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Living in the Tension: On Being Feminist and Catholic

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Abstract

Feminism challenges the dominant form of Roman Catholicism today at both essential and functional levels: What is the point of staying in a church whose good theology is never practiced? This paper uses feminist analysis of ecclesiology, prayer, and sacramental theology to argue that rather than leave, Catholic women and feminists must constantly ask, "What is God calling us to change, and what do we do until we get the change we need?" When we live in the tension, we remain faithful to our religious commitments and are able to enact practical methods for inspiring social, cultural, and ecclesial transformation.

My Catholic experience before coming to the Jesuit School of Theology for my graduate studies has been traditional and politically conservative—that I can even name it as that is a product of my widened lens. In Berkeley, I bike to the grocery store with reusable totes, I recycle fastidiously, and I cook mostly vegan meals because I care about future generations. My economic opinions skew left, and my feminism is flourishing because I care about justice. Yet, these generally good things have given me a more expansive awareness of *injustice* that is often painful to bear. In this paper, I take up the very personal problem of feminism and my Catholic faith. What I offer here is the most preliminary of notes for future sketches of liberated models of church. I take hope in the already existing diversity of Catholicisms and hope to argue for using our plurality to sustain our unity.

Feminism challenges the dominant form of Roman Catholicism today at both essential and functional levels¹: What is the point of staying in a church whose good theology is never practiced? Or, put in a biblical remonstrance, "You foolish person, do you want evidence that

¹ Essential challenges are ones that require the Church to reform some of its constitutive teachings, for example about how it defines itself, the human person, or any of the sacraments. Functional challenges are problems that require the Church to reform its actions—where the Church has good theory but bad practice.

faith without deeds is useless?" (James 2:20).² I believe that what the Church offers—sacraments, the history of believers' encounters with God, direct institutional descent from Jesus—makes it impossible to leave. Rather than leave, Catholic women and feminists must constantly ask, "What is God calling us to change, and what do we do until we get the change we need?" I recognize that this a tenuous position to hold but counter that holding tension is what it means to be religious.

Ecclesiological Concerns: Gender, Priesthood, and Ordination

If the many women who feel a call to the priesthood are right in their discernment, then the Church has been denying its members fulfillment of vocation and has much forgiveness to ask from these women. Generally, the ecclesiological argument is that ordaining women betrays tradition; the feminist hermeneutic of retrieval argues that it is, rather, the tradition that has betrayed women. At the end of John Paul II's *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* he writes, "I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful."³ Debates still ensue as to whether he meant this infallibly or not, but here I focus on the substance of his claims. John Paul II points to "fundamental reasons" for the prescription, which are the "example[s] recorded in Scripture," and "the constant practice of the Church."⁴ He adds "theological reasons," which are that Christ was not following "sociological or cultural motives peculiar to his time" but acting in a "sovereign" freedom.⁵ The Church, therefore, professes that it cannot defy this sovereignty, for it is "her fundamental constitution, her theological anthropology," and it is Christ given.⁶ Untreated

² Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced employ the *New International* (biblegateway.com).

³ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, apostolic letter, Vatican website, May 22, 1994.

https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html

⁴ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, sec. 4

⁵ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, sec. 2

⁶ Ibid.

is whether the example of Christ was meant to be normative, linked to the development of the priesthood, or permanent for all time. What does it mean for Christ to have been acting in sovereign freedom yet to have come with his own particularity into a world of contingency?

Responding to the claims of "constant practice," Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza problematizes the interpretation that the biblical men called to be apostles by Christ functioned like priests, an interpretation that creates the foundation for male-only apostolic succession. She argues that the Church's dominant "positivist" read is, in fact, ideological; it is a culturally contextualized stance that fails to adequately interpret the text against itself and against history.⁷ The use of the term apostle is "rare" and originally "described the function of a commissioned messenger."⁸ The number twelve is recovered as a symbol of the ancient constitution of the tribes of Israel and their place in the Kingdom of God; thus, the apostles are "eschatological-symbolical rather than historical-masculine," standing for a new vision of salvation that envelops God's chosen people and the rest of the world.⁹ Mark's emphasis regarding the apostles is not on their identity but rather on actions, through the power "given them to cast out demons."¹⁰ They are called *to do* like Christ in taking up his suffering rather than *to be* like Christ, an emphasis that would make gender irrelevant. Here, Schussler-Fiorenza admits that the Lukan interpretation on the significance of the apostles' maleness is debatable and less easily retrieved. Still, she emphasizes that Luke's male apostles are not ordained into apostolic succession.¹¹ Ultimately, our historical-theological concern should be "whether the discipleship of equals will be realized by the *ekklesia*" and not whether Jesus' silence on women in the twelve-circle lets us exclude

⁷ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation*, (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 106.

⁸ Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 107.

⁹ Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 109-110.

¹⁰ Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 111.

¹¹ Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 112.

non-male priests.¹² With this feminist critical analysis of the biblical roots of the priesthood, we see how the priesthood's gender prescription finds itself on shaky ground.

Recognizing how monumental the above changes would be, feminists push further! Many have argued that the mere admittance of women into the ranks is no progress at all, for "the patriarchy... helped warp the priesthood into a bastion of hierarchical privilege and power."¹³ They ask if hierarchy is at all useful for a Church called to radical equality, a question that I find worthy of response. The hierarchy, I hope, can be more than benign. It can be beneficent by preserving unity of structure, belief, and practices across parishes. I defend the slow pace of change in our Church because I recognize that it comes from a desire to think carefully and only speak the truth in accordance with tradition. While I affirm the constant need for revision and even see the necessity of monumental change, I want the Church to be able to support it thoroughly when it does take it up, and I want the Church to avoid further schism among members of its body. Additionally, I worry that a church without a hierarchy would swing into alignment with one stance and then its opposite depending on the dominant mood of the moment. For matters of eternal truth, it seems important that one is not frequently contradicting herself. The priesthood, I think, can be restored through a deeper embedding of priests within the laity, a process already begun by women who have taken up new forms of ministry oriented toward the sacraments, such as pastoral associate, liturgy director, and religious education director.¹⁴ Through the efforts of women aided by the ecclesiological changes of Vatican II, the laity and the clergy are collaborating all the more closely in the administration of and care for parishes. Susan Ross recounts that the current priesthood has a more service-oriented understanding of

¹² Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 116.

¹³ Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 125.

¹⁴ Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (City: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd., 2001), 207.

church and is distinct from the clerically centered, older model that might have limited priestly concern to a rigid following of Mass rubrics or an exacting of precise penances.¹⁵ Yet even more important to Ross is that women have been expanding our notions of sacramentality to include rites of passage like quinceañeras, parental preparation for infant baptism, and wake ceremonies. Ross exults that women are even forming an intensified parish commitment to a single Sabbath celebration because this too is a fortification of the parish's spiritual life and a deepening of community.¹⁶ In support of my argument for a reformed hierarchy, I conclude with an extension of Ross' critical question: "How is [our] practice of worship in relation to community and church *already* redefining what we mean by the sacraments"¹⁷ *and* the lived doctrine of our faith?

Concerning Prayer and Sacraments: Naming God

Here, I move from ecclesiological questions to sacramental concerns of prayer and God language. Famously, Mary Daly argues that the priesthood is one of many limited and limiting structures in Catholicism that positions God as male, and, consequently, makes maleness God. For a truly feminist analysis of Catholicism, the ecclesiological changes I have proposed cannot be considered apart from the gendering of prayer. Daly and Elizabeth Johnson both argue that the maleness of prayer, from names for God to actual descriptions of who God is to references to humanity as *man*, have created a deleterious exclusiveness. For men, this exclusion adds to the history of barriers between them and true respect for women; they perpetuate the Augustinian mistake in thinking that women possess the *imago dei* only secondarily.¹⁸ Carol P. Christ demonstrates that the maleness of God has come to imply the ungodliness of women. The existence of this asymmetrical valuation is apparent in the swift rejection Catholics give anything

¹⁵ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 209.

¹⁶ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 214.

¹⁷ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 209.

¹⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 95.

associated with the name Goddess. Christ argues that the image of Goddess is rejected precisely because it symbolizes "female power as beneficent and independent," "affirms the female body and its cycles," and "affirms female will."¹⁹ She points to how even progressive feminist women feel uneasy with *her* as a God pronoun to reveal how deep seated our anti-woman intuitions are about God-language. The weight of this is made somberly clear when Daly asserts that a woman who assents to belonging to this church is "assenting to her own lobotomy."²⁰ For any Catholic woman, this pattern of dehumanization "make[s] her aware of herself as a stranger, an outsider, as an alienated person" from the image of male Christ and the totality of male-God.²¹ Ultimately, a dualistic and hierarchal view of humanity denounces St. Paul's call to live such that "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female... [We] are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

But what idols must be smashed before Goddess language can be seen as common sense? First, some contend that Goddess language is not biblically grounded, but they forget about Wisdom-Sophia of the Old Testament, a distinctly female (in language and in being) person named as being with God since the beginning (Prv 8). Yet, this clear example of Woman-Goddess has been buried under faltering interpretations of this figure that simply deify the character trait of wisdom before allowing divinity to be tainted with the feminine. But feminist theologians still have more to say anticipating the retort that such an aberration surely cannot be prescriptively read. Feminists suggest that the reception of the inspired word and centuries of "preservation" might be marred by either sin or accidents. Of course evil and accidents as possibilities in the world do not keep us from truth, but they do often slow our access to it. More

¹⁹ Carol P. Christ, "Why Women, Men, and Other Living Things Still Need the Goddess: Remembering and Reflecting 35 Years Later," *Feminist Theology* 20, no. 3 (2012): 248, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735012436897>.

²⁰ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), 20.

²¹ Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 20.

importantly the first requires repentance and the second recovery, and these two actions are exactly what feminists call us to in more than our biblical interpretation. Careful attention to details and humble attention to the experiences and insight of women is what is needed to recover dominant biblical interpretation. We have managed enough major shifts, and preserved our unity of faith, that this recovery of language should almost be a non-issue. These claims are bolstered by arguing that limiting names for God to masculine ones places an idol between Goddess and us, which prevents us from seeing Her in Her infinitude.

So, what is a recovering revision? Here is where the beauty of abundant creativity is seen. Freely, Johnson posits God-images of Spirit-Sophia, Sophia-Jesus, and Mother-Sophia, all taken from the female Wisdom naming of God in the bible. She rescues the bible from its patriarchal translators, interpreters, and selectively seeing promulgators. The Spirit is in mutual philia with us and strengthens us *en lucha* but is “essentially free, blowing like the wind where she wills.”²² With Spirit-Sophia, we are called into mystical relation to she who is transcendently immanent. Jesus Christ is called Jesus-Sophia Son of Wisdom, and he comes to us in friendship as both *vere deus* and *vere homo*, such that we are bonded to his “humanity in solidarity” rather than his maleness in isolation.²³ The father gives way to Mother-Sophia, who is “free existence in lasting relationships” and allows us to grow in our response to Goddess through social justice.²⁴ These names are simply the beginning. Already we have a diversity of Catholicisms in communion praying differing liturgies in word, in deed, and in aesthetic preference. Popular piety has given us numerous devotions and numerous saints. We betray tradition to see ourselves as monolithically unified and unchangeable. To this, Ada María Isasi-Díaz expands our inherited

²² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and the Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum Press: 1999), 145-147.

²³ Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 165.

²⁴ Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 164.

understandings of God to match the experiences of communities, calling for an unmasking of “so-called objective understandings.”²⁵ She pushes us to pray more openly, in community, and in a way that creatively responds to our Goddess-given desires.

I recognize that Trinity, Eucharist, priesthood, and marriage are all bound up together and that the provisional re-theologizing of them suggested here is monumental. Still, I maintain that constant revision is always necessary for a people of limited understanding and of such great concupiscence as ours, and that these revisions recover rather than deconstruct our essence. The revelation of our faith is salvation history, by which I mean that the greatest story of our lives is a history of our own recovery by the Goddess who loves us. Her purpose in creating us, as asserted in *Dei Verbum*, is to reveal to us that she is “the one living and true God” and has a plan to “make known the way of heavenly salvation.”²⁶ What we must takeaway is that we are always called to know and to repent, and often we are called to repent of what we thought we knew. By using the sources of scripture and tradition along with the methods of historical criticism and our natural reason, we have found viable solutions to a number of historical challenges to the faith, and feminist challenges are currently some of the most pressing. As feminist Catholics, we cannot forget that we are embodied beings with a faith that demands that we take ourselves and our material conditions seriously.

Practical Questions, Living Tradition

To convince you that this project is one of hope, I end with suggestions for ways we might be the feminists we want to see in the Church. We can start a feminist version of the

²⁵ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Identificate con Nosotros: A Mujerista Christological Understanding,” in *Jesus in the Hispanic Community: Images of Christ from Theology to Popular Religion*, ed. Harold J. Recinos and Hugo Magallanes (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 255.

²⁶ Paul IV, *Dei Verbum*, dogmatic constitution, Vatican website, November 18, 1965, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

Fellowship of Catholic University Students to engage young people as themselves, offering answers to their own most pressing questions, organizing popular national conferences, and visioning discipleship as authentic collaboration and friendship. As there are summer camps for young women about chastity and pro-life issues, we can build into them a pro-life commitment that includes being anti-racist and repositions chastity as one of many interconnected virtues meant to be lived by all. We can encourage those with the energy and means to march for life to *work* for life by volunteering, advocating for social justice, and giving help to women with crisis pregnancies. We can build bible study guides that the laity can take up on their own in their homes and parishes. And we can recognize that these efforts are already happening.

The functional challenge put generally is: Can we make it happen? Specifically, can the clergy and other men (and women) learn to accept women as valid leaders? Can we empower the laity to pray beyond the sacraments and for themselves? Can we train priests to be more sensitive, aware of and opposed to clericalism, engaged in and encouraging of feminism in general? I think we can, and, importantly, we have historical precedents of monumental shifts in good and bad directions to give us hope for any kind of shift. We have flipped on whether priests can be married, and we are in communion with Churches who have the opposite stance. We changed Church offices from systems of patrimony and parsimony to processes of need and discernment. We let the sacrament of penance develop from a once in a lifetime, multi-year, public affair, to a private and frequent consultation. We also needlessly removed women from the diaconate, and ended the practice of abbesses hearing the confessions of nuns in their convents.²⁷ We support democracy over kingship and freedom of conscience over state mandated religion. We let the Mass be morphed by cultural considerations in its rubric, language, and customs. If we think any of these shifts were not so monumental as the ones proposed in this

²⁷ New Advent LLC, " Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)" 2021, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3811.htm>.

paper, it is because we are too distant from the original to tell. Our history is nothing but repeated attempts by a broken but spiritually full people to find and live the truth. That is what it means to be the people of Goddess.

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