



# Women, Sex, and the Church

A CASE FOR CATHOLIC TEACHING

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## Introduction

I grew up in a broken, non-churchgoing, nominally Catholic home. As a young child and a teen, I both witnessed and then lived a life diametrically opposed to Catholic Church teaching on sex and marriage. Concentrating on Women's Studies early in college, I identified with a radical feminist contingent and was adamantly anti-Catholic. For these reasons and more, I am an unlikely candidate to bring together the women who contributed to this book.

Yet, by the grace of God, it is precisely because of these reasons that I have felt compelled to do so. A long and painful road led me back to the doors of my baptismal faith. It was a road on which I can recall falling to my knees repeatedly. First, asking the God who had already pulled me from the clutches of anxiety and despair whether he had a Son who had come in flesh, as my Christian acquaintances were claiming. Then, begging him to show me a church in which to reverence him that was *not* the "antifeminist" Catholic Church. And then finally, resigned to the movements of my soul toward the Church, bringing to God each qualm I had about Rome, asking him to grant me clarity.

Along the way, I discovered that a high percentage of girls whose parents had divorced shared my unease about life, love, and relationships, and

that many of us acted out in ways that served only to perpetuate our fragile self-esteem. Patiently reserving my heart for one man required constant prayer and vigilance, but it allowed God time to heal my wounds and to teach me the virtues of friendship.

I also came to see that the doubts that had surfaced interiorly about abortion, just before my flirtation with Christianity, were quite reconcilable with my feminist spirit. Though I can speak for no other feminist of radical leanings, it became obvious to me that my particular drive to eradicate gender differences spoke more of my low self-worth than it did of any rational claim to merit. Once I came to understand the irresistible love God has for each one of us—a love whose healing power I had personally experienced—the nature of my feminism changed. My desire to work for the benefit of women (and children) did not lessen; I simply recognized original and personal sin, not the patriarchy, as my adversary, and self-sacrificing, redemptive love, rather than legal commands, as the primary vehicle for cultural transformation.

My “reversion” to the Catholic faith was borne of experiences and insights like these, and then confirmed by intense intellectual study. The teachings of the Church on sex and marriage are not easy to live. Through them the Church asks us to do much that is against our (fallen) nature, much that is against our culture. But by prayerfully living according to Church teachings on sex and marriage, we are not only protected from much emotional, physical, and spiritual harm, but these teachings also have the power to transform us into persons capable of both giving and receiving the selfless love for which we were designed. It is a love that works wonders, that delights, that restores. It is a love that delivers a peace that I, personally, never imagined possible.



Despite boasting one-fifth of the world’s population, the Catholic Church is by no means a “popular” institution. Classical teachings on abortion, premarital sex, divorce, and especially contraception, are thought by many—both outside the Church and within—to reek of, at best, old-fashioned ideas of sex and, at worst, patriarchal views of women. The reservation of the priesthood to men, for its part, is often simply regarded as male chauvinism. These Church teachings lead many

to wonder how any self-respecting woman or woman-loving man can stay and pray within the Catholic Church.

Yet, it hasn't always been so. Historically, it was precisely the early Church's teachings on polygamy, divorce, birth control, abortion, and infanticide that most attracted pagan women into the Christian fold.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Rome hasn't always stood alone on these controversial matters. Every Christian church, and therefore most Christians, agreed with Rome on each of these practices up through the beginning of the last century.

The modern advent of the birth control pill, liberalized views of women, and the sexual revolution inaugurated a cultural reordering throughout the Western world wherein principles and institutions that had traditionally guided decision-making on even the most "private" of matters were trumped within the span of a generation by the preferences of the apparently autonomous individual.

Indeed, a 2005 study published in *American Catholics Today* indicated that the majority of Catholics now look to themselves rather than to the Church as the "proper locus of moral authority" on issues of abortion, divorce, birth control, and "nonmarital" sex—despite their continued allegiance to the Church on matters of social justice and concern for the poor.<sup>2</sup> Catholic voters differ little with their nonreligious counterparts on their views of abortion, and Catholics seek civil divorce in similar numbers. But perhaps most strikingly, few believe that ignoring the Church's teachings on sex and marriage makes them any less Catholic. For many, and for perhaps many more since the sex abuse scandal that erupted in 2002, sex has simply become an aspect of life on which the Church no longer has authority to teach.

One could assume that many ordinary Catholics dispensed with the teachings on sex and marriage during the turbulent 1960s for the simple reason that these teachings are difficult to live, that they require, for some of us, a degree of self-control and selflessness that is beyond ordinary means.

But history reveals another force at work as well. For just as the world was coming to believe that there was more intrinsic value to sex than procreation, and that there is more to being a woman than birthing and nurturing children, the Church, too, was articulating a more nuanced understanding of human sexuality and the nature of women. A substantial number of vocal theologians believed that such development of

doctrine was a sure sign that, at long last, the Church would “modernize” its teachings on abortion, sex, and marriage—and on the priesthood as well. This hoped-for view prevailed among progressive-minded academics and activists to such an extent that the Church was ill-prepared to handle their immediate protest of *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 encyclical reaffirming the Church’s prohibition of contraception. Almost overnight, Catholics, whether in the pews or in the seminaries, received the strong impression from dissident theologians (through the mouthpiece of the media and the lecterns of the Catholic colleges at which they taught) that the Church was wrong about its teaching on contraception—and perhaps about much else when it came to human sexuality. The only responsible thing for a thoughtful Catholic to do, according to these academics, was to ignore Church teachings and “follow one’s conscience.”

To be fair, the Church did give these theologians a foothold for their views in the Vatican’s modern reconsideration of sex and women. While the Church had always prioritized the procreative, or baby-making, aspect of conjugal sex, buttressed by theological treatises that derided sexual pleasure even within marriage, she began to draw much more attention to the unitive, or love-making, aspect of marriage in the modern period. Similarly, the Church’s views on the nature of women also shifted. Increased papal attention to the dignity and equality of women, just prior to the Second Vatican Council, was ratified in the Council’s denunciation of sexual discrimination and support for greater recognition of the rights of women. In the wake of these changes, many waited with bated breath for the Church to dismantle restrictions on abortion, contraception, divorce, and sex outside of marriage, and to clear the way for a married priesthood open to women.

But no change came—or has come, in the decades since. Indeed, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have taken every opportunity to reaffirm the Church’s constant teaching on abortion, sex outside of marriage, divorce, contraception, and the priesthood. They have done this even as they continue to articulate, and rearticulate in new ways, the Church’s modern recognition of the dual purposes of sexuality and of women’s fundamental equality with men.

Many Catholic feminists, such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Lisa Sowle Cahill, among others, take this “staunch” reaffirmation of old doctrines within new theoretical frameworks to reveal that whatever the

*rhetorical* elevation of interpersonal unity in the sexual union and the declaration of the equal dignity of the sexes, the Church's adherence to these traditional sexual taboos *itself* indicates that sexism is still alive and well in the Catholic Church. Regarding the Church's views on sex and women, Ruether writes:

Feminist Catholics believe that the root of this defect [in the Church's worldview on sexuality and women] is the view that sexuality is sinful in itself and opposed to the higher spiritual life, allowable only within heterosexual marriage for the purpose of procreation, and the concomitant view of women as a lesser form of humanity, linked with the inferiority of the body and sexuality, whose primary destiny is motherhood. Only by remedying these views of sexuality and women can progress be made on developing more adequate teachings that will liberalize Church policies on celibacy, divorce, homosexuality, contraception, and abortion.<sup>3</sup>

And while Cahill in her book *Women and Sexuality* applauds the new "personalist" themes in John Paul II's writing on sexuality in what has since become known as the theology of the body, she writes:

In the end, the personalist shift has been incomplete. Current teaching attaches [to this personalist account] conclusions once derived within the old biologicistic, procreative, and hierarchical model of sexuality, and especially women's sexuality (as defined primarily in terms of motherhood, domesticity, and submission to the husband/father instead of equal partnership).<sup>4</sup>

But even more than the teachings on sex and marriage, what is most problematic for these older Catholic feminist theologians and ordinary feminist-minded Catholics alike is the Church's insistence that the priesthood is an exclusively male institution. For surely it is possible to simply—and quietly—attempt to live as one wishes, ignoring much of the Church's teachings on sex (though not so much on marriage) in hope that the Church will come around some day. But for the all-male priesthood, feminist Catholics share an unequaled antipathy; for them, their "institutional second-class status" is evident at each Mass when men alone serve at the altar.<sup>5</sup>

For centuries, theologians linked restrictions on abortion, sex, divorce, and the priesthood with the assumed inferiority of women. It is simply inconceivable to these older Catholic feminists that once women's inferi-

ority was rejected, such teachings would continue to be regarded as worthy of assent. But that is exactly what the Catholic Church has claimed to be true.

In her illuminating book *The Catholic Priesthood and Women*, Sister Sara Butler, professor of dogmatic theology at Saint Joseph's Seminary in New York and a contributor to this volume, explains how the Church simultaneously affirms traditional doctrine while rejecting traditional rationales for such doctrine. Writing solely about the issue of the exclusivity of the priesthood, she details the misunderstood difference between the "deposit of the faith"—those teachings (or doctrines) handed down by the apostles orally (i.e., tradition) or through the written word (i.e., Scripture)—and how theologians have understood such doctrines. Whereas the deposit of the faith remains the same for all time, the way in which theologians understand and then explain such Church doctrine can and does change over the course of history. This happens as new questions are raised and prior explanations challenged by new insights, discoveries, or ideas about the world. Thus, Butler argues, while many theologians once based their argument for the male priesthood on the assumed inferiority of women, this doctrine has actually always been grounded in the *facts* of sacred history. Such facts concern Jesus' example in choosing the Twelve and the unbroken tradition of the Church since then—though it wasn't until 1977 that the Church found it necessary to say so.

Similarly, though individual theologians had sometimes relied on false ideas of women's subordinate status to *explain* Church teachings on sexuality (that both sex and women were made solely for procreation), they do not *depend* on such ideas for their validity.

Rather, the Church's teachings on abortion, sex, marriage, and the priesthood depend on that which all other Church doctrines depend: the words and deeds of Jesus Christ and his apostles recorded in Sacred Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit and the light of reason, preserved in the tradition of the Church.

Contrary to the old Catholic feminist view, it's not that these controversial Church teachings are wrong *in themselves*; it's just that the modern world is in desperate need of a pro-woman *explanation*.

Pope John Paul II has been called *John Paul the Great* in part because he began the difficult task of reexamining and rearticulating biblical truths and Church teaching in light of modern philosophical insights into the



human person and human experience, foremost among them freedom and equality. John Paul II's theology of the body, and the "new feminism" he championed, have afforded many intellectually curious Catholics a strong theoretical explanation for many truths of the faith that have been challenged in recent decades, especially those concerning sexuality and the role of women in the Church and in the world.

His writings have provided a unique philosophical critique of the secular humanist and feminist ideas that abound in Western culture. Catholic new feminist writers, inspired by *On the Dignity of Women* (1988) and his *Letter to Women* (1995), have expounded on John Paul's vision of the equality and complementarity of the sexes. These writers have challenged secular feminists who either blindly deny gender differences or refuse to admit that such difference should amount to anything in the public (or private) sphere. John Paul's consistent refrain and lived witness that true freedom is found in total self-gift has allowed his followers to confront a Western society based, in part, on claims of individual autonomy and false notions of liberty as license. He taught that the self-donation for which the human person is made is ultimately realized in the sexual union of the spouses. This teaching has elevated the meaning of sex at a time when our consumerist culture has debased sex, treating it as simply another form of entertainment.

And yet, despite the rich theological explanation of these controversial topics in recent years, as well as a vibrant orthodox faith practiced by many John Paul II-inspired young Catholics, the Church continues to be perceived as anti-woman and anti-sex, sometimes virulently so. It's as though some inside (and outside) the Church cannot fathom how the Catholic Church can so appreciate the dignity of women and the beauty of sex, and yet still stand firm in her views on abortion, sex, marriage, and the priesthood. For many, a deep disconnect remains between the Church's new, modern emphasis on equality and freedom, and her continued adherence to traditional teachings.

A *practical, pro-woman* defense of these controversial teachings is required to bridge the gap. As the late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, a social historian and convert to Catholicism, whose elegant writings always evinced a deep concern for the welfare of women, wrote: "[A] viable new feminism must directly confront the realm of practice . . . the real terrain of struggle . . . [f]or most women understand their lives within [that] con-

text.”<sup>6</sup> Ordinary Catholics (and non-Catholics alike) need to understand, in non-theological terms, why self-respecting women and women-loving men can faithfully live these controversial Church teachings in the modern world. This book intends to help them do just that.

Marshaling sociological, biological, and medical evidence; anecdotal accounts; and personal experience, the women who write in this volume challenge the common misconception that the Church’s teachings are anti-women and anti-sex. Rather, these women believe that it is precisely the Church’s controversial teachings on abortion, sex, marriage, and contraception that bespeak the Church’s love of women—and reverence for sex. Recent empirical evidence reveals just how harmful breaking from these teachings has been for women, their children, and our culture over the past few decades. Moreover, this harm has disproportionately affected those for whom the Church holds a special concern: the poor. Indeed, the women who write these chapters argue that, contrary to popular belief (and old-guard Catholic feminism), following Church teachings on sex and marriage, in spite of the sometimes arduous difficulty of doing so, actually helps women to flourish—physically, emotionally, relationally, and socially.



Before launching into a pro-woman account of each of the Church’s controversial teachings *in practice*, it is necessary to elucidate the Church’s *theoretical* understanding of equality and freedom. For in many of the cases examined in the chapters that follow, the harm that has come to women as a result of straying from these teachings is due to a fundamental cultural misunderstanding of these two key concepts. In chapter 1, then, philosopher Laura Garcia will look first at the Church’s modern view of the complementarity of the sexes, or equality in difference, and corroborate this theory with recent biological and sociological data on the differences between men and women. Garcia will then explain the Church’s account of human freedom, its difference from the secular view of freedom as license or autonomy, and its perfection in the self-giving acts of interdependent persons.

Reflecting upon my work as editor of *The Cost of “Choice”: Women Evaluate the Impact of Abortion*, I will take up the issue of abortion in chapter 2. I will show how Church teaching not only reverences every human

life as unique and sacred, but in so doing, dignifies every mother, whether rich or poor, healthy or infirm, in her call to nurture new life in her womb. Abortion (alongside contraception) has been regarded as the *sine qua non* of the modern-day secular feminist movement. Yet, abortion has harmed women, physically and emotionally, in our relationships with men, and in our very social status as women. Societal structures will not change for the benefit of women and their families when women are willing to sacrifice their own offspring to further their educational and career aspirations. Moreover, abortion advocates often argue that poor and desperate women are the prime beneficiaries of liberalized abortion laws. On the contrary, I will show how the Church's life-affirming message is actually the true champion of the poor.

In chapter 3, Cassandra Hough, founder of both the Anscombe Society at Princeton University and the Love and Fidelity Network, discusses the emotional and physical pitfalls for young women who engage in sex devoid of love and marital commitment. Recent studies and ample anecdotal evidence reveal that premarital, and especially casual sex, is inherently anti-woman. Regardless of whether young women want to be emotionally unaffected by sex—in the way it *seems* young men often are—the truth is that sex binds those who engage in it. This bonding makes women's attempts to enjoy casual sex along the lines of the promiscuous male almost impossible. Early sexual activity focuses young women's energies on young men, rather than on their own studies and goals, thus increasing the likelihood of depression and poor academic performance, among other setbacks. Perhaps most devastating of all is that, unbeknown to most women, sexually transmitted diseases are not gender-neutral: STDs are far more harmful to women than to men—especially to their future fertility and the health of their future offspring. Hough makes the case that the woman who waits for a man to commit is better prepared to find him in the first place—and to enjoy lasting love, free from the emotional (and sexual) baggage that often results from loveless sexual encounters.

In chapter 4, economist Jennifer Roback Morse, author of *Smart Sex: Finding Life-Long Love in a Hook-Up World* and *Love and Economics: It Takes a Family to Raise a Village*, and founder of the Ruth Institute, points to dozens of studies that show that, on the whole, married individuals are happier, healthier, more sexually satisfied, and more prosperous than single, cohabiting, or divorced individuals. Married women especially benefit

when they share a lifelong commitment with their spouses. Though secular feminists criticize the institution of marriage for its lack of freedom and autonomy, indissoluble marriage actually increases a woman's freedom to choose a path in life that a great many women wish for themselves: a life in which they are free to devote much of their time to their children. Moreover, Church teachings that promote monogamous, permanent marriage are especially crucial for poor women whose lives are greatly improved by it, and for whom divorce strikes an especially brutal financial blow. In chapter 5, Angela Franks, author of *Margaret Sanger's Eugenic Legacy*, tackles by far the most controversial of the Church's sexual teachings: contraception. She discusses the historically eugenic and anti-woman rationales for contraception, and the ways that contraception has hurt women in their relationships with men. Then, explaining the Church's teaching on the crucial distinction between contraception and natural family planning, Franks shows how the latter is far more respectful of women's bodies, the different sexual appetites of women and men, and the sacred relationship between spouses.

It has been said that natural family planning is one of the best kept secrets of the Catholic Church; this is especially so for those women and men who desire children but have been unable to have them. Just as the couple using NFP respect—rather than suppress—the natural fertility of the woman when the couple elect to postpone pregnancy, NFP-inspired reproductive medicine (i.e., NaProTECHNOLOGY) also has had tremendous success in assisting women to conceive. In chapter 6, educator Katie Elrod, writing with obstetrician Paul Carpentier, describes this holistic and cutting-edge approach to women's reproductive health and illuminates the reasons for its success. The writers contrast such an approach with assisted reproductive technologies (ART). Such technologies are fraught with risk for both women and the children conceived through them. In ignoring the natural signs and symptoms of women experiencing infertility or miscarriage, these writers argue that the ART industry places profit motives ahead of respect for and attention to women's bodies.

Once a proponent of ordaining women, dogmatic theology professor Sister Sara Butler takes up the subject of the priesthood in chapter 7. She explains the Church's rationale for reserving the ministerial priesthood to men, and shows how these reasons in no way contradict the inherent dignity and equality of women. Looking first at the fundamental reasons

for the Church's teaching, she then describes the Church's theological explanation for this much-maligned teaching.

In chapters 2 through 7, contributors defend the Church's positions on what are understood to be definitive teachings, teachings that have been understood in different ways throughout history as our knowledge changes, but are not themselves up for debate. Chapter 8 turns to a subject upon which there is no definitive Church teaching, and about which many modern-day women struggle: balancing the need (or desire) to work with care of one's family. Relying on the social teachings of the Church, St. Thomas Law School professor Elizabeth Schiltz seeks to bring an authentically Catholic perspective to this timely question, introducing secular feminists to Catholic thought, and Catholics to some like-minded secular feminists.

I conclude the volume with an examination of the relationship between the Church's celebrated concern for the poor and her more controversial sexual teachings. As it turns out, the data reveal that authentic social justice cannot be separated from Catholic teaching on sex and marriage, as much as some in the Church would like to try. This truth is evinced by the disproportionate harm that straying from these Church teachings has had on the poor, especially poor women and children. Today, as in all times, the Church stands as a prophetic witness to the inherent worth of the human person regardless of his or her social status. The Church also courageously maintains the unpopular conviction that in promoting the intrinsic value of life, the dignity of the sexual union, and the indissolubility of the marital bond, she is protecting the poorest of the poor. Inasmuch as women of all walks of life have suffered at the hands of a culture that has denigrated sex, marriage, and life itself, *all* women of faith possess a distinctively *feminine* mission of cultural renewal: to reveal to the world the way of attentive, humanizing, self-giving love.

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The Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe