

**WHERE ART THOU?**  
**REFLECTIONS ON FINDING A PLACE FOR**  
**MOTHERING IN THEOLOGY THROUGH MIGRATION**

MA. ADEINEV M. REYES-ESPIRITU

*This paper echoes the claim of other prominent mother-theologians that the experience of mothering has been relegated to the sidelines of theology. Convinced that mothering can be a locus theologicus being a universal phenomenon essential to human family, this work examines how attention on migration can serve as an entry point for mothering studies in theology. It first surveys existing work on mothering in theology, followed by what has been done in other disciplines. A section that reviews some relevant works on migration theology reveals that there is indeed room for mothering studies here. Thus, a proposal to look at migrant mothering as a spiritual experience located at the intersection of migration and mothering is offered.*

**INTRODUCTION**

On the 105<sup>th</sup> world day of migrants and refugees celebrated on September 29, 2019, Pope Francis' message centered on the argument that to be concerned about the migrants is essentially to live out Christianity as it is.<sup>1</sup> He posits that "it is not just about migrants" for whatever is done for these people or on their behalf is done for humanity. He speaks of a "globalization of indifference" where migrants, among others, have become "emblems of exclusion" faulted for all social predicaments.<sup>2</sup>

Pope Francis argues that the othering that these people experience reflects a mechanism of disregard that can apply to

---

<sup>1</sup> "Message WDMR 2019\_EN.Pdf," Google Docs, accessed November 3, 2019, [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1e1Qz84xq3xK3qsECjqwPwPnUPaghuT/view?usp=embed\\_facebook](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1e1Qz84xq3xK3qsECjqwPwPnUPaghuT/view?usp=embed_facebook).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

anyone who just does not fit the norm. Hence, to recognize their plight is to reclaim the Christianity lost in the culture of disregard.<sup>3</sup> This is a bold yet necessary statement to make especially amidst growing global nationalist sentiments wherein migration is perceived as a threat to the growth, security, and integrity of receiving states. As the phenomenon of migration is identified to be an impetus to the awakening of certain Christian characteristics that are insidiously deadened by the “throw-away culture,”<sup>4</sup> it also becomes an opportunity to explore certain lacunae in theological pursuits.

In theology, are there certain realities which have been relegated to the margins? One of the fields that may be considered to fall on the sidelines is mothering studies. Insights from Pope Francis’ aforementioned message and an observed trend in the phenomenon of migration contribute to the argument why it is significant to find a place for mothering in theology.

First, the usage of the statement, “it is not just about migrants,” appears to be an effort to counter the segmentation of the mission into something that only concerns migrants. He puts forth a universal value to the efforts to address the plight of the migrants. Similarly, mothering is also a universal reality and practice wherein the value to nourish, rear, form, and protect one’s child surfaces as unifying despite the plurality in methodology and contexts. As such, an inquiry into the mothering experiences of the human family cannot but contribute to theology.

Second, Pope Francis comments on the centrality of migration in the worldwide goal to work for sustainable development. Truly, migration as a phenomenon is situated within a network of states that strive to work for sustainable development. In this discourse, varying opinions on migration may be oversimplified as a threat or an opportunity. Such simplistic positions can prove to be more detrimental given the complexity of the phenomenon. When talking about sustainable development, it is inevitable to discuss gender equality. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) has gender equality for its fifth

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

sustainable development goal.<sup>5</sup> The aim is to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.”<sup>6</sup> Among the several manifestations of gender inequality, the UNDP has identified “unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work” as one of them. This issue is undeniably situated in the realm of mothering.<sup>7</sup>

Third, theologians working on a theology of migration have identified a feminization of migration.<sup>8</sup> The number of women experiencing migration have increased through the years. Their moves have been driven by economic and security reasons among others. A significant number of these women are mothers who have to deal with mothering in geographical distance. There are also those who confront the joys and challenges of mothering as migrants in foreign lands whose culture, support system opportunities, and expectations may be different from those of their countries of origin. Can theology of migration usher greater theological inquiry and attention into the field of mothering, given the feminization of migration?

Mothering studies is an area that is quite foreign in mainstream theology. Conversely, theology of migration is receiving sustained interest and rightly so. A simple search on Google Scholar illustrates the disparity with nine results for “theology of mothering” and 705 for “theology of migration.” The field of mothering studies, as *another* area, can be treated as a fertile ground that is just not fully discovered yet. It deserves tilling and possesses the potential to bear fruit and provide nourishment to sustain theological contributions to the daily human family life. It is against this background that this paper seeks to investigate the (in)visibility of mothering in the field of theology and the possibility

---

<sup>5</sup> “Sustainable Development Goals,” UNDP, accessed November 3, 2019, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Goal 5: Gender Equality,” UNDP, accessed November 3, 2019, <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-5-gender-equality.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Gemma T. Cruz, *Toward a Theology of Migration: Social Justice and Religious Experience* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014); Gioacchino Campese, “The Irruption of Migrants: Theology of Migration in the 21st Century,” *Theological Studies* 73, no. 1 (February 2012): 3–32.

of finding a place for it in its intersection with migration. In order to present this investigation, this paper takes the following structure. The first section is allotted to a survey of existing work on mothering in the field of theology. This is followed by significant contributions to mothering studies from other disciplines. The third part navigates what has been said about migration in theology. Lastly, the paper rounds up with a proposal to take a look at the intersection of migration and mothering and discover a *locus theologicus*. As an example, it can come in the form of a specific point in the intersection, namely migrant mothering as spiritual experience.

### MOTHERING IN THEOLOGY

The most significant attention to mothering in the field of theology can be attributed to the development of feminist practical theology. This wing of theology paved the way for the everyday life of women to become valuable sources in doing theology.<sup>9</sup> An exemplary figure in this field is theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore who, by drawing from her experience as a working mother, brought attention to and initiated reflection on the problematic understanding of biblical and theological traditions that supports the division of family and work between the female and male genders.<sup>10</sup> Her invitation to consider that the experiences and knowledge of mothers allow for a unique way to understand God is significant to the succeeding work in the field. Another notable contribution of Miller-McLemore is her book *In the Midst of Chaos*, a personal narrative that walks its readers through the ordinary and often muddled activities of parenting vis-à-vis her spiritual insights and reflections born of such experiences.<sup>11</sup> This particular book of Miller-McLemore gives an endearing testimony

---

<sup>9</sup> Joyce Ann Mercer, "Feminist and Womanist Practical Theology," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, ed. Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 104-6.

<sup>10</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

<sup>11</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice*, The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

to how parenting is indeed a vocation, a call from God, that when answered, leads to a lifelong spiritual journey. It affirms that parents do not have to look someplace else to encounter the sacred because in parenting, their home becomes the holy ground. As expected, a theologian like Miller-McLemore ably articulates her experience of spirituality in the mundane task of mothering. It will be quite interesting to inquire how ‘ordinary’ mothers, specifically migrant mothers, can speak about their mothering experiences and whether their narratives will reveal as well what Miller-McLemore has claimed in her work.

Among the theological sources on mothering, one of the most relevant to the proposal of this paper in the last section is the book, *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology: Mothering Matters*.<sup>12</sup> It is a compilation of essays written by several women in the fields of motherhood studies, religious practice, theology, spirituality, and pastoral care. The editors, mothers and theologians alike, have identified several reasons that persuaded them to create the volume. They value this project as an entry point for various voices to come together to dialogue given that the demands of mothering can detach women from the community. They also recognize how mothering is a pervading interest both in pop culture and in the academia. Despite such attention, they have identified the absence of theological reflection and discourse by women who are mothers themselves. They see the need for more diverse voices to be heard and to challenge the more homogeneous meaning-making process concerning motherhood as spiritual practice. The editors posit that not much support is given to mothers and parents in faith communities.<sup>13</sup> They also assert that mothering is not duly

---

<sup>12</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “And the ‘Hall Was Burned to the Ground’: Mothers and Theological Body Knowledge,” in *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology: Mothering Matters*, eds. Claire Bischoff, Elizabeth O’Donnell Gandolfo, Annie Hardison-Moody ; with Foreword by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 59-88.

<sup>13</sup> Practical theologian Joy Arroyo confirms in her study that the limited support received by women and mothers in their faith communities does not address their spiritual needs specific to their context. See Joy L. Arroyo, *Spiritual Transformation and Church Involvement in Matrescence* (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2018).

explored in the fields of religious practices and much less in ethics, systematics, and biblical studies. Very importantly, they suggest that mothering, as an embodied experience, is a significant and rich source for theologizing. This anthology, through the narratives and reflections shared by several women, contributes to the groundwork of this paper's proposal to look into migrant mothering as spiritual practice. Several of the essays are worth discussing here to be able to illustrate the diversity of contexts and experiences surrounding mothering and to see what has already been said about this practice and experience.

One of the essays in the book is Kelly Brown Douglas's "The Race of It All: Conversations Between a Mother and Her Son" which illustrates that mothering is not the same for all as popular culture and even some academic work would suggest.<sup>14</sup> For black mothers and fathers, they have to start early on and doubly hard in instilling in their children their value as God's children. They do this within the reality of a world so hostile to them on the basis of the color of their skin. Douglas's reflection on their experience as a people denied of rights and freedoms because of their physical appearance and the history that comes with it highlights the distinct character of what she terms as black faith. In the constantly threatened and unjust atmosphere where she and her fellow black women mother their children came a defining realization that "the innocent Jesus who was presumed guilty and crucified, is one with [their] innocent black sons and daughters."<sup>15</sup> Douglas's work illustrates how one's experience of struggles and tribulations in mothering defines the image of God that develops throughout her faith journey, a valuable point to consider in reading through the narratives of the migrant mothers.

Another essay in the area of African American theology is written by systematic theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher. In her writing, she gives a distinction to the term 'mothering' as "a

---

<sup>14</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, "The Race of It All: Conversations Between a Mother and Her Son," in *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology: Mothering Matters*, Claire Bischoff, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Annie Hardison-Moody, Editors; with Foreword by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 23-40.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 37.

creaturely activity not limited to biological mothers,” and “a verb and action toward others.”<sup>16</sup> She also defines mothering as an activity that involves love and is therefore “from God and is God” who is love.<sup>17</sup> Her essay, which involves dissecting literary works of African-American novelists, exemplifies how mothering is a social activity that is also spiritual, socio-economic, and political.

In contrast, Miller-McLemore points out what she observes to be a resistance in the field of theology “to inquire into biological motherhood as a source of knowledge.”<sup>18</sup> She finds the need to reclaim the material maternal bodies in that “the physical not only gains meaning within culture, it also influences meaning and shapes thought”<sup>19</sup> and that “physical bodies shape knowledge, including theological knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> In proposing an inquiry into a highly physical activity such as mothering of migrants, without disregarding all the other facets, Miller-McLemore’s observation stands as an important point of reflection.

The last work from the volume that is worth discussing here for its extensive outlook on mothering is Hellen Moon’s essay on transgressive mothering. She uses legal theorist and political philosopher Martha Fineman’s definition of vulnerability<sup>21</sup> as that which is not to be seen as a handicap that weighs down the vulnerable, being “essentializing, derogatory, and objectifying” but as an inevitable reality that occurs in the lives of everyone in varying contexts, and “is shifting, constant, and fluid.”<sup>22</sup> From this

---

<sup>16</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, “Inspired Mothering,” in *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology: Mothering Matters*, eds. Claire Bischoff, Elizabeth O’Donnell Gandolfo, Annie Hardison-Moody,; with Foreword by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 41.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>18</sup> Miller-McLemore, “And the ‘Hall Was Burned to the Ground’...” 73-74.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>21</sup> See Martha Fineman, “‘Elderly’ as Vulnerable: Rethinking the Nature of Individual and Societal Responsibility,” *Elder Law Journal* 20, no. 1 (2012), <https://theelderlawjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Fineman.pdf>; Martha Albertson Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20, no. 1 (2008): 1-23.

<sup>22</sup> Hellen Moon, “Transgressive Mothering as Wo/Men’s Human Rights Work... Holiness and the Human,” in *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for*

understanding of vulnerability, Moon goes on to extend the idea of mothering, which she identifies as spiritual practice, by looking at it as that continuous task of taking care of others may it be one's children, siblings, parents or partners or even being on the receiving end.<sup>23</sup> She describes mothering as spiritual practice as it becomes a venue for us to recognize “our vulnerabilities, our fragility, and our ambiguities as human persons who have desired to flourish, given our human situation.”<sup>24</sup> This perception bears special significance when reading the experiences of mothering of migrant women, who, because of their particular context, may experience greater vulnerabilities. Consequently, these experiences also bear the potential to be revelatory of the distinct spirituality that can emerge from such situation. A significant contribution that Moon makes in the discussion is her view of mothering as transgressive, as a human rights work that opposes all that is unjust. In so doing, she makes the connection that such a very personal and spiritual activity is at the same time communal and political.<sup>25</sup>

Still in the field of theology, this paper proposes to explore mothering as spiritual experience for migrant mothers by taking inspiration from the *mujerista* theology spearheaded by Ada María Isasi-Díaz.<sup>26</sup> *Mujerista* theology is a form of liberation theology that developed among the Latinas in the United States of America and that valorizes the voice of grassroots Latinas as they express themselves, narrate their experiences, and share their practices and understanding of their faith.<sup>27</sup> In particular, its concept of *lo cotidiano*, the everyday lived experience of Latina woman, applies in this study as it presupposes the significance of the daily mothering practice of the migrant mothers. The underlying

---

*Theology: Mothering Matters*, eds. Claire Bischoff, Elizabeth O'Donnell Gandolfo, Annie Hardison-Moody ; with Foreword by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 101.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>24</sup> Moon, “Transgressive Mothering...,” 104.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 99-109.

<sup>26</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Orbis Books, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “*Lo Cotidiano*: A Key Element of *Mujerista* Theology,” *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology* 10, no. 1 (August 1, 2002): 5-17.

hypothesis is that the migrant mothers, in speaking about their experiences of mothering in a foreign land, will be able to reveal something distinct about their journey, particularly their faith life, and in so doing, contribute to how their plight is understood from the perspective of Christian faith and conversely, also enrich how Christian faith is understood and expressed from their vantage point.

Closely related to the argument of this study is the motivation behind Claire E. Wolfteich's *Mothering. Public Leadership, and Women's Life Writing*.<sup>28</sup> Throughout her research in the field of Christian spirituality and her practice in the academia, she has noticed that the reality of mothering is nearly absent in the available resources.<sup>29</sup> In this book, she explores Christian spirituality through the life writings of some Christian mothers. Wolfteich makes a necessary and important clarification as she expounds on mothering and spirituality. She elucidates that in her discourse on mothering as spiritual practice, she does not attribute automatic holiness to mothers but rather asserts that mothering is a lifelong journey that involves the practice of spirituality.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, her argument that mothering 'is a spiritual path and practice' (emphasis in the original) that does not necessarily take precedence over others but is worth studying bears importance in any attempt to speak of migrant mothering as *locus theologicus*.<sup>31</sup> All these insights compose a meaningful starting point for the exploration of a rightful place for mothering studies in theology. It would also be beneficial to look at what other disciplines contribute to mothering studies.

### MOTHERING IN OTHER DISCIPLINES

Outside the theological discipline, a constant material that came up as a valuable source among the articles, books, and other

---

<sup>28</sup> Claire W. Wolfteich, "Spirituality, Mothering, and Public Leadership: Women's Life Writing and Generative Directions for Spirituality Studies," *Spiritus*; *Baltimore* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 145-64.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

works in the topic of motherhood and mothering is Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, originally published in 1976.<sup>32</sup> In her book, Rich identifies two meanings of motherhood, "one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential-and all women-shall remain under male control" (emphasis in original).<sup>33</sup> By narrating her reflections on her personal experiences as a mother and coupling it with her research about the oppressive circumstances that women endure in patriarchal motherhood, her work became an alternate voice or an opposing account to the romantic and dreamy portrayals of wonder mothers who willingly and effortlessly maneuvered family life. In that way, she has helped women come to terms with their experience of maternal ambivalence. In the words of Andrea O'Reilly, a prolific writer in the field of motherhood and a professor of gender, sexuality and women's studies, after having read Rich's "ovarian"<sup>34</sup> work, "I was forced to see and name my oppression as a mother; as well it gave me permission to be angry. I also remember feeling a huge sense of relief—I was not the only woman who raged against motherhood, and at times, her children."<sup>35</sup>

In the succeeding years after *Of Woman Born* was published, feminist scholarship has significantly taken up the topic of motherhood. The influence of the book can be seen in the works that followed which dealt with maternity in how it is oppressive, on one hand, and empowering, on the other.<sup>36</sup> A manifestation of the consequent increased interest and dedication in the field of motherhood and mothering is O' Reilly's founding of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, an organization that delves into scholarly and activist work in

---

<sup>32</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (SUNY Press, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-21.

motherhood and mothering.<sup>37</sup> This organization is partnered with Demeter Press, a publisher that pioneered in producing peer-reviewed scholarly work and creative literature on mothering, sexuality, family, and reproduction.<sup>38</sup> In 2006, O'Reilly coined the term "motherhood studies" to recognize this particular discipline rooted in the practice of maternal theory that has developed through the years.<sup>39</sup> Four years after, in 2010, the *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, the first ever encyclopedia on this specific field was published.<sup>40</sup>

Another landmark in feminist writing and literature on mothering is philosopher Sara Ruddick's *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*.<sup>41</sup> One of the greatest contributions of her work to the academe is her systematic way of arguing that mothering is a practice from which a particular kind of thinking arises. As an activity aiming for preservation, growth, and social acceptability of children, maternal practice brings forth among those who practice it, men and women alike, ways of thinking that are geared towards achieving them. "Maternal work itself demands that mothers think; out of this need for thoughtfulness, a distinctive discipline emerges."<sup>42</sup> Ruddick coupled her concept of maternal thinking with a hopeful expression of its potentiality to translate to efforts in peace work.<sup>43</sup> Her work encouraged the recognition of the experiences of women, and of mothers in particular, to be loci of valuable knowledge. It complemented Rich's work's accomplishment of raising people's criticality toward oppressive forms of motherhood by arousing a positive outlook on mothering as an experience that can also be empowering for those who engage in such practice and potentially beneficial to the society on a broader scale.

---

<sup>37</sup> "MIRCI," accessed August 22, 2019, <https://motherhoodinitiative.org/>.

<sup>38</sup> "Demeter Press," accessed August 22, 2019, <http://demeterpress.org/>.

<sup>39</sup> Andrea O'Reilly, *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* (SAGE, 2010), vii.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Beacon Press, 1995).

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 127-251.

There has already been some good work done on the topic of mothering from varied disciplines including theology. But as theologians Miller-McLemore, Bischoff, Gandolfo, and Hardison-Moody assert, it is insufficient.<sup>44</sup> The dearth in resources is even more evident in the area of empirical studies. The little I have found are in psychology journals. One relevant project is the study "A Mixed-Methods Exploration of Christian Working Mother's Personal Strivings," which involved 200 Christian working professional mothers. The researchers explored the significance of Christian subcultural factors to the experience of the Christian working mothers. It is interesting to note that the results of the study affirm the centrality of spirituality as a motherhood theme.<sup>45</sup>

Still in psychology, two subsequent qualitative researches on mothering by Aurelie Athan and Lisa Miller confirm the presence of spiritual experience within motherhood. The first research, "Spiritual Awakening Through the Motherhood Journey," explored the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth from a spiritual perspective.<sup>46</sup> The second one, "Motherhood as Opportunity to Learn Spiritual Values: Experiences and Insights of New Mothers," extends the inquiry to motherhood in general, with a focus on garnering knowledge on how the spiritual life of mothers is defined by the presence of children in their lives.<sup>47</sup> This study concludes that motherhood holds the capacity to bring about spiritual awakening among mothers.<sup>48</sup> Even so, the researchers recognize that positive transformation may not be experienced by

---

<sup>44</sup> *Parenting as Spiritual Practice and Source for Theology* (New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Jennifer A. Gallagher et al., "A Mixed-Methods Exploration of Christian Working Mothers' Personal Strivings," *Journal of Psychology and Theology; La Mirada* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 48-61.

<sup>46</sup> Aurelie M Athan and Lisa Miller, "Spiritual Awakening Through the Motherhood Journey," *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering* 7, no. 1 (n.d.): 17-31.

<sup>47</sup> Aurélie M. Athan and Lisa Miller, "Motherhood as Opportunity to Learn Spiritual Values: Experiences and Insights of New Mothers," *Journal of Prenatal & Perinatal Psychology & Health; Forestville* 27, no. 4 (Summer 2013): 220-253, accessed March 14, 2019 <https://jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/4951/4145>.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

all mothers. As exemplified by what has been done in other disciplines surrounding mothering and motherhood, this area of studies, on its own, is replete with topics worth pursuing. How does migration, as a distinct but related phenomenon, shape what can be discovered and said about mothering? Outside the scope of theology and religious studies, there has already been some extensive work done on migration and mothers.<sup>49</sup> But how about the place of migrant mothering in theology? To answer this question, it would be helpful to first take a look at how migration is treated in theology.

### MIGRATION IN THEOLOGY

Here, we shall explore several works on migration from a theological perspective. First of which is Gemma Tulud Cruz, who has observed from her studies a feminization of migration particularly in Asia.<sup>50</sup> In chapter two of her book *Toward a Theology of Migration: Social Justice and Religious Experience*, Cruz presents an in-depth exploration into the migration experiences of women.<sup>51</sup> She identifies how migration of women, particularly labor migration, is a gendered reality. She also talks about gendered transitions and gendered violence and draws a connection between these experiences of gendering and “a global political economy of gender that marginalizes women.”<sup>52</sup> To respond to these oppressive realities that migrant women go through in the migration phenomenon, she proposes a liberation theology that seeks to bring

---

<sup>49</sup> See Glenda Tibe Bonifacio, *Feminism and Migration: Cross-Cultural Engagements* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2012); Inka Stock, “Gender and the Dynamics of Mobility: Reflections on African Migrant Mothers and ‘transit Migration’ in Morocco,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 9 (2012): 1577-1595; Bin Wu, *Whose Culture Has Capital?: Class, Culture, Migration and Mothering* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011); Disa Bergnehr, “Mothering for Discipline and Educational Success: Welfare-Reliant Immigrant Women Talk about Motherhood in Sweden,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 54 (2016): 29-37; Mirca Madianou, “Migration and the Accentuated Ambivalence of Motherhood: The Role of ICTs in Filipino Transnational Families,” *Global Networks* 12, no. 3 (2012): 277-295.

<sup>50</sup> Cruz, *Toward a Theology of Migration...*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-51.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

about social justice not only by holding a preferential option for the poor but for the “poor (unauthorized) migrant woman.”<sup>53</sup> In the same book, Cruz has also started to talk about the phenomenon of transnational mothering wherein mothers abroad continue their mothering tasks from afar.<sup>54</sup> Her contribution to the theology of migration is very well reflective of the feminization of migration and laudably considerate of the plight of the most vulnerable subjects in the migration phenomenon. This paper, following what Cruz has already started doing, seeks to encourage the creation of an opening specifically for migrant women who, while facing the struggles that come with migration, also engage in mothering work in the receiving country.

Another work in the field of migration theology is that of Gioacchino Campese, who talks about the “irruption of migration” in his article of the same title.<sup>55</sup> It is an allusion to the related and much broader phenomenon of “irruption of the poor,” wherein contextual and liberation theologians recognized the poor and sought to address the reality of poverty in doing theology.<sup>56</sup> In Campese’s work, he narrates the history of migration theology for the past thirty years up to 2012 by citing significant works in the field and assessing what he has identified to be deficiencies. He attributes the irruption of migrants in theology to three factors namely social, theological, and pastoral-practical.<sup>57</sup> Because of the worldwide political and social attention given to the phenomenon of migration, Christian churches and theology recognize the necessity to follow suit.<sup>58</sup> Migration is viewed as “one of the privileged sources or *loci theologici* of contemporary theological reflection.”<sup>59</sup> Pastoral workers immersed in work that caters to migrants ask for spiritual and theological guidance and resources to help them be better equipped to respond to the demands of their

---

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>55</sup> Campese, “The Irruption of Migrants.”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 4-7.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 5-6.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 6.

evolving ministry.<sup>60</sup> Campese posits that the human and faith experiences of migrants themselves become important sources of theology as in the case of the Latinas, Latinos, and Asian Americans in the United States.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, Campese reminds us of the need to include the irregular migrants in the discussion, those who are pushed to the margins because of their illegal status. To include them, he clarifies, is not to see them as mere victims but as a people capable of ushering in the formation of a “multicolored” society.<sup>62</sup> His work shows what has so far been achieved in the field of migration theology. In so doing, he substantiates the imperative to embark on further research that will expand our understanding of this ubiquitous reality. In a specific way, the proposal of this paper endeavors to encourage a glimpse into the experience of mothering of migrants with hopes of enhancing contemporary theological reflection. Despite the recognition of the feminization of migration,<sup>63</sup> this subsector of migrants, the migrant mothers, has not been studied well in the field of theology.

In addition to Cruz and Campese, Daniel Groody has laid a helpful groundwork for theologians navigating the phenomenon of migration. In his article “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees,” Groody presents four foundations that are geared toward understanding Christian faith and its demands from the perspective of migration.<sup>64</sup> Groody’s first foundation is *imago Dei* which emphasizes the need to see the value and dignity of the migrant, first and foremost, before other social and political labels are ascribed to them. Furthermore, *imago Dei* is to be understood as a constant protest against the different discriminating and oppressive attitudes toward the migrant.<sup>65</sup> He argues that the concept of *Verbum Dei*, Jesus’ incarnation, kenosis, and death, speaks of a migration story, that of God’s movement towards humanity, which consequently enables humanity to move

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 10-18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 25-26.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel G. Groody, “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees,” *Theological Studies* 70, no. 3 (2009): 638–667.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 642-648.

towards him. This in turn becomes a framework that can be used to view and understand the phenomenon of migration and the issues surrounding it.<sup>66</sup> Groody explains the next foundation, *missio Dei*, with due emphasis on Jesus's ministry of reconciliation. Following this mission in the midst of the migration phenomenon calls for the creation of space for the migrants as an expression of hospitality. This gesture of welcoming people has to be perceived as beneficial both for the giver and the receiver.<sup>67</sup> *Visio Dei* implies obedience to God and fidelity to his kingdom. Looking forward with hopeful anticipation to what is to come, the fulfillment of God's kingdom, one seeks to contribute to that which brings communion within the here and now. This framework invites the believer to view things by transcending the national and political boundaries of this world.<sup>68</sup> When Groody wrote this article in 2009, he made an observation on the absence of theology in migration studies.<sup>69</sup> Ten years have passed and much work still needs to be done. Nonetheless, these foundational concepts that he has put forth continue to guide how theology is done in the context of the evolving phenomenon of migration.<sup>70</sup> It is this rich growing theology of migration that can potentially pave the way for greater explorations in the area of mothering studies in theology. This is not to say that mothering studies is not valuable on its own but that an inquiry into the specific experience of mothering of

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 648-653.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 653-659.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 659-664.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 640.

<sup>70</sup> Some of the works that bank on what Groody has started are the following: Vhumani Magezi and Christopher Magezi, "Migration Crisis and Christian Response: From Daniel De Groody's Image of God Theological Prism in Migration Theology to a Migration Practical Theology Ministerial Approach and Operative Ecclesiology," *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2018): e1-e12; Christopher Magezi and Christopher Magezi, "Migration Crisis and the Church: A Response to Lacunae and Considerations for Christian Ministry Engagement," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 38, no. 1 (2017): 1-9; Peter C. Phan, "Deus Migrator—God the Migrant: Migration of Theology and Theology of Migration," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (2016): 845-868; Campese, "The Irruption of Migrants"; Norlan Julia, "Strengthening Filipino Migrants' Faith through Popular Religiosity," *Mission Studies* 33, no. 3 (2016): 352-375.

migrant mothers may inform the continuing development of a theology of migration. This can become clearer in the succeeding section through the exposition of some examples of the intersection of mothering and migration examined from the perspective of theology.

### THE INTERSECTION OF MIGRATION AND MOTHERING

One work that valuably brings together the issues of migration and mothering is Hellena Moon's "Immigrant Mothers of Color, Pastoral Theology, and the Law."<sup>71</sup> Moon lets her readers have a glimpse of the experience of colored migrant women who engage in caretaking work without receiving any form of support for themselves. She argues that there has to be a critical pastoral analysis of the powerful and unjust system that marginalizes these immigrant colored women in the caretaking industry. She identifies the task of pastoral theology to advocate for changes in the law surrounding caretaking work and to develop a theology of care that gives due attention to and consideration for the caretaking work specifically done by immigrant women of color and that assesses the oppressive structures that support this system.<sup>72</sup> By zooming in on the experience of immigrant and colored women who perform the task of caretaking for the more privileged families who hire them, Moon is able to exemplify that the experience of mothering and caretaking is indeed variegated and that race, social status, political status, and political and economic forces contribute to such differences.

In exploring the intersection of migration and mothering, it is interesting to verify if there is any connection between migrant mothers' expression of spirituality and their experience of integration in the society of the receiving country. Does pursuing the kind of spirituality that develops from one's mothering contribute to her integration in the receiving country or does it

---

<sup>71</sup> Hellena Moon, "Immigrant Mothers of Color, Pastoral Theology, and the Law," *Pastoral Psychology* 61, no. 3, 343-58, June 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-011-0413-0>.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 356-357.

pose a hindrance? In this area, theologian Doris Peschke's work "The Role of Religion for the Integration of Migrants and Institutional Responses in Europe: Some Reflections" gives some insights.<sup>73</sup> Her study focuses on the experience of religion of the migrants in Europe. Peschke claims that religion affects a migrant in several ways such as formation of one's personal identity, daily living, and community life. She asserts the necessity for migrants to both express and live out their religious creed as this helps them to find grounding in the receiving country.<sup>74</sup> She sees the significance of interactions between the religious communities of the receiving country and of the immigrant communities to the process of integration.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, she notes that there are cases when religion effects isolation in the receiving country.<sup>76</sup> This is exacerbated by the hostile attitude generated by the September 11, 2001 attacks wherein religion has been identified as an impediment to the integration of the migrants.<sup>77</sup> It will be noteworthy to study if the kind of religion matters in relation to the experience of integration. Is there a relationship between the migrant mothers' experience of religion and their integration in society? Will things be different if the woman is Muslim or Christian? Does the migrant mother's religion matter if the receiving society is secularized? These are some of the questions that may be posed as one researches a particular area in the intersection of migration and mothering.

### MIGRANT MOTHERING AS SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

One point in the intersection of migration and mothering that can be explored theologically is whether mothering is indeed a spiritual experience. This specific example that this paper puts forth banks on previous work in mothering and motherhood studies, as discussed in the previous paragraphs, which affirm that the practice

---

<sup>73</sup> Doris Peschke, "The Role of Religion for the Integration of Migrants and Institutional Responses in Europe: Some Reflections1," *Ecumenical Review* 61, no. 4 (2009): 367-380, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1758-6623.2009.00034.x>.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

of mothering is a locus of knowledge that is worth studying. Furthermore, to hold that mothering is an activity that is contributive and essential to the fibers of the society is to acknowledge that it is an imperative to make it a subject of inquiry, consideration, and reflection. As the works above exemplify, mothering is a variegated reality that is colored and seasoned by the distinct contexts in which people, particularly women, perform such role. Amidst the feminization of migration, it is argued that attention must be given to the mothering experience of migrants, a task that has not yet been significantly done. This is to be able to contribute to the ongoing theological conversations on migration and mothering, two separate areas which can also be confronted as a united reality in the case of migrant mothers. One way to embark on research in this area is to employ empirical methodology of inquiry that seeks to develop into a theological reflection. It can be done from a respectful and anticipative stance that migrant mothers are capable of revealing nuggets of truth about the Christian faith through their narratives. With the goal of offering a resource in the ongoing development of a theology of migration, this exploration gives value to Peter Phan's assertion that "a theology of migration must be deeply rooted in the flesh-and-blood stories of migrants themselves as human being whose dignity and rights have often been trampled upon."<sup>78</sup>

Mothering and migration are two significant areas of scholarly pursuit. As presented in the previous paragraphs, several studies have been conducted on the two separate topics. In theology, both these phenomena have been separately taken and reflected on. This paper stands unique to the aforementioned endeavors in that it proposes to explore the marriage of these two realities in the narratives of the migrant mothers. Studying them together in an empirical manner is an endeavor to ponder the possibilities of Christian faith that it may continue to speak and to matter to the people of today especially in this age of migration.

---

<sup>78</sup> Peter C. Phan, "Deus Migrator –God the Migrant: Migration of Theology and Theology of Migration," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 4 (December 2016): 845-868, accessed August 26, 2019, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0040563916666825>, 855.

Parents have always been viewed by religions to play a crucial role in the formation and sustenance of the faith of their children. Take for instance Pope Francis who has reiterated this parental responsibility several times<sup>79</sup> and the wealth of church documents that deals with faith and family life.<sup>80</sup> Among religious pastors and formators, there are efforts to recognize and identify how this reality can be nurtured and utilized in faith formation of the youth.<sup>81</sup>

---

<sup>79</sup>See Hannah Brockhaus, "Pope in Ireland: Parents Are the First Example of Faith for Children," Catholic News Agency, accessed August 17, 2019, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-in-ireland-parents-are-the-first-example-of-faith-for-children-59621/>; Pope Francis, "Pope Francis on the Importance of Family," accessed August 17, 2019, <https://blog.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit/pope-francis-on-the-importance-of-family/>; "Pope to Parents: Work Together with Schools - Vatican News," September 7, 2018, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-09/pope-francis-parents.html>; "Children Must See the Faith Lived at Home, Pope Tells Parents," Catholic Herald, January 14, 2019, <https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2019/01/14/children-must-see-the-faith-lived-at-home-pope-tells-parents/>.

<sup>80</sup> See John Paul II, "Familiaris Consortio" (Vatican, November 22, 1981), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html); "Catechism of the Catholic Church - The Fourth Commandment," accessed September 10, 2019, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a4.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a4.htm); "The Family in the Catechism of the Catholic Church," accessed September 10, 2019, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20060707\\_1-evada-valencia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20060707_1-evada-valencia_en.html); Pope Paul VI, "Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World" (Vatican, December 7, 1965), [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

<sup>81</sup> See Michael Theisen, "Partnering with Parents to Bring Home the Faith," *Momentum* 44, no. 4 (2013): 28-31, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1477225029/?pq-origsite=primo>; Marcia J. Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Children, Parents, and 'Best Practices' for Faith Formation: Resources for Child, Youth, and Family Ministry Today," *Dialog* 47, no. 4 (2008): 348-360, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6385.2008.00414.x>; Karen Barreras, "Strong Catholic Families in Reno: Helping Parents Build Faith at Home," *Momentum*; *Washington*, October 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1616161175/abstract/4B77ADED5DFC4606PQ/1>; Kathy Giesbrecht, "Encouraging Parents," *Canadian Mennonite*; *Waterloo*, March 17, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1512408717/abstract/FC41CBBC35BE4432PQ/1>; Bill Bischoff, "It's a Parent's First Eucharist as Well as a Child's,"

Empirical studies have been conducted that shed light on this supposition.<sup>82</sup> If parents play a significant role in the faith lives of their children, can the same be said about the impact of children on their parents' lives? How does a person's faith life change the moment she or he becomes a parent? Parenting, specifically mothering, has to be explored in how it contributes to a person's spirituality. In *Gaudium et spes*, children have been identified to "contribute in their own way to making their parents holy."<sup>83</sup> Similarly, theologian Joyce Ann Mercer posits that congregations benefit from children in how their questions and involvement in church stimulate reflection among older members and to an extent, affirm their identity as a Christian community.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, in arguing for the inherent value of children at present and not just 'for the future,' practical theologian Annemie Dillen asserts that welcoming children into the church communities provide for the adult members, in a 'mystagogical way,' an experience of the inchoate form of the kingdom that is inclusive of everyone.<sup>85</sup> There have already been statements, both by the church and academic scholars, that support the idea of mutual spiritual contribution that takes place between parents and their children. However, an

---

*Momentum*; Washington, October 2008, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/194685767/abstract/4313CC9A38AC4552PQ/1>.

<sup>82</sup> See David C. Dollahite et al., "Beyond the Bucket List: Identity-Centered Religious Calling, Being, and Action Among Parents," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10, no. 1 (2018): 44-54, <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000130>; Marsulize van Niekerk and Gert Breed, "The Role of Parents in the Development of Faith from Birth to Seven Years of Age," *HTS Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (2018): 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i2.4773>; Todd F. Martin, James M. White, and Daniel Perlman, "Religious Socialization: A Test of the Channeling Hypothesis of Parental Influence on Adolescent Faith Maturity," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 18, no. 2 (March 1, 2003): 169-87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558402250349>.

<sup>83</sup> Pope Paul VI, "Gaudium et Spes," 48.

<sup>84</sup> Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0513/2005013223.html>. 194-195.

<sup>85</sup> Annemie Dillen, "Children Are the Future...and the Present. Challenging Pastoral Practices with Children," *Counseling et Spiritualité. Counselling and Spirituality* 28, no. 1 (20090101): 129-148, <https://lirias.kuleuven.be/retrieve/422590>, 141.

empirical and theological study that focuses on the effects of mothering on the mother's spirituality has yet to be done. By seeking to understand better the significant task of mothering and its supposed effect on a person's spirituality through an empirical research, necessary attention and consequently, appropriate support, can begin to come to these people who have always been expected to do the work of caring, nurturing, and forming.

Beyond the parent-child relationship, mothering has a great impact on how women navigate their lives. It affects how they treat their respective spouses or partners, other people's children, fellow parents, and other people in general. A significant role like mothering cannot but shape a person's perspective in life. This change is akin to how early grade teachers continue to explain things in simple and easy to understand manner even outside of the classroom setup or how nurses continue to exhibit nurturing and health care attitudes to others outside of their workplace, such as in their family or local community. One's profession or vocation significantly forms the person in that the principles behind such activity extend to almost everything else she or he does. In the Filipino culture, this phenomenon is attested to by the common practice of people to greet new mothers with the statement, "*Nanay na nanay ka na.*" (You truly are a mom!) This is often used as a form of salutation to a new mom who is observed to be exhibiting mothering skills or expressing a motherly outlook in life. People sense something distinct and different about these new mothers which they have not observed before they became mothers. Mothering changes people. This paper considers this assumption on the transformation that mothers go through as they perform mothering, particularly whether such transformation involves changes in their spirituality. On a more specific way, this paper calls for an observation of how such development comes to play among migrant mothers. Migration on its own involves several changes other than one's location. It would be interesting to investigate, therefore, the nature and extent of transformation that is involved in migrant mothering in relation to spirituality. This is an example of an attempt to give greater consideration to mothering studies against the backdrop of migration in the field of theology.

## CONCLUSION

Where art thou? Where are you? This is a line popularized by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. In this paper, the attempt is to locate mothering studies in theology by using the discourse on migration as springboard. Pope Francis reminds the human family that "it is not just about migrants." To respond to their plight and to recognize their presence is to tap into the Christian identity. In essence, whatever good done to them is done to the entire human family. This discussion leads to a realization that certain realities have been, deliberately or not, pushed to the sidelines in the way theology has been done through the years. The area of mothering studies is one of those that has been other-ed. As such, it emerges as a timely and significant pursuit amidst the feminization of migration and within the global effort to promote sustainable development. Very importantly, mothering is a unifying reality just as migration is. They may be experienced in various forms, but they symbolize the universal needs to give and receive security, protection, nourishment, and formation, among others. Everyone is, in varying degrees and forms, agents and partakers in the phenomenon of migration and practice of mothering. The search for a place for mothering studies in theology came in the process of reviewing what has been done and said about mothering in and out of the theological discipline. Existing work on theology of migration was revisited next. Lastly, this paper identified that research into migrant mothering as spiritual experience is one example of navigating the intersection of migration and mothering which can bring about the discovery of another valuable *locus theologicus*. "Where art thou?" as Merriam-Webster claims, should be interpreted as "Why are you?"<sup>86</sup> This gives another level of meaning to this paper's endeavor. Why has mothering studies not received much attention in the field of theology that it still has to be located. Miller-McLemore, whose work on mothering and theology is of immense significance, identified this "big void"

---

<sup>86</sup> "What Does 'Wherefore Art Thou Romeo' Mean?," accessed November 3, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/wherefore-meaning-shakespeare>.

around three decades ago.<sup>87</sup> Up to today, there is still this dearth of literature in the area of mothering studies in theology. To have to argue for a place for mothering studies is indeed a kind of “protest theology” that resists the inattention to such a reality that is crucial to the fabric of human family.<sup>88</sup>

**Ma. Adeinev M. Reyes-Espiritu**

KU Leuven

Faculty of Theology and Religious Sciences

Sint-Michielsstraat 4 - bus 3100

B-3000 Leuven, Belgium

nev.reyesespiritu@kuleuven.be

---

<sup>87</sup> Bonnie J Miller-McLemore, “Feminism, Children, and Mothering Three Books and Three Children Later,” *Journal of Childhood and Religion* 2, no. 1 (2011): 32.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.