

La Lucha Continues
Mujerista Theology

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Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Isasi-Díaz, Ada María.

La lucha continues : mujerista theology / Ada María Isasi-Díaz.
p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 1-57075-557-4 (pbk.)

1. Mujerista theology. I. Title.

BT83.5831I83 2004

230' .082—dc22

2004006505

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La Lucha

My Story

I was born a feminist Thanksgiving weekend 1975 at the first Women's Ordination Conference (WOC). I was at the time living in Rochester, New York, and had driven with a group of women to Detroit. A friend in charge of religious education for the diocese knew about the conference and insisted I should go. After nine months as a salesperson at Sears, I had recently started to work part time in an inner city parish while beginning my studies on a Master's in medieval history. I had no money to travel to Detroit, stay in a hotel and pay the conference registration fee. "Several of us are going by car so you can just come with us," answered Denise Mack. "And, you can stay in our room. Don't worry about it." Regarding the registration fee, she said she would talk with Lyn Sommers, another Rochester woman who was responsible for organizing small discussion groups for the conference. Lyn called me. "I need one more facilitator for the small groups," she said. If I could do that task, the conference fee would be waived. "Sign me on," I said, with a sense that there was no way of avoiding this conference.

Friday after Thanksgiving, hours before the sun rose, my brother-in-law drove me to the group's gathering point. We started the long drive to Detroit. Little did I know, as I sat in the back seat of the car on that cold November morning, that this conference would influence radically my worldview and give direction to my life for the rest of my days.

The sense of excitement and possibility that filled the hallways of the hotel where the conference participants gathered was incredible. The process that had been designed for the conference remains one of the best I have experienced. In the small groups in which we gathered after the plenary sessions the participants discussed the issues presented and began to organize themselves for action. Given what we had heard and what we were discussing, what did each of us want to do? Little by little the small groups dissolved as people moved to all sorts of caucuses being formed according to the interests of the conference participants. The small group I facilitated carried out this assignment conscientiously and after the second plenary session the group had dissolved. I was jobless, but not for long!

My conference name tag identified me as a facilitator and during one of the breaks, as I stood in a hallway drinking a cup of coffee, a tall imposing woman asked me in quite an abrupt manner, "Where is your group?" Learning that my group had already dissolved, she thrust papers and markers into my arms and said while rushing on, "Then come and help me." Marjorie Tuite, a nun well-known because of her work against racism, was facilitating a caucus formed to consider establishing an organization on the issue of women's ordination in the Catholic Church and she needed someone to take notes. I followed her without saying a word, fascinated by the energy she exuded. During the next hour I was to have the most intense lesson of my life in group dynamics.

Never losing sight of the task at hand, Marjorie allowed everyone to speak. Her no-nonsense attitude invited people to think before they spoke. The meeting moved along at an incredible pace. She was constantly summing up where we were as I did all I could to write down every step we took. When the meeting was over, she briefly checked what I had written, told me to whom to give the notes, and left the room to solve some problem that had come up with the dynamics of the conference. Later, at the last plenary session, the assembly was asked to consider the resolution from our caucus. I felt a certain awe when I heard read the words I had written.

My birth as a feminist took place at the ending ritual of the conference. When those who believed themselves called to ordi-

nation were asked to identify themselves, I knew I had to be honest and stand. However, a battle was raging within me. I felt caught between a sense of vocation—what I wanted to do with my life—and a sudden awareness of the intense struggle that lay ahead. I turned to Mary Walden, an Ursuline sister whom I had met fifteen years earlier only three days after arriving in the USA as a refugee from Cuba. In tears I said, “Mary, I do not want to stand. I am tired of battles.” She smiled at me reassuringly. Then I felt myself rising to my feet, almost forced by the belief that I was called to be ordained. I was among the last ones to stand. When I looked around I found myself surrounded by a “cloud of witnesses.” In this battle, at least I would not be alone. After a few seconds I sat down thinking, I have been born, baptized and confirmed in this new life all at once! As I left the assembly I signed a paper indicating my interest in working on the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church.

Back home working in an inner city parish and studying at the university kept me very busy. A few months went by. One day the phone rang and it was Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt, a member of the task force that had organized that first Women’s Ordination Conference. “You signed the list of those interested in forming an ongoing organization and I am calling because we are doing just that,” she said. The first meeting was going to be at Rosary College (now Dominican College) outside Chicago, and once again I simply did not have money for an airline ticket. “We have vowed,” said Rosalie with her characteristic passion, “we will not meet again without women of color participating.” I was to save the date, she insisted, and she somehow would find the money to pay for my ticket. She did and I became involved as a volunteer for several years and eventually worked as paid staff for WOC. It was in the women’s movement in the Catholic Church that I began to learn about gender oppression. The Catholic Church with its oppression of women turned me into a feminist!

In the 1960s I had been a missionary in Lima, Peru, and there the poor had taught me the real meaning of religion. They taught me that if religious beliefs are not the basis for the struggle for liberation, they can indeed become the “opium of the people.” They taught me that God stands with the poor and that

liberation and salvation are inseparable, that “poverty is a slap in God’s face.” In 1970 when I left the convent and came back to the USA, I had the sense that I was starting life anew. Those were difficult years, for, despite the love and support of my family, I simply did not feel at home in the USA and I did not know what to do with my life. I knew that leaving the convent did not absolve me from my vocation to ministry—re-defined by my experience in Peru as ministry with and for the poor. Every week I would read the *National Catholic Reporter*, a liberal Catholic newspaper, looking for clues as to how I could get involved in the church. As I read news of the church in the USA, nothing seemed important to me, nothing seemed to resonate with me. One day I stopped to read a small announcement that I had noticed ran every week. It talked about the Deaconess Movement: write, it said, and they would send a newsletter. After I saw it three or four times, I am not sure why I did it but I responded. Soon I received a homemade newsletter written by Mary B. Lynch, a Roman Catholic laywoman. Years later I learned she was the one who called together in Chicago a group of women who organized that first Women’s Ordination Conference in Detroit. I found the newsletter interesting but it did not touch what then was at the heart of my personal struggle: looking for ways to get involved in stopping poverty and the exploitation of Latin America by the USA.

During 1976, the first year of my life as a feminist, I worked hard at educating myself. Though I knew next to nothing about feminism and gender analysis, I understood early on that I could apply the same processes and categories of analysis I had used to learn about poverty and its relationship to the Gospel message to the oppression of women. There was not much available to read, but I have always learned best from experience. I began to wear my new-found gender-analysis lens all the time! Soon a group of us started to meet locally to see what we could do to move the church in Rochester to deal with the issue of women’s ordination. Local and national involvement provided me with a community of women with whom I could learn. Many of them were veterans of the social movements of the 1960s. In Lima I had been thoroughly involved in advocating for the poor with civil authorities and in church circles. As I heard other women

draw from their experiences in previous social movements, I could parallel their moves and draw from my own experiences in Lima. During this process of learning I led with my heart: I kept in mind at all times the commitment I had made when I stood at the closing ritual of the Detroit conference for women's full participation in the church. Group reflection and reading began to provide me with the intellectual tools I needed to see the connections between poverty and sexism. My vision became clearer but my world became more complicated as the days went on. Soon I could sing with full conviction, "I wish my eyes had never been opened."

Much of the work we did in those early years of WOC fell into three categories. First of all we were hard at work creating an organization, trying desperately to expand our membership, to create an economic base for our work, and to set up procedures for communication and decision-making that followed feminist understandings of group process. As part of the WOC office team my job was to expand our membership and work with local WOC groups. Second, we also did all we could to keep the issue alive publicly. The fact is that both the secular and the religious press were kind to us in those early days of the movement. We worked hard to provide all the background they needed on the issue of women and the church and to accommodate their requests to the best of our ability. Many of the reporters we worked with let us know they were sympathetic to our cause and did all they could to keep our issue in the public eye. For example, when John Paul I died a few weeks after being elected pope, one of the main television networks decided that instead of rehashing the church's procedure for electing a pope they would look at issues facing the church. WOC was contacted and I was selected to be the one interviewed on a popular morning show, "Good Morning America." I learned much from this experience and was happy to have played a role in having our message reach millions. Soon surveys were saying that over 60 per cent of Roman Catholics wanted women to be ordained.

The third area of our work, which undoubtedly caused us the most frustration, was dealing with the Roman Catholic bishops. Some of them were convinced that women should be priests but they did little to move the issue within church structures. With

the help of Bishop Charles Buswell we were able to pursue a two-year dialogue with the bishops' committee that dealt with women's issues. I was one of the WOC dialoguers during that process and learned much about church politics.

One night I was in the elevator with a bishop involved in the process. We considered him a friend and yet I sensed that he did not understand our arguments. As the door of the elevator closed I said to him, "Why do you not understand what we are saying?" With a pained expression he said to me, "Ada, don't you see that if I understood I could not remain a bishop in this church?" I wanted so much to ask him why he wanted to be a bishop if that meant compromising the truth. It was a crude awakening for me to realize that truth does not always carry the day, that knowing does not necessarily lead to action. The dialogue with the bishops taught me much about the insidiousness of power and the need for power to be re-conceptualized as a capacity to bring about justice instead of being a tool to control and dominate. I believe we need to understand that power belongs to the community, to those invested in the organization or institution in question and not solely to its leaders. Leaders must understand that they are only given the opportunity to exercise power by the community and for the good of the community and that, therefore, they have to be accountable to the community. Unless power is understood this way, it will continue to be used to oppress instead of to liberate. The re-conceptualization of power is a task that feminist theory, feminist theology, feminist sociology, and feminist organizations have not focused on sufficiently. Until we do, we will continue to undermine the work we do on behalf of justice for women.

I have never known how to proceed in life without seeing what I do as either a way of surviving (like washing dishes or working at Sears as a salesperson when I could find no other jobs) or as part of my vocation in life. I was not surprised, therefore, that I began to find work on the issue of women's ordination, which I soon saw as but one way of working against sexism, as part of my vocation. The experience of a woman involved in WOC in the early days helped me realize this. She called one day and said that she needed a break; she felt burned out. What she said impacted me greatly: the fact is that it scared me out of my

wits! For weeks I chided myself for perhaps not taking the issue seriously enough, for I certainly did not feel anywhere near exhaustion. On the other hand, I did not want to become so drained that I had to step away from my commitment to the women's movement. I had gotten involved thinking that women would get ordained within a decade or so and then I could once again concentrate on working with the poor. But what if involvement in this issue left me psychologically spent?

One day, as I drove home from work in the middle of a snow-storm, three things became clear for me. First of all, I realized that sexism was a category of oppression and that it did not exist apart from poverty but compounded it and vice-versa. (Soon, together with Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt and Marjorie Tuite we designed a visual to explain the interconnections of sexism, racism/ethnic prejudice, and classism.) Second, as I slowly inched ahead on slippery roads, I could hear my mother saying the words with which she always ended her letters to me: as long as God gives us the energy we need for the struggle, we will be all right. Mamá has always insisted we should not ask God to free us from struggling but rather we should thank God we have something to struggle for. What we need to do is ask God to give us *fuerzas para la lucha*, strength for the struggle. (Years later I would work on developing *la lucha* as a category of social analysis and as a theo-ethical category.) Third, the snow-covered windshield of my car became like a movie screen where I could see my next-door neighbor in Lima, a woman who lived in extreme poverty yet never lost her sense of dignity and purpose of life. I remember the steadiness of her struggle: day after day she dealt with the reality of the present and survived that day in order to be able to face the next. (That reflection has led me to develop the category of *lo cotidiano* as the main site for struggle, as the site that reveals oppression at the same time it illumines the preferred future.) What I realized that day I came to understand more and more as I discussed it with my women friends in Rochester. From that day forward I have never been scared of burning out, often singing to myself, "I ain't no ways tired. I've come too far from where I started from. Nobody told me the road would be easy." And, as to burning up, that is what life is all about, isn't it? For me life is about being passionate for

justice! That is what fulfills me; that is what gives me energy and creativity.

In 1976, to celebrate the bi-centennial of the founding of the USA, the Catholic bishops organized a consultation process to define the main issues that the church needed to address in the years ahead. The process finished with a conference in Detroit. Initially Women's Ordination Conference was not invited but several of the leaders of the organization pressed for inclusion and eventually we were allowed to participate. Our work at this conference, called "Call to Action," was the first public action of WOC as an organization. We worked hard to be a positive presence at that meeting. For me personally, "Call to Action" was very important, for there I met Yolanda Tarango, a Chicana nun from El Paso, Texas. After the Catholic Bishops' Conference I asked her repeatedly to join WOC. Yolanda was not eager to do so, and little by little I learned the reason. At the end of the WOC conference the year before two women had read an important statement to the whole assembly. María Iglesias, a nun from New York City who was at the time national coordinator of LAS HERMANAS (a Hispanas/Latinas Catholic organization), and Shawn Copeland, then president of the National Black Sisters Conference, had spoken to the largely white women's assembly. Shawn had warned conference participants not to rebuild the walls of Jericho to keep black and Hispanas/Latinas out once white women made it into the priesthood, "One of the other parts to the story of Joshua is that after the people took the city of Jericho, Yahweh said to them, 'Never build in this place again a city like this.' So if you go through the walls and you take the city, then don't build the same city again."¹

With Yolanda's help, I began to analyze and study the issue of racism/ethnic prejudice in the women's movement. In the summer of 1978 Yolanda invited me to participate in the national meeting that brought together Hispanic priests and members of LAS HERMANAS. At that meeting I began to understand the complexities of the ethnic prejudice against Hispanics in the USA, its connection with racism, how ethnic prejudice is present in the women's movement, and the role it plays in oppressive structures. That meeting also made me realize that, given that the vast majority of Hispanas/Latinas in the USA are poor

women, working for justice for women in the church could be an effective way of working for justice for women who are poor. I left that meeting with two firm convictions: I needed to listen to grassroot Hispanas/Latinas just as I had learned to listen to the poor in Lima. (Years later Yolanda and I developed a method for doing *mujerista* theology that starts with the voices of grassroot Hispanas/Latinas. Several key theological claims have arisen from this conviction: *mujerista* theology is a liberative praxis; grassroot Hispanas/Latinas are organic theologians for they are admirably capable of explaining their religious understandings and the role religion plays in their daily struggles; the lived-experience of grassroot Hispanas/Latinas is the source of *mujerista* theology.) Second, I needed to begin to bring to the table of WOC and other organizations in which I was participating the voices I was listening to: I needed to voice the perspectives and issues of Hispanas/Latinas.

Many of the women I worked with in WOC, almost exclusively white women, were committed to the struggle against racism. I believe many of them came to understand the particulars of the struggle of Hispanas/Latinas in this society. However, as I began to speak more and more as a Latina from that special perspective and as I attempted to link sexism to racial/ethnic prejudice, I began to become invisible in the movement. Jamie Phelps, an African-American nun active in WOC in those early days, offered me advice time and again. "Girl," she would say, "be careful. They will sideline you as soon as you become too vocal as a Hispanic." How right she was! After five years of being at home in the women's movement struggling for justice in the church, I began to feel alienated. Disagreements regarding priorities, styles of leadership, and strategies, as well as struggles for control of WOC together with my own personal shortcomings created a most difficult situation and I was asked to resign from my job with the organization in which I had been involved for seven years. Extremely distraught by what had happened I spent time analyzing the reasons for it and trying to learn from it. It seems to me that, though we had struggled to wield power in non-oppressive ways, when difficulties arose we fell back into the way we had been treated all of our lives in patriarchal structures: we turned disagreement into confrontation and we wielded power

to control and dominate instead of to enable and facilitate. However, though wounded and disillusioned I was not about to turn my back on the struggle for justice for women. That had become part of my vocation in life, of who I am. I simply needed to find new avenues for involvement, new ways of contributing to the liberation of women.

Religion always has been a central part of my life. Religion, in particular Roman Catholicism, is a key element of Latina culture. It is not at all exceptional for me, therefore, to have become aware of gender discrimination through my involvement in the church. Nor is it remarkable that a church issue, the ordination of women to a renewed priestly ministry, provided for me the opportunity to struggle for justice for women. My awareness of how sexism operates in the Catholic Church and how it influences our religious understandings and practices has never created for me a crisis of faith. My religious beliefs, on the contrary, seem to grow stronger. The injustices I have suffered in the church, the many pitfalls it harbors, have led me to a deeper understanding of myself and my vocation in life. Since I was young I have always distanced the divine and my relationship with the divine enough from the church (and now from theology) so that what the church teaches and the way it acts do not scandalize me or disappoint me in any way that affects negatively my faith. At the same time, as a young missionary in Lima, I learned that the church has power and influence in society. Though in the USA the role of the church in society is different and though today that role is not what it was even as recently as the 1980s, I believe that churches still have a powerful moral influence in society. I believe churches have an obligation always to take a prophetic stance: they always have to be on the side of the poor, the oppressed, the exploited, the marginalized, the vulnerable. Furthermore, I believe that justice is a constitutive element of the Gospel message. The Gospel message is intrinsic to my worldview: it is an ongoing source of understanding; it is, most of the time, the backdrop against which I make judgments; it motivates me and sustains me.

While working at WOC I had begun to take courses in the Master of Divinity program at a seminary in Rochester, New York. As I tried to sort out what to do with my life after leaving

WOC, I knew that it would have to be related to the struggle for justice for women from the perspective of religion. I decided I would finish my theological degree and then return to what has always given me greatest joy: working with grassroot Hispanas/Latinas. I knew I had to look beyond Rochester. My willingness to look for new ways of being involved in the struggle for women's liberation in church and society and the commitment to diversity of women theologians like Carter Heyward led me to participate in the project that produced the book *God's Fierce Whimsy*. Then, thanks to the sisterly care of Beverly Harrison and Ardith Hayes, in the spring of 1983 I found temporary employment at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and that fall I started my studies there. Yolanda Tarango and I had been working on gathering the voices of grassroot Hispanas/Latinas for publication, and I intended to use my theological studies to finish this task. Our book, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*, was first published in 1988. *Mujerista* theology was born in the many conversations Yolanda Tarango and I had with groups of LAS HERMANAS all around the country. It emerged from the many struggles we had as Hispanas/Latinas with church officials to have our voices heard and taken into consideration. It came from the conviction that we had to speak for ourselves or we would continue to be invisible or, at best, Hispano/Latino men would speak for us.

But the elaboration of *mujerista* theology never would have happened without the community of which I was a part at Union Theological Seminary in the 1980s. Angela Bauer, Elizabeth Bounds, Pamela Brubaker, Katie G. Cannon, Chung Hyun Kyung, Marilyn Legge, Margie Mayman—how much I learned from all these women as we took courses together, spent time reading each other's work and commenting on it, and cried and laughed together! Then there are the women who used their contacts and influence to open roads for me personally and to insist on including *mujerista* theology as one of the theological voices of women that needs to be part of women-centered theologies. Among these women, and there are many, I particularly remember Rosemary Radford Ruether, who referred us to her editor at Harper & Row and helped us to get our first book published. Letty Russell made sure time and again at the American

Academy of Religion and elsewhere that *mujerista* theology was included. Marcia Riggs and Karen McCarthy Brown helped me become a professor at Drew University. For years when I could not find any other Latina at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion, it was with Katie G. Cannon, Joan Martin, and other womanist theologians that I felt at home. Their struggles to have their own sessions at the AAR were the blueprint I followed to propose establishing a Latina/Latino theology session at the AAR.

Having decided to go on to study for a PhD and to work as an academician I still had to deal with the fact that it is the work I do with grassroot Hispanas/Latinas that is most life-giving to me. It is from them that I draw creativity and strength to continue to struggle for justice. Through the years I have learned the difficult task of straddling both worlds, the academy and the grassroot Latina community. These two areas of involvement have been my mainstay as I have worked to develop *mujerista* theology.

Also during these last twenty years I have been blessed with coming to know and become friends with women from many other parts of the world who under much more demanding circumstances than the ones we Hispanas/Latinas face here in the USA, insist at all times on justice for women. Aruna Gnanadason, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Elizabeth Tapia, Mary John Mananzan, Ofelia Ortega, Elsa Tamez, Ivone Gebara, Tania Mara Sampaio—these and many other women have taught me that we cannot struggle for justice for women thinking only of our own communities. They have taught me that if we do, some women will benefit at the expense of others, a tragic development given the fact that no one is truly liberated unless we all are liberated. The dictum, “think globally, act locally,” is one we need to continue taking to heart as we move ahead in the twenty-first century.

Together with the struggle for justice, friendships and relationships have been central in my life. As a *mujerista* I have come to understand how these two themes are intrinsically linked. Very important to me is the belief that we cannot sustain the struggle for justice for women without a deep sense of commitment to each other as women. There is no possibility of creating just structures in the academy, in the churches, and in society at large

if just relationships and solidarity do not inform our lives on a daily basis. At least I can bear witness to how much we can accomplish when we come together as community. I can also bear witness to how destructive we are when we forget about each other or use each other and the movement for our own self-aggrandizement. For me, the struggle for justice for women is part of who I am; it is, therefore, a religious issue. My most profound religious experiences have happened in the midst of *la lucha*; and *la lucha* is what gives meaning and joy to my life. In *la lucha* I find God time and again. Yes, for me *la vida es la lucha*: we must struggle to create community if we are to contribute to making justice for women a reality in our lives and our world.

Notes

1. Anne Marie Gardiner, SSND, *Women and Catholic Priesthood: An Expanded Vision — Proceedings of the Detroit Ordination Conference* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 189.