RESEARCH ON OUR CHRISTIAN ORIGINS
Following up the Spirituality Forum in Portugal 2007, we decided to deepen our knowledge on our Christian origins, i.e. to get to know better how Christianity was understood and lived in the first communities, before Christianity became the state religion in the Roman Empire.

We used some basic texts, one written by a Bible expert – Francois Vouga – and others by feminist theologians, with special attention to Schluesser Fiorenza and the research of women concerning the first Christian communities.

We have been struck by the fact that these communities were so different in origin, culture and way to live their faith, and we feel there is a connection with what is our present situation in many of our communities.

We understand that there have always been many ways to live the Christian message and this can help us to be open to our culture diversities today. We believe that it is important to go back to the genuine message of the Gospel in order to get rid of the weight of Church historical power and institutional orthodoxy.

Another aspect of our search has been to acknowledge the work done by women, from Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza to the many others that have revealed the presence and the role of women in the communities at the time of Jesus, and how later this presence has been discounted and denied through the centuries.

From our research we have chosen some topics which we see as relevant to the Grail Vision and history

PLURALISM
The first Christian communities had different visions as far as the meaning of resurrection and Jesus’ message were concerned. The dialogue and the confrontation among the communities were continuous and produced conflicts and spiritual enrichment at the same time. As Vouga says: “... diversity was a constitutive element of Christian unity right from the beginning and **plurality** is intrinsic to Christianity’s self definition... In a period of history like our own, with thought being torn apart by the breakdown of ideologies, post-modern pluralism of opinions and the development of unified global structures of commerce and information, I believe it necessary to insist on this striking fact: Christianity brings a tradition and a promise in which the legitimacy of diversity is a constitutive element of its unity.”

Christians’ starting point consists of Jesus’ Easter appearances. The Easter proclamation is to be recognized as the founding moment of Christian faith, after which not only the Hellenistic tradition but also other early Christian movements consider Jesus’ life and teaching as salvific events.

In early Christianity a great variety of phenomena and trends existed and it’s not always easy to see how they related to each other. However, they shared two elements:

1) Specific aspects of Jesus’ life and preaching are taken up as the basis of Christian self-understanding.

2) The Jesus event is interpreted from different cultural, intellectual, religious,
geographical and social starting points.

In the early Christian writings these differences gradually become less prominent. The writing of the four gospels, the writings drafted and distributed under the name of the apostles (1 Peter, Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians, the Letter of James) Revelation and the Acts of the Apostles represent the effort made by different circles and schools to present a clear and logical interpretation of the event of Jesus Christ and of human life. The very drafting of the four gospels demonstrates that a conflict of interpretations existed among Christian movements and between Christianity and the surrounding religious environment.

This spirit of interpretation and research “according to the spirit of times” has come down to the Second Vatican Council and we are committed to it in the Grail.

**EARLY CHRISTIANITY**

Looking at the reasons for the success of the Christian spirituality in the first two centuries A.D, we became aware of how important it is for the Grail to deepen its spiritual roots in order to build up a new identity in our fragmented and globalised world.

From a historical point of view, Christian beginnings would be inconceivable without a group of Greek speaking disciples of Hellenistic culture who proclaim the gospel outside Israel.

The Hellenistic communities immediately become the home-base for subsequent Christian missions which they supported and financed. Their success had an extremely important influence on the subsequent development of Christianity in general which gained the adherence not only of Jews but also of pagans. Their widespread success changed the social nature of Christianity which became predominantly an urban movement in Hellenistic and Roman society.

It is not possible to give a complete account of the development and expansion of the diverse Christian movements. Our information consists of fragmentary bits of information from which no generalizations can be made. Trajectories and traditions cannot be rigidly distributed geographically as people and ideas travelled appearing in new places yet taking different shapes.

Christians made up a fairly notable community attesting to the mobility of people and religious ideas in the Roman Empire. Monotheism and the moral ideal resonated with the pagan world. The novelty lies in the exclusive nature of the God of Jesus Christ. This gave rise to an existential decision which led to the constitution of God’s family on earth that in turn granted symbolic and social identity to Christians. Hellenistic pagan Christianity defines its identity through belonging to the Saviour of the world and through rules which govern all those Christian households which are meeting places for the church community.

The preaching content of Pauline and Hellenistic Christianity, its capacity to evolve and the forms of expression it created, provided broad sectors of the population with a personal, religious and social identity which was dogmatically sound and yet at the same time sufficiently flexible to prove and remain attractive.

**THE HOUSE CHURCH**

House churches were the main structure of the Christian missionary movement, places in which the first communities gathered and where space, support and guidance were provided for every member. Many of these churches were founded by women or had

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4 Existential: based in experience.
women as patrons and supporters. These were educated and wealthy women who provided
the church with funds for specific purposes. Often these women would teach and preach;
they were apostles and ministers and some of them worked together with Paul.

Priscilla and her husband Aquila, Phoebe and Lydia all financially supported their
churches and, because of their authority, helped other missionaries and Christians
defending them in the law courts and other institutions. These communities were not
patronal-like society but were societies of equals.

The members of the house churches were not only important people but came from
every sphere and level of society. As a faith family, the fellowship explored different ways of
living together. The house church offered equal opportunities for women because the home
was considered women's true sphere, this meant that the PUBLIC SPHERE of the
Christian community was IN THE HOUSE. The church was “in her house” and the lady of
the house in which the ekklesia met bore the main responsibility for the community.
House churches were present in Rome up to and beyond the third century and women’s
roles in them must have been considerable. If we compare the role of women in the first
Christian communities with that of the deaconesses who emerged later, we find that they
were broader and did not reflect typical women’s roles of working only with women and
children.

We see a connection between the Grail tradition of liturgical rituals and
spiritual practices and the first communities gathering in the houses. We need
to rediscover this tradition of celebrating in the community houses – Grail
Centres – and building our liturgical rituals.

BASILEIA: The Vision of the Kingdom

The first communities believed in the vision of a Kingdom of Justice,
Peace and solidarity with the poor announced by Jesus. The Grail Vision directly
connects to it. Our vision has always been and, we hope, will continue to be
inspired by this message that is also the fundamental message of many religions
and of many spiritual paths.

Jesus’ vision of the basileia calls all women (and men) without exception to
wholeness and autonomy as well as to solidarity with those women in difficult situations
hard to bear.

Jesus proclaimed the Basileia of God and shared the theological concern for the
renewal of the people of Israel as chosen people and Yahweh’s nation. However, he did not
share their idea about the holiness of the Temple and Torah as God’s dwelling place. In his
teaching Jesus conveys a vision of the Kingdom as the practice of fullness.

Jesus makes whole the humanity of the masses, those who do not belong to the
chosen people; he is friend of publicans and prostitutes, eating and drinking with them
and with all who do not belong to the “holy people” and, according to them, are somehow
lacking.

At the centre of Jesus’ vision is not the holiness of the elect but the fullness of all.
Hence his parables make use of images from the world of women. His healings and
exorcisms ensure women’s fullness.

The Ekklesia of Women

S. Fiorenza and many other women theologians and biblical scholars (see
Bibliography) have attempted to re-construct the history of early Christianity as women’s
history through a historical critical analysis of the Scriptures.

Women, as God’ Church, have an ongoing history whose roots and starting point
are in the women of Judaism, the Jesus movement and the movement of the early church.
It is a history of oppression but also of conversion and liberation. This solidarity between
women of history and women today is important because it enables us to recuperate our heritage as Christian women and members of God’s people.

*Ekklesia,* in the New Testament, means Church, a civil and political notion rather than a religious one; it indicates the assembly of free citizens who meet to decide on their own political and spiritual issues.

The Gospel is not a private affair to be lived out in an intimate, individual way but it is the community proclamation of the life-giving power of Sophia-Spirit and the divine vision of a different world and community. **The centre of early Christian experience was not a holy book, rite, or mystic experience but the ongoing creation of relationships, the presence of God among and through each other.**  

Baptism is a sacrament which calls us to a discipleship of equals, that is, the overcoming of all divisions and structures of domination: a vocation consisting of engagement and solidarity. **It is the experience of a “new Church” where everyone is accepted for what they are, roles can be exchanged and solidarity is practised, especially with the oppressed and the least of this world, the majority of whom are women and children.**

**WISDOM – SOPHIA**

Feminist theologies point to Wisdom-Sophia as the feminine symbol of divinity, in a way which can help us find it in the Christian tradition as well as in other spiritual paths and religions

For Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Sophia is another way, a feminine one, through which the Israel’s God communicates with us. Spirit-Sophia is the source of transforming energy among all creatures. She initiates novelty, instigates change, transforms what is dead into new stretches of life. Fertility is intimately related to her re-creative power, as is the attractiveness of sex. It is she who is ultimately playful, fascinating, pure and wise, luring human beings into the depths of love. As mover and encourager of what tends toward stasis⁵, Spirit-Sophia inspires human creativity and joy in the struggle. Wherever the gift of healing and liberation in however partial a manner reaches the winterized or damaged earth, or peoples crushed by war and injustice, or individual persons weary, harmed, sick, or lost on life’s journey, there the new creation in the Spirit is happening.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, Crossroad, New York, 1983  
Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992  

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⁵ *Stasis*: a state during which little or no change occurs.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following questions are starting points for discussion to get us thinking about the text. Please be sure that notes are taken during your reflection, and that someone is delegated to send your grouping’s response.

Send this to Ruth Crowe at ruthcrowe@ozemail.com.au by 15th August, 2009.

For this first text we would like to ask you:

1. Was anything new for you in what you read? What did you know already, and what was new?

2. What aspects of our Grail vision and values come out of our Christian origins? Which aspects continue to be relevant to your life and action as Grail women in your country?

3. This text sheds new light on the diversity of Christianity in its early years. How might it help us to understand diversity within Christianity and other world religions? How might it help us to understand diversity within the International Grail today?

4. Are there any other comments your group would like to share from your reflection?

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