

## Introduction

*Women are filled with love and faith and give a lot to others. Their faith does not exist just in church but in their homes, the streets, and their places of work. Christ preached many things; things like loving others and sharing with the example of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes. And that is just what the women here do—in the comedores (communal dining rooms), the education projects, the communal banks. They multiply what isn't enough. And suddenly they do more than just practice a religion. They are doing what Christ said to do. They do it with much love and they confront problems just like Christ. And they pick up the whip when people take advantage of others; when there's injustice.*

Rosa Castillo Reyes  
President  
*Club de Madres*  
(Mothers' Club)

This book aims to illuminate the words and deeds, the reflections, and the faith of a group of women who live and work in El Agustino, one of the poorest *barrios* (neighborhoods) of Lima, Peru. Such *barrios* were created by a massive influx of people into Lima from the 1960s to the present as Peruvians sought relief from the rampant poverty, the devastating violence of terrorism over the past three decades, and natural disasters.

The vast migration from rural areas to the cities, with the intermingling of different cultures, religious traditions, languages, and customs, has necessitated the rethinking of social structures. The new urban environment

created the need to construct something new. This mass migration, and all it entails, creates a *mezcla* (mixture) of cultures and conditions unseen until this time. What does all this mean for the people, the church, and specifically the women of Peru? How, in turn, have the women of El Agustino responded?

We see in El Agustino the creation and evolution of a local theology born in the struggle to change the status quo while recognizing the presence of God. This theology arises from the bottom up, from the people and not from trained theologians. The actions of the women focused first and necessarily on the question of survival—survival for themselves, their families, and their community. Their theology focuses not on a worldwide transformation but rather on building and supporting societal structures to improve the local environment in response to the call of God.

The theological themes that emanate from the women of El Agustino emerge through their involvement with the institutional church, their work in various projects in the barrio, their family lives, and their prayerful reflections. These women for the most part do not possess much formal schooling. Nonetheless, they possess and espouse complex theological propositions with a high degree of independence and proficiency. A careful listening reveals a rich education of a different variety—one rooted in life-changing experiences.

Although the expression “to give voice” is used frequently in theological discourse today, I am admonished by the words of one El Agustino resident and coordinator of *La Federación Popular de Mujeres* (Federation of Women), Rosa Pacheco, who said to me: “You say you want to give voice to us women. Well, let me tell you this: women have always had a voice. The problem has been that the men who hold the power do not bother to listen to us. This, however, never stopped us from our mission.”<sup>1</sup> Faith, perseverance, and the efficacy of love are lessons to be learned from the women of El Agustino.

## Why These Women?

*The expression, “women doing theology,” is new, as is the explication of what the expression means. Previously, there was never any mention of sexual difference with regard to those who wrote theology, since it was obvious that the task was something proper to men. Today it would seem that the matter is no longer obvious, and the gender of the authors must be specified. Gender is understood not only as a biological difference prior even to birth, but especially as a cultural dimension, that is, as a stance or an aspect that affects*

*the production of other cultural values, of other kinds of human interrelationship and other ways of thinking.*

Ivone Gebara, S.N.D.  
“Women Doing Theology in  
Latin America”

El Agustino is not the only *barrio* in which impressive action by women has occurred. In the *pueblo joven* (young or new town) of Villa El Salvador in Lima, a *barrio* very similar to El Agustino in its development, the NGO (nongovernmental or nonprofit organization) *La Federación Popular de Mujeres* (Women’s Federation) plays an essential role in providing health care, food, and social services for the poor as well as acting as a very influential liaison with the city and federal governments and the local church.<sup>2</sup> Similar organizations were established in El Agustino and throughout the *pueblos jóvenes* of Lima. The impact of the work of women organizers is widespread and they share specific goals and sentiments throughout Peru in answer to the problems that they face.

One of the extraordinary early leaders of this movement was María Elena Moyano.<sup>3</sup> This dynamic, charismatic leader was born in 1958 in the Lima suburb of Barranco; her family moved to the *pueblo joven* of Villa El Salvador when she was thirteen. She studied psychology in college and emerged as a founder and leader of the Women’s Federation in Villa El Salvador.

Sra. Moyano’s social activism was dynamic and resulted in many positive changes for the poor. She actively fought lethargic and ineffective federal and local governments for improvements in housing, medical, food, and work programs. Her work, and the programs run by many people like her, threatened the nationwide anarchy plans desired by terrorist groups, especially *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path). If the poor experienced any improvement in their life conditions, the appeal of anarchy (and the allure of benefits promised by terrorists) were diminished. As a result, she received numerous death threats from Sendero. While Sendero was trying to tear apart the fabric of Peruvian society, women like Sra. Moyano struggled to hold life together and to move ahead. She lived very publicly and was the organizing force behind a massive protest against Sendero in Lima in September 1991. In February 1992, as she was leaving an organizing meeting, she was assassinated in front of her children.

The impact of her death was felt throughout Peru and more than three hundred thousand people attended her funeral. As Paulina Flores de Osorio, the founder of the *pueblo joven* of San Pedro, said, “The death of Elena had an impact on all of us—especially the women who are working

for social change. In her life and death, we have a living example of what it means to be a Christian; to believe so deeply that you are ready to give up your life for the people of God. Is this not what Jesus did?"<sup>4</sup>

Maryknoll Sister Rosa Dominga Trapasso said,

María Elena's death took on tremendous proportions because of how she was killed and what it meant. It exposed the vulnerability of everyone. It was a turning point for many people because Sendero could murder someone so close to the people. We were devastated by her death and the day of her funeral the Mass was concelebrated and, of course, it was all men. The irony was not missed. All the leftist politicians, some with their guns showing, were up in front, and the women with whom and for whom Elena worked—the vulnerable ones—were pushed to the back of the church and into the streets.<sup>5</sup>

Some of the women of El Agustino received death threats as well. This did not stop them from working for the betterment of the people in their district. Nor did these threats, a well as the innumerable obstacles they face daily, diminish their resolve to discover and understand more deeply the presence of God in their midst.

## Why El Agustino?

*You have to understand that just years ago there was nothing here in El Agustino: no streets, no trees, no electricity, no stores, no people. This was just a desolate area so close to downtown Lima but untouched by all that goes on in the city. And when people started to move here, it was more from necessity than desire. Who would want to live in such a dismal place? But most of us had no choice. So, we had no choice than to work very hard to create a place where life could go on, where children could be born and grow, where a glimmer of hope for the future could exist.*

Edelmira Aclari Castellares  
Secretary at the neighborhood school

On the barren hills east of downtown Lima, once part of a large hacienda abandoned in the 1930s, a *Mercado Mayorista* (wholesale market) was built in 1945. As rural conditions in Peru deteriorated, people began to settle in this hilly, sparse, and inhospitable setting. New sections of the neighborhood arose almost overnight from these dusty, treeless, mostly

uninhabited hills. Hundreds of Peruvians arrived in Lima weekly during the 1970s–1980s seeking economic security and freedom from violence. These exiles from their home districts entered Lima en masse. They built their homes from scrap wood and pieces of corrugated aluminum, carried water for miles from muddy streams, sewage flowed down ruts in the ground, electricity was a dream for the future, schools were nonexistent, hunger was the norm, and health problems ran rampant. This is the origin of El Agustino.

The Roman Catholic parish of *La Virgen de Nazaret* (The Virgin of Nazareth, commonly referred to as El Agustino) was created by then Cardinal Juan Landázuri Ricketts, the archbishop of Lima (1955–1990), in 1968 and was assigned to the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in Peru. The parish would become a focal point for those struggling to make sense of the new and often threatening urban environment.

The women on whom this book focuses are residents of El Agustino. Many of them left the Peruvian countryside for Lima in the last three decades. Because of adverse conditions that brought them to the city and those they encountered upon their arrival, most of these new immigrants lived beneath the poverty level for many years. At some point, usually very soon after these women settled in El Agustino, they became involved in the projects of *Servicios Educativos El Agustino* (Educational Services El Agustino or SEA), the social outreach agency of *La Virgen de Nazaret* parish.

El Agustino in many ways represents the changes occurring throughout Lima and in each major city of the country and throughout Latin America from 1960 on. The mass internal migration patterns created entirely new civil, cultural, linguistic, and religious milieus. This influx of people into El Agustino also created massive problems to which the residents of the barrio, primarily the women, responded. This is the context in which theology is done. These are the context and the challenges to which the women respond.

Theologian Robert Schreiter wrote, “The poor are important because they give voice to the aspirations of what may be the majority of Christians in the world.”<sup>6</sup> The women of Peru comprise half of the population. I turned to some of these women to hear their aspirations, challenges, successes, and defeats.

## Liberation and Feminist Theologies

Although the women of SEA speak eloquently of the tenets, goals, and aspirations of Latin American liberation theology, for the most part they have little or no formal knowledge of this theological school. Yet, as Fr. Gustavo

Gutiérrez, the father of liberation theology, said, “They are the best of liberation theologians because they do not need the training. They live it; they live the Gospel.”<sup>7</sup>

These women do not consider themselves liberation theologians, yet they share much in common with those who write and do research in this area. It is important to consider liberation theology because of its profound influence in Peru and worldwide as well as the question of what role women may play in its future developments. Gutiérrez, as early as 1960, was bringing together groups of poor women and men in Lima to discuss their relationship with God. His seminal work, *A Theology of Liberation*,<sup>8</sup> arose from this experience. Through his careful listening, he elaborated a theology of the people of God.<sup>9</sup>

Secular feminists in Peru—mostly upper class—are influenced by North American and European feminist theory. However, this influence has had a negligible impact upon the thinking of most of the women of El Agustino. The women in this study and the secular feminists of Peru share some of the same goals and aspirations despite the fact that the latter readily admit that there is little consideration of the plight of the poor in their writings, research, and reflections. As Dra. María Emma Mannarelli, a historian and administrator for *Centro de la Mujer Peruana Flora Tristan*<sup>10</sup> (Flora Tristan Peruvian Woman’s Center), a leading secular feminist research institute, said, “I personally always have criticized this (lack of consideration of poor women) within Flora Tristan. . . . Not to address the question of poor women in a vertical society such as ours is a neglectful situation and one that must be corrected.”<sup>11</sup>

The understandings central to Peruvian liberation theology and Peruvian secular feminism are something that the women of El Agustino instinctively embrace. Without any formal training in either liberation or feminist theologies, they speak of their desire for the fruits of both. Their social, cultural, and theological reflections bring to light the correlations between feminism and liberation theology.

However, this book is not meant to be either a comparison of feminist thought or the theological thinking of Peru’s liberation theologians with the women of SEA. The theology of the women of El Agustino is not a subset of something that precedes it. This study is an examination of a theology emerging from women who are poor and who work for the poor.

These women experience lives permeated with hope for a new future—hope against hope, often in the direst of circumstances. As they compellingly speak of, and work toward, their dreams—for family, parish, neighborhood and neighbors, and country and world—their words, experiences, and ambitions stand in stark contrast to the individualism so common in the United States and Europe and among the wealthier citizens of their own country. As theologian James B. Nickoloff succinctly states, “The nascent solidarity among the poor—dramatically seen in

Peru, for example, when ethnic identity gradually gives way to a consciousness of social class—is the source of a genuine hope against the ubiquitous forces of death.”<sup>12</sup>

These women have a profound sense that their faith, their hard work, and their love will most assuredly be able to achieve for them and for their neighbors the freedom they fervently desire, the liberation that the Gospel of Jesus Christ promises them. This liberation is all-encompassing. They work for freedom from the poverty that has crippled their lives and the lives of their families, neighbors, and friends; they look ahead to a time when the government of their country will truly have the welfare of its citizens—particularly its most vulnerable citizens—foremost among its goals; they foresee an era when the cultures of their ancestors stand in proud bearing with the implanted culture of the United States and the Iberian Peninsula; they anticipate a period when the barriers of a machismo society will no longer adversely influence their lives; they focus on building a liberating church that fully incorporates women and men as equals; and they work to lessen the economic, cultural, social, political, ecclesiastical, and personal obstacles that stand in the way of their living as fully human.

The women in this study represent the possibility of change for the better. Through their work and their faith, they help to redefine a theology of the poor, a theology for a liberating church. The themes of liberation of which they speak mirror the themes that are heard worldwide. However, as women whose voices have not been heard, as women who are quietly yet effectively changing the status quo, their goals are subtly different from other theologies and are very important. Indeed, in many ways the future of the church in Peru rests in the hands of the women of the church.

## Contextual and Local Theologies

*Contextualization . . . is the sine qua non of all genuine theological thought, and always has been.*

Douglas John Hall  
*Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology  
 in a North American Context*

Theologian Stephen B. Bevans provides the following definition of contextual theologies:

Contextual theology can be defined as a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the Gospel; the tradition of the Christian people; the culture,

whether brought about by Western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice, and liberation. Doing theology contextually is not an option, nor is it something that should only interest people from the Third World or missionaries who work there. The contextualization of theology—the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context—is really a theological imperative. As we understand theology today, contextualization is part of the very nature of theology itself.<sup>13</sup>

The time has come to hear the voices of the majority of Christians in the world and to explore the theological statements that reflect the reality in which this majority lives. It is also imperative that the contextual theologies be examined for patterns that will lead to a better understanding of how various issues are handled: fidelity to scripture and the magisterium (teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church), the interplay of cultures, the role of women, and the manner in which context shapes the way in which we think and theologize. While classical theology thought of itself as an “objective science of faith,”<sup>14</sup> derived from the two sources of Scripture and tradition and therefore unchangeable, contextual theology adds a third *locus theologicus*, that of personal human experience. The subjectivity of this new way of faith seeking understanding rejects any consideration of a theology existing context-less. Our personal and communal realities are the only media through which we may come to an understanding of our God and our context inevitably influences that understanding.

The pluralistic and controversial nature of Christianity itself has been underappreciated in theological study for a long time. However, a cursory examination of Christian history attests to the fact that theology has always involved the process of trying to understand faith in a particular social, historical context. One need only compare the hierarchy of today’s church with the early apostles to appreciate the manner in which culture has wielded its influence. As wars, reformation, politics, and reexamination of philosophy molded theology in the past, today the same occurs through the appreciation of the personal encounter with God. Clearly, the course of comprehending the Word of God made flesh continues and the holiness of the ordinary is recognized. The inherent pluralism of the world demands the attention of anyone doing theology if we believe in the Incarnation.

As we explore the spirit of the Gospel that is alive and flourishing in the lives of these women, when we come to a greater understanding of their Christian tradition and at the same time begin to grasp the *mezcla* (mixture) of cultures in which they live, there will emerge a local theology that may stand as a model for others.



## Conclusion

In El Agustino, where everyone shares common poverty and displacement, the women's struggle is important because their inclusive efforts have allowed many to survive; it's significant by the movements of God in their midst made visible by their theological reflection; and it's meaningful for the example for others to follow and for the lessons Christians may share.

As the final document from the 1985 Oaxtepec, Mexico, Conference on "Doing Theology from Third World Women's Perspective" points out:

The passionate and compassionate way in which women do theology is a rich contribution to theological science. The key to this theological process is the word "life." We perceive that women are deeply covenanted with life, giving life, and protecting life. The woman in our streets always appears surrounded and weighed down with children: children in her body, in her arms, on her back. Thus, even physically, she extends and reaches out to other lives, other human beings born of her body, sustaining their lives. In doing theology, we in the Third World thus find ourselves committed and faithful to all the vital elements that compose human life. Thus without losing its scientific seriousness, which includes analyzing the basic causes of women's multiple oppression, our theologizing is deeply rooted in experience, in affection, in life. We as women feel called to do scientific theology passionately, a theology based on feeling as well as on knowledge, on wisdom as well as on science, a theology made not only with the mind but also with the heart, the body, the womb. We consider this a challenge and an imperative not only for doing theology from women's perspective, but also for all theology.<sup>15</sup>

To understand the women of El Agustino, and their actions and their thoughts, we must examine the major factors that shape the context in which they live. Some of the most momentous social occurrences of this past century have brought them to this point. Their integral faith and how it moves them to a deeper, more complete understanding of their God will change the world in which they live. How they answer the call of God will lead them forward.



A typical street in El Agustino, with buildings climbing the hills in the background.