Being Methodist in Argentina: To Be or Not to Be

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Introduction

Allow me to start with a modest and sincere homage to the host country and to its contribution to universal culture. By this I am referring to the subtitle of this presentation: "To be or not to be." These famous words written by someone who lived near here enclose in a kernel the question of identity, the search for the meaning of life. The first part of my title expresses my condition of Argentine Methodist. And here arises also the question of identity.

Therefore, before we pose the question about what it means to be a Methodist, I think I must ask myself what the meaning is of being Argentine. A very common joke in Latin America mentions that all the people descend from the monkeys (another important British contribution to universal culture!), but we Argentines descend from ships. Most of our literature, art, and music express the difficulty of defining our identity. We are a country where millions of men and women arrived between 1870 and 1930. Argentina was a huge territory, with a scarce native population and without the solid Indigenous cultures that existed in places like Mexico or Peru—an area quite similar in size to the subcontinent of India but that had very little population. And these people arrived from a variety of latitudes, buying the cheapest passage in those ships—women and men traveling third class because

there was no fourth class. They arrived with no money but with eyes full of hopes and dreams. Buenos Aires was at the time a Tower of Babel. There were churches, but the people preferred other places. There were bars where women and men met to have fun after their long day's labor. At the end of the nineteenth century these were dark establishments by the port where Poles, Italians, Russians, Spaniards, Welsh, Germans, Greeks, Jews, Arabs, Turks, and French met. And among this confusion of languages and flavors they perceived that the melancholic sound of an instrument created in Germany, the bandoneon, brings them together. Its box and its notes are as foreign to the Argentine soil as every single one of those women and men, but maybe that fact is what generates their claim for ownership. In Buenos Aires the bandoneon does not belong to anyone in particular, and for that reason it belongs to everyone. The same as these women and men, on the shores of the River Plate the bandoneon is an orphan; much like the instrument, they have no history or they have lost it or have strived to get rid of it. Therein a profound and complex music is born, that decades later will be known all over the world and acquire fame and fortune. Its name is enigmatic and African: tango—a music that expresses nostalgia for a lost land, the search for an identity still diffuse, the certainty that nothing is assured.

You are probably asking yourselves why I am providing this description of a slice of South American culture in this theological talk. As it happens, the Methodist Church has been in Argentina for quite a long time. In 1836, the First Methodist Church was established by an English-speaking community whose members were British and American businessmen and traders. Thirty years later, this community would define itself as a faith community with a commitment for Spanish-language missionary work among the local Argentine population.

It is in that social context that Methodism grew and expanded in Argentina. And it was in that Protestant and evangelical church that the immigrants and their sons and daughters discovered the gospel, which became the light that illuminated their lives. Those immigrants were looking for a faith and they found it in our Church, maybe because Methodism did not demand that they abandon their gifts and

their dreams. On the contrary, Methodists preached that the faith of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Ghost did not reject what they were, but rather enhanced their gifts and directed them in another direction (what we call *conversion*, from the Hebrew *shub*, from the Greek *metanoia*). Their lives were now called to tune in with God's plan and to work for the transformation of the world. They were socialists, anarchists, liberals; they carried libertarian dreams that instigated them to dignify women, to educate their children, to think and to work for a just and fraternal world. In the Methodist Church nobody condemned their social and political ideas, but instead, apart from a strong anticlericalism (anti-Catholicism) typical of the period, they found a community that boosted education, progress, the culture of work, and the ethics of personal and social solidarity.

It was in this quest for social identity that Argentina was striving for (and in a certain sense still is) that Methodism grew and developed through those values and added its own search for identity. Although it was not the first Protestant church in Argentina, it was the first missionary church that was trying to take hold among Argentines. And in order to become Argentine, Methodism had many identity problems: it was a church English in origin that had arrived to the country as a US missionary endeavor; that had to preach in a Catholic land, in Spanish, a language until then foreign to the evangelical and Protestant denominations; and it was a church that was growing due to the conversion of members who were Argentine but also "foreigners" of a variety of nationalities.[1] Therefore, it was in this missionary context that the Argentine Methodist Church constructed its theology and its identity.

Allow me to make a brief digression in order to comment in regard to what we call *theology*. I teach at a university where we have departments called "Theological Sciences" and "Biblical Sciences." I must

1 It is interesting to know that even today the office of the national government related with the non-Catholic churches and other religions (Oficina para el Culto no Católico) is located under the Foreign Office (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores). This office was created in 1853 and remains in that structure.

confess that I teach in these departments, but I do not know the meaning of these disciplines. I do not understand the word *science* added to "theology" or "Bible." Is a scientific reading of *Hamlet* possible? Does anybody know how to read Walt Whitman scientifically? In my own field (Hebrew Bible) the best introductions to the Old Testament start with a description of the ancient history of Israel, some of them with elements of archaeology and others with a history of the canon. It is clearly crucial to know these things in order to be able to read the Bible in depth. But before that, it is necessary to be aware of what a text is, and I consider the Bible to be a text. It is essential to know what a poem or a myth is, because a psalm is a poem, and the creation narratives are profound and very rich myths that must be analyzed and studied. By this I mean that my approach to theology and to biblical studies is closer to artistic discourse rather than scientific discourse. For my theological thinking I find more inspiration in my readings of Charles Dickens or Daniel Defoe (and of course also in the ample variety of works of the rich Latin American literature) than in those books about theology or the Bible that have scientific pretensions. Nevertheless, I enjoy reading Kazoh Kitamori, Rasiah S. Sugirtharajah, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and also my colleagues from Latin America. But theology grows from the experience of faith. The primary place of theology is a world where faith is present and where the gospel is proclaimed, and from there on, questions will arise that will provoke our reflection. It is in a second instance that theology becomes academic and a college subject, and we, as academics, should never forget that first point of reference for our task. The *loci theologici* are life itself and its challenges.

Therefore, in this chapter, we will reflect theologically with reference to four examples of life that move us. In them, humanity shines, and they become food for thought. They are four women whose lives were transformed due to an imperative of faith and life. They searched and found their identity in the trial the Lord set forth in their lives. Three of the women were Methodists, and the fourth one was a Jew. Two are from the eighteenth century, one is from the twentieth century, and one died in this century. Two are from the Caribbean, one is German, and one is Argentine.

Two Enslaved Persons in Antigua, Island in the Caribbean

Sophia Campbell and Mary Alley, enslaved persons[2]

On November 29, 1758, John Wesley wrote in his diary, "I rode to Wandsworth and baptized two Negroes belonging to Mr. Gilbert, a gentleman lately come from Antigua." The baptism was a result of the three of them having participated in Wesley's preaching and having a strong conversion experience.

Upon his return to the island of Antigua, in the Caribbean, Nathaniel Gilbert resigned his post in the local parliament and began to preach the gospel among those around him: enslaved persons who worked in his sugar cane plantation. After a few years, he formed a congregation of two hundred members. Later, Nathaniel Gilbert eventually died. He was succeeded for a short time by his brother Francis, who followed his brother's work, but he also died. The community was left without mentors, without those who took the gospel to it.

The Bible has duos of famous women. There were the midwives Shiphrah and Puah in Egypt; Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth; the cousins Elizabeth and Mary, mothers of John and Jesus, respectively; Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus who received Jesus in their home. Now we would like to rescue from the bottom of the barrel of history and add to this distinguished list the enslaved persons Sophia Campbell and Mary Alley.

We know little about them—so little that it is not possible to attempt a biography or even a short summary of their lives. We know that they had both gone to London with their master to hear the preacher everyone was talking about. We know that they were baptized there and also that when the Gilberts died, without titles or pomp, they took up the conduction of the church in Antigua, a congregation of enslaved persons who had discovered that the gospel gave them the freedom denied to them by the world.

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2 From P. Andiñach, *The Book of Gratitudes: An Encounter between Life and Faith* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 168–69; cf. Michael N. Jagessar, "Early Methodism in the Caribbean: Through the Imaginary Optic of Gilbert's Slave Women—Another Reading," *Black Theology* 5, no. 2 (2007): 153–70.

They were pastors and preachers; they celebrated the arrival of babies in the church and gave thanks at funerals for the lives of those who had departed.

These two enslaved women, during a time when masters and pirates had the power, led the mission and made it grow, and were bearers of the light that shines in the darkness.

The Spirit ordained that there would be no grave for Sophia and Mary. Their remains lay somewhere on the island, already part of new life. They are sugar cane; they are the wood of a pulpit; they are the infinite sand. Somewhere in the world where beauty floods everything, we can imagine the immense loveliness of Sophia and Mary.

Sophia and Mary are considered to be the women who enabled the Methodist Church to survive in Antigua.

The first thing to point out is that a man who was cultivated, white, and rich founded the Church in Antigua. We must thank God because someone like Nathaniel Gilbert, who was powerful, accepted a mission destined for the marginalized members of society. He left his government post and spent his days sharing the gospel with the enslaved persons of the island where he lived. Although he did not give up his money, he abandoned his prestigious station in life in order to reach out to the lowly inhabitants of the island. But Nathaniel died and so did his brother Francis. The enslaved persons' new church was then without a leader.

Then Sophia Campbell and Mary Alley appeared. They were very different from Nathaniel: He was a man, they, women. He was cultivated, and we could imagine his eighteenth-century library with authors such as John Milton, John Bunyan, Thomas Hobbes, and maybe the recent and marvelous travel book of the Irishman Jonathan Swift; most probably Sophia and Mary barely knew how to read and write, and the only book they possessed was the Bible. He owned land and enslaved persons, while they had nothing. Finally, Nathaniel was a free man, while Sophia and Mary were enslaved persons; they did not even possess their own bodies.

It was then that the Holy Spirit intervened and a miracle occurred—the miracle of revealing that what appeared to be weakness was hiding an incredible strength. We should not be deceived by a superficial

theological discourse that the Holy Spirit transformed the weakness of these women into strength in order to carry on with the mission. They were never weak, and they were already strong when they took over the challenge that the Lord placed in their path. They were enslaved persons and strong; they were poor but rich in intelligence; they were women with a capacity for decision-making and leadership. The miracle was not transforming what was coarse into something brilliant: they were brilliant and we, unaware.

This tale is an opportunity for posing the question, What is a miracle? In my understanding a miracle is not an act of disruption of natural law. Of course, God could do that if God so pleases, but in my experience God scarcely desires it. A miracle is the revelation that something that seems to be impossible is possible due to God's intervention. Could two Black enslaved women in the eighteenth century have the sufficient capability to lead a congregation of men and women? Common sense does not agree with that; the Holy Spirit ascertains that it is possible. Let us note that, seen from this angle, the miracle does not operate on *them* but rather on *us*. We are the ones who think that it is not possible that persons with very limited education could lead a community of faith, and the Holy Spirit operates the miracle of opening our eyes to the reality of the wealth that those two persons were hiding.

A second aspect that I wish to explore is the relationship between the world and the gospel. Personally, I grew up in a Methodist family in which I was taught since I was a child that faith did not separate us from the world. On the contrary, we had to search for the good things in the world and support them, as well as reject the ones that were against God's will. The message was not that we needed to distance ourselves from the world but rather that our challenge was to be in the world and contribute to improving it. I feel happy with that conception of the gospel, and today I still think in that manner. However, the story of Sophia and Mary helped me revise my way of thinking, and although this did not induce me to change it, it allowed me to see another dimension of the same problem.

What good can we find in the world when we look at it from the perspective of the enslaved? When society, the dominant culture, the

world, tells enslaved persons that they inhabit a body that does not belong to them, that they do not own their hands, their lungs, their sex? In the case that an enslaved woman gave birth to a boy or a girl, the baby did not belong to her, because the owner might sell the child if pleased to do so or if needed. What can we say when the world offers enslavement as a way of life? Some texts in the Bible may help us to delve into this reality.

The enslaved person feels pain in the soul. Human pain is always specific and historical but is raised in the *wail* to a cosmic and universal dimension. When this happens the event of enslavement becomes a symbol, and for that reason the biblical text places in God's lips, "I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters" (Exod. 3:7, RSV). The text refers to the concrete clamor (Heb. *tzea´qa*) of the Israelites in Egypt, but their words are significant for all time and all peoples who are suffering oppression and anguish. The tale of the exodus from Egypt would be of value simply as information of an event suffered by a Semitic group of people. But the God who liberated Israel is the same that today hears the clamor of those who suffer oppression and cry for justice. The text turns a specific, passing, and forgettable event—as hundreds of acts of justice and injustice, endured by women and men that disappeared in time—in a tale of mythical characteristics and therefore with a narrative density that takes us beyond historical time. The biblical statement regarding the enslavement of Israel refers to our enslavements, our pains, and our injustices. It refers to Sophia and Mary and to their hidden anguishes.

In other passages the Hebrew expression *ne´aqah* (Exod. 2:24; 6:5) is used, which we translate as "moaning." Let us ponder for a moment the question, What is a moan? To moan is to make a sound that does not have as its primary purpose communication. A cry, in the same way as a word does, expects to be listened to and is waiting for an answer. However, a moan is something primal, and it originates before the word. It is what comes from one's innards, and it does not wait for an answer because it does not believe that there is someone who might be able to hear. It is the lament of a desperate human being, of someone who has lost all hope. What the text reveals is that God moved

toward that moan and operated in an incredible way in regard to enslaved persons. God acted in a creative manner when he responded to this moan. When God came upon Moses and summoned him to the liberation feat, God created unforeseen conditions. Once again, we are facing a miracle.

We have no knowledge of what Sophia and Mary thought of miracles. But we are certain that they read with plenty of attention the story when the God of the Bible operated the miracle of Israel's liberation from enslavement. In those narratives, and in others, they found an identity and succor for their lives. Sophia and Mary discovered that the gospel provided the freedom that the world denied them.

A Woman in Germany, the Rabbi Regina Jonas

Rabbi Regina Jonas (1902–1944)[3]

She was a rabbi when no woman had ever been one before. She remained in Berlin when almost everyone else was leaving. At twenty-nine years of age she was given a book and the dedication said, "To our first preacher since Deborah . . . who is not only a talented speaker but a good preacher, and with a sense of humor as well." We can imagine the congregation smiling, happy with the rabbi that made them open up body and soul with her words.

She was one in millions, and even so, we wished to forget her. She left a text, a single text that survived a fire and was not reduced to ashes. In it she says that a woman could be a rabbi, and that she would be one, if the Lord called her to such a task. When violence and Nazism were growing and becoming intolerable, she was offered a way to leave the city. She refused, because leaving the city meant leaving her community. She decided to stay behind to preach and accompany those she most loved in their pain and anguish. The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, who would know her later in an extermination camp, remembered her sermons. He remembered that in

3 P. Andiñach, *The Book of Gratitudes,* 158–59; cf. Elisa Klapheck, *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

them she dealt with Talmudic and biblical subjects, and she encouraged the lives of her brethren. However, Frankl did not mention her in his memoirs. A woman who shared forced labor with Regina in 1941 said, "The veil of forgetfulness must be allowed to fall over her because everything she did was forbidden."

On November 3, 1942, Regina and her mother, Sarah, made a state-mandated statement of their assets: some old furniture and a gramophone soon to be confiscated. Three days later they were both deported to the Theresienstadt Camp. Two years went by, and one of the many trains that went from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz-Birkenau took rabbi Regina Jonas and her mother to their deaths. They both died on December 12, 1944. Her brother Abraham had died one year earlier in the Łódź ghetto. Rabbi Joseph Norden had written Regina a letter a few weeks before: "Don't cry . . . there is no sense in crying; it doesn't help anyone and has a negative effect on you, especially on your eyes, your beautiful sweet eyes."

Seventy years have gone by. What can I wish for you now, Regina? For you to have embraced your mother during the last minute, the last beat of your heart.

When I became acquainted with the life story of Regina, my first impression was to understand the force of her call for a mission. And the field for that mission was the community of believers that surrounded her. From early on, Regina understood that she was not alone in the world but rather that she was living among a community that provided her with an identity and a community that she wanted to serve.

It is quite remarkable how Regina distinguished herself in her preaching. It has been mentioned that her preferred subjects were the Bible and Talmud and that she applied humor to her preaching. It is probable that the humor would be destined to comfort the Jewish community that already in the 1930s was starting to feel in Germany the oppression of anti-Semitism. Her engagement with her community of faith was so powerful that when she was offered to abandon her city for a country where her life would not be in danger, she refused and decided to stay with her flock. Who were these people? Most probably the Jews who could not leave—the old folk, the widows, the ones who

had no family to go to. Regina decided to stay, although there is little doubt that her determination condemned her to death.

The example of Regina has made me think about the sense of that community that we Christians call the church. It is a community that has a double dimension, the visible one and the invisible one. The visible one is the one that each one of us makes up, with our virtues and our flaws. But there is another dimension to the church, that is, the invisibility of the church. The invisible church is the church of Christ, the one that is present whenever two or three gather in his name and that defines itself in such a way that it cannot be reduced to a mere human expression. The Holy Spirit works according to its own free will and cannot be shaped or locked into our tastes, models, and thoughts. It is not limited to buildings, cultures, denominations, languages, or any of our human barriers. The church of Christ is there, where the Holy Spirit is. It is also the church that has existed through the past centuries, the church of those who have preceded us on the path of faith and who have offered their testimonies, brothers and sisters to whom we are linked through our belonging to the people of God.

The invisible church is the church that is not present even if we are standing in the most prestigious cathedral in the city or next to the most well-known preacher, if God does not approve the work that is being done in that place. The invisible church is the "actual" church, the one that is not based on our abilities—rather, it exists despite our behavior and inabilities—but on the free and generous grace of God. Of course, I do not want to baptize Regina. She did not need to be baptized to be truly a woman of God. But I feel that she is in my church with me, in our Church.

One of the most routine, and least perceived, miracles is that God grants us his invisible presence in the visible church made up of men and women. By this we mean that the invisible church is present in the world through the visible church. When the church preaches, educates, creates links among people, and shares the faith and the sacraments, it is making visible a deeper reality that is invisible and transcends what we do. We may say that the task of each Christian is to make visible

that dimension of the presence of God in the church and in the world, that is and will be invisible to our eyes.

A second thought comes to my mind when I think of the life of Regina, and that is the value of the Other (the neighbor) in her life story—the sacred value of the person she was facing. The Other was a human being, and Regina understood that her own destiny was tied to him or her. A Jewish philosopher of our time and one of the great minds of the twentieth century, Emmanuel Levinas, during the Second World War was taken prisoner, as was Regina. He lived four years in a concentration camp in Hannover, Germany. There he learned about contempt and pain. His writing will be stained by the experience of having endured a tragedy that very few were able to survive. His philosophical works exude that fundamental question of the meaning of life and of the place of ethics in human relations. In his thoughts, the Other, the neighbor, is always at the center of his concern. Levinas repeatedly mentioned that the book that left a mark in his life and thought was, in his words, "the Hebrew Bible, from my most tender age in Lithuania."

Once he gave a lecture in Paris on the Holocaust and its consequences for ethics and culture. In his talk he mentioned his experience in the concentration camp, his fears, his anguish, his loss of practically all his family. When he finished, a few Latin American students approached him and asked him what he could say about the *other* holocausts. They were referring to the fate of the original inhabitants of America during the European conquest or of the millions of persons who slowly die of hunger in the present. Levinas was silent for a moment and then answered, "It is you who must talk about that." Far from avoiding his responsibility, Emmanuel Levinas—much like Regina Jonas—brings us face to face with our own responsibility of denouncing the injustice inflicted on our neighbor, that in biblical terms would be "the destitute, the orphan, the widow and the foreigner."

Allow me to take a minute in order to reflect on the words of this other woman who met Regina in a forced labor camp. She said, "The veil of forgetfulness must be allowed to fall over her because everything she did was forbidden." It moves me profoundly to know that

someone has lived and has given her own life to do forbidden things. It was forbidden to collect heads of grain on Saturday. It was forbidden to talk to a woman in public. No woman was allowed to argue in the Assembly of Rabbis of her city. It was forbidden to be a woman rabbi. The only text that survived from Regina's papers is an essay, a kind of brief dissertation to be presented at the rabbinical school, titled "Why a Woman Can Be Rabbi." It is an analysis of biblical and Talmudic texts in which she proves that, even though it is forbidden, there is nothing to be found in them that denies the right for a woman to be rabbi. She says that what defines a rabbi is not the gender but the call from God. And if the call arrives, one must respond to it. Regina did and said forbidden things, much like Jesus in many moments of his life.

A Woman in Argentina, Evangelina Rodríguez

Evangelina Rodríguez[4]

Evangelina had given birth by caesarean section and was ordered on bed rest. She lived in the Ingeniero Budge District in southern Greater Buenos Aires, where it flooded when it rained long. On the second day of her convalescence, it began to rain, and the waters rose. Her two-year-old son was home alone and, when the rising water gathered strength, it began to sweep away everything in its path. The water that took furniture and garbage also took the body of her child and, with it, also his life.

Evangelina went looking for him downstream, where everything that got dragged built up, but she could not find the child's body. She searched through the mud for two days on both sides of the stream and among the filthy remains left behind by the current. The body was not recovered, and the little angel slept forever with no wake and not even a fistful of earth to cover him, nor a gravestone to remember him.

While searching for her son in the most unsanitary places, Evangelina contracted an abdominal infection, forcing her to fight for her life for several days. Her body finally overcame death, and she was able to move forward.

4 P. Andiñach, *The Book of Gratitudes*, 118–19.

After these events, and throughout her lifetime, Evangelina knitted and put together quilts of multicolored squares that she herself designed. And while she knitted, she thought. As the yarn ran through her hands, she meditated. At night she also meditated. She knit and treasured all her thoughts and pondered them in her heart.

Evangelina is known in the neighborhood as the Methodist lady who went to funerals and prayed for the life of the deceased. She arrived and prayed, talked to the family, and consoled them. She gave a word of encouragement to those who found no consolation; she calmed the desperate with words of faith. Evangelina mourned a neighbor, a grandfather, a young mother who left little ones behind, but in secret, throughout her lifetime, she mourned for her little angel who had had no funeral.

Evangelina was a simple and poor woman. She attended a Methodist congregation in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the south of Buenos Aires. Since very early on, her life was pierced by the tragedy recounted above. The loss of her small child was present in her heart every day of her life, as is the case of any mother who loses a child. What moves me in her life story is how the Holy Spirit operated the miracle of turning her personal tragedy into a purposeful mission.

Every day people die—in fact, thousands—in a city as big as Buenos Aires. For most of the people that is only a statistical matter. But due to her experience Evangelina knew that the dead body was not a statistical figure. She knew that behind every single person who departed, there were persons who felt that their lives would not be the same, for whom the death of a loved one (an old person or a young one, a husband or a wife, a child) would leave a mark in the soul that would never heal. She knew that the loss of a loved one was a very deep pain. But Evangelina knew something else. She knew about the succor that you have when you carry Jesus in your heart. There, where she had the memory of her loved one, she also had the presence of Christ in her life. Therefore, the pain for her loss remained, but this tragedy of her past did not determine her present and her future. She faced life hand in hand with Jesus, and thus she found the strength to tackle the challenges she would find along the tracks.

Evangelina attended funerals and consoled the relatives with words of faith. She spoke of the love of God and of the gratitude they had to have for the life of the departed, who had been important for them. She told them all life is a gift from God and that we must thank God for those who surround us and illuminate us with their presence and with their life. To some the Lord has given them many years to be among us, and others have been with us a shorter time, but we all have to be grateful to God. And thus Evangelina provided the testimony of her faith in Jesus, a faith hardened by her experience and her pain. She shared what she had, and that was her way of providing relief and hope to the persons who were sad and sometimes without any hope at all. Evangelina was poor in the eyes of the world and rich in the eyes of God.

Evangelina's life story has driven me to think why Jesus resuscitated Lazarus. It makes no sense to think that he did so, considering that years later, Lazarus was going to die anyway. Lazarus had to travel the road from life to death twice, much like his loved ones had suffered their separation from him in two cases. There is another sense to that act of resurrection. In my opinion, what Jesus was doing was consoling the ones he found in extreme desperation. He felt compassion for them, and he acted in order to give them faith and hope. And he did so by resuscitating Lazarus but more still by allowing the glory of God to be manifested as he says, "This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it" (John 11:4, RSV).

What is surprising from this narrative is Jesus's will to respond to the care needed by the sisters and friends of Lazarus because of his death. Moreover, this drives us to understand that the resurrection of Lazarus is not the only miracle narrated there. There is a second miracle, and it is the intimate conviction created in the heart of those who were present in fact, that the glory of God had manifested itself in front of them. On the one hand, a dead man had been resuscitated; on the other, they had witnessed the unequivocal manifestation that God carries out his promise of always being close to the one who is suffering. Jesus drew upon an extreme case, so that everyone who was present would have no doubts regarding the Lord's commitment to life and to the suffering of the persons who face the death of a loved one.

It is remarkable how in this narrative, Jesus preannounces his own resurrection and places it in the theological line of the manifestations of the glory of God. It is not by chance that in this scene we find the statement of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25, RSV), and the awe-inspiring declaration of faith of Martha (v. 27), which is more profound and complex than Peter's (Matt. 16:16), but that is seldom remembered by us—and by "us" I am referring to theologians. Martha's declaration was stated in a context of resurrection, much like an affirmation that arose from within her and that included the declaration "the one coming into the world." We have coined the expression *Confessio Petri*, but we say nothing of Martha. I consider that Evangelina Rodríguez would identify more with Martha than with Peter, and for this reason, the church should speak also of a *Confessio Marthae* (a Latin expression that does not exist in Christian theology), because upon Peter's and Martha's confession the church was built.

There is a second aspect of Evangelina's life story that makes me ponder, and this is the fact that the tragedy of the death of her little one and the horrible circumstances that surrounded her were never removed from her life. She coexisted with the pain in her heart, and she was able to live and serve in her task of communicating the gospel. It is not often that theological discourse has comprehended the pain of the death of a loved one. Sometimes I have felt that our message is something like "Jesus will make you forget what happened and will provide aid" or "in due course and with the help of God you must look forward." Evangelina never thought Jesus was asking her to forget what had happened in her life, nor that she had to look forward as if she had no past. When we look with sensitive eyes at her life, we see that the death of her little one and the memory of those days served her to discover a reality in the souls of other people. That fact that she meditated and thought over in her heart is what provided an identity to her life and a meaning to her days.

The custom of the Wailing Women has existed for centuries in some countries and cultures (maybe also in Israel, cf. Jer. 9:20). These were women who were paid to cry at funerals and burials because there

was a belief that a lot of crying would help the soul of the departed on his or her journey to heaven. I believe this custom never existed in Argentina, but for that matter the ministry of Evangelina was something wholly different. She did not cry but rather consoled the crying of others. And if she cried it was not because she wanted to ease the access to heaven of the deceased, but rather because she was moved and felt compassion for those who were suffering. In the same manner, Jesus cried (John 11:35) when he saw the crying of the sisters and of the friends.

The life of Evangelina Rodríguez illuminates that profound theological truth that the Spirit of God moves us to use what we are, even in our personal tragedies, in order to serve our neighbor and give testimony of the love of Christ.

Conclusion

All academic articles and talks are bound to have a conclusion. I teach this to my students. But I must confess that I do not feel comfortable looking for a conclusion for this chapter. I would like to leave with you the strength of those four women who found their identity, their profound identity, in the challenge of being faithful to the gospel. I have presented them as representatives of many others, and also of many men who inspired us and keep inspiring with their life stories. At the beginning, in the first narrative, I made a list of memorable biblical women: Shiphrah and Puah in Egypt; Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth; the cousins Elizabeth and Mary; Martha and Mary. I already mentioned that I wish to add to this list Sophia and Mary; today I also wish to add to them Regina and Evangelina. And I would like that each one of you add to this list those women and men who have been or still are an inspiration for your faith and your theology. They are those who in a silent manner pray every day, give testimony of their faith, try to be faithful to the gospel they have received, and so nourish the church of Christ in the world. We need them so they wake up our imagination and so they reveal new challenges for missionary work and for theological reflection.

In my book *Old Testament Theology* I state that the Old Testament is an unfinished work. Not because it needs a New Testament. The New Testament is also an open and unfinished book. The message of the Bible is unfinished because it proclaims what is yet to come, for the definitive redemption of all reality. In that hope we live, and while that does not yet occur, we give thanks because the Spirit calls for women and men, in the hardest of circumstances, to provide testimony of God's infinite love for the world.

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