

## Intergenerational Faith Sharing and She Who Is

by Kevin Zobel, CSSR

Almost immediately after she stepped into the tiny chapel, my grandmother launched into an animated conversation with an old friend she never expected to encounter. Flaming candles of varying degrees of height and color weighed down the air surrounding the old wooden statue of St. Jude, who welcomed visitors in a one-room enclosure just outside the main church of the mission of San Javier del Bac, itself a quiet, whitewashed enclave outside of Tucson, Arizona. I stood by quietly and awkwardly, much as I often did when my grandmother’s friends would stop by for coffee, spinning stories and sharing news in a seamless weave of Spanish and English. Two generations removed from Mexico, I found my grandmother’s faith—much like her other friendships—a curious blend of hospitality and distance, of earthy narrative and mystery, spoken in a language at times familiar and other times lyrically inaccessible.

In my ministerial encounters with families of more recent arrivals, I discover among the younger generations a tension similar to my experience in the St. Jude chapel with my grandmother. As children and grandchildren of immigrants, we continually curate our inherited treasuries of images and values as we establish our sense of identity in light of cultural changes, or—as in the case of my own family—the inevitable blending of cultures through marriage across ethnic lines. However, listening to the stories and struggles of matriarchs and patriarchs within immigrant families, I recognize the urgent importance of discovering ways of assisting families in this necessary but difficult process of affirming, renewing, or creating ties of faith across generations. Too often, the failure to mediate intergenerational conversation results in feelings of rejection or disintegration among generations—a phenomenon exacerbated by the presence of acculturative stressors and other pressures of migration. How, then, might families engage in creative discourse around questions of faith while respectfully affirming, renewing, and chal-



Eight-year-old Kevin (leftmost), his siblings, and his grandparents Joaquin and Rachael Solórzano

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lenging different ways of imaging God and negotiating other shared symbols of the faith? Or, on a personal level, how might my grandmother have introduced me to the intimate friend she encountered in the chapel?

By extending this intergenerational experience of negotiating symbols and images of the faith to the broader community, we discover how the dynamics of prophetic challenge and identity renewal that motivate ongoing liberation theologies and postcolonial projects play out in the life of the domestic church. Immigrant families, often themselves part of communities living on the margins, face the difficult task of thriving in unfamiliar and often hostile environments in ways that draw strength from inherited traditions while, at the same time, vacating or reimagining those symbols that fail to empower or liberate. In this light, I suggest that Elizabeth Johnson's *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* offers one resource in addressing the urgent concerns of immigrant families as they negotiate the language and symbols of their faith. *She Who Is* promotes a movement to systematize an inclusive and universally empowering trinitarian theology; however, Johnson's methodology offers support to intergenerational faith dialogue because it proceeds first from the power of words and images to promote or impair human flourishing, and thus takes seriously both the faith experience of the human person and inherited tradition.

Johnson's study focuses primarily on how patriarchal and androcentric ways of imaging and speaking about God act concretely to undermine the human equality of women as *imago Dei*. From a methodological perspective, Johnson enters the juncture of classical and contemporary discourse about God, and uses the lens of women's flourishing to discover whether a feminist theological approach might effectively deconstruct the inherited system of sexist discourse about God, search tradition and scripture for new or alternative ways of imaging God, and thereby reconstruct a trinitarian theology that restores to women the right to image and name God out of their experience, leading to transformation of community.

Throughout her exploration, Johnson emphasizes that images of God *function*—that is, they impact “personal and common weal or woe” not just spiritually, but psychologically and sociologically.<sup>1</sup> Johnson embraces Sophia as a guiding image to overcome speech about God that has relied almost solely on male designations that, over time, have become accepted as a literally understood maleness intrinsic to the trinitarian symbol of God. In her exploration of the dimensions of Sophia as Spirit-Sophia, Jesus-Sophia, and Mother-Sophia, Johnson models a way of doing theology that proceeds from classical themes, diagnoses where and how the church closed off creative and inclusive ways of imaging God, and invites the tradition into conversation with human experience. In this way, Johnson's feminist understanding of the Trinity contributes to contemporary liberation and postcolonial movements a dialogic methodology that takes seriously the plight of families and avails them of the treasury of Christian scripture and tradition as they exercise their right to name and image God and appropriate faith symbols and images from their lived experience.

As with all talk of God and the life of faith, the family conversation remains ultimately inconclusive—always in liminal tension in light of dynamic cultural crosscurrents. Throughout her exploration of God-Sophia, Johnson admits that speaking about God from the posture of human analogy and experience will never capture God's full essence, but rather points humankind, especially those on the margins, toward a vivifying, liberating, and relational experience of God. Johnson emphasizes that God is “*like* a Trinity,” and, while all analogies ultimately fall short of full appropriation of the economic and immanent God, those images that envision a radically relational understanding of the Trinity as *perichoresis*, or mutual indwelling, recognize that “there is reflected a livingness in God, a beyond, a with and a within to the world and its history; a sense of God as from whom, by whom, and in whom

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1 Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 36.

all things exist, thrive, struggle toward freedom, and are gathered in.”<sup>2</sup> Johnson’s methodology thus takes seriously the challenge introduced by Karl Rahner, who argued that a connection must exist between Trinity and humanity because this symbol of God points to a mystery of salvation, otherwise it would never have been revealed.<sup>3</sup>

Johnson’s feminist methodology also draws empowering and imaginative conclusions from Rahner’s underlying trinitarian thesis of the fundamental integration of the Trinity as transcendent and as lovingly operative and concerned with human thriving: namely, that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”<sup>4</sup> Johnson asserts that “We hope that it is the livingness of *God* who is with us in the suffering of history, and so we affirm that God’s relation to the world is grounded in God’s own being capable of such relation.”<sup>5</sup> Catherine LaCugna echoes Johnson’s proposition of the fundamental relationality established by life in God by way of Trinity, and notes that to live in God means to enter into the life of Christ, the Spirit, and the life of others within the Reign of God as the manifestation of God’s “economy.”<sup>6</sup> In this way, Johnson’s feminist approach to discourse about God remains relevant to Christian life today because it affirms the radical equality and participation of all persons in the ongoing praxis of the Reign of God, realized through the movement toward life in God as a creative immersion into the indwelling of the Trinity-as-relation, which remains always in solidarity with human suffering.

Among families, the language and symbols of faith therefore advance an agenda of empowerment when they direct each generation toward the mystery of salvation as a true and active source of redemptive hope and lodestar of human dignity. For those on the economic and cultural margins—including many immigrant families—the question and criteria for renewing or reimagining a common core of faith language and symbolism becomes: Are our images and ways of speaking about God and our faith redemptive? Do they reaffirm our dignity as the beloved of God—*imago Dei*—over and against circumstances and structures that act against our ability to thrive in our new community? Cultural assimilation potentially places the immigrant generation into a defensive posture with regard to family faith heritage. Johnson’s methodology offers one possible means by which families—with support from the faith community and its ministers—might take initiative in engaging the inevitable influx of unfamiliar cultural material by adopting cross-generational criteria for evaluation: namely, the unity and thriving of the family.

Over twenty years after its publication, I am discovering that *She Who Is* contributes new possibilities of support for families by constructing a methodological framework that proceeds from inherited traditions, respectfully but critically explores their meanings, and then draws upon the particularity of current experience to direct these symbols toward new or revived meanings that assist families in sharing their faith and values across generations. As a minister among families struggling to maintain unity and nourish healthy identities—all the while striving to empower younger generations to adapt to new cultural realities—I recognize the importance of preparing occasions and spaces for families to dialogue about how they express their faith to one another. In my own experience, opportunities for this type of dialogue arise as adolescents begin to question the practices of their families and communities. Rather than confronting these stirrings with a desperate sense of defensiveness, I believe that we as a faith community might view these as sacred times bursting with creative possibility. By applying a lens of family unity and thriving, we accompany youth through the natural process of curating their family symbols and images, making a space for them to contribute their story into the family faith narrative. One only has to look at

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2 Johnson, *She Who Is*, 211.

3 Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1970, reprinted 1997), 21.

4 Rahner, *Trinity*, 22.

5 Johnson, *She Who Is*, 200–201.

6 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “Living Trinitarian Faith,” in *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 382.

the dramatic and empowering—sometimes provocative—ways that Latino/a youth appropriate the narrative and symbolism of *La Virgen de Guadalupe* as a way of proclaiming their identity and, at times, challenging the society that lavishes them with cultural dynamism while, at the same time, often assigns them to the margins.

Additionally, there remains an urgent need to form and nurture supportive communities around parents and grandparents who experience feelings of abandonment or rejection as their children leave behind traditional faith practices. Following the systematic approach adopted by Johnson in *She Who Is*, we who accompany these families in ministry are invited to mediate these difficult but necessary conversations. By focusing on family unity and thriving as an evaluative lens, we might assist families in transition negotiate their treasury of faith symbols both old and new: introducing new generations to old friends like St. Jude, while welcoming new images and ideas brought home by the younger generations as they forge their identity between cultures. As I look back to that warm and fragrant devotional chapel, and my grandmother's animated encounter with St. Jude, I wonder what she might have taught me about what this friendship meant to her throughout an often difficult life filled with transition and, at times, social isolation. Sadly, this is a conversation my grandmother and I never took time to share.