

# *“VISITATIONS”*

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*“In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country,  
to a city of Judah and she entered the house of Zacharia and greeted Elizabeth”  
(Luke 1,39)*

The story of the Visitation offers us the picture which looks most like, and indeed inspires, the roads women walk together in their desire to bring the world in all its fullness, into the world. In the encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, we see a meeting of mothers, women from two different generations who as prophets recognise and bless each other. Two women on the move who, in reaching out to each other, carry the divine with them.

Mary hurries towards Elizabeth; the two women long for this encounter, they exult in the beauty of this mystery and the children in their womb exult with them. They are going to treat themselves to three months together, spending time sharing their pregnancies: an embodied time, a time of expectation, a time of contemplation. A time for silence in which only the body speaks through the sound of a heartbeat or the gentle lapping of amniotic fluid. A time of wonder in which the one becomes two, run through by life's creative power. Here the men are silent, they quit the stage naturally because they are simply not included in this scene. There is a difference, a female more-ness as the women's embrace weaves together the flourishing of body and spirit while - in the breath of Ruach - they celebrate life.

### *Our journey in the divine footsteps: An Introduction*

We know and appreciate many women who are passionately committed to working towards new roles for women in the Churches. Others are seeking to re-name the divine speaking out of their own experience as taught by the consciousness raising movement of the Seventies. They reflect on how their experience relates to identity, gender roles, the scriptures, prayer, language, and God. Such questioning has given rise to subjective yet shared truths which have brought us to yet deeper levels of awareness, freeing the divine from the shackles of patriarchy.

We hope that as these different roads meet, they will generate both a new faith community and a new humanity as Grace Villa, paraphrasing Roman 8, 18-26, affirms "the whole creation groans and suffers as it waits for the revealing of the daughters of God". Today, women's coming into speech has torn down the veils in the temples of patriarchy.

Those veils separated the divine from life itself, from the everyday and the sacred from the profane. Gone is the veil which tore women apart, dividing us from our own inner dialogue, **disrupting the unity of our mind, body and emotions**, wreaking havoc with our genealogies and making us forget our foremothers.



We believe that if we face the symbolic order together and undo those knots which create suffering, then a profound inner transformation can take place. We can

lay the foundation for a shared home which, in spite of our varied backgrounds, histories, expectations and allegiances, can accommodate us all.

We have called such a home the “Base Christian Communities’ Women’s Groups” as it is around their experience that a common trajectory and a network of relations have been formed. Many other women, both groups and individuals have met around this table, led by a common quest for the divine and mutually recognizing the richness in different contributions and in the sharing of strong emotions, new languages and imaginaries.



*Barcelona. The European Women’s Synod – Plenary session 2003*

### ***Introducing ourselves: “Eve’s awkward daughters”***

As early as 1968 many Christians, women and men of various backgrounds disappointed by traditional Catholicism, wanted to implement the results of the Second Vatican Council. This led to the founding of Christian Base communities all over Italy. Christian and not Catholic, because they were to be ecumenically aware, sharing fellowship with other Christian churches. Even though the church hierarchy sought to repress this movement, its research in the areas of ministry (especially regarding who presided over the Eucharist) and traditional sacramental practice, undertaken in light of the gospel, could not be stopped.

In the long run, this led many communities to claim the aforesaid sacraments for themselves, dropping some and transforming others so as to create a fellowship where priests were no longer necessary. Ministry was considered service to the community and the leading of Bible study groups or presiding over the Eucharist was organized by rote or by recognizing and valuing each individual’s gifts.

The National Conference of Christian Base Communities held in Genoa in May 1981 was particularly significant. The theme was “Sexuality and Liberation” and for the first time women and men from the Base Communities openly discussed doctrines concerning sexuality, love, male-female relations, pleasure, contraception and so on, with the declared aim of supporting the 194 abortion law.

As well as these developments which invested the whole Community, a critical consciousness was beginning to make itself felt amongst the women. This had to do both with the patriarchal and hierarchical Church and our own *sitz im leben*: the “setting in life” and vital context from which an oral narrative tradition and then a written text, would subsequently spring. All this was happening within communities which were, however, conditioned by a masculine imprinting difficult to by-pass. We faced this problem in a seminar entitled “The Awkward Daughters of Eve. The Base Communities and Women’s Research” held in Brescia in 1988. There, for the first time, an all-woman group presided over the Eucharist, an event which hit the headlines. The newspaper “Repubblica” entitled its article: “Ten women at the altar. At Brescia Base Communities defy the church’s ancient prohibition”.



*“The Awkward Daughters of Eve”  
The Base Communities and Women’s Research” held in Brescia in 1988*

Thanks to months of preparation involving mainly women, all the round table discussions, debates and meetings in the three day long conference were led by women. However, the women presiding over the Eucharist proved to be most effective symbolically, and this had an enormous impact on the direction the Base Community women would subsequently take. The bread broken and distributed by women took us back to the Easter meal celebrated in Jewish families as well as to

what we were doing everyday round our tables at home. We weren't trying to make a point or being provocative, but rather wanting to image forth a deep desire for female freedom which would open up new possibilities for women's ministry in the Church. This seminar was a watershed; no longer did we want to be assimilated to a male world. Our symbolic independence was from here onwards to be found in women identified relations and the mutual recognition of our own worth.

### *The first international visitations*

In the two years prior to the Brescia seminar, the women's group from the Pinerolo Base Community (founded in 1986), had met up – in the European meetings – with the women from the French and Dutch Base Communities. The first visitations were taking place as women from Europe set out for face to face meetings with other women.

Faces, experiences, thoughts and exchanges; such contacts made our desire - fuelled on freedom - contagious. Various meetings and exchange visits occurred which led to a two day seminar held in Paris in September 1988: «*Émancipation ou féminisation: quell'est la différence?*». "Féminisation" is an intuition: the feminine as bearer of a creative force that has always been repressed or annihilated but which must find expression if society is to benefit from its uniqueness. Together with the women from France and Holland, we celebrated the Anointing at Bethany (Mark 14,3-9). Seated in a circle on the floor we each dipped our fingers into a phial containing perfumed oil and, as we pronounced a blessing with the words "I proclaim Christ's death and resurrection", we anointed the hand of the woman next to us. As we did this we were all powerfully aware of the undeniably feminine nature of that action which Jesus had likewise recognized, declaring that it would be remembered throughout the world, "in memory of her" (as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's famous book reiterates.) The times were ripe and it was precisely then that we decided to continue meeting up with those Base Communities' women's groups that had been founded after our Brescia seminar.

The women who were already in touch with each other decided, as independent subjects, to undertake research into the divine within the various Communities. They thus began to coordinate their efforts by meeting on a national level, creating important opportunities of mutual support and recognition.

Such coordination meetings proved useful for organizing the national conferences which still take place. In these, often with the help of experts (theologians, philosophers, scholars in various fields), we look at specific topics which have become important for our ongoing study. For a few years, we also tried to keep in touch with the women from the other European communities. In 1991 we took part in the Base Communities' European Conference and later, in other meetings of the European network. However, these proved of little use for our own independent research as European women.



*The Anointing at Bethany: Paris 1988*

### ***The Women's Synods in Europe***

The idea of organizing women's synods in Europe emerged out of the Christian ecumenical context of the Eighties. Women from different European countries were getting together to form a women's movement aimed at connecting spirituality and politics.

In 1985, Karin Hamar, a member of the World Council of Churches, expressed the need for a Women's Synod for the first time. The first synodal meeting was held in Holland in 1987 and in 1988 the World Council of Churches proclaimed the "Ecumenical Decade of the Churches in Solidarity with Women". In the five years from 1990 to 1995 a series of synodal events took place in Germany, Holland, Austria, Italy and Switzerland. In 1992, a team was formed to organize the first European Synod which was held in 1996 in Gmunden, Austria with the title "Women for Change in the 21st century". One thousand, two hundred women attended. As no Italians had actually taken part in the organization, few Italian women attended the Synod, only three from the Base Communities' women's groups and some women from the Waldensian Church. The women from the Base Communities reported very positively on their experience.

Women's Synods have offered and still do offer a model of participation which differs from the traditional one; apart from those speakers invited to talk on specific topics, each woman tends to speak for herself and out of her own experience, putting herself, her skills and expertise on the line.

Between the first and the second European Synod, held seven years later, six national Synods (in which England also joined) were held one after the other. As a large number of Spanish women had taken part in the first European Synod, it was decided to hold the second one in Spain. In 2003, about 700 women gathered in Barcelona round the table set for the European Women's Synod: "Compartir

cultures”. Christian, Muslim, and Jewish women from about thirty European countries, Africa, America, and Asia gathered on the university campus for five days (from the 5th to the 10th August).

Thanks to the organizational skills of Assunta Sozzi from the “Group for the Promotion of Women” in Milan, approximately forty women from different parts of Italy took part. As well as members of the “Group for the Promotion of Women”, there were women from various Base Community women’s groups, as well as “The Full Moon Circle” (Il cerchio della luna piena”) from Padua, “The Grail” (“Il Graal”) from Milan, “Female Thea-theology” (Thea-teologia al femminile”) from Trento, “Circle Women” (“Donne in Cerchio”) from Rome, and ‘Femmis’ from Verona, the theologians Adriana Valerio (member of the European Society of Women in Theological Research) and Marinella Perroni (for the Network of Italian Women Theologians). On the agenda were the strategies and politics of women’s presence in the churches, women and violence in the churches, education for peace and gender, female images in the Bible, feminist and ecofeminist theologies. The activities took place not only in the formal setting of the the general assembly but also in alternative women-spaces where non-verbal practices, such as dance, yoga, song and bibliodrama were brought into play as we sought for a greater awareness of our bodies and emotions.

This is how Sister Daniela Maccari, responsible at the time for the “Femmis” website, described the celebration of the Eucharist: *“For many it was the first Eucharistic concelebrated by three women priests (two of whom were also Bishops). The loaves of bread blessed and broken amongst a hundred or so women, the blue ceramic cups which passed from hand to hand, the song **Adoro te devote** sung to a new melody, the stole of coloured silk offered at the beginning and everyone’s hand outstretched at the moment of consecration, the sharing of a faith from above whose worn and torn history had been mended by these women’s courage.. all this and much more which words are insufficient to express, was one of the high points of the Synod. A Synod which not only dealt with diversity but also actually dared to make a difference and coming from the Catholic church itself. On Sunday, Rabbi Eveline sat among the same three women who were concelebrating the Eucharist and said the Lord’s prayer and the final blessing in a way which moved her and touched us all.* (From Femmis, the Combonian feminist magazine, now <https://www.combonifem.it>)

### ***Building the Communal home. Not only the Base Community women’s groups***

We were so happy and enthusiastic at having been so many that we soon wanted to meet up again. Thus, after only a few months the Italians who had taken part in the Barcelona Synod met at the Free Women’s University (Libera Università delle Donne) in Milan at the invitation of Luciana Percovich. On that occasion as each of us talked of her own particular journey, shared concerns and points of contact began to emerge. While respecting our differences, we agreed to continue to make use of the Annual Women’s Conference which was already a recognized space.



*Barcelona, the European Women's Synod 2003 – Meeting with Teresa Forcades*



*Barcelona 2003 – a group of participants from Italy*

A plural subject was being born that would soon journey together. The encounter was between the Base Community Women, on the one hand, and women from other groups, on the other hand. All shared a common passion for questions of faith and spirituality as well as a desire to journey separately from men, not as an end in itself but as an important way of freeing and valuing women's speech and gaze so that we could stand with our own vision in the world.

*“This opened up a “Space” where women’s words and deeds were (and still are) possible. Claiming the centre, as autonomous subjects we explored our relation to the divine, diving deep into our experiences and critically re-reading the biblical tradition from a woman’s standpoint. We sought new tools for knowledge and referred constantly to that wisdom which is derived from “starting from oneself”, which is part of women’s culture itself.*

This new grouping first met in Trento during the XIV National Conference of Base Community Women in 2004 called “The divine, how to set it free, how to bring it into speech, how to share it. The light and airy divine amongst us”. It was held in the Carmelite convent at the Madonna del Laste sanctuary, an ancient sacred site laden with history stretching back thousands of years to the paleolithic and pre-patriarchal eras. From this time on we claimed a common ground *“the divine amongst us, light as the breeze that blows, brings us refreshment- conveying something pleasing and not worrying, a reality which intrigues but does not rigidly condition us, a desire which gives us freedom to think and freedom to journey”*

As well as the groups and associations which had met at Barcelona, various other groups such as “Identity and Difference” (“Identità e differenza”) from Spinea, “Rahab street volunteers” (“Raab volontari di strada”) from Rovereto, took part along with individual women, including some nuns. From henceforth the journey was not being made by Base Community women alone. Even though some groups dropped out along the way, others, such as “Women on a quest” (“Donne in ricerca”) from Padua, Ravenna and Verona and, more recently, the “Sisterhood” from Mantova and the Interreligious Observatory for Violence against Women (founded in Bologna in 2019) have joined us on the journey.

Throughout the years, thanks to our various visitations, we have built up a communal home which is extremely open to those without and very hospitable to those within. Every encounter has brought with it valuable contributions, discussions, theological research and most importantly, liturgical moments (for examples, see the Appendix). The times of free and creative sharing all grew out of the experience of the Base Communities’ women’s groups which locally practise a different form of ministeriality as shown in “Magdalene and the Other Women” (“Maddalena e le altre”) quoted above.

In fact, we continue to engage in serious theological research on the subject of the ordination of women to the clergy in its various levels of the diaconate, presbyterate and episcopacy. This prophetically aims to make a real and radical change, putting an end to the clerical caste. We completely agree with the stand made by French theologian Anne Soupa. In 2019, she stood for election as bishop of the city of Lyons, creating a vast movement in public opinion and among many women who followed her example. In a videoconference organized by the Interreligious Observatory for Violence against Women and held on the 12th December 2020, Anne Soupa shared her views which met with the complete agreement of Italian theologian, Antonietta Potente.

Anne Soupa declared *“My candidacy for the bishopric of Lyons is a lay one. I’m not claiming to be a priest nor am I asking to become one. I am critical of the ordained ministry and I am against the article of canon law which maintains that ordained ministry is a divine statute. This is the first example of the Church’s abuse of power. I would never want to be part of such a system. The Church originated with lay people. When the word “priest” is found in the gospel it is used only of the High Priest who will condemn Jesus. The word “priest” comes into use in 250 A.D. The tradition of the church is not a clerical one, as the first figures to appear in the first Christian communities were bishops. Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch are the first bishops we know about, and between the year 100 and 250, there were lay and not clerical bishops. Thus, putting forward my candidature for the bishopric and stepping outside of clerical logics actually means being faithful to the gospel. It is a return to origins. I stand apart from this clerical world which has no future.”*

We agree with these theologians that it’s no longer a question of women asking but rather daring to take what is our right. We must no longer revendicate equality with men. This means being ourselves, prophetic women, women who dare! This applies to both women believers and non believers. It applies to the women who have left Catholic orders and to those who claim that life’s *disorder* points to the truth. Now this means filling the “light and airy divine amongst us” with content. “What point is there in being granted access to the priesthood when the church continues to be anchored in a hierarchical and patriarchal order?” (Elizabeth Green).



*The Eucharistic Celebration at the 2002 National Conference in Frascati*

Our work focussing on the body - concentrated in various workshops - has been equally important, acting as a premise to the Conferences themselves. We were occasionally confronted with new and unexpected scenarios as we experienced deep

emotions spelling wholeness. In fact, our whole being - that Greek philosophy had divided into a mind considered superior to a body equated with sin and impurity - was made whole once more.

It is not easy to express in words what happens in workshops devoted to the body. It often happens, however, that such activity creates greater awareness and a new and profound bonding. **Is it possible to do theology with and through the body?** Our experience has taught us that is so. Faith is not incense smoke going up in temples but wiping away tears, keeping hope alive, loving life.

It is important for us to let go and trust ourselves completely to the other. An example of this took place in the National Conference held at Monteortone in 2001, where Elisa Barato led us in the following exercise starting out from the mother and daughter myth of Demeter and Kore.

*“Let’s form pairs and hold hands: I am the daughter, you are the mother. Closing my eyes I entrust myself to you as you lead me round the room, first of all walking slowly and then more quickly. It’s not easy for me to move with my eyes closed but you will take care and make sure that I don’t hurt myself, that I don’t bump into anything or anybody. At the end of this “journey” we will swap over and change roles and then we will bring everything to a close with a big hug.”*

Once more, at Monteortone in 2021 Marina Marangon and Franca Filippone invited us to *“let the spa water in the pool wash over us. As our friends support us and the water soothes us, let us release our tensions and our painful experiences so that positive and divine energies may flow. Our minds are free and we communicate with each other through our bodies as they are both welcomed and welcoming..”*

Yet again, in the hills around Padua, in an old mansion standing in a park with huge trees, during one of our coordination meetings:

*“Let us stand in a circle round this big kitchen table and take it in turns to knead this dough made of flour and our pain, of water and the tears which flow ceaselessly and abundantly. A rhythmic strength runs throughout our whole body from our arms (with their sleeves rolled up) into our hands. The more energy we put into this ancient movement the more we will get rid of our anger and tensions, worries and anxieties. As we share pain, fears, and disappointments (which are both completely different from and exactly the same as each others’), we once more reunite the threads of life.. Courageous and renewed we start off again on our journey. Tomorrow this bread will be broken round the eucharistic table, the bread of our body, shared by the hands of women, in memory of Jesus”*

Another example is biodance which was introduced at Cavoretto (1996) and taken up in a new and original way by Elizabeth Green, theologian and Baptist minister; meditative dances led by Daniela Mazzoni: the body is free, one’s heart opens, the mind clears; Bible drama based on Joel 3 with the Waldensian deacon Karola Stobaus; the global nature of languages with Sandra Morero; Rosanna Rabezzana from the Alma Mater centre of Turin and her drama workshop; yoga and meditation led by Antonia Tronti and Elisa Barato; various art workshops led by Katia Petrelli, Carla Galetto and Catti Cifatte that tapped into our creative abilities as well as the Jewish dances with Paola Pagliani.

*“A wonderful table carefully laid with succulent food, an amazing harmony of flavours, perfumes and colours offers us not only the pleasure of eating but also the joy of being together. On the beach, on a day so windy that we can’t hear ourselves speak, we let our footsteps speak for us. In the park, we silently embrace a tall tree, our inner sacred space swells as we feel it’s life force re-uniting our mind, body and emotions. Again and again we discover the ancient sacred way of speaking through touch and embraces, breath and sighs, laughter and tears, and we get in touch with our strength, knowledge and comfort, our sharing and trust”.*

We have run many different workshops throughout the years, also in literature, poetry and painting. More than once we have experimented with drama like at the National Conference held in Genova in 2006, “The Treasure of the Mind” (which can be found in the Report). We have always been guided by wise hands and women’s voices in an unending and shared quest for our self and the divine. The preparation of the workshops themselves has often also been a time to care for and strengthen our relationships.

The only organizational meetings we had were the coordination ones held periodically. They themselves are laboratories of ideas where issues and desires coming out of the local groups are shared. We use them to plan our National Conference; distributing the various responsibilities among the different groups and sometimes individual women. These relate to practical and organizational matters, the study of the main theme and how we will articulate it, the planning of the group work as well as body related activities. So every woman is already taking an active part in the conference even before it starts!

In 2008 at Castel San Pietro Terme, the friends from the group “Women on a quest” (“Donne in ricerca”) from Verona and Ravenna used Maria Zambrano’s poetic writing to take us on the same journey Antigone (seen as an archetype of the soul at its highest level of consciousness) took into freedom. As we wove together different types of language, from reading the text to moments of quiet listening to one’s self, we re-thought the characters in Zambrano’s philosophical drama. Instead of committing suicide like in the Greek play, Antigone becomes the voice of a dawning awareness and, as she overcomes all hesitation and repentance, her sacrificial action wrought of love, shines with a new light.

*“Yes girl, you were always connected with water, you always had something to do with water as if you and water belonged to each other” (M. Zambrano, Antigone’s Tomb, 1967, p. 86).*

*At the beginning, water serves to quench the body’s thirst but then it becomes a symbol of living water which quenches the spirit’s thirst i.e. our constant desire to go beyond a merely human dimension. The force which holds us up as we fall into the dark windings of life’s caverns is nothing less than the divine, the ineffabile and unattainable which embraces, pervades and lifts us out of the depths of humanness.. She reveals the ray of light which filters through the darkness of our caverns, enabling us - as modern day Antigones - to see that light which we can call “Sophia”. Such brightness transcends human space and gives both hope and the possibility of going beyond –to the characters in Sophocle’s play as well as to the many women and men of our time who, like Antigone are striving to go beyond*

*merely human deeds. The act of washing and of compassionately taking care of someone is deeply rooted in the gospels and Antigone's sacred act consists precisely in this as she throws abundant water on her dead brother's blood.*



*Base Communities' women's groups join together with others of a circle of discussion and meditation*

Throughout the years we have repeatedly affirmed the importance of being present with our names noting the way that women, having been cancelled from history, have been pushed into oblivion. How important are names in the construction of our identity? Our name enables us to be recognized and also allows us to relate to each other. Our names, linked to those have come before, form a genealogy which strengthens us and our daughters.



*Encounters between women from different generations*

During the workshop “In our name” held at Frascati in 2002, we were invited to play with our names, amplifying and expanding them so as to reply to the question “How do we express the divine?” We were invited to form acronyms, the initial of the first word in every line spelling out our name and thus creating a real soul signature.

(As) *Mary (the Goddess), generative Earth Mother*

*A embraces the universe, I*

*R e-find myself and the breath of new life,*

*I nvent myself*

*And open up to the divine within.*

*G day after day seeking to build myself up*

*In the company of friends*

*Observing and discussing*

*Various moments of life have made me what I am*

*And the path is still long but I do*

*Now think that*

*No one will be able to stop us and take from us what we have shared together*

*And now everything is calmer, quieter.*

*Ripping apart old patterns and rediscovering our truth written inside us*

*Once more daring to experiment fearlessly with new and different things without seeking permission*

*Sure that I am not alone, that the knowledge we need is inside us*

*And having courage and determination for the journey!*

*Relating to other women makes me grow!*

*I learn from other women that we have so much to give each other!*

*Always loving our life and sharing it with the world*

Words tumble out one on top of the other, are caught and the reflected back to us as women share their stories. The fact that we have always started from our own experience is not at all new but has been (and still is) a feminist practice right from the start. Some of us tend to adopt a more “political” perspective, while others reflect on their personal experience, but whatever perspective is chosen, we can’t help but refer to our own life story and the depth of our experience..

Re-discovering ourselves, then, becomes almost a game, a wager. We see ourselves in each other’s stories, as our women’s groups, monastic communities, feminist associations, families, workplaces, relationships with mothers and daughters become our reference points once more. Whether we like it or not, this is where the experience we are talking about is located. As we speak, our stories run into each other and are woven together. We invent new metaphors and enjoy being in each other’s presence without any trace of hierarchy. This is not just a way of relating to each other, essentially it is an authentic expression of being itself.



*Weaving and painting: tools and themes in the celebration organized by "Circle Women" (Rome) at Trento in 2004*

### ***Subtraction and Breaking Boundaries***

Throughout the history of the Christian West, women have been pushed to the margins of both the civic and the sacred spheres. In the middle of the former stands "man", the male, his way of looking at the world and his way of doing things primarily through hierarchical institutions. The second sphere parallels the first: God the Father is at the centre, defined by his masculine attributes. Women are once more at the margins due to the the binary economy's inexorable law which views the male positively and determines the feminine negatively.

In order to leave the closed circle of patriarchy, we have to dismantle the masculine imaginary and discourse (with its humiliating references, values, and framework), which women have interiorized. To do this we need to engage in a continual work of subtraction and deconstruction. We have had to dismantle a huge amount of scaffolding to find out what has been robbing us of our life. We have also had to question the ways in which our identity, both subjective and collective, has been constructed and then weave new relations to fill in the void.

We have proceeded in a spiralling fashion (which bears in itself the seeds of contradiction), leaping ahead, backtracking, repressing. There is no *Veritatis splendor* to guarantee eternal security. Just as the deer renews its antlers every year, so we continually destroy certainties, dogmas, and old habits. We have replaced them with women identified relations full of generative power which unite body and spirit. No gap exists between body and spirit, but by taking care of our bodies we have also cultivated our spirituality.

As living on the margins is both difficult and painful, women are prone to two temptations. The first is wanting to occupy the centre in an emancipatory process which adopts male models. The second is to make the margin the key to their imagination and actions. This means being confined to a comforting maternal counter-culture which places itself in (yet another) ritual circle in contrast to mainstream male culture.

*“Now female strength comes neither from allowing itself to solidify on the margins nor from putting oneself in the centre. Centre and margin are complementary to each other as part of the same dialectic. The centre exists only because there is a margin and vice versa. Let’s try and get out of this sterile opposition”* warns Chiara Zambini in the meeting we held in 2010 at Castel S. Pietro. Rather, as women we should affirm ourselves on the world’s stage, declaring “I am She who is” as a meaningful expression of our transformation. Not with arrogance or with vengeance but as a coming to consciousness and a claiming of responsibility. The foundation for our being in the world depends on being authentic, starting from our selves and owning our own experience. No one can stand in our shoes and speak for us. This is the inexorable “fatigue of our public dimension which requires that each one of us speaks forth her own word”.

The imagery of transformation can only be changed insofar as we stand in the world’s reality and go beyond beyond the sort of power articulated in institutional and hierarchical decisions. Women need to break the boundaries of given rules, consolidated practice and still remain anchored and faithful to reality itself. We should never lose sight of the basic rule which guides us, the love of life as “the heart’s own *logos*” which springs from the maternal root of our being in the world.

### ***How we embraced feminist theology***

Theology and feminism: it was necessary to put these together now that we had discovered a new vision of the divine was possible. However, we were unable to do this alone and so we began to study, read and discuss with our women theologian friends. When we swap hugs, we need to allow ourselves to get involved. If there is any resistance, then these reservations disappear in a shared embrace. That is exactly what happened, as passion, engagement and competency all became intertwined.

We were aware that our religious culture is permeated with exclusively masculine definitions, roles and ideologies. At the same time, we knew that a new vision inspired by what we felt would open our minds and hearts. As we explored, reading the most important works, we gained various criteria for reflecting on and interpreting religious writings and traditions, and began to attempt biblical exegesis using the historical critical method. We asked about the authors and recipients of the “holy” texts, the context in which they were written, what had been hidden and silenced. In other words, we used a “hermeneutic of suspicion” developed by the great Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.

We noted that the Jesus movement was characterized by the joint presence of men and women, even though Judaism was dominated by patriarchy. The gospels

actually name some of the women who followed Jesus, Joanna, Susan, Mary, Salome, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary. There are also unnamed women, symbolic women whose stories are told and whose role becomes important: widows, mothers in law, daughters, sisters, the Samaritan, the woman with the flow of blood, the woman who anointed Jesus and others. It was risky for these women to follow Jesus and such discipleship makes them even more courageous and important!

Similarly, the genealogy in Matthew's gospel names five women whose stories belong in the biblical tradition of "boundary-breaking" as part of the divine plan. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Betsabea and Mary are direct descendants of this tradition. Although the patriarchal context of Hebrew society at the time granted women an important role in the prayers and rites conducted in the domestic sphere, those who set down and transmit the story of the Jesus of Nazareth, cannot fail to describe the presence of women in various public contexts. Furthermore, they confirm that after Jesus's death, women were the first to announce the resurrection and played an important role (which went well beyond that of the family) in the first Christian churches.

It is also true, however, that after Jesus' death things got increasingly difficult for women. Power becomes ever more clericalized and male dominated and a process begins which will gradually but constantly exclude them from the sphere of the "sacred". Pronouncements which are increasingly exclusionary and anti-women create a misogynous mindset in the consciousness and symbolic of both men and women which is in turn reiterated by various Councils and Papal Encyclicals. This leads to interpolations in some texts (such as Paul's letters) and to the decision to include misogynous texts in the canon while excluding texts - such as the apocryphal gospels - which view Mary Magdalene, for example, in a positive light.

Women, their stories and authority have been obscured through the centuries by narratives, theologies and doctrines that only cater for Fathers and not Mothers of the church. Furthermore, when the Father's thought is handed on through education and teaching, those male ideas and interpretations which diverge from official doctrine are likewise obscured.

As time went on and our research progressed, we became fascinated by the pre-patriarchal stages of history, goddess religion and the matriarchal societies of the past and present, as well as the myths handed down before the onset of the great monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). These studies, including Marija Gimbuta's extremely interesting work in mytho-archeology have given us a different view of the history of religious and social origins. Luciana Percovich and Luisella Veroli guided us in this research.

At the beginning of the new millennium some of us took part with great interest in a series of meetings on pre-patriarchal myths held by the Free Women's University in Milan. In December of 2002, we also participated in the wonderful meeting with Mary Daly, a theologian who has been foundational in our own theological journey and has shown amazing strength in uprooting the Father's theology in her groundbreaking books, "Beyond God the Father" and "Quintessence: Realizing the Archaic Future".

Throughout the years we have also read various theological and exegetical works with some Protestant churches and have referred to the thought of Italian theologians such as Elizabeth Green, Letizia Tomassone, Adriana Valerio, Marinella Perroni, Cristina Simonelli, Daniela di Carlo, Antonietta Potente, Ivana Ceresa, Adriana Cavina e Carla Ricci who have all become our companions along the way. Feminist theology, unlike male academic theology, is rooted in the practices of the women's movement. Wherever in the world feminist theology has developed, it has always had a relational aspect starting from the concrete experience of women. This is true for the wealthy countries on the American continent, where at the end of the nineteenth century Elizabeth Cady Stanton produced the Woman's Bible, as well as for the Latin American ones which claim a theology incarnate in the bodies of poor and oppressed women.

In every group that has been formed pastor theologians have promoted the discussion of ideas among women. The reading of different texts, direct engagement, interpersonal relations, female actions and women's manual and practical self-expression have been the yeast which has enabled feminist theology itself to grow in mutual exchange. Feminist theology offers a new prospect of freedom for both women and men. It is, however, women's discovery based on their own journey and on issues which are dear to them.

***We are part of the women's movement and we have also been inspired by the philosophy of sexual difference***

Another relation which has been just as important for the Base Communities' women's groups along with other women, has been the meeting and discussion with the philosophers of sexual difference. Luisa Muraro and Chiara Zamboni, founders of the group of philosophers "Diotima" have been with us at various moments of our critical reflection. They sensitively accepted our invitation and have given us further elements of critical analysis, enabling us to gain symbolic competence regarding patriarchal symbolics and to recognize the maternal symbolic order and our own genealogy. They taught us perspectives which we would change our language, our places of reference, our images and symbols: ***"In a male-centred church, women lose out. In equality between the sexes, women submit to men. With no divine to reflect women, a woman loses her sense of self and of her own difference"*** (Mira Furlani)

Their theory, which now makes up a substantial part of our research, has inspired the invitations we have issued and the titles we have given to our various meetings. The **"Women's bookshop"** in Milan which offers a free space for feminist discussion has often hosted us as we have published our reports and documents.

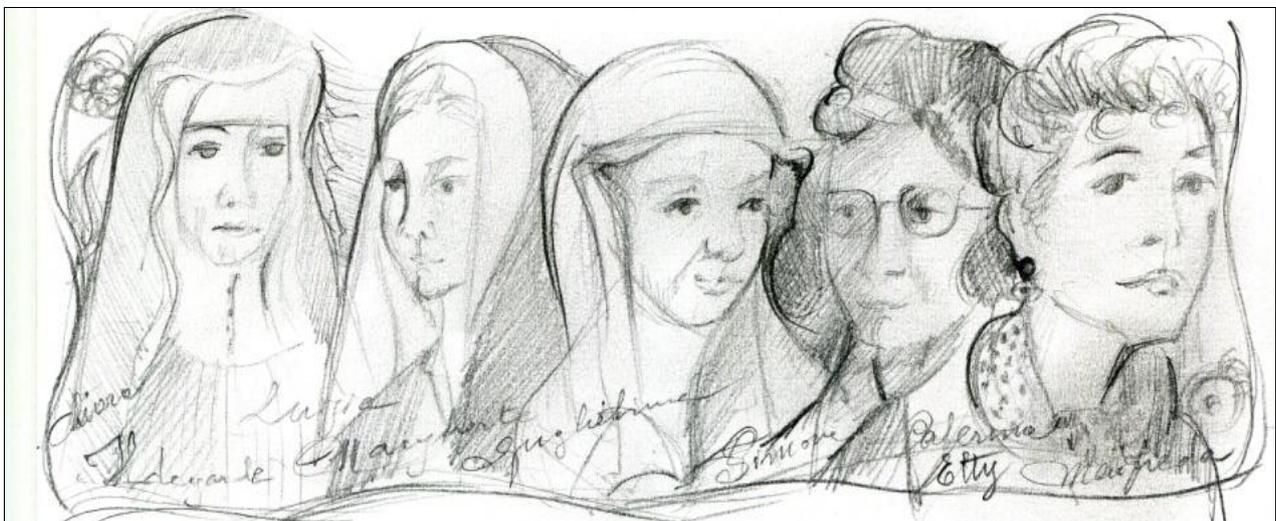
However, the many women who share our journey reflect the complexity and plurality of the wider women's movement. We do not always agree on everything and sometimes differences of opinion amongst us have created conflict which we have tried to live through constructively. We have learnt how to disagree without destroying ourselves and each other. We have not always completely succeeded in

this but we have always endeavoured to stay together on our journey into female freedom.

Our work, intertwined with the women's movement and its practices, found an operating newspaper called "**Women's Land**" willing to publish the Acts of our National Conferences. Giovanna Romualdi has been our contact in the area of the feminist press and has formed and maintained relations with various other women who live quite a distance away.

As we recall our "political" engagement and our interaction with the inner and outer journeys taken "not only by the *Base Communities*' women's groups but also with others" we want to appreciate the personal contribution, constructive criticism and guidance provided by Giancarla Codrignani, who has constantly been part of our reflection on the divine. For many years, the women's link group met on the premises of the Orlando Association in Bologna thus coming into contact with one of feminism's most important cultural contexts both in Bologna and Italy as a whole. Adriana Sbrogiò and Maria Trevisa, founders of the Association *Identity and Difference* in Spinea in the province of Venice have also been important for our ongoing journey. Their politics and practice tend to value – even in local government – politics with a difference that take into account the different ways men and women live in the world.

The witness of the many women engaged both politically and socially, who were present our last National Conference held in Rome in 2019, has likewise been meaningful.



### ***On Mary of Nazareth***

One of theology's most important features and one of the most difficult to deal with, is the doctrinal and dogmatic construct centred on the figure of Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus. Archeologists' various analyses as well as the theses of some feminist theologians have shown that from antiquity (see the biblical references), ordinary people's spirituality gravitated towards female divinities even though the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam considered this not only inconceivable but positively idolatrous.

In some respects, we can say that Christianity does not eliminate this yearning for a female divine and Our Lady can be considered the woman on whom this type of spirituality has focussed. It had, in fact, proved impossible to eliminate women from Christianity's vision both because of the powerful presence of women themselves and of their importance in Jesus' life and story.

Recent readings of Mary of Nazareth have taken her off the pedestals and altars where she has been put so as to better to appreciate her concrete human characteristics. She has regained the face of an authentic woman who, together with other women, followed her son. Scripture has little to say about her but we can imagine what her maternal role was, worried for her daughters and sons including Jesus on the one hand, and highly involved in their education, on the other hand. The Magnificat as a song of thanksgiving becomes her new confession of faith.

<p>Mary has always been a fundamental figure of reference for Catholic women, going beyond the asexual and unreal stereotype constructed by and fixed in the male ecclesiastical imagination. The Word became flesh in a woman's body although it is precisely woman's body which excludes her from the sacred sphere. It is not because of her mind, or her feelings, but only because of her body. Women, however, have managed to save themselves from this dangerous and inhuman schism. They have read doctrine and dogma through their own eyes, creating and cultivating - together with other women - an intimate and personal relation with Mary without the mediation of priests. The thought of Ivana Ceresa, expressed in the article "An immense symbolic treasure" published by Via Dogana in 1991 (see the appendix) helps us to understand this extraordinary reality. <i>"Woe, woe to those who attack this 'truth' laying waste the immense symbolic treasure that we find in this dogma of the Catholic church. What more can than this truth of faith tell us - as a nation of women - about own amazing greatness as bearers of the divine "with no man"?"</i></p>	<p><b>Women's Prayer to Mary</b>          For five hundred years the statue of Mary has stood in front of the pillar of Notre Dame in Paris witnessing the moral, physical and spiritual sufferings of Paris' (and not only Paris') population. It's not rare, even today, to find a man or a woman praying or crying before the statue. Who is it a statue of? To whom is such suffering offered? To a stone figure or to a God whose face she represents? We decide for the woman Mary, face, image and bearer of God.          MARY to whom the poor of the earth Turn their faces.          MARY face of the God-Woman, milk and honey, black Madonna on whom this cathedral has been built.          MARY who sings the song of the oppressed, promising that one day the world will be transformed into a just world.          MARY ear of God, listening to the unbearable cry of humans who have been abandoned, to whom we no longer listen; God's own eye which sees the derelict poor who come before you, whom we do not see.          MARY who did not turn away from the cross, wild woman of a revolutionary</p>
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*I really believe that patriarchy has never said anything about us greater and more promising than Mary of Nazareth, the mother of the Lord Jesus, our sister and the firstborn who makes God - and us - divine.*

*I thus love Mary as a complete genealogy of mothers. She is my matrilinear and original ancestor, no one of us can be more amongst our own than she was in the time spent amongst her own, obscure and hidden as she was. Thus each one of us can assume her own destiny to be and create the divine.*

son who had no strength or power, which she hands us as a brother, MARY God's own laughter when the poor rise up.

To you, Mary we bring the unbearable unceasing cry that the strong and wealthy cannot hear. We cry out to you, image of the Mother God, in an endless line of women and men throughout the centuries, we cry out to you, oh face of Maternal God, ears, eyes, tears and laughter of the God of justice.



**Carla Galetto reads the prayer in Paris in Notre Dame - 28/07/1991 – European Conference of the Base Communities.**





*Covers of the Acts of our National Conferences*

***So, what do our women’s visitations have to offer?***

As we have explained in some detail above, we have taken down much scaffolding along the way, weaving women identified relations in its stead. We did this in the spiralling fashion theorized by Elizabeth Green both as regards contents and methodology. Such freedom has enabled us to come and go, to be both in and outside the tradition, taking part in the life of the Communities but also criticizing it from within. We have made the most of being forced to stand on the margins gaining, as Mercedes Navarro Puerto taught us in Barcelona, a broader critical vision and a greater freedom of movement.

The pathway we as women have taken has served primarily to show us that the “universal neutral” is a make-pretend cage, a cultural construct of patriarchy. Man is not humanity, there are both women and men each with their own difference and with

different things to say. Our journey has thus helped us create a place of true fellowship from which we can gather that strength, authority and power - fruit of a feminine view of the world – and then contribute it to places where men and women meet together.



*The picture of spiral creation, with us since the Cavoretto Conference in 1996*

At a certain point, however, our journeying hit an obstacle. A deep need told us that we had to risk something more, venture further on. Biblical images of a maternal God, comforting in our search for freedom were no longer enough. Nor was it sufficient to rescue some of the Biblical women from obscurity, however meaningful, transgressive or liberating they might prove. We started to explore God. What sort of an approach did we want to have with transcendence itself?

Should we go *Beyond God the Father* (Mary Daly), towards *She who is* (Elizabeth Johnson)? Should we follow the way of the mystics, experimenting with inner illumination? Or was God to be found in the answer to our deepest identity and liberating power? We were used to making room for a living theology, speaking of God from out of our own personal experience. To contact this desire once more was the only way of flying high without abandoning the terrain of concrete reality.

We began by questioning the patriarchal God in whose name people have always been divided. A God used to support wars and conflicts and to fetter female freedom. Our research has shown us that such theological language and imagery do

not correspond to the way we experience life and that there is a strong connection between Father religions and violence including violence against women.

We have realized that whole pieces of the tradition are simply missing like the symbols, words and relations which mirror (Irigaray) our female selves and that it is very difficult to find embodied signs, acts and words which reveal and speak forth the divine within.

Just as Mary, the mother of Jesus, kept the angel's annunciation in her heart to meditate upon, allowing herself to feel what was happening in the depths of her being, so we too have shared a meditative thought open to the world. Thus a way of being in the world - emerging from the inner life of the everyday- is born which then leads us into a political practice of direct and concrete engagement with what exists.

We are convinced that the discourse of spirituality is not abstract. The sense of loss and unease which women feel and suffer, does not originate in something that has been taken away from us and that we need to get back but rather arises from the depths of our inmost being. As feminism has taught us, such a practice is both inner and personal, public and political. **Mystical politics** mean standing concretely within history and nurturing its unfolding through actions that spring from the inner self. This is the sort of politics we have adopted. It leads us to a "**dis-ordered ministeriality**" a long way away from religious ritual and much nearer to a faith lived in everyday actions.

This is what we mean when we talk about dismantling the scaffolding that has held up church institutions while at the same time putting women in a box.

This is our contribution to a new type of *polis* which knows that order is not hierarchical or a bundle of rules but must grant adequate space to each and everyone regulated by the more complex wisdom principle of relations.

In this way, we are able to abandon non negotiable values along with the exclusions and rebuffs to which a Church founded on apartheid has accustomed us. This starts off by excluding women and goes on to propose a society which closes its borders, a culture which enforces sameness (for example, in its model of the family), and the exercise of a power born and cultivated in violence so that war is just "politics by other means".

We do not, therefore, accept a hierarchy of doctrine which continues to discriminate people, women and men on the basis of their sexual orientation. In particular, we stand in solidarity with the LGBT community.

We own a feminist and eco-feminist spirituality inspired by Lady Wisdom who "*Cries out from the streets and makes herself heard in the squares*" which does not get lost in a vertical quest for the divine but which lives immersed in reality and participates in everyone's struggles.

We are working on an epochal change. We are no longer providing the bricks to repair structures which are alien to us as women but, day by day, we are the wings of the divine breath which, we have discovered, is "light and airy". In this way we aim to make a prophetic proposal understanding prophecy as "provocation for change" (Adriana Valerio).

For many women, patriarchy as a form of domination over our bodies, no longer has any credit and even where men's behaviour is still highly patriarchal, more

women than ever - all over the world - are freeing themselves. Free, they work together so that their mothers, sisters and beloved daughters are also free. Women's strength and freedom is – like the kingdom of God – in the here and now. They are alive, they are visible, and above all, they are contagious!

However, we cannot say that patriarchy is over until men also attend to equal relations and until both men and women become personally responsible for their own actions, and free themselves of the habit of delegating to others.

In moments of crisis women are granted a salvific role in a hypothetical feminization of society and the church. It is as if we were considered the unique bearers of moral renewal and of a civilizing mission which the Catholic church (the institution which more than any other in history has taken on patriarchal connotations), has actually denied us.

We do not feel obliged to accept this role but we rather wish and work for men to become aware of partial nature their own gender as well as of the conditioning they have received from a male chauvinist culture. We believe that the divine will expand through a radical transformation of consciousness in society and in the churches.

### ***Where are we now?***

In these pandemic times relations at a distance have blossomed, and we have been in touch with women a long way away, sometimes from even across the ocean. Normally, we would never have been able to meet them nor would we have been able to organize the various exchanges we have had. It has become a time for women's celebrations, domestic liturgies, many online services, a time full and overflowing with shared ecumenical prayer.

Before the pandemic some of us had, on various occasions, been in contact with "Women for the Church" (Donne per la Chiesa) and we continue to exchange news, online talks, sisterly messages, books and information with this association.

What we have shared, and still want to share, is the idea and desire to build a common vision, a "synergy of differences" to include those many realities which already exist. By abandoning the risk of isolation and fragmentation, such realities could become a powerful conversation partner in our struggle against sexism.

We are not talking only of Catholic women but also of other women who recognize the need to unmask the roots of the patriarchal, misogynous and androcentric imaginary. They may be engaged in parish work, in religious education, in local groups; they may be our religious sisters or women of other faiths and religions all wanting to pursue a journey of female freedom which has no need of blessings from above.

Many groups on the interreligious scene which are forming spontaneously (or in a more organized fashion) can help us towards this goal. They are comprised of women who, like us, are on a quest and wish to share their rebirth and re-flourishing.

Our last National Conference (Women's Bodies. Journeying from Patriarchal Domination to an Incarnate Spirituality) was held in March 2019 in the International Women's House in Rome. We were called to gather in one of the most important centres for women, at the heart of the politics and relations of Italian feminism.



*The International Women's House and the symbol of our XXIII Conference*

We thus chose to make ourselves available to meet and exchange views with other women who like us are, in this historical moment, creating transformative thought and practice, taking the conflict necessary to this process in our stride. Women's voices are currently and powerfully emerging and are being heard all over the world. The feminist revolution has empowered our speech. It has not, however, been without a backlash which we discern in the continuing increase in domestic violence and femicide all over the world. The most reactionary factions in the Church and in politics are attempting to bring things back to "normal" or even take us back to the "dark ages".

We are witnessing (as if there were some sort of global reactionary design), patriarchy's attack on abortion laws, attempts to abolish women's rights starting with the basic right to education, and leading to homophobia, transphobia and the persecution of migrant populations. Rich nations are building walls to keep out arriving immigrants while most of the victims of war among the civil population are women and children.

As new theological challenges such as ecofeminist theology and queer theology, come – in our own context - on the scene, we need to get together and attempt to understand their possibilities, ambiguities, resources as well as their problematic aspects. The aim is to create a community inclusive of all differences, to make room for a spirituality which is connected to humankind and the cosmic nature - animal, vegetable and mineral - which surrounds it.

This is why we have deemed it necessary to strengthen our network of relations and affirm once more that we are "on the move" "along the way" together; that our bodies are sacred insofar as they are defined by a "wholeness of body, mind,

emotions and spirituality which cannot be violated” (quoting from the invitation to the Rome conference) connected - as it is - to every living being.

It is clear that this brief history cannot do justice to its contents – be they embodied, liturgical, symbolic or theological – at the heart of each and everyone of our twentythree National Conferences. Interested readers are invited to refer to the Acts and illustrative tables on the Base Communities’ website under the heading “women’s groups” [www.cdbitalia.it](http://www.cdbitalia.it)

### *Our proposal*

Thus, **without having to ask anyone’s permission**, we now share various proposals in progress, along with others which we can imagine, plan and realize together. In particular we want to recall:

- The birth of the OIVD (Interreligious Observatory of Violence against Women) which was the idea of Paola Cavallari, promoter and president. We think the two sub-groups “Interreligious women” and “We are all Anne Soupa” provide a great opportunity for forming an interreligious network as well as for liaising with Catholic women internationally. In this way we are engaged in discussions with women belonging to different religions producing studies and public statements on how patriarchal religion has contributed to the discrimination and exclusion of women and how it continues to breed violence.

- The group formed round the letter “The church hierarchy asks women’s forgiveness” is another opportunity for networking both with Italian women belonging to various groups and associations as well as with international networks. <https://www.Cdbitalia.it/chiesa-chiedici-scusa-le-novita-la-risposta-del-card-bassetti>

- The Association “Women for the Church” whose president is Paola Lazzarini, is another channel for women to make their presence felt in the church: “*We are Christian women, belonging to various groups and associations each having their own specificity and history. We have come together in order to respond to our baptismal calling. We commit ourselves to an increasingly egalitarian Church able to promote the full dignity and participation of all.*” (from the *Women for the Church manifesto*)

- Last, but certainly not least as far as women’s speaking out is concerned, is our openness to interreligious movements and the international networks of Catholic women such as the **Catholic Women’s Council**, and **Voices of Faith**. We consider the possibility of organizing a new international Synod of Catholic women with great interest.

To these ends we recognize ourselves as the **Base Communities’ Women’s Groups and the Many Others**. We commit ourselves not only to the proposals already on the table but also to those actions which we will imagine, dream and share with each other so as to bring them about together.

- A **pilgrimage** organized by the Catholic Women's Council (CWC) and in Italy by Voices of Faith which originated in the German church of Cologne (Mary 2.0). Groups of networks from all five continents (with different countries, language groups and cultures) would be involved. It would contemplate meetings, conferences, concerts, debates, dance, bicycle tours, different forms of artistic expression and should terminate in Rome.

- A national gathering/conference to include both the signees of the "Letter asking women's forgiveness" as well as those who see the need for a "quantic leap" (Mary Daly). The aim is not to lose sight of the proposals from the Amazon Synod which were the result of women's work and of their vision of a Church of equals which have largely been ignored.

- **Towards an Ecumenical Synod of Christian Women:** to give birth with creative courage to a large international ecumenical and inclusive event in a year or two's time.

For our part, we hope that in the near future an interreligious meeting may unite women of different faiths in a common goal to overcome divisions, walls, misunderstandings and ideologies. A meeting that would commit us to supporting women's ventures all over the world, in solidarity with movements for peace, for the protection of nature and for a greater recognition of women's contribution to society, politics, work and religious groups. To this end small groups could link together and- we believe - be signs of something really new.

We are, therefore happy to share with all our friends - in a broader "visitation" - the experience which we have acquired in our group work and in the relations we have made. We are referring to our thought, engagement, talents and skills on behalf of the Communities of the future, for a "different church" as we await a new Pentecost which will change a theology and practice which is centuries old and simply is no longer acceptable.

"And in the last days it shall be, God declares, and I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams" (Acts 2,16, Joel 3,1)



*Women belonging to different groups united,  
The group "We are all Anne Soupa" gruppo " OIVD , 2020*

## APPENDIX

Base Communities' Women's groups in collaboration with  
Circle Women, Women on a Quest (Padua, Ravenna, Verona),  
Identity and Difference, The Grail-Italy, Thea-Theology in the Feminine

**XXI NATIONAL CONFERENCE - Verona 15 – 17 May 2015**

**Divine Footsteps on Today's Roads  
The Mystical and Political Strength of Women's Embodied-Word**

### **BREAKING BREAD TOGETHER**

#### **Greeting and Introduction**

##### **Prayer: Awakening**

It is dawn.  
In the silence of this morning  
Only birds in a hurry  
Flutter the life of an April day.  
The breath of my soul  
Seeks space  
And my restlessness awaits the sunrise.  
Let us open the windows  
Of our heart and let life's light come in.  
Let us open the windows  
And welcome the warmth  
Which warms us all.  
Hurry,  
Love has no time to lose,  
It is far too precious  
Let us open our hearts  
And embrace the world (*Elsa Gelso*)

**MUSIC:** Jan Garbarek, *Procedentem Sempiterna*

##### **Rereading of verses from Psalm 139**

All: 13 *For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.*

Reader. -                      and my mother in her mother's womb  
   And her mother in her mother's womb

And her mother in her mother's...

A long genealogy of women  
   In Your infinite endless dream...

A. – 14 *I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.*

R. -                                The wonderful fruit of my foremothers, a part of You  
   And likewise my daughter  
   And likewise all women, my sisters.

A. - 14 *Wonderful are your works*

R. -                                stardust fruit of your desire  
   A part of You, Matrix of life.

A. - 14 *You know me right well*

R. -                                You know my limits and my anxieties,

My desire to love and my thirst for the infinite

A. - *Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my thoughts.*  
<sup>24</sup> *See if there is any wicked<sup>[c]</sup> way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.<sup>[d]</sup>*

### **Bible readings:**

#### **The Gospel of Mary :( 12-15)**

*Then Mary rose, embraced them all and said to her brothers:..”Do not be troubled and doubt because his grace will go with you and protect you “  
. (7-16)*

*Mary said to them::*

*“What hasn’t been given to you to hear, I will announce to you:*

*I had a vision from the teacher and I told him:*

*Lord, I see you in this apparition*

*He replies “Blessed are you that are not disturbed at my sight*

*Where is our nous, there is our treasure..*

#### **Comment on the Gospel of Mary:**

The “nous”, “the treasure” the fine point of the soul is the true knowledge that each person has of him or herself.. Jesus chose to reveal this precisely to Mary, a woman “The teacher has made her worthy and loved her more than us”, says Levi Matthew.

Mary is not troubled. Trustingly, she has welcomed him and then, with tender care she turns to her brothers to encourage them and reveal the secret she has received. A profound relation between the divine and the human, the feminine and the masculine. “We will become the human in all his or her wholeness. Let us allow her to take root in us and grow as s/he has asked.

#### **The Gospel of John 4,5-30**

<sup>27</sup> *Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”*

The disciples’ wonder and silence aren’t positive at all, they are signs of a difficulty still with us today, the difficulty men have listening to women speak!

It’s not easy for us to cause men to wonder. Often we appear incomprehensible to them, complicated, boring or uninteresting compared to what the world of their own sex has to offer. In fact, in John’s story it is Jesus who causes the disciples to wonder as he breaks customs and taboos: a rabbi didn’t speak to a woman on the street; Jews didn’t speak to Samaritans.

Wonder prisms open our way of looking at reality in a way which urges change. The men’s question, however, is hanging in the air and doesn’t get answered

Now, the disciples’ desire - which often leads them to ask the teacher questions - is not sparked off.

Everything comes to a halt and their wonder does not lead them to ask why

As it happens, the tradition has recorded the theological conversation between the Samaritan woman and Jesus just like other women’s words and deeds.

It would almost seem that this male difficulty, along with many others, is intentionally thrown into relief by the Gospels: their intolerance as far as children are concerned; the way they fall asleep in the garden of Gethsemane, Judah’s betrayal, Peter’s denial, Thomas’ unbelief. There is nothing like the faithfulness of the women’s love, from the Magnificat right up to the women present at the cross and the tomb, with their compassionate fortitude.

This difference – which we recognize - comes out quite clearly in the Gospels, proof that a male perspective is able to see what Jesus taught.

May those who kept and transmitted the first oral and written traditions, then, be blessed as they saw and reported precisely those traces of freedom which obviously lay outside the cultural, social and religious mores of the day. This, in fact, is what followed on from their wonder: the ability to give body and speech to a reality which their world and era did not yet share so that the new could take its time to make itself comfortable.

This has all been a very complex process with which we are quite familiar as we bustle to and fro, inside and out, filling and emptying, building and demolishing. Such is the enormous work of the symbolic as it weaves together the meaning of things and words. If we follow this path we have no other choice than to drink of the water which gives life, quenching the thirst of our inner most being, the *“nous” the “treasure”, that fine point of the soul, the true knowledge that each of us has of him or herself but which has to be rediscovered,* as our friends from Ravenna put it. (Doranna Lupi)

**MUSIC:** Fausto Bottai, *Moon Serenade*

*From Gaia and God* (di Rosemary Radfort Ruether, pag. 385):

1. “If we are “optimistic” it suggests that change is inevitable and will happen in the “natural course” of things, so we not make much effort ourselves. Someones else will take care of it. If we are “pessimistic” change is impossibile, and therefore it is useless to try....
2. What we need is neither optimism nor pessimism, in these terms, but committed love.
3. We also remain clear that life is not made whole “once and for all”, in some static millennium of the future. It is made whole again and again, in the renewed day born from night and in the new spring that arises from each winter..
4. Being rooted in love for our real cmmunities of life and our common mother, Gaia, can teach us patient passion, a passion that is not burnt out of season, but can be renewed season after season.
5. Our revolution is not just for us, but for our children, for the generation of living beings to come. What we can do is to plant a seed, nurture a seed-bearing plant here and there, and hope for a harvest that goes beyond the limits of our powers and the span of our lives.

**• YOU ARE BLESSED**

6. You are blessed if you wonder at the the light each morning brings, for your eyes that see, your hands that caress, you feet that walk.
- A.** If you sing because your heart is beating
7. You are blessed if you think that today the first day of the rest of your life is beginning.
8. You are blessed if you look at people and things with pure eyes, when you manage to laugh, when you take joy in tiny flowers and the simple gifts you receive as you walk through life.
9. You are blessed if you know how to direct your desire to being rather than appearing, if you don’t obstruct the movement of life itself and the spirit’s inspiration.
10. You are blessed if you have ears to understand, an intelligence which contemplates and if you realize that life, in all its forms, is a web of relations of which you are part.
11. Your are blessed if you experience that wonder at being without which no revelation of what is, is possible.
12. You are blessed if you know that the one great law of life is love and loving means accomplishing the law by going beyond it.
- A.** You are blessed if you know that something is missing because loss invokes fullness as thirst invokes the fountain.

## **IN MEMORY OF JESUS' SUPPER**

Here we are trusting and welcoming each other as we remember the bread which was broken and the cup which Jesus shared with the men and women closest to him, during the Last Supper. On that occasion he said "Take, eat this is my body, drink of it all of you. This is my blood, and do this in memory of me". Every woman who conceives shares body and blood with the life in her womb, a precious mixture out of which our humanity springs, a deep root of empathy. It's no coincidence that Jesus uses this symbolic act to remind us of what his whole life taught: unconditioned universal love for all living beings, each and everyone loved in his or her own unique fashion.

**MUSIC:** Kruger Brothers, *Beautiful Nothing*

### **Spontaneous prayer: let us begin with a prayer**

#### **Thank you for your presence**

If I look at the mountains covered in snow  
I feel Your presence  
If I look into the eyes of the person I love  
I feel Your blessing.  
If I listen to Your voice in the depths of my heart  
I feel your company.  
If, in a world increasingly violent, I see signs of hope,  
I feel Your love.  
Thank you, Fountain of life and love.  
For Your presence in our lives,  
for the care you show every one of Your creatures,  
for the joy You give us  
and the help You offer  
in times of difficulty.  
I no longer have a name to call You by,  
nor an image to represent You with  
You can move ever more freely in the freedom  
Of my thoughts and in my heart  
(*Carla Galletto*)

### **Lay prayer**

Hail Mary,  
How beautiful  
and full of grace,  
child, sister, friend, lover, mother, old woman  
Inside me as  
light as the sky  
with her feet firmly on the ground  
as you earn your daily bread  
and discover your strength  
may what escapes you be surprising!  
Changing as the sky  
Solid as the earth  
Blessed be your loves  
Blessed your freedom  
Sweet Mary  
Fear is with you  
Cradle her like a fruit of your womb  
Give in to temptation

And let go of your children  
 Forgive men their debts  
 And let them to you  
 Be indebted  
 Hail Mary  
 You that know evil  
 And the time that prepares for death  
 Blessed be the seasons  
 The cycles of the moon,  
 Blessed be water, piss, milk and blood  
 Blessed be births, deaths and re-births  
 Blessed be life and its cruelties  
 With you I pray  
 That time be my mother  
 Between the womb and the grave  
 That my laugh may be light  
 And my tears fertile  
 And the truth, perhaps not too distant  
 Hail Oh Mary,  
 I am a daughter like you,  
 bless my father  
  
 I who am born a woman  
 Help me to become one  
 And rejoice in my every happiness.  
 (Alessandra Racca)

### **Final Blessing**

#### **Shekhinah, My sister in the wind**

*Shekhinah: She who dwells, She who is near, the divine Presence who indwells, the feminine face of God.*

*Shekhinah is a grammatical variant of the Hebrew root Shin Kaf Nun/shākhan which means dwell, live, indwell, presence (Concilium 5/2000).*

1. I feel upheld by the universe  
 By the fountain where every life begins,  
 wafted across time and the space which enfolds me  
 gently borne on the wind.
2. *Shekhinah!* Heal my mind and body  
*Shekhinah*, I call you my friend,  
 use your beaming power  
 help my hurting heart to heal.
3. Your presence in my life is so subtle  
 That sometimes I forget to let you in  
 The shelter of your love protects me  
*Shekhinah*, my sister in the wind.
4. *Shekhinah*, my sister in the wind  
 I trust your love which brings wholeness to my being  
 your *Ruah* (spirit) rustles in the wind  
 your wings cradle my soul
- T. *Shekhinah*, my sister in the wind  
*Shekhinah*, you whisper in the wind  
*Shekhinah*, you spiral in the wind

*Shekhinah, my sister in the wind.*  
 (Geela Rayzel Raphael 1987)

**Sign of Anointing:** “may the divine Presence go with you!”

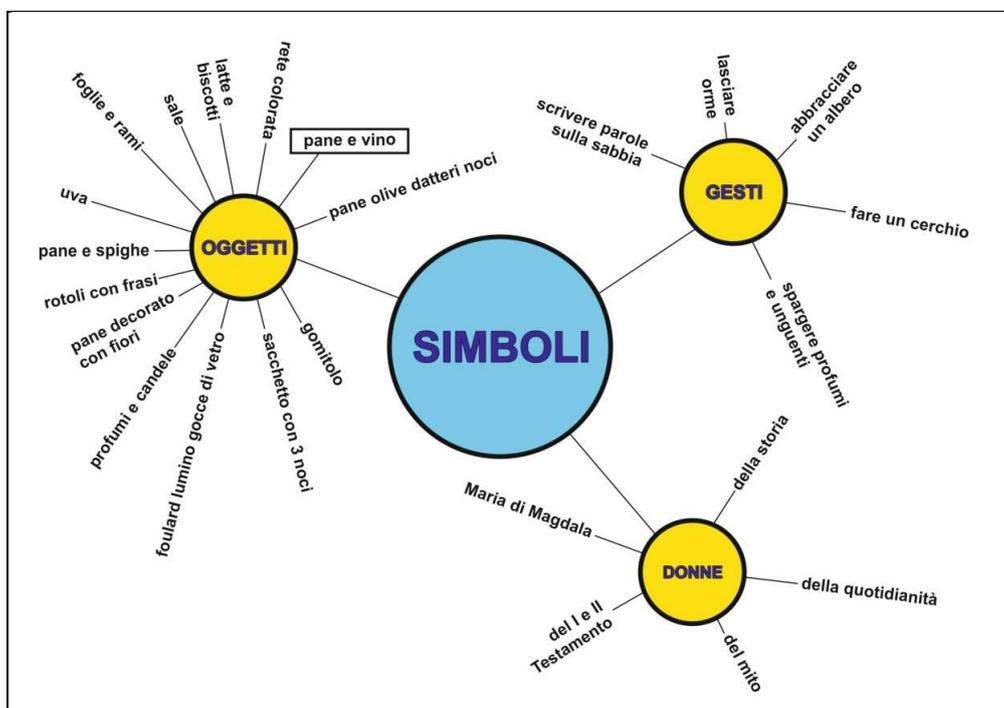
**The scrolls are given out –**

**MUSIC:** Soeur Marie Keyrouz, *Ya Sayyda-s-Salam* (Oh Lord of Peace)

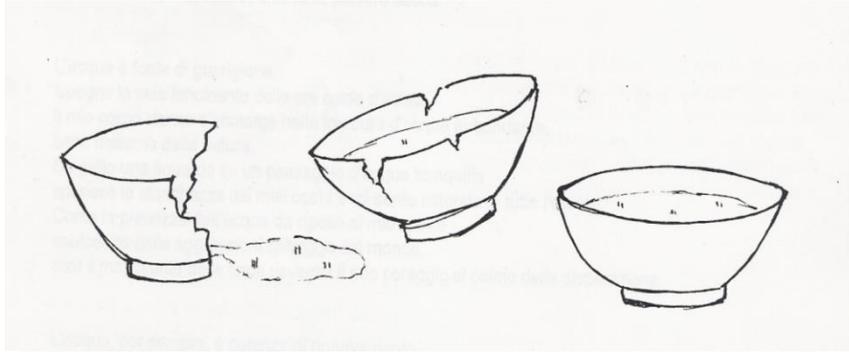
*Organized by the Women’s group of the Viottoli Base Community, Pinerolo in collaboration with “Women on a Quest” from Ravenna*



Setting the table for the Eucharist –Verona, National Conference 2016



## BEYOND GOD OUR FATHER



### THE DIVINE, HOW TO FREE, SPEAK AND SHARE HER

#### GENERAL MEETING: I OFFER YOU A CUP OF WATER

We have prepared a celebration on water because we feel the need to get back to the wellspring and the wealth hidden in the thousand streams of our experience and pathways, which sometimes flows slowly and silent like a karstic river, other times roars and rushes like mountain streams.

“Water is a source of healing.

It quenches a burning thirst in the heat of the summer,

Water is the figure of the eternal, endless current

And our ability to adapt to every situation in life.

It lives out the secret of change in the midst of the unchangeable

Not submitting to the framework of law,

the fullness of peace in the midst of unceasing movement

she rises up only to descend once more

she changes pain into joy and is the perfect union between personal identity and community”

(Sun Ai Lee Park, Corea del Sud - Meditation Book,

National Assembly of Women of the United Church of Christ, USA, July 1984)

Wisdom’s voice speaks to us from the waters. She says:

come and take of the water which restores and renews the whole of creation.

Oh wellspring of our hope, here we are before you,

You have invited us to come with our gifts and desires

With what makes us strong, with our questing

Come and quench our thirst with the living water of your presence

**ALL THE CONGREGATION:**

We celebrate the presence of the Mother God in our life

And we wish to be made whole with the water of her promise,

Wellspring of wisdom, hear the cries of your sons and daughters:

May your healing waters

Soothe our suffering.

We are hungry and thirsty for your living water

Hidden in the heart of our different traditions

In our struggles we want to be able to face risks

And we come before you to pray in spirit and in truth.

**The Gospel of John 7, 37-38:**

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. <sup>38</sup> Whoever believes in me, as <sup>[a]</sup> the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

### **Remembering...**

We want to remember all the good things of life  
Which You have given us,  
but we now we also want to remember  
all that in our life  
witnesses to our fragility and hurt,  
everything which yearns in us for the living water  
which will transform the deserts of our desperation  
into gardens of hope.  
We conserve the memory of tears  
Which we women have poured out silently  
Afraid that someone might hear.  
Tears we held back because we believed what they told us  
That we deserved the violence we endured,  
The tears that we were unable to hold back  
But still nobody comforted us  
The tears we have cried alone  
Because we didn't want to ask for help  
The tears we have shed with other women  
Because our sisters couldn't feed their children  
Or because they live in fear or because the earth itself is threatened,  
We cry for this and more  
And for all this we offer you a cup of water

( All go to the “well”, and fill an empty cup with water and pour it on the ground)

### **Prayer:**

Often my cup is broken  
My dreams of security, of a safe home are broken  
Who will help me pick up the pieces?  
Can broken lives be mended so that  
they can hold living water once more?  
We remember all the women  
Who have gone trustingly towards an unknown world,  
who, like Esther, have overcome fear with courage,  
We thank you greatly  
For all the women who have dared come forward  
And become leaders  
For all who have dared to challenge society's stereotypes  
At the risk of being isolated.

**ALL THE CONGREGATION:** We give you thanks

(All go to the well, and repeat the action with a cracked cup – emptying it on the ground)

### **Preghiera:**

Sometimes my cup is cracked and near to breaking

Overflowing with the cries of a disfigured and wounded humanity  
Yet alone we can do nothing  
We cannot quench another person's thirst  
Nor fill someone else's water jar.  
We remember all those women, who down the ages, have tried to change society.  
We remember those known and unknown  
Who have fought to change history and have hoped before us  
We remember all those women whose name and face we do not know  
Who have contributed to creating peace – shalom – on earth..  
May their courage and their life force sprout  
In the soil of our relations  
So that we neither become weak nor get lost.  
Let us remember our sister companions along the way  
We can name them out loud  
Or remember them in silence.

**ALL THE CONGREGATION:**

We give you thanks  
So that our cups, when shared, take on another meaning  
The suffering in solitude is touched by grace  
Here we see a well, and an underground spring which never dries up,  
we know that we can draw of this water  
so that faith may prevail over our discouragement,  
and hope over our despair.  
Sisters, let us continue to give ourselves the courage to hope:  
that our empty cup might be full  
that our broken cup might be mended  
that our cracked cup might once more be proved useful.

**ALL THE CONGREGATION:** Amen

Now the earth is no longer arid,  
but is ready to welcome women's life force.  
Whoever wants to can now express a brief thought, a feeling, a desire, a wish.....

**Now let us read together Isaiah 58,10a-11:**

If you offer your food to the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,  
then your light shall rise in the darkness  
and your gloom be like the noonday.  
<sup>11</sup>The LORD will guide you continually,  
and satisfy your needs in parched places,  
and make your bones strong;  
and you shall be like a watered garden,  
like a spring of water,  
whose waters never fail..

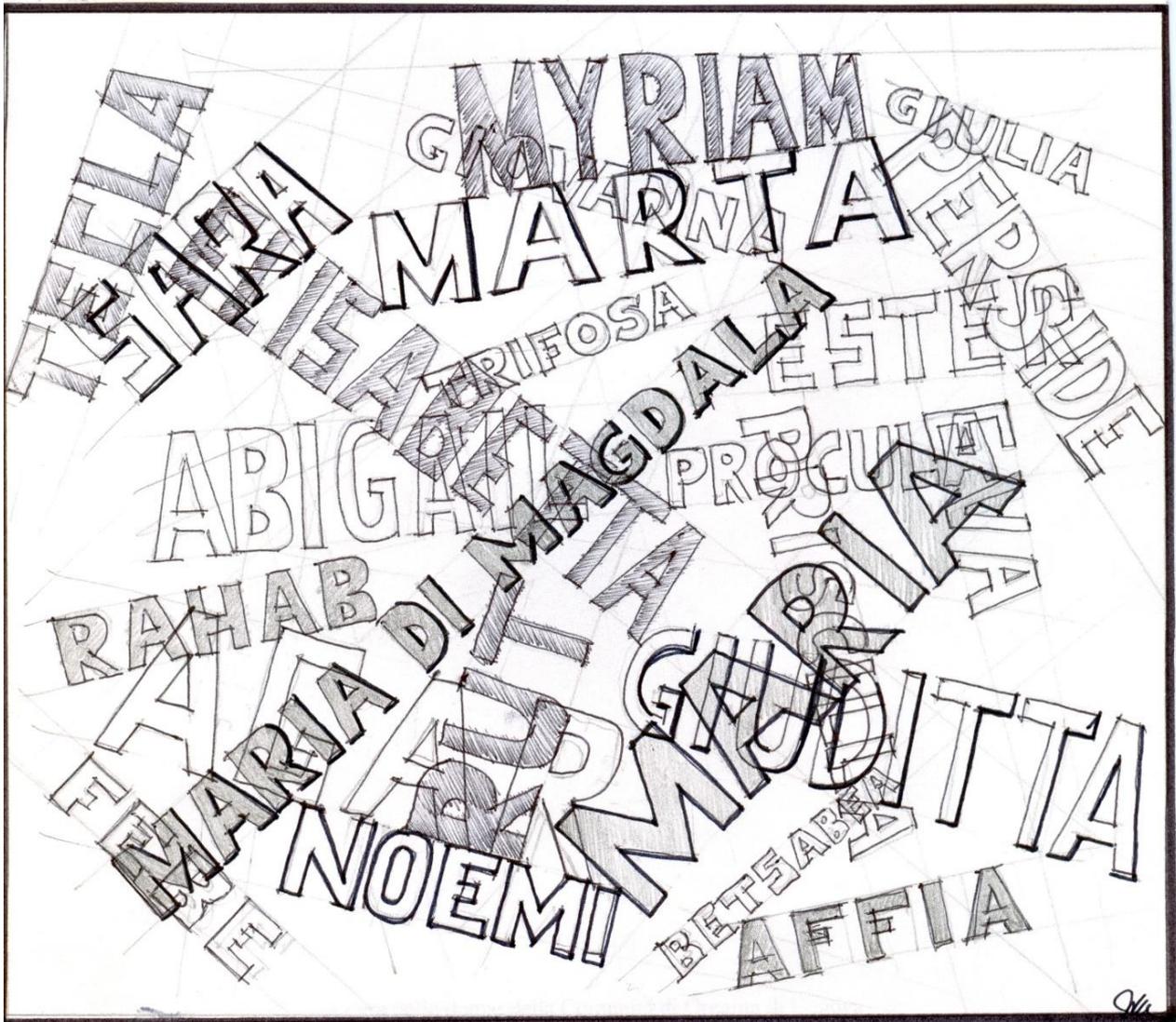
(Baskets full of bread)

**Final thanksgiving:**

Sisters, let us grant each other the strength to appreciate Mother Earth  
With all her secrets and natural beauty,  
so that, conscious of belonging to her,  
we can safeguard it for ourselves and our children.

Sisters, thankyou for the bread and the water we have shared.  
These signs of our being-together  
Give us the courage to actively work  
In our society which generates discrimination and wars.  
Sisters let us grant each other the strength not to look away  
From today's violence of today and the pain of all women.

*By the "Women on a Quest" group fremo Verona - XII NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF THE  
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*This document was prepared on behalf of the coordinating group of the Christian Base Communities' Women's Groups and the Many Others.*

*It was produced and written by: Doranna Lupi, Catti Cifatte, Elena Lobina Cocco, Paola Pancaldi, Anna Caruso, Grazia Villa and Carla Galetto.*

- *The photos are from the archives of the Christian Base Communities' Women's Groups*
- *Drawings by Catti Cifatte*



**Christian Base Communities' Women's Groups and the Many Others**