admired him greatly and felt they both were "in almost general agreement over the essential facts of cultural and organic evolution," although Huxley did not share Teilhard's religious beliefs and acknowledged their "ineradicable divergence of approach." After Teilhard's death, Huxley agreed to write the well-known preface to the English edition of *The Phenomenon of Man*, but was bitterly attacked by some of his rationalist friends "for supporting a religious (and not fully scientific) work!"¹³ Huxley tells us that in 1955, shortly after Teilhard's death, the French Catholic University in Montreal, Canada, organized a public event, chaired by the vice-chancellor and announced as an "unbiased enquiry" into the theological and scientific aspects of Teilhard's work. Huxley and his wife were among the packed audience in the Magna Aula of the university and Huxley's *Memories* include the following description of what happened:

The rostrum was occupied by a long table at which were sitting five lay professors and several clerical theologians, including a grim and majestic Dominican Abbé in beautiful white robes . . .

One by one, the theologians and the professors got up and said their piece. Was Père Teilhard a good scientist? No, he was not. Was he a competent philosopher? No, he was not. Was he a sound methodologist? No, he was not. People call him a geologist, but he was only an amateur. People call him a theologian—but was he? Finally, the Dominican rose to sum up. He spoke in beautiful French and went through all the arguments. The audience sat spellbound. The Abbé in his sculptural white robes studied all the faces turned towards him, awaiting his verdict. He raised his hand from the ample folds of his cassock: Père Teilhard, he said, was a poet. "Ses paroles somptueuses sont un

piège. Prenez garde de ne pas y tomber.” He sat down in profound silence. Teilhard and all his works had been condemned.¹⁴

This is an extraordinary testimony to the fact that in spite of almost all his religious works still being unpublished in 1955, Teilhard’s name and ideas were sufficiently well-known among a French-speaking public to attract wide public attention, but also cause fear and a defensive attitude among traditional Roman Catholics. It is interesting to note how Huxley reacted to this experience, especially when the vice-chancellor invited him to speak as someone who had known Teilhard personally. Huxley’s account continues:

I accepted, and walked up to the rostrum. Turning to face the audience, I explained that, from my personal knowledge, Père Teilhard was a completely sincere man, an excellent palaeontologist, and that although I did not agree with him on all points, I considered that his reconciliation of scientific fact and religious belief along evolutionary lines was enlightened and helpful. There was a burst of spontaneous applause from the audience, as of great tension released. The clapping continued for several minutes, while the panel of assessors looked glum. As I went out of the hall, happy to have done something to vindicate my old friend, I was besieged by eager young questioners.¹⁵

Is this account of an occurrence in the mid-1950s perhaps indicative of the fact that Teilhard may be better understood and more acknowledged by non-believers than Christians, especially Roman Catholics? More generally speaking, are Catholics perhaps so wedded to a traditional understanding of their heritage that it is impossible for a truly modern intellectual to be accepted in their own midst? Much of the Catholic intellectual tradition in the narrow sense of the word is perhaps still too overshadowed by a strong ascetic, androcentric, and elitist legacy of the past. Yet at the same time, many fresh beginnings and creative transformations

in the wider understanding of catholicity can be noted around the world. There is a genuine openness, an honest search for life-enhancing and holistic possibilities, a sincerity of critical self-questioning and a healthy experimentation with new ways of being catholic and ecumenical, a less certain but more humble way of living one's faith in a more personal, individual way, but also in search of living in a community that accepts genuine differences. And this includes very diverse approaches to the ideals of intellectuality which in turn call for a re-visioning of the Catholic intellectual tradition as hitherto understood.

Re-visioning the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

The millennium is a time for renewal and reawakening, a time for rejoicing, for celebrating our heritage, but also for its critical resifting for future generations. The intellectual world—the world of knowledge and ideas—has grown immensely, and consequently no faith tradition can any longer fully embrace it or hold a monopoly over it. To remain true to its own catholicity, its inclusive universality, the Catholic intellectual tradition must now be much more open, more in dialogue with others and with secular culture. It must become more pluralistic and abandon some of the monolithic, eurocentric features of its own self-understanding. I learnt this first not from Teilhard de Chardin, but from living in India for five years, where I was challenged to the core by the existence of other faiths and cultures which had created different intellectual and spiritual traditions of equal greatness and splendour to that of Catholicism.

Renewal is linked to *metanoia*. It is ultimately a spiritual event—and Teilhard de Chardin articulated more clearly than most that our epic journey of hominization must be one of growing spiritualization—but such change in consciousness is not only marked by a change of soul; it is embedded in a process of dynamic transformation, of a conscientisation which I see closely dependent on the multi-layered, creative use of and access to education at all levels, for all people. A postmodern secular society needs more and more intellectuals, and so does the Church, but such intellectuals are not born, they are produced by society. It is

therefore essential that we create the necessary conditions which make it possible to nurture responsible intellectuals with an independence of mind as well as an integrity of soul, and a moral consciousness that is accountable to their sisters and brothers around the world.

I want to argue that the affirmation and renewal of the Catholic intellectual tradition is dependent on meeting three challenges: (1) the global challenge; (2) the gender challenge; (3) the spiritual challenge.

The Global Challenge

The *global challenge* relates to a variety of issues. It includes our consciousness of the world and the destiny of its peoples as one; our global interdependence in material and spiritual matters; the sense of the planetary, and the need for a planetary or world theology (in a pluralistic, not monolithic sense, for in reality there can only be theologies in the plural as theological truth is always mediated through different experiences, discourses, and world-views); the acknowledgement of the decisive contributions of the peoples of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other parts of the non-Western world to the common heritage of humanity and to the shaping of our human future; the sense of the cosmic arising from the new story of the universe in which we are all immersed; a sense of reverence, wonder, and awe toward the great abundance of life, and the global responsibility we share for the ecological balance and harmony of our world. For the Catholic Church, the global challenge is closely bound up with the challenge of both Christian and global ecumenism, linked to the encounter and dialogue between different world faiths.

At a practical level, the Church is already deeply involved with issues of justice, peace, and development around the globe, helping to promote social, educational, and at times also political, transformations in different countries of the world. Also important in this context is the encouragement of interfaith dialogue, and the collaboration of members of different faiths to abolish poverty and violence, and work for ecological balance and sustainability. Besides much practical work at the grassroots level,

there are also many Catholic intellectuals, women as well as men, who are deeply committed to these issues and are reformulating theological thinking on these matters.¹⁶ Ever since the Declaration of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions on "A Global Ethic," there exist challenging programs in quite a few places to develop, according to the four directives of this Declaration: a global culture of "non-violence and respect for life," "solidarity and a just economic order," "tolerance and a life of truthfulness," "equal rights and partnership between men and women."¹⁷ Here the gender challenge comes up, but little has been done so far by the religions to pursue that. More efforts are going into formulations of an "earth charter" from the perspective of different faiths, and efforts to work for peace in the world. But good will alone is not enough here. Much practical and intellectual work is needed to develop the Church's resources for peace-making—and that includes a reconsideration of the theological thinking on the just war theory, as well as deep repentance for past injustices and acts of inhumanity.

The Gender Challenge

The *gender challenge* is about the realization of the full humanity of women and men, with all the equality and justice this implies. It is about the deconstruction of traditional, fixed gender roles and the harm they have done to both women and men, but especially to women. The current understanding of human sexual differentiation, the Christian teaching about all humans being created equal and in the image of God, the validation, affirmation, and empowerment of women, and the potential for gender balance and reconciliation beyond gender differences open up exciting new theological perspectives and promise possibilities for new creative turns in the Catholic intellectual tradition. It is regrettable that the Catholic Church did not take part in the World Council of Churches "Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women" (1988-98). This program produced much good work among Christian women around the world in terms of practical workshops, conferences, and publications which helped to shape a new consciousness and solidarity among Christian women. Quite a few Catholic

women took part in these activities, but the Church did not officially participate in raising Christian awareness about gender issues and their challenging implications. There exists a great deal of ignorance about these matters in high church circles, and many pronouncements from the Vatican cannot be understood as anything other than a reaction based on fear. If only the Church would make an effort to enter into genuine dialogue with Catholic women rather than go on making ill-informed pronouncements about women in general. Such dialogue is especially urgently needed with women intellectuals at the cutting edge of contemporary theological thinking but, as far as I can see, the position of a Catholic intellectual in the Catholic Church officially still belongs firmly to the male of the human species. In view of this, it is rather surprising, if not provocative, that so many internationally well-known feminist theologians come from a Roman Catholic background.

I am firmly convinced that Catholic women around the world must strongly aspire to leading intellectual roles in all areas of human inquiry, and must be encouraged in achieving this role in every possible way. Education to the highest possible level in every field is an indispensable condition for this, and it would be a valuable piece of research to find out how many practicing women Roman Catholics are in higher education today. It is important to document women's achievements, in the past as well as in the present, and to provide young women with strong role models and examples to emulate. In the USA, there exists in Washington the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the only one in the world, and in England, it has just been announced that a National Library of Women will be built in London, another unique phenomenon.¹⁸ As this announcement was made while I was writing this essay, it inspired me to dream what a wonderful achievement it would be if somewhere in the world there could be a place to create a library of the works of Catholic women writers and intellectuals through the ages. This could provide such a strong focus of empowerment for Catholic women today, and it could in turn become a contributory factor in the creative and transformative re-visioning of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

The Spiritual Challenge

The *spiritual challenge* is the greatest of all and embraces the other two, for a balanced approach to global and gender questions can only grow out of a spiritually sound human life. The spiritual challenge is also the most urgent, for our culture is in a profound spiritual crisis, and the Catholic Church is by no means exempt from this. Much of the spiritual search today is evident from the growth in retreats, prayer, and meditation meetings. It is also visible in the tremendous growth of publications on spirituality, for example the texts published in the series *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, or the series on *World Spirituality*. Catholic intellectuals have made an essential contribution to the production of each of these series, now so widely used. Also important is the fact that many universities in the U.S. and elsewhere now offer courses on spirituality, and that there exists a "Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality" which is ecumenical, but has many Roman Catholic professors as members. Among women, and especially women with a feminist consciousness, there exists a large interest in spirituality of a holistic and integral kind which can bring about personal and social wholeness. The great tradition of Christian saints and mystics includes an extraordinarily large number of "women of spirit" who can provide an empowering paradigm for Christian living and are of considerable importance in the contemporary women's movement.¹⁹ Some of these women have also made an important contribution to the Catholic intellectual tradition, if one does not dualistically separate mystical theology from other, more abstract forms of theology. I am thinking here of Hildegard of Bingen, for example, or Teresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena who, as declared "Doctors of the Church," truly belong to the rich Catholic intellectual tradition, although they represent much else besides.

The great contemporary interest in different forms of mysticism, whether in Christianity or other religions, reflects the hunger and thirst for spirituality, for direction, meaning and purpose. This deep longing, expressed in many different forms far beyond the traditional boundaries of faith communities, is also a cry addressed to the Catholic intellectual tradition. As articulated

through its theological formulations, this tradition has become increasingly conceptual, abstract, and rationalistic, so much so that some feminist theologians speak of “the violence of abstraction” found in Christian theology. It is a tradition often alienated from the body, from the earth, from life, and from a God who is truly alive as the all-encompassing, all-sustaining, all-inspiring fire of divine love.

An intellectual tradition that fully embodies the incarnational heritage of Catholicism cannot be true to itself if it is falsely intellectualist and rationalistic. On the contrary, it must give full embodiment and articulate a critically reflexive evaluation for the entire range of human experiences. Only then can it be truly catholic in the wider sense. And only then can it be spiritually nourishing and help people find their own center and thereby discover their connection with the greater center that is God.

The task of an intellectual always involves taking up a critical position, to sift and question data, to interrogate and reflect thoughtfully, imaginatively, and critically on ideas, problems, and situations. Such a critical position also encompasses an ethical stance, for the intellectual has responsibilities to the wider society, and in our case this includes a responsibility toward the Church as the community of the people of God. At the present threshold of time, moving from one millennium to another, it is important to critically reflect on the Catholic intellectual tradition, take stock of its opportunities and challenges, realize its incompleteness and shortcomings, ask how it is being challenged, and suggest in what way it might be renewed.

Challenges are always needed, for they produce new growth. If the Catholic intellectual tradition can meet the challenges I have signalled here, and others too, there will be further strength and growth. We possess a gloriously rich intellectual inheritance in Catholicism, but Catholics will have to wrestle with decisive new challenges during the next millennium—the tradition cannot remain intact without some profound changes. Yet it has the resources to respond to the new circumstances and contexts of a new era. Let us hope that the Catholic intellectual tradition will remain a truly living inheritance that continues to thrive, and to inspire women and men to work together in solidarity and

community for a great human task and noble intellectual vocation. Only then will the Catholic tradition shine like a bright light in a new season.

Notes

1. I have discussed the importance of education for women within the context of different religious traditions in my article "Education and Literacy" in Serinity Young, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women and World Religion* (New York: Macmillan Reference, 1998), 291-94.

2. See the fascinating study by David F. Noble, *A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). The author convincingly demonstrates how the experimental practices of modern science are marked by a quasi-monastic asceticism, and points out how the ascetic, anti-woman attitudes of Christian monasticism have also helped to shape the process of militarization. It is a very thought-provoking book which raises many questions about the inherently ambivalent nature of many traditional Christian intellectual activities.

3. A.D. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods* (1920; rpt. Cork: Mercier Press, 1962).

4. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*, 241f.

5. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*, 24. The quotation is from Pascal's *Pensées*.

6. See Joann Wolski Conn, ed., *Women's Spirituality. Resources for Christian Development*, 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

7. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*, 28-29.

8. In Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 214-20. The original title in French is "Recherche, Travail et Adoration."

9. Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ*, 220.

10. This is especially true of his intimate and great love of the living Christ, and his lifelong devotion to the Sacred Heart, which took on a new, cosmic meaning in his works, which has so far been little studied, not even by Jesuits who write at length about the devotion to the Sacred Heart.

11. I cannot discuss his seminal ideas or the inspiring example of his spirituality here. For more information, see my Bampton Lectures, *Christ in All Things: Exploring Spirituality with Teilhard de Chardin* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997) or the illustrated, introductory biography, *Spirit*

of Fire: The Life and Vision of Teilhard de Chardin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

12. See especially the detailed account given by one of Teilhard's Jesuit superiors, René d'Ouince, *Un prophète en procès*, particularly vol. I, *Teilhard de Chardin dans l'Église de son temps* (Paris: Aubier, 1970).

13. Julian Huxley, *Memories II* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973), 29, 28.

14. Huxley, *Memories II*, 29.

15. Huxley, *Memories II*, 30.

16. The bibliographical references are large and consists mostly of Christian ecumenical sources. To quote just two examples: see the contributions in David G. Hallman, ed., *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), and the study by Paul F. Knitter, *One Earth, Many Religions: Multifaith Dialogue and Global Responsibility* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

17. See Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, ed., *A Global Ethic: The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

18. The National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington only covers the period since the Renaissance and therefore it unfortunately does not include the rich artistic heritage of medieval women who all belong to the Catholic tradition. Nor does it include any artistic achievements from women of non-Western cultures.

19. See my illustrated book on *Christian Mystics: The Spiritual Heart of the Christian Tradition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), where I have given special attention to some of these women.

