



Immaculate Conception of Gender: The Marian Phenomenon Among Catholic Women Pilgrims

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Abstract

This research concerns the phenomenological pragmatics of the Marian imaginaries in the study of gender and religion as intersecting and coconstituting themes. The contemporary constructions of antiquity occur in two ways: phantasmatic conceptions of the sacred as indoctrinated gendered catechisms, and embodied forms manifest on the body, thus serving as dogmatic disruptions for human sexuality. Reminiscent of Irigaray, what are the ways in which seemingly sexed bodies shelter the deterritorialized Queen? In what manner do bodies on pilgrimage facilitate the mediation of the mediatrix? This study examines how the queen of virgins, the Regina Virginum, demarcates the visions of womanhood and femininity through fieldwork among the Latina Catholic women pilgrims to the House of the Virgin Mary in Selçuk Province, Turkey. In this context, it further provides an analysis of discourse within the context of Pope Francis' address at the General Audience held in the Paul VI Audience Hall on Wednesday, 23 August 2023. The research results are set to highlight how women can cultivate empowerment by embracing their inner selves, paralleling Mary's spiritual influence on women's agency. Findings demonstrate how women utilize pilgrimage experiences, inspired by Mary's multifaceted symbolism, to challenge gender norms, reconstruct identities, and assert agency, emphasizing the transformative potential of religious practices in empowering women.

Keywords

Women pilgrims, the phenomenology of religion, Marian imaginaries, gender, sexuality

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Introduction

Research into pilgrimage is emerging as a multifaceted field replete with diverse and nuanced avenues of scholarly inquiry. This complex field encompasses a multitude of intriguing trajectories, each illuminating the composite dimensions inherent to the phenomenon of pilgrimage. From delving into the materiality and sensory dimensions of pilgrim experiences to exploring the interplay of globalization, identity formation, and conflicts within pilgrimage contexts, several themes in this context have emerged, including secular pilgrimages, the convergence of technology, medical and healing pilgrimages, ecological impacts, and the ever-evolving facets of pilgrim engagement. Consistent with these core endeavours, research into pilgrims' journeys contributes to a comprehensive and insightful understanding of pilgrimage as a complex and dynamic human praxis.

Recent themes researched in the anthropology of pilgrimage include the intersection of pilgrimage and tourism, the gendered dimensions of pilgrimage, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on pilgrimage, the relationship between pilgrimage and religious authority, and the concept of pilgrimage as a transformative ritual. These themes have been explored in various contexts, such as Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Nepal, pilgrimage in Estonia, and the role of pilgrimage in different religious traditions. Scholars have also examined the narratives, philosophy, literature, and depictions associated with pilgrimage and the social, cultural, and economic aspects of pilgrimage tourism. These studies contribute to our understanding of the diverse motivations, practices, and meanings of pilgrimage in different cultural and religious contexts (Alatas, 2019; Buitelaar, 2020; Buitelaar et al., 2020; Coleman, 2002; Feldman, 2014; Jafari and Scott, 2014; Nordin, 2009; Sepp and Rimmel, 2020; Ulak, 2022).

Research conducted in pilgrimage anthropology has aspired to engage with the multifaceted interplay between gender and religion, a long-standing pursuit among scholars endeavouring to fathom the complexities inherent in human experiences and perceptions. Central to this intricate interconnection is the enigmatic figure of Mary, an enduring symbol that transcends the carnalities of womanhood. In this regard, the present study seeks to explore the confluence of Mary's imaginaries with womanhood and female sexuality, thereby aiming to highlight the gendered constructs of Marian phenomenologies.

This study extends its purview to contemporary manifestations, wherein antiquated sacred concepts become inextricably enmeshed with gendered ideologies, manifesting both through deep-seated indoctrination and corporeal embodiments. Implicitly invoking the theoretical foundations laid by Luce Irigaray, the study invites contemplation upon the manner in which ostensibly gendered human bodies metamorphose into vessels of the *deterritorialized Queen*, thereby effectuating a nuanced fusion of celestial divinity and terrestrial existence.

Of particular focus within this inquiry is the exploration of the impact of Marian teachings, specifically among the Latina Catholic women pilgrims to the House of the Virgin Mary in the Selçuk province of Turkey. To achieve this, the research implements a fieldwork analysis encompassing observations of the ethnographer as the spectator at the emancipating trajectories of the pilgrim and interviews into how the

Marian imaginaries are articulated. These methodologies converge to unearth the intricate choreography that unfolds between deeply held religious convictions and the nuanced domain of self-perception within the unique sociocultural context of the pilgrimage site.

Methods

This research was carried out through a month-long fieldwork at the House of the Virgin Mary situated in Turkey in July 2023, a location of profound religious significance. Applying a phenomenological perspective, the research involves participant observation to gain insights into Catholic women pilgrims' daily routines and practices. Complementing this, in-depth interviews are employed to delve into their personal stories and viewpoints, revealing how the Virgin Mary contributes to shaping their sense of self. The fieldwork analysis goes beyond verbal interactions, encompassing visual elements within the pilgrimage site, to explore the convergence between visual depictions of the Virgin Mary and the self-perception of the women pilgrims from Latin America. Through subsequent thematic analysis, this study seeks to uncover the ways in which Catholic women pilgrims perceive and perform womanhood and their sense of femininity. Ethical considerations underscore all aspects of the research process, ensuring that participants provide informed consent and that their confidentiality is safeguarded.

Regional Significance

The cult of Mary, rooted in the veneration of the mother of Jesus, holds a significant place in Christianity, particularly within the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some Anglican traditions (Thomas et al., 2018). This reverence is deeply tied to the theological developments of the faith, notably the adoption of the title 'Theotokos' at the Council of Ephesus in 431. This pivotal Council clarified the inseparable union of Jesus Christ's divine and human natures, solidifying the term 'Theotokos' or 'Mother of God' to emphasize Mary's role as the bearer of God incarnate. This designation had profound implications, affirming the unity of Christ's nature and highlighting Mary's unique part in salvation history. It underscored her cooperation in God's plan of redemption and positioned her as an intercessor between humanity and the divine. The theological significance of 'Theotokos' echoes through time, shaping the understanding of Mary's role and broader concepts of Christology, the Incarnation, and the human-divine relationship. As a result, the cult of Mary evolved into a meaningful aspect of numerous Christian traditions, inspiring believers to draw closer to Christ through the example and intercession of his mother while deepening their understanding of the profound mysteries of the faith (Vuola, 2019).

The House of the Virgin Mary, nestled on Mount Koressos near Ephesus in present-day Turkey, holds a profound connection to the theological birthplace of the cult of Mary. This dwelling, believed by many to be the place where Mary spent her later years, serves as a tangible bridge between the theological significance of the title 'Theotokos' and the devotional practices centred around Mary. As the site where the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 AD officially affirmed Mary's title as 'Theotokos' – Mother of God – the

connection between the council's theological decision and the house's historical and spiritual significance is palpable. The Council's declaration had profound implications for Mary's role in Christ's life and the salvation narrative, solidifying her as the conduit through which the divine and human aspects of Jesus Christ were united.

Within the enclaves suffused with the essence of the Virgin, the consecrated precincts of Marian sites, particularly those steeped in historical and theological eminence such as the venerated House of the Virgin Mary, assume an exceptional potency in shaping and influencing the trajectories of women who undertake pilgrimages to these revered grounds. These sanctuaries manifest as transformative crucibles, igniting within the innermost being of female pilgrims a metaphysical amalgamation of the spiritual, emotional, and societal dimensions.

The Marian Quest: Gender on Pilgrimage

The Virgin of Guadalupe, on the other hand, appears dressed in the clothing of the indigenous, native peoples; she speaks their language, she welcomes and loves the local culture: Mary is Mother, and under her mantle, every child finds a place. In Mary, God became flesh and, through Mary, He continues to incarnate Himself in the lives of peoples. (Pope Francis, General Audience, Paul VI Audience Hall, Wednesday, 23 August 2023)

In the intersectionality of identity and religion, the Pope's resounding words illuminate the revered figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Cloaked in indigenous attire, she emerges as a harmonious embodiment of cultural fusion, an ethereal bridge between the divine and the earthly. The Pope's portrayal unveils a profound symbiosis – Mary not only wears the garb of the native peoples but speaks the cadence of their hearts, dissolving linguistic barriers with her maternal tenderness. She, *the Universal Mother*, gathers every soul beneath her embrace, enfolding them in a sanctuary of belonging and protection. Yet, beyond the tangible, the Pope's narrative transcends – Mary's essence, a vessel of the divine, perpetually enfleashes the spirit of God within human lives, reaffirming her enduring role as a conduit of the sacred into the mundane.

The Papal proclamation revolves around the veneration of *the Virgin of Guadalupe* and its interweaving with indigenous cultural contexts. Several salient aspects emerge from the Pontiff's discourse:

1. **Cultural Integration:** The crux of the Pontiff's exposition resides in the conspicuous observation that the Virgin of Guadalupe is meticulously depicted adorning the attire indigenous to the local population. This deliberate sartorial alignment stands as a testament to an unparalleled and potent manifestation of cultural integration. In this symbiotic portrayal, religious imagery transcends dogma, inviting profound contemplation on the dynamic interface between religious and cultural paradigms. It conveys the notion that sacred personas can seamlessly assimilate within and resonate with native traditions and ethos, thereby forging a nuanced nexus between spirituality and cultural identity.
2. **Linguistic Connection:** A pivotal tenet of the Pontiff's enunciation resides in the Virgin's linguistic resonance with the vernacular of the indigenous populace. The

assertion of her fluency in the language of the native people underscores an elemental and empathetic link. This linguistic convergence assumes multifaceted significance – it serves not only to transcend language barriers but also to unravel a profound empathy with the heart of the local community. In this language of affinity, the celestial is rendered accessible, while the terrestrial is elevated to the sublime, culminating in a hermeneutic bridge between the divine and the quotidian.

3. Maternal exemplar: The Pontiff employs evocative phraseology to cast the Virgin Mary as a universal maternal figure. In doing so, he unfurls a paradigm in which her maternal embrace becomes a haven of belonging and sanctuary for all denizens of existence. This conception of Mary as a nurturing and inclusive entity disseminates an overarching sense of protection and attachment. This maternal archetype, spanning cultural, temporal, and religious boundaries, encapsulates a profound sense of unity and emotional succour.
4. Continued incarnation: Implicit within the Papal address is the theological proposition of Mary as an enduring conduit for the divine incarnation. The Pontiff intimates that Mary's hallowed agency extends beyond historical epochs, fostering an ongoing assimilation of the divine within the mundane. This perspective underscores the indelible linkage between the ephemeral and the ethereal, reiterating the notion that Mary, as a conduit, perpetually revitalizes the sacred within the realm of human experience. Thus, the quotidian fabric of existence becomes a tapestry interwoven with spiritual threads, and Mary emerges as a perennial medium through which the sacred perpetually converges with the profane.

The profound thematic resonance that emerges from the articulated Papal discourse and Mary's multifaceted imagery offers a captivating exploration of the interplay between gender, religion and culture. Each dimension I conceptualize as *Marian imaginaries*, *phantasmatic conceptions*, *embodied forms*, *deterritorialized essence* and *mediating role* contribute to a broadened understanding that encapsulates the complexity of this intersection.

The Marian imaginaries provide a window into the diverse ways in which she is perceived and depicted across cultures and epochs. These representations not only reflect the prevailing societal attitudes towards gender but also influence the construction of religious identity. By delving into these imaginaries, one can uncover the subtle threads connecting cultural norms with theological beliefs. This intersection can offer insights into how notions of femininity and spirituality intertwine, raising questions about the power dynamics between the divine and the human and the role of women within religious narratives. *Phantasmatic Conceptions of Mary* refers to the conceptual frameworks through which she is understood within religious teachings. Here, the portrayal of Mary can potentially reinforce traditional gender norms or challenge them. The way she is envisioned as a mother, a virgin and a nurturing figure plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of womanhood. Analysing these conceptions allows for a nuanced examination of how religious institutions navigate gender ideologies and how these, in turn, impact the broader discourse on faith and identity. *Embodied Forms* encompass the tangible manifestations of Mary's representation, particularly within the context of the

human body. This can involve the veneration of religious symbols, the recitation of prayers, or the adoption of specific practices associated with her. By exploring how devotees embody Mary's qualities and teachings, one can delve into the ways in which religious beliefs transcend the intellectual sphere and become integrated into the very fabric of believers' lives. *The Deterritorialized Queen* metaphorically situates Mary beyond the confines of specific geographical or cultural boundaries. This evokes a sense of universality and timelessness, suggesting that Mary's significance transcends regional contexts. Such an interpretation underscores the capacity of religious figures to bridge cultures and traditions, fostering a sense of unity among diverse populations while highlighting the shared human experiences that connect people across the globe. Central to this intricate tapestry is *Mary's Mediating Role*, casting her as an intermediary between the divine and humanity. This concept is reflective of the broader function that religious figures often hold, connecting individuals to their spiritual beliefs and practices. As a mediatrix, Mary embodies the idea that spirituality is not confined solely to a direct relationship with the divine but is also intertwined with the human experience and the guidance of revered figures.

Compared to the General Audience, the Papal statement about the Virgin of Guadalupe wearing indigenous attire aligns well with the study of Marian imaginaries. These imaginaries denote the manifold representations of Mary across different contexts. As the Virgin intertwines with local cultures through her sartorial alignment, it becomes evident that her presence embodies a cultural bridge. This alignment acquires nuanced significance when viewed through the lens of gender and religious identity. The very act of Mary embracing indigenous attire redefines and reimagines her symbolic form, becoming a focal point for the intersection of culture and religious devotion. As the indigenous Mary engenders a sense of belonging, the exploration of how representations influence perceptions of gender and religious identity gains profundity, echoing the inclusive and transformative power of a malleable, culturally integrated Mary.

The concept of phantasmatic conceptions can be understood as the imaginative ideals that permeate religious teachings. The Papal notion of Mary as a universal mother figure resonates here. The image of Mary as an all-encompassing nurturer defies traditional gender norms by deftly navigating the realm of spirituality. In this, Mary embodies a phantasmatic conception that subverts prescriptive gender roles and offers an inclusive paradigm, where her maternal identity eclipses normative boundaries, resonating with diverse genders and identities. The Papal emphasis on Mary's linguistic connection with the indigenous population converges with the exploration of embodied forms. The tangible representations of Mary's linguistic affinity, transcribed in prayers, hymns and narratives, become embodiments of cultural and spiritual connection. This embodiment is not confined to textual expressions alone; it extends to the human body itself, where believers internalize these representations as part of their religious identity. Here, the embodied forms align with the linguistic connection, creating a profound relationship between Mary's language, her spiritual role and the tangible practices of devotees.

The concept of a deterritorialized Queen resonates with the Papal concept of Mary as a continued vessel for divine incarnation. This celestial nature, detached from specific cultural and geographical boundaries, aligns with the exploration of the transcendent aspect of Marian imaginaries. This detachment endows her with a universal quality that

traverses regional confines. The intersection of these notions accentuates her role as a mediating presence between the celestial and human domains, capturing the essence of her 'mediatrix' role.

From Ethereal to Embodied

Studies have explored the gendered dimensions of Muslim pilgrimages, such as the experiences of female Muslim pilgrims to Mecca and beyond (Buitelaar et al., 2020). They explore the connections between pilgrimage practices and various aspects of women's lives, such as mobility, social relations, identities and power structures, while also delving into the narratives and storytelling of female pilgrims, encompassing instances like the pilgrimage to Mecca for second-generation Moroccan-Dutch women (ibid). These studies highlight the multi-voiced narratives and the interplay between content, narrator and lifeworld in constructing the meanings of pilgrimage experiences for women. Furthermore, studies have explored the impact of pilgrimage on women's quality of life, including the positive effects on the immediate post-pilgrimage quality of life of sick pilgrims (Klimiuk and Moriarty, 2021).

In the phenomenological study of gender and religion, the complex interplay between the sacred and the gendered self presents an intriguing landscape for exploration. At the heart of this intricate dance lies the figure of Mary, a symbol that transcends time, tradition and culture. In this section, I delve into the pragmatics of the imaginaries surrounding Mary, probing the intersections and co-constituting themes of her representation as both an ethereal celestial being and a grounding force in the human experience. To unravel the threads of Mary's significance, one must first navigate the multifaceted nature of her presence. The phenomenological approach invites us to look beyond mere religious doctrine and instead consider the lived experiences and perceptions that shape the religious landscape. Mary emerges as a dynamic figure in this tapestry, embodying diverse roles that span from the divine intercessor to the earthly mother.

Central to this exploration is the notion of *phantasmatic conceptions of the sacred*. Through indoctrination and cultural narratives, Mary's image has been imprinted onto the collective consciousness, often intertwined with gendered catechisms. The very act of envisioning Mary becomes a process of interpreting femininity, virtue and subservience. These visions, whether painted on the canvas of Renaissance art or etched into the minds of the devout, offer glimpses into the intertwining of faith and gender constructs. Yet, the story of Mary's influence does not end within the confines of imagination. The second facet of contemporary constructions of antiquity unfolds through *embodied forms manifest on the body*. Here, Mary transcends her celestial portrayal and takes on a palpable presence in the physical world, inhabiting and gendering the female bodies, thereby finding shelter for her deterritorialized condition. This embodiment, however, is not without its tensions. Mary's earthly manifestations disrupt dogmatic perceptions of human sexuality, challenging established norms and boundaries.

The very act of embodying Mary within one's gendered self can be seen as a reclamation of agency – a way to break free from the confinements imposed by traditional gender roles. As Mary becomes a beacon of divine strength within, the human body becomes a vessel for transformative power. The concept of Mary as both human and divine extends

beyond the realm of the individual. *In what manner do bodies on pilgrimage facilitate the mediation of the mediatrix?* This question leads us to explore the gendering role that Mary plays between the human body and the celestial merits of chastity. In this sense, Mary's celestial conditioning does not distance her from humanity; instead, it serves as constitutive of gendered aspirations. Her perpetual virginity invites contemplation on the condition and the probabilities of the sacred feminine. Thus, her presence allows the devout for a reinterpretation of femininity not as subservience but as a source of strength and empowerment.

Within Irigaray's intellectual forays lies a captivating understanding, one that intricately navigates the embodiment through the prism of Mary. This nuanced exploration emerges as a strategic avenue through which agency is reclaimed, and the confinements imposed by normative gender paradigms are ruptured (Hollywood, 1998). By effectuating a fusion between the divine essence encapsulated by Mary and the gendered self, Irigaray propounds a potent trajectory towards identity reclamation and transcendence of the constraints intrinsic to prevailing sociocultural constructs.

The transformative impetus embedded within Irigaray's framework acquires profound resonance when considering the revolutionary implications entailed by the act of embodying Mary within the matrix of one's own gendered self. In a milieu where conventional gender demarcations have frequently circumscribed individuals within proscribed theatrical scripts, Irigaray engenders a perspicacious vantage. To internalize the attributes epitomized by Mary – those of fortitude, tenacity and a sacrosanct communion – bestows upon the individual the capacity to envisage their very identity exceeding the circumscribing bounds of societal anticipations (Kelso, 2015).

At the heart of it all lies the reclamation of agency. Irigaray suggests that by identifying with Mary's divine strength, individuals can break free from the confinements of traditional gender roles. The gendered body, which has historically been objectified and confined, becomes a canvas upon which agency can be painted anew. This embodiment becomes a form of resistance against the limiting narratives that have shaped perceptions of what it means to be a woman. Central to Irigaray's exploration is the concept of Mary as a mediator (Irigaray, 2021). This perspective challenges the conventional dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, offering a vision of unity and interconnectedness. Irigaray's perspective on Mary's celestial nature offers a departure from the notion of transcendence as a means of distancing oneself from the human experience. Instead, Mary's celestial attributes serve as a mode of connection. The divine nature within Mary doesn't isolate her from humanity but rather unites her with it. She becomes a symbol of the potential for divine presence within the human condition. Irigaray's interpretation thus presents a profound shift in understanding spirituality – an approach that doesn't seek to escape the human body and existence but to embrace and elevate them.

Marian Embodiments

A similar story to the Virgin of Guadalupe unfolds at the revered site of Lourdes in France. Here, Mary's appearance to the modest Bernadette Soubirous is portrayed with the plain elegance of a white robe adorned by a celestial blue sash. This choice of attire highlights her deep humility, connecting her intimately with the everyday rhythms of

human life. Pilgrims embarking on the pilgrimage to Lourdes, adorned in immaculately white vestments, conspicuously embody the ethos of humility while simultaneously petitioning for profound transformative blessings. Their chosen attire seems to evoke a profound connection with the benevolent intercession of Mary herself, representing a tangible manifestation of entreaty manifested in the form of pristine white robes. Similar narratives that encapsulate the devotions surrounding Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal and Our Lady of Kibeho in Rwanda serve to illuminate the intricate amalgamation of Mary's venerable presence with diverse cultural narratives.

Furthermore, within the Eastern Orthodox traditions, the artistic portrayals of Mary harmoniously amalgamate the distinctive ceremonial attire intrinsic to cultures such as those of Greece and Russia. This syncretic artistic practice serves the purpose of nurturing virtues of humility and reverence among female adherents within this religious faith. Across these resplendent exemplifications, Mary's celestial essence perpetually interlaces itself within the mosaic of diverse societies. She assumes the role of safeguarding their sartorial legacies, a living embodiment of their ceremonial practices, and a paragon of their resolute devotion.

Deep within the folds of Catholicism, the veneration of Mary assumes a role that subtly moulds the experiences of female bodies and the vocal expressions of women. In the ritual cadence of the rosary, where each prayer bead becomes a silken thread of whispered supplication, women discover a sublime conduit to sanctify both their earthly forms and the melodic cadence of their voices, entwining their most intimate longings with the divine realm through Mary's hallowed intercession. The repetition of 'Hail Marys' reverberates as a sacred invocation, harmoniously celebrating the intertwining strands of femininity and faith. Furthermore, the portrayal of Mary as the 'Virgo Maria', an embodiment of both immaculate purity and nurturing maternity, subtly etches its impression upon the canvas of female sexuality. While this archetype raises Mary to the lofty echelons of divine motherhood, it concurrently inscribes a richly layered narrative concerning womanhood, meticulously weaving the threads of purity alongside the potentiality of childbirth. In the Marian pilgrimage, the lives of women effortlessly converge with the sacred topographies of shrines and grottoes consecrated in honour of the Virgin. Here, the gestures of devotion seamlessly intertwine with the corporeal experience of embarking upon journeys as women traverse landscapes of stone and earth, mirroring the landscapes of their own devout hearts. These pilgrimages forge a corporeal devotion, a tangible manifestation of faith that mirrors the fervent ardour they hold for the cherished figure of Mary.

For instance, the enigmatic phenomenon known as the 'mystical marriage' with Christ, often paralleled with Mary's own divine relationship, casts its resplendent glow upon the experiences of female mystics. Through this mystical union, they yearn for a profound communion that effortlessly transcends the confines of the corporeal, erasing the conventional boundaries that demarcate gender and spirituality. This ethereal bond metamorphoses into a conduit for articulating fervent devotion that gracefully traverses the limitations of traditional gender roles.

In light of Irigaray's arguments, it's crucial to approach these teachings with an open mind, recognizing the potential for them to empower and inspire while also being cautious not to reinforce constraints that might limit women's agency and opportunities. Viewing

the Virgin Mary as a representation of flawless beauty and grace has the potential to play a role in defining current beauty standards that emphasize flawless and unblemished appearances. This influence could impact how women perceive themselves and contribute to shaping societal norms of beauty. However, the spiritual empowerment and devotion encouraged by teachings centred around Mary provide women with a deep well of inner strength and a sense of connection. This, in turn, can enhance their self-confidence and sense of purpose. Given the ongoing evolution of perspectives on gender and sexuality, it's important to recognize that religious doctrines continue to exert a significant influence on these aspects. This intersection presents a rich area for academic exploration, particularly through the lens of phenomenological research into religious phenomena. As we delve into these subjects, we open up opportunities to better understand how religious beliefs intersect with personal identity, empowerment and the broader societal discourse.

Mary Among the Latina

This research carries significant relevance for Latina Catholic women as it explores the intricate interplay of gender, religion and cultural identity through the prism of Marian imagery. Through an examination of how contemporary interpretations of the sacred influence societal expectations regarding gender and human sexuality, it sheds light on the real-life experiences of Latina Catholic women, who frequently navigate these intersections within their religious and cultural contexts. Furthermore, the research highlights the potential for empowerment that religious practices can offer women, offering insights into how Latina Catholic women can derive strength from their faith and the multifaceted symbolism of Mary to challenge established norms, reshape their identities and assert their agency within their communities.

The figure of the Virgin Mary, particularly the Virgin of Guadalupe, radiates as a profound and luminous beacon within the spiritual trajectories of Latina Catholic women. She resides at the very heart of their devotion, serving as a sacred nexus where faith, culture and identity intertwine in harmonious splendour. Remarkably, Mary, especially the Virgin of Guadalupe, assumes a role as a potent symbol that unites Latina women through the concepts of unified womanhood and feminine expressions, even when scrutinized through a feminist lens. Here, we delve into various examples that illuminate this profound connection.

For these devout souls, the Virgin Mary transcends mere ethereal presence; she metamorphoses into a wellspring of spiritual connection and empowerment. Her essence emanates purity, humility and unshakable faith – qualities that reverberate with profound depth in the hearts of countless Latinas. She takes on the role of a guiding star for women embarking on their quests for virtuous and faithful lives, igniting the flames of feminine grace and spiritual virtue within them. Mary's unwavering commitment to justice and compassion holds the potential to spark feminist activism among Latina women. They find inspiration in her example to champion causes such as women's rights, social justice, immigrant rights and the welfare of marginalized communities. In their eyes, these causes are natural extensions of her message of love and protection, propelling them into action to effect positive change. The devotion to the Virgin Mary intricately weaves itself into the rich tapestry of Latina cultural identity. La Virgen de Guadalupe transcends her

role as a religious icon; she becomes an emblem of the Latin American heritage. Her presence graces homes, sanctuaries and communal spaces, serving as an enduring testament to ancestral bonds and an everlasting link to the Catholic faith.

In moments of adversity and uncertainty, the Virgin Mary emerges as an unwavering source of solace and protection for countless Latina women. She embodies the compassionate archetype of a maternal figure, a vigilant guardian who watches over her children with unwavering care, providing both comfort and guidance. This maternal symbolism carries profound significance, particularly for Latina mothers who fervently implore the Virgin Mary's intercession to safeguard their beloved families from harm. Mary's role as a compassionate mother figure resonates deeply within the hearts of Latina women, underscoring the intrinsic strength inherent in the maternal experience. From a feminist perspective, this resonance serves as a powerful celebration of motherhood, challenging any preconceived notions that might label motherhood as a weakness or limitation. Instead, it elevates the maternal role to one of unwavering fortitude, nurturing the understanding that being a mother is an embodiment of strength and resilience.

The devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe occupies a distinctive and cherished place in the hearts of Latina Catholic women. Rooted in tradition, her apparition to Juan Diego, an indigenous Mexican, in 1531 and the miraculous imprint of her image upon his humble cloak symbolizes a powerful merging of indigenous spirituality with Catholicism. This sacred event resonates deeply with Latina women who hail from diverse ancestral lineages. Furthermore, the central role of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic faith challenges established patriarchal structures within the Church. Viewed from a feminist perspective, her prominence provides a platform for Latina women to assert their voices and perspectives within a religious framework, thus contributing to the ongoing discourse on gender equality and inclusivity. In this way, the figure of the Virgin Mary becomes a symbol of empowerment and a catalyst for change within the faith community.

Latina Catholic women derive strength from the Virgin Mary's dedication to justice and the well-being of society, using her example as a wellspring of inspiration to advocate for social justice, immigrant rights and the empowerment of marginalized communities. Her message, characterized by boundless love, unyielding compassion, and unwavering protection, transcends the boundaries of personal devotion, propelling Latinas to champion the cause of a more just and equitable society. As a paragon of purity, humility and unwavering faith, the Virgin Mary offers Latina women a compelling archetype of femininity that challenges conventional gender roles. From a feminist standpoint, she serves as a living testament to the idea that strength can be discovered in embracing one's femininity and that women are capable spiritual leaders and exemplary role models for others to emulate.

Findings: Narratives of Mary

Virgin and mother could correspond to a female becoming, on condition that these words are understood in the spiritual and not just in the material-natural sense. It is with her 'virgin' soul, as much as if not more than with her body, that Mary gives birth to Jesus. The figure that she can represent for us is that of a woman who stays faithful to herself in love, in generation. In this, Mary's virginity surpasses, in divine dignity, motherhood. (Irigaray, 2004, p. 152)

Pilgrims' gestures resonated with the very essence of Mary's maternal proclivity. Conversations conducted through interviews underscored the pervasive sentiment of Mary's venerated status as the quintessential maternal exemplar. Evidently, this idealized image profoundly influenced the spectrum of their conduct. Through these dialogues, an ethos saturated with reverence for Mary's archetypal attributes emerged, elucidating the profound impact upon their behavioural paradigms:

Mary's enduring presence in various forms has taught me a lasting lesson: that womanhood transcends eras. From her timeless influence, I've discovered my own path into the essence of womanhood. (Maria)

One woman named Maria vividly conveyed her profound connection with Mary's ongoing incarnation, illustrating how this spiritual bond profoundly influenced her perception of womanhood. She described how the story of Mary was not confined to the past but was an enduring narrative that continued to shape lives. Just as Mary's spirit persisted, her wisdom and guidance transcended time. This realization became the cornerstone of Maria's personal journey. Maria's experience of Mary's ever-present influence inspired a remarkable transformation in her sense of self. This newfound perspective emboldened Maria to fully embrace her own sexuality, recognizing it as an essential facet of her identity. In Mary's example, she found validation for her belief that spirituality and sensuality need not be at odds. Instead, they could coexist harmoniously, enriching her understanding of what it means to be a woman:

With her intercession, I felt a tranquil clarity, as if the Virgin's maternal guidance was directing me. Just as Our Lady of Guadalupe's image remained on Juan Diego's cloak, symbolizing her perpetual presence and protection, I sensed the Virgin's gentle touch, reassuring me that I was never alone on my journey. (Maria).

Maria's narrative deeply resonated with other women who held similar feelings. For example, Lucia, Maria's accompanying friend, recounted how Mary's resolute dedication to her convictions set a precedent for a self-assured form of womanhood. This perception empowered Lucia to actively seek leadership roles within her community, underscoring that her gender posed no obstacles to her aspirations. Furthermore, Lucia found comfort in Mary's constant and unwavering presence. Isabella interpreted Mary's journey as a story of personal development and self-discovery, which provided her with the confidence to navigate her individual journey more assuredly. Through this, she gained the strength to challenge societal norms that aimed to confine her based on her gender:

In my beliefs, I've learned to view my gender and body as important parts of who I am. I see them as gifts from the divine, representing my spiritual path. (Lucia)

Lucia recounted her experience of embracing her gender and bodily expressions as sacred manifestations of her faith. Much like Mary, she viewed herself as a conduit for embodying divine teachings. As she traversed the pilgrimage site, the visual depictions of Mary became interwoven with her own narrative, encouraging her to emulate the virtues they depicted.

In this regard, I would like to refer to the *embodiment and fluidity of identity* that emerges as a guiding framework. At its core is the recognition of the diverse and fluid nature of women's identities. This notion finds resonance in the narrative's depiction of Maria's evolution. Initially constrained by societal expectations, Maria undergoes a profound transformation by embracing her sexuality as a fundamental facet of her identity. This journey parallels Irigaray's argument that women's identities defy singular categorization; they are multi-dimensional and fluid (Irigaray, 1992). This challenges the traditional norms that impose rigid definitions on women, echoing Irigaray's call for the celebration of the diverse and dynamic nature of women's existence:

I learned to navigate the fine line between strength and vulnerability. Mary's titles weren't mere labels; they embodied her nurturing presence. Continuing my pilgrimage, I grasped the truth that I wasn't alone on this journey; I was part of a sisterhood, nurtured and sheltered by the Holy Virgin of Virgins. (Lucia)

Central to Irigaray's philosophy is the concept of spirituality and self-expression. She contends that spirituality should empower women to express themselves authentically (Irigaray, 1993). Maria's empowerment is thus highlighted as she harmonizes her spirituality with her sexuality and self-expression. This mirrors Irigaray's criticism of conventional religious structures that often suppress women's agency and voices. Maria's ability to align her faith with her individuality exemplifies Irigaray's vision of spirituality as a force that nurtures women's agency and selfhood.

The celebration of women's sensuality and desire emerges as another lens through which to interpret the experiences of the women pilgrims. Maria's affirmation of her sexuality stands out as she dismantles the perceived conflict between her sensuality and her spirituality. This mirrors Irigaray's critique of male-centric philosophical discourses that tend to silence or objectify women's desires (Irigaray, 1985b). Maria's embrace of her sensuality aligns with Irigaray's call for women to assert their desires as legitimate expressions of their identities, challenging the existing norms and conventions. Irigaray's critique of patriarchal language structures is subtly engaged with the exploration of reclaiming language and representation. For women like Lucia to reclaim language and representation within their communities, their voices must be amplified across diverse contexts to disrupt established hierarchies perpetuated by language (Irigaray, 1985a).

Irigaray emphasizes the importance of narrative in allowing women to articulate their experiences (Irigaray, 1985b). Lucia's journey of self-discovery, intertwined with Mary's narrative of growth and transformation, exemplifies this concept. Her engagement with Mary's story illustrates Irigaray's belief in women's narratives as potent sources of knowledge and self-understanding. These challenge the historically dominant narratives that marginalize and silence women's voices, aligning with Irigaray's mission to give voice to women's stories.

As these stories intertwined, a collective portrait emerged of women who found strength in their spirituality without suppressing their individuality. This harmonious fusion of faith and self-expression became a testament to the enduring impact of Mary's narrative. It showcased how, through embracing Mary's presence, these women reshaped their bodies and gender perceptions. Their experiences underscored that spirituality

when approached with an open heart and an understanding of its inherent fluidity, could serve as a powerful catalyst for personal growth, empowerment and a redefined sense of womanhood:

Mary's evolving companionship aided me in discovering solace in weaving my personal path of development with hers. Just as her model steered me through trials and triumphs, I also embraced my gender identity. Our narratives converged, unveiling the route for me to embody the empathetic resilience I aspire to display to the world. (Sarah)

In conversations with different women, I heard stories of how Mary's continued incarnation was interpreted as a reflection of their own life journeys. Sarah, another pilgrim, shared how she saw her own experiences of growth and change as a parallel to Mary's evolving presence in the world. This perspective allowed her to embrace the complexities of her body, her sexuality and her gender expression. Sarah's story was not unique; many women saw their lives as a continuous narrative interwoven with Mary's enduring spirit. The visual aspects of the pilgrimage site played a role in this narrative as well. The depictions of Mary as a compassionate and strong figure seemed to validate the participants' own struggles and strengths. Observing how these portrayals influenced their posture, gestures and even the way they interacted with others was fascinating. Similarly, the visual representations served as a reminder of the qualities they aspired to embody.

Esther, a devout Catholic woman in her early 40s, embarked on a pilgrimage to the house of the Virgin Mary with a group of fellow believers. As we walked the path leading to the sacred site, Esther shared her thoughts on the impact of the Virgin Mary on her feminine spirit. She described Mary as the epitome of strength and grace, a woman who faced challenges with unwavering faith.

Sitting in the serene surroundings of the pilgrimage site, Esther elaborated on her understanding of womanhood. She saw Mary as a model of resilience, someone who defied societal norms by embracing her calling with humility and courage. Esther believed that through Mary's example, women could find the power to break free from limiting stereotypes and pursue their aspirations, whether in their families, workplaces, or communities. Esther's eyes lit up as she spoke about female empowerment. For her, the Virgin Mary symbolized empowerment through gentleness, a concept she felt was often overlooked. She explained that true strength didn't always manifest through assertiveness but could also be found in compassion, patience and nurturing. Esther expressed her desire to incorporate these qualities into her own life, believing they could lead to positive change for herself and those around her.

Clara, a young academic in her late 20s, approached the pilgrimage to the house of the Virgin Mary from an intellectual perspective. As we walked and discussed her views, she shared how her research had led her to explore the intersections of faith, feminism and womanhood. Clara saw Mary as a complex figure, a blend of strength and vulnerability, and she was eager to delve deeper into the nuances.

Seated on a bench near the pilgrimage site, Clara mused on her evolving understanding of womanhood through Mary's example. She saw Mary not as a passive figure but as an active participant in her own story. Clara believed that by embracing her role in the divine

narrative, Mary demonstrated that women could shape their destinies and contribute meaningfully to the world. She saw Mary's consent to be the mother of Jesus as an act of agency, challenging the notion that empowerment solely meant resistance. For Clara, embracing their roles with intention and purpose meant a source of empowerment.

Sofia, a middle-aged woman with a background in counselling, embarked on the pilgrimage to the house of the Virgin Mary, seeking personal healing and transformation. Having worked with survivors of trauma, Sofia had witnessed the profound impact of faith on the process of healing. She saw Mary as a symbol of solace and compassion, which resonated deeply with her therapeutic approach. Beside a tranquil stream near the pilgrimage site, Sofia opened up about her perspective on womanhood and empowerment. She emphasized the importance of nurturing and self-care, values she believed Mary embodied. For Sofia, female empowerment wasn't just about achieving goals but about finding a sense of inner peace and resilience. She felt that Mary's ability to hold space for suffering while maintaining her faith exemplified a unique form of empowerment – one rooted in empathy and spiritual growth:

It was as if Mary's spirit lingered, whispering tales of empowerment to those who sought solace and inspiration. (Judith)

Amid the flickering candles and the scent of burning incense, Judith shared her own stories of trials and triumphs with the Virgin Mary. She spoke of shattered glass ceilings and dreams, battles won and scars earned:

In Mary's presence, my vulnerability became my strength, and my journey felt validated in the eyes of a fellow woman who had known both the pains and joys of existence. (Judith)

She discovered that the Virgin's legacy wasn't merely a relic of the past – it was a living, breathing force transcending time and space. Judith found shelter in women like Mary, becoming a beacon of hope for those who sought liberation from societal confines. Through the eyes of the Virgin, Judith understood that her gender and sexuality were not chains to be broken but colours to be woven into the tapestry of her individuality.

The various designations ascribed to Mary, including titles like 'Mother of God', 'Our Lady of Guadalupe' and 'Immaculate Conception', hold profound layers of significance that deeply resonate with women's lived experiences. These titles encompass traits of strength, resilience and compassion, qualities that defy conventional perceptions of women as passive and submissive beings. They empower female pilgrims to envision femininity as a wellspring of potency and self-empowerment. In addition, Mary's portrayal as the 'Mother most merciful' upends the stern judgements often linked with patriarchal religious frameworks, enabling women to reclaim their autonomy through self-agency and self-absolution.

Pilgrimage encounters centred around devotion to Mary cultivate a shared sense of womanhood. Titles like 'Mother of the Church' and 'Queen of Martyrs' accentuate the communal dimension of women's journeys, wherein Mary's own trials and victories mirror their individual experiences. This communal affinity fosters solidarity and shared narratives, countering the isolation frequently stemming from masculinist societal

constructs. Designations honouring Mary's virginity, like the 'Perpetual virginity of Mary', provoke reflections on the intricate facets of femininity and sexuality. Rather than confining women within narrow definitions, these titles present a nuanced outlook on purity and virtue. Women pilgrims can reinterpret these attributes as virtues transcending the physical realm, placing emphasis on emotional and spiritual purity. Consequently, Mary's titles furnish women with alternative archetypes of femininity that extend beyond mere sexual identity.

Through my experiences and conversations, I could see the emergence of recurring themes. The participants' understanding of Mary's teachings went beyond a simple devotion; it became a lens through which they viewed their own identities. These women found empowerment in Mary's story, allowing them to navigate the complexities of their bodies and gender expressions with a sense of purpose and acceptance.

Conclusion

Irigaray's concept of *staying at home* is not confined to the physical realm but extends to the interior landscape of the soul – a space where women can cultivate their unique identity and sense of empowerment. This notion can be richly explored by considering the parallels with the Virgin Mary, a figure deeply revered by Catholic women for her spiritual depth and transformative influence. She proposes that women should seek an authentic sense of self by metaphorically *staying at home* within their own souls. This entails delving into their inner world, embracing their desires and cultivating a genuine connection with themselves.

The Virgin Mary, as a spiritual archetype, embodies this notion of *staying at home* within the soul. Mary's unwavering faith, her quiet strength and her ability to nurture and empathize exemplify an inner dwelling that serves as a source of power. In the context of the pilgrimage narratives, Mary becomes a symbol of the inner sanctuary where women can discover and cultivate their spiritual essence.

Irigaray's focus on these divine interruptions aligns with modern calls for emancipation from prescribed roles, heralding an era of embracing diverse gender expressions. Irigaray's revelations about Mary's symbolism unveil a magnificent tapestry. Her insights encourage us to engage with the symphony, bridging historical visions and spiritual experiences. Mary's transformative imagery guides us on a journey to recalibrate gender dynamics, dissolve doctrinal limitations and establish an inclusive and equitable society.

In this study, I sought to scrutinize the manner in which women adeptly traverse intricate social and cultural frameworks, thereby manifesting agency within circumscribed parameters. This exploration leverages the lens of the Marian pilgrimage to illuminate the transformative mechanisms through which women reconfigure their roles and assert agency within the context of their religious convictions. The designations attributed to the Virgin Mary, notably exemplified by the appellation *Our Lady of Guadalupe*, serve to bestow upon women the capacity to contest established gender paradigms. Instances of pilgrimage assume the embodiment of curative modalities, while communal settings established through pilgrim engagements foster a milieu of collective solidarity. Concurrently, religious observances, exemplified by the doctrine of the perpetual virginity

of Mary, furnish women with the means to reconstitute prevailing understandings of gender and sexuality, thereby intricately interlinking domains of spirituality, womanhood and sexuality.

Women's pilgrimage experiences not only challenge traditional gender norms and patriarchal constructs but also enable them to construct agency and empowerment within these spaces. Through a feminist analysis of the interplay between Marian phenomenologies and women's agency in pilgrimage experiences, we unveil the dynamic interplay between faith, agency and the reconfiguration of gendered identities, highlighting the potential of religious practices to become sites of transformation, healing and empowerment. Mary's multifaceted titles offer a canvas upon which women pilgrims can paint their narratives of empowerment, self-discovery and healing. In this sense, this exploration underscores the potential of religious spaces to be sites of resistance against the masculinist positioning of women to assert their agency.

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