

The nun within

REFLECTIONS ON OUR SELF-CARE
WORKSHOPS WITH ACTIVISTS

R O S A P O S A G U I N E A



Translation credits

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The nun within

In the last five years, together with the Akahatá team¹ I have facilitated more than 40 workshops across the Latin American and Caribbean regions, during which I was lucky to have exchanges with more than 500 LGTBI and HR defenders from our regions.

This document shares reflections on self-care and the internal resistance to it. As you can see, it is not academic writing and does not pretend to be so.

During these workshops and from our different experiences of activism, together we analyzed our lives and some elements of our ways of being and found a thread of emerging beliefs that take us away from the center of our lives and from caring for ourselves. Time and again

at the workshops I have used the image or the concept of the “nun within” to analyze these beliefs. In this document, my intention is to elaborate on that.

I have a deep respect for the kind nuns that occupy the furthest corner, the most marginalized periphery where priests never dare to tread. I respect them when they devote their lives to their calling and I stop respecting them when they use their position to perpetuate discrimination and violence against LGTBI people.

The nun within that we will discuss here is a character that inhabits us and that learned to give up on what is hers; who was taught that “to love is to fully surrender, forgetting oneself” (the

1. In many of those workshops, methodologies, content and facilitation have been shared with Mujeres al Borde (<http://www.mujeresalborde.org>) that I thank for the path traveled together.

lyrics of a church song). The nun within learnt that the harder she treats herself, the better; she learnt not to expect any reward or recognition, as to do so would be selfish; not to care for herself, as that would be vain; to firmly believe that to give it all is the only thing that matters. In the most surrendered version, this nun does not even care for the beautiful heaven awaiting her, as her only joy is the giving itself.

“Being for others”, as mothers-wives had been defined by Marcela Lagarde² as a key feature of conventional femininities: life has a meaning if focused on giving one’s best for others (husband and children) to be well, to develop themselves, to be taken care of, etc. I think this is one of the key aspects of “being a woman” – many of us may have rebelled against imposed femininity but this selfless-generous element persists. We may not have husbands or children,

but we have a group, an organization, collective, union or party to which we devote our lives.

The nun (without and within) is expected to have no other ties so she can surrender her labour for free (or almost) to a cause – be it god, the poor or a fairer world.

The mandates that are anchored in the very core of our activist, revolutionary, Leftist, ultra-alternative, sexual and/or gender dissident beings, come from a trilogy that has nothing to do with us.

Do you remember the fascist slogan about “God, the Fatherland and the Family”?

I want to discuss with you how all that has been embedded in our heads, even though our thinking is far, far away from that pattern. Let’s go step by step.

2. L agarde, Marcela, Los cautiverios de las mujeres, madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas. UNAM México 1990. Reprinted in 2003

This is a historical reference from which I learned a lot. Now, I am far from her way of thinking. I recommend the following article: ¿Qué hago yo ahora con Marcela Lagarde? El dichoso “borrado de las mujeres” y el debate entre feministas

<https://abarquin.wordpress.com/2020/08/13/que-hago-yo-ahora-con-marcela-lagarde-el-dichoso-borrado-de-las-mujeres-y-el-debate-entre-feministas/>

GOD:

Regardless of individual beliefs, I want to examine the cultural idea of the Christian-Catholic god that floats above the swarms of our brains and the streets of our cities.

In Christian culture, sacrifice is the measure of human dignity: the more you sacrifice, the more you deserve. The peak of sacrifice is Christ who “gave up his life”, was tortured, and murdered. The idea that death is the utmost sacrifice has been deeply engraved in us.

To sacrifice oneself is to be a better person.

Suffering makes you deserving. If you suffered, you deserve good things happening to you; if you enjoyed yourself, the time has come for you to be damned; if you had pleasure, you deserve to be punished.

This is quite simplified and we may say that it is not how we think – true, but somewhere within, this remains.

Thus:

Sacrifice and suffering are extremely valued.

Enjoyment and rest always raise suspicions.

Someone who suffers, deserves our empathy; someone who enjoys, does not. This is part of the colonisation of our minds.

FATHERLAND:

This is a doubled-edged notion.

For well-intentioned people, it is about the common good. It means independence, self-management, pride in being, etc.

But since the 1800s, the fatherlands that were created post-independence from the colonial powers replicated colonial ways of being and organizing themselves.

There is always a war-like tone to this notion, linked to the need to defend “us” from those outside/different, that “threaten the Fatherland”. The Fatherland heroes are always men, most of them military.

There is this idea about dying for the Fatherland being the highest ideal.

Once again, it's about dying – surrendering your life.

Everywhere we see monuments to fallen soldiers, the Fatherland's heroes and martyrs.

So, dying is always the right thing to do. That those who always die are not the ones who decided to declare war, is just a coincidence.

This idea of dying combines itself with the Christian one. All this goes together. Let's remember that for our nations to come into being what was needed was to erase all diversities and reduce them to a single idea, a single nation, one national song, one flag, one language, one sexuality, one bodily identification, one religion, etc.

FAMILY:

The family is where the gender mandate for women instructs us to surrender our lives. To sacrifice for the wellbeing of family members – husband, children. As this is deeply ingrained into our life programming, even if we don't have husbands or children, we will have an organization, a collective, a party or a union. In order to be good, we have to postpone ourselves.

We may have children or not, but we have organizations to take care of, to give them our time, our money, our free labour.

We may be the eternal wives-mothers giving, giving and giving to others without anybody ever noticing it. To give in silence, without anyone knowing – that's top of the game. Self-erasure, so our “husbands and sons” can shine.

At home there are silent domestic tasks that family members often believe are done by magic, but in fact, they are done by women. The same happens in our organizations: after a meeting in which we changed the world, it seems that glasses get picked up and washed all by themselves.

I want to extend this idea of the mandate ruling cisgender straight women to LGTB persons because it is also valid for us. If you are a lesbian, besides carrying this mandate of servitude, you also must “compensate” your lesbianhood by being the most surrendered, the most generous, the best caregiver. It does not matter if your partner's parents are disgusting: you must expiate the ‘fault’ of being a lesbian by heroic care-provision.

If you are trans, you have to at least provide financial support. I know a thousand families that survive thanks to what their trans child provides (but would

never accept or acknowledge her or him). It's like paying for being included, paying for existing.

Less often I have also seen cases of gay men taking care of families to compensate for their gayness.

These notions of god, fatherland and family are not ours but they live in us and stop us from taking self-care seriously by whispering in our ears that self-postponement is top of the game, that always prioritizing others is the best.

In fact, it is the best ... for patriarchy to perpetuate itself. How much free labour do we do for love? For love of a person, an idea, a collective, a party, a church, a union, an organization.

I summarize all this in the character of the nun within, as a symbol of perpetual sacrifice, lack of pleasure, ongoing self-postponement and social erasure.

And this happens to activists too.

Not to everybody, of course. At the other extreme, we have the supreme egos –

and there are quite a few of those. They could be the abbesses, the headnun or headpriest, as preferred.

The nun within summarizes the culture of sacrifice as the only path, sacrifice being the best option, taking you straight to heaven. We love martyr cultures, we love the possibility that when we die someone will carry our face on a t-shirt.

Sacrifice is also to kill ourselves a little every day, to become a bit more sick, always erased, accepting or self-imposing sacrifices.

Activism is not a religion.

Self-care is not the opposite extreme by which we do not do anything for free, we demand payment for everything, over-value our contributions and

believe the world must pay homage to us. The idea is not to become abbesses or headnuns or egotistical superstars. The idea is to manage to find a balance. Loving yourself is not synonymous with giving up on the community, but rather the opposite.

Self-care is balance, to not put aside our health, to learn again how to listen to our body and our needs.

We have also learnt that enjoyment requires money, that it is only for the rich, that without resources one cannot have fun, and that is not true.

Some basic things about the functioning of our bodies are not related to luxury: to sleep, to have fully functional digestive systems, to breathe, to be at peace. To be well is not a luxury. Self-care is not a luxury; it is a need.

I know that the lives of many human rights defenders are under continuous threat, that sometimes it is impossible to sleep or to enjoy a moment of peace because of the harassment coming from

the outside. What I address in this text is our internal disposition as activists, and the ideas that stop us from taking care of and holding ourselves together.

To care for ourselves is not to put generosity aside but rather to take responsibility for yourself; to listen and to know yourself so you can set your own boundaries and judge less. To take care of oneself means, in the long term, to avoid burdening others with your health the moment you collapse. It seems something selfish at first glance, but it is actually the most responsible and generous choice you can make for your organization, your family, your loved ones.

Let's contemplate the nun, the death, the fatherland, the martyr and let's turn all of them upside down. To be well is not a meaningless proposition.

Let's banish the nun – or at least let's give her some sleeping pills. Or a hug – and then teach her pleasure and rest, make her laugh, have fun in all ways possible.



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