

# WOMAN'S RESPONSE

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DOES it make a difference that God took on a human face? If so, what might be the significance of this for us now? These are the issues which I will address in this reflection. Within the area of Cornelian spirituality we can say, straightforwardly, that there are two possible lines of approach to the matter. One of these is life-related and the other is death-related. On the one hand we have the joy of women who have become mothers, who rejoice in the new life (and in Mary's case she is the mother of God). On the other we have the sorrow of women who see their sons die, who grieve at the waste of the life they have borne.

These issues are in turn related to that of hope. Christians have a **hope**. For what? In tradition it is for eternal life. Not all first century Jews had such a hope but Christian Jews stressed the nature of their hope, as we can see from Paul's letter to Corinth (I Cor 15). If our hope were only for this life then we would be objects of pity as deluded, or scorn as senseless people. That Christ died is not in itself the core value then; what is even more central is that he still lives. As Christ, so also we will live. Being in Christ means that we share his identity: in a two-way process we take on life because Christ took on human existence and death which is the end of all human boundaries. That is the point of Paul's Adam/Christ image.

This hope means that we have energies to spare for what does not bring immediate profit, that which is slow to produce reward. We can direct our energies to building up God's kingdom at whatever cost in time and effort. Christ's gift to this work is eventually his death, a death which means that incarnation has reached its final goal. Death is now capable of transformation to life and growth. This is represented in Cornelia's own life and hope, in her devotion to the mother of sorrows. Out of the death of her marriage and of her practical capacity to act as mother to her children comes new life. "The Society was founded on a breaking heart." How do we carry our responsibility for owing our existence in this sense to Cornelia's burden of pain, her accepted suffering?

The ultimate consequence of death experienced as hope is a renewal of creative energy. The mother stands with her son and supports his work. This theme brings us to birth images and the epiphany theme, one dear to Cornelia's vision for her successors. What expresses God's love to the world? A mere child. Such a fragile identity for an all-powerful God! Yet a child is also a symbol of unlimited potential. A new life offers hope for the continuity of existence. Who knows what that child will accomplish in the fullness of time? Hence the joy of the community at the resurrection is likened, in the fourth gospel, to the joy of a woman who has given birth to a child successfully. She rejoices that a child has come into the world and forgets the pain. This too is a sign of hope, as a Christian quality.

Cornelia directs us to begin again with the child Jesus walking in his ways as he grows up, thus developing attitudes of simplicity, trust and of openness to God. Cornelia knew the joys of a family gathered together at table or around the piano. From that human experience she could pass on a belief in family, the

family of Jesus at Nazareth and her SHCJ family.

In these practical and ordinary ways Cornelia developed a response to an incarnational religion and was able to offer this vision to others. The ordinary family life becomes the source of instruction, of wisdom, within Christian living. As such Cornelia is an example of the wise woman of **Proverbs** 1-9 who sets up a household of faith and calls her family to enter in and make it their home.

The positive rejoicing in life, in birth and creativity is always shadowed, in human experience, by the certainty of death. Life cannot be grasped and held; it does not appear to have a certain hope of gain to offer. But life that has passed through death and not been extinguished, that life endows incarnational faith with deeper meaning. Thus Paul in **I Corinthians** looks to a glorious future when God will be all things to everyone (15:28). Cornelia was prepared to make a test of life's happiness by accepting its death. The break up of her marriage, the dispersal of her family and the early deaths of three of her children was her personal experience of the deepening of incarnational truth. We inherit her vision that life is to be enjoyed but also freely offered back to God. Each of us has a personal journey to make along these lines - from the gift of life, to death, to new life, as we respond to the fullness of the meaning of Christian hope. So ought all to form themselves to their own spirit; but as we share Cornelia's vision and spirituality we form ourselves also to the common spirit which enriches and builds up the whole.

In all of this Cornelia is our teacher. As in **Sirach** 6 the spirit she offers us may seem hard but "soon you will eat of her produce", and seeking out her message will lead us to experience the change into joy, the putting on a robe of gladness, which is at the heart of incarnational religion. Tradition tells us that Wisdom was at the centre of Creation and was made manifest in the Cross of Christ (I Corinthians 2, Wisdom 7). And all who truly seek God follow Wisdom's teaching. She is the source of hope and joy and of life with God. In her spirituality Cornelia herself mirrors these eternal values and offers a personal way of entering into the **hope** that Christ offers - the eternal state of being in joy as part of God's family united in itself and open to new members. Out of this heart of sorrows/heart of joy comes the desire to share these values with others and to realise in a concrete and everyday manner the building up of a Society, a community which exists for the good of all its members.

It was God's design that initiated the incarnation but a woman's response which completed the process. In Cornelia we have another woman whose ability to search for God in life and whose courage and generosity in opening up to God's plans offers us a way of wisdom, of Christian instruction. In this Cornelia incarnates that capacity of women to respond to God and to have joy in sharing in the work of creation and renewal. As she discovered what that hope meant for her she herself became a dwelling place of the Spirit and a sign of God's power and energy at work in the world. Mary, mother of sorrows and mother of joy, Mary, mother of God, stands behind this sign as yet further proof of incarnational hope. We stand in this circle of heroic women and add our own personal experience to the whole.