

Recovering the Legacy of the Thought of Catholic Lay Women (1945-62)

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Abstract At the crossroads of gender studies, theology and transnational, intellectual and cultural history, this article introduces a new perspective on the pre-history of the Second Vatican Council. The post-war and early Cold War period coincided with the rise of a generation of lay women who became true national and international apostolate professionals. The *herstories* of their legacies have been largely overlooked or confined by biographical or national boundaries. However, due to their influence on public policies and agenda setting, lay women were able to use 'female' forms of associationism as an entryway into male-dominated arenas, including theological debates, while simultaneously beginning to articulate their desire for greater participation in both broader society and the Church.

Keywords Catholicism. Gender. Agency. Lay Women. Transnational History. United Nations. Humanitarianism. Intellectual History. Personalism.

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1 Revisiting the Legacy of Catholic Lay Women in the Pre-conciliar Years: A New Research Field or a New Perspective?¹

To the ‘strawberries on the cake’;²
and to Prof. Aurora Morcillo (FIU),
in memoriam.

The study of the Second Vatican Council appears to be thriving. The last two decades have witnessed an exciting revival in scholarship.³ With the reactivation of the so-called culture wars, the Council’s complex and diverse legacy, its purportedly unfinished reception⁴ and the role that its teachings might have played in the development of twenty-first-century Catholicism have recently returned to the fore in many ongoing debates. Thus, it may come as a surprise to know that significantly fewer works (and words) have been devoted to the analysis of women’s participation in the Council.⁵ Most significantly, the *herstories* of the women who laid the ground for Vatican II (and for women’s participation as auditors) are still lacking.

Given this gap, one might all too easily assume that Catholic lay (and religious) women did not play a noteworthy role in the pre-conciliar years. This presumption seems confirmed by the fact that scholarship dealing with the aftermath of the Council has boomed in recent decades.⁶ While this exploration of the great advances achieved by Catholic women since 1965 is necessary, it has also

1 This article was written under the auspices of two projects: “Modernidad y religión en la España del siglo XX: entre el consenso y la ruptura” (PGC2018-099909-B-I00, funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and ERDF A way of making Europe); “Sociedad internacional y europeísmo. La huella de las otras Europas” (PID2021-122750NB-C21). It is also part of Núñez Bargaño’s MSCA Project 101108049 – TheoFem “Lay Women: International Experts and Theologians avant-la-lettre. Legacies and Entangled Histories (1945-1962)”. The author also wants to thank Prof. Laura Pettinaroli and Prof. Mario Aguilar, for their kind invitation to share an early version of this work at the Centre for the Study of Religion and Politics, School of Divinity-St. Andrews University (3 November 2022) and at the Séminaire annuel *Les archives du pontificat de Pie XII: recherches en cours. Gli archivi del pontificato di Pio XII: ricerche in corso* (École française de Rome, 10 January 2023).

2 “Women theologians are ‘the strawberry on the cake’, says Pope” by Hannah Roberts, *The Tablet*, 11 December 2014, cited in Madigan, “Women During and After Vatican II”, 90.

3 Cf. Van Rompay, Miglarese, Morgan, *The Long Shadow of Vatican II*; Gabriel, Spieß, Winkler, *Catholicism and Religious Freedom*; Weiser, “Les experts au concile Vatican II”; Faggioli, *The Rising Laity*; Bonner, Denny, Fraser Connolly, *Empowering the People of God*; Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II*, to cite some of the most relevant works.

4 Clifford, *Decoding Vatican II*.

5 Cf. Madigan, “Women During and After Vatican II”; Heyder, Muschiol, *Katholikinnen und das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*; Valerio, *Madri del Concilio*; Perroni, Melloni, Noceti, *Tantum aurora est*.

6 Blasco Herranz, Moreno Seco, “Españolas en el catolicismo internacional”; Masqueli-er, “Ni vraiment dissidentes, ni complètement obéissantes”; Martínez Cano, “40 años

reinforced the overall impression that the preceding period was characterized by a logical evolution from “obedience to revolt”, or that the post-conciliar years were a “storm after the silence”.⁷ This unconscious narrative seems to imply that numerous aspects of their professional and intellectual lives changed for these women *only* after Vatican II happened. Suddenly, they were engaging in theological debates and proposing their own ideas about a diversity of topics: the laity, the gendered division of religious labour, the Church’s relationship to the world, a ‘feminist’ reading of the sacred texts. Did Catholic women really not think about or discuss these issues in the years preceding the Council?

Inspired by the thought-provoking work of Bosschaert, Derks, Desmazières, Henold, Bidegain and Rossi, this article introduces a new orientation for research into the pre-history of the Second Vatican Council.⁸ At the crossroads of gender studies, theology and the history of ideas and internationalism (in particular, transnational and cultural history), the article draws on work conducted at ISACEM (Istituto per la storia dell’Azione cattolica e del movimento cattolico in Italia Paolo VI) and the AAV (Archivio Apostolico Vaticano), as well as relevant publications by Catholic lay women held at the Maurits Sabbe Library (KU Leuven) and the Biblioteca Nacional de España.⁹ This work indicates that the growing public role played by lay women in local and international lay organizations was accompanied by a simultaneous development in their intellectual engagement in contemporary ecclesial, political and social debates. As a result of their efforts to influence public policies and set agendas, lay women were able to use ‘female’ forms of associationism as an entryway into male-dominated arenas, including theological debates. Although these women were a minority – often elite – they nevertheless made meaningful, and greatly overlooked, intellectual contributions.

de Teología Feminista en España”; de Dios Fernández, Mínguez Blasco, “De la obediencia a la protesta”; Henold, “Woman – Go Forth!” just to cite a few.

7 I cite here the formula used by de Dios Fernández, Mínguez Blasco, “De la obediencia a la protesta”, and by Govaart-Halkes, cited by Derks, “Changing Lanes”, 82.

8 Bosschaert, “Is there a Future for Contemporary Church History?”; Derks, “Changing Lanes”; Desmazières, “Généalogie d’un ‘silence’ conciliaire”; Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*; Bidegain, “El cristianismo y el cambio socio político de las mujeres”, and Rossi, *Uncharted Territory*.

9 I would like to thank Alejandro Dieguez, Paolo Trionfani, Simona Ferrantin and Alessandro Romano, for their kind support during my research stay at the Roman archives (June 2022). I also would like to thank *Resilience* (and notably Lieneke Timpers and Dries Bosschaert) for the TNA-Resilience scholarship that allowed me to conduct preliminary research at KU Leuven.

2 Separating Women from ‘All Those Gratuitous Flowery Adjectives, the Pedestals and Incense’

Research conducted by historians Della Sudda, Moreno Seco, Blasco Herranz, Margotti, Scaraffia and Zarri, and Van Osselaer suggest that Catholic women’s experiences in the twentieth century were not only complex, but also involved an active dialogue with the prescriptions of the Catholic Church and society on the whole.¹⁰ While the apostolic work of Catholic lay women has been the object of a significant amount of academic literature, their thought and their substantial work as international agents have not received the same amount of attention. Some publications have looked at the lives of certain Vatican II ‘mothers’, yet they have rarely transcended purely biographical¹¹ or relatively regional or national perspectives.¹²

The limited scholarship accorded to the intellectual and transnational work of these women seems to unconsciously mirror some of the gender conventions and essentialist views by which they were perceived at the time, that is, either as dedicated mothers or as purely spiritual and delicate beings. It is significant that when women finally entered the Council as auditors, they were often addressed by the appellative *pulcherrimae auditrices* (most beautiful female auditors). Australian theologian Rosemary Goldie argued that the comparison of women to flowers by the men in the parallel commissions was emblematic of the dangers of employing a different, romanticized language to speak about females.¹³ For Goldie, it was important to omit the “gratuitous flowery adjectives, the pedestals and incense” because women were asking to be “recognized [by the Church] as the full human persons they are, and treated accordingly”.¹⁴

10 Scaraffia, Zarri, *Storia delle donne*; Margotti “L’autre moitié de l’Église”; Della Sudda “L’action catholique féminine au XXe siècle”; Moreno Seco, “De la caridad al compromiso”; Blasco Herranz, *Mujeres, hombres y catolicismo*; Van Osselaer et al., “Charismatic Women in Religion” and Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*.

11 Salas Larrazábal, Rodríguez de Lecea, *Pilar Bellosillo*; Roussel, Ben Djaffar, *Marguerite Fiévez*.

12 Moreno Seco, “De la caridad al compromiso”; Duriez, *Femmes catholiques, femmes engagées*; Blasco Herranz, “Las Mujeres de Acción Católica”.

13 Much less known is the contribution to this discussion by the then president of the WUCWO (World Union of Catholic Women’s Organisations), Pilar Bellosillo. On the need to integrate a Hispanic perspective into the transnational history of Catholicism, cf. Rodríguez Lago, Núñez Bargueño, *Mas allá de los nacionalcatolicismos*.

14 In this respect, while the role of English - and French - speaking Catholic women has received some attention, much less has been written about women from other regions of the world, including the Hispanic world. Of the 23 female auditors, 5 were Hispanic: Pilar Bellosillo (Spain), president of the WUCWO; Cristina Estrada, A.C.J. (Cuban-Spain), superior general of the Sisters of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart (Ancillae Sacri Cordis Jesu) in Spain, despite being born in Cuba; Margarita Moyana Llerena (Argentina), president of The World Federation of Catholic Young Women and Girls (WFCY-

Many studies continue to consider Catholic women as second-class citizens (perpetually dependant on, or primarily subservient to, a male authority figure). While Catholic women had to – and often continue to – operate within highly hierarchical institutional constraints, this condition should not be de facto interpreted as a complete absence of female agency. Two well-known cases of early modern Catholic women, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz and Saint Teresa de Jesus (to cite two well-known Hispanic cases), show exactly how complex women’s relationships to male authorities could be. In more recent times, other examples come to mind, such as, for example, Lili Álvarez (1905-1998). Largely known for her successful career as a pioneering multi-sport athlete, Álvarez was also a committed Spanish feminist and outspoken journalist with a multi-faceted international career. Writing within the adverse context of the Franco dictatorship, in her book *Feminismo y espiritualidad (Feminism and Spirituality)* she used subtle rhetorical strategies to overcome political and religious censure, and to powerfully criticize the infantilization of Spanish women by the Church (but also, by extension, Francoist society as a whole). While her book does not fully question the concept of ‘biological’ difference, it creatively makes use of the teachings of one of the “Second Vatican Council celebrities” (i.e., Cardinal Leo Joseph Suenens)¹⁵ to demand that the Church viewed religious women (and, consequently, lay women) as full “adults” in the room. In particular, she skilfully appropriated the art of the medieval ‘gloss’ (or text commentary) to *desvergonzadamente* (unapologetically) cite “the sacred authors of the Church” as a means to legitimize, or sacralize, her own ideas.¹⁶

As this example shows, some of the categories and perspectives used to study women and religion required regular fine-tuning. When approaching the deconstruction of gender roles, many scholars continue to perceive religion as a major obstacle to the advancement of civic and women’s rights. The supposedly straightforward equation between religion, patriarchy and the subordination of women is too often insufficiently problematized. It is precisely this secular/liberal concept of female agency (which is understood as inevitably secular) that the work of Mahmood, Braidotti and Scott has helped to deconstruct.¹⁷ Religious convictions may have led women to partic-

WG); Gladys Parentelli (Uruguay), vice president of the female branch of the MIJARC (International Movement of Catholic Agricultural and Rural Youth) based in Louvain; and Luz-Marie Alvarez-Icaza (Mexico), co-president of the Latin-American Christian Family Movement groups. Quote in text from Madigan, “Women During and After Vatican II”, 83.

15 The work she cites is Cardinal Suenens, *Promotion apostolique de la religieuse*.

16 Álvarez, *Feminismo y espiritualidad*, 20.

17 Cf. Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*; Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times” and Scott, *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (in particular the chapter “Sexularism: On Secularism and

ipate in various forms of resistance, appropriation and even activism in a number of complex ways. In this respect, Scott eloquently observed that the acquisition of formal political and citizen's rights for women did not automatically translate into full social and economic equality. In fact, many first-wave feminist leaders drew on deeply held religious principles to advance their arguments. Similarly, Mahmood has demonstrated that 'agentival capacity' not only entails "a resistance to norms, but [...] the multiple ways one inhabits those norms"¹⁸ and, thus, that clear-cut divisions between secular agency and religious subordination should continue to be carefully re-evaluated.

Another reason for the invisibility of Catholic women in much ongoing research¹⁹ is that they fundamentally challenge some of the dominant frameworks from which the study of social movements, theology, transnational and intellectual histories and feminism have tended to be approached. Catholic lay women's experiences are often difficult to locate on the left-/right-wing political spectrum. In addition, their means of action and expression frequently elude conventional narratives and methodologies, as well as most canons of scholarship. While mapping the genealogy of Catholic lay women's thought and transnational work for the pre-conciliar period in full detail is beyond the scope of this article, the work offers a significant starting point from which to begin the process of recovering and reconsidering their legacies. By arguing that Catholic lay women were committed participants in international forums of religious and secular knowledge and transnational communities of care, the article demonstrates that it is important to continually question assumptions about widely known historical phenomena such as the Cold War, feminist waves and the Second Vatican Council.

Gender Equality"), as well as Giorgi "Gender, Religion, and Political Agency".

18 Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 15.

19 Two of the most significant examples are Patricia Owens' "Women and the History of International Thought", cf. <https://www.politics.ox.ac.uk/research-projects/women-and-the-history-of-international-thought.html> and Marta Verginella's EIRENE project, cf. <https://project-eirene.eu/>. Cf. Regulska, Smith, *Women and Gender in Postwar Europe*, along with Garner, *Shaping a Global Women's Agenda* important arguments. Cf. also Vuola, "The Exclusion of (the Study of) Religion".

3 Catholic Lay Women in the United Nations and Second Vatican Council: Two Complementary ‘Signs of the Times’?

In 1963 Pope John XXIII formulated the emerging role of women as being a clear ‘sign of the times’ in his encyclical *Pacem in terris*.²⁰ Although the period between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the Council was in many ways characterized by a return to ‘traditional’ gender roles and the spread of a Cold War ideal of domesticity,²¹ these relatively understudied years were also a time of considerable change.²² It was during those years that the bases for the social and ecclesial movements that would later shake the 1960s were laid. This foundational work was also carried out by women, many of whom have been omitted of traditional and alternative narratives because they do not comfortably fit the definition of a feminist leader, an international agent, or a Catholic thinker. Despite being mostly conservative in spirit, Catholic teachings did, in fact, engage with the changing situation of women to a large extent; and vice versa, women interacted significantly, though often not overtly, with Catholic and secular teachings. The American feminist Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, in the same context in which John XXIII was preparing to convene Vatican II.²³ She and her French counterpart, Simone de Beauvoir, were regularly cited by lay women (sometimes, though not always, as criticism), along with encyclicals and documents by other religious authorities, in their reflections about their apostolate in society and the Church.²⁴

In this respect, the Second Vatican Council could also be interpreted as a product of its time. Although the pre-conciliar years were marked by an impulse to expand the Church’s presence in society and the international arena, the history of this period has been largely written in strikingly secular and national terms. In the last two decades, research has begun to reaffirm the influence of Catholicism on

20 John XXIII, *Pacem in terris*, paragraphs 126-9.

21 As new power struggles between East and West began to arise, the media often presented conservatism and, thus, the ‘traditional family unit’ as an antidote to the anxiety provoked by this uncertain political situation. Yet, parallelly, women’s increasing prominence in the workforce and growing access to education were prompting a re-evaluation of their role in society, thus undermining efforts to re-establish the supposedly ‘innate’ gender roles of men and women.

22 Feldner, Gorrara, Passmore, *The Lost Decade?*; Montero, Louzao, *Catolicismo y Franquismo*.

23 Madigan, “Women During and After Vatican II”, 79. Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*.

24 Álvarez, *Feminismo y espiritualidad*, 47; Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*; Pelletier-Baillargeon, “Un Concile pour le deuxième sexe?”.

post-war and Cold War European and world histories.²⁵ Although the pontificate of Pius XII coincided with a period of accelerated secularization, it also witnessed a renewed wave of religious effervescence,²⁶ along with the consolidation of the Catholic Church as an increasingly influential transnational agent.²⁷ Although women were an essential piece of this historical puzzle, most scholarship has tended to focus on the Vatican Curia, the hierarchy, male Catholic politicians, activists, and high-profile intellectuals.²⁸ However, the recently unsealed Vatican Archives of Pius XII have offered a new opportunity to reassess the role played by Catholic lay women in bringing about institutional, social, and religious change in the pre-conciliar years. One crucial aspect of this period was the Church's attempt to expand the ranks of lay ICOs (International Catholic Organizations). The overall objective was to counter the influence of communism in the international arena, while simultaneously providing a religious alternative to liberal-secular values. As a result, the expansion of the ICOs' sphere of action was promoted not only geographically, but also in newly formed international institutions. As ICOs were operating transnationally in the fields of health, social care, and humanitarianism (areas that, at the time, were generally associated with female action), this effort involved the greater engagement of lay women in public life.

Pius XII repeatedly called upon Catholic women to personally take on an active role in international post-war society. As early as 1945, the pontiff addressed women regarding the best way they could "maintain and strengthen the dignity of women" in the "current [i.e., post-war] circumstances" in which "Providence" had placed them.²⁹ The pope encouraged the expansion of women's apostolate efforts in the following terms:

Your entry into this public life took place suddenly, as a result of the social upheavals of which we are spectators; it matters little!

25 Cf. Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade*; Thompson, *For God and Globe*; Kirby, *Religion and the Cold War*.

26 Margry, *Cold War Mary*.

27 Pasture, "Religious Globalisation in Post-war Europe"; Levant, Pettinaroli, Sibire, "Le Vatican, un acteur religieux singulier dans un monde global".

28 Chappel, *Catholic Modern*; López-Chaves, *Los intelectuales católicos*; Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the Origins of European Union*; Compagnon, *Jacques Maritain et l'Amérique du sud*; Chenaux, *Pie XII*. An exception is Brydan, *Franco's Internationalists*, in particular chapter 5 "Spain's Catholic Internationalists" which has a section on Maria de Madariaga. Also, on catholic nurses as 'moral experts', cf. Brydan, "Antagonistic Internationalists".

29 *Questa Grande Vostra Adunata. Women's Duties in Social and Political Life: Address of His Holiness Pope Pius XII to Members of Various Catholic Women's Associations*, 21 October 1945. Citation from the article "Anche il problema femminile è nella mente e nel cuore del Papa", 3 (Author's transl. of the Italian original from the 1955 article).

You are called to take part in it; will you perhaps leave to others, to those who become promoters or accomplices in the ruin of the domestic hearth, the monopoly of the social organization of which the family is the principal element in its economic, juridical, spiritual, and moral unity? The fate of the family, the fate of human society, are at stake... Therefore, every woman, without exception, must understand well her duty, her strict duty of conscience not to remain withdrew, she should rather take action (in the manner best suited to her particular circumstances) in order to contain the currents that threaten the hearth... There is yet another reason one must add to this compelling incentive for the Catholic woman to enter the path which today opens to her industriousness: **her dignity as a woman. She must compete with man for the good of the civitas, in which she is equal in dignity to him... they both have the right and the duty to cooperate for the total good of society and of the nation.**³⁰

Access to political activity through voting rights,³¹ along with the spread of communism, are two important elements that explain this pontifical call to women to reach out beyond the traditional sphere of the home, and to fully participate in the re-Christianization of national and international life. Yet, the use of the word ‘dignity’ suggests that Pius XII’s discourse may also be responding to possible intra-ecclesial tensions around ‘the woman question’ and in particular, to the way the defendants of ‘nouvelle theology’ and other ‘progressive’ Catholic thinkers might have conceived the multi-faceted role of women. In particular, his words can be interpreted as acknowledging the spread of what could be defined as ‘personalist feminism’,³² a current that had been developing since the early 1930s (although some of its ideas can be traced back even earlier), and that would increasingly advance an egalitarian perspective of gender roles, while preserving some of the more traditional ‘maternalist’ tenets.

One particular event that marked the greater involvement of lay

30 “Anche il problema femminile è nella mente e nel cuore del Papa”, 3 [in bold letters in the original].

31 Although the right to vote had already been granted to women in certain countries before and after the First World War (Finland 1906; Norway 1907; Denmark, Iceland 1915; Russia, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, the United Kingdom 1917; Germany, Austria 1918; the Netherlands, Luxembourg 1920; Spain 1931), in the aftermath of the Second World War another significant wave of universal suffrage spread largely across southern and eastern Europe: France 1944; Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary 1945; Italy (of particular importance in the Vatican context), Romania 1946; Malta 1947; Belgium 1948; Greece 1952.

32 I borrow the concept from Gauvreau, *Catholic Origins of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution*, cf. in particular chapter 5 “The Epic of Contemporary Feminism”, 176. The relation of personalism to feminism will be examined in the last section of this article.

women in international forums was the 13th Conference of the IUCWL (International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues) in Rome. Held in 1952, it was at this gathering that the decision was made to change the name of the IUCWL to the WUCWO (World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations). The symbolic change from 'international' to 'world' is significant: it denotes lay women's aspirations to more actively contribute to the Church's efforts "to renew the face of the Earth"³³ in the post-war and early Cold War period. Similarly, in order to facilitate *liaisons* with the UN (United Nations) offices that had been established in Paris, as well as those existing in Geneva, the organization's headquarters would be transferred from the Netherlands to France.³⁴ Led by the work (and financing) of the US National Catholic Welfare Council, and particularly by lay woman Catherine Shaeffer,³⁵ the WUCWO formed part of the formal and informal diplomacy networks established on the post-war international stage. A select group of International Catholic Organization leaders participated in the San Francisco Charter Conference in 1945 to institute the UN.³⁶ In addition, between 1947 and 1948 the IUCWL was granted consultative status with the main UN agencies: UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council), UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) and the ILO (International Labour Organization).

Throughout the 1940s, Catholic lay women became involved in an ever-growing number of international projects and agencies, including the Commission on the Status of Women. Consultations were regularly scheduled between the WUCWO and different members of the national delegations belonging to the United Nations Secretariat. The WUCWO also helped other Catholic organisations that were themselves preparing reports for different UN commissions. To make more efficient recommendations, WUCWO consultants conducted preliminary exploratory work. This often included developing and conducting surveys amongst their national affiliates. Similarly, to

33 The phrase "*Rinnovando la faccia della terra*" comes from a translation from the English Catholic journal *The Tablet*, 20 October 1951, in ISACEM, fondo Unione donne di Azione Cattolica (UD), busta 236, fascicolo Internazionale - Congressi Mondiali Apostolato dei Laici (1, 2, 3). The liturgical symbolism is powerful here: "rinnovare la faccia della terra" is taken from Psalm 104:30. Its particular strength is directly related to the spiritual effervescence of the Pentecost.

34 Rossi, *Uncharted Territory*, 179.

35 Born in the United States, Shaeffer had a Master's degree in Economics and International Relations, she was a member of the National Council of Catholic Women and had worked since 1927 in the social action department of the National Catholic Welfare Council.

36 Rossi, *Uncharted Territory*, 5.

better brief delegates on the importance of Catholic values, Catholic lay women organized workshops to provide them with a more thorough knowledge of Catholic thought. This was a fundamental activity since, at the time, lay women did not have access to certain university degrees, most notably Theology. They were educated in structures that have received little academic attention, such as religious institutes, but also the educational communities established by local and international Catholic Action groups. Lay women needed to master Catholic concepts in order to spread the Church's mission and educate other women, particularly when they were called upon to take part in UN sponsored workshops organized in the so-called 'developing world'. In fact, just as the need to better prepare women for their domestic and apostolate efforts was central to the post-war/reconstruction period,³⁷ the social and civic international training of women's missions – along with the amelioration of the working conditions of women worldwide – were two of the central preoccupations of the WUCWO in the 1950s.³⁸

While the engagement of Catholic lay women was largely grounded in a traditional discourse, a growing sense of what would be called women's 'empowerment' today can also be detected. Following Catholic doctrine, lay women continued to present their role as 'the caring and/or pious sex', but this depiction was now presented as a powerful means to legitimize their right to contribute to crucial international conversations and to demand greater equality. This is, for example, what Argentinian social worker and WUCWO Vice President Celina Piñeiro-Pearson³⁹ championed in her speech to the 1,200 WUCWO delegates gathered in Rome in 1952. Entitled *The Proper Mission for the Laity in Today's World and Women's Responsibilities in it*, Piñeiro-Pearson's speech denounced the incapacity of men, because of their violent nature, to achieve true peace and, thus, the need to include

37 Due to the particular features of the Spanish case (i.e. the Civil War, 1936-39), the chronology is slightly different. Educational workshops were organized in 1945 by the dioceses of Madrid to train women 'catechists' charged with the 're-evangelization of the suburbs'. An estimated 2,034 women were trained as leaders of apostolate tasks that year. Cf. *Memoria diocesana* 1945, in AAV, Arch. Nunz. Madrid 1329, fasc. 1, ff. 154-66.

38 Cf. for example, *UMOFC (Union Mondiale des Organisations Féminines Catholiques) Congresso di Roma 1952-Carrefour Problèmes économiques et sociaux*, in ISACEM, fondo UD, busta 245 - Internazionale - metodi, studi, schemi; groupe de recherche internazionali UMOFC 1950-57, fascicolo Congresso di Roma Aprile, 1952; *Programme Provisoire* and *Congresso Bogotá Janvier 1957-57/1 UMO/Congrès/Amé. Lat.*, in ISACEM, fondo UD, busta 245 - Internazionale - metodi, studi, schemi; groupe de recherche internazionali UMOFC 1950-57, fascicolo Congresso di Roma 29-9/4-10 1957.

39 She was the first elected president of Argentina's FMJFC (Federación Mundial de Juventudes Femeninas Católicas), 1933-40, vice president of the WUCWO.

women to accomplish this fundamental task.⁴⁰ By referencing their ‘natural’ role as mothers, Piñeiro-Pearson asserted that women have the higher moral ground and, accordingly, a greater capacity than men to produce long-lasting social change.

Piñeiro-Pearson’s speech should be seen against the background of a wider process of the re/construction of the discourse of motherhood in the wider inter/national community, and the reforms of maternity rights legislation implemented during the post-war years in particular.⁴¹ Both religious and secular organizations competed to attract new members, and equally claimed to defend the rights of women as mothers, workers and citizens.⁴² Female activists and leaders from the left and right both appealed to women’s maternal instincts within the simultaneous and competing peace campaigns that took shape on both sides of the Iron Curtain in the context of the formation of the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization).⁴³ These women, who belonged to different sides of the political spectrum, argued in surprisingly similar terms that their maternal predisposition could lead their nations away from nuclear annihilation, and that they were better prepared to consolidate a peaceful future. By connecting women’s local and international issues, they helped to spread and consolidate the message that the world of international action and politics was not the exclusive domain of men. However, Piñeiro-Pearson’s speech is also significant because it reveals the powerful lobbying capacity of the WUCWO. The vice president is very much aware that the organization could potentially speak on behalf of “us women, who are half of the entire population of the world” (mark the interesting resonance with Suenens’ famous words uttered during the Second Vatican Council). In her defence of the need for the greater involvement of Catholic women in international life, she very intelligently mentioned the fact that the WUCWO included an estimated 36 million women worldwide, many of whom were avid moral campaigners. If the echo of all these members was heard around the globe, she observes, significant advancements in world peace could be achieved.

⁴⁰ Piñeiro-Pearson, *The Proper Mission for the Laity in Today’s World and Women’s Responsibilities in it*, 1952, in ISACEM, fondo UD, busta 245 - Internazionale - metodi, studi, schemi; groupe de recherche internationales UMOFC 1950-57 (Author’s transl. of the original French).

⁴¹ For an in-depth analysis of pre-war social reform as a gendered space and practice and a very well-constructed hypothesis with regards to “feminism as a social regeneration movement by women and mothers”, cf. Blasco Herranz, “The Power of Motherhood”. For the Italian case, cf. Schievenin, “A Law Made by Italian Mothers for Italian Mothers?”.

⁴² Pojmann, “For Mothers, Peace and Family”.

⁴³ For an analysis of the role of peace in Catholic Italian circles in the late 1940s and 1950s, cf. Moro, “The Catholic Church, Italian Catholics and Peace Movements”.

At this time, Catholic NGOs were operating in a context where Western governments were increasingly favouring secular transnational humanitarian action agencies.⁴⁴ However, as noted by Piñeiro-Pearson, lay women could serve as important actors on the religious battlefield of the post-war and early Cold War period. Indeed, this potential for mobilizing public opinion probably helped to transform the concept of their civic roles in the eyes of some members of the Church hierarchy and Roman Curia. As a result, Catholic lay women provided ever-growing support for the expansion of cooperation in UN projects around the world. Women like American Catherine Schaefer, Argentinian Celina Piñeiro-Pearson, Belgian Christine de Hemptine and Spanish Pilar Bellosillo, to cite but a few, travelled extensively, collaborating with other women and men across the globe and across different denominations.⁴⁵ Their work was helped by existing global networks of lay Catholics, as well as by the presence of missionaries. The several gatherings that took place in this decisive decade include the UNESCO General Conference of Montevideo (November-December 1954) and New Delhi (November 1956), and the UN sponsored Western Hemisphere Seminar on “Participation of Women in Public Life” (Bogota 1959). These seminars promoted women’s education, particularly, though not exclusively, in civic development, marriage and the family. They also provided the occasion to gather information on the political and religious situation in the countries that hosted them, especially regarding the influence of communism and the advancement of secularization. The findings were regularly reported to the Holy See.⁴⁶

As a result of this multi-faceted worldwide engagement, Catholic women in positions of leadership in ICOs became humanitarian and apostleship experts (although additional study including a social history of Catholic networks remains to be done to identify the extension and impact of their work).

In this respect, it is necessary to define the category of ‘Catholic lay women’ so often used to approach a phenomenon that is quite diverse in nature. On the eve of their appearance at the Council,

⁴⁴ Barnett, Gross Stein, *Sacred Aid*, 5.

⁴⁵ According to records at the ISACEM, there was a WUCWO meeting in London (June 1956) and a congress and several workshops in Latin America (a total of 12 countries were visited in 1956). A workshop in Moscow is also mentioned, as well as preparation of the ICOs conference (Bruges, 11-15 April 1957) and the World Congress for Lay Apostolate (Rome, 5-13 October 1957). Added to this document in pen is an additional reference to “Bruxelles, congrès des migrations”. Other meetings took place in Africa and Asia. Cf. *Ordre du jour provisoire de la Réunion du Bureau, Paris 1-3 Mars, 1957*, in ISACEM, fondo UD, busta 245 - Internazionale - metodi, studi, schemi; groupe de recherche internazionali; UMOFC 1950-57.

⁴⁶ Derks, “Changing Lanes”, 97; Pollard “Pius XI’s Promotion of the Italian Model of Catholic Action”, 766.

Catholic women were hardly united in perspective.⁴⁷ As with their male counterparts, lay women did not belong to a fully coherent ideological or social group. Whereas many of the women leaders in the pre-war period came from an elite background, leadership in post-war times increasingly fell into the hands of younger middle-class professionals.⁴⁸ This was exacerbated by the impact of the division, at least since the 1930s - although the timeline is slightly different for each country - of Catholic Action into 'specialization' groups by gender, age, and professional background (working class, peasant, student and 'independent' milieus).⁴⁹ The idea was to use 'specialized' apostolic techniques developed by middle-class professionals to improve re-Christianization and evangelization methods. Consequently, specialization made it possible for women Catholic Action leaders to receive better training and, thus, to achieve increasing professionalization and public engagement.

Other aspects of diversity within Church governance were also significant, particularly the intersection of local and national contexts in the global arena. The international and intellectual work of Catholic Action women must be viewed against the background of the tensions existing between the different Catholic Action models (for example, Italian, Belgian and French). Similarly, different cultural units existed. For example, in some workshops and congresses, women gathered according to linguistic blocs: English, Spanish, Portuguese, French. In this respect, although Christian Democracy was on the rise in post-war Western Europe, the persistence of the 'intransigent' line was still powerfully felt, particularly as the Cold War legitimized some of the most conservative lines behind the banner of anti-communism. In fact, Swiss historian Philippe Chenaux maintains that there were two currents competing for influence in the Vatican: one inspired by the French-speaking world and another one shaped by the "Hispanic model".⁵⁰ In the words of philosopher Jacques Maritain (cited by Chenaux) "the day may come soon, when we may witness a conflict tear the Church between a 'French' and a 'Hispanic' concept of religion's relationship to the world".⁵¹ Chenaux associates the first current with 'possibilist' figures in the Church, most notably, the cardinals Giovanni Battista Montini and Domenico Tardini (Secretariat of State), as well as Federico Alessandrini (*L'Osservatore Romano*) and Maritain himself, while the second group

⁴⁷ Derks, "Changing Lanes", 88.

⁴⁸ Della Sudda, "L'action catholique féminine au XXe siècle", 111.

⁴⁹ This division into specializations seems to echo, and in a very abstract way foreground, what is currently referred to as 'intersectionality'. Cf. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins".

⁵⁰ Chenaux, *Pie XII*, 336.

⁵¹ Chenaux, *Pie XII*, 322.

was overtly favoured by the cardinals Alfredo Ottaviani and Giuseppe Pizzardo (also Secretariat of State). Chenu at times refers to this second faction as the “Vatican Pentagon”. Also playing a role in this phenomenon were the group of progressive Catholics represented by the *Cronache Sociali*; the neutralist sensibility of Giorgio La Pira; and the rising influence of American Catholics and Catholic philo-Atlanticism (closely related to increasing US influence in the world through the European Recovery Programme and NATO). Unfortunately, there is little detail regarding how Catholic women positioned themselves in all these crucial intra-ecclesial power struggles and “rival internationalisms”.⁵² An understanding of these transnational and intersectional perspectives would make it possible to problematize what are currently simple or apparently clear-cut North-South dichotomies.⁵³ To what extent were political, geographical and cultural divides bridged (or amplified) by religion in the 1950s? And to what degree did human – and women’s – rights help to conciliate or intensify spiritual and social tensions?

4 “The Hour” of Women:⁵⁴ Towards a Genealogy of Transnational Networks of Female Catholic Thought (1945-62)

Recovering the legacy of Catholic lay women as intellectual agents between the end of World War II and the Second Vatican Council faces the obstacle of finding documents that provide evidence of their contributions to crucial theological debates, perhaps because women left few traces of their intellectual activities or because the sources are scattered around the world and the WUCWO archive is currently not accessible. But researchers also may not be looking where (and how) they should. This concluding section of the article offers a hermeneutic proposal in this respect. Following Belgian theologian Dries Bosschaert’s compelling call to explore “travelling religious concepts” in contemporary religious history,⁵⁵ future research could address the

⁵² I take the expression from Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade*, 272. Blasco Herranz, *Mujeres, hombres y catolicismo*; Rochefort, Viennot, “L’Engagement des hommes pour l’égalité”, among others have also advocated for a history of Catholic women that includes their relationship with men. In the specialized Catholic Action, men’s and women’s lives stood, for the most part, in a complex relationship to each other.

⁵³ For a thorough analysis of the African (and mostly secular) case, cf. Barthélémy, *Sororité et colonialisme*. For the Catholic context cf. Christiaens, “Europe at the Crossroads of Three Worlds”. Cf. also de Jong, *Complicit Sisters*.

⁵⁴ Paul VI, *Address of Pope Paul VI to Women. Closing of the Second Vatican Council*, 8 December 1965.

⁵⁵ Bosschaert, “Is There a Future for Contemporary Church History?”.

intellectual and transnational lives of pre-conciliar women by considering the way in which ideas travelled across real or symbolic boundaries. Such a perspective involves moving beyond the customary way in which research on intellectual Catholic circles is conducted, looking less at what male figures of authority said, and more at what the women themselves were saying. In other words, it broadens the types of sources, and even the kinds of archives, consulted. It also pays closer attention to the work of disseminating and receiving ideas to explore alternative supports or means of expression, along with more or less subtle rhetorical strategies such as Álvarez's medieval 'gloss'. As noted above, it is particularly crucial for future research to explore transfers taking place beyond secular, religious and Cold War divides and, notably, those that occurred within international communities of thought, knowledge, diplomacy, and political and humanitarian action. Critically, the relationship was dialectical in nature: while lay women's work was aimed at emphasizing Catholic values in international forums, some non-Catholic principles and practices were also - probably unwillingly - being transferred to the religious sphere. From this perspective, and to cite Agnès Desmazières, the silences of the Council regarding women (and by extension, the experience of the women who prepared the Council) should not necessarily be understood as a complete exclusion of their perspectives, nor as the inexistence of their legacy.⁵⁶

The first two sections of this article examined how Catholic thought permeated the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations and was a fundamental piece of their preparation as leaders of apostolic work. Women were up to date on some of the central theological and political debates of the time thanks to conferences, workshops, small meetings and publications, such as the organization's bulletins and journals. In addition, due to their leadership positions within the ICOs, a select number of lay women had regular access to other important Catholic leaders, including bishops, members of the Roman Curia and the pope. This explains how lay women played a key role in the Second World Congress of the Lay Apostolate (1957), a congress that helped set the stage for the Council.⁵⁷ Yet it is very possible that their work was also fundamental during the First World Congress of the Lay Apostolate (1951). As Ruth E. Bennett from the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW) argued, the women who participated in the First Congress not only were "leaders in the work of the Church in their countries", they were also women who would "take back to their own areas the inspiration and the information to enable their [local, national] organizations to continue and expand

⁵⁶ Desmazières, "Généalogie d'un 'silence' conciliaire".

⁵⁷ Desmazières, "Généalogie d'un 'silence' conciliaire".

their efforts to Christianize the life around them”.⁵⁸ Additionally, lay women like Maria Vittoria Donadeo and Rosemary Goldie became members of the COPECIAL (Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Lay Apostolate) created by Pope Pius XII in 1952. These are but two of the most significant examples of the decisive international forums for shared reflection within Catholicism in the 1950s. These congresses allowed the hierarchy, the clergy, and the laity (women and men) to exchange ideas. In many ways the assemblies laid the foundations for some of the discussions that would later become central to Vatican II, such as the relationship between the hierarchy and the laity, and the broader relationship between the Church and the world.

In addition, the war, post-war and decolonization processes formed the backdrop for the evolution of Catholicism (and particularly lay women) during the period. While a new paradigm of theological ideas and political action had already begun to emerge in the interwar years (1920s-30s), it was the combined experience of the resistance, the living memory of wartime atrocities and the religious and political effervescence of the late 1940s and early 1950s that would profoundly shape what historian Gerd-Rainer Horn describes as the first wave of ‘liberation theology’ and Catholic activism.⁵⁹ It is important to further consider the transnational and gender aspects of this phenomenon, which involves a heavy two-fold transatlantic transfer of ideas between the English-, French- and Spanish-speaking worlds, a dynamic that also reached beyond Europe and the Americas through Cold War activism to embrace Africa and Asia. However, although women were certainly part of this vibrant context of exchanges (as their work within the ICOs demonstrates), little is known about the multifaceted ways in which they contributed to its development.

Accordingly, there is a real need to promote the study and analysis of women’s participation in the ongoing debates over a Catholic theological anthropology of the human person and to collect data to that end. Despite initial scepticism, Catholic doctrine began to consider the dignity of the human person as ‘possibly’ reconcilable with human rights and democracy in the context of the interwar years. This realignment of ideas resulted both in a revision in the thought of leading Catholic intellectuals, and a reconsideration of apostolate work and re-Christianizing practices. While the work of male thinkers is well known, the history of the way in which women interacted with – and contributed to – the advancement these ideas is yet to be written. Emmanuel Mounier’s *Révolution personaliste et communautaire* was

⁵⁸ Bennett, *World Congress and the Lay Apostolate a Challenge to American Catholic Women*, 12-13.

⁵⁹ Horn, *Western European Liberation Theology*.

published in 1934, the same year that Maritain proposed his concept of 'humanisme integral' (later, in 1942, Maritain would develop this concept into 'Christian humanism'). In addition, in 1938, Pius XI argued that Christian teachings alone gave full meaning to the demands of human rights and liberty, mainly because it provided worth and dignity to human personality. In this way, human dignity was mobilized as part of the church's internal theological and ecclesial debates, including those that discussed Catholicism's struggles with modern society.⁶⁰ In the post-World War II context, and encouraged by Pius XII's words during the conflict, human dignity continued to be considered and discussed within Catholics circles on different sides of the political spectrum.⁶¹ It also carried on its dialogue with the secular concept of human rights. For example, the Charter of the United Nations adopted in 1945 in San Francisco included the idea of 'dignity'. Similarly, the concept of 'human dignity' was central to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Although the use of this concept did vary within secular and religious cultures, the existence of a common language indicates an intriguing proximity,⁶² a degree of competition,⁶³ and even the possibility of a complex two-way circulation of ideas.

Along with the concept of 'human dignity', Mounier's theory of 'personalism' encouraged a rethinking of women's roles in society and the Church. Mounier's ideas pervaded transnational Catholic debates,⁶⁴ particularly the idea of a personalist form of social Christianity.⁶⁵ In the case of women, Mounier's influential essay, "La femme est aussi une personne" (*A Woman is Also a Person*), along with other pieces authored by women⁶⁶ that formed part of Volume 45 of the renowned journal *Esprit*, denote the gradual, yet significant, spread of the concept in Catholic intellectual circles. This pre-war reflection explains how in the years after World War II - the very period most closely associated by historians with the reinforcement of older gender hierarchies and an extreme separation between spheres - the

60 Łuków, "A Difficult Legacy: Human Dignity".

61 Chamedes *A Twentieth-Century Crusade*, 237-41; Pasture, "The Invention of European Human Rights"; Bennett, *Technicians of Human Dignity*; Menozzi, *Chiesa e diritti umani*.

62 Joas, "The Sacredness of the Person".

63 Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*.

64 Gauvreau argues that there was a conservative and an 'egalitarian' version of personalism, which had deep implications for the way Catholics viewed gender roles, cf. *Catholic Origins of Quebec's Quiet Revolution*, 175-246.

65 There were different understandings of personalism; some versions were more conservative in nature, while others became increasingly progressive.

66 Mounier, "La femme aussi est une personne"; the essays authored by women were: Grépon, "La femme dans la cité des hommes: une cité en collaboration"; Le Cormier, De Corlieu, "Pour un statut personnel de la femme mariée".

emphasis on ‘spiritual’ femininity would rapidly lead to the spread of a ‘personalist feminism’ in the context of Catholic Action. Thus, while there continued to be a great deal of conservative ‘maternalist’ language, a parallel ‘egalitarian’ current consolidated itself within the different specializations, most notably within the youth and worker sections. Emphasis on the dignity of the human person would transform the relationship between husband and wife (and thus, by extension, between the laity and the Church) as involving a reciprocal understanding of each partner.⁶⁷ It increasingly aimed at transcending traditional legalistic notions of hierarchy and subordination.⁶⁸ Significantly, this ‘revolution of mentalities’ and spiritual practices occurred within the supposedly non-political setting of the Catholic Action movements. In these groups, (young) women were increasingly placed on an equal level with (young) men.⁶⁹

In sum, this chapter has argued that the international work of lay women in religious and secular communities was fundamental in their acquisition of an increased awareness of the changed position of women in post-war society. Although personalist ‘feminists’ and other lay Catholic women usually distanced themselves from secular feminism, their involvement in a variety of transnational communities of care and knowledge led them to become vital transnational and apostolic experts. In the long run, their experiences contributed to deconstruct some of the pervading concepts of traditional theology, such as, for example, the ‘complementarity’ of the sexes. Parallely, Catholic women increasingly started to endorse other empowering notions (including that of ‘baptismal equality’) as a means to demand greater recognition within Church governance and decision-making.⁷⁰ Further study will allow us to have a more precise understanding of the extension and impact of their multifaceted transnational lives, notably for influential yet rather understudied years of the pre-conciliar period. Specifically, a social, intellectual, and global history of Catholic networks and thought (one which accords a rightful place to women) will be a significant asset to ongoing scholarly efforts aimed at recovering and re-evaluating the wider legacy of female transnational and intellectual agents. It will also greatly contribute to shaping the new research agendas that the engagement with their study can provoke.

67 Cf. Le Cormier, De Corlieu, “Pour un statut personnel de la femme mariée”.

68 These currents are comparable to what Chappel has termed ‘paternal’ and ‘fraternal’ Catholic modernisms, cf. *Catholic Modern*.

69 Gauvreau, *Catholic Origins of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution*, 181-2; Bidegain, “El cristianismo y el cambio socio político de las mujeres”.

70 On the work of women pressure groups created to influence Vatican - and not just UN - policy, cf. Derks, “Changing Lanes”. For a contrast with religious women cf. Guise-Castelnuovo, “Femmes en réseau et centralisation romaine”.

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