



# HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION

היברו יוניון קולג - מכון למדעי היהדות

## New York School Graduate Studies Program

### *Doctor of Ministry Project Final Approval*

**To: The Members of the Doctor of Ministry Faculty**

I hereby submit the signatures of approval from my advisors and Dr. Carol Ochs for my completed Doctor of Ministry Project.

The title of the completed Project is:

SOUL FINDING: ACCESSING SPIRITUALITY IN MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN  
FROM NEW YORK CITY TO A TEXAS BORDER TOWN.

I have submitted one unbound copy on 25% cotton paper to the HUC-JIR library for binding.

I have submitted velo or spiral bound copies to my mentors and Dr. Carol Ochs.

<u>DONNA E. CONROY</u>	<u>Donna E. Conroy</u>	<u>3/14/08</u>
Student Name	Student Signature	Date

_____ HUC-JIR Mentor's Name	_____ HUC-JIR Mentor's Signature	_____ Date
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_____ Dr. Carol Och's Approval	_____ Date
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**SOUL FINDING:  
ACCESSING SPIRITUALITY IN MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN  
FROM NEW YORK CITY TO A TEXAS BORDER TOWN.**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Doctor of Ministry at Hebrew Union College  
March 24, 2008**

**DONNA E. CONROY**



**TITLE: SOUL FINDING: ACCESSING SPIRITUALITY IN MOTHERS  
AND THEIR CHILDREN - FROM NEW YORK CITY TO A TEXAS  
BORDER TOWN.**

**CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY.**

For 13 years (1993-2006) I lived and ministered in New York City, specifically, East Harlem, as a community health nurse for an agency sponsored by a group of Roman Catholic religious women, called "The Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Services." It was while working there, among newly arrived Mexican immigrants, that I conceived of the project originally entitled: "Soul Finding: Accessing Spirituality in Mothers and their Children who live in East Harlem." My position as community health nurse, in this multi-faceted service agency, gave me an opportunity to work closely with the social service arm of the agency and be involved in multiple service projects with mothers and children. My own clinical practice was in the area of peri-natal nursing, working with mothers from conception to birth to after birth until the child has reached approximately 3 years of age. The mothers were involved in voluntary support programs after the infant reached 2 months, and through their participation, the professional staff was able to follow various families until the children began nursery school. Maternal-child bonds were well established by this time. It was during this time that I began and finished a course of studies at HUC/PGCMH for an advanced degree in pastoral counseling, and began to recognize a need, expressed to me by several mothers and service

providers, to talk with me about "faith" and "religion" and "God." I attempted to engage some mothers and service providers (in the therapeutic nursery setting) in one-on-one conversations, offering them the time and the safety of a holding environment and relationship to speak about how their awareness of God's presence and the healing power of grace and love can influence their parenting and teaching style. This experience developed into this Demonstration Project, through which I intend to show that an increased awareness of God's action and presence in a woman's life can influence her parenting style and that the pastoral encounter is one way to heighten this awareness.

I had the opportunity to test my idea with four women who generously agreed to speak with me about their relationship with God and how God and a sense of spirituality has been and is part of their family life. About how they came to know God and how they have experienced God as they journeyed from other parts of this country or from their country of origin to reside in New York City. These conversations were profound, and full of hope.

The relationship between myself and the women was well established and deeper bonds were forming, when this project was rather abruptly terminated by circumstances in my own life. I was asked by my religious community, The Sisters of Mercy, to relocate to Laredo, Texas, to assume responsibility for the program we sponsor, internally, to introduce women to life as a vowed Sister of Mercy. This period of their incorporation into

the community is called the novitiate. The novice minister (the ministry to which I was invited) occupies a unique position in a mutual discernment process. I accompany women as they discern their call to Mercy, and I stand in for (so to speak) the community of Sisters of Mercy in discerning a woman's individual fit in Mercy. An essential component of this discernment is ministry - how does this woman understand her call to ministry as a Sister of Mercy? What does it mean for her to be called Sister of Mercy in a ministry setting? All of the women who are admitted to the novitiate have been involved in one way or another in a ministry setting in the Roman Catholic Church. Some of them struggle to understand the purpose of the structure of this novitiate time that removes them from familiar surroundings, work, family, friends and community to have them come to Laredo, Texas, to enter into this intense journey of self-discovery. It is a question of identity: Who am I as a Sister of Mercy in ministry? This is one facet of the novice's discernment, integral to the whole. In coming to a fuller, integrated sense of self, the woman is given opportunities during the novitiate to be engaged in ministry with women who are living at the margins of society, seeking fullness of life in church and in society. She is also given opportunities for communal theological reflection during ministry seminars. The place of ministry for most of the women is in one program or another of a ministry sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy from the Regional Community of St. Louis, Mo. One of my responsibilities as novice minister is to facilitate this weekly ministry seminar, an important

venue for the exercise of pastoral counseling skills, which has also served as an introduction for me to the ministries offered by the Sisters of Mercy in Laredo, Texas, primarily offered through a non-profit agency called "Mercy Ministries of Laredo." I have also been invited to be involved in ministry as a pastoral counselor with the women who come to Mercy for support and assistance.

Having described facets of my personal journey that seem to me relevant to understanding the geographic sweep and subsequent theological implications of this demonstration project, I will offer synopses of the mission statements and ministries of each Agency. I will state the specific needs apparent in the population of these two communities that, although geographically diverse, are at the same time reflective of similarities in culture, language, religious orientation, immigration status, socio-economic problems and family structure. Similar, also, are the efforts of programs sponsored by various religious communities to walk with women who are seeking fullness of life in church and society - for themselves and for their children. What at first seemed to me to be an almost insurmountable hurdle in the completion of the Demonstration Project as I had originally hoped and conceived it, has proved to be, as I myself become inculturated into life in southeastern Texas, the blessing that unequivocally declares the relevance of this Project to ministry in a broad context; as its title implies, from the concrete of Manhattan streets to the cactus of the Texas desert. Across this geographical expanse, mothers are caring for children and

within this vocation, yearning to en flesh their own spirituality. In working with several families, I have witnessed how a mother's personal relationship with God, when supported and allowed to flourish, can influence the dynamics of the entire family - most particularly, mother-child bonding and interaction. My personal experience and belief tell me that before the fullness of this influence can be realized, women must have the opportunity to tell their stories, and have these stories heard and honored by another. The specific need to which I plan to minister is a need for women to discover, to honor and to use their own voices in the work of self-discovery. Mothers yearn to tell their stories and through the telling of the stories, discover ever more deeply who they are and who God calls them to be - women seeking fullness of life in family, church and society - to be the best mothers they can be.

### **MISSION STATEMENTS**

I will address the specifics of each Agency individually, including mission statements, a brief history of services provided, and the demographics of each population. After these specific identifying characteristics have been introduced, I will speak more broadly about the implementation of the work I hope to accomplish with the women who are associated with these Agencies - The Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Service in New York City, Mercy Ministries in Laredo, Texas.

## NEW YORK CITY

### The Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Service (LSA):

"LSA, founded in 1958, is a nonprofit community-based organization that works with the people of East Harlem to address the physical, emotional, educational and spiritual dimension of family health. Its home-based and center-based programs are designed to empower those who are most vulnerable and who have least access to the basic necessities of life, in the conviction that the entire community grows when individuals and families are affirmed in their own dignity."

In keeping with this mission statement, the Little Sisters Family Health Services sponsors a variety of community and center based programs, one of which is the home health agency. The home health agency, of which I was a professional member, can be understood fully only in the context of the mission as it is embodied in the constellation of services that has taken place over forty years of work in East Harlem.

The target populations from LSA for this Demonstration Project are, directly, three mothers who are enrolled in the home health agency, and, indirectly their children. Also included in this population is one woman of color who is a teacher's aide in the therapeutic nursery, another certified service offered by this Agency.

These families who utilize LSA home health agency and the therapeutic nursery are comprised of 99% single women of color. Ethnic diversity, always a reality in East Harlem (with the newest immigrant groups coming from Central and South America, Africa and China) adds richness to the cultural fabric of the neighborhood, and it also increases pressures on the

family system as these new immigrants strive to incorporate themselves into the life of this vibrant community. The stress of immigration, poverty and social isolation puts these families at enormous risk of foster care placement. The goal of the Agency is to preserve and build up intact families. The home health agency and the therapeutic nursery are two services that offer unique, discreet yet parallel support to families in times of stress.

Having worked for many years at this Agency in the capacity of community health nurse, I often came away from situations wondering: "Where is God in this home?" I never took the risk of searching for the answer to my question at its source: with the mothers themselves.

### **LAREDO, TEXAS**

Laredo is a Mexican border town located in Southeastern Texas, three hours south of San Antonio, west of Corpus Christi and Brownsville. The natural boundary between Laredo and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, is the Rio Bravo (Grande) River. Laredo has a rich history and at one point in time, was one city divided by the Rio Bravo (Grande) - part of the city was in US territory and part was in Mexico. People crossed the bridge freely, daily, for commerce, education, trade, family visiting. This is no longer true. The cities were demarcated in 1847, following the war with Mexico, and the River is guarded by the US border patrol. There are no roads out of Laredo and southeastern Texas that are not monitored by border patrol agents, armed with dogs, weapons and sophisticated electronic surveillance

equipment. However, the border is soft in the city of Laredo itself, and detection of undocumented people who cross through the waters daily is left to agents further up the road. This results in an influx of undocumented people from Mexico and Central America who live, with their families, in Laredo. Access to health care and necessary services are severely restricted, if present at all, as is the case throughout the continental United States. Laredo is a city that is proud of a rich Mexican heritage. This city of approximately 231,470 people is 95% Mexican, with the remaining 5% "other". This "other" includes all Anglos, people of color, Asian and Latino populations from Central and South America. The dominant language is Spanish, while the official language of the city is English. One is able to live and work in the area without fluency in Spanish – although being able to speak Spanish, as a Sister of Mercy, influences our presence and ability to effectively communicate with the people with whom we choose to live and minister. The Sisters of Mercy have been present in Laredo and other locations throughout southeast Texas as primary health care providers and teachers for more than 120 years, and remain present through the expanded work of Mercy Ministries. Mercy Ministries is comprised of a fully staffed, certified and multi-service outreach ministry which was established as a new expression of Mercy's longstanding commitment to respond to the needs of the Laredo community. Primary healthcare, healthcare education, advocacy and social services are important components of Mercy's mission to serve people in need. The City of Laredo

Health Department, Webb County, Texas A&M Colonias Programs, Laredo Medical Center and many others have pledged their support to Mercy Ministries of Laredo. The mission statement of the Agency is thus described:

Founded in the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy and following the example of Jesus, Mercy Ministries of Laredo provides primary healthcare, healthcare education, and social services in Laredo and the surrounding area. We will strive to address the needs of all persons, especially those who are economically poor and marginal. Mercy Ministries of Laredo will demonstrate special concern for the needs of women and children while promoting family values. We will collaborate with other providers and partners who share in our mission and values.

The target population for this Demonstration Project from Mercy Ministries is three women who have been associated with Mercy Ministries and the Sisters of Mercy for at least 4 years. These women are single parents, Mexican nationals who are here without documents and their primary language is Spanish. Most of the children have been born in the United States.

Both of the service agencies described above operate a number of programs - home health agencies, clinic, preventive services, therapeutic nurseries, language instruction, food pantries, advocacy programs - each program a reflection of the mission statement. The services are highly utilized by the people in their respective catchment areas - East Harlem for the Little Sisters; Laredo and surrounding colonias for Mercy Ministries. Neither agency has a program that directly and specifically addresses the

spiritual needs of families, although this dimension is implied in all services offered.

Most of the women who are connected to these two agencies have experienced trauma and violence in their lives - physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual trauma. They are intimately acquainted with the trauma, in one form or another, of immigration, separation, isolation, domestic violence, insufficient food, shelter and clothing. Their children witness this violence, live through it themselves and suffer its effects.

Specifically, I intend to minister to the universal need, embedded in the heart and soul of each mother, to be the best mother she can be. I intend to help her gain access to the story of her relationship with the Holy in her life and recognize how this relationship influences all of who she is and what she does in the context of her family. The focus of this demonstration project is to assist mothers, through the medium of personal story telling, to access the action and presence of God in their lives and come to a deeper understanding of how this primary relationship with God influences their own relationship with their children and the specific ways in which they live out their call to be mother. I also suspect that they may discover, in conjunction with this, how the lives and care of their children enlarge their love of God and their desire to develop their own spirituality. It is my hope that telling their stories in the holding environment of a pastoral counseling relationship will facilitate recognition, healing, growth, and ultimately strengthening the mother/child bond and enhancing family life. Telling

their stories can help one recognize how an awareness of God's presence and the healing power of grace and love can influence ones parenting style. Exploring spirituality through story telling can help a mother discover God as Co-parent, instilling in her an ability to function in today's world, with its myriad challenges, as the best mother she can be.

## **CHAPTER II: RELIGIOUS AND CLINICAL PRINCIPLES**

### **Religious principles pertinent to this project.**

The central, organizing principle of Christianity (this project is designed within the context of Christianity) is the mystery of the Incarnation, the coming of God's Word to birth in the flesh of Jesus Christ - the good news for Christians is that as Jesus is the Word of God made flesh, each of us is a word of God, cherished into life through our mothers, our caretakers, those who have loved and continue to love us into being. In the words of Rolheiser (1999), "God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink become a sacrament. God's many faces are now everywhere, in flesh, tempered and turned down, so that our human eyes can see him. God, in his many-faced face, has become accessible, and visible, as the nearest water tap. That is the why of the incarnation" (p. 78).

Within the context of Christianity's core belief, citing primarily the works of Ronald Rolheiser and Christopher Morse, feminist theologians have influenced my desire to intentionally honor the stories that women tell of their lives. I suspect that the bulk of this project will address issues of religion and spirituality, rather than theology, and this intuition is supported by authors who write in these areas. Essential feminist values of mutuality and interdependence, in conjunction with the religious phenomenon of a perceived presence of God's accompaniment on life's journey, inform this demonstration project. Sallie McFague is the feminist

theologian who has primarily influenced my own understanding of incarnation/embodiment, language and development of God images in the lives of women. Her study and writing will serve as reference and foundation for the work I will be doing with these women. The writing of Kathleen Fischer, Carol Ochs, and Parker Palmer also serve as additional lens through which I have come to understand how telling the stories of our lives supports self discovery as a path to God and a manifestation of Incarnation.

Having stated that Incarnation is the central doctrine of Christianity, this Demonstration Project is concerned more with how this doctrine is lived out daily, in the lives of the people of God, (spirituality) than it is with religious defense and theological explanations. I understand "theology" in the spirit of Morse (1994) as sayings about the gods which have developed through scholarly research. "The content of the sayings (*logia*) about God and ultimate matters (*theos*) is derived from a preaching called 'the gospel.' This preaching speaks of things, as Luke the evangelist puts it, 'which have been accomplished among us.'

(Luke 1:1). These things are things that are said to have culminated in Jerusalem" (p. 15). As stated, this Project will be carried out in the milieu of spirituality. Massey and Dunn (1999, p.117) make a cogent distinction between religion and spirituality. Religions and religious observance may provide the shape of the God image, while it is spirituality that nurtures the relationship between the individual and that image. Religions represent

organized ways of believing about, relating to and acting in accordance with transcendence and/or divinity, and may provide for the communal expressions and support for the development of spirituality.

Spirituality addresses the phenomenon of transcendence, sacredness, divinity, God (Allah, Yaweh, deities and ultimate meaning or theology and religion) in the lived experience and daily life of the believer.

**Clinical principles pertinent to this project.**

This project could be approached from a variety of clinical perspectives. The theoretical base out of which I will work is attachment theory, having been informed and influenced by the work of Winnicott, Bowlby, Fraiberg and Siegel. It has long been suspected that many of the common psychiatric and social problems of adult life have their roots in the early relationship between the child and it's mother, and adults' emotional well-being and life circumstances profoundly affect the quality of the infant-caregiver relationship. Extensive research in the area of attachment has shown that many children develop insecure attachment to their primary caregivers. Thus, rather than constituting a protective factor for the child's development, the attachment relationship becomes a risk factor for subsequent social-emotional development. The seminal work of Rizutto has influenced the development of this project as I plan to engage mothers who seek to understand how their essential attachment relationship to God may be mirrored in their lives with their children.

One of Bowlby's contributions to attachment theory was to place attachment within the motivational system, distinct from the instinctual system concerned with sex and reproduction, in line with Freud. His contributions make a direct link between the instinct of maternal bonding and a comforting, protective God. Attachment theorists (Winnicott, 1971, Rizzuto, 1979 McDargh, 1983) have compared God to an attachment figure. From their viewpoint, the experience of a relationship with God is the experience of a deep emotion bond. For those who are spiritually conscious, a relationship with God is of ultimate importance. People look to God as the safe haven who offers caring and protection. Greeley (1981, p.18) says that "just as the story of anyone's life is the story of relationships - so each person's religious story is a story of relationships." Kirkpatrick (1995) suggests that attachment to God is similar to the attachment experienced by a child for its mother and conversely, the attachment of God for us is like that of a mother for her child. As Bowlby (1969) observed, if one considers oneself worthy of care and love, one views one's attachment figures as caring and loving of them. Therefore, if one's perception of maternal or paternal attachment is positive, it is likely that one's perception of God attachment will be positive. However, the converse may not be so true. Similar to human attachments, the experience of attachment to God may wax and wane according to the individual's need. This occurs when there is no availability of human attachment figures or under circumstances of severe stress and anxiety when human attachments

simply may not endure. While studying attachment theorists and working with, speaking to and of infants and mothers, I have been drawn to consider a preliminary study by Elizabeth Young-Bruehl and Faith Bethelard, "Cherishment" (2000). Researching the work of Japanese psychoanalyst T. Doi, they began to discover a way to express the human fundamental need/desire "to wish or to expect to be loved" (p. 5). They have investigated and provided clinicians with a new way to think about love, attachment and care, all of which are integral components of the mother/infant dyad. Their work will serve as an important model for my own understanding of this relationship and another way to assist mothers to appreciate their fundamental attachment relationship to God and how this relationship can be mirrored in their love and care for their infants. Their work seems to be influenced by Bowlby's (1969) observation, mentioned previously, that if one considers oneself worthy of care and love, one views one's attachment figures as caring and loving of them.

I intend to address the requirements of Chapter IV by using the Case Study model offered to us throughout our program. The works of the scholars and clinicians cited above, and pertinent literature, will be reviewed and integrated, as applicable, into each case study. I will be presenting, minimally, five situations/cases, in which I will have demonstrated the relationship between clinical and religious principles through my ministry with these specific women. By using this model of presentation, I will demonstrate my understanding of the interplay of

religious and clinical principles within the context of the pastoral counseling relationship.

### **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

#### **Approach and Procedure.**

The aim of this demonstration project is to invite mothers, through the medium of personal story telling, to discover ways in which their relationship with God may or may not influence how they relate with their children. (They may also discover how their children influence their relationship with God.) The subjects of the demonstration project are the women themselves and indirectly, their children. As we speak together, and I listen to the language they use, I will gain insight into the principles that help them recognize the sacred elements of their lives, what and who is meaning-giving for them and how they tell other people about their lives. Because so many of the women associated with LSA and Mercy Ministries have experienced abusive relationships and are disenfranchised from community and family supports, it may be difficult for them to identify these sacred elements. In the holding environment of the pastoral encounter, I will offer myself in listening to and encouraging the women to tell the stories of their lives and their motherhood, using reflective feedback and non-invasive counseling techniques to facilitate conversation and appropriate self-disclosure. As they engage in this work I will listen to their language, both their spoken words and their body language, as we talk together about their images of God, the metaphors they use to describe their relationship with God and with their children; whether they make a connection between these two fundamental relationships - or not; how they

have felt and experienced God's presence or perceived absence during difficult times in their lives, where was God and who stood in for God for them as they made an often perilous journey across the desert and through the water to come to the United States.

I have spoken with appropriate supervisors at both Agencies to assist me in discovering women who may be interested in talking with me about their life's journey. They are aware of and approve of my project. They either have or will give the women a brief explanation of my topic of conversation, and help them to determine whether or not they may be interested in having an initial conversation with me. Once they agree to talk with me, an appointment time is arranged to meet them either at one of the Agencies, in a visiting parlor in my home, or in their own homes, whichever atmosphere offers them the most comfort, security and privacy. Besides their agreement to participate in this conversation, a desire to explore the soul or spiritual dimension of their lives and willingness to attempt to articulate this out loud, the only other requirement would be that they have at least some familiarity with English, although they do not need to be perfectly bilingual. At the outset of the conversation they are assured of the confidential nature of our conversations. They are informed that I am working on a special project that is exploring women's spirituality and relationship with God and how this influences their maternal call.

The following are some topics for our individual sessions, although varied interests will surely be manifest as the conversation deepens. I plan

to have two or three conversations with each woman and each conversation would last no longer than one hour. During the second session I would take the opportunity to invite the women to some hands-on activity that could be a way to visualize their self-expression - letter writing, work with color, clay, fabric or wood, walks in nature, work with plants, scrapbook work with photos, etc. I would talk with them about this towards the end of the second session and have multiple materials available for their use on the second visit. As they work on their project, our conversation will continue. I will also ask the women to bring photos of their children with them, if they have any, on the second visit.

During this time I will introduce some or all of the following ideas towards the aim of facilitating our time together.

"Tell me about...

- What you value most in life.
- What gives your life meaning and purpose.
- Your immigration story.
- Your children.
- Your hopes for your future...for your children's future.
- How you feel about being a mother.
- How you discover your own spirituality - who and what is holy in your life.
- How you pray. What spiritual practices are present in your life.
- How you share your sense of spirituality with your children.

- How your holiness influences the way you live your life each day.
- How your spirituality influences your way of relating with your children.
- Who first taught you about God or instilled in you a sense of the holy.
- How your own childhood memories evoke a sense that God was an important part of your family life - or not.
- Where/how a sense of God, of the sacredness of life, speaks to you most clearly - family, children, nature.
- What you would like your children to learn from you about God and about the sacredness of life.
- How you have experienced God's presence in your life.
- How God has helped you during difficult times in your life - or not.
- How you imagine God for yourself and for your children.
- How caring for your children has influenced your feelings about God."

At the end of the second visit I will invite the woman to return for a third visit, and perhaps bring her completed art work, letter, scrap book - whatever it is that she has worked on - to the session and share the outcome with me if she feels comfortable and free to do so. I would want to establish an atmosphere that encourages sharing, while at the same time, leaving each participant free to share this work of intimacy with me or not.

The work that I have done so far towards completion of the D.Min. program, plus attentiveness to the rhythm, gifts and challenges of daily living helps me to appreciate, in every part of daily life, the mystery of God

unfolding in our world, and most especially, in the lives and homes of the women with whom we are associated. Having the opportunity to articulate ones story is a powerful tool of self-discovery and integration. As we tell our unique story, giving voice to our deepest hopes, dreams, fears and vulnerabilities, we come to a deeper understanding of our personal journey. At times I see my work as deceptively simple - the facilitator of story-telling. Every day I listen to stories - love stories, horror stories, comic stories, stories of hope and faith, stories of loss, grief and deep pain. Stories of success and stories of failure. As I listen to these human stories, I hope to bear witness to my belief that each of us is made to be in intimate relationship with each other and with our Creator (a poignantly maternal image); a Creator who is at once uniquely personal and ultimately mysterious to us. I believe that to find God, we need look no further than our deepest, truest longings and the ordinary stuff of daily life. The core of this D.Min. project is just this: giving voice to the sacred story of motherhood through the telling of personal story.

### **Assessing Outcomes.**

My hopes for each woman who is participating in this D.Min. project are simultaneously simple and profound - that together we discover God's presence in the people God has given us to love and in the ordinary stuff of our daily lives. Some of the ways in which I will be able to assess the outcomes of this project (although not limited to, as I may discover as I become more deeply involved in their stories) are:

- Have the women developed some ease in talking about and entrusting parts of their story to me?
- Can they describe how the stories of their personal journey enrich their understanding of who they are?
- Can they identify a sense of God accompanying them on their journey?
- Can they identify the metaphors they use for God and the richness of their own symbolic language?
- Can they express any pleasure in being a woman? In being a mother?
- Do they express any desire to continue to deepen a relationship with God through their call to motherhood?
- Can they express how their sense of deepening spirituality and holiness affects their parenting?
- Are they interested in involving their children in any "soul-finding" activity?
- Can they say how their children respond to these activities?

My method of writing the report of my work, guiding principles, execution of and evaluation and results of this project will be the case study procedure. I will tell part of the story, as I have come to understand it, of each individual woman.

#### **CHAPTER IV: OUTCOME OF THIS DEMONSTRATION PROJECT**

The aim of this demonstration project was to examine how a woman's relationship (or lack thereof) with God influences her parenting style. My intent was to use the pastoral relationship to assist each woman in telling her story, in giving voice to the unique journey she alone has traveled. Through telling her personal story in the safety and supportive environment of the pastoral counseling relationship, it was my hope that each woman might discover how the presence and action of God in her life strengthens her bond with her children AND how her vocation to be a mother draws her ever more deeply into the heart of God. The religious principle that has been most pertinent to me as I was involved in this project has been the central mystery of Christianity, the Incarnation. Rolheiser (1999), has summed up most beautifully and most succinctly how this mystery is played out daily in the lives of the women I had met: "God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink become a sacrament...That is the why of the Incarnation" (p. 78). I could find no other source in which this expression of Incarnational spirituality is stated more clearly than Rolheiser's. This is the work of these women, and this is how they, for the most part, understand their motherhood - as an extension of the Incarnation, and as a call to make safe, nurturing and holy homes for their children and their families. They have been growing in awareness of

the power of their call and of their ability to articulate what this call means in their daily lives.

The clinical theory that has most deeply informed my ministry with these women is that of attachment. It has become clear to me in this ministry that these specific women have, to one extent or another, developed a secure attachment to God, as God has come to be known within the Christian/Catholic paradigm. One woman who has converted from Catholicism to the Church of the Latter Day Saints attends services primarily for the advantages the Church offers her children; she has reported that in "her heart" she will always remain deeply Catholic and suffers from fear of rejection by God because of her conversion. Interventions with this woman will be discussed at a later point in this work. A relationship with God has, in turn, had an essentially positive influence in the lives of these seven women and seems to be a source of strength, nourishment and courage for most of them. They, in turn, view themselves as the predominant source of strength, nourishment and courage in their families, with their husbands (those who are married), with their children and with the children under their care (in the cases of the two women who are primary caregivers for many hours of each day).

I had the opportunity to interview seven women, four women in New York City, and three women in Texas. Six share a similar cultural background and immigration story. The seventh woman is significantly younger than the other six and is a service provider in New York who does

not have children. It was my original intent to talk with mothers as well as with women who serve in a surrogate mother role with children as nursery school teachers. My own physical relocation in the middle of this project prevented me from carrying it out as originally designed. This Chapter will discuss results of my meetings with all seven women.

Prior to addressing the specific findings of this project, I will provide biographical data on each participant. Names have been changed and identity hidden to protect and preserve each woman's anonymity.

### **THE STREETS OF NEW YORK**

**SARITA** is a 34 year old mother of 4 boys, whose ages range from 12 to 3. She herself was raised in a two parent household in a small village outside of Mexico City. Her mother did not work outside the home, and her father worked as a farmer on another man's ranch, located many miles away from their home. He would travel to the ranch every Sunday evening and return to his family the following Saturday morning. Sarita attended the local village school, and completed 6 years of schooling. When she was 17 years old she married her husband, Eduardo, and they crossed over from Mexico to Arizona, essentially to find work, when she was 20 years old. They came originally from Arizona to Minnesota, where her husband's cousin lives, and eventually, to New York City, living with other cousins in East Harlem. She is the natural mother of three of the children, and a boy, aged 8, is the child of Eduardo by another woman who was unable to raise

him. He has lived with Sarita and Eduardo since his infancy. Two of their children were born in Mexico and two were born in the United States. Bringing the children from Mexico, across the desert and through the River was a harrowing experience for Sarita, a memory that she carries with deep distress and shares with caution. Eduardo is able to support his family by working late evenings at a restaurant in lower Manhattan as a bus-boy, and at night, he drives a gypsy cab in the City. He sleeps during the day, and has dinner each night with his family. Both Sarita and Eduardo were baptized Roman Catholic, and attended the local parish church until approximately two years ago. Sarita was approached by missionaries from the Church of the Latter Day Saints and became interested in opportunities offered for the children through membership in the church and entered in to a process of conversion. Eduardo does not attend services with the family unless coerced for benefits for the children, although he also went through the conversion process. Sarita is an active member. She came to be known to the Little Sisters Family Health Services when one of the boys developed asthma, and she was referred to the Agency to participate in the asthma prevention program. I was originally the nurse who visited the home, and was aware of Sarita's faithful church involvement. Although she does attend the Latter Day Saints church, she has a shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe in her home, and is constantly "on alert" that someone from the church may pay her a surprise visit and see the shrine, which she says would automatically invalidate her membership. She is willing to take this

risk due to the deep cultural, personal and national relationship with this particular manifestation of Mary. Sarita was eager to participate in this project because she had many concerns about her conversion and her relationship with God as manifested through her denominational choice.

**NADIA** is a 36 year old mother of two sons, one of whom is a senior in high school. This young man was awarded a scholarship to a prestigious boy's Catholic school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and has been able to achieve the grades necessary to maintain the scholarship. The other son is still in primary school in East Harlem. Nadia and her husband, Pedro, had both been educated as chemical engineers in Mexico City. They too walked across the desert, crossed through the River at New Mexico and came to East Harlem to live with cousins who arrived several years before them. In New York, Pedro works in a sewing factory and Nadia has found employment through the Little Sisters Agency as an office worker. Pedro was picked up during an immigration raid at his factory and spent several months in a detention center in New Jersey. His family was unable to be in contact with him, and they live in daily fear of the "Migra" invading their home. They too are willing to risk this possibility to remain in the United States to make a way for their two children, both of whom were born in this country. They are both in the process of obtaining legal status, but do not expect any action on their case for many years. Nadia and Pedro are actively involved in the local Roman Catholic parish, and work to find ways to use their University education for the benefit of their family and the local

community with whom they are associated. They risk social activism, particularly around immigration issues and environmental issues that affect their neighborhood. Nadia became known to the Little Sisters Agency when her first son was born, as she participated in the maternal-infant program. She was also followed during her pregnancy and after the birth of her second son, and it was at that time that I met her. She and I have kept in sporadic contact since that time, and she gladly participated in this project. She was interested in talking with me about her struggles with parenting issues with her oldest son, as well as reconciling the daily fear she lives with, related to immigration issues, with her trust in God.

**GERTRUDIS** is a 38 year old widow who had 2 sons, 1 daughter and was carrying a high-risk pregnancy when I met her after her referral to the Little Sisters Agency to participate in the high-risk maternal/infant program. All three of her children had developmental delays, and one also had a serious heart defect. She was 2 months pregnant when her husband was stabbed to death in Central Park. Late one night he was robbed as he crossed through the Park on his way home from work. His body was not discovered until the following day, although Gertrudis called the police when he did not return home, as this was not his typical behavior. He worked the evening shift in a restaurant on the Upper West Side, as a bus-boy, and would call her every night as he was leaving work, usually arriving home about an hour and a half later. He called her that night and never returned home. She was a baptized Roman Catholic who was born of Mexican parents in this country,

and was not affiliated with any particular parish. She was eager to talk with me about changes in her relationship with God and the questions that have arisen for her since her husband's murder.

**YVONNE**, a 21 year old woman of color, is employed, along with many other women of a similar background, at the Little Sisters Agency in the nursery school. She is a college student at one of the City Colleges, who is not married and does not have children. She is majoring in education and hopes to complete a degree and all requirements to be a nursery school teacher. Yvonne lives with her maternal grandmother who raised her from infancy, as both of her parents died when she was "just a little girl" of AIDS. She is actively involved in her Pentecostal Church, sings in the choir and is a teacher in the youth group. She began working at the Little Sisters as part of a college placement, and was hired as a teacher's aide after this experience. Yvonne is active in her Church and said she did not "understand why I have so many questions about God. Most of the time I believe God is nearby; but when I think of my mother and father, of myself as a baby, of what I see happens to the babies here, I begin to wonder." She yearned for the opportunity to speak with someone about her "questions," and asked if she could be "interviewed" when she learned about the project with which I was involved. She also has begun to question her own ability and desire to have her own children, given the suffering of little children in the world today - suffering she herself has endured and suffering she witnesses in the faces of many of the children who come to the nursery.

## **THE STREETS OF LAREDO**

**GLORIA** is a single mother who came to Laredo from Reynosa, Mexico, 15 years ago. At that time people were able to walk over the bridge at Reynosa for shopping, for work, for socialization with other family members, with very little attention paid to documentation. This is no longer the situation at any border crossing. Gloria walked over one day to shop, with her husband, and they decided to stay, eventually making their way to Laredo. Their children were all born in Laredo and attend the public schools. Soon after their arrival in Laredo, Gloria began to find herself increasingly isolated, while her husband wanted to stay as he had family in the area. He began to drink heavily with his cousins, lost his job, and began to verbally and physically abuse Gloria. The day that he began to lash out at his then 8 year old daughter, Gloria left the house when he was out and made her way to "Casa Misericordia", a safe house for women and children who suffer domestic violence. Once there, she was assisted to find permanent housing for herself and her children, enrolled in education classes at the Mercy Education Center, learned English and has been able to support herself and her children cleaning houses, catering (with another woman from the Center) and sewing. Gloria is involved not only in programs offered for women at the Center, she is involved in her Church as well. She is an active member of the local Catholic parish, and her children are all altar servers. The girl, Inez, is very accomplished musician and a good student, who is a junior in high school now. She is working towards

applying for a scholarship at a Catholic women's college in San Antonio, and is being supported by her guidance counselors with this plan. Gloria asked to participate in this project when she heard of it through the Center director. She said that she is always eager to talk about how she has experienced God as a saving God, and believes sharing her story is one way to help other women who may need support and encouragement.

**CARMELITA** is older than the other women I have talked with; she is approximately 58 and has been in this country many years and remains undocumented. She has a 25 year old daughter who was born here, has completed her education to a Master's degree level in education and is financially sound, in a stable marriage with one son. Carmelita came to this country with her husband when they were young, and for a while they did well. He began to drink, to beat her and her daughter, and she found herself living throughout South Texas, working in the homes of wealthy families. She and her daughter were always given rooms in these homes; she was eventually able to pursue high school and junior college education for herself, and has opened up a day-care in her home, of which she is very proud. She insisted that I go to her home to see how she has arranged things for the children, and the space impressed me as loving, nurturing, clean and as educationally sound as any day care I have visited in the past. Carmelita was eager to speak with me about the on-going development and deepening of her spiritual life. She describes herself as a woman of deep faith, who understands and knows that "God has walked" with her every

step of her long, arduous journey from Mexico to the United States, has protected her from danger and given her the strength and ability to care for and see her daughter and her small family prosper in safety. Carmelita is in a second and seemingly stable marriage.

Although **FRANCESCA** may be chronologically young (27), life experience has helped her to mature beyond her years. She shares with most of the women I know and the women I have spoken with for this project, the harrowing journey through the desert of northern Mexico, into southeastern Texas. She is in an emotionally stable and supportive, though financially insecure, relationship with her husband, whom she married in Mexico when she was 17 years old. He had secured a good job in a small spice factory in Laredo, which was raided by the "Migra" (INS) and he managed to escape. They live in constant threat of deportation in Laredo, so close to the border, although there usually are not as many raids here as in cities further north. They had one child 9 years ago, and then 4 years ago she found herself pregnant with quadruplets - without the aid of fertility drugs. They have loved and cherished these children, and her pregnancy and their birth came as a shock to both husband and wife. It is since that time that he has lost his job, and providing adequately for the family has been a source of stress and tension. Francesca tells the story of local church women coming to help her after the babies were born, but she was not able to accept this help except for a few days, because she was convinced that these women ("Gringas") were determined to kidnap one or

two of her infants. So she cared for these infants without any help. This is a source of pride, as well as exhaustion for her. She and her husband support themselves by selling old clothes weekly at the "pulga" which is like a flea market held in various parts of the city each week. They buy huge plackets of used clothing, passed through numerous hands - St. Vincent dePaul Society, Goodwill, Salvation Army, the local shelters - until it reaches theirs, for fifty cents or one dollar per placket. They are able to make enough profit for rent and food for the week. The entire family is engaged in this endeavor; washing, ironing and readying the clothes for sale - even the four year olds have specific duties, sitting near the clothing on Saturdays and talking with the women and children who come to buy. Francesca, Carmelita and Gloria belong to a small support group who meets weekly with one of the Sisters from the Center and have each participated in many educational programs offered through Mercy Ministries. They agreed to meet with me, in their group and individually as well, because they had many questions about their faith, as well as a deep desire to "talk" about how God has been present and guiding them throughout their lives. They have expressed, individually and in group work, their strong belief in God's protection as they have journeyed through some dangerous territory in their lives - actual environmental danger in the desert, interpersonal danger from abusive spouses, and social danger from lack of resources. They share a common journey and wonder and amazement at their common questions: "Who has protected me and continues to look over me

on my journey? How have I come to be where I am today, safe, and able to provide for my children?" The questions and life experience of each of these women seem to me to echo Parker Palmer (2000) when he speaks about vocation and finding out what ones life is truly about. Although they may not frame their questions, hopes and dreams in the language of "vocation" they seem to understand well what vocation means. "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am. I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity, not the standards by which I *must* live - but the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life" (p.4-5)

## **FINDINGS/METHODOLOGY**

I realized early on (in the first interview with Sarita) that I had too many "topics" for discussion, and as she began to speak, it was difficult to focus the session as I had hoped. Six of the seven women who came to speak with me came already "convinced" that God has journeyed with them and is a real and active presence in their lives. They came believing that it is God who crossed the desert with them (reported by every woman, excepting Yvonne, who expressed symbolically God's presence in her life by saying "God was with me when I was most alone and forsaken as a young child. He did not let any harm come to me - my grandmother was God for me.") It is God who kept these women safe, safe from weather, safe from snakes and poisonous plants, safe from men who rape and rob women who make this

journey unaccompanied. Every woman who had been in an abusive relationship with her spouse or partner reported her belief that it was God who had made a way for her to leave the relationship without permanent physical harm to herself or her children. The one who reported the most significant struggle in her relationship with God, as well as with her parenting style/skills was Gertrudis. Besides questioning, understandably, the entire notion of a protective God with whom she had a personal relationship, she was experiencing, and had been even prior to her husband's death, difficulties in parenting skills and style, difficulty managing her household, and although in a committed relationship, a felt lack of spousal support.

In order to report on the findings of this ministry project, the interview questions are divided into the following categories:

- Immigration stories
- Values
- Quality of relationships – God, children, spouses, partners, significant supports, friends, family members
- Parenting style/skills
- Spirituality

Various and related topics were discussed at each meeting, and at different times throughout the meetings, each woman responded, more or less, candidly. The following topics were discussed at the first meeting:

**Immigration stories.** Two of the women I met with were born in the United States; one woman first generation Mexican, the other, African-American whose family migrated from Georgia in the 1940's. Although neither of them had a personal experience of immigration and/or immigration stories per se, they did relate to hardships and difficulties they experienced as children whose parents suffered the consequences of dislocation, unemployment, societal disrespect, prejudice, racism, poverty, lack of adequate health care and/or access to this health care. They internalized the hardships of their parents, and their parent's struggle profoundly affected their world view. Gertrudis' family immigrated from Mexico during the historic time in the US when it was easier for Mexican immigrants to obtain green cards, so they did not suffer the same type of fear, unemployment and suspicion as do more recently arrived undocumented persons. Yvonne's parents were subject to the dual societal rejection of prejudice and racism experienced by people of color with AIDS, and access to adequate health care was severely restricted. Both of these women were open and eager to tell their stories, and as they articulated their family history and their own place in that history, they expressed a deeper understanding and acceptance of how the historical reality of their parent's lives effected their ability to care for them as children. Both of these women found themselves nurtured by a mother figure, someone who taught them how to love and instilled in them a desire to be loving mothers

themselves. In both instances, these women were their maternal grandmothers.

Nadia related a particularly poignant story as she spoke about the arrest and deportation of her husband. His sewing factory was raided, he was brought to the detention center in New Jersey where he was denied access to his family and lawyers for several weeks. Eventually he was sent back to Mexico, only to return again, by the same route through the desert two months later. The family has considered moving, as they are aware that INS raids on private homes are common. So far, they have not done so, and are aware that they cannot rely on the fact that their children are citizens to prevent their deportation.

Five women share a common history and immigration story. Although the external events are similar, leaving their home and country of origin, in this case, Mexico, at late adolescence, crossing the desert, swimming the river, insecurity of destiny, fear of capture, beating, robbery or rape - how these women have adapted to life in this country and their day to day are unique and individual. Each woman, once we established trust, was eager to tell me her story and her struggles, her fear and her courage. Their stories and what they have endured for the sake of a better life for themselves and their children have become a locus of pride for each of them. One of the particular challenges I faced during the meetings was the reality of my functional, yet limited, ability to speak Spanish. None of the women spoke English, except for a few phrases and words, and we opted not to have a

translator present during our meetings. This mutual struggle helped create a bond between us as each of us revealed our vulnerability to the other. Vulnerability on the part of the pastoral counselor, one of the qualities of the ministry of presence which I continually discover, is essential in accompaniment and encouragement of women. Each woman, whether first generation or immigrant herself expressed the clear reason for immigration, whether from the southern part of the U.S. or from Mexico - to have a better life, which for them means employment, education and economic security for their children. Yvonne and Gertrudis describe growing up under the watchful eye of their grandmothers who worked every day, came home each afternoon to cook supper and supervise their homework. The rule of their homes was order, prayer and study - with some time for play on the weekends. The reward of prayer was described to Yvonne as "being a sparrow in the eye of God..." and Gertrudis knew God's presence as a child and teenager and "protection by la Virgen." (Our Lady of Guadalupe.) They studied and did their homework to "get ahead" and succeed in school, go to college and have work that would secure their futures. Although from widely divergent backgrounds, they received similar at-home messages and advice.

The women from Mexico each described their mothers as the center of the family life, and acknowledged the absence of their fathers as related to work that often brought them miles away from the family during the week. Each woman described a tearful parting from her mother, who

simultaneously supported her in her immigration. Separation from her own mother during times of stress, illness, childbirth, marriage difficulties and episodes of domestic violence has been a hardship that each one has endured in stoic silence. Perhaps Nadia expressed most clearly the shared sentiment: "The chance for me to talk about myself and what are my own hopes and what I am afraid of hardly ever happens. This feels like...relief. Someone is sitting next to me and hears me talk."

**Values.** The points that were discussed under the generic rubric of "values" include

- What do you value most in life
- What gives your life meaning and purpose
- What are your hopes for your future...for your children's future

Without exception, each woman reported that her family and those she loved - relationships - were what she valued most in her life, and also, that this love for children, spouse, family, partner, was what gave her life meaning and purpose. When speaking of this value and the reality of family life, many of the women cried - Gertrudis out of grief for her husband and a sense of abandonment, Yvonne for her parents and their suffering and her own particular feelings of abandonment as a child, Gloria for betrayal by her husband, Carmelita for years of physical and psychological abuse by her husband. Each woman was able to tell something of her own story, and their hopes were coupled with regret and sorrow. Many of the women expressed deep sorrow at the suffering they endured as a result of

childhood trauma related to sexual abuse by male relatives. The women who were able to talk about this reality were the women who had worked with Mercy Ministries and chose to have our meetings held in a group (Gloria, Carmelita and Francesca.) They have been given opportunities in the past to articulate stories of their lives and consider themselves in a safe environment when with one of the Sisters, or someone associated with the "Casa" (the domestic violence shelter sponsored by Mercy Ministries,) is present.

Each woman expressed, again, similar hopes and dreams for their future and for their children, as reported earlier. Except for Yvonne, none of the women who are divorced or single hoped for a partnered relationship for themselves, but had their hopes focused on their children – health, education, security, happiness within a family structure.

The first meeting with each woman was essentially introductory, in which I explained this project and elicited their support.

I had originally planned that during the second meeting, I would "take the opportunity to invite the women to some hands-on activity" as a way of visualizing their self-expression. I invited the women to this and not one of them was interested in this suggestion. The women from New York preferred to "just talk" and the women from Laredo suggested, individually, instead, that we meet together "in a group, all together, to talk with each other and with you about our lives." Gloria arranged a common meeting time and invited us to her home for a pot-luck supper, which we had one

Tuesday evening. We shared food and stories that evening, along with laughter, tears and spontaneous hugs. The meeting turned out to be informal, and the conversation was free flowing. Present at the meeting were Gloria, Carmelita, Francesca and myself. Gloria's children were also present in the home, but in another room with the door closed, and except for introductions and good-byes, were involved with homework and TV. Our privacy was assured.

I would identify the topic of our evening gathering as one that addressed issues of "Quality of Relationships." We spoke about God, spouses, partners, significant support persons, the importance of friends, work and family members. The evening was intense - from 6 until approximately 10 pm and the time went quickly. Besides the obvious affection and familiarity these women enjoy with each other, two characteristics of this group that I noted was that there was no cross talk when someone was speaking - each woman was listened to with respect and responded to appropriately. Additionally, their hospitality that included me in the group that evening was a sign of trust that I deeply appreciated. I was aware of a feeling of respect and awe for what these women have accomplished, and almost a yearning that my own life would be as remarkable in generosity and self-giving as theirs seemed to be. The countertransference with these women was strong, and I think that I used it well in gaining trust, facilitating story telling and expression of emotion.

**Parenting styles/skills.** Each of the women, those in New York as well as in Laredo had participated in parenting programs and has been actively aware of and eager to learn skills that would help her to be the best mother that she is capable of being. The same program was used in both agencies, "Active Parenting" that taught them proactive rather than reactive interventions with their children as a way to improve communication skills. Most of the women expressed that physical punishment was a routine part of their lives, delivered by their fathers, not their mothers. The two women, Yvonne and Gertrudis, who were raised by maternal grandmothers, were not physically punished as children. Gertrudis struggles with seeing God as actively involved in her life following the traumatic death of her husband, the father of her children. The other women report that they rely heavily on a sense of prayer and belief in the "saving power" or "saving hand" of God to guide them during difficult times - particularly when discipline and patience with their children is needed.

**Spirituality.** The women who participated in this study were self-selected, and had already developed some ease in talking about themselves and their relationship with God, particularly the women in Laredo. Gertrudis continued throughout our time together to voice sadness, confusion, frustration, anger, doubt and rage over her husband's death and was unable to reconcile his death with her prior image of God as a benevolent, kind and loving parent. She was unable and uninterested in praying. Her approach and desire to speak with me was not surprising to me as I had previously

recognized and validated her grief. I also referred her for grief counseling, in which she had declined to participate. Each woman credited her mother (and grandmother) with instilling a sense of God, spirituality, desire to pray, loyalty to the Church, inside herself. They talked about their own desire to help their children develop a similar sense of God, and of the frequency with which they turn to God throughout the day for help with specific problems, such as patience, frustration, fear, envy, anger. None of them believe in any "magic solutions" for problems. The group of women from Laredo have reported that they each have in their homes a copy of the prayer, "Footprints," the essence of which is that when a woman is walking down the beach alone, she noticed only one set of footprints in the sand, and wondered where is God? Her answer from God was that when she felt herself most alone, confused, frightened, or vulnerable, this is when God carried her. This prayer, as well as the prayer of AA for wisdom, were both noted as particularly meaningful for them. Each woman, except for Yvonne who is from another tradition, expressed love for, belief and pride in and guidance from "La Virgen de Guadalupe." She has become a symbol of national as well as religious strength and consolation for many Mexicans.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Sarita struggled throughout our conversations with feelings of guilt for her conversion and seemed to be asking me for validation that she "will be OK..." That God will not be "mad" at her for not attending the Catholic Church. Although I attempted to reassure her that what God looks at is the purity of one's heart, one's

intentions and personal integrity, I believe that it may take time for Sarita to come to this realization herself. I encouraged her to continue to participate faithfully in her new church and to continue to pray for peace of mind and heart.

### **ASSESSMENT**

As stated at the beginning of this paper, my hopes for each woman who participated in my project were simultaneously profound and simple: that, in the context of the pastoral moment, women would give voice to the sacred story of motherhood through the telling of personal story. A second hope was that they would discover how their relationship with God influences their relationship with their children. A third hope was that they would discover how their relationship with their children influences their relationship with God. How these hopes have been met or not will be addressed in chapter 5. I have outlined specific assessment criteria in Chapter 3. I have described the personal circumstances, sketches of personal stories (compiled sufficiently to assure confidentiality and anonymity,) interview content and results at the beginning of this chapter. I will end this chapter by reporting on the assessment guidelines used at the third and final visit with each woman. The women from Laredo met again in a group, at Gloria's home, and we had coffee and dessert together. I met with the women from New York individually, as I had been.

**Have the women developed some ease in talking about and entrusting parts of their story to me? Can they describe how the stories of their personal journey enrich their understanding of who they are?**

As stated several times throughout this paper, many of these women have participated in support groups offered through the agencies to which they are attached, and thus have already developed the skill of appropriate self disclosure. They "self-selected" to participate in this project by bringing themselves forward for conversation after they heard of my interest through agency supervisors. I believe they had basic trust in me because of my association with the agencies. They appeared to have insight into their personal dynamic, although they may not have tapped in fully to the richness, depth and power of their immigration journey and experience. Gertrudis, the woman whose husband was murdered in the park, although she could talk with me about the facts of her husband's murder, had profound difficulty articulating her deeper emotions and the impact of his death on her life, the life of her family, her connections to supportive others, and described her faith as "lost." She was not able to reconcile this tragic loss with her prior held belief in a personal God who watches over her, who rewards those who are good and punishes those who are evil.

**Can they identify a sense of God accompanying them on their journey?**

Each woman who made the journey from Mexico spoke eloquently about her sense of God protecting her as she traveled from her home, hundreds of miles through the desert to swim across the Rio Bravo into the United

States. She professed belief in a God who has stayed with her in her difficulties here in this country, difficulties with employment, with spousal relationships, with housing, with language. Some women (Gloria, Francesca, Sarita and Carmelita) said that they had no idea how harsh life could and would be for them here – and continue to believe that God is their protector. Yvonne expressed her belief that God has protected her through the person of her grandmother.

**Can they identify the metaphors they use for God and the richness of their own symbolic language?**

Each one of the women used mixed metaphors when speaking of God and the only one who seemed to have a more personally creative language for God was Yvonne, who described God as the “hand who holds you gently and rocks you to sleep. The hand who holds you as though you were a baby sparrow who just fell out of its nest.” Other women spoke lovingly and affectionately of their “loving Father God,” while realizing that most of their loving images in their daily lived experience flow from their relationships with women, beginning with their mother, and with Yvonne, her grandmother. Nadia, Gloria and Francesca spoke of God with birthing images “like a womb I was born from” (Nadia), “Being loved by God is like nestling in your mother’s breast” (Gloria), “God is like a big pregnant mother who carries you inside and even though you are born, the cord is never cut” (Francesca). They expressed a deep joy when their deeper inner emotions and feelings for and about God were affirmed. A desire to teach

their children about this constant love of God seemed almost like an urgency for some of the women. "We are attached to God always," said Gloria. This desire did not seem to be connected to formal religion, although, as noted prior, the women themselves were practicing Catholics, some more active in their parishes than others.

**Can they express any pleasure in being a woman? In being a mother?**

The first part of this question was not addressed in our meetings, and the second part was spoken spontaneously by each woman, with Yvonne expressing a deep desire to have her own children "some day."

**Do they express any desire to continue to deepen a relationship with God through their call to motherhood?**

Nadia and Sarita clearly expressed an understanding of being a mother as a way of coming closer to God. They spoke about their prayer and hope of being a "good mother," which for them meant loving their children, being patient and understanding, putting their children's needs first. Gloria said that she experiences being a mother as a "holy" way of life, if she is paying attention to what is asked of her day to day. She tries to live her life "day to day. It's all we have, today..."

**Can they express how their deepening spirituality and holiness affects their parenting?**

Except for Gloria, none of the other women with whom I was speaking in the small group context would seriously identify or call herself "holy" and they were not able to articulate a sense of "spirituality." The response I got

when I began to talk about this particular topic was a quiet laughing or giggling. As we went more deeply into the conversation, they had a better understanding of the holiness of every day living, and were willing to admit that yes, perhaps there is a depth of holiness about their lives that remains unclaimed by them. The women I spoke with individually were better able to engage in this question. Gertrudis did not see or understand anything "holy" about her present suffering and loneliness, and when I asked her if we could talk together for just a few minutes about the passion of Jesus, she began to cry. When I identified her tears as "holy tears" she cried more intensely, and also expressed gratitude for this conversation that seems to have somehow given her "life" and a desire to "get better." It was at this point that I spoke with her about grief counseling and made a second referral for her.

**Are they interested in involving their children in any "soul-finding" activity? Can they say how their children respond to these activities?**

These questions were not addressed at any depth with the women. Economic constraints prevent these families from vacationing or going on trips together. Sarita takes advantage of free activities offered in New York City for children and families. As mentioned earlier, this was her primary reason for joining the Latter Day Saints - for the experience of community and the educational, emotional and social activities offered to the children of church members. We spoke about the deep emotional toll this decision is making on her, her own lack of familiarity with practices of her new

church, the way in which she misses the liturgy of the Catholic Church, and its prayers. I found myself in a position of supporting her own decision, assuring her of the goodness and generosity of her intention, and expressing my feeling for her own sacrifice. I recognized issues of countertransference when in conversation with Sarita; feeling attracted to her goodness, her pathos, wanting to somehow “rescue” her from her own dilemma. Recognizing this dynamic in myself helped me to respond to her with appropriate empathy and compassion and to stay within appropriate boundaries. Sarita transferred to me some of her own feelings of affection and longing for her mother, for the counsel that her mother offered her, for the assurance that her mother would give her, for her support, her presence and ultimately, her love. To work with these issues presented a challenge; because I had the opportunity to see Sarita frequently in the neighborhood, we had time to process these feelings and bring closure to our relationship at the appropriate time.

## **CHAPTER V: SYNTHESIS**

### **Initial expectations and hopes.**

I began this project with many hopes and expectations. I hoped that giving women the opportunity to tell the stories of their lives within the holding environment of the pastoral encounter would help them discover and/or deepen their understanding of the ways in which their relationship with God may or may not influence their lives and ultimately, how they relate with their children. I hoped that coming to deeper understanding of Who and what gives meaning to and nourishes their lives would enhance self understanding and appreciation of how a fundamental attachment to God or to a Loving Presence can be mirrored in their love and care for their children. I hoped to hear the stories of their lives, their immigration stories, the stories of their nuclear families; I hoped that the affirmation offered in our conversations would lead them to deeper levels of discovery of the sacred elements in their lives; I hoped that story telling would encourage them to reach out beyond themselves for support. I hoped that they would actually articulate their hopes and fears aloud. I hoped that they would accept and trust me. I hoped that we would be able to communicate across the lines of linguistic and cultural barriers.

I expected that it would take time to establish trust among ourselves, and knowing that for some of them I was a familiar "helping" figure in their lives and that others knew of my association with the agencies they had already worked with, it may not take very long for this basic sense of trust

to develop. I had also expected language difference to play a more significant role in effective communication than it actually did. As the women noticed my struggle with Spanish, they were more at ease in their own struggle with English, and we managed an effective way of communication, taking turns filling in the gaps and clarifying meaning. It may not have been the most economic way of speaking - however, it helped lower one very significant cultural barrier.

The outcomes that I address later in this discussion attest to the fact that my earlier clinical pastoral expectations and hopes are congruent with actual outcomes of this pastoral intervention

### **Relationship between outcomes and needs and aims as discussed in**

#### **Chapter 1.**

The need I identified as the topic of the Demonstration Project in Chapter 1 is stated "The specific need to which I plan to minister is a need for women to discover, to honor and to use their own voices in the work of self discovery. Mothers yearn to tell their stories and through the telling of the stories, discover ever more deeply who they are and who God calls them to be - women seeking fullness of life in family, church and society - to be the best mothers they can be."

The aim of this Demonstration Project was to address this need through individual pastoral encounters and the use of creative art projects as a way to access deeper recesses of the inner self and have an opportunity to

experience different ways of "giving voice" to inner yearnings, hopes and desires.

The results of this Demonstration Project assert that my initial intuition, that women flourish in an atmosphere that supports and encourages self-expression, leading ultimately to deeper self-knowledge and self-awareness, have been confirmed by the outcomes of this Project, as previously discussed and described. They participated openly, willingly, with trust and confidence, during the individual pastoral encounters, as well as in the group sessions. Each one was forthcoming of her deeper desires, hopes and fears; she was able to tell portions of her life story and welcome the insights, challenges and affirmations offered, by this pastoral counselor as well as by group members. Some of the women were able to risk exposing emotions of anger, doubt, fear and rage, while others exposed their vulnerability through tears.

#### **Unexpected outcomes and suggested pastoral principles.**

In reference to the expectations and hopes I had as I began to plan and execute this demonstration project, I discovered, as previously stated, that they as well as the needs and aims I discussed in Chapter 1, were primarily congruent with the outcomes described in Chapter 4. There was no incongruence noted, or unexpected clinical outcomes, although unexpected positive developments revealed themselves as the project unfolded. I have identified the progression of these developments to be:

- Initially, I identified a need for women in East Harlem to have an opportunity to discover, to honor and to use their own voices in the work of self discovery. Through discovery and articulation of each one's life story, they would have an opportunity to explore their spirituality and attachment to God and how this influences their maternal call. Circumstances in my own life necessitated that I stop this work before it was completed. In moving to Southeastern Texas, I decided to continue this project in a new culture, with women from somewhat similar cultural backgrounds. This unexpected development gave me the opportunity to work with a broad spectrum of society and it also removed me from familiar, secure surroundings, and taxed my own creativity, adaptability and courage.
- The move from New York to Texas shortened the length of time I had to work with the women in New York. Our meetings were individual and the women were not drawn to be involved in art projects as I had originally planned. The individual meetings gave these women the opportunity to deepen self awareness and a sense of self worth as they spoke confidentially of difficult life experiences in the safety and security of the pastoral encounter. They expressed their own need to talk, to verbalize and articulate deeply held fears, desires, failures and fears. Someone listened to them and them alone.

- The women were not hesitant to articulate doubts and fears concerning a relationship with God. They responded well, with support, to the opportunity to question God's existence and/or God's presence in their lives. One of the women had experienced that familiar paradigms and God-images were obliterated by life experience and she was relieved to have an opportunity to express this disappointment, anger and sadness.
- The women in Texas were primed and ready for group work, and were familiar with each other. They had developed a network of mutual support and friendship, as well as a measure of independence and self-direction. They had a deeper desire to share their lives with each other than they did to work individually, one on one, and so, suggested a communal meal rather than solo art project.
- Language was not the major barrier that I had expected it to be for my integration into the group in Texas. They were accepting and affirming of my developing facility with Spanish, as I was with their English. We supported each other in mutual acceptance and learning.
- The women in this group trusted me, building on their prior experiences of trust in the goodness of the Mercy Sisters they had encountered in the past. This manifestation of the Incarnation in Mercy women brought willingness, joy and relief to the lives of

these women, and they blossomed in the safety of our group meetings.

- I had initially intended to use the case study model as the basis for reporting on the interventions and outcomes of this project. As I began the actual writing, I realized the redundancy and repetition this model presented. After consulting with one of my advisors, I altered my way of reporting and analyzing outcomes.
- I had originally intended to engage the women in discussion of issues related to “pleasure in being a woman.” This topic did not seem pertinent as the discussion developed, and was not introduced.

The dynamics at play (for the pastoral counselor as well as for the women) in these unexpected, though positive outcomes, are trust, vulnerability, a willingness to use oneself and ones vulnerability at the service of another, flexibility, empathy, creativity and generosity, a willingness to model appropriate self disclosure, an ability to recognize and use the issues manifested in the dynamics of transference and countertransference creatively, for the growth of the women as well as for my own growth in this pastoral ministry.

**Relationship of outcomes to the religious and clinical principles discussed in Chapter 2.**

I expected affirmation of the natural congruence between the clinical theory of attachment and the Christian religious principle of Incarnation. In

addition to this congruence, I also found this complementarity to be adequate in supporting the basic premise of this demonstration project.

Essential feminist values of mutuality and interdependence have influenced this project by offering ways to assist women to identify and articulate God images that validate their experience, stimulate their imagination and supply words to express a uniquely feminine world view and experience.

All of the women, except possibly one (Gertrudis) expressed a clear and secure attachment to God within the Christian/Catholic paradigm. Each woman articulated a foundational experience of positive attachment to a maternal figure (either mother or grandmother). Gertrudis is struggling with her familiar protective God-image, and her tears indicate the depth of that struggle. Her willingness to be involved in grief counseling may open the way for her to mature in her relationship with God as she experiences healing from a deeply traumatic event. The women's involvement in education to enhance their parenting skills, their interest in learning how to communicate effectively with their children, their desire for the health, growth, education and happiness for their children, the personal risks they are willing to take to afford these opportunities for their children - all this gives witness to their attachment to their children and their innate understanding of a mothering posture in a family. The involvement of these women in group work at their respective centers shows that they are learning the value of story telling as a way to discover the richness, courage

and strength of their own lives. Group work at their respective Centers has given them an opportunity for social bonding that they may not have otherwise experienced. My assessment is that these outcomes mirror what I had expected to discover by framing this Demonstration Project within the ideology of attachment theory:

The Christian religious doctrine that was foremost in my mind and heart as I worked with these women was the doctrine of the Incarnation, which challenges us to live and love as Jesus did. "Such a spirituality would flow from our recognition and belief that the way we are with ourselves and the way we are with others, both depend on the way we are with God; AND the way we are with God depends upon our believing and acknowledging and accepting the truth that has been revealed to us through Jesus Christ of the way God is with us! This means that we let the Word of God, uttered through Christ in our midst reveal to us our own beauty - that we are A word of God - unique, chosen, spoken only once" (Clarke, p.1-3). This tells us something of the "how" to live an Incarnational spirituality, so evident in the lives of a small segment of women in East Harlem and in Laredo. The "why" is Mystery. "God takes on flesh so that every home becomes a church, every child becomes the Christ-child, and all food and drink become a sacrament." (Rolheiser p. 78).

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