



EVE'S PILGRIMAGE

A WOMAN'S QUEST FOR THE CITY OF GOD



T I N A B E A T T I E

Eve's Pilgrimage

*By the same author and published by
Burns & Oates*

Rediscovering Mary

The Last Supper According to Martha and Mary

TINA BEATTIE

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A WOMAN'S QUEST FOR THE
CITY OF GOD



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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	i
1 In the Beginning: The Sistine Chapel	ii
Creativity, visions and symbols	
Male and female they created them	
Gender, love and solitude	
Images of God	
Sexuality and the Fall	
The New Eve	
Restoring the vision	
2 Fallen Empires, Holy Wars: The Colosseum	37
The militant Church	
Violence and the social order	
Genesis, sex and violence	
Genesis in the Early Church	
From pacifism to holy war	
Modernity and war	
Envisioning peace	

CONTENTS

3	Baptizing Eve: The Pantheon	67
	Christian and pagan encounters	
	Mary, Eve and the goddess	
	The defeat of the goddess	
	Sexual annihilation	
	Feminizing religion	
	Gendered rites	
	Baptismal births	
4	The Maternal Church: Santa Maria in Trastevere	95
	The birth of Mary	
	The story of St Anne	
	Maternal conceptions	
	Christian matricide	
	From sacramentality to morality	
	Reforming symbols	
5	The Fall of Nature: Santa Maria Maggiore and the Villa Borghese	119
	The story so far	
	From humility to humiliation	
	Dis-graced nature	
	The pagan Church	
	Feminine nature and masculine science	
	Nature as Eve	
6	Dancing in the Dark: Mass at St Peter's	143
	The broken Church	
	Human misery and God's mercy	
	Affirming goodness	
	The Second Vatican Council	
	Joy and hope, grief and anguish	
	Breaking and blessing	

CONTENTS

7	Death's Friendship: Domitilla Catacombs	171
	The jigsaw of death	
	Baptizing the darkness	
	Death's enigma	
	The cult of the saints	
	The anonymity of death	
	Befriending death	
8	Love's Resurrection: The Paul VI Concert Hall	191
	The dancing Christ and the dancing women	
	Nuclear transfigurations	
	Imaginative resurrections	
	The language of life	
	Practising for eternity	
	Resurrection and justice	
	Redemption	
	'A reconstruction of feelings'	
	The bride	
	<i>Bibliography</i>	217

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List of Illustrations

Cover

Creation of Eve, Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel

Chapter 1

Creation of Adam, Michelangelo, Sistine Chapel 10

Chapter 2

The Colosseum 36

Chapter 3

St Anne and the Virgin Mary, Lorenzo Toni, The Pantheon 66

Chapter 4

Mosaic of the Virgin Enthroned, façade of Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere 94

Birth of the Virgin, Pietro Cavallini, Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere 115

Chapter 5

The Rape of Proserpina, Bernini, The Borghese Gallery 118

Apollo and Daphne, Bernini, The Borghese Gallery 118

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The Ecstasy of St Teresa, Bernini, Church of Santa Maria
della Vittoria 141

Chapter 6

Mass at St Peter's 142

Chapter 7

Veneranda and St Petronilla, fresco, Domitilla Catacombs
171

Chapter 8

The Resurrection, Pericle Fazzini, Paul VI Concert Hall
190

Preface

This book was finished before the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. I am writing this Preface in the immediate aftermath when the world seems to stand on the edge of an abyss. The last chapter in particular now haunts and disturbs me. I did not plan that chapter, and I am not sure why it took the shape it did. I offer it as an elegy and a prayer for the city – that great symbol that encompasses the vision and the folly, the solidarity and the violence, of our shared humanity. Ultimately, the city is a work of redemption, wherein we transform the garden of creation into the history and the culture of our human becoming. In the turmoil of our broken and frightened lives, may the city be for us a symbol of that eternal city, the New Jerusalem, where one day, peoples and faiths will come together to live forever in the justice and mercy of God – Yahweh, Allah, Trinity.

There are questions we are the solution
to, others whose echoes we must expand
to contain. Circular as our way
is, it leads not back to that snake-haunted
garden, but onward to the tall city
of glass that is the laboratory of the spirit.

R. S. Thomas, 'Emerging'

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For Dave

‘He has taken me to his banquet hall,
and the banner he raises over me is love.’

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Introduction

In August 2000 I was invited to Rome to give a presentation at a Pontifical Marian Conference, as part of the Jubilee celebrations. Those who negotiated my invitation implied that they wanted a feminist perspective on Mary, but I found my feminist sensibilities frozen by the prospect of standing up in front of some of the church's most celebrated and conservative Mariologists. In the event I gave what was probably the worst paper of my academic career to date. But that trip to Rome was a pilgrimage of momentous significance for me. It marked a point in my life when I found myself taking stock of the distance I had travelled symbolically, spiritually and physically, since I became a Roman Catholic while living in Zimbabwe in 1987, as a married woman and mother of four little children. In the intervening years, I had come to live in Bristol with my family, taken a degree in theology and religious studies, completed a doctorate on Marian theology and symbolism, and embarked on an unexpected career at the age of forty as a writer and lecturer in theology. I had also discovered feminism – at least twenty years later than most of my contemporaries. My experiences of love and marriage, sexuality and motherhood, the making and breaking of relationships, the treasuring of friendships, all had to find a space of accommodation and meaning within these two new and improbable convictions which had found a space of tempestuous cohabitation within me – Catholicism and feminism.

A pilgrimage is what the anthropologist Victor Turner refers to as a liminal experience.¹ It is a time of risk and transformation, when a person's identity and social role are briefly suspended as he or she experiences a stage of transition or a rite of passage. I did not intend my trip to Rome to be a pilgrimage, but in retrospect that is what it became. I had recently completed my doctoral studies and I did not yet know what direction the future might take, so I had a sense of being open to new beginnings. I had for the first time left my family for longer than a few days, so it represented a realization that the years of being bound physically and emotionally to my children's dependencies were coming to an end. I was emerging from a painful time of personal crisis, so I was in that heightened state of vulnerability and hope when one must learn to love again and love differently. After 25 years of marriage I was discovering for the first time the enormity, the grief and the wonder of married love – something that I think few feminists have understood. And perhaps in an analogous way I was reassessing what it meant to be a Catholic, in that disturbing and enchanting city which symbolizes the best and the worst of the Catholic faith. Is my relationship with Catholicism capable of turning into a loving and committed marriage, or will it always be a turbulent love affair which might yet end in tears and a broken heart? I have no answer to that question, but it is one I continue to ask myself. Encoded within that question is another even more unanswerable one: what kind of faith and what kind of God does my Catholicism sustain?

That word 'God' has undergone intense scrutinies and transformations in the last 300 years of Western thought. In the late nineteenth century Friedrich Nietzsche declared that Western society, and in particular Christianity, had murdered God. God was dead. Since then, some philosophers and theologians have attempted to raise God, not this time as the real creative being who sustains but is infinitely other than the time and space of the

material world, but as an empty symbol, a useful narrative device which helps us to tell a story about the world. Which God do I mean when I use that word? In what follows, is God in some sense 'real', someone I believe exists beyond anything human beings can say or imagine, or is 'God' a fiction without which this story and indeed every story might fall apart? To reflect on these questions would require a book in itself. Perhaps for me, God is the name of the void, of the sustaining absence at the heart of the world that is more acute and more real than the most vivid presence. g-O-d. The empty sphere at the centre, inadequately shaped by the ciphers of language, religion and culture, enigmatically encoded in nature as well as in human imagination. I am drawn again and again to Catherine of Siena's ravishment at the end of her life, when she cried in ecstasy or agony (who knows which, and can we really tell them apart?), 'You, eternal Trinity, are a deep sea: The more I enter you, the more I discover, and the more I discover, the more I seek you. You are insatiable, you in whose depths the soul is sated yet remains always hungry for you.'² Thérèse of Lisieux echoes Catherine when she writes, 'Love attracts love and mine soars up to You, eager to fill the abyss of Your love, but it is not even a drop of dew lost in the ocean.'³ It is the God whom Catherine calls 'fire and abyss of love' that holds me, in Thérèse's words, 'an abyss whose depths I cannot plumb'. It is the Catholic Church that holds me back, gives shape to the abyss, and makes it possible for me to contemplate it at all without disintegrating into the formless abyss of Nietzsche's murdered God.

I have also been profoundly influenced by the work of the Belgian philosopher of sexual difference, Luce Irigaray, who argues that the Nietzschean death of God is an opportunity for women to birth God or the gods anew in our world. Irigaray's references to the divine are ambiguous and difficult to categorize, but from my own theological perspective she has helped me to

see that our language about God needs to encompass fecundity, celebration and incarnation in a transformed and revitalized passion for the divine goodness of creation and the body. The Christian tradition, particularly Protestantism but also to a certain extent Catholicism, has developed an idea of a morally austere, distant and punitive God modelled on the image of the stern father figure of the patriarchal social order. Today, feminist theologians experiment with different ways of speaking about God – as mother, friend, creative spirit, nature, life and breath. Such forms of expression remind us that, even while respecting the unfathomable abyss of God, it is important to speak a language of faith that communicates joy, creativity, nurture and abundance, as well as unspeakable mystery. These different kinds of theological language are sometimes referred to as apophatic and cataphatic respectively. The cataphatic entails a profusion of imagery and language, which celebrates the all-encompassing presence of God in creation, while the apophatic recognizes the ultimate impossibility of speaking of God at all.

Because of my quest for a theological language that can express maternity as well as mystery, I refer to the Church in the feminine. Until the Second Vatican Council, Catholicism retained the earliest Christian understanding of the Church as a living and nurturing maternal body, symbolically associated with Eve as mother of the living, with Christ as eucharistic body, and with Mary as mother of Christ. I shall return to this theme later, but I have decided that, whatever the risks inherent in over-emphasizing the maternal dimension of the Church, I do not want to substitute 'it' for 'she' when referring to the most potent and widespread symbol of maternity in Western history.

I spent several years in an evangelical church when my children were young, and there I encountered a very different language of faith from that of the Catholic mystics. In that church, whatever the mystery of God, Jesus was apparently a vivid and

INTRODUCTION

undeniable presence. He told people things, held conversations, gave signs, answered prayers, and seemed to demand an absolute, unflinching and rather noisy loyalty in return. The problem was, I did not know him, or I did not know what people meant when they asked if I knew him. The more they offered to pray for me, the more perplexed I became. I doubt if any of them interpreted my conversion to Catholicism as an answer to prayer, but if I have in any sense discovered or begun to know Christ, it is through the sacramental and social vision of Catholicism.

The Catholic Church called to me and continues to attract me because she does not ask for simplistic language or unquestioning faith, although she can accommodate both. She offers what for me is a more credible Christ – a Christ who is intellectually satisfying and socially and materially nurturing. The Christ of the Catholic faith is sacramental mystery made intimate, tangible and earthy in bread and wine, in ritual and candlelight, in art and architecture, in politics and society, in a community of faith that encompasses all humankind in some form or another, and still sees God's grace in the natural world. Catholicism continues to offer that elusive glimpse of something understood, something expressed and communicated through the centuries by a certain language, a certain vision, a certain way of seeing the world.

This sense of recognition came to me when I was confined to hospital during my fourth pregnancy. A retired Presbyterian minister visited me and brought me books to read. They were all by Catholic authors, and they included Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*. As I read, I began to realize that there were ways of speaking about Christ that were more compelling to me than the biblical literalisms of evangelical Christianity. Soon after my son was born, I went to see a priest and a year later I was received into the Catholic Church. That is the matrix in which this book was nurtured, and in which my own spiritual quest has developed.

'How can you write a book about Rome when you only spent ten days there?' somebody asked me. But the Rome in this book is as much a place of the imagination and the spirit as of the physical world. On my return to Bristol, I spent several months reading and researching about the city's art, architecture and history, and then went back for a few days to check up on certain details, so I hope that it is a travel guide of sorts. But unlike other travel guides that claim to offer an original view of a city, this rarely deviates from the beaten track of the tour guides. Instead, it seeks to bring an original vision to bear on the old, familiar places, so that perhaps by changing the way we look we also change what we see. I have chosen and arranged the material to form a theological narrative of Catholic history, so that I link places together not because of their physical proximity but because of their symbolic resonances.

I had a sense as I travelled about the city and read about it afterwards, that I was listening to voices that have shaped my thoughts over many years, and particularly during recent years of intense study. I wanted to acknowledge those voices and their influence on my ways of thinking and believing, so this is part personal reflection and part theological enquiry in conversation with other theologians and theorists. Readers familiar with the book based on my doctoral thesis, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, will recognize common themes and resonances. However, this is not intended to be an academic treatise, and I use endnotes only to give references for quotations. It is primarily a discursive ramble along the highways and byways of Catholic history and culture, gathering together the fragments of the past and attempting to shape them into a pattern for the present and a vision for the future. It is an exploratory and tentative quest for meaning, and like every pilgrimage it is multilayered.

It is also a consciously gendered narrative, in so far as I decided not to occupy the place of the neutral, detached observer

but to look for the story of woman encoded in the Catholic faith. I ask how a woman might learn to walk the Catholic way to God, without stumbling and perhaps dying along the way because of the load she must carry on her back. I am conscious of the many women who have set out along this path with such hope and inspiration, only to find themselves physically or metaphorically imprisoned by the men who have constructed barbed wire fences, funeral pyres, torture chambers and prison cells along the road to heaven. How can one be a Catholic and a feminist, a traditionalist and a postmodernist, a conservative and a radical, a believer and an agnostic, without tearing oneself apart in the process?

Or are these the wrong questions, questions that are already defined by and in captivity to a vision of being and becoming which is 'his' rather than 'hers', history rather than herstory? Must a woman make these violent and painful choices, and do they not always involve severing some part of ourselves that we cannot live without? Maybe there are hidden pathways and secret alleys that might allow us to link up the fragmented and incoherent dimensions of our modern world, and to weave together visions in which heaven and earth, God and the world, woman and man, nature and culture, can coexist without competition and violence, in relationships of mutual love and illumination.

With such possibilities in mind, Eve became my travelling companion, like the imaginary friends of early childhood. She is a wayward wanderer in the wilderness of history and culture, a once and future voice of wisdom and rebellion, of seduction and promise. Far more than her distant daughter and namesake, the Virgin Mary, the New Eve, it is the old Eve who symbolizes Everywoman's story in the Catholic Church.

Thus, playing truant from the Pontifical Conference, Eve and I went on a pilgrimage through Rome, and this is our story. I hope that others might find in it resonances of their own struggles and their own visions, wherever they belong in relation

to this vast travelling roadshow called the Catholic Church that has trundled its way through the pages of history with such flamboyance, violence and beauty.

So come with me and taste and touch and see. Look at the shimmer of sunlight on an angel's wings, depicted in mosaic high above the altar of an ancient church. Close your eyes and breathe the incense-laden air with its waxy aura of a million candles flickering with the hopes and fears of all the generations of Christians. Reach out and let your hand linger on the well-worn foot of a beloved saint, as the Roman matrons crowd around you with their shopping bags, kissing and clucking and muttering and crossing themselves, praying for who knows what secret dream or frustrated desire burning within them? See the human form called forth from stone and wood and clay, evoking the divine among us. Let your mind unfurl and your body delight in this incarnate mystery, God with us, God of incense and candlelight, God of the vaulted dome and the musty sepulchre, God of the city streets and the laughing children, God of the mamas and the madonnas and the lithe young men who swagger around the Spanish Steps. God of the middle-aged woman who stands on the corner of the Via Appia, waiting for customers. God of the refugee mother and child who beg inside a church until the priest comes and chases them away. God of the butchery and murder of history, God of the corruption and decadence of Rome, God of the manger and God of the cross. Come with me. I cannot show you God, but I can show you the pointers, the arrows, the markers, and there, in between, in the silent gaps, maybe we will sense the absence that is not God, and maybe that absence is the closest that we can come to the presence of God.

INTRODUCTION

Notes

1. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1974).
2. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. with introduction by Suzanne Noffke, O.P. (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 364.
3. Thérèse of Lisieux, *The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*, trans. John Beevers (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 147.