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Redefining Sisterhood: The New Nuns, Laywomen and Catholic Feminist Activism, 1953-1992

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

REDEFINING SISTERHOOD:
THE NEW NUNS, LAYWOMEN AND CATHOLIC
FEMINIST ACTIVISM, 1953-1992

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN HISTORY

BY

ALEXANDRA MICHAELIDES

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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INTRODUCTION

The involvement of American Catholic women in the feminist movement after 1960 is considered an anomaly. To many, Catholic feminism is an oxymoron. Until recently, I also assumed this. I was raised Catholic and attended Catholic schools from kindergarten through high school. I was required to attend mass at least once a week with my family and also with my school, as well as to take a religion course every term. Yet, throughout all of my Catholic education, I was never introduced to the activism of women religious or the possible compatibility of feminism and Catholicism. Though I study American women's history, much of what is written on second wave feminism ignores the reform efforts of Catholic laity and women religious. My perceptions radically changed after meeting lay women and women religious who identified themselves as both feminists and Catholic through the Ann Ida Gannon Center for Women and Leadership. It is from this initial shock that my curiosity and fascination grew and I saw the potential for research.

In "Redefining Sisterhood," I examine Catholic feminist activism during the 1950s through the early nineties, exploring the origins of Catholic feminist consciousness and activism, the development of lay and women's religious activism in and outside of the church over four decades, and how the movement's goals and optimism changed. I hope to present a better understanding of a much-ignored movement, to provide evidence

for their importance in women's history, as well as to contribute to the discussion about post-World War II American Catholicism. This investigation is essential for understanding the trajectory of the second wave feminist movement into the 1980s and '90s and the feminist backlash, in addition to further illustrating the deep effect of the feminist movement on American society.

Catholic feminists fought to eliminate or revise what they perceived as sexist language, traditions, and rules within the church. Activists most fervently worked for the ordination of women and a more egalitarian church that included women as leaders and a non-sex specific language in referring to God. Though Catholic feminists had limited success within the formal structure of the church, their triumphs or failures should not be viewed in these terms. While this dissertation examines feminist attempts to alter the Catholic Church, I also pay attention to theoretical discussions about faith, gender, and the proper role of the church, grassroots efforts to build women's communities, and the consciousness-raising of Catholic women and ex-Catholic feminists alike, events and successes that rarely made the news. For example, despite tension between feminism and organized religion, organizations like the Chicago Catholic Women worked to attract estranged ex-Catholic feminists back to the Christian faith by redefining Catholicism and establishing new female-centered ceremonies.

In "With Sisterhood," I identify the origins of lay and women religious feminist perspectives, what issues were of importance to Catholic feminists, and how their goals and tactics evolved. I work to identify the influences and events that radicalized women

to embrace reproductive rights legislation, challenge papal and local church officials, and conceive of an alternative church for women. In light of their controversial stance regarding abortion and their less controversial demands for sexual equality, I also attempt to answer how these women resolved their differences with their faith and their church.

Just as the larger feminist movement changed American consciousness, there were political, institutional, and personal implications to Catholic feminist activism and theoretical arguments. Examining these issues and questions provides a greater understanding of American Catholicism and Catholic feminism, but also a more complete picture of the second wave feminist movement. Also, by investigating feminist activism during the 1980s, I reevaluate the usefulness of concepts of second and third wave feminism. Instead of creating separate categories for feminist activism in the late twentieth century, I argue that while there was a decline in mass demonstrations during the 1980s, feminist activism thrived with various outlets for exploration and protest, including Catholic feminism.

While the literature on the second wave feminist movement is growing, Catholic activism by women religious and lay women remains largely ignored. Much of the research on second wave feminism focuses on famous leaders like Gloria Steinem, Betty Friedan, Kate Millet, popular organizations like the National Organization for Women, and headline-grabbing protests.¹ Texts have examined the goals, activities, writings, in-

¹ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Penguin, 2001); Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Sara Evans, *Tidal Wave: How Women Changed America at Century's End* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Amy Farrell, *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994).

fighting, and accomplishments of liberal and radical feminists as they challenged patriarchy in divergent ways. Yet, the bulk of the literature on the second wave feminist movement, both liberal and radical, ignores the activism of Catholic women who supported reproductive rights for women and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Nor has the literature significantly explored efforts by lay and women religious to reform the Catholic Church, including doctrines regarding the all-male priesthood and traditional notions of gender. Histories on Catholicism are not focused on feminist activism, and those on women religious tend to address sisters' efforts in support of civil rights and the poor, rather than the women's movement.²

I limit my study to those who identify as Catholic feminists, rather than simply Catholic or feminist, and whose activism is mainly focused on or drawn from Catholicism. While I utilize the work of Mary Daly who renounced Catholicism, I do so because her theoretical work, even her later work denouncing the church, was influential and referenced by Catholic feminists long after Daly walked away from the church. Because of my focus on American feminism, I do not address other important liberal Catholic movements like liberation theology, civil rights, and support of labor. My work is in part an examination of American Catholicism, but this is not a history of the institutional church. Instead I focus on the grassroots activism of sisters and lay women.

² Sue Ellen Hoy, *Good Hearts: Catholic Sisters in Chicago's Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); James Terence Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America 1933-1962* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Amy Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Radical Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Mark S. Massa, *The American Catholic Revolution: How the Sixties Changed the Church Forever* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The city of Chicago was one of the major hubs of Catholic feminist activism in the United States. Several of the most well-known activists and theologians lived and worked in the city. Chicago was also characterized by considerable economic, cultural, ethnic, and sexual diversity, which the Catholic feminist movement addressed with more frequency by the 1980s. For these reasons, I focus primarily on Chicago. I begin the analysis in the 1950s because it allows me to address the origins of Catholic feminism from the Sister Formation movement and the implications of Vatican II. I continue to examine feminist activism as it gained momentum by the mid 1970s and in the early nineties which allows me to discuss activism in support of the failed Equal Rights Amendment, why sisters entered the discourse on reproductive rights, the uphill battle for altar girls, and the fight over the various drafts of the now-abandoned church's pastoral letter on women.

This study would not be possible without the holdings of the Women and Leadership Archives at Loyola (WLA), including the papers of Catholic feminist activists Patricia Caron Crowley, Sister Anne Carr, Sister Donna Quinn, and Sister Marjorie Tuite. The WLA also houses the records of the Chicago Catholic Women, Women-Church Convergence, and Chicago Women Church. I also have utilized the transcripts and audio recordings from the Mundelein College Oral History Project to better understand perceptions of Catholic feminist activism, the larger feminist movement, and the possible implications of a Catholic women's college education. To better understand Catholic feminism amongst young lay women, I also examined the Mundelein College student

newspaper. At Marquette University, I looked at the collections of the Chicago-based National Coalition of American Nuns, the papers of its co-founder and major activist Sister Margaret Traxler, the records of Women's Ordination Conference, and those of Sisters Uniting. I was privileged to interview prominent Catholic feminist activist Donna Quinn; Sister Patricia Ann Crowley, daughter of the late Patricia Caron Crowley; and former nun and feminist theologian Frances Belmonte, who was involved in the larger movement.

Recent social historians contend that there is a distinctive American brand of Catholicism, which explains the relatively liberal stance of American laity and religious compared to other nations' Catholic communities. Jay Dolan's argument that American culture, especially the value of democracy, has had a major role in shaping an American brand of Catholicism, is essential to aspects of my dissertation.³ Because of the United States' history of and expectation for democracy, after Vatican II the religious community and laity were more willing to accept a more modern church and a diminished hierarchy. I build upon this claim to explain the predominance of Catholic feminist activism and the rejection of the church's teaching on birth control. In addition to Vatican II, Charles Morris claims that modern American Catholicism has been influenced by other aspects of American society in the second half of the twentieth century, such as the rise of college

³ Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

attendance.⁴ Higher education and anti-communist efforts of some cardinals contributed to a growing skepticism towards and rejection of an authoritative church and pope. There has also been substantial work that argues that women's colleges, including Catholic single-sex universities, were quite beneficial in aiding a sense of independence for women and fostering nascent feminism.⁵ I build upon these studies by discussing the importance of education for Catholic women, especially sisters, and how these unique women's environments influenced some women to enter the sisterhood and eventually inspired them to question and fight against gender standards in the church and society.

Substantial work examines the history of Catholicism and the important role of nuns in American society, but little has been done that focuses on the Catholic feminist movement from the 1960s through the 1990s. Writings on Catholic feminism emphasize theory, personal beliefs and experiences, or retellings of significant events. While these are helpful in their own ways, the literature suffers from a lack of historical analysis that situates Catholic feminism in the context of twentieth-century American society, which I work to do. The genesis of Catholic feminist activism beginning in the 1950s and 1960s has generated the most attention, rather than the movement as a whole. Histories of the second-wave feminist movement only briefly mention Catholic feminism, and most focus on the radical feminist critic of Catholicism, Mary Daly, instead of grassroots activism.

⁴ Charles R. Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners who Built America's Most Powerful Church* (New York: Random House, 1997).

⁵ Mary Lou Anderson, "Catholic Women's Colleges and Feminism: A Case Study of Four Catholic Women's Colleges" (Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1992); and Margaret A. Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

Some substantial recent works examine the important role of Catholic sisters in shaping American society and Catholicism. Authors Rosemary Radford Ruether, Rosemary Skinner Keller, Jo Ann Kay McNamara, Carol Coburn, Martha Smith, and Marie Augusta Neal examine nuns as agents of change, contradicting their one-dimensional image in popular culture.⁶ Neal argues that since the sixteenth century, nuns have actively sought out greater connections to their community and the poor, instead of living a cloistered life. McNamara, Coburn, and Smith expand the field of social and women's history by emphasizing the impact of nuns' social work in health care and education. Furthermore, Maureen Fitzgerald explores the complexities of religious life during the nineteenth century.⁷ She argues through her work on Irish sisters' role in the American welfare system that sisterhood confined nuns, yet it provided them an opportunity to work directly with their communities. These authors dispel the myth that nuns were only passive and pious, demonstrating over different time periods how sisters negotiated patriarchal spaces, led fulfilling and active lives, and created powerful female spaces. Their arguments reveal the groundwork that establishes the important and sustained connections between sisters and social activism that exists to this day.

⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Skinner Keller, eds, *Women and Religion in America*, 3 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981-1986); Jo Ann Kay McNamara, *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns through Two Millennia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Carol K. Coburn and Martha Smith, *Spirited Lives: How Nuns Shaped Catholic Culture and American Life, 1836-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Marie Augusta Neal, "Ministry of American Catholic Sisters: A Vowed Life in Church," in *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles Inside the Mainstream*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 231-243.

⁷ Maureen Fitzgerald, *Habits of Compassion: Irish Catholic Nuns and the Origins of New York's Welfare System, 1830-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

One of the central elements of this project is the complex relationship between feminism and Catholicism, more specifically how women defined and found their feminist consciousness through Catholicism and found empowerment in a patriarchal, organized religion. Caroline Walker Bynum explores the later conundrum for European medieval women.⁸ She argues that while women had a limited role in Christianity, pious women found powerful, personal, and distinctly feminine connections to Jesus through food and their bodies. Fasting, as a means to understand Jesus' suffering, was a predominantly female spiritual practice because women controlled food preparation and intake. Likewise, many women felt strong connections to Jesus, seeing him as feminine, by focusing on his bodily suffering and his healing capabilities and relating this to their own physical suffering and nurturing capacity during pregnancy and breast feeding.

Bynum shows how even under quite oppressive circumstances women subverted traditional notions of Christianity and tailored their religion to meet their needs. Her argument about the malleability of Christianity parallels second wave feminist interpretations of Catholicism and Jesus that I explore in my text. For instance, Catholic feminists commonly referred to Jesus as a feminist, viewed themselves as complying more with Jesus' intended vision for society rather than that of the official Catholic Church, and went so far as to call the church sexist and sinful.

Numerous texts attempt to understand the origins of Catholic feminist activism. Most of this literature gives at least partial credit to the Second Vatican Council

⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

(1962-1965). Andrew Greeley argues that the enthusiasm for change and desire to reform the Catholic Church during the 1960s altered the way laity and clergy viewed the rigidity of Catholicism. The significant and unprecedented transformations generated by Vatican II helped Catholics imagine possibilities for individual interpretation of religion as well as the ability to envision future changes. Greeley, a priest, chronicles the church's inconsistencies with birth control pre and post-Vatican II, which he argues further helped Catholics question the fallibility of church doctrine. "While this revolution was probably over by 1972," Greeley argues, "the changes have become permanent because the laity and the lower clergy, loyal to the basic doctrines of the Catholic heritage and to the images and stories of the Catholic imagination, no longer accept the Church's right to control their sexual lives."⁹ Greeley argues that the organizers of Vatican II never intended to ignite calls for women priests or abortion rights, but by encouraging a reevaluation of church rules and personal faith, the church opened the door of possibilities, especially for those who had previously felt voiceless.

Other authors such as Amy Koehlinger argue that Vatican II directly led clergy to the civil rights movement.¹⁰ With the public activism of nuns, including public protests and pickets, sisters were no longer seen as passive, allowing for a different, more ideologically intimate relationship between women religious and laity. Koehlinger argues that white religious identified with African Americans in their fight for equality and that

⁹ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁰ Koehlinger, *The New Nuns*.

religious' involvement "sharpened sisters' criticisms of the male authority structures in the church."¹¹ Sara Evans also argues that the second wave feminist movement has its origins in the civil rights and other leftist movements, as women involved in activism found their issues or concerns pushed aside and women's participation often devalued.¹² Similarly, sisters' involvement in the civil rights movement awoke or reiterated the need to fight gender discrimination. Furthermore, that involvement in the civil rights movement and their religious communities helped prepare nuns to organize, define their feminism, and fight for feminist demands. "In fact," she argues "many of the sources that nourished nascent feminism among sisters were distinctly Catholic and specific to the experience of vowed religious."¹³ Koehlinger asserts that the feminist critic of Catholicism Mary Daly proved to be a greater motivation than the likes of Betty Friedan.

Suellen Hoy argues that the 1960s were not the beginning of nuns' involvement with the black community, but rather the culmination of years of working to educate and improve conditions for African Americans.¹⁴ Yet, Hoy maintains it was not until the early 1960s that women religious became more involved in activism to seek social change, rather than in charitable activities. Like Greeley, Hoy asserts that Vatican II was influential in ushering in unexpected social change. She also contends with Koehlinger that nuns were quite active in the civil rights movement, and similar to other women

¹¹ Ibid., 16

¹² Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

¹³ Ibid., 235.

¹⁴ Hoy.

involved in leftist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, became more aware of issues of gender discrimination. Hoy focuses on the relationship between nuns and the black community in Chicago, but like most authors only briefly examines the beginnings of Catholic feminist activism.

Mary Jo Weaver has written the most substantial work on Catholic feminism. She argues that women and “women’s experience [have] been omitted from every conceivable arena of religious identity.”¹⁵ She recounts how in the 1950s, sisters successfully extended the period of time between the completion of their education and when they taught through the Sister Formation Movement. This collective action trained sisters in organizing and networking, and gave them confidence —tools sisters needed for later feminist demands. In addition to the previous authors’ assessments of Vatican II, Weaver maintains that one of its important consequences was that the barriers between lay and women religious crumbled. Similar to Koehlinger’s conclusions of sisters’ role in the civil rights movement, Weaver argues that Vatican II allowed nuns to appear more approachable and less isolated, encouraging a more open relationship between lay women and nuns. Yet, Weaver maintains, while barriers remained between sisters and laity, as well as between sisters and male clergy, these activities strengthened collective feminist action. Furthermore, nuns’ “outsider status in the hierarchal church [gave] them insider status in the women’s movement.”¹⁶ Weaver continues her discussion through the early

¹⁵ Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

eighties, addressing the women's ordination movement and the formation of WomenChurch.

Weaver's strength and weakness is that her book is a vast account of liberal American women's Catholicism. Because her focus is so broad and her scope so wide, an in depth analysis of particular events and activists is rare. Her work is encyclopedic, but it lacks an analysis that examines the role and shift of the Catholic feminist movement. I attempt to expand on her description in several ways, including explaining why there was a shift towards radicalism by the early eighties, the rationale for when and why women religious spoke up about abortion rights, and examining the problems and decline of WomenChurch. Weaver also devotes space to summarize four major writers in Catholic feminist thought. While this summary is helpful, in my text I include others theorists and integrate feminist thought along with an analysis of Catholic activism to demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between the two, as well as illustrate a shift in Catholic feminist thought.

Recently more attention has been paid to the Sister Formation Movement as an impetus for Catholic women religious' involvement in the women's movement of the second half of the twentieth century. Authors such as Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner stress that the Sister Formation Movement was of greater importance to women religious than Vatican II.¹⁷ They maintain that the Sister Formation Movement introduced nuns to new ideas about the church and fostered cooperative action. Many

¹⁷ Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

sisters were already inspired and hoping for radical institutional change prior to Vatican II. The “from the bottom up” approach of Quiñonez and Turner is fascinating and revises the traditional narrative of Catholic history. Weaver, too, addresses the Sister Formation, but Quiñonez and Turner are more explicit that Sister Formation was integral to the development of a progressive and feminist Catholicism. I utilize Quiñonez and Turner’s conclusion and build upon it by addressing how important the role of education was for many sister activists and why they were in disagreement with conservative church leaders and thinkers who espoused traditional notions of the limited role and capacity of women. American sisters became some of the most educated women in the world, making arguments against women’s full participation in the church and calls for them to be subservient, and less independent difficult for sisters to abide to.

There is little on specific Catholic lay feminists. Authors John Korte and Rose Marciano Lucey provide mostly-descriptive texts on early lay Catholic activists and dissent, with focus on the lives and social work of Chicagoans Patrick and Patricia Crowley and the Christian Family Movement (CFM) which they co-founded.¹⁸ While Korte and Lucey present little analysis, they succeed in providing a close look at the life of Patricia Crowley who later became active in the Catholic feminist organization, the Chicago Catholic Women. The authors describe the Crowleys’ involvement in the church’s Special Study Group on Population and Birth Control, which lasted from 1964 to 1968. The Crowleys found that Catholic couples were displeased with the rhythm

¹⁸ John Korte, *Simple Gifts: The Lives of Pat and Patty Crowley* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, Inc, 1979); Rose Marciano Lucey, *Roots and Wings: Dreamers and Doers of the Christian Family Movement* (San Jose: Resource Publications, Inc., 1987).

method as the only accepted means of birth control by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. They discovered that the stress of possible pregnancies was damaging to marriages. The study group presented these findings to the Pope, who subsequently rejected their suggestions to allow artificial contraception in marriage with the *Humanae Vitae*. The experience left Patricia Crowley heartbroken and critical of papal authority. The pair publicly rejected the *Humanae Vitae*, and by doing so, lost friendships and high-ranking Catholic support. *Simple Gifts* especially points to the significance of these events to Patricia Crowley, which one can see as the origin of her feminist consciousness.

Authors also have recently examined and described selected aspects of Catholic feminist and progressive activism from the 1960s until the 1990s. Joseph Dunn, a priest who integrates personal experiences into his text, provides an account of the conflicts over progressive change, including the fight for women's ordination after the Second Vatican Council.¹⁹ Mary J. Henold asserts that a transition between 1975 and 1978 transformed how grassroots Catholic feminists identified themselves and approached their activism.²⁰ Henold argues that during these years activists gradually shifted away from optimism and calls for dialogue between feminists and clergy. In these years, she contends that feminists felt increased resistance from church leaders, developed a greater sense of their own feminist consciousness and theology, and with their frustrations, were radicalized by the end of the decade. She presents evidence from the first Women's

¹⁹ Joseph Dunn, *The Rest of Us Catholics: The Loyal Opposition* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate Publishers, 1994).

²⁰ Mary J. Henold, "'A Matter of Conversion': American Catholic Feminism in Transition, 1975-1978," *American Catholic Studies* 16, no. 4 (2005): 1-23; Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Ordination Conference in 1975, in which most of the activists spoke with hopefulness that change was possible by working with, rather than promoting breaking from, the institution church. Minor successes occurred, such as the Call to Action conference in 1976, in which some male clergy expressed interest for greater gender equality in church. Yet, shortly after Call to Action, the Vatican released its *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, opposing female ordination. This rebuke, Henold writes, led Catholic feminists to their first major, organized activism, but though angry, feminists still worked for dialogue and remained confident. By the end of the decade, however, high hopes waned as feminist suggestions and dialogue failed. Finally, calls for patience were replaced with angry demands for justice and activists eventually a broke away from the institutional church.

Henold does not explore the reasons for this initial optimism, nor does she adequately explain the shift to radicalism, questions that deserve much more attention, perhaps because she ends the bulk of her discussion by the early eighties. Furthermore, while I agree that optimism was shaken by 1976, but I do not see a dramatic difference between the mid-seventies and the late seventies. There were harsh criticisms made of the church, certainly, but those were found prior to 1976 as well. Likewise, I argue that activists remained hopeful that changes could be made in the church, even after the *Declaration*, as evidenced by the liberal Call to Action meeting that left many Catholics certain that progress was right around the corner. I disagree with Henold that an ideological shift took place at the time. I contend that this shift occurred later, in the mid

eighties. Though the *Declaration* was distressing to activists, I find it too simplistic to place an ideological shift on its shoulders. I argue their radicalism occurred later as a result of social conservatism in the institutional church, the backlash against feminism in the United States, and a string of disappointments. It was the mid eighties, not the seventies, that saw Catholic feminists enter the public discourse about reproductive rights, publicly defy the pope, and create an alternative form of female-led worship, WomanChurch.

A few texts like Henold's and Weaver's briefly address Catholic feminist support of reproductive rights in mostly descriptive ways, and what is available is mostly focused on the 1984 Catholics for Free Choice advertisement signed by women religious in the *New York Times*. There has been little that theorizes why Catholic feminists waited until the eighties to enter the debate about abortion rights. I connect the timing of public support for reproductive rights to the failure of the ERA. Catholic feminists worked tirelessly for the ERA and did not want to draw a connection between abortion and the proposed bill. Nuns especially wanted to use the prestige and respect of the sisterhood to win support for the ERA, and did not want to muddle things with controversy. When it became apparent that the ERA would fail, Catholic feminists felt freer to speak up. Also, I had the privilege to utilize correspondences from women thanking sisters for their support of reproductive rights and sharing personal accounts of pastoring, abuse, hard decisions, and asking for forgiveness, that have not been discussed to date.

Though Catholic feminism had momentum in the eighties, American liberal Catholicism as a movement was in decline. David J. O'Brien theorizes the decline was due to several factors.²¹ The rise of conservative politics and focus on the marketplace, rather than solidarity with trade unions, made liberal social justice Catholicism less popular. Liberals turned away from Catholicism because of tension and frustration with the institutional church's conservatism, especially regarding gender and women. Likewise, outspoken liberal bishops and church leaders felt silenced and less able to take a contradictory stance.

Other authors of note who examine the struggles of and power relationships in Catholic feminist activism include Mary Fainsod Katzenstein and Catherine Wessinger.²² Katzenstein, a political scientist, emphasizes that the American Catholic feminist efforts that challenged the church are quite different than other American battles for equality in that Catholics did not have access to the courts. She argues that legal redress made feminist progress possible elsewhere. Likewise, the lack of legal redress radicalized the Catholic feminist movement as "they had no reason to believe in interest-group politics or evolutionary change."²³ Nuns were both insiders and outsiders in the feminist movement and in the church, which gave them fluidity to understand and work with each group. Wessinger explores how organized religions use various types of authority to

²¹ David J. O'Brien, "What Happened to the Catholic Left?" in *What's Left?: Liberal American Catholics*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 255-282.

²² Mary Fainsod Katzenstein, *Faithful and Fearless Moving Feminist Protest inside the Church and Military* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Catherine Wessinger ed., *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles inside the Mainstream* (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

²³ *Ibid.*, 165.

exclude women from leadership, all of which are applicable to Catholicism.²⁴ These include the authority of scripture, charisma, hierarchy, office, education, and violence. Her analysis of power structures provides a useful paradigm I considered when researching feminist activism, success, and resistance.

Catholic feminism was never a major movement, nor did feminists represent the majority of Catholics. But, the rise and decline in Catholic feminist activism gives us insight into the pluralism that defines American Catholicism and expands our understanding of the far reach of feminism. An examination of grassroots feminist activism within one of the largest, oldest institutions gives credence to reconsidering narrow labels like liberal and radical, as activists worked within and outside of the institution. Often, when describing my project people are inquisitive as to how these women can be firmly Catholic and feminist. I hope to shed some light on how Catholic women redefined their faith, challenged the institutional church and American society at large, and built a feminist community.

²⁴ Catherine Wessinger, "Women's Religious Leadership in the United States" in *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership*, 3-36.

CHAPTER 1

ORIGINS OF THE CATHOLIC FEMINIST MOVEMENT

The church wasn't changing, but the whole world was changing—and people live in the world, and they are not stupid.¹

In the fall of 1979 Sister Teresa Kane, wearing a simple suit, prepared to speak to a large audience of American women religious and the guest of honor, Pope John Paul II. This was his first visit to the United States as pope, and his every move received great coverage in the Catholic, national, and international presses. Kane spoke as president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, an organization representing the majority of American Catholic nuns. She was to welcome the pontiff on behalf of American sisters, which she did.

But she had something more in mind than a joyous greeting. “I urge you to be mindful of the intense suffering and pain, which is part of the life of many women in these United States,” she said as a rupture of clapping burst through the church, momentarily overpowering the volume of Kane’s voice.² She continued:

As women we have heard the powerful messages of our church, addressing the dignity and reverence for all persons. As women we have pondered upon these words. Our contemplation leads us to state that the church in its struggle to be faithful to its calls to reverence and dignity of all persons must respond by

¹ Fran Belmonte, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

² *Theresa Kane — Ten Years After Her Address to the Pope in the US - Lorretta Women's Network*, Box 15, file 2, Donna Quinn papers, Women and Leadership Archives (hereafter cited as WLA).

providing the possibility of women as persons being included in all ministries of our Church. I urge you, Your Holiness, to be open to and respond to the voices coming from the women of this country who are desirous of serving in and through the Church as fully participating members.

There was more applause, and the room filled with the energy and tension that follows moments of public defiance. Some looked sternly ahead. Some waived yellow flags, others could not contain their bursting excitement and rose to their feet clapping then quickly sitting back down, looking both stunned and beaming with happiness.

There was a similar polarizing reaction of Catholics who watched or listened at home. Many could not believe what they had just witnessed—a nun, in the presence of the pope, urging that the church radically change. Who did she think she was? How dare she speak to the pope in such a manner? Why did she bring up the matter now? What on earth had occurred for *that* to happen?

For those following the unrest between women and the Catholic church, especially in the United States, Kane's speech was not a bolt from the blue. Her bold move brought attention to the vibrant American Catholic feminist movement that by the late seventies had grown and was becoming impatient, visible, and outspoken.

Catholic feminism. To many, that sounds like an oxymoron or an impossibility. Yet, by the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, Catholic feminist activity flourished, especially in major cities with large Catholic populations like Chicago. Catholic women attended and designed their own church services without a male priest. They still do. There were numerous protests against the Catholic Church's refusal to ordain female

priests. Often at great risk to themselves, many lay and religious women vocally campaigned for the legality of abortion and for the church to accept the use of birth control. These events and controversies were indeed covered by the Catholic and secular presses. But somehow, these images have been left out of our collective popular memory.

Popular imagery may be a major culprit for this confusion. Women religious have a rather limited presentation and often at extreme ends of the spectrum—either as oppressive teachers brandishing rulers or as harmless old women in full habit playing sports meant to be a joke on greeting cards and calendars. American women religious' social activism has been largely overlooked, especially in comparison to the number of studies on Protestant women's assorted social campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The image of Catholic lay women in popular culture is much more varied, often tangled with stereotypes of Italian, Irish, or Hispanic ethnicity—a burdened, pregnant housewife with multiple children; a socially and religiously traditional woman; a young, rebellious rule-breaker; a strong, working-class matriarch—yet *feminist* is rarely a descriptor. In scholarly work, as well, the connections between laity and feminism are inadequately addressed.

Most histories of the second wave feminist movement ignore Catholic feminism, and those that do tend to place the roots of Catholic feminism within the larger feminist movement.³ On the other hand, most histories of Catholicism, if they address Catholic feminism, place the origin at the Second Vatican Council. There is some truth to both of

³ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking Press, 2000), 264-265.

these arguments, but the answer is much more complex and it requires examining the different roots of feminist consciousness for women religious and lay women.

The Second Vatican Council and its call for renewal and reform is rightly credited for much of the increase in Catholic social activism in the later half of the twentieth century, but it is also important to note the long history of social work by women religious and laywomen prior to the council. Since the sixteenth century, Catholic sisters had actively sought out greater connections to their community and the poor, and resisted living a cloistered life. By the mid-eighteenth century in America, although the church hierarchy was reluctant, nuns began abandoning cloisters to work closely with the poor. By the nineteenth century, thousands of women religious and laywomen chose this option as well, working to improve the conditions of health care and education for the poor. In the twentieth century, the most famous example was laywoman Dorothy Day and her work with the Catholic Worker movement. While Day did not identify as a feminist, her social work was rooted in Catholicism, similar to many of the women involved in the Catholic feminist movement.

Each woman, lay or religious, has a unique story of how she came to her feminist consciousness, but certain trends emerge. The role of women's education, The Sister Formation Movement, the reformation process of Vatican II, and activism in the civil rights movement were key ingredients to women religious' feminism. Similarly for lay women, a new emphasis on the laity, Vatican II and its call for Catholic social responsibility, and the debate over birth control were influential in forming their feminist consciousness.

Of course the influence of the women's movement cannot be discounted. Catholic women did not live in a bubble, and a burgeoning secular, second wave feminist movement grew in momentum since the early 1960s. Even if Catholic women did not initially identify with or find relevance in the early women's movement of the 1960s, it is fair to say that lay women and sisters had at least heard of feminist rumblings. *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan's massively popular critique of white, middle and upper class femininity, was published in 1963.⁴ The National Organization for Women (NOW) formed in 1966, and it should be noted that the founding members of NOW included two Catholic sisters, Sister Mary Joel Read and Sister Austin Doherty.

Prior to the major reforms brought by Vatican II, and during the transition years while reforms were still being considered and implemented, life for sisters was incredibly structured and controlled. Sister Joan D. Chittister describes the time before the Second Vatican Council as "obedience—strict obedience, military obedience, parental obedience—was the standard for the vow [...] I did what I was told instead of doing what I should and called it obedience."⁵ Every aspect of a sister's life was controlled—from major decisions to the minutia of daily life. She took vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. All of her earnings and possessions would become the property of the order, she would reside in a convent, and she would wear her order's habit.

⁴ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

⁵ Joan D. Chittister, "No Time for Trying Cats," in *Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story*, ed. Ann Patrick Ware (Kansas City: Leaven Press, 1985), 5, 12.

Nuns expected never to return home. A sister would miss family holiday celebrations, even Catholic sacraments like weddings, baptisms, and funerals. In fact, she had to choose which parent's funeral to attend, as it was forbidden to attend both. Furthermore, she also had to decide if she wanted to be present while her parent lay dying and miss the funeral, or wait for the funeral as only a small allotment of time was allowed for such a visit. As it can be imagined, this rule was devastating and left some sisters bitter, questioning their decisions.

In essence, a sister was largely cut off from her family and friends. All mail, incoming and outgoing, was censored. A former nun, Mary Gilligan Wong shares a story of a fellow sister whose mother stopped writing because she was embarrassed that an educated nun would read a letter full of broken English.⁶ Visitors were allowed, but only once a month and limited to four adults at a time, and a sister had to eat separately from her guests. Family members could phone the order to speak with a superior, but were unable to speak directly to their relative in the convent.

Habits varied based among orders, but in general they were made of wool and disguised the form of and covered entirely a woman's body. Some novices' heads were shorn, others only had their hair clipped short. A tight veil was worn on the head covering all hair, or what was left of it. Some veils, due to their design, limited a sister's peripheral vision. Perceived vanity was strictly forbidden and met with harsh consequences. Numerous sisters were chastised and humiliated for inspecting their reflection or taking too long to dress or bathe. Kissing the floor was frequent punishment.

⁶ Mary Gilligan Wong, *Nun: A Memoir* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983), 182.

Permission was needed for something as basic as a drink of water and forgiveness begged for an incident as slight as breaking a dish. Smoking and alcohol were prohibited. “I remember being told when we would all begin to wear our winter shawls, whether you were cold or not,” writes Sister Chittister.⁷ In the early 1960s, tampons were forbidden, but sanitary napkins allowed, a small luxury earlier generations were not given. Even though forbidden, in some convents “the tampon is driven underground and begins to do an active business in the novitiate black market.”⁸

Recreation was complicated as well. Women religious were not allowed in public without a companion. Even with a companion, restaurants, movie theaters, and meetings outside of the convent were not to be visited. One convent was not allowed to watch the coronation of Queen Elizabeth because they were not given permission from the prioress. To make sure sisters obeyed the order, men from the congregation came in to remove the borrowed television that sat in the community room.⁹ During the period of transition following Vatican II, expectations were high and often met with frustration. “In 1965, the schedule was always more important than the conversation. I lived with a superior who routinely turned the TV detective story, ‘Perry Mason,’ off at 8:15 rather than extend the recreation period 15 minutes so we could find out who did the who-done-it. After all, recreation was a time period, not an experience.”¹⁰

⁷ Chittister, 13.

⁸ Wong, 182.

⁹ Chittister, 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

As teachers in Catholic schools all across the country—the one place that sisters wielded the most power and connected to society—their power was usurped by a priest's. One former nun remembered how the sisters that taught her had a tendency to downplay their own intelligence or knowledge of Catholicism and enforced the idea that the priest was *the* spiritual and intellectual authority figure. “If a complicated theological question came up in religion class [...] a nun would always say: ‘Let’s have father come in and tackle that one!’”¹¹ For major decisions concerning the parish or school, a nun’s opinion only went so far, and in the end the parish priest had the final say. “Despite her elevated spiritual state, no one forgot that a nun was, ultimately, just a woman.”¹²

The severity of these rules and restrictions applied to women religious—not to priests, deacons, or brothers. Priests also took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, but they were not sheltered and sequestered from life like sisters. Priests enjoyed a range of freedoms from public speaking, attending celebrations, an independent life, and comfortable clothing to drinking. Sisters, even though technically not cloistered, were practically cut off from society at large. “Separation from the world, not insertion into its pain, was the theological vision of the time.”¹³

Why would any woman choose a life as a nun? The traditional argument is that women and men are called by God to religious life. “I wanted to be a nun since I was six years old,” Sister Donna Quinn said.

¹¹ Wong, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

¹³ Chittister, 12.

I always wanted to be a sister except when it came time to enter. I was going with someone that I thought I was in love with at that young age, and I struggled then until about October and I remember as a postulant, after I entered in September, [...] I looked up at this crucifix that was above the postulant mistress' head. I don't know if it was a conversion or what, but from that day forward, that's all I ever wanted to be, and I never struggled with leaving or not leaving—I never did struggle with that.¹⁴

Surely those who entered felt a spiritual connection to God, though even those who felt a call from God acknowledge that there were other reasons why they joined the sisterhood. “If I had been in public school, if I had never known any nuns, if I had not been taught that my only options were marriage or the convent—I might have been attracted to the Peace Corps,” argues Patricia Hussey, a former nun.¹⁵ For women who entered in the early to mid-sixties, before the women's liberation movement, options for American women were limited. As many Catholic women raised prior to the sixties indicate, there only appeared to be two viable options—housewifery and motherhood or the nunnery.

American women certainly held other roles besides these two polarizing positions, but to many women who entered the sisterhood, these options seemed the most obtainable and realistic. “I had never known any career woman. The only role models I had were nuns and the women in my family who had all gotten married, had kids.”¹⁶ Motherhood seemed daunting to many. When explaining their reasons for choosing a religious life, often women share stories of the hardships of their mothers. “My dear

¹⁴ Donna Quinn, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

¹⁵ Barbara Ferraro, Patricia Hussey, with Jane O'Reilly, *No Turning Back: Two Nuns' Battle with the Vatican over Women's Right to Choose* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990), 56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

mother,” writes Barbara Ferraro, a former nun. “I remember her as always pregnant. She would change from summer maternity clothes to winter maternity clothes.”¹⁷

But the convent was not chosen merely as a way to escape marriage or the social condemnation that came from becoming a “spinster.” Nuns were and are respected members of society. “It was the idea of specialness that fired my imagination,” writes Wong.

Images of visiting my aunt and cousin [who were nuns] rose up before my eyes: everyone always treated them with such respect and reverence. We’d dress up in our Sunday best and sit all prim and proper in their convent parlors, presenting them with homemade cookies and boxes of chocolates. When we went to visit other aunts and uncles, we’d wear our old clothes and play out in the backyard with their kids. The thought of *my* brothers and sisters one day bringing their children to visit the aunt who was doing something *special* with her life suddenly became very intriguing.¹⁸

In their role as teacher, nuns were often the leading or only professional, autonomous female role models for young Catholic women. “[T]he most independent girls became nuns. At least, so it seemed to me,” argues Ferraro. “I thought of a convent as a kind of feminist commune (not that either word had ever entered my consciousness), full of strong women working in sisterhood, doing good.”¹⁹ Sister Quinn agrees. “It was seeing strong women,” she said, “and you know that was probably why I entered religious community, too, because those were the strongest women I saw—the nuns that taught me.”²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid., 12.

¹⁸ Wong, 24.

¹⁹ Ferraro, Hussey, with O’Reilly, 14.

²⁰ Quinn.

While popular culture is filled with tales of angry, old, hostile nuns (I myself grew up hearing my father comically tell stories of nuns smacking students at his friends' Catholic all boys school in Chicago), the positive influence of nuns is often ignored. All-female school environments in particular are cited for encouraging young women to excel academically and nurturing independent thinking and confidence.²¹ Describing her move from a coeducational Catholic middle school to an all female Catholic preparatory high school, Wong argues that she was “suddenly free to be all that I can be intellectually.” She was thrilled to find an environment where gendered expectations and discouragements were muddled. “I am not restricted by unwritten codes that remind me that boys don't like girls who are too smart, that *no one* likes girls who are DCRs—damned curve raisers.”²² Former nun Fran Belmonte also thrived in her Catholic all girls high school. “[T]hose nuns—to this day I think how they were so standup and so cool and so smart. They raised something in our intelligence and in souls.” She continues:

They taught us how to push against ourselves. [...] They did something for us. They made us self-initiating. They gave us pride in our gifts. They gave us respect for one another. They gave us joy in one another's accomplishments and I think it really happened there. The word feminist wasn't around in the 50s. I graduated high school in '59. [...] I think that's where it really began, I think some of my loyalty to the church remained because I knew what good things they had done. And just like everybody else, as a child, I confused those standup women with the church. And people still do.²³

²¹ Mary Lou Anderson, *Catholic Women's Colleges and Feminism: A Case Study of Four Catholic Women's Colleges* (Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1992); and Margaret A. Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

²² Wong, 86.

²³ Belmonte.

The mostly all-female world of sisters before the Second Vatican Council, even with its power struggles and severe rules and limitations, had its upside. To some sisters, the convent and novitiate are where the Catholic feminist movement began. “We were supposed to be so humble, and women weren’t important. But I remember the day I figured it out,” remembers Belmonte. She elaborates on the dramatic and reverent fashion in which deceased sisters from her order were mourned, celebrated, and buried. As soon as the hearse approached the convent and was visible, a bell would toll alerting the sisters. Several hundred women would cease whatever it was they were doing, grab candles and crosses, and line the road and lead the hearse in. There was “solemn importance to this woman coming home.” Her body, once in the front parlor, was never left alone until she was buried, as two women prayed for and sat with their former sister. “It was the privilege of the century for you to be asked to watch with the body,” she stresses. Sisters would tell stories of their deceased friend, sharing funny moments and her accomplishments. “There’s all this stuff about we’re not important, we have to be humble, women aren’t important [...] Now this was in ’59, ’60, [...] no matter what they said, we obviously believe women’s lives are important, and I am living with a whole bunch of women who think women’s lives are important—they just can’t admit it.”²⁴

Becoming a sister also carried the possibility of making a noticeable, positive difference to the society. When a young sister spoke to a middle school to encourage the vocation of religious life she included in her pitch the power to change the world. “I was stunned: no one had ever told me that I, a mere girl, might actually be able to make a

²⁴ Belmonte.

contribution to the world.”²⁵ After Vatican II, the possibility of nuns improving society seemed especially viable. By the mid-sixties women religious and priests publicly joined the fight for civil rights, and their presence at sit-ins and marches was not ignored by the press. “I remember I once saw on television some nuns in full habit taking part in a civil rights march, and I thought they were slick,” said Patricia Hussey, a former nun. “They were the part of the church that was alive for me, that had something to say about what was right and just, and what was wrong and evil. [...] I was absolutely clear that I did not intend, by entering a convent, to escape the world.”²⁶

What many sisters and some scholars note as the crucial push towards collective Catholic feminist activism for women religious—happened years before Vatican II. The events that unfolded in the late forties and early fifties were initiated by sisters and encouraged by the Vatican, yet arguably the Vatican did not foresee the consequences. Education was one of the most common apostolates for sisters, and it was not uncommon for young sisters to begin teaching in parochial schools with only a high school degree or little more than that. Sisters were indeed under-qualified instructors, and felt as much. Many studies and a 1952 National Catholic Education Association (NCEA) survey confirmed these fears and frustrations. Also, by the fifties, there were growing social expectations and state requirements for educators to have a greater level of education than simply a high school diploma.²⁷ Yet, obtaining an advanced degree was difficult for

²⁵ Wong, 26.

²⁶ Ferraro, Hussey, with O’Reilly, 56.

²⁷ Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 20.

sisters due to their busy schedules and various responsibilities within their orders, especially during the school year. Often, discouraged sisters earned college degrees after years of taking parceled out courses over numerous summers. Religious congregations were placed in a difficult position, too. The financial strain of hundreds of sisters seeking college degrees was daunting. Sisters were caught in the middle, as their desire for more education as well as state requirements were weighed against the bishops' very real need of supplying teachers.²⁸

But Rome sided with American sisters rather than bishops, and what resulted was the women religious-founded Sister Formation Conference (SFC) in 1954. Sponsored by the NCEA and the Conference of Major Superiors, with financial help from a Ford Foundation grant, 150 Sister Formation Centers, colleges of sort, quickly formed. The centers were designed specifically to meet the requirements and needs of sisters. The centers complimented the Catholic universities that many of the sisters already attended, and had a standard curriculum for sisters. In addition, women religious successfully campaigned to have a three-year waiting period before they taught, allowing for sisters to more easily and efficiently earn a higher degree, even if bishops and parish priests protested.²⁹

The result of SFC was astonishing. American nuns, who once struggled to complete degrees, became some of the most highly educated women in their country and

²⁸ Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 80.

²⁹ Elizabeth Carroll, "'Reaping the Fruits of Redemption'" in *Midwives of the Future*, 58; and Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 7.

the most educated sisters in their church.³⁰ Simultaneously, there was also an informal education occurring. “I remember that I tried to learn as much as I could by questioning and listening to some of our sisters who had gone to study at good theology schools in Europe and in [the United States],” recalled Mary Luke Tobin, who would become one of the most prominent women in the national Catholic feminist movement.³¹ Sister Elizabeth Carroll reiterates Tobin’s sentiment. “It was the education of sisters that most educated me,” she wrote. For Carroll, it was the SFC that first “challenged mediocrity in religious life and service,” rather than Vatican II.³²

Sister Formation had lasting effects for the agitators, the sisters who followed them, and the many women that were educated. Sisters soon learned to organize and network, and found confidence—tools they would need for later feminist demands. Collective activism and improved education sparked discussions and interests in social and church reform. Indeed, for many sisters, the SFC was the first step in questioning women’s role in the church and society and developed their feminist consciousness. For Sister Ritamary Bradley, listening to writer and canonist Monsignor J.D. Conway speak at a Formation Conference in the mid-fifties was the first time she had so explicitly heard someone challenge the position of women in society. No doubt, his calls for women religious to “shake off your shackles and proclaim your equality, in all things spiritual and intellectual, with earth’s supreme creature, man,” were met with shocked faces. He

³⁰ Quinonez and Turner, 6.

³¹ Mary Luke Tobin, “Doors to the World” in *Midwives of the Future*, 184.

³² Carroll, 58-59.

noted, in a somewhat patronizing manner, that he had been warned that his “rabble-rousing language of an agitator” might embarrass the sisters, so he would tone down his plea for their sensitive ears. Yet while condescending, arguably placing much of the blame on women themselves for their own oppression, and overly-optimistic about the help that male clergy of all levels would provide to promote sexual equality, he presented a powerful challenge. “As long as sisters are content to accept the proposition that women are inferior to men,” Conway argued “the stronger sex will be content to accept their own estimate of themselves.” He encouraged women religious to study Catholic theology “and see if some of your ingrained attitudes are not simply tradition and custom, unwarranted by modern circumstances.”³³

The SFC did the “unbelievable” wrote Sister Carroll; it encouraged sisters to question. “[W]e, who had accepted traditions as almost a divine order, found few humanly (or divinely) reasonable answers to justify much that we did.”³⁴ Sisters were ready for change. They were not alone.

Pope John XXIII called for reform, a second Vatican Council. He hoped to modernize the church and help it better serve its worldwide congregation. The councils between 1962 and 1965 set a variety of new guidelines and precedents and asked those in religious communities to consider and reform everything from their understanding of the Gospels to whether sisters should be required to live in a convent. Missing mass was no longer a mortal sin. Mass would now be spoken in the language of the people, not in

³³ Ritamary Bradley, “The Truth Shall Make You Free” in *Midwives of the Future*, 70-71.

³⁴ Carroll, 58- 59.

Latin. Gone would be the days of hastily-pinned tissues on girls' heads, as a head covering was no longer required for the female sex while in church. Some parishioners and religious eagerly welcomed reform, other missed the rituals and rules and disliked the idea of change.

The Second Vatican Council was arguably the most important event for Catholics all over the world in the twentieth century. In many ways, what was greatly important about the Second Vatican Council was not what it changed in the church, but that the church changed at all. "The publication of the documents of Vatican II gave new direction to all the instincts, questions, and restlessness operating under the surface of a very uniform life," Sister Carroll said.³⁵ "Vatican II allowed us, as it were, to see a different view of who is church and a larger, 'the small c' they call it, embracing the faithful," argues Quinn.³⁶ "I think that was a very important point besides the changes in liturgy, the changes in what we wore, we became more one with the people."

One of the oldest and most static institutions not only changed, it challenged the ordained to take a step back and truly reevaluate their commitment to their vows, customs, and guidelines. Were the ordained working to serve the voiceless, the poor, those in need? Were sisters and priests working to better the larger community or themselves? This required personal reflection and for religious to come together to consider their parameters in light of the Gospels. *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, a letter from Pope Paul VI, outlined the task for religious to be undertaken, including the need for legislative

³⁵ Ibid., 61.

³⁶ Quinn.

assemblies. To many, this letter is the most important document of Vatican II for what it declared and what it asked of religious. The letter explained how the documents of the Vatican Council were to be carried out and called on religious members to evaluate practices themselves. “In undertaking this study superiors and representatives to the chapter were to listen to every sister,” remembers Sister Carroll. To her the “respect for each sister, implicit in the process of soliciting recommendations for the chapters [legislative assemblies] and listening to each speaker carefully before making decisions” was monumental.³⁷

Primarily it altered the concept of superiorship, of giving orders and securing compliance. It enabled those of us in positions of authority to examine what Jesus meant by “I am in the midst of you as one who serves.” Authority became for us enablement of our sisters, the setting free of ideas, talents, qualities of personality that could be put at the services of others.³⁸

For many sisters a crucial element of renewal was to replace their traditional habit with ordinary clothes. “Before we were always the good nuns,” said Quinn, “and we could be put in our place, and nobody knew you as a person, but you were just ... a nun. Holy and separate, revered and up on a pedestal.”³⁹ She describes the excitement she felt buying patterns for simple, modest, but modern dresses, that a sister she lived with would sew. But much more than the thrill of wanting to get out of the uncomfortable habit was the joy of eliminating a physical, noticeable difference between women religious and lay women.

³⁷ Carroll, 61-62.

³⁸ Ibid., 62.

³⁹ Quinn.

Sisters were tired of being viewed as special. As Fran Belmonte explains, over time the special treatment she received bothered her:

I would go to the square, to the drug store, and because I was sister I would get ten percent discount, and I would watch a woman right here with little kids who could ill afford what she was trying to get there, but she didn't get a discount. I'd go down to the square [...] and if there was a cop on the corner he would stop traffic for sister to cross the street. He wouldn't do it for the woman standing beside me. I'd get on the bus, and some woman with packages and exhaustion would get up to give me her seat and if I got up to give her my seat she wouldn't take it.⁴⁰

The privilege of religious life, which many felt was undeserved and unfair, weighed on sisters. "It was embarrassing," Quinn states remembering the special treatment she routinely received when she wore the habit, "you knew the right thing to do, this didn't seem right."⁴¹ Sisters argued that they did not want special treatment, to be feared, or to be viewed as having authority over others. To put it plainly—sisters did not want to be treated or seen as better than those that they served, whether it be the poor, the disenfranchised, parishioners, or troubled youths. "[T]hey're giving me all these privileges because they can see me coming a mile away with these funny clothes. Now these women are not going to put on these funny clothes, so I'm going to take them off; and now we're going to be sisters, small 's.' And we're going to all have the privileges and rights we can get."⁴²

⁴⁰ Belmonte.

⁴¹ Quinn.

⁴² Belmonte.

Women religious also wanted to erase the hindrances to communication and felt that forgoing the habit would increase the probability for persons in need to reach out to sisters—allowing them to better serve their community. “Afterwards they’d talk to you and it was more real [...] When I didn’t have the funny clothes on they’d tell you, ‘it’s just us gals.’”⁴³

Vatican II also stimulated greater involvement and interaction between African American and white nuns to fight poverty and injustice. In droves, priests and sisters became active in social causes, most notably poverty and the civil rights movement. As historian Sullen Hoy demonstrates, Vatican II was not the beginning of the relationship between the African American community and white women religious. Sisters spent decades working to improve living and educational conditions, but the institutional changes of the Second Vatican Council allowed for greater activism and involvement. Since nuns were no longer forced to live in a convent, rather than simply being helpful outsiders, sisters moved into poor and socially-neglected, often black neighborhoods in large numbers. White sisters gained a greater understanding of the extent of racism and the necessity for action. With the public activism of nuns, including public protests and pickets, sisters were no longer seen as passive, allowing for a different, more ideologically intimate relationship between women religious and laity. Historian Amy Koehlinger argues that white religious identified with African Americans in their fight for equality and that religious’ involvement “sharpened sisters’ criticisms of the male

⁴³ Ibid.

authority structures in the church.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, that involvement in the civil rights movement and their religious communities helped prepare nuns to organize, define their feminism, and fight for feminist demands. As Sara Evans argues, the second wave feminist movement has its origins in the civil rights and other leftist movements, as women involved in activism found their issues or concerns pushed aside and women’s participation often devalued.⁴⁵ Similarly, sisters’ involvement in the civil rights movement awoke or reiterated the need to fight gender discrimination.

Women religious were not the only Catholic women awakening in feminist consciousness; lay women also began to question traditional gender roles and male authority. A vivid image comes to mind when we picture the stereotypical 1950s American, white, middle-class feminine ideal. She is passive and domestic, and if Catholic pious and pure. Her world is her family. She supports her husband, adores her children, and is selfless. This ideal, the “feminine mystique” as Betty Friedan coined it, is similar to the Catholic ideal—the eternal woman.⁴⁶ In Catholic magazines and books from the mid-fifties through the late sixties, the eternal woman was an exemplar of Catholic womanhood.⁴⁷ A German writer, Gertrud von Le Fort, further popularized this

⁴⁴ Amy Koehlinger, *The New Nuns: Radical Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 16.

⁴⁵ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979).

⁴⁶ Friedan.

⁴⁷ Henold, 26.

archetype in her publication *The Eternal Woman* in 1954.⁴⁸ What makes the eternal woman unique from the secular 1950s ideal is the moral weight attached to her.

Le Fort argues that women had a greater ability than men to surrender to God's will, and must live a submissive life as an example to others. Also, marriage and motherhood were considered essential parts of an ideal, moral woman. "... [W]e must realize," Le Fort argued, "the importance of establishing clearly that every one of these three timelessly valid aspects of woman's life—virgin, bride, and mother—denote the fulfillment of woman's life in its entirety, but each within its own proper scope."⁴⁹ Woman's nature demanded, Le Fort argued, sacrifice and it was morally and socially imperative that woman cultivate and act on her God-given quality. Submitting to one's husband, selflessness, and obedience would keep the family together and better humanity.

Silence was a virtue that women naturally understood and should practice. "One of the privileges of the maternal woman is the quiet, extremely important function of knowing how to wait and be silent, the ability sometimes to overlook, indulge in, and cover up a weakness," Le Fort argued. "As a work of mercy this is no less charity than clothing the naked."⁵⁰ Certainly, understanding when to speak up or not is a social skill, but throughout her book Le Fort stressed silence and submission as natural female qualities, perhaps some of the most valuable a woman could have.

⁴⁸ Gertrude von Le Fort, *The Eternal Woman*, Translated from German by Placid Jordan (Milwaukee: Milwaukee Bruce Publication Co., 1962).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

To not demonstrate the characteristics of the eternal woman was to bring chaos to the natural order and the family, and to disobey God's will. If a woman struggled with "the problem that has no name," there was something wrong with her moral compass.⁵¹ It is against the backdrop of the eternal woman that we must consider lay women's trajectory and the weight of their actions.

Just as American housewives were not as submissive and enthusiastic about housewifery as the espoused white, middle class ideal would have it, Catholic women were more varied than the eternal woman ideal. Catholic women attended college in large numbers, similar to other American women. Often, they benefited from challenging and supportive women's colleges, like Mundelein College in Chicago's north side, where women's inability to excel in traditional male fields or leadership was moot, as their professors and university president were often women. And while a long career was not always the ultimate goal, the education and expectations for women at single sex colleges were stellar. Also, Catholic mothers found ways to be subversive. For instance, Lynn Weiner argued that the Catholic women who founded The La Leche League in the Chicago suburbs rejected male authority through their activism encouraging breast feeding and natural birth.⁵² The women of the La Leche League claimed a personal authority over what was best for their birthing experience and nurturing their babies and argued that women could better provide for their families naturally—without the aid of

⁵¹ Friedan, 13-29.

⁵² Lynn Weiner, "Reconstructing Motherhood: The La Leche League in Postwar America," *The Journal of American History*, Vol 80, no 4 (March 1994):, 1357-1381.

science and commercialism. They rebelled against claims that drugged, highly controlled hospital births were in order and that formula was superior to breast milk. Like the eternal woman, the women of the La Leche League stressed the utmost importance of motherhood and an innate maternalism, but they also rebelled against and dismissed popular male, scientific authority.

By the 1950s, there were also a few progressive lay Catholic organizations influenced by the work of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn. Cardijn argued that laity were apostates, as essential and equal to the ordained. In 1943, the papal encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* reaffirmed this notion. In *See Judge Act*, Cardijn argued the importance of acting based on one's conscious—to observe a situation, to judge, and then act appropriately. Individuals like married couple Pat and Patty Crowley were encouraged and energized by the newly-important role of laity and used Cardijn's method as a basis for what would become the largest progressive Catholic organization, the Christian Family Movement. Formed in 1949 in Chicago by the Crowleys, the CFM was a group of devout Catholics, socially liberal, who, notably, had rather progressive politics concerning civil rights and gender roles. It is not shocking then that seven of the founding members of the La Leche League were also members of the CFM. Unlike other church groups or organizations, women and men held the same roles and openly discussed together, rather than separately. "We talked about Scripture and talked about what was happening in our lives," CFM member and wife of a deacon, Myrtle Edgerly remembers. "It made religion seem more real. Before this, husbands went to one thing in the church,

wives to another. But CFM we did things, to study and talk together. It was the foundation for all the work we do now.”⁵³

“My folks were involved with liturgical reform *way* before Vatican II,” Sister Patricia Crowley, daughter of Pat and Patty, says. “They were part of the movement that prepared for the changes that came, and certainly had studied [... T]hey had used [Mystici Corporis] as a basic for their theology for the Christian Family Movement all the time. They were prepared and wanting, and itching for things to change in that way.”⁵⁴ Just as Vatican II was monumental for women religious, it was also important for lay women. There were vast changes in an attempt to bring Catholicism to the present and to better serve the people. During the years of the Vatican Council, Catholics felt a palpable energy and excitement. As the years of the council passed, it seemed more likely that the church would alter its stance on birth control, as well. The church had begrudgingly allowed the use of the notoriously unreliable rhythm method in 1951 as an acceptable form of contraception for married couples who have “serious motives” for avoiding a pregnancy.⁵⁵ Since then, the daily contraceptive hormone pill, simply known as “the pill,” was introduced and proved to be effective. Though it was readily available to married women and reliable, by 1960 most Catholic women did not take the pill or use any artificial method of birth control.

⁵³ Rose Marciano Lucey, *Roots and Wings: Dreamers and Doers of the Christian Family Movement* (San Jose: Resource Publications, Inc., 1987), 16.

⁵⁴ Patricia Crowley, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

⁵⁵ Robert McClory, *Turning Point: The Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission, and How Humanae Vitae Changed the Life of Patty Crowley and the Future of the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 23.

In 1963 the Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, Family and Births was formed. Most likely because of their involvement with CFM, Pat and Patty Crowley were invited to be a part of the fifty-seven person commission. Of those participating, there were three married couples, the Crowleys and two couples that ran rhythm method clinics. The commission is notable because it was the first that included women, even if that number was only five.⁵⁶ It should also be noted that of the women who participated, all were either infertile or celibate. Crowley herself, while only in her thirties, had an emergency hysterectomy after the birth of one of her daughters.

The Crowleys were instructed to assess the use and role of the rhythm method amongst CFM's married couples. With the help of another commissioner who was a sociologist from Notre Dame, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to thousands of CFM couples. The frankness, intimate nature, and desperation of the hundreds of responses, mostly written by women, were clear.⁵⁷ Letter after letter illustrated devout Catholic couples' struggles and frustration with the rhythm method. There were responses from overwhelmed mothers, financially struggling families, and women and men bitter about their sex life because of the burden of using the rhythm method. A father of six wrote that "[r]hythm destroys the meaning of the sex act [... and] seems to be immoral and deeply unnatural." A mother wrote that "I find myself sullen and resentful of my husband when the time for sexual relations finally arrives. I resent his necessarily

⁵⁶ John Kotre, *Simple Gifts: The Lives of Pat and Patty Crowley* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, Inc, 1979), 89-90.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 97.

guarded affection during the month and I find I cannot respond suddenly.”⁵⁸

The issue of contraception, often within the confines of marriage, was discussed and debated in Catholic and secular publications. A compilation of essays about the subject, *What Modern Catholics Think About Birth Control*, was published in 1964.⁵⁹ Many contributors supported birth control in a monogamous marriage, arguing that periods of abstinence within a marriage were disruptive and harmful and that not using birth control added significant emotional, financial, and physical stress. “When my love of my husband and of God is enhanced by intercourse can I really feel that abstinence will bring me closer to both? No!” argued Anne Martin.⁶⁰ “Abstinence will turn me back upon myself.” Though, many supported the practice, this was rarely discussed in feminist terms. Only one author questions the prescribed importance of motherhood for women.⁶¹ Furthermore, while sexual satisfaction is acknowledged by some, the pleasures of sex for women are limited to the joy of connecting to their spouse, a connection to God, and maintaining a healthy marriage. There is a clear discomfort addressing female sexual desire and pleasure. “Sex can be even more pleasurable for a woman than a man—not that she achieves the same kind of climax or release—but she reaches a pitch and tapers off,” argued Martin.⁶² “For her, it is an all-pervading desire and pleasure and contentment

⁵⁸ McClory, 73.

⁵⁹ William Birmingham, ed., *What Modern Catholics Think About Birth Control* (New York: Signet Books, 1964).

⁶⁰ Anne Martin, “Time to Grow in Love,” in *What Modern Catholics Think About Birth Control*, 202.

⁶¹ Sally Sullivan, “Woman: Mother or Person,” in *What Modern Catholics Think About Birth Control*, 204-214 .

⁶² Martin, 200.

that envelops like a blanket every part of her body and glows long after, and stays throughout the next day. Love makes her warm-hearted and more calm and patient.”

The Christian Family Movement’s newsmagazine *ACT*, which had a circulation of forty thousand, published a statement by a Dutch Bishop who argued that married couples alone should decide on family planning.⁶³ Rosemary Radford Ruether, a woman who became one of the leading Catholic feminist voices, poignantly addressed the debate over of birth control in the *Saturday Evening Post*.⁶⁴ Ruether argued that sex was an essential, nurturing ingredient in a healthy marriage and that the church’s stance on birth control was harmful and unrealistic. She concluded with the growing Catholic consensus of the time, that sex and birth control were private matters, and as the Vatican had argued earlier, Catholics should use their consciences to determine what was right for themselves and their family. The bulk of her opinion piece focused on maintaining a strong, happy relationship, but she also addressed the unique concerns of women. She stated that wives often become the “policeman of the marital bed” and that a “woman who cannot control her own fertility, who must remain vulnerable to chance conception, is a woman who cannot hope to be much more than a baby-machine.”⁶⁵ The church is harmed too, she argued, because it is insisting that people follow a rule that “doesn’t seem to be serving any meaningful moral purpose.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “A Catholic Mother Tells ‘Why I Believe In Birth Control’,” *Saturday Evening Post*, April 4, 1964, 12-14.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 12, 14.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 14.

In 1965, Patty and Pat presented their correspondences to the commission and were instructed to prepare and distribute a more scientific survey for CFM members from around the world. The Crowleys received surveys from approximately three thousand couples in eighteen countries.⁶⁷ The survey showed mixed views. Seventy-eight percent of the responding couples claimed that the use of the rhythm method had harmed their relationship. But 64 percent of the couples also claimed that rhythm was helpful in some ways.⁶⁸ As in the previous questionnaire, respondents told devastating stories of struggling and desperate couples for whom rhythm had not worked or caused great stress. “The survey revealed the varied and often arbitrary advice married couples were receiving from priests.”⁶⁹ Some of this disparate advice from priests included forbidding the rhythm method altogether; some insisting upon rhythm until after their first child was born; some advising practicing rhythm, but only for an allotted period of time; and some permitting the use of the pill in short intervals. A frequent addition to these responses was the desire to “shop around” for a more lenient priest. Overwhelmingly, the respondents argued that the church should change its position about birth control.⁷⁰

As the respondents of the Crowleys’ survey indicated, there was a difference in what the church officially instructed and what was put into practice. Priests and theologians indeed gave out a spectrum of advice and judgments. “In the seminary we

⁶⁷ McClory, 88.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 89-90.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁰ Korte, 97.

were told that if one spouse insisted on contraceptive intercourse, the other spouse could accept that and continue engaging in intercourse for the sake of preserving the marriage,” Father Greeley remembers. “The accepting partner, however, could not initiate intercourse. We were warned not to tell people about this exception; apparently they didn’t have a right to know it.”⁷¹ Archbishop Leo Joseph Suenens, author of the 1956 publication *Love and Control* and an influential figure in the creation of the Birth Control Commission, had similar advice for wives. If a husband practiced coitus interruptus, the wife could avoid sin if she remained “passive” during sex.⁷²

When the state had a say in what contraceptives were available, a woman’s options might be more limited. For instance, in Connecticut and Massachusetts, states with large Catholic populations, it was not until 1965 that physicians were legally allowed to prescribe birth control for married women. It was not until 1972 with the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Eisenstadt v. Baird* that unmarried women were guaranteed the same rights.⁷³ Due to personal beliefs or the state, many women saw only one alternative—a surprisingly common and incredibly risky procedure—sterilization. “What was allowed in Connecticut in terms of contraception? The answer is zero, zip,” explains Dr. Richard Hausknecht. “This may shock you a little bit, but we did hysterectomies instead.” Six to seven weeks after a delivery, surgeons would perform a hysterectomy.

⁷¹ Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Revolution: New Wine, Old Wineskins, and the Second Vatican Council* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 28.

⁷² McClory, 38.

⁷³ Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 238.

[D]oing a vaginal hysterectomy on somebody who's had three or four kids, six weeks postpartum, you got two choices, you've either got to be faster than hell, or you'd better get the blood bank cranked up because the blood loss will be astonishing. It was prehistoric, absolutely prehistoric. From a training point of view we were delighted by this because we got a chance to operate. But our poor patients suffered enormously. I mean the risks of what we were doing were simply not rational and unacceptable.⁷⁴

Fran Belmonte shares a compelling story of her mother's struggle with the church's teaching and her need to practice birth control in the late 1950s. It was in witnessing this event that Belmonte said she first discovered that she could hate. "When I was in high school my mother really wanted, she had this yen, to get back to church. Now I'm a parochial school girl in a Catholic high school I think this is hot stuff. My mother wants to go up the street to confession." But her mother's enthusiasm was dampened after visiting the priest and permanently shook her comfort level in the church.

She comes home, she's white, she's grey. She looks like somebody kicked her in the gut with a hobnailed boot. I say, "mom, what's wrong." She said, "he refused me absolution." I said, "you've got to be kidding me." My mother was taking birth control, the pill didn't exist so they must have been using condoms [...] He said he couldn't give her absolution unless she stopped using birth control.

While this would be disappointing for many women, it was particularly jarring for Fran's mother because she had been ordered to practice birth control from her physician.

Now, I know—we used to tease my little sister, she had to be the most wanted baby that was ever born—she kept trying to self abort [...] it was a very hard pregnancy and it was hard to keep this baby. And when she was born, my mother had taken so much medication that we called [my sister] The Porcupine. She had tufts of hair all over her body, of course it wore off, she was just a beautiful kid. [The] doctor told my mother after that, "look, don't you ever get pregnant again,

⁷⁴ "American Experience: The Pill" <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/filmmore/pt.html> (accessed August 1, 2010).

because if you do, you will not carry to term, you surely will lose that fetus, but you will probably lose you.”⁷⁵

Her mother finally felt a sigh of relief, several years later when she had a complete hysterectomy. While at the novitiate, Belmonte received a joy-filled letter from her mother about the imminent procedure. “I’m thinking, now I’m mad the second time. My mother has to be happy that they’re going to cut her. And I knew that she was going to feel relieved. I think of all the Catholic women who went through this.”⁷⁶

In 1966, it was Patty Crowley who spoke to the delegates on the Council and presented the findings of the survey. Before Crowley was asked to participate, she had agreed with the church’s stance on artificial birth control. But her experience on the Council and reading the hundreds of personal letters changed her and her husband’s perspectives. She argued that adherence to the rhythm method seemed to be harming, rather than helping marriage. She also added that “I feel like I would be disloyal to women if I didn’t also emphasize one point: We have heard some men, married and celibate, argue that rhythm is a way to develop love. But we have heard few women agree with them.”⁷⁷ She spoke further that it was time for the Catholic church to change and recommended that the “sacredness of conjugal love not be violated by thermometers and calendars.”⁷⁸

The panel had voted for reform. The Crowleys and others, even those who did not

⁷⁵ Belmonte.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Korte, 99.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 99.

support the use of artificial contraception, were certain that the pope would fall in line with the commission's recommendation.⁷⁹ The Crowleys left feeling motivated and enthusiastic for the changes they were certain would happen.

Over a year later, on July 29, 1968, the Crowleys were awoken by a phone call at four in the morning from the Associated Press. The reporter informed the Crowleys that the pope had just published an encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, which rejected the commission's recommendation and banned the use of artificial contraception. "I don't believe it," Pat responded, and hung up. "We asked ourselves why we had ever gone to Rome in the first place," Patty recalled.⁸⁰ "They were deeply hurt because they had spent a good amount of time and energy and weren't even told [directly]," said one of their daughters, Sister Patricia Crowley. "I don't think my father ever got over it. He died six years later." Patty lived into her nineties, but according to her daughter, the failure of the church to accept the majority position bothered Patty for the rest of her life. She did not talk about *Humanae Vitae* until twenty-five years later, prompted to by Catholics for Free Choice and several priests, who asked her to reflect and speak at Niles College for the anniversary. "It was very upsetting to her to start to talk about it."⁸¹

The Crowleys were not the only individuals shocked and disappointed. *Humanae Vitae* was met with much resistance, both quiet and vocal from Catholics on all levels from parishioner to bishop. A Gallup poll taken shortly after the release of the encyclical

⁷⁹ McClory, 136-7.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 137.

⁸¹ Crowley.

showed that only 28 percent of American Catholics supported the policies of *Humanae Vitae* and 18 percent were not sure.⁸² As the years passed, an increasing number of Catholics rejected the Church's teaching on birth control. It is rumored that the public anger with and general ignorance of the encyclical led Pope Paul to never write another.

The anger was proportionate not only to the desire for reform, but to the feeling that the church owed its people reform. "To have the window open and a little care come through and a hope that we were going to get some horse sense around this institution and then have it dashed—[lay women] were more mad," argues Belmonte. "But I think without Vatican II they still would have been mad at that encyclical. The fact is Vatican II did happen [...] and for the first time people like Patty Crowley were invited in to do the research and have their say." She argues that *Humanae Vitae* was a defining moment for lay women and their strained relationship with the Catholic church. "The world was ready for Patty Crowley; the church was not."⁸³

Historian and priest Andrew Greeley argues that Vatican II convinced Catholics that the unchangeable church could change⁸⁴ This is a very important observation, and cannot be overstated, especially when trying to understand the development of Catholic feminism. As Greeley contends, the mere act of reevaluation, rather than the pope's actual pronouncements, created a Catholic revolution from which Catholics around the world have yet to come back. Catholics rejected the Church's involvement in their sex lives,

⁸² McClory, 146.

⁸³ Belmonte.

⁸⁴ Greeley, 1.

even if the core beliefs of Catholicism remained.

Even though the pope maintained that the use of artificial birth control was sinful, the percentage of Catholic couples and priests who agreed with this assessment had dramatically diminished by the seventies. A poll of Catholics conducted in 1963 showed that 56 percent believed that contraception was always wrong, but in 1974 only 16 percent felt that way. Likewise, the same polls showed a drop from 70 to 42 percent in those who believed that Jesus made popes the head of the church.⁸⁵ Polls of priests in 1967 showed that 40 percent viewed birth control as always morally wrong, while by 1972 only 29 percent did.⁸⁶ “Blind obedience may have worked with the peasants,” Greeley argues, “it didn’t work with an educated public.”⁸⁷ What began with great anticipation by Catholics was followed by genuine disappointment, the increase in questioning of the authority of the church, and a rejection of its conclusions. “The church wasn’t changing, but the whole world was changing— and people live in the world, and they are not stupid,” argues Belmonte.⁸⁸

The revolution in thought was happening. Lay women and sisters were not at this point united in efforts to reform the church, but barriers were breaking down between them. A combination of the massive, somewhat unthinkable changes to the Catholic church, the introduction of democracy into women religious’ orders, and the growing

⁸⁵ Ibid., 39.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 67.

⁸⁸ Belmonte.

women's movement, set the stage for all the players to come together and seek a new church and a new role for women.

CHAPTER 2

“IT WAS IN THE AIR”

CATHOLIC FEMINISM ON THE RISE, 1965-1976

[W]e had all the faith in the world that we were going to change this church within, well thirty years seemed far too long, maybe twenty, well for sure ten. That's been one of the greatest disappointments. I guess we didn't know what we were up against.¹

Though not much time passed between the beginning of Vatican II and the announcement of *Humane Vitae*, the landscape was clearly different. Catholics were emboldened by the numerous changes to the institutional church. A new crop of progressive women religious gained attention for their vocal, liberal stances and actions. Laity were additionally energized by their bolstered position in the church. Social activism challenged public policy and prejudices, with feminism undeniably becoming a mainstream movement. These different ingredients set the stage for an optimistic Catholic feminist movement.

By 1965 the Second Vatican Council concluded, but the energy and optimism for additional changes to the institutional church did not wane. The call for lay and religious for renewal—to reconsider and to reform the church, religious orders, and their own spiritual lives—opened the floodgates. While numerous seeds in addition to Vatican II

¹ Donna Quinn, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

planted the growing interest and motivation to radically change the church and rethink one's role within it, Vatican II's importance and international reach cannot be overlooked. Priests and women religious became increasingly more vocal and visible in the civil rights movement and other various social justice issues. On the flip side, enrollment of women religious was approximately cut in half between 1968 and 1969.² Priests, sisters, and brothers inspired by the revolution of thought fled organized religious life in record numbers, though not necessarily Catholicism or spirituality. The freedom granted through the renewal process, as well as the social change happening before their eyes, inspired many to leave or reconsider a celibate religious life, and instead seek social or spiritual work through other avenues.

Laity were exhilarated by recent theological arguments and papal encouragements to become more active. Historian Jay Dolan argues that there is a distinct American Catholicism, which is influenced by a history of religious freedom and democracy.³ Dolan argues that an expectation of personal freedom and democracy influenced how American Catholics approached their faith. This inclination towards personal entitlement was also aided by the level of higher education, which was for Catholics, as for many Americans, becoming a priority by the later half of the twentieth century.

Women organized as well. One of the sparks for large-scale feminist activism originated with Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. The

² "In 1968 some 1,500 women entered religious groups in the U.S. In 1969, about 800." Dorothy Donnelly, "The Empress Has No Clothes," *National Catholic Reporter*, May 24, 1974.

³ Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992).

immensely popular text addressed housewives' frustrations and feelings of limitation, as well as aspects in popular culture that encouraged women to seek ultimate fulfillment through their family and as housewives and not paid labor. For many women, reading Friedan's text was like reading their own story and was an eye-opener explaining their depression and anomie. Yet, while the text applied to many women, working-class women and women of color found the issues addressed in *The Feminine Mystique* less relevant as they participated in the paid workforce or had different cultural ideals that did not as greatly value white middle-class notions of gender. Nevertheless, Friedan's words were influential and meaningful to many women, and the popularity of the book drew media attention and a renewed interest in women's rights.

In 1966, Friedan with other women and men co-founded the feminist civil rights group, the National Organization for Women (NOW). Initially, NOW worked to change public policy, and improve education and employment opportunities for women. NOW was a liberal feminist organization—they were willing to work within the system to fight for women's rights. NOW and other liberal feminists felt that with institutional change and civil rights legislation, the status of women and employment opportunities would greatly improve.

At the same time, there was a burgeoning younger generation of feminist activism. These young women were inspired by and annoyed with the limitation of their activism within the civil rights and anti-war movements and began to find a collective voice for more radical changes. They called their movement women's liberation. They

focused on issues such as sexuality, sexual abuse, beauty standards, and patriarchy, though liberation groups were not monolithic as they used a variety of tactics as well as theoretical approaches to feminism. While NOW recognized gender inequality, their approach to challenging sexism was to address legal inequality and employment opportunities—women’s liberationists were more interested in changing the entire system. These younger activists protested a patriarchal system that caused or perpetuated gender inequality.

Some activists were not involved in the larger feminist movement or even inspired by the major theoretical feminist texts, yet one cannot discount the influence of an uprising that challenged gender roles and social structures. Catholic women witnessed and processed the social changes and challenges individually, along with the rest of America. Feminism and women’s rights were debated, discussed, and covered in the world of publishing, popular culture, and politics, and of course in private discussions and consciousness raising groups. Feminism changed the vocabulary and the conversation. Some Catholic women like Patty Crowley initially were not interested in the women’s movement, but developed their feminism through their Catholic social justice interests.

Others, like Sister Donna Quinn were intimately linked with the larger feminist movement. She describes herself first and foremost as a feminist rather than Catholic. “[My feminism] changed in the way that I love it more as the years go on. It becomes deeper for me. It’s who I am, it defines who I am and how I respond to things.”⁴ Many of

⁴ Quinn.

these activists had dual membership in Catholic feminist organizations and secular ones, especially NOW. Activists like Quinn educated themselves with the writing of theologians and theorists like Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza as well as secular feminist theorists and publications like *Ms.*

Like any ideology, Catholic feminism was not monolithic. Catholic feminism in many ways is synonymous with feminism. Catholic feminists seek equal political and social rights for women, yet their association with feminism often developed through their Catholicism and a history of American Catholic social justice efforts. For some like Patty Crowley, Catholic social justice efforts led to an interest in women's rights. Others were inspired by liberal interpretations of the New Testament that argue Jesus called for universal equality. Some Catholic feminists between the late 1960s and the late seventies focused their activism efforts on church issues such as women's ordination, but the majority were not single-issue activists and concerned themselves with improving the status of women in the Catholic church, working for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, gender discrimination as a whole, civil rights, and workers' rights. While society may have been (and still is) perplexed by Catholic feminism, the women who embraced Catholicism and feminism were not. In this vibrant space—of burgeoning feminism and a changing Catholicism—Catholic feminist organizations formed and grew, the “new nuns” flourished, and theorists explored new grounds.

The Catholic feminist movement, buoyed by Vatican II, the civil rights and women's liberation movements, began out of optimism and with an expectation that the

church would modernize. The realization that long-standing traditions and oppressions were being challenged fed the optimism. Former nun Fran Belmonte, recalling the enthusiasm of the time, simply puts it that, “it was in the air.”⁵ Catholic feminists were a minority amongst practicing Catholics, and amongst themselves varying degrees of liberalism and radicalism existed. Catholic feminist organizations of mostly women religious, often overlapping in membership, sprang up in major cities or areas with large Catholic populations, a hub being Chicago. Similar to and inspired by the trajectory of the larger feminist movement, Catholic feminists fueled one another and were radicalized by what they would consider insufficient change. But in the period from 1968 to 1976 the Catholic feminist movement was optimistic; there was a burgeoning activism of women religious; several Catholic feminist organizations developed; and there was a burst of Catholic feminist theory that reflects the idealism of the period.

The “new nuns” represented a combination of young, enthusiastic sisters and established women religious who eagerly embraced the changes brought by Vatican II and the renewal process. The “New Woman” of the turn of the twentieth century represented a forward-thinking, educated, independent, modern woman; likewise the same descriptors are relevant to the “new nuns.” This new breed of sisters were visible and outspoken in their efforts to fight for civil rights, social justice, as well as their connection of social justice to their second-wave feminist beliefs. More often than not, these “new nuns” had dropped their habits, which they saw as giving sisters an

⁵ Fran Belmonte, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

unnecessary and wrong privilege as well as inhibiting communication and service to the public. Sisters were giddy to sew or purchase modest garments, including slacks—acts to which some Catholics, even in the twenty-first century, find sacrilegious and respond with hostility. Sisters were also collected wages which were previously given to their orders, allowing them to rent apartments on their own or with fellow nuns.

The “new nuns” publicly fought for social justice. Unlike their foremothers who were concerned with social and racial concerns as well, these younger nuns enjoyed greater freedom of expression because of the changes brought by Vatican II and the renewal process. In the late sixties, however, while progressive sisters were interested in women’s rights, they did not necessarily label themselves publicly as feminist or align with the second-wave movement. For some like former sister Belmonte, their identification with feminism took time, even if they found themselves sympathetic to the ideology. “I don’t remember using the word much— ‘feminist.’ I know I used the word, but I don’t remember thinking of it as part of my real identity. It just seemed to me anyone with sense [agreed with feminist ideas],” she said. “And also, I might have been scared of the word.... In the sixties and seventies I was in really good standing ... [and] I considered myself very Catholic, very loyal.”⁶

Religious renewal could be acrimonious, with progressive nuns pitted against traditional sisters and male religious leaders. It was common for snide comments to be made about women religious clothing and for insinuations to be made about their character. Some experienced accusations of promiscuity for wearing earrings. Sister

⁶ Ibid.

Quinn, every inch the representation of a new nun, laughs as she recalls a priest's hostile reaction to a modified habit that she and her fellow sisters wore that had "a little veil and our legs showed." At Sunday mass at the pulpit in the presence of the sisters and the congregation the priest launched into a bitter tirade, accusatorially stating "these are not the good nuns of this parish, they are not wearing the garb that we want."⁷

The most infamous battle over renewal occurred between the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters in Los Angeles (IHM) and their Cardinal Archbishop, James McIntyre. The IHM sisters acted similarly to their peers and had deliberated on changes they felt were best for their order. The changes the IHM agreed upon were essentially no different from other progressive orders. What made IHM's renewal unique was Cardinal McIntyre's intense disapproval and the subsequent showdown between the two parties. The cardinal was hostile towards the church's shift away from tradition and particularly to women religious' new freedom and self determination. He demanded that the sisters conform to his individual idea of what was appropriate for an order of sisters and to retract the modifications they chose democratically. The sisters refused. Rome sided with the cardinal; the consensus was that the sisters of IHM were tumultuous and too much of a distraction—would they just play nice and "pay lip service" to the instructions?⁸ By 1970, the IHM sisters had to make a choice. Fifty elderly sisters agreed to Rome's terms.

⁷ Quinn.

⁸ Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1995), 94.

Four hundred other sisters, rather than acquiesce, requested to be disavowed and formed the Immaculate Heart Community as laywomen.

The conflict in Los Angeles highlights the precarious and volatile position of women religious after the Second Vatican Council. Change was in the air, challenges were made, but progressive sisters were still at the mercy of the Catholic power structure. Sister Elizabeth Carroll argues that the IHM sisters “were the scapegoat of the renewal movement of women religious.”⁹ Former Mother General Anita Caspary of the IHM sisters of Los Angeles wrote about the ordeal thirty years later. “It was not a single cardinal who forced us to abandon canonical status in the Catholic Church. It was a vast ecclesiastical system that for centuries has used every ploy to keep women beholden to its curiously antiquated rules and regulations,” she argues.¹⁰ “Bishops, cardinals, priests, have inherited the legacy of domination over women, especially over women religious, who by built-in dependencies of their lifestyles were made subservient to male clerics.” Even with the disheartening events concerning the IHM of Los Angeles, though, progressive religious remained optimistic and focused on the bigger picture. Yes there were sexist individuals, bad apples, but surely, many assumed, the church would continue the trajectory of reform.

⁹ Elizabeth Carroll, “Reaping the Fruits of Redemption” in *Midwives of the Future: American Sisters Tell Their Story*, ed. Ann Patrick Ware, 53-68 (Kansas City: Leaven Press, 1985) 58; and Lora Ann Quiñonez and Mary Daniel Turner, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 65.

¹⁰ Anita M. Caspary, *Witness to Integrity: The Crisis of the Immaculate Heart Community of California* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 220.

As a sister, aligning oneself with the feminist movement certainly had implications. By its nature, feminism challenged patriarchy, and the church was and is nothing if not a patriarchal institution. Feminists also made arguments and demands including a true sexual liberation for women, the decriminalization of abortion, and optional motherhood, which differed from formal Catholic teaching. The media also perpetuated a negative, hostile, angry, and man-hating image of women “libbers.”¹¹ And of course, as witnessed by the ordeal of the sisters of IHM, challenges to the system could lead to public accusations and threats of excommunication. It is no wonder then that progressive nuns initially towed a fine, diplomatic line when embracing feminism. By the mid-seventies, though, more sisters were willing to do so.¹²

The earliest major Catholic and explicitly feminist organization to form was The National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN). They claimed and claim to only represent one to three percent of American nuns, having a membership at its height of roughly 2,000, to perhaps as few as 500 presently. NCAN, which is still active, formed in 1969 and initially their focus was civil and workers’ rights. By the seventies though, they emerged as a feminist organization of women religious with broad and lofty goals. They set out to fight for gender equality within the Catholic church, stating that all “decisions regarding women in the Church be made by women” and fighting for the ordination of

¹¹ Susan J Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994).

¹² The extent of Catholic feminism is hard to determine as individual nuns may consider themselves feminists, but they perhaps never participated in feminist events or organizations.

women.¹³ Their social justice desires were also grand. They, along with many other Catholic feminist organizations, worked tirelessly for the passage of the failed Equal Rights Amendment, and shared membership with the National Organization for Women. They derive their philosophy from their interpretation of the Gospels and sisters' personal relationship with Jesus. They would become one of the most radical organizations of women religious.

They were "new nuns," and as such they disliked the privilege and pomp and circumstance of the church. In 1970 they suggested that women religious orders stop the canonizing process of foundresses, and instead donate the funds set aside for canonization to the poor. They also fiercely rejected conservative calls for sisters to return to the habit. In response to bishops in Fort Wayne and Raleigh mandating the habit, NCAN wrote that it was "improper, even indecent, for any man to tell a woman what to wear." Their feminism had yet to radicalize though, and they added an exception: "unless of course he's married to her and even then, he should be subtle and prudent."¹⁴

In 1971, in the spirit of renewal and to celebrate the upcoming American Bicentennial, American bishops called for a national conference in Detroit, "A Call to Action: Liberty and Justice for All," to discuss and debate the direction of the church and its teachings. In preparation for the conference, hearings were to be held two years before to listen to the concerns and opinions of Catholics, lay and religious, to determine the

¹³ National Coalition of American Nuns (hereafter known as NCAN) newsletter, February 17, 1972, Box 1, file 2, NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA).

¹⁴ Ibid.

proposed resolutions for the event. Sister Donna Quinn was determined that women's voices be included, and as a result, in 1974 Chicago Catholic Women (CCW) formed. Though they were not allowed to provide a delegate, they remained hopeful that "A Call to Action" would facilitate progress for women. They also realized the pertinence of having an organization of lay and women religious devoted to improving the status of women in the church, and continued their work.

CCW was similar to NCAN in scope, Quinn was adamant that CCW represent both lay women and sisters, even if CCW's membership at its height was roughly 450 women, overwhelmingly made up of women religious. This desire is indicative of the feminist-inspired philosophy of the "new nuns"—the idea of universal sisterhood—that women religious and lay women should fight together and for one another, and that they were equals. "We were all together, we were unified," Quinn said. "I worked very hard on the idea of having [...] lay women and nuns together. Nuns [...] had the most power, the most visibility, the strongest networks, they were the ones in the movement, and we were trying to bring laity in."¹⁵ Sometimes that meant aggressively persuading lay women to participate. "I was always dragging with me laity, like Rosalie Mushal-Reinhardt," she said.¹⁶ It was also important for Catholic feminist organizations not to segregate themselves from the larger feminist movement. CCW proposed sending teams of sisters and lay women to other women's groups, "so that a dialogue and sharing might

¹⁵ Quinn.

¹⁶ Ibid.

enable us to be more aware of each other's insights, feelings, and where we are in relation to the Mission of the Church."¹⁷

"Sisterhood," wrote Sister Maureen McCormack, "being sister to another, has taken on a new meaning for me in the context of feminism."¹⁸ This desire for universal sisterhood is demonstrated in a story Quinn relates about one of CCW's early meetings that took place at Mundelein College, chaired by its president Sister Ann Ida Gannon.

The cardinal was quite upset with us, and Monsignor Bracken [...] sent over this man who was in development work [...] he got up in front and he had one task that he was sent for—to find out how many were nuns in this group. So he looked down and he said, "How many of you are laity?" Well, the nuns started thinking, "Hey, we're laity" so every hand in the room went up [...] He became frustrated, he said "No, no, no! I mean how many of you are sisters?"¹⁹

Their hands all shot up again. "Well we were all, we were sisters, oh, to me that was the deepest moment of what the feminist movement was, what sisterhood was."²⁰

Technically, under canon law women religious were considered laity, but there is a good chance that Quinn's example was not just about a technicality. For her and her peers, this minor act of rebellion spoke of their aspiration for women's solidarity and at the same time brought attention to nuns' status as second class citizens in the church.

Another organization to form was the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC).

The WOC is an American progressive organization of women and men who work for the

¹⁷ Chicago Catholic Women (hereafter known as CCW) newsletter, January 1976, Box 12, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

¹⁸ Maureen McCormack, "Uprooting and Rerooting," in *Midwives of the Future*, 95-110, 103.

¹⁹ Quinn.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

ordination of women as priests, deacons, and bishops. They are the oldest and largest organization that is solely dedicated to women's ordination. In December 1974 laywoman Mary Lynch organized a meeting in Chicago to inquire about raising the issue of women's ordination. This small meeting of thirty-one friends led to a conference in Detroit nearly a year later that featured twelve hundred participants and had to turn away an additional five hundred due to space. The Detroit conference entitled "Women in Future Priesthood Now: A Call to Action" was the first national conference focused solely on women's ordination in the United States and would be the impetus for WOC. The meeting was also overwhelmingly dominated by women religious, a reflection of the status of the Catholic feminist movement by the late seventies.²¹

Catholic women were not only organizing, they were theorizing. The wide grasp and history of patriarchy was documented by theologians Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza. Yet, even while acknowledging the vast hurdles again, the tone of the first WOC conference was very optimistic and theoretical. Discussions abounded regarding the nature of priesthood: what it should ideally become, how they would transform the institution, if women even wanted to be a part of the institutional hierarchy.²²

After the first conference, WOC successfully fought for delegate status at "A Call to Action," participated in protests, published statements and a newsletter, and organized

²¹ Women religious outnumbered lay women three to one at the Detroit conference. Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press: 2008), 121.

²² *Ibid.*, 127.

conferences to keep the issue of women's ordination in the news and to put pressure on the church to change its policies. Three years after their first national conference, there was another held in Baltimore, this one demonstrating a frustration at the lack of progress. WOC started as a liberal feminist organization, meaning that they sought reform by working with and within the Catholic church, but it became increasingly more radical and by the mid-eighties members claimed their own power over ordination and spirituality.

The radical trajectory and optimism barometer of many Catholic feminist organizations parallel that of prominent Catholic feminist theorists. Early in the existence of many Catholic feminist organizations, they remained optimistic that the Catholic church would ordain women, eliminate sexist language, bring women into full and equal participation within the church, reevaluate its condemnation of artificial birth control, and engage in a dialogue with those of differing opinions. "We were Catholic-rooted, we had all the faith in the world that we were going to change this church within, well thirty years seemed far too long, maybe twenty, well for sure ten," laughs Quinn. "That's been one of the greatest disappointments."²³

Catholic feminist theorists developed complex, highly-researched arguments using biblical texts and church history to prove that gender disparity is wrong. They analyzed the patriarchal context in which religious texts were written, argued that Jesus supported sexual equality, and asserted that women's full participation in the church

²³ Quinn.

would not be disastrous but in fact beneficial. One of the first works of modern feminist theological theory was written by Valerie Saiving in 1960 in her influential article “The Human Situation: A Feminine View.”²⁴ She began her article by introducing herself. “I am a student of theology; I am also a woman. Perhaps it strikes you as curious that I put these two assertions beside each other, as if to imply that one’s sexual identity has some bearing on his theological views.”²⁵ In “The Human Situation” she theorized that Christian notions of sin and pride were gendered rather than impartial.

Contemporary theological doctrines of love have, I believe, been constructed primarily upon the basis of masculine experience and thus view the human condition from the male standpoint. Consequently, these doctrines do not provide an adequate interpretation of the situation of women—nor, for that matter, of men, especially in a view of certain fundamental changes now taking place in our own society.²⁶

She did not write of women and men as essentially different, but instead acknowledged that women and men have different life experiences, social consequences and expectations. She argued that certain actions and characteristics are viewed differently in men and women. For instance, individualism and longing for work outside the home are praiseworthy characteristics in men, but viewed negatively in women. “Yet theology, to the extent that it has defined the human condition on the basis of masculine experience,” she argued “continues to speak of such desires as sin or temptation to sin.”²⁷

²⁴ Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (April, 1960): 100-112.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

Theologian Mary Daly, who would become one of the most scathing voices against the Catholic church, initially was critical yet optimistic for the church. In her ground-breaking text, *The Church and the Second Sex*, first published in 1968, Daly examined the representation of women in the Bible and theology and the status of women and sexism in the modern church. Her texts were hugely influential to Catholic feminists and social activists, and Daly is cited by many as one of the prominent voices that formed their feminist consciousness. “As Sisters in the Church,” read a letter in support of Daly to Boston College, “we are especially mindful of Dr. Mary Daly’s leadership role in the movement against discrimination toward all women in the universal Sisterhood of all women in contemporary society.”²⁸ What Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, or Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* were to shaping the feminist consciousness of secular feminists, Daly’s texts were to many Catholic feminists.

Daly argues that the Bible was written by “men of their times, and it would be naive to think that they were free of the prejudices of their epochs.” She continues that “[i]t is therefore a most dubious process to construct an idea of ‘feminine nature’ or of ‘God’s plan for women’ from biblical texts.”²⁹ She did not question the validity or the importance of the Bible, but simply suggested that one should not read biblical texts literally, but rather one must consider the historical context in which they were written,

²⁸ Correspondence from National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice to Boston College, June 5, 1969, Box 4, file 10, NCAN collection, MUA.

²⁹ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 3rd ed. (1968; rept., Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 74-75.

and the perspective and gender of the authors. In fact, she presents examples from the Bible to illustrate her point about the progressiveness and uniqueness of Jesus.³⁰

She found particular fault in the gendered structure of the modern church and the message she believed it sent.

As long as the Church maintains a significant distinction between hierarchy and laity the exclusion of women from the hierarchy is a radical affirmation of their inferior position among the people of God. By this exclusion the Church is in a very real and effective way teaching that women are not fully human and conditioning people to accept this as an irremediable fact. It is saying that the sexual differentiation is—for one sex—a handicap so crippling that no personal qualities of intelligence, virtue or leadership can overcome it.³¹

Yet, combined with her critique was a sense of expectation that the Catholic church could learn “mistakes of the past, and not continue to repeat them.”³² She also found the silver lining in the 1966 Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World. “[I]t does not explicitly condemn artificial contraception but appears to leave the door open for further consideration,” she argues optimistically. “It also avoids the familiar jargon about the subordination of women.”³³

Daly’s optimism significantly faded several years later. She explained her initial exuberance in the third person in the 1975 reprint of *The Church and the Second Sex* in the “Feminist Postchristian Introduction,” distancing herself from her earlier writing. “Daly expresses a hope, both here and throughout her book, for genuine change in the

³⁰ Ibid., 79-80.

³¹ Ibid., 197.

³² Ibid., 117.

³³ Ibid., 120.

status of women in the church,” she wrote of her former beliefs.³⁴ Daly continued her analysis:

This baffling optimism can be understood if one is aware of the euphoria that prevailed among Catholics during the time of “Vatican Council II.” So deceptive was this cloud of optimism that, despite the evidence which she herself amassed, Daly was unable to perceive the sexism was inherent in the symbol system of Christianity itself and that the primary function of Christianity in Western culture has been to legitimize sexism.

Another aspect of Daly’s (former) optimism came from her belief that Jesus respected women and viewed them as equals. “In the New Testament it is significant that the statements which reflect the antifeminism of the times are never those of Christ,” she writes. “[Women] emerge as persons, for they are treated as persons, often in such contrast with prevailing customs as to astonish onlookers.”³⁵ She even finds elements of women’s liberation in Jesus, but acknowledges the barriers because of the context in which the text was written. “The contemporary social inferiority of women was, indeed, reflected in the New Testament,” she contends. “Although the seeds of emancipation were present in the Christian message, their full implications were not evident to the first century authors.”³⁶

This train of thought continued and other activists and theorists boldly insisted that Jesus did not just respect women, but that he was a feminist. One of the theorists to make such a claim was the highly influential Catholic feminist, Rosemary Radford

³⁴ Ibid., 17.

³⁵ Ibid., 79.

³⁶ Ibid., 80.

Ruether. To prove Jesus' feminism Ruether argued that he overturned sexist traditions, had women as apostles, and trusted them the most. "The Rabbis had specifically forbidden women to be taught in the religious circles of disciples," Ruether argues. "Jesus is really overthrowing this practice in his culture when he affirms Mary's [Magdalene] right to come out of the woman's role of servanthood and to join as an equal member in the circle of disciples."³⁷ She maintains that Jesus spoke about "One who creates a community of equals, a community of brothers and sisters."³⁸ Prolific writer and professor Leonard Swidler also juxtaposed the customary treatment of women in Palestine to that of Jesus, arguing that Jesus ignored social and legal codes in favor of a new, moral code. Swidler also posits that Jesus saw God and the Holy Spirit as masculine and feminine, providing an example from a parable. "From this evidence it should be clear that Jesus vigorously promoted the dignity and equality of women in the midst of a very male-dominated society: Jesus was a feminist, and a very radical one."³⁹

Theorists and theologians also worked to elevate the role of women in biblical texts as well as the perceived prescriptive roles for women. Phyllis Bird argued that the Old Testament, the section of the Bible that is often used to cite gender roles and the nature of women, does not have a singular representation of women.⁴⁰ She maintains that

³⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary, The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 84.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁹ Leonard Swidler, "Jesus was a Feminist," *Catholic World* (1971), <http://www.godswordtowomen.org/feminist.htm> (Accessed February 11, 2011).

⁴⁰ Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 41-88.

although there are images of subordination as the feminine ideal, there are positive examples of strong women, too. “Israel’s best statements about woman recognize her as an equal with man, and with him jointly responsible to God and to cohumanity. That Israel rarely lived up to this vision is all apparent, but the vision should not be denied.”⁴¹ Others argued that the Bible could be reappropriated and read with creative eyes.⁴² Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza emphasized the patriarchal context in which the Bible was written as a way to explain the limited and often negative presence of women. “Much of women’s ‘her-story’ in early Christianity is lost,” Fiorenza argues.⁴³ “The few references which survived in the New Testament records are like the tip of an iceberg indicating what we have lost. Yet at the same time they show how great the influence of women was in the early Christian movement.” Ruether also devoted considerable time challenging the patriarchal nature of the church by analyzing Mariology. “Mariology has its appeal for males,” she argued, “because it enshrines the dominant ego and active principle as masculine in relation to women, who become the symbol of passive dependency upon the male.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Ibid., 77.

⁴² Phyllis Trible, “Eve and Adam: Genesis 2-3 Reread” in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1979), 74-83. Originally published *Andover Newton Quarterly*, 13 March 1973.

⁴³ Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, “Women in the Early Christian Movement” in *Womanspirit Rising*, 84-92, 92. Originally published as “Women in the New Testament” in *New Catholic World* (November-December 1976).

⁴⁴ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexists Ideologies and the Human Liberation*, 2nd ed. (1975: rept., Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 56.

Even in the face of dismissal, Catholic feminists were confident that women's ordination was on the horizon. A 1974 NCAN newsletter joked, "Good Bishop Bernadine of Cincinnati said on the *Today Show* that [women's] ordination would not come in his lifetime, which is sad news indeed, for it means that he does not intend to live long."⁴⁵ For years, feminists and progressives made arguments supporting the inclusion of women to the priesthood. "The New Testament discloses to us that women were educated in the scriptures and that they assumed leadership roles of sufficient magnitude to attract many women into Christian congregations," argued Constance Parvey.⁴⁶ "Paul's theology of equivalence in Christ provided a vehicle for building a new religious and social basis for women-men relationships in the future. This radically new theology of women, however, became obscured in the later epistles."

Others, notably theologians, detailed the history of patriarchy in Western society and the Catholic church, and wrote that the exclusion of women from the priesthood represents a history of sexism, rather than the word of God. "There are, of course, many rules that are an insult to women in addition to the famous Can. 968 which forbids females the sacred ministry. That prohibition," posited Clara Maria Henning "must be viewed in connection with other discriminatory laws and their origins as they developed over two thousand years of antifemale theology and legislation."⁴⁷ Ruether, would offer a more biting take.

⁴⁵ NCAN newsletter, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1975, Box 1, file ,3 NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA.

⁴⁶ Constance F. Parvey, "The Theology and Leadership of Women in the New Testament" in *Religion and Sexism* , 117-149, 146.

⁴⁷ Clara Maria Henning "Canon Law and the Battle of the Sexes" in *Religion and Sexism*, 267-291, 271.

The insistence that the male alone could represent Christ in the priesthood (since he alone possesses that spiritual image of God that mirrors the divine Word), and the continuation of the Jewish ideas of woman's uncleanness, operated to exclude women from any positions of authority in the Church and thus to insure that, however high a woman might rise in the female ascetic ranks, there would always be a male authority above her.⁴⁸

Daly theorized that "the exclusion of women from the hierarchy [...] has perpetuated an atmosphere in which theologians—all male—felt no pressure to give serious attention to the problems of the other sex in their struggle to achieve first-class citizenship."⁴⁹

But claiming Jesus as a de facto feminist and using biblical texts to support women's ordination and gender equality in the church is complicated and problematic, just as any utilization of Jesus or the bible for political or social movements is. As Carla Maria Henning pointed out, feminist and progressive interpretations were easily brushed off. "We have studied theology, Church history, religious education, and canon law, but all for nought," she argued "unless we use these areas of knowledge aggressively."⁵⁰

Also, the Bible and Jesus have historically been used to justify everything from evils such as slavery and war, to positions for and against women's suffrage, for gay rights or discrimination against homosexuals, and everything in between. For every well thought-out theological argument supporting women's ordination referencing Jesus's feminism, there was an opposing view using the same text, but perhaps different passages, and a vastly different interpretation. "'God' can be used oppressively against women in a

⁴⁸ Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth*, 110.

⁴⁹ Daly, *The Second Sex*, 190.

⁵⁰ Henning, 287.

number of ways. First, it occurs in an overt manner when theologians proclaim women's subordination to be God's will."⁵¹

Catholic feminist activists were faced with a struggle similar to that of women's suffragists. As Joan Scott argues in *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, women's suffragists were put in a double bind: any argument they made to "prove" that women's suffrage was good and would not disrupt gender roles, the family, or society or that women were equal to men or that women were morally superior to men, were met with a counter argument.⁵² The one true argument for granting women suffrage—that they were citizens and therefore should be given full citizenship—is most difficult to use to convince someone who does not view women as full citizens or equals to men. Any argument that is attempted can be dismissed or "disproven." Progressive Catholics, unlike suffragists though, did not have democracies and legal avenues to attempt institutional change.

The Catholic church is not a democracy, yet the prospect of the bicentennial bishops' conference in Detroit invigorated progressives with the belief that collective action could influence official church policy and practice. Catholic women wanted to be a part of the process, too. The members of NCAN, and the newly-formed CCW and WOC got to work crafting testimonies and recommendations to present at the conference, even if they were not specifically invited to do so or flat out told not to bother.

⁵¹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 19.

⁵² Joan W. Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Sisters outlined patriarchy and sexism in general terms, in the world and in Catholicism, adding substance to why change was needed. Brief explanations address issues such as the sexual double standard, traditional positions of power, the power of language, and labor. Harsh criticisms were made, but were done so in a constructive tone. “When a tradition of the inferiority and subordination of women is retained, the acting Church is in conflict with the teaching Church,” wrote Sister Patricia Hughes, demonstrating the optimism that the true church valued equality in the fullest sense.⁵³ She continued, arguing that a “Church whose ordained ministry excludes women is lacking in credibility. We can ill afford to compromise the integrity of the Gospel, or the universal liberation by which it should be known. But we are learning the truth, the truth that can set us free.”⁵⁴ Discriminatory practices in the church hurt the church, many argued. “If women are diminished in the Church, the Church itself is diminished,” argued Sister Teresa Maltby.⁵⁵ “The Gospel message is one, simple, whole truth applicable to male and female alike,” Sister Elizabeth Carroll stated.⁵⁶ “Yet a double standard has been derived from it.” Contempt was aimed at a patriarchal system that had misinterpreted and rewritten the authentic message of Jesus.

⁵³ Patricia Hughes, “Preliminary Bicentennial Hearing ‘Liberty and Justice for All’: Testimony on the Ordination of Women to the Diaconate and Priesthood,” testimony, Chicago, Ill., June 1, 1975, Box 12, file 20, CWW collection, WLA.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Teresa Maltby, “The Exclusion of Women From Participation and Decision-Making in the Church,” testimony, Chicago, IL, June 1, 1975, Box 12, file 20, CCW collection, WLA.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Carroll, “Testimony at the Bicentennial Hearings of the Catholic Church,” testimony, Chicago, IL, February 4, 1975, Box 12, file 20, CCW collection, WLA.

Emphasis was placed on the necessity of bringing women into full participation in the church through women's ordination, elimination of gendered language, and recognizing the ways in which the institutional church was patriarchal. There were diplomatic approaches for each of these. "What is the Church saying to women about the dignity of human nature?" wondered Hughes considering the church's stance on women's ordination. "What is the Church saying to men?"⁵⁷ A group of sisters provided multiple reasons for why exclusionary language in church documents should become more universal, including: "Will young people see it as just another area of church life that is out-of-step?"⁵⁸ Eliminating sexism would save the church, make it relevant. "Woman's role in the Church must not be less than her role in society," argued Sister Lois McGovern, "or else the woman will negate her role in the Church."⁵⁹ In addition, education, for women and men, lay and religious, was essential to make the church more ecumenical. Consciousness-raising groups were suggested.⁶⁰

There were times when frustration and bitterness seeped through. "No one would question that the apostolates of [women serving as chaplains, spiritual directors, etc., ...] are channels of God's grace. And so perhaps it is about the sacraments that we are making a statement," contended Sister Hughes. "How significant, how central *is* the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ CCW, memorandum, "Report: Bicentennial Hearings," June 1, 1975, Box 12, file 25, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁵⁹ Lois McGovern, "Obstacles to Women's Contributions to Today's Ministry," testimony, Chicago, IL, June, 1975, Box 12, file 20, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁶⁰ CCW, memorandum, "Report: Bicentennial Hearings," June 1, 1975, Box 12, file 25, CCW Collection, WLA.

sacramental life to the faith community of the Roman Catholic Church? If we are unwilling to admit that women are marginal, then the sacraments must be.”⁶¹ But overwhelmingly the tone and points were diplomatic and pragmatic rather than radical and aggressive. There would be a dialogue, feminists hoped. Yes, many wanted far-sweeping modifications, and soon, but they were idealistically certain that logically presenting well-researched points and listening to one another *would* lead to change.

The catch-phrase for Catholic feminists of this period was “dialogue.” Belmonte joked that “the word got so overused.”⁶² “Dialogue” was frequently scattered throughout speeches, theoretical essays, the Bicentennial resolutions, and in the remembrances of disappointed activists. As a carry-over from the women’s movement, sisters believed in the power of consciousness-raising and discussion. Sister Quinn explains the significance of “dialogue”:

Dialogue means [...] people that are on equal ground, equal level [...] You can’t dialogue with people that think they’re better than you—that women are nothing in the church [...] Dialogue to me is a little more sacred [than just talking], it’s like equal sharing. Talking with someone until they get it is something else. You know, you’re not ever talking at someone, but *with*, and the questions that someone might have to ask you, just challenging you or questioning or maybe you question back. You learn, you’re in a learning situation on both sides. But dialogue is another thing, it’s sacred, it’s something equal partners can share.⁶³

But “dialogue” was constantly used, and with sincerity, because there initially was a great amount of faith that an educated, judicious, respectful discussion *could* happen, even with

⁶¹ Hughes.

⁶² Belmonte.

⁶³ Quinn.

the top leaders of the church, thus naturally leading to alterations in church policy. “Was I confident in the beginning?” asks Quinn regarding the prospect on a true dialogue. “I was wide-eyed and ‘oh yes, it’s going to happen.’ I was so naive.”⁶⁴ Even Daly, in her earliest work held out hope for the church and male and female cooperation with the help of dialogue.⁶⁵

Also, a dialogue would unite Catholic women under the power of sisterhood. “We met some people whom we have perceived as the opposition,” wrote Rosalie Mushal-Reinhardt, a representative for WOC, regarding an encounter with two women from the National Council of Catholic Women.⁶⁶

My experience of them, is that they have no touch with feminism or liberation theology. I think this is key for we must begin a dialogue with them. They could not understand why I use my two names—they admitted it was so confusing. Also, they have no awareness of women who are in seminary or that a woman can lead a Scripture Service. They are beautiful women and our sisters and we cannot really consider them the opposition. Not in our model[.]

The main reason, though, that progressives put such emphasis on dialogue was because in the mid-seventies the movement was liberal in its approach. Activists wanted to enact change from the inside, were optimistic that the church was not flawed beyond repair, and had no intention of leaving the institution.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ “Our efforts, then, must be toward a level of confrontation, dialogue, and cooperation between the sexes undreamed of in the past, when the struggle for biological survival of the species and numerical multiplication had to take precedence over any thought of qualitative development of relation between the sexes.” Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 195.

⁶⁶ Correspondence from Rosalie Mushal-Reinhardt, Women’s Ordination Conference to the Sisters of the Core Commission, 26 October 1976, Box 12, file 24, CCW Collection, WLA.

Optimism was dealt a major blow when Pope John Paul VI gave a statement against the ordination of women, responding to the Episcopalian Church's recent vote to ordain women. On October 15, 1976, the pope released the *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, which argued that Catholic priests must physically resemble Jesus and reaffirmed that women should not be admitted to the priesthood. This statement was quickly met with criticism from feminists and the press, the extent of which will be dealt with in the next chapter.

A week later, with the papal proclamation hovering over the proceeding, 1,340 delegates, representing bishops and Catholic organizations, met in Detroit to participate in "A Call to Action." In the opening address, Cardinal John Dearden spoke of prefatory work, the discussions to come, and the great possibility of the conference.

The needs, anxieties and hopes expressed throughout the last two years are addressed to the bishops, but through the bishops they are addressed to all the Catholic people, to the nation and the world. They challenge all of us to respond by becoming a more caring, a more responsible community of men and women. Our response must come in our hearts, and then back home in our local communities. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops is going to consider the results of this meeting. I would hope that their response will be full and candid, continuing the process of dialogue, joining their voice with those that have already spoken, seeking to incorporate what has happened during the last two years into the ongoing life of the Church.⁶⁷

Representatives approved of a number of resolutions for the Catholic church that were crafted over the past two years, in the areas of the church, personhood, neighborhood, the family, work, nationhood, humankind, and ethnicity and race, which were published in

⁶⁷ Cardinal John Dearden, Opening Address, "A Call to Action" conference, Detroit, MI, Oct. 21, 1976, Box12, file 24, CCW Collection, WLA.

their entirety in the weekly Catholic news service *Origins*. The resolutions proposed a variety of changes to the church and faith, including the right for priests to marry and the end to discrimination against homosexuality. Another departure from the church's position was the importance given to personal conscience, specifically when considering the use of birth control while married.

The American bishops should use their present pastoral leadership to affirm more clearly the right and responsibility of married people to form their own consciences and to discern what is morally appropriate within the context of their marriage in view of historical church teaching including *Humanae Vitae*, and contemporary theological reflection, biological and social scientific research; and those factors influencing the spiritual and emotional quality of their marital and family lives.⁶⁸

While there was never uniform condemnation of artificial birth control, nor was it the majority opinion of the Pontifical Commission for the Study of Population, Family and Births, the assembly's statement is notable. The passage of the resolution illustrates and acknowledges the growing acceptance for artificial birth control by practicing Catholics. The careful wording, the logical approach, the references to sex within the confines of a monogamous marriage, and the suggestion that dioceses should make natural family planning courses available to couples, Catholic or otherwise, all suggest that the assembly sought to be diplomatic rather than confrontational.

The delegates also acknowledged sexism in the church, stating that the "grave problems of the world challenge the church to remove inherited structures which prevent full participation of its members in ministry and thus, to empower all of them for service

⁶⁸ "A Call to Action: Personhood: Justice Conference Resolutions," *Origins*, November 4, 1976, Box 1, file 9, CCW Collection, WLA.

according to their gifts and calls,” and that “[t]raditional church life and practices have especially limited the freedom of women to share responsibility and ministry.”⁶⁹ To combat this problem, the delegation proposed a number of sweeping changes. Recognizing the power of language and symbolism, the delegates suggested the elimination of sexist language and imagery from the NCCB and Catholic publishing houses for materials printed after January 1978, including official church documents, catechism, liturgical books, rites, and hymnals. It was also suggested that women be given equal access to theological and pastoral training and that girls be allowed as altar servers.

But delegates’ primary goal (similar to those of CCW, WOC, and NCAN) for women in the church was to bring them into full participation, regardless of the pope’s recent statement. While the bicentennial proposal did not explicitly demand women’s ordination, the conference asked that the issue of women’s ordination be seriously considered and that women, both lay and religious, participate in this exploration. The repetitive request for full participation in the church points to a desire to see women’s ordination rather than just an inquiry into the question, again representative of the diplomatic tone of the conference. The request for a “process which fascinates the formation of a more fully developed position on the ordination of women to sacred orders” falls right into line with the conciliatory approach of progressive and feminist

⁶⁹ “A Call to Action: The Justice Conference Resolutions” *Origins*, November 4, 1976, Box 1, file 9, CCW Collection, WLA.

Catholics of the mid-seventies, even if the institutional church appeared to be putting its foot down on the subject of women's ordination.⁷⁰

Participants were hopeful about the future of the church following the conference. Mushal-Reinhardt, the only voting representative of WOC (though not the only member of WOC to attend) at the conference, excitedly wrote her constituents:

[Y]ou will see that it will take time, HOWEVER, the real gift of Detroit (in my opinion) was the PROCESS. We cannot go back. Bishops admitted how freed up they were [...] being in a small groups working through the issues, compromising, agreeing, disagreeing (sic). The Process was the first gift of Detroit—and therefore (sic) the structure is changed. It will take time to learn what that means for the Bishops—but our task is clear, we are to team the implementation.⁷¹

CCW boldly praised the conference as ushering in “the beginning of a whole new era for the Catholic Church in the United States Years and the beginning of another era in the history of Chicago Catholic Women,” in an article aptly titled “1976 A.D./After Detroit.”⁷² Dialogue could prove valuable, too. “Never before had Vatican II’s self-definition of Church as people of God taken on such tangible form, enfolded in delegates from every corner of the country,” proclaimed CCW. “In being listened to, the participants had heightened their ability to listen.”⁷³

Did the recommendations represent the desires of American Catholics? That depends to whom you listen. Some say it did, citing the number of resolution meetings

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Correspondence from Rosalie Mushal-Reinhardt, to the Sisters of the Core Commission, 26 October 1976, Box 12, file 24, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁷² CCW newsletter, November 1976, Box 12, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

⁷³ Ibid.

and testimony prior to the convention; others call it a takeover by liberals. It can certainly be argued that the NCCB had no idea when they called for a conference that years later it would produce such liberal resolutions. Numerous organizations were allowed to designate a delegate, though the rejection of CCW is just one example of liberal organizations and voices being purposefully left out. Liberal and conservative groups and bishops were both allowed to participate, but naturally progressives were more prominent in attendance because it was liberals, not conservatives, who desired change and dialogue. Traditionalists saw no reason to debate institutional alterations. While the resolutions were left of mainstream Catholicism, polls from the decade demonstrate that American Catholics grew increasingly liberal about such issues as women's ordination, birth control, and divorce. A National Opinion Research Center poll in 1974 found support for women's ordination amongst Catholics to be 28 percent. A Gallup poll in 1977 discovered that support for women's ordination amongst Catholics rose to 41 percent, that the percentage of Catholics strongly opposed to women's ordination dropped from 50 to 43 percent, and that 54 percent of Catholics under the age of thirty supported ordination.⁷⁴ Also, a Gallup poll showed that among Catholics under the age of thirty, only a third viewed the Pope as divinely appointed and only a quarter believed in papal infallibility.⁷⁵

The impact of "A Call to Action" is also hard to parse. Priest and scholar Andrew Greeley argued that the conference "had little impact on most Catholic lay folk, since

⁷⁴ James Robinson, "Sign of Hope for Church," *Chicago Tribune*, April 28, 1977.

⁷⁵ Andrew Greeley, "How the Vatican Fights Unity," *Chicago Tribune*, May 31, 1977.

they were scarcely aware of its existence,” citing that two-thirds of the participants were employees of or bureaucratic members of the church.⁷⁶ This statistic is not shocking, since the thrust of the Catholic feminist and progressive movements came from women religious by the seventies. The impact of the conference may not be in what changed in the institutional church or even for the vast majority of the laity, but how the conference altered activists. Activists left Detroit hopeful and confident in the power of dialogue, even after the recent papal proclamation. Years later, activist and Sister Dorothy Vidulich remembered how the conference inspired her. “We hoped that our bonding together in common pursuits would lead to new concepts of community,” she said, “and we shared in general disappointment when the good initiatives from that conference fell by the wayside.”⁷⁷

When they realized that recommendations were not going to make a dent in the institutional church, there was a deep sense of disappointment, sadness, and resentment. Irritated by or fearful of associating with the liberal resolutions, many religious leaders in the United States did not publicly support the work of the conference. For feminists and theologians it was also becoming apparent that true dialogue was harder to achieve than they expected.

⁷⁶ Andrew Greeley, *Crisis in the Church: A Study of Religion in America* (Chicago: The Thomas More Press, 1976), 16.

⁷⁷ Dorothy Vidulich, “Finding a Founder” in *Midwives of the Future*, 161-171, 167.

CHAPTER 3

COURTING CONTROVERSY

WOMEN RELIGIOUS AND THE FIGHT FOR REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

Society wasn't used to women, or anybody, talking so blatantly against the injustice in the church. And we certainly had a case, a cause.¹

One of the most controversial and central demands of second wave feminists was legal, safe, and available abortion. Yet the vast majority of Catholic feminists were publicly silent or noncommittal on the issue until the early 1980s. Why did Catholic feminists wait so long to get involved in the public discourse and why did they enter it when they did? Furthermore, how did their approach to the subject matter change from the 1970s to the late '80s? The answers to those questions are complex and weave in the history of institutional conservatism in the Catholic church, the unsuccessful campaign for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, the political backlash against feminism and reproductive rights, and the vice presidential candidacy of Geraldine Ferraro.

Abortion was criminalized in the United States beginning in the late nineteenth century, yet the procedure had remained common, but hidden. The religious and public perception of abortion greatly shifted during the ninetieth

¹ Donna Quinn, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

century. Even the Catholic church did not formally condemn abortion until 1869. Terminating a pregnancy was and is very common, but prior to the late nineteenth century, abortion was not nearly as politicized and moralized as it was by the late twentieth century. The common and legal understanding in Europe and the United States was that it was acceptable and not immoral to terminate a pregnancy prior to quickening, the sensation of fetal movement, roughly around the fifth month of pregnancy.² Even after the criminalization of abortion, it was possible to obtain a legal procedure performed by a trained physician, yet often these abortions were costly and patients were at the whim of their physicians. Criminalization did not impact the numbers of abortions, just the safety and visibility in which many were performed. Patients and doctors legitimately and fallaciously claimed that patients could not mentally handle having a child or that the mother or fetus was seriously physically ill as a way to legally justify a therapeutic abortion.³ If women could not afford this, they sought out illegal, secretive abortions, perhaps traveling great distances. Many were performed by competent providers, and to a certain extent, this existed under the radar of police. There were police raids of underground clinics and practitioners, but often police involvement occurred after a woman's death or a well-connected person complained to the police. This is not to say that all illegal abortions

² Leslie J. Reagan, *When Abortion Was a Crime: Women, Medicine, and Law in the United States, 1867-1973* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

³ *Ibid.*, Reagan documents the impact of measles and the thalidomide disaster on the history of legalized abortion. She argues that the highly-publicized devastation from these communicable diseases and the fear instilled by unforeseen thalidomide aftereffects contributed to the public understanding and supporting legal, therapeutic abortions, and in doing so, helped pave the way for legalized abortion in general.

were unproblematic, especially for poor women. There were insufficiently-trained individuals who performed unsafe “back alley” abortions or women dangerously attempted to end the pregnancy themselves.

The debate about birth control in the Catholic community and even in the higher echelon of the church was varied. Most lay Catholics by the 1970s supported the right of couples to use artificial birth control. Just as initial challenges to the church’s stance on artificial birth control were controversial, so were and are challenges to the church’s view about the morality and legality of abortion. But the support for abortion rights was never as wide-spread as the support for birth control. Prior to the conservative backlash in the late 1970s and ’80s, there was a Catholics-led effort to inhibit abortion in the United States. Historian Leslie Reagan documents organized Catholic attempts to sway public opinion and legislation against legalized abortion, which utilized Catholic networks to pressure legislators and influence congregations and public opinion. In 1967, every bishop in New York signed a pastoral letter morally condemning abortion, with priests all over the state reading the contents of the pastoral to congregations during Sunday mass. This event is notable as it was the first time religious officials coordinated masses to address abortion.⁴ Catholic anti-abortion crusaders also utilized incendiary language to equate abortion, even therapeutic abortion, with lynch mob murders and the Holocaust.⁵

⁴ Leslie J. Reagan, *Dangerous Pregnancies: Mothers, Disabilities, and Abortion in Modern America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 158.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 158-9.

Demands from feminists and physicians for legal, safe, and available abortion grew louder by the late 1960s. Feminists, especially the younger, more aggressive women's liberationists, championed the necessity to acknowledge the prevalence of abortion. They arranged "speak-outs" where women would admit to and discuss the circumstances of their abortions, as a way to break down the wall of silence and shame associated with the procedure. Women rallied, testified before legislatures, and even ran underground abortion clinics, like Jane in Chicago. Feminists argued that criminalization did not stop the practice, but only made it unsafe. They also argued that criminalization of abortion impeded women's constitutional rights. In 1973 the Supreme Court agreed, and with the *Roe v. Wade* decision, abortion became legal in the United States.

Yet, since *Roe's* passage, anti-abortion proponents have chipped away at the divisive ruling, while working to outlaw abortion all together. In 1976, Congress passed the Hyde Amendment, removing certain federal funding from abortion, making the procedure less accessible for poor women. Since Catholics were the leading anti-abortion forces prior to *Roe v. Wade*, it is not surprising that Catholic voices would be some of the strongest to inhibit legality and practice after 1973. The spring after the *Roe v. Wade* decision, The Catholic Bishops' Conference recommended that Catholics make fighting abortion a priority through prayer, funding, assisting the National Right to Life Association however possible, and by

setting up anti-abortion organizations in every state.⁶ The CBC even began financially contributing to national anti-abortion efforts in the seventies.

The proposed legislation of the unsuccessful Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was also highly debated, but had much more support among Catholics in general and Catholic feminists in particular. First conceived of by Alice Paul in 1923, the amendment was reintroduced in 1972. The simple proposal of the ERA was that “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.” Proponents of the ERA argued it was essential to make sexual inequality illegal. Responding to arguments that existing legislation already provided equality, the Catholic social justice organization 8th Day Center for Justice in Chicago wrote that “state and federal equal protection clauses were not drafted with women in mind, and historically, the interpretation of the courts bears this out.”⁷ The ERA was passed by Congress that year, but needed to be ratified by thirty-eight states to be added to the Constitution. By 1973 it had passed in thirty, and feminists saw their goal in sight.

Opponents of the bill argued that the ERA would lead to unisex bathrooms and mandatory combat service for women, further disrupt gender relations, and accelerate the decay of American society. Conservative and anti-feminist activist

⁶ Dallas A. Blanchard, *The Anti-Abortion Movement and the Rise of the Religious Right* (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1994), 32.

⁷ 8th Day Center for Justice, “Why ERA?” n.d., Box 11, file 12, CCW Collection, WLA

Phyllis Schlafly created Stop ERA, which labeled the ERA “immoral,” “ungodly,” “antifamily,” and “unpatriotic.”⁸ Schlafly argued that feminists “hate men, marriage and children,” and that they were “out to destroy morality and the family.”⁹

Conservative Catholic women’s organizations like The National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW), as well as their local chapters aligned themselves with Schlafly.

The Joliet chapter of the Council of Catholic Women argued that the ERA “would render unconstitutional any law which makes any distinction between men and women no matter how *reasonable*.”¹⁰ The NCCW feared that the:

ERA will invalidate all state laws which require a husband to support his wife. These laws, designed to protect the most important unit of society, the *family*, will be replaced by a new principle making women *equally* liable for financial responsibilities. The stability of families will be undermined by this drastic change in wives’ legal status.¹¹

Opponents of the ERA shared the same fear and argued that the amendment would “downgrade” housewives and that women would be “forced into putting their children second to the job.”¹²

Schlafly was also Catholic, but her motivation to defeat the ERA was not rooted in her Catholicism, but rather was influenced by her anti-communism efforts

⁸ Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York, Penguin, 2001), 293.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁰ Mrs. Frances Fortier, Legislative Chairman, Joliet Dioceses, Council of Catholic Women, “The Equal Rights Admendment (sic) –Opposing View,” n.d., Box 11, file 21, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹¹ National Council of Catholic Women, “Do you know.....What it means?” n.d., Box 11, file 22, CCW Collection WLA.

¹² Fortier.

and conservative politics. It is hard to determine how typical Schlafly or the women of the CCW were in terms of activity amongst Catholic women. Progressive groups of sisters all over the country were active in campaigns for the ERA, as were laywomen. Likewise, there were strong efforts from Catholic women opposed to the amendment. Catholic women were torn on the issue of the ERA as were non-Catholic women in the United States. But, there is some evidence that suggests a disparity in church membership and beliefs in traditional religions amongst pro and anti-ERA activists, with nearly one hundred percent of the women polled who opposed the ERA claiming church membership compared to somewhere between 31 and 48 percent of women ERA supporters.¹³ How representative Catholic women were on either side, though, is uncertain, as well as the accuracy of the statements about church membership.

The recent *Roe v. Wade* decision also led to a hostile, volatile backlash against the ERA. Even though the text of the ERA said absolutely nothing about abortion rights, anti-feminists and conservative Catholics pointed out that the largest organization fighting for the ERA, the National Organization for Women (NOW) was strongly supportive of abortion rights, as were numerous other feminist organizations which supported the passage of the ERA. Anti-ERA activists linked the two issues and attacked the ERA for how it could affect abortion laws. The Council of Catholic Women stated:

¹³ Donald Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 221.

Any one who has studied the women's rights movement can see the correlation between abortion and ERA. Women's *equal right not to have a baby* is the number one plank of the Women's Rights Groups. They see the correlation. IT is essential to women under the doctrinaire equality concept, particularly with women taking on an equal responsibility for support. The NOW organization, chief proponent of ERA lists ERA #1 and abortion law repeal #2 in their list of priorities. Most organizations supporting ERA also support abortion including the U.S. Status of Women Commission.¹⁴

The Illinois Federation for Right to Life argued the amendment was “insuring that the right of privacy including its horrendous and unwarranted extension in *Roe vs. Wade* shall not be denied upon the basis of sex by any state and thus is adopting its holding in that case.” Ratification, they argued would also “make it much more difficult for pro-life forces to obtain submission and ratification of a Human Life Amendment.”¹⁵ *The Phyllis Schlafly Report* argued “the primary purpose” of the ERA “is to shrink our population.”¹⁶ The conservative Catholic backlash against abortion was so loud that for many, being feminist and Catholic seemed like a contradiction. “At the [1977 National Women's Conference], buttons reading ‘I am an E.R.A. Catholic’ brought responses like, ‘My, that must be hard,’ and, ‘You must be lonely,’” lamented Sister Elizabeth Carroll. “The church has allowed itself to be seen not merely as an enemy of abortion, but as an enemy of the women's movement.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Illinois Federation for Right to Life to Legislators, January 27, 1975, Box 11, file 19, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹⁶ *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, December 1974, Vol. 8, No. 5, Box 11, file 20, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹⁷ Sister Elizabeth Carroll, “Women on the Move: Reflections on Houston,” *America*, January 21, 1978, Box 14, file 1, CCW Collection, WLA.

Catholic feminist organizations and individuals aligned with the larger feminist fight for the amendment and publicly supported the ERA. Passage of the ERA was integral to the activism of organizations like Chicago Catholic Women (CCW), the National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN), WomenChurch, and to a lesser degree, the Women's Ordination Conference. In 1970, NCAN's 1,800 members voted almost unanimously to support the ERA and in 1977 declared passage of the ERA their "immediate priority."¹⁸ In 1975, CCW also identified working towards the ERA as their primary objective for the fall. The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) also nearly unanimously voted to support the amendment.

These organizations supported the ERA while maintaining a distance from the issue of abortion, often stressing that the amendment and the recent Supreme Court case were not associated. In a testimony given for "A Call to Action," a member of CCW argued those who link the ERA with abortion do so "on no other reason than a reluctance to accept women as social equals, and an unwillingness to question the veracity of the charges of those opposed to Women's rights; A connection which constitutional authorities disclaim." She added, "do they not see that the Equal Rights Amendment will go a long way to eliminate the conditions that drive a woman to seek such an unhappy option as an abortion?"¹⁹

¹⁸ NCAN report to Sisters Uniting October 29-30, 1977, from annual executive board meeting October 21-23, 1977, Box 9, file 12, NCAN Collection Series 2, MUA.

¹⁹ Catherine Noonan Parmer, Testimony to be presented to bishop's conference on behalf of CCW, Box 12, file 27, CCW Collection, WLA.

In 1975, CCW laid out a strategy to assist in passage of the ERA. They believed that education was key, as there was so much misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric surrounding the subject. “It is felt that many persons do not know just what the amendment states,” argued CCW “and that they don’t see how it fits in with ‘religion’ other than that it will prevent passage of any anti-abortion amendment, which it will not.”²⁰ CCW suggested printing the following statement, or one similar to it, in parish bulletins as a way of setting the story straight.

There is no “Catholic position” on the Equal Rights Amendment. Its intent, to secure full protection of the law for men and women, is consistent with the Vatican II Constitution on the Church in the Modern World which states:

With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.

Organizations utilized Catholicism in various ways to win over ERA-detractors.

When discussing Catholic anti-ERA forces, CCW described them as having “misused religion in their efforts to deny half the human race equal rights.”²¹ CCW also brought up the recent “A Call to Action” and how the ERA was endorsed in four separate recommendations, hoping that the resolutions held some weight with conservative Catholics.²² Sister Margaret Traxler asserted the morality of the ERA by pointing out that

²⁰ CCW meeting minutes, 1975, Box 12, file 23, CCW Collection, WLA.

²¹ CCW newsletter, “Update,” April, 1980, Box 12, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

²² Though the Catholic institution and the majority of Catholics in the United States ignored or were not swayed by the liberal resolutions in “A Call to Action,” progressive organizations like CCW valued the conference. Unfortunately for progressives like CCW, “A Call to Action” did not have nearly the influential weight they had hoped. CCW newsletter, January n.d., Box 1, file 8, CCW Collection, WLA.

the LCWR, “[o]ne of the most prestigious groups of Catholic women” overwhelmingly supported ratification, but added that even if “no one favored ERA, it would still be moral and right.”²³

The 8th Day Center for Justice, a Chicago based, broad social justice organization, published a set of responses to those who opposed the ERA, spending considerable time making a clear distinction between equality and reproductive rights as well as arguing that the ERA would not benefit abortion advocates. “ERA supporters deny that abortion is a right based on sex; rather it is a right based on a childbearing function of a person who happens to be a woman,” they wrote. “Since ERA touches only those concerns or rights which both men and women share, and since men cannot bear children, ERA does not concern abortion.” Furthermore, they argued, “the abortion decision passed without ERA” and that “equalization has nothing to do with condoning abortion.”²⁴

Catholic feminists petitioned legislators and reached out to the public, particularly Catholics, through their newsletters and events supporting the ERA. They spoke out against fellow Catholic organizations which voiced opposition to the amendment, denouncing the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW) for their “neanderthal self-image.”²⁵ Supporters also participated in an economic boycott of states that had not ratified the ERA. An article printed by Catholics Act for ERA suggested voicing public condemnation for an organization’s choice to meet in an unratified state as well as

²³ Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler, “Statement in Favor of Equal Rights Amendment,” Box 5, file 1, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

²⁴ 8th Day Center for Justice, “Why ERA?” n.d., Box 11, file 12, CCW Collection, WLA.

²⁵ Traxler, “Statement in Favor of Equal Rights Amendment.”

contacting the organization directly to inform them of the boycott.²⁶ Sister Donna Quinn even wrote to a fellow sister who was not participating in the economic boycott:

Ann, I think that it is imperative that you personally as a woman and also as a rep. of Sinsinawa Dominican leadership participate in the E.R.A. boycott. I would certainly be embarrassed by your presence publicly at the NCEA ((National Catholic Education Association) convention—held in a state which has said no to equality for women. This boycott is extremely important for women across this country. I know that the NCEA is saying it is too difficult to change. That is precisely [why] we are asking for our Sisters in Missouri—the “difficult” task of saying we are for equality and will not support otherwise. [... We] *have to* publicly then say that we do not support this site.²⁷

Four years later, CCW yet again protested the NCEA’s choice of an unratified state, Illinois, for their convention. CCW responded by picketing and passing out leaflets at McCormick Place, the site of the convention.

The fight for the ERA forced Catholic feminists to grapple with the issue of reproductive rights—they could not vocally support the ERA without acknowledging the debate about how the ERA would affect abortion legislation. Catholic feminists were in a peculiar position. Their church held strongly that life begins at conception, that abortion is murder, and that even preventing conception through barrier or chemical means or coitus interruptus is immoral. Yet, many feminists questioned the motives and rationality of restrictive abortion legislation and furthermore, many understood the reasons for ending a pregnancy. Catholic feminists had to determine which they valued more—the

²⁶ Catholics Act for ERA, “Urge Catholic Support for The ERA Economic Boycott,” n.d., Box, 11, file 19, CCW Collection, WLA.

²⁷ Correspondence from Sister Donna Quinn to Ann, February 17, 1978, Box 7, file 7, CCW Collection, WLA.

church's stance or the voices of women who chose or considered abortion. Those who supported reproductive rights sided with women.

Many Catholic feminists initially found their support for legal abortion in their Catholicism. One notable example of this is CCW board member, Christian Family Movement founder, and laywoman Patty Crowley. Prior to her involvement with the Commission on Birth Control, Crowley opposed artificial birth control. By the 1970s though, her Catholicism had led her to diplomatically support reproductive rights. Crowley carefully spoke to the press about her frustration with the church and conservatives' anti-abortion movement. "Instead of being so involved with the abortion issue, the church should be coming out for the poor and for justice issues," adding "I'm not really for abortion."²⁸ Often, especially prior to the mid-eighties, Catholic feminists judiciously spoke of abortion, not failing to mention that they disliked the act, perhaps even abhorred it, yet their moral beliefs should not be imposed on another.

"Since I take seriously the Vatican II document, *Dignitatis Humanae Personae* (the document on *Religious Freedom*)," Fran Belmonte wrote in 1982, "I cannot, precisely as Catholic, endorse nor further legislation which, in effect, coerces a person to act contrary to her religious beliefs."²⁹ Belmonte more recently explained this concept further. "There is a value in the Catholic system called primacy of conscience; that's why nobody drags you to confession and nobody else accuses you but yourself," she says.

²⁸ Mary Beth Murphy, "Catholic lawyers honor Patricia Crowley," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 28, 1980, Box 39, file 8, Patricia Caron Crowley Papers, WLA.

²⁹ Correspondence from Fran Belmonte to The Catholic Bulletin, c.o Mary Hangman, October 4, 1982, Box 1, file 6, NCAN Series 2, MUA.

“Conscience is so primary in that tradition that only the person can be aware of their ‘sin.’”³⁰ Another influence was the significant 1977 study commissioned by the Catholic Theological Society of America, *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought*. This book was a thoughtful reflection on morality in the modern world, with a decidedly progressive tone that argued that Catholics should move away from placing great emphasis on individual acts, but rather value a person’s larger moral character. This argument was central for many whose stance on the legality of abortion derived from their Catholicism.

Catholic feminists walked a fine line regarding abortion. Organizations struggled with a position for years. Prior to 1982 abortion was infrequently mentioned in meetings and newsletters. When it is, there is vague support for legalization in the form of supporting “the right of conscience of women.”³¹ What was not found were any organizational statements or meeting minutes that condemn abortion, its legalization, or the women who choose it, nor was there any effort to support “pro-life” activism, a phrase and movement many Catholic feminists by and large avoided and disliked. Catholic feminists struggled with their opposition to abortion and their support for women. One sister lamented her awkward status. “I have been caught in the middle several times,” wrote Walters, “having been accused of being ‘soft on abortion’ by the pro-life group and of being [a] ‘narrowminded [sic] nun’ by the pro-abortion people.”³²

³⁰ Fran Belmonte, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

³¹ NCAN board meeting minutes, October 23, 1977, Box 4, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

³² Correspondence from Sister Jacinta Mann to Sisters Margaret Traxler and Annette Walters, October 7, 1977, Box 1, file 1, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

Support for legality was not universal amongst Catholic or secular feminists. But, the majority of those active in the Catholic feminist movement were receptive to if not supportive of abortion rights. While individual members certainly had differing opinions, the leadership was eager, earlier than its membership, to jump into the debate, but were met with resistance. After Betty Ford publicly discussed her opposition to the Hyde Amendment, cofounder of NCAN, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler wrote the first lady a letter of support. "If we were open and had a good heart in the spirit of the Lord Jesus, these girls could first come to their parents or to Catholic counselors for help," she wrote. "But HYDE-LIKE we think it will go away if we tut-tut the matter and scold." She continued her condemnation of Henry Hyde, the namesake and sponsor of the bill, calling him "a hypocrite of the yellowest stripe and in short, is a fat ass and acts and speaks with his own fat cats in mind." Traxler, not hiding her sentiment, sent a copy to "Fat Ass Hyde."³³ Senator Hyde did not respond to Traxler directly, but instead sent copies of her letter to anti-abortion groups and her superior. Replying to the numerous hostile letters she received as a result, Traxler walked a diplomatic tightrope. "I think my anti-abortion views are among some of the strongest convictions I hold," she insisted, while still maintaining support for the legality and availability of abortion.³⁴ Not one to back down, she wrote her superior that "I should have used far worse language" to describe Hyde.³⁵

³³ Correspondence from Traxler to Betty Ford, August 16, 1975, Box 1, file 1, Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

³⁴ Correspondence from Traxler to Charles Scholl, September 15, 1975, Box 1, file 1, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

³⁵ Correspondence from Traxler to Sister Eunice Silkey, October 4, 1975, Box?, file 1, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

Catholic feminists as a whole were wary of making a public declaration in support of abortion rights. While many supported legality, they did not want to make that issue central to their fight. What was important and tangible for Catholic feminists was passage of the ERA, and they did not want anything to impede that. The ERA, as documented, was continually linked by opponents with support for legalized abortion, so Catholic feminists had little desire to confirm anti-ERA assumptions.

For sisters, ignoring legalized abortion was a strategic move. Nuns were clearly aware that support for the ERA from women religious had a certain moral and political weight. Support for *Roe* and legal abortion undermined their endorsement of the ERA. “I do not want to get mixed up in it,” wrote Sister Jacinta Mann, responding to an inquiry about NCAN making a public statement opposed to constitutional efforts to inhibit legal abortion, “because it reduces my public effectiveness on the many other feminist issues which are equally or even more important and certainly more salable.”³⁶ “It is essential,” argued CCW, “that Illinois legislators hear from people of faith who believe that human dignity and equality are fundamental religious values.”³⁷ Opponents of the ERA relished pointing out that pro-ERA donors also donated to and supported the repeal of abortion laws. In addition they linked pro-ERA forces to controversial supporters like *Playboy* which *The Schlafly Report* described as a “very wealthy and influential anti-family, anti-children, and pro-ERA force.”³⁸ Sister Glenna Raybell wrote Traxler about her time with

³⁶ Correspondence from Mann, to Sisters Traxler and Walters, October 7, 1977, Box, file 1, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

³⁷ CCW newsletter, “Update,” April 1980, Box 12, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

³⁸ *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, December 1974

fellow women religious testifying before the North Dakota House of Representatives in 1973. Raybell explained her decision to release a statement that supported the ERA and debunked its association with abortion. “I was asked to [write it] by some who had supported abortion because they said ‘they’ll never believe us—you’ve *got* to do it, Sister.’”³⁹ Furthermore, NCAN weighed in on making a statement on abortion in a meeting in 1977, coming to the conclusion that they would “continue its research of the issue and hold off on a statement at this time because of present efforts on the E.R.A. and the fact that people connect the two.”⁴⁰ That even in their meeting minutes, not a public document, they seem apprehensive about legality indicates how nervous they were to announce even limited support.

In 1977 LCWR publicly critiqued the anti-abortion campaign to “Choose Life.” Sister Andrea Lee, president of NCAN at the time, reached out to LCWR former director Sister Mary Daniel Turner “to offer you support in not only a courageous, but a carefully thought-out position” and added if LCWR approved, “we are ready to respond publicly in support of the LCWR position.”⁴¹ Even though support from fellow nuns would bolster LCWR, they declined, perhaps regretting their own statement, arguing that, “For the time

³⁹ Correspondence from Sister Glenna Raybell to Traxler, 1973, Box 3, file 9, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

⁴⁰ NCAN Board meeting minutes, October 23, 1977, Box 4, file 1, Donna Quinn Paper, WLA.

⁴¹ Correspondence from Sister Andrea Lee to Sister Mary Daniel Turner, November 16, 1977, Box 7, file 5, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

being we feel that more statements in the public arena would not contribute positively to the total pro-life challenge.”⁴²

By this time, many Catholic feminists were also uncomfortable about declaring their support for abortion rights because they knew full well the possible negative ramifications such a statement would generate, especially for sisters. Many were employed by Catholic institutions and feared dismissal, in addition to the sanctions from their order. Likewise, though, most had no interest in making a statement opposed to the legality of abortion, which left Catholic feminists in an odd state of limbo. Groups discussed the issue for years, attempting to determine a moral, “credible, Gospel-grounded,” and feminist stance for themselves and for their organizations.⁴³ In the winter of 1976, shortly after the passage of the Hyde Amendment, NCAN leadership contacted the board to consider making a public statement about efforts to restrict abortion rights.

The proposed statement read:

NCAN opposes efforts to promote a constitutional amendment forbidding abortion. [...] We cannot support actions to enact legislation which would force others to bear the consequences of a moral viewpoint which they, in all good conscience, do not share, for we understand this to be in contradiction to the principles of religious liberty which are part and parcel of American life. [...] Third, such legislation would once again place the burden most heavily on those whose conditions of poverty and powerlessness offer them the least range of solutions.⁴⁴

⁴² Correspondence from Turner to Lee, December, 5, 1977, Box 7, file 5, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

⁴³ NCAN report to Sisters Uniting October 29-30, 1977, from annual executive board meeting October 21-23, 1977, Box 9, file 12, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

⁴⁴ Correspondence from Sister Judith Schloegel to NCAN Board, November, 16, 1976, Box 1, file 2, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

Of the twenty-four-member board, twelve did not respond and only five supported making a statement. “I feel that the issue of an amendment concerning abortion is dying a natural death,” optimistically wrote Sister Pauline Grady. “I don’t see a good enough reason to make a big public issue of disagreement within the Church just now [...] I just can not see what would be gained. We know from experience how our stands are misquoted and misunderstood.”⁴⁵ As the seventh anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* approached, NCAN again addressed the legality of abortion, only coming to the conclusion that “unborn life is no more sacred than born life, and any consideration of a candidate’s worthiness *solely* on the basis of the abortion issue is unfair.”⁴⁶

A February 1982 memo from CCW provides another example of the conundrum facing Catholic feminists. The memo responded to the conservative backlash after it was announced that feminist folksinger Kristin Lems, who happened to support abortion rights, was to perform at a benefit for CCW. “Chicago Catholic Women was not formed, nor does it stand around the issue of abortion. Its members are women from all walks of life who hold diverse views on this issue,” the memo diplomatically said. “We support our women in their personal convictions, we support Kristen in hers. *We bond together in our womanhood in justice.*”⁴⁷

The momentum for the ERA significantly diminished after 1980. In 1977, Indiana ratified the ERA, yet they would be the last state to do so. That same year Alice Paul

⁴⁵ Correspondence from Sister Pauline Grady to Schloegel, November 21, 1976, Box 1, file 2, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

⁴⁶ NCAN newsletter, February 1980, Vol 10, No 1, Box 1, file 4, NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA.

⁴⁷ CCW Memorandum, February 6, 1982, Box 4, file 1, CCW Collection, WLA.

passed away. As a Republican candidate and president, Ronald Reagan opposed the ERA, becoming the first president since the ERA was reintroduced in 1972 to oppose it. To add insult to injury to the Catholic feminist movement whose hub was in Chicago, Illinois was still an unratified state. Furthermore, Illinois changed the rules required for ratification to a three-fifths majority, making passage unlikely. By the spring of 1982, the extension deadline for the ERA's passage approached, three more states were still needed to ratify the amendment, and the reality of gaining these additional states was nil.

In September of 1981, Senator Orin Hatch (Republican, Utah) introduced the Hatch Amendment, which sought to reverse *Roe v. Wade*. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops praised the amendment, all concurring except one bishop who argued the bill was a compromise and not strict enough. John Roach, the Archbishop of the NCCB, testified before the Senate in support the bill. On March 10, 1982, the senate judiciary committee approved the Hatch Amendment. Activism and proposed legislation to restrict access, funds, and the legality of abortion was nothing new by the spring of 1982. But, with the ERA headed towards failure and the NCCB's support of the Hatch Amendment, Catholic feminists who had remained relatively silent on the issue of abortion so as not to disturb the passage of the ERA, now felt compelled to speak up publicly.

The first to speak up was the National Assembly of Religious Women (NARW), a grassroots organization of Catholic sisters, who released a statement in early 1982, reiterating their earlier support for equal access to abortion. After working on a draft for

two months, NCAN proposed a public statement opposing the Hatch Amendment, as well as the NCCB, and formally released it on April 14 to thirty-five press outlets.

For thirteen years, NCAN has debated the abortion issue, and we remain firmly opposed to abortion, as such. Yet we oppose the Hatch Act for the following reasons:

1. States vary greatly in their perception of the common good and in their enactment and enforcement of laws in this regard. [...]
2. [...] we are likewise convinced that the responsibility for decisions in this regard resides primarily with those who are directly and personally involved.

Consequently, we call upon:

1. Decision-makers in the churches, the courts and the Congress to provide a more nurturing environment so that women will be encouraged to bring new life into the world and can be hopeful for the future of their children.
3. Women everywhere, to disavow the use of abortion as a normative means of birth control and to educate themselves in ways of being creatively responsible—insofar as this is possible—for avoiding unwanted pregnancies.⁴⁸

Not included was, “Women must have the right to make decisions about their own body,” which was rejected from the final, released statement.⁴⁹ The final NCAN statement did not have universal approval, and at least one board member resigned.⁵⁰ Members were excited yet cautious, and before releasing the statement, theologians and three attorneys were consulted.

While a statement from an organization of nuns opposing an amendment to restrict abortion sounds titillating, initially no one reported on the rogue nuns. It was not

⁴⁸ NCAN newsletter, June 1982, Vol 12 No 4, Box 1, file 5, NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA.

⁴⁹ NCAN Draft statement on Hatch Amendment, March 20, 1982, Box 1, file 6, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

⁵⁰ Correspondence, Traxler to Anne, March 22, 1982, Box 1, file Abortion, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

until several weeks later that news outlets covered the statement, including the *New York Times*, *Chicago Sun Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Soon after, there were requests for NCAN members to appear on *The Phil Donahue Show*. Initially the offer was for two NCAN members to debate the Hatch Amendment with two others who supported the bill. NCAN turned this invitation down twice, until Donahue agreed to allow four NCAN members to discuss the bill with him and an audience. “The hope on the nuns’ side,” wrote Sister Ann Patrick Ware in a draft of an article that would be printed in *Ms. Magazine*, “was that there might be an opportunity for rational discourse on the subject if the whole format were to be expository rather than confrontational.”⁵¹ On June 16, Sisters Ware, Quinn, Traxler, and Deborah Barrett appeared on the live, call-in show.

Donahue was not the dialogue sisters had hoped for. Instead of a thoughtful discussion of the bill, the audience and Donahue turned it into a debate about the morality of abortion. The sisters repeated themselves multiple times, that they opposed abortion in practice, but that they were there to support legality. “We need to remember that our statement opposed abortion,” said Ware on the talk show. “We’re not here to sell a bill of goods about abortion.” Rather, Quinn argued, “You just can’t make a law that forces consensus on a moral conscience issue.” Even though the sisters were the special guests of the show, they barely spoke throughout the hourlong broadcast, with Donahue and the audience in the studio and over the phone monopolizing the unfocused discussion, voicing a sentiment rather than a response to the last comment. The dialogue was more

⁵¹ Sister Ann Patrick Ware, “Reflections on Having a Different Voice” Box 1, file 3, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

like a room full of people all talking at the same time, combined with jeers and applause, and little thoughtful discourse on the bill, the reason for the visit.⁵²

When they spoke, the sisters' tone and comments displayed a strong association with feminism. It was feminism, rather than their Catholicism, that was on display for the millions of viewers who tuned in to the nationally syndicated show. In both joking and serious manners, the sisters attacked the historical and present patriarchal nature of the church and the legislation. They spoke of their connection to women they pastored and to women in general, more so than a connection to the church.

The reaction to the episode was swift. Anti-abortion and Catholic groups called on the pope to discipline the individual sisters who went on *Donahue*, but also NCAN as a whole. Anti-abortion groups sent video copies of the show to religious leaders including the pope. The sisters received roughly 600 letters from viewers and interested parties, eighty-seven percent of which were from women. NCAN ascertained that of the 600 letters sent, 60 wrote without stating an opinion, but simply requested more information, 355 supported NCAN, and 185 opposed the sisters' statement. The sidewalk outside NCAN's/CCW headquarters in Chicago were vandalized at least twice. The first incident shortly after the appearance on *Donahue* was a message in yellow spray paint that read, "Sister, abortion is murder." In March of the next year, activists painted "Abortion is Murder."⁵³

⁵² *The Phil Donahue Show*, transcript, June 16, 1982 Box 16, file 20, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁵³ Correspondence from Jo Snyder to Leo Lacey, Building Manager, March 13, 1983, Box 2, file 2, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

Those who wrote negatively to NCAN were most often hostile, questioning if the sisters were actually nuns or Christian, calling them “sexual perverts,” “murderers,” “demonic,” and “hypocrites,” and concluding that they hated men.⁵⁴ Letters referred to their titles in quotation marks, sarcastically calling them “sisters,” “irreligious ‘religious,’” or “a woman who calls herself a nun.”⁵⁵ Often, the writers’ childhood memories of nuns were invoked, with critics enraged that NCAN had tarnished the name of the pious, respectful sisters who taught them. Why must these sisters act so rudely, be so outspoken, and challenge the male authority, many wondered? The good nuns writers remembered would be mortified! Again, the accusation was that the nuns of NCAN, and to an extent all modern women religious, were not *real* nuns. This accusation was prevalent in the discourse of those who disagreed with any number of actions from progressive sisters. Such accusations served to dismiss women religious whose views and actions challenged church institutions, similar to dismissing a person’s argument by claiming they are “crazy,” “outside the norm,” or often for feminists, “ugly.”

Female clerical opposition to the Hatch Amendment was sometimes a springboard for writers to lament the modernization of women religious, the effect of Vatican II, and the sweeping social changes of the past two decades. The most discussed item after the condemnation of abortion, was a frustration that nuns had dropped the habit.⁵⁶ Especially

⁵⁴ Ware, “Reflections on Having a Different Voice.”

⁵⁵ Correspondences to NCAN: From Father Roger Griese, June 23, 1982, Box 16, file 18; From Anonymous, June 20, 1982, Box 16, file 18; Correspondence from Mrs. Franklin Vessey to Pope John Paul II, June 8, 1982, Box 16, file 24, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁵⁶ Ware, “Reflections on Having a Different Voice.”

vexing was the decision of some sisters to wear pants. “To us traditional Catholics you looked gross in your pants outfits which Jesus does not approve of on any women by the Bible—Deut. 22:5,” declared one Catholic.⁵⁷ “[W]e all must admit we never saw a sister that did not look lovely,” read one letter opining for the days when women religious wore the habit. “Mary seems to smile on her special daughters and each of you were beautiful” compared to the “homely” nuns of the present.⁵⁸

Most responses, however, supported the sisters and praised their courage and thanked them for making a public statement. Nine out of ten writers were women, and many shared deeply personal stories. While those who opposed the sisters spoke passionately about the church, many women who were appreciative of the sisters were hostile towards the church. Similarly to the negative responders, many supporters of NCAN shared a high opinion of women religious. Yet, nuns seemed to be the only aspect of Catholicism these writers were optimistic about, as correspondents called the church “anti-woman” and the general assessment was that it did not listen to nor care about women’s concerns.⁵⁹

Part of this resentment was due to personal experiences with male authority figures in the church. Numerous letters shared stories of priests condemning a girl or woman for her pregnancy or her unhappiness when being so. One woman shared that she

⁵⁷ To NCAN from anonymous, n.d. Box, 16, file 18, CCW Collection, WLA; Deuteronomy 22:5 “A woman must not wear men’s clothing, nor a man wear women’s clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this.” <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Deuteronomy+22&version=NIV>, (accessed May 1, 2011)

⁵⁸ Correspondence from Mr. And Mrs. James H. Abel to NCAN, June 2, 1982, Box 1, file 3, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

⁵⁹ Ware, “Reflections on Having a Different Voice.”

was date-raped and impregnated and “turned to the only people I knew i.e. the Catholic Church [and] the Priest told me I should be ashamed that I had committed a terrible sin and to pray for forgiveness [...]”⁶⁰ Another woman, who was a survivor of incest remembered the harmful words of a monsignor:

He took my father’s side. He told me he had known many men who had had intercourse with their daughters and whenever this happened it was because of his wife’s failure, and he had to turn to the daughters. When I told him my very violent father had threatened to kill me if I ever told, he shouted: “Your father doesn’t want to be driven out of his home!!”⁶¹

For some women a singular interaction with a disapproving member of the church did not define their displeasure. Rather the institution as a whole isolated them from Catholicism. “Not only did I experience the loss of a child, very confusing for a child who is not really certain what sex is, but I felt the church I love so clearly did not understand what I was going through,” wrote a woman discussing the abortion she had as a youth. “For my sanity, I had to leave the church. I am very sorry that there were not human beings of your love and understanding in the church at that time.”⁶² One woman who described herself as a “fallen-away Catholic who would desperately like to again find a ‘home,’” espoused her frustration with pontificating priests who condemned birth control, sex, and abortion.⁶³

⁶⁰ I have chosen not to name the women who shared personal stories or rape, abortion, etc., to protect their privacy. Anonymous correspondence to NCAN, June 22, 1982, Box 16, file 18, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁶¹ Anonymous correspondence to NCAN, June 28, 1982, Box 2, file 3, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

⁶² Anonymous correspondence to NCAN, June 23, 1982, Box 16, file 18, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁶³ Anonymous correspondence to NCAN, June 17, 1982, Box 16, file 18, CCW Collection, WLA.

Some wrote about their abortions, sharing a secret that weighed on them for years. Others reached out to the sisters rather than their church leaders, desperately explaining why they chose abortion, not regretful of their decision, but “hoping for your understanding and forgiveness, if possible.”⁶⁴ Some wanted clarification about their standing with the church, their ability to receive communion, if it was morally acceptable to have a tubal ligation, and have a Catholic burial. Others wrote of the horrors of life before *Roe v. Wade*.

These personal letters from women, sharing their secrets, shame, explanations, and lives reiterated what many sisters heard during their years of pastoring women and girls. By 1982, Quinn had worked with women’s groups and counseling for about a decade and Traxler had ministered to women in five prisons. The sisters’ close ties to lay women were not unique, as many women religious participated in one or several forms of counseling. Sisters also informally bonded with women, regardless of their religion, and became a compassionate ear to listen and a voice of forgiveness and understanding for struggling women and girls.

Male clergy too, of course, participated in counseling sessions. They, like sisters also had a deep theological knowledge. But, for those seeking counseling, help making a moral decision, or desiring to unburden themselves, it understandable why women and girls felt more comfortable speaking about personal matters with another woman. The distressing letters that NCAN received, filled with tales of priests’ condemnation of rape and incest survivors or women seeking abortion also reaffirmed what many sisters

⁶⁴ Anonymous correspondence to NCAN, June 30, 1982, Box 16, file 18, CCW Collection, WLA.

thought. This is not to argue that all priests addressed women and girls in the same manner or that all priests had no or little sympathy for women facing an unplanned pregnancy. But these letters illustrate a problem that many sisters observed—that women were being badly pastored, and that women’s lives were misunderstood or ill-considered. When first asked if women ever discussed abortion with her, former nun Fran Belmonte responded:

Yes. Absolutely, that’s how I knew they were being badly pastored [by priests]. They would be in shreds from having to make the decision, had to fight with everything within themselves, but for their good reasons, and they’d go try to talk it over with a person who is supposed to be there for them and they’d get excoriated and now they were worse than before they started. And they were carrying a lot of pain.⁶⁵

Male and female celibacy was indeed a barrier for some seeking advice. Celibacy was also the basis for the institutional church to stay out of the public debate about reproductive rights. How could a priest or nun, who was not sexually active, understand parenthood, marriage, an unwanted pregnancy, and the situation that led some to consider abortion? On *Donahue* and in letters responding to NCAN’s appearance on the talk show, individuals voiced their frustration with this issue. Nuns, many assumed, could never get pregnant because of their vow of celibacy. This was not their issue; this did not concern them. Also, since nuns had never borne a child, how could they possibly know the joys of parenthood; if they did, they would never support abortion, some felt. “We are very much involved,” countered Quinn. As women, they were not immune to possible pregnancy

⁶⁵ Belmonte.

from rape she argued.⁶⁶ Also, their combined years of listening to women, sisters argued, compelled them to finally speak up, to add a supportive, moral voice.

Many sisters grew more supportive of abortion rights as they pastored women. Progressive sisters argued that their co-religious should listen to and trust women to understand the complexity and rationale behind the decision to abort, adopt, or give birth. “I never had to face that decision, it wasn’t something I thought about until other women brought it up and I saw that my sisters [fellow women, not women religious] were in a bind,” said Fran Belmonte. “I was trying to put myself in their place and I was trying to understand and I was also trying as a theologian to be principled and I think my stance is principled.”⁶⁷ She, like many other nuns, maintained that women did not come to the decision to abort easily, contrary to what anti-abortion proponents may espouse. “Then Catholic women would go to confession and they would be ripped apart instead of pastored, when they were coming needing something.”⁶⁸

Like Belmonte, former sister Barbara Ferraro gave little thought to abortion until women shared their stories with her. After an adult education course Ferraro taught, a mother came up to her, wanting to talk with someone. She had an abortion years before. “I had never before met anyone who had had an abortion. I had never before even had a conversation with someone about having an abortion,” writes Ferraro.⁶⁹ Afterwards she

⁶⁶ *Donahue* transcript.

⁶⁷ Belmonte.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Barbara Ferraro, Patricia Hussey, with Jane O’Reilly, *No Turning Back: Two Nuns’ Battle with the Vatican over Women’s Right to Choose* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1990), 99.

was sure that her shock was visible, but she calmed herself and asked the woman to share her story. As the sister listened, she realized that she could not judge this woman. “I remember thinking ‘There is no easy answer to this’ and being surprised.”⁷⁰ The issue of abortion was also personalized for former sister Patricia Hussey. She too admits that she had never thought much about reproductive rights or what she would do if she were pregnant. One night, a close friend of hers revealed that she had had an abortion. “The Catholic church’s teaching on abortion began to fall apart in front of my eyes,” Hussey wrote.⁷¹ “People’s lives were involved here, and their lives didn’t fit into the neat rules of the church’s pronouncements.” Sitting there, feeling shocked, clueless, and helpless, she says she learned the power and importance of listening to women.

Many Catholic feminist nuns came to their stance and were more convinced of their belief in abortion rights as their feminism developed. The larger feminist movement and its theorists detailed a history of patriarchal control of women’s bodies and agitated for abortion rights. Catholic feminist theorists, like Mary Daly and Rosemary Radford Ruether, also supported reproductive rights and addressed the issue of patriarchy, often with the history of Catholicism in mind. Ruether examined the way in which an idealization of Mary as a subservient, asexual woman limited women’s power and demonized women’s sexuality.⁷² In *Beyond God the Father*, Daly wrote about the negative impact of Christianity on women’s sexuality and sense of self.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 100.

⁷¹ Ibid., 70.

⁷² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary—The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977).

A third idol [...] is the God who is the Judge of “sin,” who confirms the rightness of the rules and roles of the reigning system, maintaining false consciences and self-destructive guilt feelings. Women have suffered both mentally and physically from this deity, in whose name they have been informed that birth control and abortion are unequivocally wrong, that they should be subordinate to their husbands, that they must be present at rituals and services in which men have all the leadership roles and in which they are degraded not only by enforced passivity but also verbally and symbolically.⁷³

Quinn also developed a feminist understanding of reproductive rights and concluded that “the all male hierarchy imposes their belief system without any regard for our lived experience.”⁷⁴ She continues:

I think when they started to control our minds [...] what went along with that was control of our bodies, control of the fact that we could become pregnant, bare children. [...] And I *so* believe in women. I don’t think that women *ever* make the wrong choice, I really and sincerely believe that. I believe their conscience has been informed by their lived experiences and so that has got to be upper-most. That has got to be held sacred.

By asserting a position in support of abortion rights, nuns challenged and brought gender inequality to the forefront. Why was it more tolerable for male clergy to make public statements about reproductive rights or council couples about marriage and parenthood? Priests had training in theology and experience counseling parishioners, but so did women religious. In fact, more often, sisters had a higher level of education.⁷⁵ What priests, bishops, and the pope had that sisters did not, was a history of being viewed as an ultimate authority figure. The church was a patriarchal institution. To have women

⁷³ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 31.

⁷⁴ Quinn.

⁷⁵ Jane O’Reilly, “On the Vatican 24,” *Vogue*, April 1985, Box 1, file 6, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

claiming the same power, the same authority to interpret and pastor as men, was shocking to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. “Society wasn’t used to women, or anybody, talking so blatantly against the injustice in the church,” Quinn remembers. “And we certainly had a case, a cause.”⁷⁶

Though the Hatch Amendment failed, the eighties saw a rise in anti-abortion activism and proposed legislation, and anti-abortion crusades were still very much a Catholic cause. Pope John Paul II repeatedly condemned both birth control and abortion, even in cases of rape, incest, and to save the life of the mother. Catholics became the leading contributors to and members of the largest anti-abortion organization, the Catholic church-founded National Right to Life Committee. In 1980, the Committee’s annual budget was \$1.3 million with eleven million members, in 1985 \$4.5 million. While their membership decreased to roughly 7 million in 1992, it remained the most populous organization in the movement.⁷⁷

In the 1980s, right-to-life activists were emboldened by the rise of conservative Protestantism as well as demands and fiery rhetoric from politicians, including Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. The former used the tenth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade* to publish his essay “Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation,” in which he wrote:

⁷⁶ Quinn.

⁷⁷ Blanchard, 62.

Abraham Lincoln recognized that we could not survive as a free land when some men could decide that others were not fit to be free and should therefore be slaves. Likewise, we cannot survive as a free nation when some men decide that others are not fit to live and should be abandoned to abortion and infanticide. My Administration is dedicated to the preservation of America as a free land, and there is no cause more important for preserving that freedom than affirming the transcendent right to life of all human beings, the right without which no other rights have meaning.⁷⁸

Yet, the anti-abortion movement grew impatient as *Roe v. Wade* was not overturned and clinics continued to operate. Abortion providers operating legally or illegally before *Roe* were essentially ignored by opponents, but violent attacks on abortion providers, clinic bombings, arson, vandalism, and aggressive, disruptive protests rose exponentially after nationwide legalization. In this volatile environment, Catholic feminists attempted a diplomatic discourse that fostered legalization and women's choices. Facing resistance and harsh criticism, Catholic feminists increasingly became bolder, more radical, and more visible in their defense of abortion rights.

Pope John Paul II, while loved and respected by many Catholics and non-Catholics around the globe, had a contentious relationship with liberal Catholics, especially progressive American women religious. This was illustrated in the case of Sister Agnes Mansour, who was appointed by the governor to head the Department of Social Services in Michigan in December of 1982. Mansour was considered a brilliant choice by many, given her thirty years of community service as a nun, but especially as a Sister of Mercy, an order whose members took a fourth vow—to serve

⁷⁸ Rickie Solinger, *Pregnancy and Power: A Short History of Reproductive Politics* (New York: New York University Library, 2005) 229.

the poor. Conservative Catholics, though, were appalled that an element of her job would involve the administration of Medicaid funds for abortion. A Catholic, no less a sister, should not have this position, they argued. Interestingly enough, her two predecessors were Catholic laymen, yet there was no public outcry, demand for resignation, or papal intercession. Archbishop of Detroit Edmund Szoka required that Mansour publicly state her opposition to abortion, which she did. Anti-abortion organizations brought further attention and pressure to the situation, demanding that Szoka insist that Mansour publicly oppose Medicaid payments for abortion. She refused. With the support of her order, she accepted the social service position. Then, ignoring the wishes of the Sisters of Mercy, the Pope stepped in, requiring her to make a choice— “by virtue of your vow of obedience to the Holy Father” resign from her social service job or her order.⁷⁹ Failure to step down from her position would lead to immediate dismissal from her order. Mansour, boxed in, chose to keep her state position.

The whole ordeal was noted by and frustrated Mansour’s peers in the Catholic feminist movement. The incident was another example of Rome intervening in the orders of American nuns. The pope also initiated “investigations of religious orders in the United States [under the direction of bishops], with the intention of ending the period of experimentation and halting ‘abuses’ that had crept in since the Second

⁷⁹ Chronology of events surrounding Sisters Agnes Mary Mansour’s appointment as Director of the Department of Social Services, May 12, 1983, Box 16, file 16, CCW Collection, WLA.

Vatican Council.”⁸⁰ “Asking ‘How high?’ when told to jump is not what obedience means,” argued Sister Maureen Milacron, an administrator in the Sisters of Mercy.⁸¹ As Barbara Ferraro, who was later forced to resign, stated, “we as Catholic women do not have the luxury to stand back any longer. It is an issue for all of us.”⁸² Ferraro affirmed her “pro-choice” stance asking “Are we ready to by pass the threats and conflicts and stand with our convictions?” Soon, an occasion that would bring national attention would present itself.

The Democratic Party nominee for president in 1984, Walter Mondale, chose U.S. Representative Geraldine Ferraro as his running mate. (No relation to Barbara Ferraro.) Ferraro had a liberal voting record, supported the legality and public funding of abortion, and was Catholic. She was not the first or only pro-choice Catholic in office, yet her nomination to the vice presidency set off a wave of angry reactions from anti-abortion advocates. The executive of the Pro-Life Action League, Joseph Scheidler panned her selection far and wide to the press, claiming that her stance on abortion would cost Mondale the Catholic vote, ergo the election.⁸³ He also insisted that “She has to stop posing as a Catholic.”⁸⁴ The very vocal and press-friendly Archbishop John O’Connor, who was called “New York’s most outspoken Roman

⁸⁰ Robert McClory “The Church, Abortion, and Sister Margaret Traxler,” *Chicago*, December 1985, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

⁸¹ Mary Kay Blakely, “Nuns Revolt,” *Ms.*, September 1983, Box 20, file 2, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁸² Barbara Ferraro, “Reflections of the Struggle to Choose,” *Probe*, December 1983/January 1984, Vol xii No 1, Box 3, file 17, Marjorie Tuite Papers, WLA.

⁸³ Joseph M. Scheidler, Letter to the editor, *Daily Herald*, August 16, 1984.

⁸⁴ Jim Hill, “‘It Takes a Lot to Move This Church,’” *Haymarket*, October 1984, Box 10, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

Catholic leader in history,” and Archbishop Bernard Law publicly admonished her for supporting abortion rights and accused her of misrepresenting Catholicism. Anti-abortion protesters picketed her speaking events and questioned her moral character. Feminists, Catholic and otherwise, questioned the level of criticism Ferrero received compared to her Catholic male political peers like Mario Cuomo and Ted Kennedy. Yes, Ferraro was running for a more powerful and influential position than other Catholic politicians, but feminists claimed that sexism was the root of the attacks. The Catholic male institution was angered that Ferraro had not acquiesced and presumed that she could be publicly bullied more easily than a man, feminists argued.

Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) organized and ran a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times* on October 7, 1984 with the headline “A Diversity of Opinions Regarding Abortion Exists Among Committed Catholics.”⁸⁵ The ad, they argued, was to support Ferraro and other maligned Catholics who supported abortion rights. The ad read:

Statements of recent Popes and of the Catholic hierarchy have condemned the direct termination of pre-natal life as morally wrong in all instances. There is the mistaken belief in American society that this is the only legitimate Catholic position. In fact, a diversity of opinions regarding abortion exists among committed Catholics: A large number of Catholic theologians hold that even direct abortion, though tragic, can sometimes be a moral choice....

Therefore, it is necessary that the Catholic community encourage candid and respectful discussion of this diversity of opinion within the

⁸⁵ CFFC and some Catholic feminists had an uneasy relationship. As historian Mary Henold argues, many Catholic feminists were wary of associating with CFFC because they were mostly funded by non-Catholics, including *Playboy*, and approached the issue of abortion from a secular standpoint rather than a Catholic-based assessment. Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

Church, and that Catholic youth and families be educated on the complexity of the issues of responsible sexuality and human reproduction....

Finally, while recognizing and supporting the legitimate role of the hierarchy on providing Catholics with moral guidance on political and social issues and in seeking legislative remedies to social issues and in seeking legislative remedies to social injustices, we believe that Catholics should not seek the kind of legislation that curtails the legitimate exercise of the freedom of religion and conscience or discriminates against poor women.⁸⁶

The ad was signed by ninety-seven Catholics including twenty-four nuns, two priests, and two brothers. Among them are the previously mentioned Quinn, Traxler, Tuite, Ferraro, Hussey, Ware, Mansour, Crowley, Ruether, and Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza.⁸⁷

The expected uproar ensued. Condemnation and praise came from the press and noted individuals. Many women and men religious, however, were unprepared. Rome, increasingly irritated with American pluralistic Catholicism, promptly and harshly responded, demanding that the religious signers publicly recant or be expelled from their orders. The four male religious quickly renounced the ad. The sisters, though, would not budge, citing that doing so would go against their conscience. Their religious orders defended the sisters, and stated that they had no interest in kicking out a member for her personal beliefs. Rome and the sisters, who were dubbed the Vatican 24, were at a standoff.

Roughly a year later, CFFC sought signatures for a second advertisement to run in the *New York Times* in support of the original signers under the headline, “We

⁸⁶ Catholics for a Free Choice, “A Diversity of Opinions Regarding Abortion Exists Among Committed Catholics,” advertisement, *New York Times*, October 7, 1984.

⁸⁷ Belmonte. Belmonte also signed the ad, but for some unknown reason her name was not published.

affirm our solidarity with all Catholics whose right to free speech is under attack.”⁸⁸

Hundreds of Roman Catholics participated, including religious, from all over the world, though mostly from the United States. Some, like *The National Catholic Reporter*, questioned the motives of CFFC and what they intended to achieve from ads. “Don’t sign the abortion ad,” said an editorial from the NCR.⁸⁹ “What the ad will do—all as a pretense to free speech and pluralism—is cause more conflict and further inhibit meaningful dialogue.” In addition, they accused the nuns of being duped into taking on the “pro-choice” cause. “Is advocating freedom of choice at the expense of the most powerless genuinely a countercultural position?” the *NCR* asked. “Or is it more accurately a capitulation to the worst of American’s cultural values?” While the *NCR* and the signers clearly disagreed about abortion, the newspaper brought up a valid point—what was the purpose of the ads and whom, if anyone would benefit from them? Included in both statements was a solicitation for donations to CFFC, leading some to ponder if the advertisements were for dialogue or simply a publicity stunt for CFFC.

The motives of CFFC are hard to determine, but what is clear is that those involved did not speak of regrets and that Rome wanted to make an example out of the American liberal women religious. The sisters explained their motives, arguing they sincerely wanted to jumpstart a thoughtful discussion—perhaps hoping that

⁸⁸ Catholics for a Free Choice, “We affirm our solidarity with all Catholics whose right to free speech is under attack,” advertisement, *New York Times*, March 2, 1986.

⁸⁹ Editorial, “Don’t Sign the Abortion Ad,” *National Catholic Reporter*, September 27, 1985, Box 2, file 2, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

American democracy would influence the hierarchical institution of the church. “My personal intent was somebody’s got to get this conversation going, and that’s all the ad said. Can’t we talk?” said Fran Belmonte. “I would tell women if anything is undiscussable, they are treating us like a child. They may not like your position, I may not like their position, but among adults nothing is undiscussable. Nothing.”⁹⁰ Over and over again, this is the position of those who signed or supported the signers. “We asked for dialogue. We said that there’s a difference of opinion in the Catholic community,” stated Tuite.⁹¹ “It asked for dialogue, and they all got punished,” Belmonte complained.⁹²

But what seems to have infuriated conservative Catholics, at least Catholic writers and American religious leaders, was not the call for dialogue, but the statement, “There is the mistaken belief in American society that this is the only legitimate Catholic position,” implying that supporting abortion was a legitimate position.⁹³ The *NCR* argued that it was obvious that some Catholics made moral loopholes for abortion, but that this position was not the legitimate one, that this was a dissenting opinion.⁹⁴ Cardinal Bernardin of Chicago wrote that “it is incorrect to suggest that there is any ambiguity or uncertainty about the position of the Church’s

⁹⁰ Belmonte.

⁹¹ Marjorie Tuite interview by Ronni Schier September 27, 1985 and November 14, 1985, Box 2, file 25, Marjorie Tuite Papers, WLA.

⁹² Belmonte.

⁹³ Catholics for a Free Choice, “A Diversity of Opinions Regarding Abortion Exists Among Committed Catholics.”

⁹⁴ Editorial, “Don’t Sign the Abortion Ad.”

teaching authority.”⁹⁵ Had the ad simply stated that Catholics held a variety of opinions, and not called a dissenting opinion “legitimate,” would the Vatican have reacted so strongly? The example of the excommunication of Planned Parenthood director and a lay Catholic Mary Ann Sorrentino, in addition to the efforts to disallow her fourteen-year-old daughter to receive confirmation, as well as the aforementioned situation with Mansour illustrate that there were efforts to clamp down on liberal American Catholicism. It is plausible that any sort of call for discourse, especially from nuns who were supposed to revere the pope, that challenged the church’s teaching on abortion would lead to a hostile reaction. But when asked if she expected Rome to react as it had, Tuite responded “No, I should have. It’s highly predictable from the patriarchal structure that is the Roman Catholic church.”⁹⁶ The ad did not result in a dialogue, as the signers hoped, but instead the hierarchal church emphasized how clear its position was. The media documented the battle of wills to see who would cave in first, the Vatican or the sisters. “There is no dialogue. Not on anything that counts,” lamented Belmonte, reflecting on the ad controversy. “There may be a little bit of two monologues crossing over the crumbs.”⁹⁷

The next three and a half years proved extremely tumultuous for the Vatican

24. It is also hard to establish exactly what happened that resolved the situation for most of the sisters. The press reported on rumors that as of May 1985 the church

⁹⁵ Cardinal Bernardin, “New York Times Ad—Clarifying Issues,” *Chicago Catholic*, January 11, 1985, Box 22, file 3, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁹⁶ Tuite interview.

⁹⁷ Belmonte.

slightly backed down, no longer requiring a public recantation, only a signed statement to the sister's superior declaring her opposition to abortion.⁹⁸ But the sisters claimed this to be untrue and a tactic to "portray the signers as uncooperative and deserving of discipline."⁹⁹ The sisters, even though they were constantly at odds with the institutional church, did not want to leave their orders. Most of the 24 had been sisters for the majority of their adult life and the possibility of being thrown out caused great stress and sadness. Traxler suffered two light strokes, which she and her doctors attributed to the tension of her unresolved status. Slightly after Tuite's case was resolved, she succumbed to cancer. Other sisters like Quinn were bolstered by their supportive communities, but others felt dismissed, silenced, and shunned by their orders.

Eventually all but two of the sisters were cleared, with Ferraro and Hussey forced to leave their order. Ferraro and Hussey claimed that an archbishop, eager to sweep the issue under the rug told them, "Listen you two, you can have your positions privately. Just don't express them."¹⁰⁰ In the case of Tuite, her superiors issued a clarification on her behalf, enraging Tuite. Though it cannot be proven, many of Tuite's peers blame her death on the stress of the ordeal and the betrayal by her order. "What I remember most was Marjorie saying to us, 'Whatever you do, don't

⁹⁸ Editorial, "Don't Sign the Abortion Ad."

⁹⁹ Women-Church Convergence meeting minutes, November 10, 1985, Washington, DC, Box 9, file 1, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹⁰⁰ Claudia Dreifus, "Out of Order," *Ms*, December 1988, Box 11, file 4, Marjorie Tuite Papers, WLA.

sign anything. They'll distort whatever you sign. They'll lie about you like they lied about me," said Ferraro.¹⁰¹

How twenty-two of the twenty-four cases were resolved is unclear. Many sisters signed a statement that they insist was not a retraction. A lawyer representing several of the signers even issued at least one letter accusing a publication that printed that Ferraro and Hussey were the only sisters to not recant as false and libelous.¹⁰² NCAN printed excerpts from some of the sister's diplomatic "clarifications." What made the resolutions ambiguous was that sisters' statements did not actually say that they themselves condemn abortion or will cease efforts to foster legality. They acknowledged that their position was not the official position of the church, though. "We had no intention of making a pro-abortion statement. We regret that the statement was misconstrued by some who read it in that way," read the statement released by nine Sisters of Loretto.¹⁰³ "We hold, as we have in the past, that human life is sacred and inviolable. We acknowledge this as the teaching of the Church." Often the sisters defended their use of the term "legitimate" arguing that it was never meant as "official." "Women value not only fetal life but the well-being of adult women and men," wrote Gramick.¹⁰⁴ "Killing human beings, without justification, is certainly wrong," she acknowledged. "But if there are weighty reasons to morally

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Correspondence from Ralla Klepak to Twenty Third Publications, October 5, 1987, Box 4, file 2, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

¹⁰³ NCAN newsletters, April 1986, Vol 16, No 4, Box 1, file 5, NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA.

¹⁰⁴ Jeannine Grimace, "Statements on Abortion (Excerpts)," NCAN newsletter, May & June 1986, Vol 16, No 4 & 5, Box 1, file 5, NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA.

justify killing a human being, there must certainly be some compelling grounds to justify killing a human life not yet born.” When Quinn was cleared she told the press that she did not promote abortion and never had.¹⁰⁵

Communication between all of the twenty-four was not always clear, especially between Ferraro and Hussey and the remaining signers. To the frustration of the fellow signers, Ferraro and Hussey commented that they were the only two sisters who did not recant. “I am one of the original signers and have not recanted my position,” wrote Sister Judy Vaughan.¹⁰⁶ “I stated this publicly when the church officials, in fact, *claimed* that we had.” Vaughan even released a statement that ran in the newspapers including the *New York Times*, contradicting the Vatican’s report.

Relations soured between Frances Kissing, president of CFFC, and NCAN when the news broke that the remaining two sisters were dismissed. In the fall of 1986 NCAN awarded Kissing the National Medal of Honor for her “prophetic leadership in reclaiming for women the decision-making for their own bodies.”¹⁰⁷ But two years later NCAN began to question the motives of Kissing and CFFC, stating that “CFFC has over-orchestrated Pat and Barb’s stance and in the main, it would seem that Pat and Barb have not benefited by the arrangement.” NCAN also accused Ferraro and Hussey of refusing to dialogue with their order and having a “death

¹⁰⁵ Jerry Filteau, “Sister Quinn Cleared in Abortion Ad Controversy,” *NC News Service*, June 19, 1986, Box 1, file 5, NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA.

¹⁰⁶ Correspondence from Sister Judy Vaughan to ORCAR, June 23, 1987, Box 11, file 4, Marjorie Tuite Papers, WLA.

¹⁰⁷ NCAN newsletter, Fall 1986, Vol 17, No 1, Box 1, file 5, NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA.

wish.”¹⁰⁸ Perhaps this was written out of frustration that the cleared sisters were largely reported to have recanted. Or maybe it was written out of jealousy that Ferraro and Hussey were lauded over the other sister-signers for their unwavering convictions in secular feminist circles. Another conclusion is that NCAN and ad-signers began to question what the whole ordeal accomplished and what, if anything was gained from their years of personal anguish. “To speak bluntly, it appears that CFFC has designed the whole impasse in order to create a cause celebre for the public relations of CFFC,” wrote NCAN. Ferraro and Hussey denied being pawns of CFFC, and claimed the organization as their main source of support.

In the end, what actually was resolved? The sister-signers did not promise to adhere to the church’s anti-abortion teaching, to discontinue activism in support of legal abortion, or from making future statements about reproductive rights. In fact, Catholic feminists were now more convinced of the need for reproductive rights. How then, was the ad statement situation resolved? The Vatican’s main purpose in convincing the sisters to sign a clarifying statement was so that the whole matter could disappear on Rome’s terms. The situation remained unsettled. The sisters acknowledged the church’s teaching, but the Vatican 24 never changed their position, and even said as much. But the church claiming that it was resolved, that sisters had properly atoned and back-peddled, that it was just semantics at work, and that the church’s teachings were not questioned. The Vatican, in essence, had the last word; for a pronouncement from Rome surely went farther than any press release or ad that

¹⁰⁸ NCAN newsletter, Spring 1988, Vol 18, No 2, Box 4, file 2, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

a sister or lay Catholics could. By declaring that the sisters satisfied their requirements and clarified their views to the approval of Rome, the public believed that the sisters recanted. Even some of the fellow signers interpreted it this way. The church's threats were an attempt to intimidate progressive American Catholicism, and resolution of the cases was an attempt to speak for sisters.

Catholic feminists however, worked and continue to work for reproductive rights and dialogue. In fact, not long after the majority of the sisters were "cleared," a number of the signatories declared in NCAN's newsletter that they would heartily approve the ad again. Quinn, always the button-pusher, urged the church "to give up their immoral views of sexuality, to take a Pro-Choice stand—the only moral stand regarding the primacy of women's conscience."¹⁰⁹ Emboldened by the backlash from the ad, in 1985 CCW set the goal of taking a "pro-choice stand."¹¹⁰ By 1988 NCAN, not fazed by a hostile Vatican reaction, declared their organization "pro-choice."¹¹¹ NCAN, CCW, the Loretto Women's Network as well as a small number of women religious and Catholic laypersons signed an *amicus* brief filed by CFFC in the Supreme Court case of *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services*. For years CCW, and especially Quinn and Traxler, participated in a Mothers's Day rally to support abortion rights outside of Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago. Quinn even volunteered as an escort at an abortion clinic once a month for six years.

¹⁰⁹ NCAN newsletter, Summer 1987, Vol 17, No 4, Box 3, file 2, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

¹¹⁰ CCW board meeting minutes, October 18-19, 1985, Box 1, file 10, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹¹¹ NCAN newsletter, Spring 1988.

If anything, the *New York Times* ad controversy solidified and radicalized Catholic feminist positions on abortion. The lack of support from their male peers reinforced the necessity for women, lay and religious, to speak up for abortion rights. “Conspicuously absent from any supportive role were almost all progressive male theologians (save Dan McGuire and a couple others),” wrote Sister Maureen Fiedler, “and the so-called ‘progressive’ Catholic media—even though they were conspicuously present in later months to defend [male theologians.]”¹¹² To Sister Anne Marie Gadriner, a supporter of the Vatican 24, the ordeal and feminist theology reaffirmed her belief that she was a “woman in a man’s church and world.”¹¹³ Quinn emotionally remembers the controversy as strengthening her position on abortion rights.

We were almost thrown out of our religious communities with no thought to all of our hundreds of years total that we had given to this church, and so I thought we’re just appendages, we’re not so important to them, to the men in the church. They can toss us out whenever they feel like it. My community is with the feminist movement; that is my spiritual [home], my love.¹¹⁴

In personal writings and public interviews, those who signed were overwhelmingly critical of the church and determined in their position which became more securely rooted in their feminism. Their statements about abortion were less about primacy of conscience, which was still acknowledged, and more about the history of patriarchy and utilized the language of the feminist movement—that a

¹¹² NCAN newsletter, Summer 1987.

¹¹³ Correspondence from Sister Anne Marie Gadriner to Sister Mary Margaret Johanning, n.d., Box 2, file 1, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

¹¹⁴ Quinn.

woman had the right to make decisions regarding her body. “Abortion laws have been made by men to enhance their own power and domination,” argued Traxler.¹¹⁵ “I think the church is distrustful of women. I think the church—the institution—is conditioned to the historical, cultural limiting of women’s experience,” said Tuite.¹¹⁶ “Part of the abortion dilemma in the Catholic Church surely is engendered by the fact that for centuries unmarried males have devised and promulgated rules regarding sexuality and women’s bodies,” argued sister-signer Jeannine Gramick.¹¹⁷

While a decade before Catholic feminists, especially sisters, were uneasy about publicly supporting reproductive rights, by the mid-eighties, their feminism had deepened, their views radicalized, and they vocalized their controversial disagreement with the church. “There is a somewhat irreverent saying which is circulating in Catholic women’s groups,” Gramick wrote, “If men could become pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament.”

¹¹⁵ McClory.

¹¹⁶ Tuite.

¹¹⁷ Sister Jeannine Gramick, “Reflections of a Battered Nun,” 1985, Box 1, file 4, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

CHAPTER 4

THE NATURE OF WOMAN

GENDER ROLES IN TRANSITION IN AMERICAN SOCIETY AND THE CHURCH

But to think she could be a priest as a woman is misunderstanding her own feminine nature and the role God apparently has called women to fulfill in life.¹

In the late nineteenth century, feminist and women's suffrage activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote: "When women understand that governments and religions are human inventions; that bibles, prayer-books, catechisms, and encyclical letters are all emanations from the brain of man, they will no longer be oppressed by the injunctions that come to them with the divine authority of "thus sayeth the Lord."² Close to one hundred years later, Catholic feminist activist and nun Donna Quinn contemplated Stanton's words and rejection of religion. Was it possible for women to be both feminist and Christian, she wondered? And if so, how would they remain in such an old, patriarchal institution as the Catholic church? How could they reconcile feminist beliefs with the writings and teachings of the church, which feminists argued were from male writers, written in a very different time and culture, with men, rather than women in mind? Quinn, drawing her conclusions from the growing field of Catholic feminist

¹ Father James Downey, quoted in *Chaining Habits*, directed by Linda Garth (WTTW Chicago, 1986).

² Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as quoted in Donna Quinn's untitled speech, 1980, Box 6, file 5, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

thought, argued that women could be both feminist and Christian, but this would take reconsideration of and changes to long-held assumptions about gender roles, the nature of women, and their role in the church and society.

Catholic feminist theologians and theorists, like secular feminists, analyzed gender roles, were critical of patriarchy, and examined the roots of sexual inequality. For Catholic thinkers, however their focus was often on the history of Christianity. Writers like Rosemary Radford Ruether created scathing critiques of the representation and interpretation of female sexuality, limitation, character, and value. Activists challenged the church's biblical interpretation that insisted on divinely-inspired distinct gender roles and positions of power for women and men. They agitated for full participation of females in the church, especially with the issue of female altar service. These challenges, along with the larger battles for women's ordination and requesting a dialogue about abortion rights, were met with an increasingly less patient Rome.

As Catholic progressives became more liberal and vocal and as everyday American Catholics became more pluralistic, the Vatican grew more conservative and authoritative. American Catholics in particular, who strongly valued democracy and were witness to massive social movements and change, were an escalating frustration for Rome. The church hoped to squelch opposition to their authority, especially amongst progressive religious intellectuals and nuns, who were considered rebellious, in need of discipline, and destroying the foundation of the church, and from frustrated Catholics who challenged traditional gender norms. The Vatican was unable to

extinguish feminist thought in the church, but they did help discourage younger generations of progressives, who grew increasingly alienated from the church.

To reevaluate and rebuild a Catholicism for women that reconsidered gender roles, Catholic feminists had the burgeoning fields of women's history and feminist thought. But as constructive and informative as secular works were, Catholic feminists needed to utilize the language and knowledge of Catholic theology and church history to work within the framework of the church. For instance, feminists argued that sexual discrimination was wrong, but had to add more substantial, moral weight to it. Often, Catholic feminists used the Bible, an extensive knowledge of church history, and canon law to justify their case. Their agenda was a classic attempt at using the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. An additional conundrum for Catholic feminists was that they did not totally dismiss church writings as Stanton did. They found value in the Bible and Catholicism. Yet, using the "master's tools," i.e., scripture and canon law, was problematic. Multiple interpretations existed, with traditional, conservative readings considered more valid than a new feminist approach. Also, those who held such fundamental perspectives often had more influential voices that could trump new progressive readings.

Catholic feminists emphasized the roll of church fathers. Theorists and writers took great issue with how church fathers misrepresented aspects of the Bible to promulgate gender inequality and a demeaned image of women. In 1968 Mary Daly,

while still considering herself Catholic, wrote about what she viewed as narrow-minded and false interpretations of the Bible. “An examination of the writings of the Church Fathers brings vividly into sight the fact that there is, indeed, a problem of women and the Church,” she wrote.³ She argued against the perpetuation of ideas from certain church fathers, especially Paul, who had one of the most negative views of women. “There is perversity involved in the prolongation of doctrines and practices in an age in which they can be seen as faulty and harmful—which is quite a different matter from their expression in a milieu in which they appeared justifiable.”⁴

In her widely popular book amongst women religious, *Women and the Church*, Sister Albertus Magnus McGrath traces one aspect of gender disparity to notable male scholars and church fathers.⁵ She sees the Old Testament as riddled with insinuations or references to women as property and that women’s sexuality is to be feared and controlled. But it was the church’s early theological fathers that latched onto the most anti-woman passages and corrupted the overall meaning of the Bible to promote a Christian rationalization for gender inequality, McGrath argued. She quotes from the book of Ecclesiasticus and analyzes the impact of such thinking.

‘No wickedness comes anywhere near the wickedness of a woman, nay a sinner’s lot be hers. Sin began with a woman and thanks to her we all must die.’ Here we have explicitly formulated the Eve syndrome, the projection on to women of cosmic guilt, the burden of contempt and shame of which St.

³ Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex*, 3rd ed. (1968; rept., Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 85.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁵ Albertus Magnus McGrath, *Women and the Church*. (New York: Image Books, 1975).

Paul, the Fathers, and the scholastics were to make such effective use in shaping the Church tradition.⁶

Another major issue for examination was the representation of and reverence for Mary, the mother of Jesus. Theologian and professor Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote extensively on the significance of Mariology and how adoration of Mary was used as a tool to limit and sexually repress women. She challenged Daly's notion that Mariology could have liberating elements to it. "Mary's virginity can be understood as the symbol of female autonomy, her completeness and integrity in herself, apart from the male," she wrote, summarizing Daly, "[y]et despite these liberating possibilities of Mariology, feminists also realize that it is churches with a high Mariology which are the most negative to women."⁷ Ruether argued that the emphasis on Mary's lifelong virginity, an assumption that Ruether rejected, was harmful to women. Mary's supposed lifelong virginity is revered, becoming an ideal for Christians, with a sexual life seen as lesser than a celibate one, but especially for women. Furthermore, Ruether argues, male church leaders find Mariology appealing because it reinforces traditional gender roles, male dominance, and female docility. Ruether argues that Mary was an active agent, but her utilization has been detrimental to women. "Mariology cannot be a liberating symbol for women as long as it preserves this meaning of "femininity" that is the complementary underside of

⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *New Woman, New Earth: Sexists Ideologies and the Human Liberation*, 2nd ed. (1975: rept., Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 36-37.

masculine domination.”⁸ On the other hand, there is a vast misunderstanding and lack of reverence for Mary Magdalene, she argues. Mary Magdalene is commonly mistaken for a prostitute and described as such first and foremost often by lay people, rather than as an apostle. That Mary, Jesus’ mother and characteristics attributed to her such as passivity and asexuality have been extolled rather than Mary Magdalene, one of Jesus’ most trusted disciples, speaks to a selective, sexist reading of the Bible, Ruether argues.⁹

If one places greater emphasis on particular passages, especially found in the Old Testament rather than the New Testament, and views the sexes as having uniquely and divinely intentioned characteristics and roles, it is easier to argue against women’s full participation in the church and for restrictive gender roles. Catholic feminists argued that if women are considered less holy and capable than men, discrimination and a justification for this discrimination are certain, whether that be in obvious ways like the opposition to female participation in the church, or more subtle tendencies like a sexual double standard or the use of gendered language.

“I can see nothing wrong with a woman saying ‘Oh I wish I was a man so I could be a priest,’” said Father James Downey, head of the Institute on Religious Life, a national group based in Chicago dedicated to explaining official church positions.¹⁰ “But to think she could be a priest as a woman is misunderstanding her

⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary, The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977).

¹⁰ Father James Downey, quoted in *Chaining Habits*.

own feminine nature and the role God apparently has called women to fulfill in life [... Though,] beyond the obvious fact of the purpose of women to bear children, I don't suppose there is any particularly appropriate role for them as taught by the church." Statements like Downey's, feminists argued, relied on a limited, sexist interpretation of the Bible and perpetuated patriarchal gender roles and injustices within the church. "In speaking of sexism as a structural sin, we stress that sexism is not a metahistorical given, either by God or by Christ," wrote Catholic theorist Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "nor is it based on the ontological dichotomy of human nature. It is a structural embodiment of human power and oppression."¹¹ Catholic feminists did not have a literal reading of the Bible, and because of this came to alternative conclusions about women's nature and place in society. Their faith, readings of religious texts, and conclusions about gender roles were informed by their feminist education, whether through academia and reading Catholic feminist theory, their involvement in or observations of the feminist movement, social and ministerial work, or their female peers. But, while feminists like Fiorenza believed restrictive gender norms to be man-made rather than divinely sanctioned, many conservative Christians disagreed.

Secular feminists challenged gender discrimination through the judicial system; Catholic feminists could not. No formal policy of review existed whereby a group, however large, insisted that a practice was unjust. Feminist groups could protest, write letters or speak out, or withhold church donations, but institutional

¹¹ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Sexism and Conversion," *Network* (May-June 1981), 15-22, 17.

change was beyond their control. The closest attempt at democracy, the American bishops' meeting, *A Call to Action*, resulted in a variety of progressive suggestions and plans for implementation. Yet, it became apparent not long thereafter that the meeting was a facade of democracy, as the long-discussed conclusions and resolutions were ignored and the meeting dismissed as liberalism run amuck. Against overwhelming odds, Catholic feminists still fought and attempted to work with the institution church, at the local and international level, to foster lasting change.

The primary goal of Catholic feminist organizations prior to 1980 was to bring women into full participation in the church—in leadership positions as priests, in employment at parishes, and as altar girls. The fight for parishes to expand altar assistance to girls, as well as the arguments for and against their inclusion, shared parallels to that of the debate surrounding women's ordination but there were important differences. While a priest is viewed as a symbol of Jesus and the role of priest has power and prestige attached to it, an altar server has no power or status and his or her role is primarily symbolic. Certainly, servers assist the priest during the mass, by ringing bells, lighting candles, or most notably during the process of the blessing of the Eucharist where servers hand items to the priest to be consecrated. In many American parishes after Vatican II, the Eucharist is presented by a lay family, not the servers. Either way, a server is an assistant—he or she does not consecrate items, lecture, or lead prayers.

Girls were explicitly forbidden from altar service in an eighteenth century encyclical. After the Second Vatican Council in the mid 1960s, a few parishes around the world began using altar girls, though not with papal support. In 1970 and then in 1980, seeking to curb the rising liberalism in American churches and the spread of altar girls, Rome once again declared altar service a singularly male activity. Yet, even with the declarations forbidding girls serving, parishes, mostly American, rebelled and allowed girls.

Then, in January of 1983, the Vatican released a highly-debated addition to canon law. The document discussed, amongst other things, the appropriate roles allowed for lay persons in religious celebrations, including extraordinary ministers (the role of passing out communion), altar service, and lectors. Written in Latin, Catholics debated whether Rome intended to indicate acolyte activities to include or exclude women. The debate comes down to a matter of grammar; the use of “laici” meaning laity, rather than “viri laici” meaning lay males. Did the writers, who used the word “laici,” intentionally mean that women and girls were allowed to participate in church functions? Was this a grammatical oversight or an explicit allowance of female servers? Scholars and religious officials came to different conclusions. The Vatican finally clarified the issue of female servers in 1994, with a letter announcing that girls could serve, but parishes were not required to do so, even if given authorization from a bishop. Why the Vatican waited almost a decade to formerly address the issue of female servers is unclear, leading some to postulate that Rome

never intended girls to serve, but was caught in a bind. Prior to the clarification, opponents and supporters of girl servers tended to interpret the additions to canon law in agreement with their own personal beliefs about women's ordination and girl participation.

After the 1983 revision to canon law, it appeared to some parishes in the United States that Pope John Paul II had given tacit approval, and now felt they were given permission to allow girls to serve. Yet, others in prominent positions who disagreed with female service or interpreted Canon 230 differently, worked to stop the spread of girls serving, insisting that Rome gave no such permission and that to allow girl acolytes was in direct violation of the pope. Archbishop Joseph Bernardin of Chicago was one such individual. In July of 1983, the Cardinal sent a letter to all priests in the Chicago archdiocese stating:

[T]here are directives from liturgical documents which exclude this practice. I would request that all our parishes follow these liturgical norms. I am sensitive to the desire of women to participate more fully in the liturgy. In particular, I do not want young girls to be hurt in this matter, nor do I wish to diminish their enthusiasm for serving the Church.¹²

No evidence suggests that the Cardinal was working under any other directive besides the recent canon proclamations, another example of the radically different interpretations. The *National Catholic Reporter* speculated that the letter was sparked not by a large number of Chicago parishes that allowed girls to serve, since only a

¹² Correspondence from Joseph Bernardin to Chicago Catholic Women Prayer and Protest Sponsored by CCW, Call to Action, and The Altar Suffragists, July 1983, Box 4, file 2, CCW Collection, WLA.

few did, but instead by recent media coverage of the issue.¹³ But, it should be noted that the number of parishes that allowed female acolytes did increase after Bernardin's predecessor Cardinal John Cody, who vehemently opposed altar girls, passed away in 1982. The turmoil in Chicago represented the power plays and confusion that occurred in the 1980s, leaving parish priests unclear who was ordering what and what was actually said.

Feminists, girls, and supportive priests reacted swiftly to Bernardin's orders, with Chicago Catholic Women (CCW) and Call to Action sponsoring a protest at the Art Institute, a popular destination in downtown Chicago, which temporarily housed the Vatican Art Collection Exhibit. Supporters of girl acolytes wrote to Bernardin, parish priests, and the Vatican expressing their resentment at the Chicago cardinal's action. "It has been called to the minds and hearts of many of the Roman Catholic girls of Chicago that they may not serve Mass, for we are potential 'women', and this is a grievous fault," wrote an "Altar Suffragist."¹⁴

To feminists and even non-feminists, the directive seemed excessive. While many Catholics opposed the idea of women's ordination, not as many viewed girls serving with such hostility. The act of altar service is largely symbolic after all, with no power or real status, compared to that of a priest. At a basic level, prepubescent girls symbolically serving the church were nowhere near as threatening as women in

¹³ Author unknown, "Bernardin Trips Over Altar Girls," *National Catholic Reporter*; July 29, 1983, Box 19, file 1, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹⁴ Correspondence from Brigid Racey to unknown recipient, 26 July 1983, Box 16, file 11, CCW Collection, WLA.

leadership roles. While many Catholics did not approve of women's ordination, not as many felt comfortable disallowing enthusiastic girls from assisting in mass, especially those who had already been given permission and experienced service. To many Catholics, especially feminists, the ban on altar girls appeared as if powerful men were picking on young, harmless girls.

Some priests in the Chicago archdiocese declared they would obey Bernardin, maddening but not surprising feminist activists who at this point were accustomed to priests' flimsy support. "There will be a lot of tears, but if it's an order, we will obey," said a pastor from Evanston.¹⁵ Others, like Father John Faye stood firm, saying that if altar service was to be reserved for boys only he would discontinue both male and female service all together. "There's a matter of justice involved here," he said. "I can't just say to the girls, 'you can't serve anymore.' Separate but equal has a very bad history in the U.S. The Supreme Court has said it's intrinsically unfair. Just substitute the words 'black children' in place of 'girls,' and see what is involved." By the end of the decade more parish priests agreed with Father Faye.

The debate regarding female servers raged throughout the eighties, but the disagreements were primarily amongst those in leadership positions in the institutional church. Opponents argued that allowing girls would break tradition, that Jesus did not want women in leadership roles as he had only male apostles, that it would put women one step closer to the priesthood, and that the presence of girls

¹⁵ Author unknown, "Bernardin Trips Over Altar Girls."

represented the feminist or liberal takeover of the church. If girls participated, the church would be feminized, they feared.

The real opposition was about the nature of women and the perceived divine differences between and roles of men and women. Those opposing girls' participation relied on an understanding of gender roles that Catholic feminist theorists like Ruether and Magnus worked to discredit—conservative and literal Biblical interpretations, with greater weight given to Old Testament passages and church fathers who emphasized female subordination. Opponents argued that females were not allowed to serve in any capacity because it was against the will of God and their nature. Women were to be subordinate to men. And God wanted men, rather than women to lead and be the voice of the church. To allow girls to serve would indeed lead to women infiltrating the priesthood, they feared, and this would throw away the natural and divinely stated order of society and go against God's wishes. As some literalists explained, it wasn't their decision to have a male only church leadership—it was God's, and disobeying that would have extraordinary consequences.

At a Synod on the Laity in 1988, the Reverend Joseph Fessio, distributed a letter condemning female altar servers. Fessio, a prominent Jesuit priest and founder of Ignatius Press, was a good friend of one of Pope John Paul II's closest confidants, Archbishop Joseph Ratzinger (later succeed John Paul and become Pope Benedict XVI.) The letter, given the notability of its author, speaks to how debated the issue of altar service was. Also, the letter encapsulates many of the fears outlined by

opponents. To allow girls to serve would give them “false hope of becoming priests” he argued and would only lead them to “frustration” and “an identity problem for the girl herself and for the faithful who see her on the altar vested as a priest.”¹⁶

Proponents of girl servers expressed a similar argument that girls would be frustrated that they could not become priests, yet did not consider this a reason to halt girls’ participation. Fessio recognized the decline in the number of men willing to be ordained, but rather than encourage that the priesthood be opened up to interested women or married men, he warned that female participation in lay activities would decrease male ordination. “Altar boys are a major source of priests. If the church allows altar girls, many young boys will not want to be altar boys. This will cause a decline in vocations to the priesthood.” The latter argument was routinely used to justify the exclusion of girls. To conservatives, a boy’s lack of interest in altar service and the decline of overall attendance in American churches and those willing to be priests, was and still is placed squarely on the feminization of the church. This rationale may seem questionable as the church’s power structure is still completely male.

But, resistance to female priests was no doubt his and others’ primary concern, as Fessio’s seven page diatribe against altar girls is littered with references to women’s ordination. “If the pope gives in on this point, the inevitable perception will be that the ‘first step’ toward women’s ordination has been achieved,” he wrote. “The feminists will increase their demands for more concessions, and there will be further

¹⁶ CCW Newsletter (March 1988), Box 12, file 2, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

violation of church discipline as the ‘next step.’ Now is the time to say no.” Those who favored altar girls did not dispute that female servers would put women closer to the priesthood—they hoped it would. Having girls assist in a symbolic way they optimistically felt would make the inclusion of women into the priesthood not look as foreign or unnerving. If girls became altar servers, why not priests? On the other hand, if girls were barred from service, what did this mean for women in the church as a whole? Sister Quinn speculated on the opponents to girl acolytes, saying that they viewed girls as “not good enough to be close to the Eucharist.”¹⁷ Furthermore, she hoped the attention brought to the altar girl debate would lead Catholics to the women’s ordination movement. “Because those little girls grow up, and if there’s no place for them as a little girl, then there is certainly going to be no place for them as an adult.”

Feminists hoped that the addition of girls would feminize the church, meaning that this would lead to the inclusion of women in every aspect, and unlike their opponents, did not view women’s inclusion as a negative. “I admit that it is not by carrying cruets that women are going to arrive at their full religious development but, for them, it is serious that even that is refused them,” wrote the National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN).¹⁸ Including girls would alter a longstanding tradition, and like any major change, there were some who are uncomfortable with it. For feminists,

¹⁷ Donna Quinn, “‘Inequality: The Church’s Sin,’” *Haymarket*, October 1984, Box 19, file 1, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹⁸ National Coalition of American Nuns (hereafter cited as NCAN) newsletter, November 1980, Box 1, file 4, NCAN, series 4, MUA.

the lack of altar girls, like the exclusion of women from the priesthood, was a very obvious sign of oppression and discrimination that represented a deeper problem of sexism in the church. At the most basic level exclusion was possible because women and girls were viewed as inferior to men and boys, and inequality would continue to perpetuate itself as long as those making and interpreting the rules were male.

Gradually more parishes allowed girls, with or without permission from their diocese's bishop. The use of girls is less of a contentious issue in America in the present day, with almost every diocese accepting the practice. As of 2006, only one Catholic diocese, that of Lincoln, Nebraska, refused girl participation, and in 2011 a Phoenix church discontinued the practice, but overall the transition to include girls was rather uneventful; the inclusion did not lead to any major upheavals or justification for flight from the church. By the late-nineties compared to a decade prior, the use of altar girls in the United States was not controversial. More controversial, was the exclusion of girls. Although, along the journey to accept girl participation some parishes put restrictions on service, for instance, girls could not be cross bearers or they could only be cross bearers, the cross bearer being exactly what it describes, an attendant who carries a large cross during the processions at the beginning and end of mass.

The relatively calm transition amongst hostile accusations and orders to cease the practice of female servers speaks to the disconnection between church officials at the Vatican and in the United States and American laity. Similar to American

Catholics' failure to agree with the repeated denunciations of birth control by the institutional church, many American Catholics, especially younger ones, did not find girl acolytes problematic, while church leaders did. Primarily, it had been priests, bishops, and earlier the pope who were opposed to girl integration rather than the American Catholic public. Some speculate this resistance among American clerics was based on loyalty to Rome and a discomfort with changing tradition. Others question if the motivations of male officials were more selfish rather than selfless, as the main concern surrounding the issue of altar girls was the possibility of women's ordination. Perhaps male church officials were concerned with sharing power with, losing power to, or having to pledge obedience to women. If women were ordained, would the church's new structure and preachings reflect gender equality rather than a patriarchy?

While altar service may not have been seen as an injustice or at least one that could be remedied before the feminist movement of the sixties and seventies to Catholic girls, for those born after the women's movement this did not hold as true. Not to discount the level of sexism still prevalent and the vast reach of patriarchy, girls raised in the 1980s and nineties did not grow up experiencing as many types of overt discrimination. While surely not the case for every girl raised after the seventies, but for many, they were expected to do as well as boys academically and to be able to participate in the many of the same sports. They saw women in leadership positions on the news and in the media, were encouraged to have careers, and told

they could be anything in addition to starting a family. One must acknowledge the tremendous changes brought because of the feminist movement, for Catholic laywomen as for non-Catholic ones, even as feminists argue there is much work still to be done. So much progress, both legally and socially, had been made, resulting in greater expectations from girls raised after the feminist movement.

A minority of conservative Catholics still insist that the pope never indicated girls could serve, and to include female servers in a mass is heresy. Others opposed to girl acolytes acknowledge that the pope gave his approval, but contend it was unwise and has led to a decline in church membership and ordination. But, for the most part American Catholics no longer take issue with girls' participation, as evidenced by the almost universal practice in American churches. Catholic adults are typically thrilled rather than infuriated that any child, boy or girl, wants to participate in the church. While a fairly large minority of American Catholics still oppose women's ordination, this cannot be said about women and girls participating in lay functions as readers, servers, and extraordinary ministers. To the disappointment of Catholic feminists, though, girl servers have not feminized the church leadership, opened the doors to women's ordination, or recently sparked mass mobilization efforts to redefine the priesthood.

Catholic feminists' accusations that the Catholic church was sexist were routine by the late seventies. Yet even as they declared the institution sinful and unfair

to women, activists held on to hope that their work and education measures would weaken and enlighten Rome. Catholic feminists pointed to growing integration of girls in altar service as a success, but by the mid-eighties it was clear that the institutional church was uninterested in further revisions or changing their attitude on gender roles and women. Feminists' optimism deteriorated, and by the mid-eighties progressives had less faith in the power of dialogue and they questioned if they and the church ever even had one. This erosion of optimism was not the result of one event, but rather of a series of disappointments and moves by the Catholic hierarchy and the recently-elected young pope, John Paul II, to quiet and control progressive "Vatican II Catholics," especially in the United States, to discredit feminism, and to reassert the authority of Rome. As feminism changed the political and social landscape of the United States by the eighties, in comparison the church stagnated and bitterly fought against progressive appeals for gender equality, working to maintain a patriarchal structure.

The attempts to reign in liberalism in the church were vast, but much of the emphasis was on issues of gender and sexuality. Feminism was viewed as disrupting the church and obfuscating issues of real import. The feminist agitation for altar girls, women's ordination, along with rebellious nuns, and calls from laity and religious to rethink the church's stance on gender roles, homosexuality, birth control, and abortion created a problem for the Vatican. The eighties saw the Vatican hoping to curb pluralism in several measures—by becoming more authoritative and strict with

religious, reaffirming opposition to birth control and abortion, and by drafting a pastoral letter on women.

Relations between Catholic feminists or at least liberal Catholic women and Pope John Paul II were strained from the start of his papacy and got considerably worse by the end of his tenure. The pope's conservative, traditional beliefs about gender roles and the place of women, along with his reassertion of the necessity of physical resemblance to Jesus for ordination did not win him any feminist support. Nor did his refusals to meet with Catholic feminists or Theresa Kane, the president of the Leadership Council of Women Religious (LCWR), the largest organization of American nuns, representing over ninety percent of American orders.

The pope's various comments in praise of and about the nature of women only exacerbated relations. One notorious example that Catholic feminists cited to demonstrate sexism in the church and the disparity between progressives' view of women and that of the church, was a speech he made to a group of female housekeepers who worked for the church. "Women do have their place in the church," said Pope John Paul II.¹⁹ "Be happy that you can keep the residence of the priest clean and free him from material tasks which would absorb part of the time he so needs for his apostolic labors," he said, concluding that their work was "more suited for female charismas."

¹⁹ Robert J. McClory, "Speech to Housekeepers Sparks Claim of Sexism," *National Catholic Reporter*, May 28, 1982.

“The church has never seen women as truly equal in intellectual capacity, in administrative capacity, in all the areas where we are certainly equal,” said Sister Quinn.²⁰ “When Pope John Paul II says that the church has always shown respect for women, he means by putting us on a pedestal. [...] We have to be like the Virgin Mary to be “respected” or “respectable,” she said contemplating gender relations in the church. She failed to see how mothers, single women, and lesbians were respected. “Nor have they respected the women in religious communities, who have given their lives to the church.”

A visible indicator of the independence of women religious, especially in America, was their lack of habit. For traditionalists, the lack of habited nuns was a sad loss that appeared disrespectful, self-absorbed, and too modern. From the moment sisters dropped the habit after Vatican II, there were angry reactions to the change that persist today. And though there were numerous accusations of indecency, heresy, and judgments made of their moral character, unapologetically sisters held fast to their decision. Each order democratically decided what or what not to do considering the habit, and few were willing to rescind this right. Many like Sister Margaret Traxler viewed the calls for the habit wearily. “Men want us in a habit so they can know we’re their property,” she argued.²¹ Responding to a Puerto Rican bishop’s order for nuns in his diocese to wear habits, Traxler wrote “I hope the papers were wrong for I

²⁰ Quinn, “Inequality: The Church’s Sin.”

²¹ Jane O’Reilly, “On the Vatican 24,” *Vogue*, April 1985, Box 1, file 6, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

would have to think then that you are a very obscene man to be watching nuns' hemlines."²² She continued, that "it is obscene and I use that word in the fullest sense, to have a man speaking about women's wear. To repeat this in another way: no man has the right to dictate to a woman what she must wear."

And while the occasional negative comment from a superior or a congregant was not out of the ordinary, sisters were not prepared for the repeated calls from Pope John Paul II for women religious to abandon secular clothing. In 1979, during his first visit to America as pope, he told a group of women religious that their return to the habit was "not only my personal conviction, but also the desire of the church, often expressed by so many of the faithful."²³ His calls for nuns to return to the habit escalated, and with the 1983 revisions to canon law, the issue became more fraught. NCAN forcefully responded saying that they were "suspicious of moves toward imposing religious garb, which reintroduced elitist distinctions, and of requiring 'superiors' in every community as the ultimate decision makers, which destroys collegiality."²⁴ Furthermore, they challenged Rome by using its own history against itself, calling "the church to the realization of its own ideals" and declaring that their resistance was in accordance with Vatican II.

²² Correspondence from Margaret Traxler to Bishop Juan Fremiot Torres-Oliver, July 11, 1977, Box 8, file 5. Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

²³ Pope John Paul II, speech to women religious at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, DC, October 7, 1979, *NC News Service*, Oct 8, 1979, Box 7, file 2, NCAN Collection, Series 2, MUA.

²⁴ Stephanie Overman, "Coalition of Nuns Fears Effects of New Code of Canon Law," *NC News Service*, January 7, 1983, reprinted in NCAN newsletter, February 1983, Box 4, file 2, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

But it was not just the lack of a habit that was bothersome to the pope, it was how sisters chose to dress themselves. “We were wearing slacks, and he was having difficulty with that, I could tell,” said Sister Joan Leonard, explaining an interaction with Pope John Paul II.²⁵ When he asked if all sisters in the United States wore slacks, she responded that they sometimes did. “He didn’t seem pleased by my answer. I remember that we were both drinking wine and looking at each other across a small table, when it dawned on me that he simply didn’t understand the dynamics of the American church, much less American women. We were from two different worlds, and we both knew it.”

Leonard’s conclusion was one that many Catholics deduced themselves. While no one could accuse Pope John Paul II of being undereducated—he spoke ten languages, traveled more extensively than any other religious figure—yet it appeared that there were cultural gaps of misunderstanding. Even though he was influential in the process of the Second Vatican Council, he had nostalgia and reverence for some aspects of Catholic life prior to the major changes of the council and gender relations before the feminist movement. “I don’t think he likes Northwest Europe, and I think he dislikes a lot of things about America,” speculated University of Chicago historian Martin Marty. “Trained as he is in Poland, where the regime is always forcing unity upon the church, he is not really ready for the wild, free pluralism we have in America.”²⁶

²⁵ Otto Friedrich, “Women: Second-Class Citizens?,” *Time*, February 4, 1985.

²⁶ Merrill McLoughlin, “The Pope Gets Tough,” *US News & World Report*, November 17, 1986.

The papal calls for the return of the habit were in conjunction with what many nuns viewed as a wide crackdown on and attempt to reign in American nuns who as a whole, not just members of feminist groups, were seen as too individualistic and disorderly. In the new canon additions, Rome now insisted that sisters live in their orders' residence rather than independently. Also, orders were to submit their constitutions for approval by the end of 1986, giving the Vatican instead of the order the final say. Fearing what this could mean to their orders, several large groups of nuns and NCAN debated sending in their constitutions at all, which would lead to uncooperative orders losing their canonical status.

Sister Traxler, never one to mince words, argued that she “made her vows to God, not to the Pope” and became a spokeswoman against the directives and the conservative leanings of the church.²⁷ Other sisters, frustrated with the tightening of the reins quipped that popes come and go, so they were not as concerned with following particular orders. “The Pope wants us back in the 19th century, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, and fulfilling the mandates of the patriarchy without question,” Traxler said. “And the bishops are going right along with him. Well, we’re not going to let that happen.”

In addition to what some religious viewed as micromanaging of their orders, Rome made it clear that they were focused on having a unified voice of the church, and that voice would be that of the pope. The Vatican’s greatest frustration with

²⁷ Robert McClory “The Church, Abortion, and Sister Margaret Traxler,” *Chicago*, December 1985, Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler Papers, Series 5, MUA.

America was not materialism, greed, or war, but instead the country's liberalism concerning gender roles, pressure from feminist activists, and the wide rejection of papal authority about birth control and to a lesser degree abortion. Public dissent on these issues was discouraged and outright punished; examples would be made.

One of the most infamous examples of this was the ordeal of the signers of the *New York Times* advertisement for Catholics for Choice in 1984 that stated that there were a multitude of positions on abortion. The signers were threatened with dismissal and in the case of two nuns, forced out of their orders. Former Sister Agnes Mansour was required to choose between her vows or her state job as the head of the Department of Social Services which involved the provision of Medicaid funds for abortion. Mary Ann Serrentino, also a former sister, was excommunicated for her role as an executive director to Planned Parenthood. Even laity were not immune, as a twelve year old girl from Toledo, Ohio was barred from the Catholic school she had attended since kindergarten because she publicly declared her support for reproductive rights.

Other examples were to be made of prominent American Catholics who opposed the church's stance on birth control, homosexuality, and divorce. One of the most vocal opponents against the church's stance on birth control was the well-respected theologian, prolific writer, and Catholic University of America professor, Father Charles Curran. After teaching at the university for decades, the Vatican found Curran was not "suitable nor eligible" to teach theology.²⁸ Curran's requests to clarify

²⁸ McLoughlin.

his positions and his willingness to leave out the issue of sexuality in theology courses were denied. While Curran was well-known in academic and religious circles, that was not the case with an archbishop of Seattle, Raymond Hunthausen. He was a progressive Catholic, to be sure, disagreeing with certain church teachings most notably about homosexuality and birth control. But with Hunthausen, much like with the Vatican 24, it appears that he was picked to be made an example of to inhibit further liberalism. Hunthausen was investigated by the church and relieved of much of his power as archbishop. “The Archdiocese should withdraw all support from any group, which does not unequivocally accept the teaching of the Magisterium concerning the intrinsic evil of homosexual activity,” warned then Prefect Ratzinger.²⁹ Furthermore, Rome was angered by the archbishop’s allowing divorced congregants to receive communion without an annulment, a widespread practice in American churches, and his “ill-advised welcome of a pro-homosexual group to your cathedral.”

What is interesting about the crackdown on those whose views differed from Rome’s regarding birth control and divorce is that dissenters were the norm in the United States, by far. As previously discussed, by the late sixties American lay Catholics were accepting of artificial birth control, contrary to the statements from the church. By 1985, roughly seventy percent of Catholics supported the use of contraceptives, divorce, and the

²⁹ Correspondence from Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger to Raymond Hunthausen, September 30, 1985, Seattle Catholic, http://www.seattlecatholic.com/misc_20040105.html (accessed September 14, 2011).

allowance of divorcees to remarry.³⁰ The views on homosexuality were generally not as accepting, but this too was shifting due to the visibility of the gay rights movement. The issue, feminists argued, was about control. As more American Catholics devised their own set of ethics, the church's power within their lives diminished. Furthermore, as Catholic women, like their non-Catholic peers, used artificial contraception, supported the legalization of abortion, and questioned restrictive gender roles, this was also a rejection of papal authority.

Discord in the church regarding gender roles, sexuality, and church authority was obvious. American bishops realized that they needed to address the concerns while maintaining the rule of the church. In 1984 they decided that they would research and write a pastoral letter on women to be published four years later: a new guide for modern women rooted in the church's teachings and responding to discontent and the calls of the feminist movement. But the document would not be bishops solely speaking for women they assured; women would be a part of the process—not as writers, but as consultants. The bishops even asked for advice from Catholic women's organizations about which women should participate, including the LCWR and Women's Ordination Conference, as well as the conservative Institute on Religious Life.

Feminists participated, weighing the positives and negatives of involvement or a lack of involvement. Some speculated that their voices would be co-opted. If they did not participate though, there would be no chance of improving the status of

³⁰ McLoughlin.

women in the church. Nevertheless, they were pragmatic about what their participation, or the pastoral for that matter, would change. “Many of the women expressed feeling very schizoid about the situation,” Women Church Convergence (WCC) said amongst themselves, “having some hope, but many doubts.”³¹

Feminists were able to participate in the process, in the form of providing testimony and five women were selected to be consultants, yet from the start they expressed their reservations. Even while speaking at the pastoral hearings, women implored that the letter on women not be written. The problem with the pastoral, Catholic feminists almost universally pointed out before a single draft was released, was that pastoral letters were written about social problems like poverty, not a group of people, let alone half of the church. “To write a Pastoral Letter on Women is ridiculous,” said Sister Marjorie Tuite.³² “In the past, Bishops have written on racism, not black people, on economic justice, not poor people.” Women were not the problem, sexism and patriarchy were, feminists argued, and that should be the focus of the letter, not women. An inquiry into the history and breadth of sexism in the church as well as a plan to overcome it would be much more beneficial. “It is patriarchy that has validated the legal, social and economic systems of society,” said Tuite.

It is patriarchy that continues to enforce relationships of domination and subordination, determining human experience, public and private, nurturing

³¹ Women Church Convergence notes (hereafter know as WCC), June 2-3, 1984, Box 9, file 1, CCW Collection, WLA.

³² Marjorie Tuite, “Let Us Be Clear,” *Probe*, May/June 1985, Box 3, file 17, Marjorie Tuite Papers, WLA.

the evils of racism, sexism and militarism. This culture of dominance is masculinized, hierarchical, exclusive and elite. It perpetuates a social order based on domination and privilege for the few. It creates and nurtures institutions of limited access and no ownership. It is for many women the institutional church.

Furthermore, bishops writing about women, even if they were doing so with the help of a selective group of women, was inappropriate. In her testimony before the Chicago archdiocese hearing, Margaret Boivin, a representative of CCW, said that they “strongly recommend that the pastoral not be written.”³³ Bishops, she argued, because they were male lacked the knowledge of being a woman and could not properly express women’s concerns and experiences. They would only “[reflect] the patriarchal worldview and ecclesiology which presumably the pastoral was intended to alleviate.”

Hoping to redirect the bishops to write a pastoral letter on patriarchy, feminists critiqued the all-male power structure, demands for women’s ordination, and calls for a rethinking of limited gender roles that place men above women. “Genesis proclaims that all that God made is good. It is difficult then to explain the underutilization of women’s gifts in the all-male hierarchal Church,” said a representative of Chicago Call to Action.³⁴ “The exclusion of women’s participation in the sacramental sphere of the divine leads to a sense of self that is alienated from the divine,” she argued. “Is there NO woman anywhere possessing the qualities

³³ Margaret Boivin, “CCW Testimony for the Proposed U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral,” (testimony, Chicago Archdiocese hearing, November 9, 1985, found in CCW newsletter, Winter 1986, Box 2, file 5, CCW Collection, WLA.

³⁴ Sheila S. Daley, “Chicago Call to Action Testimony on the Proposed U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral On Women,” testimony, Chicago Archdiocese hearing, November 9, 1985, Box 10, file 3, CCW Collection, WLA.

necessary for witnessing formally within the institutional church at these significant moments?” Because women had always been excluded from leadership, decision-making, and those forming mass biblical interpretation, much had to be reconsidered. Women’s ordination was a start, followed by a major overhaul of church practices, from male imagery and focus to pastoring that had empathy and consideration for women’s experiences.

Women who participated in the pastoral hearings along with those anticipating the results of the effort were not at this point expecting a revolutionary letter. The bishops, after pressure to change the subject from women to patriarchy, chose instead to write a “Response to Women’s Concerns for Church and Society.” Catholic feminists acknowledged that the first draft made some, minute progress. Mary Hunt, co-directer of Women’s Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER), descried the draft as “a baby step forward,” but qualified that “the Catholic Church is an adult.”³⁵ Ruether called the draft flawed but important. Feminists were encouraged by the unprecedented amount of female participation and that nearly a third of the pastoral contained first-person testimonies from women.

The problem with the letter, feminists argued, was that it did not properly deal with the issue of equality in practice. “The bishops take as their theological starting point women’s full and mutual equality with men in the image of God,” praised

³⁵ Mary Hunt, “Bishops Offer Women Only a Limited Partnership,” *Windy City Times*, July 21, 1988, Box 10, file 8, CCW Collection, WLA.

Ruether.³⁶ “Despite this promising beginning, the bishops are unable to carry through their partnership models in any of the three areas of male-female relationship discussed in the pastoral: partnership in the family, in society and in the church.” Ruether and others took issue with the bishops’ assertion that women’s primary vocation was motherhood, the bishops’ unwillingness to budge on their stance on ordination, and the reliance on the idea of complimentary gender roles. “What does it mean to say that women are equal with men as images of God but cannot ‘image Christ?’ What is Christ if not the paradigmatic ‘image of God,’” Ruether posited. Though the bishops acknowledged that sexism is a sin, feminists argued that this notion “has not penetrated very deeply into the episcopal consciousness.”³⁷

But, realistically, because bishops had no intention of recommending women’s ordination and Pope John Paul II was vehemently opposed to it, they were in a bind. Anything short of suggesting absolute, full participation from women would be viewed negatively by feminists. If bishops were to maintain that women were equals to men in the eyes of God and should be treated likewise, how could they rationalize forbidding ordination? The parallel of the bishops’ conclusions to that of the history of racial segregation with “separate but equal” legislation was not lost on feminists.

By 1992, three more drafts were released. With each draft feminists were more discouraged. “The second draft, even after extensive discussion by women

³⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Bishops’ Pastoral Flawed But Important,” *National Catholic Reporter*, December 23, 1988, Box 22, file 2, CCW Collection, WLA.

³⁷ Hunt.

throughout the country, is notably more sexist than the first,” exclaimed WCC.³⁸ The second draft was distressing, they argued, because of its subtlety. “There is the appearance of having done some homework by quoting some feminist theology while leaving aside the essentials,” argued a report of the latest draft.³⁹ “This may make the document appear more palatable, but the overall result is intellectually embarrassing, morally disingenuous insofar as there is no move on the power questions, and finally, not conducive to women’s well being.” Furthermore, in a move that seemed to represent the core of the dilemma of feminists with the church, the voices of women were given less space in the second draft, then all together removed in the third and fourth drafts. In another telling move, the phrase “sin of sexism” which was found in the first attempt, was eliminated by the final draft. WCC speculated that the document’s conservatism was due to its reliance on previous church documents, rather than listening to the concerns of women and rethinking positions. “This is a church document based on church documents,” they argued.

Some theorize that the Vatican’s insertion into the writing process explained the noticeably more conservative tone and elimination of women’s voices. American bishops were called into Rome for a meeting which was described as “a tough two days” to discuss the first draft.⁴⁰ Later, the Vatican sent written critiques of the drafts, which many assume to be highly critical of the bishops’ progress. These were only able to be read by

³⁸ WCC meeting material, draft of press release, November 12, 1989, Box 9, file 6, CCW Collection, WLA.

³⁹ Report from Convergence Committee on the Pastoral on Women to WCC, April 22, 1990, Box 9, file 7, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁴⁰ Peter Stainless, “Bishops’ Struggle on Role of Women Yields Little” *New York Times*, September 6, 1992.

select members of the committee. Also, following the first draft, Pope John Paul II released an encyclical on women, “The Dignity of Women,” which reaffirmed the idea of gender equality, but that women and men had separate, complimentary roles.

A rare glimpse into the review process showed the variety of opinions amongst the bishops and their inability to form a singular opinion about gender roles in the church. Vast disagreements were also present about the direction of the pastoral. Debates ensued as to whether feminism, radical feminism, or sexism were sins and how each should be addressed. Many bishops questioned if the pastoral was actually “pastoral.” “This document is a response to our own concerns and the concerns of the Vatican and not the concerns of women,” said Bishop Buswell; others concurred.⁴¹ The lack of agreement was troubling to bishops. “We need a consensus,” Bishop Banks commented. “If we do not have a consensus, it will have no credibility.” Unable to decide upon a draft, the project was abandoned, leaving the pope’s recent encyclical to be the definitive statement on gender and women’s role in the church and society.

The debates over the proper role for women, in church and society, did not end with “The Dignity of Women.” Catholic feminists continued to fight for progressive, nonliteral interpretations of the Bible and a faith that allowed for equal participation and representation. In the eighties, as women became more frustrated with the church’s stance on the nature of women and ordination, they became less willing to invest as much effort and expectations in the institutional church, forming grassroots religious communities.

⁴¹ Review notes for the pastoral letter, found in a correspondence from Therese J. Stokan to Rosemary Radford Ruether, July 1, 1992, Box 3, file 18, Marjorie Tuite Papers, WLA.

For American girls and women raised after the progress of the feminist movement, the church's insistence on limited gender roles seemed incongruent with the values they grew up with and old fashioned. The disagreements with the church about gender roles made accepting papal authority, and in some cases entire church teachings, less of a priority to newer generations. Furthermore, the enthusiasm that activists held at the beginning of their fight gradually diminished. While many argue that the church will have to alter its stance on gender roles to thrive in the twenty-first century and beyond, other activists have given up hope entirely and argue that women should not look towards the church for progress. Progress will not be found in an institution, but rather through feminism and community building with women.

CHAPTER 5

“WOMAN CHURCH SPEAKS!”

THE FIGHT FOR WOMEN’S ORDINATION, A NEW PRIESTHOOD, AND WOMEN-CHURCH

Because women have always baked the bread which men have blessed in their rituals and we now claim that bread to be holy by ourselves when we call on the name of God to offer thanksgiving.¹

The most prominent issue for Catholic feminists was to bring women into full participation in the church. One aspect of this was women’s ordination. At their inception, major Catholic feminist groups like the National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN), Chicago Catholic Women (CCW), and Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC), saw women’s ordination as a necessary and attainable goal. In the early seventies, many activists believed they would achieve this goal in their lifetime. Feminist theorists and theologians published and lectured about the rationality, imperativeness, and scriptural basis for including women in the sacrament of ordination. But, rather than women merely being ordained and included into the current structure, Catholic feminists envisioned a new, different priesthood and church that shared feminist ideals and a connection to the disenfranchised. By the early 1980s, less emphasis was placed on ordination, and more was given to women creatively claiming the church for themselves, outside of the

¹ Ritual Meal itinerary, 12 November 1983, Chicago Catholic Women Collection (hereafter cited as CCW Collection), WLA.

institutional barriers. As feminists sought refuge in what they would name “Women-Church,” there was an ideological shift in Catholic feminism from a movement that worked and sought change within the institutional church, to a more radical ideology. The Catholic feminist movement’s trajectory and the tensions that developed amongst activists parallel the histories of fellow secular feminist groups, demonstrating similar beneficial and problematic aspects of radicalism.

Catholic feminists, like feminists in the the larger secular women’s liberation movement, whom they were inspired by and worked with, envisioned new structures and approaches to power and hierarchy. By 1975, at the first Women’s Ordination Conference in Detroit some questioned the validity of women’s participation in the priesthood in its present status. What was the real goal? Was it incorporating women into the positions of leadership or was it creating a new church that reexamined privilege and its service to their worldwide congregation? For many progressive Catholics, the answer was the latter. “Will women in ordained ministry lose the freedom of movement, the versatility and the style of shared authority which have marked our ministry thus far?” asked Sister Kathleen Ashe.² “Or can we hope that instead of being absorbed into a priesthood which has not always escaped elitism, arbitrariness, undue caution, and oppressive authoritarianism, our sisters [...] will transform it?” Elements of cultural feminism, based on assumptions that there are biological characteristics unique to women, seeped into the

² Sister Kathleen Ashe, “Women in Ministry—Another Phase,” Unknown Publication 1975, Box 1, file 8, CCW Collection, WLA.

discourse about women's ability to alter the institution and the ideal priesthood. For instance, some doubted that women would be susceptible to the seduction of power. Others believed that women would bring special qualities to the priesthood. Yet, activists and scholars were not naive. Some like feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether wondered if it was even possible to change something as large as a centuries old, worldwide church. They might not be able to radically change the meaning of the priesthood, but they at least had to try.

By the sixties, calls for a total and equal participation by women and a reconsideration of theology were found in other major religions, too. Some even were receptive to change. In the summer of 1976, the Episcopalian church declared that ordination and full participation should not be contingent upon sex. Progressive Christians celebrated the news and no doubt predicted a domino effect that would reach Catholicism.

In October of the same year, Pope Paul VI released the *Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood*, which made clear that the Catholic church had no intention of following suit. In the statement, the Pope declared that a natural physical resemblance to Jesus was paramount to the Catholic priesthood and that women should not be admitted to the priesthood. The news out of the Vatican was well-received by conservatives and denounced by progressives. Two years later, laywoman and Chicago Catholic Women (CCW) member Renny Golden summed up the frustration:

If women had thought requests for ordination, based on the accumulated research of theologians as to the scriptural and moral justification for female priesthood would eventually be recognized as a just cause we were mistaken. If we had thought that arduous scholastic preparation of unprecedented numbers of seminary women would demonstrate our capabilities we were mistaken. If we thought that the example of Latin American women ministers filling in for the priest shortage, administering parishes in barrios, struggling against poverty and oppression was living witness to a desperate need in the church we were mistaken. If we thought that our work in ministerial roles would, through the concerted efforts of our brothers change at the local level we were mistaken.³

Critics of the *Declaration* voiced confusion and hostility and mocked the limited ideal of physical resemblance. Sister Donna Quinn referred to the proclamation as “the penis statement.”⁴ Ruether would mock it, too, wondering aloud how “balls” were the requirement for priesthood.⁵ How could sexual organs be given precedence when considering the right of ordination? Did not claiming that a symbol of Jesus, a priest, could only be properly shown as male, diminish the power of Jesus? Some snickered, did this mean that only Jewish, bearded men in their early thirties should be allowed into the priesthood? “If the ‘church’ is the ‘Spouse’ of Christ,” wrote Father Carroll Stuhlmeller of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, “then only women can be members.”⁶

Feminist theorists and theologians provided elaborate rebuttals to the *Declaration* with thoughtful analysis of the historical priesthood and the representation of women in

³ Renny Golden, “New Woman, New Church, New Priestly Ministry: A Perspective on Baltimore,” CCW newsletter (December 1978), Box 2, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁴ Undated CCW materials, Box 11, file 7, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁵ Rosemary Ruether Ruether, “Theological Reflections on Woman-Church,” speech, “Woman Church Speaks!” conference, Rosemont, Illinois, November 13, 1983, Box 5, folder 2, Women Church Convergence Collection (hereafter cited as WCC), WLA.

⁶ Correspondence from Father Carroll Stuhlmüller to Mary Kanabay, 3 February 1977, Box 10, file 17, CCW Collection, WLA.

the Bible. Adhering to a male hierarchy was both an ancient notion and a modern understanding that did not reflect the teachings and practices of Jesus, Catholic feminists argued. Building on the Catholic feminist discourse that Jesus was a feminist, as illustrated in a previous chapter, theorists and theologians stressed how revolutionary and inclusive Jesus was. Ruether argued this by examining the significance, treatment, and inclusion of Mary Magdalene and other women in Jesus' inner circle. They were some of Jesus' most trusted followers and the ones to whom he revealed his resurrected self. "The Rabbis had specifically forbidden women to be taught in the religious circles of disciples," wrote Ruether. "Jesus is really overthrowing this practice in his culture when he affirms Mary[Magdalene]'s right to come out of the woman's role of servanthood and to join as an equal member in the circle of disciples."⁷ Furthermore, she argues, Jesus spoke about "One who creates a community of equals, a community of brothers and sisters."⁸ To ignore this message is to misrepresent his teachings.

Ruether also argued that this limited notion of Jesus was flawed. Jesus' maleness, which she argued "has no ultimate significance," is not what made him important to his community and to Christians throughout time—it was his divinity.⁹ "Christ is not necessarily male, nor is the redeemed community only women, but a new humanity, female and male," she argues.¹⁰ Not only is valuing the maleness of Jesus inaccurate, she

⁷ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Mary—The Feminine Face of the Church* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

maintains, if continued it does irreparable damage. By associating maleness with divinity and in turn the priesthood,

Our exploration of Christology has led to an impasse. A Christology that identified the maleness of the historical Jesus with normative humanity and with the maleness of the divine *Logos* must move in an increasingly misogynist direction that not only excludes woman as representative of Christ in ministry but makes her a second-class citizen in both creation and redemption. Androgynous Christologies try to affirm the female side in the vision of a Christ that is “neither male nor female.” But the identification of this androgynous Christ with the male Jesus continues to give an androcentric bias to the vision of redemptive humanity. Woman can represent only the “feminine” side of a male-centered symbol the fullness of which is disclosed only in a male person.¹¹

Those who championed women’s ordination understood the gravity of such a momentous alteration to Catholic tradition. They realized that by arguing for the universality of the priesthood, they were in fact challenging the notion of a male God. “When feminists succeed in changing the position of women in Christianity and Judaism, they will shake these religions at their roots,” Naomi Goldenberg wrote. “The nature of a religion lies in the nature of the symbols and images it exalts in ritual and doctrine,” she contended, “[and the] psychology of the Jewish and Christian religions depends on the masculine image that these religions have of their God.”¹²

There was an outpouring of responses from opponents of the Vatican’s statement. Theologians from Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, all priests and one sister, wrote a unified letter detailing the lack of scriptural basis for the omission of women priests.

¹¹ Ibid., 134-5.

¹² Naomi Goldenberg, *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 5.

WOC optimistically responded in a press release, writing that they “welcome[d]” the *Declaration* “because it rejects the major tradition of the Church that held the subordination of women ‘in the order of nature.’” Yet, they also argued that the document “offers one model of priesthood that is cultic and elitist,” and that it “is an argument based on sexual discrimination,” and ignores the pastoral elements of the priesthood. But, fitting with the still-hopeful and diplomatic nature of the WOC at the time, they argued “Far from ‘closing the door’ on the discussion, it is apparent that the language of the *Declaration* invited responsible research and discussion.”¹³ The Sisters of Mercy of Brooklyn also released a critical, yet hopeful statement, arguing that “since there is no scriptural basis for the *Declaration*, we do not believe that the debate is over.”¹⁴

NCAN, which would become one of the loudest, most radical Catholic feminist organizations, did not themselves release a statement or initially respond with the feminist critique for which they would become known. They were not totally silent on the matter, though. They decided it best to support sisters and organizations that had released statements or protested the *Declaration*, and endorsed the statement of Sisters Uniting, who wrote that they repudiated “the theological reasoning in equating the humanism of Jesus and the risen Christ with maleness.”¹⁵ WOC and Chicago Catholic Women arranged a prayer vigil and event entitled “Healing a Wounded Church,” at Holy Name

¹³ Women’s Ordination Conference press release, “WOC Welcomes Declaration,” 28 January 1976, Box 10, file 20, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹⁴ Statement from Apostolic Committee of the Sisters of Mercy of Brooklyn, circa 1976-1977, Box 9, file 1, National Collation of American Nuns Collection, (hereafter cited as NCAN) Series 2, MUA.

¹⁵ Lara Medina, *Las Hermanas: Chicago/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 99.

Cathedral in downtown Chicago, in February of 1977. Three hundred attended the vigil conducted by women with prayers offered by two prominent priests, one the president of the priests' senate, the other the superintendent of Chicago archdiocesan schools. Attendants were encouraged to be proactive and were given the names and addresses of over fifty American bishops to write to asking for their support of women's ordination.

CCW had a pragmatic, yet radical response that would develop into a controversial annual protest. Responding to the *Declaration* and annual Seminary Collection in Chicago parishes in early February, CCW advertised in their newsletter, the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and the *Chicago Daily News* that CCW would collect funds to support the newly founded Women's Pastoral Education Fund. "There are Roman Catholic Seminaries and Schools of Theology, some in Chicago, currently preparing women to assume positions of shared responsibility and decision making in the Church," read the advertisement.¹⁶ Annual collections for seminary school would be used to educate only men. CCW created The Women's Pastoral Education Fund "[a]s an alternative for those who desire to experience JUSTICE in the Church." They urged supporters to send a message by placing the advertisement, whose headline read "Contribute to Justice," in their parish collection basket.

By the next year, CCW joined the Quixote Center (a Catholic social justice center in Maryland), the WOC, the Catholic Women's Seminary Fund, and Priests for Equality in using "funny money" as a form of protest and fundraising.¹⁷ With payment of their

¹⁶ CCW newsletter (February 1977), Box 12, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

¹⁷ The Quixote Center originated the idea of "funny money" or "Almighty Dollars" in June of 1977.

dues, CCW members were given a dollar that read “Equal Justice Reserve Note” and quoted a Vatican II document stating that “every type of discrimination ... based on sex ... is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.”¹⁸ The dollar also had an image of St. Therese of the Child Jesus, a Carmelite nun who felt called to the priesthood. On the back of the note there was an equal sign drawn in between a male and female symbol with a message indicating that the giver had withheld a donation to the seminary fund and instead would be donating to the CCW’s Ministry Fund. There was even a space for donors to sign their names. The money raised was awarded to women pursuing their education in ministry. Unsurprisingly, this protest was met with hostility. The *National Catholic Reporter* and John Cardinal Cody of Chicago accused CCW of “sabotage.” Sister Maureen Reiff responded, pointing out that the past year CCW only received \$650, while the Chicago seminary collection raised approximately \$455,000.¹⁹

The response from CCW was indicative of their concerns and approach to women’s ordination. While other organizations wrote bishops and sought dialogue, an activity in which CCW participated, they additionally worked towards educating and placing women in positions of leadership and employment in the church. They were forward-thinking and believed in creating a ready pool of women, properly educated and ready to serve the church as priests or as pastors. “The fund,” explained CCW’s newsletter, “is aimed at narrowing the gap between that which is and that which ought to

¹⁸ “Funny Money,” circa 1977, Box 16, file 7, CCW Collection, WLA.

¹⁹ Undated correspondence from Maureen Reiff to letter to the editor of *National Catholic Reporter*, Box 2, file 3, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

be and thereby contributing to our growth as a more humane, just and loving church.”²⁰

Also, like many Catholic feminists, CCW felt it was imperative that women be knowledgeable in theology so they could equally participate in scholarly and theological discussions regarding the future of the church.

For CCW, and the newly formed Women of the Church Coalition (WCC), a collection of similarly-interested women’s groups from all over the country, women’s full participation in the church was a prerequisite if there was ever to be a true universal, Catholic church.²¹ Women’s ordination was an important element of this, to be certain—but only one part of women achieving full participation in the church. CCW worked tirelessly, often with little success, to place women in places of leadership within the church and the Chicago Catholic schools’ administration. Numerous letters were sent encouraging parishes to consider hiring women, especially to pastoring positions. Fed up with CCW, and Sister Donna Quinn in particular, Cardinal Cody sent a letter to every Chicago Catholic parish as an attempt to discourage female employment. In the letter, Cody wrote that “a Sister Donna Quinn,” the “a” a subtle dig belittling her status, and her organization CCW “has no authorization from the Archdiocese and has no approval to function as an employment agency” and that parishes were “respectfully advised that the Archdiocese does not approve of such a program.”²²

²⁰ CCW newsletter (October 1978), Box 12, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA

²¹ WCC initially included such groups as CCW, NCAN, WOC, Las Hermanas, National Assembly of Women Religious, Leadership Council of Women Religious, and Network. By the 1980s WCC would expand and represent many more Catholic and non-Catholic women’s groups.

²² “Highlights in the History of Chicago Catholic Women 1974-1985,” Box 1, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

Mounting frustrations led to more explicit calls for revolutionary change and a more critical stance on the institutional church. Describing a priest's recent declaration of solidarity with women by removing and throwing his collar on the table then ordering a round of Bloody Marys for everyone present at a social gathering at the National Women's Conference, the National Coalition of American Nuns (NCAN) was unimpressed. "Keep your Bloody Mary's," they wrote in a newsletter.²³ "If you're really concerned about equality, tell your Bishop you don't know how much longer you can work in a Church which perpetuates inequality in all its official structures." Catholic feminists were impatient with simply words of support; they wanted action. People were not to be congratulated on recognizing the oppression of women in the church and society—this should be expected of everyone, they argued. If you failed to work for change yet remained in the institution and held a position of power, you were part of the problem.

A second Women's Ordination Conference was held in Baltimore in the fall of 1978, the theme "New Woman, New Church, New Priestly Ministry." Over two thousand women and men participated, demanding women's ordination and a new priesthood. "We do not simply want to be a part of the priesthood in its present form," said an attendant. "What we're after is a renewed priestly ministry that concentrates more on serving people than on the administration of a bureaucratic ordination."²⁴ Building on the discourse from the first WOC conference and the state of Catholic feminist theory, participants called not only for a revision of the priesthood—they were redefining it themselves. In a radical

²³ NCAN newsletter (January 1978), Box 1, file 4, NCAN Collection, Series 4, MUA.

²⁴ Roy Larson, "Catholic Group Ordains Change," *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 13, 1978.

move, approximately two hundred and fifty women participated in an unsanctioned, women-led eucharist service. Reporting on the conference for the CCW newsletter, Golden surmised a palpable change in the Catholic feminist movement. "...[W]e're in this together, less preoccupied with male clerical support or lack of support, and [...] we must be the creators of our own destiny, of our own history," she wrote.²⁵ "We've begun to 'throw off' the 'false consciousness' which internalizes the oppressor's values, keeping us passive and divided."

The Baltimore conference inspired a petition to American bishops requesting that the bishops petition the Vatican to remove the physical resemblance requirement for the priesthood. The petition, with over thirteen thousand signatures, was presented by the WCC in May of 1979 to the chairperson of the National Coalition of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) Committee on the Role of Women in Society and the Church. Summing up the growing consensus amongst Catholic feminists, the women in attendance left the meeting convinced that little change was around the corner.

Catholic feminist and progressive groups were abuzz during the first United States visit of the recently elected pope, John Paul II. Activists wanted to reach out to him, hoping for a dialogue. Sisters, too, wanted a dialogue. Already there was noticeable tension between the Pope and American sisters, which would escalate until his death. To Pope John Paul II, American sisters were too independent, radical and disrespectful of the

²⁵ Golden, "New Woman, New Church, New Priestly Ministry: A Perspective on Baltimore," CCW newsletter (December 1978), Box 2, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

church's authority. To American sisters, many of whom were the most educated women in America and the world, his conservative notions about gender roles, his calls for them to return to the habit, and his insistence that women could not be priests, showed the great divide between them.

Feminists wanted to make a statement—to force the Pope to recognize that gender equality was important and was on the horizon, even in the church. CCW, the perpetual thorn in John Cardinal Cody's side, encouraged him to request that women distribute communion during the papal masses while in the United States, including Chicago. Extraordinary ministers, both male and female, were used in some parishes following Vatican II. But, the process was and is controversial, and, technically, it is supposed to be reserved for instances when priests are unavailable, though rarely used in only those cases. Calls from CCW and other progressives to include women were met with a statement that explained that because of the abundance of ordained men, ready and willing to distribute communion during the Pope's visit, there was no need for extraordinary ministers. But, the response, sexist or otherwise, set off a barrage of angry press accusing the Vatican of metaphorically holding up a "No Girl's Allowed" sign. While the Pope's visits and celebrating masses in various American cities became huge attractions, some local Catholic feminist groups and sympathetic priests used the controversy surrounding the rejection of women to boycott the events. Some even picketed outside, passing out leaflets and wearing blue armbands, a symbol adopted by the women's ordination movement.

Realistically, though, a boycott by a relatively small number of irritated Catholics did not and could not send the message to the pope that American progressives wanted. That message was delivered by a stately looking, middle-aged nun, Theresa Kane. Kane was president of the largest organization of American nuns, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), representing over ninety percent of American sisters. Kane spoke before Pope John Paul II on behalf of LCWR, and American women religious in general. In her short speech she urged the Pope “to be open to and respond to the voices coming from the women of this country who are desirous of serving in and through the Church as fully participating members.”²⁶ The reaction to Kane’s speech was considerable, the LCWR receiving almost 5,000 letters regarding her speech, which differed along conservative and liberal lines. Support and praise poured in from liberal and feminist Catholics and non-Catholics. Likewise, accusations of blasphemy and disrespect were common amongst conservatives. In fact, to the present day, Kane’s name is invoked as a representation of feminism’s corruption of nuns.

Proponents of women’s ordination felt as if they were on a roller coaster ride: great highs and moments of assurance, followed by bitter lows. Meetings, protests at male ordination ceremonies, and sternly worded statements gave feminists a sense of temporary control and influence, but their activism was not making a dent in the institutional church. “[E]ven a group such as NCAN does not impact church issues so that any significant changes occur,” wrote Sister Jean Ingrassia in a letter explaining her

²⁶ *Theresa Kane — Ten Years After Her Address to the Pope in the US - Loretto Women's Network*, Box 15, file 2, Donna Quinn papers, WLA.

resignation from the aforementioned organization.²⁷ “Religious women do not operate from any position of power, given the present structure and established procedures, but also because they refuse to assert themselves in a radical manner so as to force change.” She mourned that groups like NCAN and LCWR had great numbers and passion, yet failed to mobilize women to force change. “Maybe what I’m saying is that the battle is futile,” she wrote, “the male entrenched hierarchy in the church will not be moved by pious platitudes or threats of boycotting the collection basket when for the most part religious women still serve without pay and bend to be blessed by the oppressor.”

Then, in 1980, the Vatican made an announcement that felt like a smack in the face to women’s ordination advocates. Anglican male priests, even those who were married, could become Catholic priests. Though it was not stated explicitly, it was generally understood that the invitation was directly related to the recent admission of women into the Anglican priesthood. Those who disagreed with the admission of women could “follow their conscience” and leave the Anglican faith and be welcome as Catholic priests—even if that meant not adhering to a vow of celibacy.²⁸ CCW called the decision “a direct insult to Catholic women, to Episcopal women priests (who of course) cannot participate in the plan and to American Catholic priests [...] who do not have an optional celibacy doctrine.” For several years Catholic feminists had suggested a re-imagining of the priesthood, and the most recent setback furthered their desire to reconsider what the

²⁷ Correspondence from Jean Ingrassia to Andrea Lee, October 19, 1979, Box 3, file 1, NCAN Collection Series 3, MUA.

²⁸ CCW newsletter (October 1980), Box 2, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

priesthood and church was, what activists wanted, and what it meant to envision alternative forms of spirituality. Catholic feminists were tired, angry, and heartbroken. One of the movements' once strongest and most optimistic voices, Rosalie Muchal-Reinhardt summed up the sentiments of many: "Goodbye boys. You can have your church back."²⁹

Beginning in the late seventies, Catholic feminists experimented with claiming church for themselves. Like the activists at the 1978 WOC meeting, Rosemary Ruether encouraged women to be creative and consider new ways to celebrate mass together.³⁰ This seed of protest and dissatisfaction blossomed into what would become the Women-Church movement.³¹ With Women-Church, women created a vastly different space and meaning for church than the sanctioned one of Catholicism. Women collectively created new ceremonies, rituals, prayers, and vocabulary to worship. In essence, they developed new concepts of what a Catholic spirituality could be if created by and with women in mind.

Years before the Vatican's declaration that priests must physically resemble Jesus, the ever-increasingly radical theologian Mary Daly stated "that if God is male, then the

²⁹ Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 232.

³⁰ CCW newsletter (February 1978), Box12, file 1, Donna Quinn Papers, WLA.

³¹ The naming of the Women-Church movement took some time to finalize. Descriptors range from "Woman Church," "Women Church," "Women-Church," "women-church," and "Womanchurch." Ruether argued for the use of "Women-Church" for grammatical reasons and because it acknowledged the diversity of women, and eventually "Women-Church" became the adopted name of the movement. To avoid confusion, when speaking about the movement I will only refer to it as Women-Church except when directly quoting documents or individuals who refer to it otherwise.

male is God.”³² Sister Marjorie Tuite agreed, arguing male imagery of and language used for God affected women’s perception of themselves. “For women to realize the fullness of their dignity,” she wrote, “it is essential that they name their own experiences—the reality in which they live and, in particular, the God to whom they pray.”³³ Daly further maintained that eliminating the maleness of God was important, but was not optimistic that that alone was enough, also demonstrating her tendency to value gender above all else. “It can legitimately be argued that a transexual operation upon ‘God,’ changing ‘him’ to ‘her,’ would be a far more profound alteration than a mere pigmentation change,” she argued. “However, to stop at this level of discourse would be a trivialization of the deep problem of human becoming in women.”³⁴

Daly was far and away more radical than most Catholic feminist theorists and activists, but like her, many challenged the validity and usefulness of the present patriarchal institutional church for women. Was this religion a suitable home for women? Could women overlook or extricate what they viewed as sexist practices and dogma? Or should they conceive of a new vision of what Christian devotion and women’s spirituality could be?

A growing frustration with the church led some to consider what was lost by fighting for ordination or if women should be ordained at all. By 1980, WCC somewhat

³² Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 19.

³³ Marjorie Tuite, “Language Does Make a Difference,” *The Church Woman*, n.d., Box 2, file 30, Marjorie Tuite Papers, WLA.

³⁴ Daly, 19.

distanced themselves from their support for women's ordination, claiming that they considered other issues such as funding women's theological education, and bringing minority women into leadership roles, of greater importance. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza was particularly critical of the women's ordination movement for focusing on ordination while not giving the same attention to issues that affect many women like birth control, rape, and domestic violence. She granted that these volatile issues would certainly fracture Catholic activists, but "we are in danger of silently consenting to the violence done to women in order not to jeopardize our own ecclesial or social advancement."³⁵ Were Catholic feminists willing to throw their values and fellow women "under the bus" to obtain the right to participate in the hierarchal structure? "Baptism makes women full members of the body of Christ," wrote Fiorenza, "whereas ordination into the present ecclesiastical structures would integrate us into the patriarchally defined clerical structures that exploit women and do not serve, but 'rule,' the laity."³⁶ Was seeing women in positions of leadership worth ignoring major issues associated with patriarchy?

Furthermore, she and others were skeptical of the actual power women would have if they were ever ordained. Remembering an earlier discussion with a priest regarding what she believed her call to be a bishop, she described the priest's flabbergasted response. If she or any woman was a bishop, then men would have to pledge obedience to a woman, and that was out of the question. If there were no women bishops, women would only be pledging obedience to the male hierarchy. "Therefore,

³⁵ Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Sexism and Conversion," *Network* (May-June 1981), 15-22, 17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

before women can be ordained to the diaconate or priesthood,” she theorized, “women must be ordained bishops, cardinals and popes. Otherwise ordination would mean abandoning one’s own people, women, and perpetuating the structural sexist ideology that maintains the weakness and otherness of women.”³⁷

This is not to argue that women’s ordination ceased being an issue for Catholic feminists; it remained on their agenda. For instance, in 1986 NCAN publicly called upon retired bishops to ordain women to the priesthood.³⁸ But by the early 1980s, gaining a leadership role in the institutional church paled in comparison to defeating sexism at large. Catholic feminists still pointed to the lack of women’s ordination as a blatant exhibition of inequality—but it was just that—a very obvious example. More important, yet subtler, engrained instances of sexism, racism, and classism existed, and women’s ordination would only be a facade of progress. Like activists who radicalized through their involvement in the secular feminist movement, Catholic feminists found working within what they viewed as flawed frameworks less tolerable and less valuable. Instead, they sought new systems and structures that they themselves would define.

When a WOC conference failed to come to fruition in the early eighties, members of WCC evaluated what the status and desired direction of their movement should be and what were the next steps to attaining their goal. They were pessimistic about the feasibility of substantial change in the church, but filled with excitement to work outside

³⁷ Ibid., 19.

³⁸ Mary Beth Murphy, “Nuns Ask Retirees to Ordain Women,” *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 11, 1986, Box 20, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

of the box. “We have gotten from the institutional Church as much as we are going to get. We have struggled and stretched it as far as it can go,” said Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz. “It’s not a matter of getting as much as we are going to get,” responded Diann Neu. “It’s a matter of not wanting anything else.” They discussed the problems of the fight for women’s ordination. Las Hermanas, an organization of lay and religious Hispanic women, wanted women ordained, but they and other progressive Hispanic Catholic organizations like Padres Associated for Religious, Educational, and Social Rights (PADRES) were concerned with the lack of Hispanic priests and bishops serving and representing the needs of the American Latino community. Las Hermanas argued that simply having white female priests or bishops was not the solution for the Hispanic community. Also, focusing on ordination had been myopic, WCC argued. Instead, big-picture items such as building a strong sisterhood amidst diversity, examinations of power, power distribution, and sexism were emphasized.

WCC devised a national meeting in Chicago to bring women from various backgrounds and states of their relationship with Catholicism and the Catholic feminist movement to discuss the future of a woman-focused revision of church. The goal was to bring women together, to foster strong bonds of sisterhood, and to create new forms of worship. And while they came together because of their association with Catholicism, they did not want to focus on the institutional church. The power of women, rather than the victimization of them by the church should be emphasized. They also concluded, no doubt influenced by Isasi-Diaz and Las Hermanas, that dwelling on the church as the

ultimate oppressor was a “white middle class agenda”—and did not reflect the needs of women, the poor, and the disadvantaged all over the world.³⁹ Activists also reached out to their constituents for help formulating topics and speakers through the newsletters of the various participating WCC organizations. The conference was entitled “Generations to Generations: Woman Church Speaks,” reflecting their new identity as claiming church for themselves and their desire to bring women of all ages together. “Woman Church Speaks” is of great import because it demonstrated the change in direction of the Catholic feminist movement and defined the radicalism that followed.

The entirety of “Woman Church Speaks” reflected their feminist ideals. Women-Church was about creating a safe space, a place for *women* to come together, to express ideas, and to form their own traditions. They debated whether to allow men at all, inquiring into the legality of it being for women only. No men were invited as speakers or guests, and they were not expected to attend.⁴⁰ As Catholic feminists argued, the church was man-made, run by men, with men instead of women in mind. “Distressing as it may seem to males who imagine themselves sympathetic to feminism, this process of consciousness raising must necessarily have a separatist stage,” argued Ruether.⁴¹ “Women have to withdraw from male-dominated spaces so they can gather together and define their own experience.” This exclusivity was not to continue indefinitely, but

³⁹ WCC meeting minutes, March 20-22, 1983, Box 8, file 3, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 59.

considered important to allow women to create their own identity “because women, more than any other marginalized group, have lacked a critical culture of their own.”⁴²

The conference also hired two plain-clothed female police officers as security guards, requiring that they have no visible weapons, and keeping in mind minority women’s complex relationship with police, wanted at least one of the officers to be a woman of color. The conference provided child care for young children, and teenage female children were encouraged to attend events, since they were the future of the feminist and Women-Church movement. Acknowledging and supporting women’s work was of utmost importance, as well. The committeewomen who worked on the conference were financially compensated, WCC arguing that their work and time was valuable, a reaction to the expectation that women typically volunteer. Conference and mailing materials were printed by a female-owned, local business, even if a chain was cheaper.

These additional costs left organizers with a conundrum, as it in turn raised the cost of the conference registration fee. They worked with organizations to set up scholarships for women who could not afford to attend, but that did not resolve the problem. This was a multi-day conference at a hotel in the suburbs of Chicago, and food, lodging, and the conference fee added up. Reaching out to poor women was important, and activists spent a great deal of time talking about serving the community and working against their tendency to focus on white, middle-class issues. But, in this instance, feminism yet again trumped class issues.

⁴² Ibid., 59.

One of the top priorities of the committee, at least on paper, was to make “Woman Church Speaks” inviting to women of color. The feminist movement had and has a reputation of prioritizing gender over race and class, and ignoring or being unaware of issues that affect minority groups. The hope was for this conference to be a turning point. WCC unsuccessfully courted two groups of black Catholic women, The Knights of Peter Claver-Ladies Auxiliary, the largest group of black lay Catholics in the United States, and the National Black Sisters Conference (NBSC). The NBSC, which initially supported the conference, voted against sponsoring it, questioning why Catholic feminists were interested in connecting with black women now and expressing dissatisfaction that issues of gender constantly dwarfed issues of racism. The Knights on the other hand withdrew because of the wide Catholic feminist support for abortion rights and the growing support for lesbian rights. Feminists lamented that these organizations would not join them, but were unwilling to dissolve their support for the controversial topics.

More successful efforts were made to continue the complex relationship with Hispanic women. Las Hermanas was a co-sponsor of the conference and a frequent supporter of Catholic feminist efforts. In a move to accommodate and welcome Hispanic women, all conference materials were written in Spanish and English. Brochures had the dual languages on the same page, and the order of the language rotated. Speeches were also translated into English or Spanish, giving Spanish-speakers the benefit of addressing their concerns eloquently to the audience.

The speeches and spoken prayers of the conference reflected the new direction of the Catholic feminist movement. “We are not in exile but the Church is in exodus with us,” Ruether argued in a speech.⁴³ This would become the definitive and oft-quoted statement of the conference and the Women-Church movement. Catholicism had lost its way, they argued. The people of the church were not being properly served, there was too much emphasis on and deference for priestly and papal authority, and an interpretation of Christianity that denigrated and limited women was a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Jesus’ teachings.

Women could and were celebrating church many presenters argued. “I’ve come to Chicago to bring the Good News,” said Kip Tiernan.⁴⁴ “We don’t need the approval of our oppressors to do what we must do as Christians.” Furthermore, speakers rejected the notion of hierarchy and authority. Previously, feminists argued that for women to have a voice in the church and to fulfill their calling, they must obtain official leadership status. Now feminists argued that one does not require the institutional church to bestow this power. “I am an urban minister,” said Tiernan. “Nobody told me I could be one. I am one! Jesus didn’t have a [Master’s of Divinity] and I don’t need one either, and neither do you!”

Another major challenge to traditional thought was the re-imagining of the image of God. Feminists for years had rejected a solely male image of God, viewing God as

⁴³ Ruether, “Theological Reflections on Woman-Church.”

⁴⁴ Kip Tiernan, speech, “Woman Church Speaks!” conference, Rosemont, Illinois November 12, 1983, Box 5, file 2, WCC Collection, WLA.

non-gendered being, but this conference expanded and legitimized seeing God as feminine. In the opening service, a speaker read “[...] visualize the Holy One as birthing mother. Imagine her hands holding you... hear her say ‘I am the Mother of all things.’”⁴⁵ Ruether questioned why God could not be imagined “in the faces of women, or children, of the poor, of the timid and gentle creatures of the earth.”⁴⁶ Ruether’s growing radicalism was on stage as she elaborated on the negative associations of womanhood, why traditionally a feminine image of God was rejected in Christianity, and in essence why the church rejected women’s ordination.

Women image the body, the passions, the shameful bloody process of birth and death, [...] of corruptibility, of all that foul and stinking limits from which this mighty transcendent masculinity seeks to escape into eternal life and power forever and ever. Women cannot image God, the mighty and external One. They are the image of all that is *not* God, of all that must be crushed and reduced to silence so that men can be as God.⁴⁷

Some, like Deborah El-Dahn, took this further and argued for Goddess worship.

This was not the first time that Goddess worship was mentioned when considering spirituality, of course. In the preface of her 1978 work of theory *Gyn/Ecology*, Mary Daly no longer felt that changing or eliminating pronouns was enough when referencing God. “There is no way to remove male/masculine imagery from *God*. Thus, when writing/speaking “anthropomorphically” of ultimate reality, of the divine spark of be-ing, I now

⁴⁵ Opening Service, “Woman Church Speaks!” conference, Rosemont, Illinois November 11, 1983, Box 8, file 4, CCW, WLA.

⁴⁶ Ruether, “Theological Reflections on Woman-Church.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

choose to write/speak gynomorphically. I do so because *God* represents the necrophilia of patriarchy, whereas *Goddess* affirms the life-loving be-ing of women and nature.”⁴⁸

To some, speaking of a Goddess simply meant viewing God as feminine or with traditionally feminine characteristics, or as a form of semantics to neutralize the perceived sexism of the church. For others, like El-Dahn this meant borrowing elements of non-Christian religions that had multiple Gods and Goddesses. Goddess worship did not appeal to the majority of women who claimed to be a part of Women-Church, but those who did represented a growing fringe movement and an association with cultural, secular feminism. Goddess-worship, or at least elements of Goddess-worship, would be bolstered by the 1986 publication of the groundbreaking book by historian Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, which, amongst other aspects, discussed the prominence and decline of Goddess worship.⁴⁹ More than Goddess worship, though, the re-imagining of God in feminine or atypical terms eventually led to the development of Christian Eco-Feminism and brought independent, creative elements to the ever-expanding notion of women’s spirituality.

One of the most notable and praised events of the conference was the eucharist meal. Catholic women had made the controversial decision to collectively and independently of the church celebrate eucharist for several years at this point. Some called it mass, some called it a “woman’s liturgy” since they did not use the traditional

⁴⁸ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978; rept., Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), xlv.

⁴⁹ Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

texts and prayers of a typical Catholic mass. This practice was and is considered sacrilegious, disrespectful, and not actually a celebration of the eucharist by traditionalists, because those that perform the blessing and liturgy are women and not ordained priests. To claim the power and right to perform this sacrament was and is highly controversial to many conservative Catholics and non-Catholics alike, so much so that the inclusion of an unsanctioned celebration of eucharist was one of the main reasons that LCWR—an organization whose president had recently argued for the full participation of women in the church—chose not to cosponsor the event. When planning “Woman Church Speaks,” the idea of a woman’s liturgy was central to the conference. Activists decided they wanted to redefine what celebrating the eucharist was; why not “[focus] on seeing everything we do as liturgy.”⁵⁰ They also wanted to re-appropriate some traditional elements, such as breaking bread. Isasi-Diaz was adamant that whatever they decided upon, it should be an “intelligible and unmistakable sign to the institutional church.”⁵¹

In the Catholic mass after Vatican II, a priest, draped in an elaborate vestment, was the unmistakable leader of the service. He led the congregation in traditional prayers, creeds, and hymns, gave a liturgy, read from the Bible, all in the language of the congregation, and indicated when everyone else should stand, sit, and kneel in unison. Biblical readings might focus on or feature the lives of women, but the routine prayers, except for the Hail Mary, were in reference to Jesus and God, who was described solely

⁵⁰ WCC meeting minutes, March 20-22, 1983, Box 8, file 3, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁵¹ WCC Task Force meeting minutes, July 8-10, 1983, Box 8, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

as male, either as “Father” or indicated with male pronouns. There are also altar servers, typically a few youths from the congregation. Traditionally servers were only boys, but by the 1980s more liberal churches gradually integrated girls. The priest standing behind the altar consecrated wine and unleavened bread, then distributed it to the congregation. By the 1980s, it was common for churches to have extraordinary ministers, which included women, to distribute communion. In the Catholic faith, the process of blessing the bread and wine by the priest transformed the food into the blood and body of Jesus, viewed as a representation or a reenactment of the final meal that Jesus shared with his apostles. Individual Catholics differ as to whether this is supposed to represent a symbol or if it is literally a transformation. Symbol or transubstantiation, the eucharist is *the* centerpiece of a Catholic mass.

The ritual meal of “Woman Church Speaks” was a clear sign of eucharist, but vastly differed from a Catholic mass. As women gathered at their tables for their meal, a collection of racially diverse female mimes and dancers greeted them. Then the greeters moved to the stage and each woman, rather than a singular leader, recited a statement about Women-Church, a blessing, or led the audience in prayer. The prayers and statements made at the service encapsulated the spirituality and ideals of Women-Church in that moment in time. And while feminist elements were found elsewhere in the conference, that they were included in what these women saw as a eucharist celebration demonstrating their significance and how these women were literally redefining their faith.

In the service they praised and celebrated aspects of women's lives that was traditionally derogated, such as women's work, motherhood, menstruation, and giving birth. No longer should women see their work as devalued and their bodies and birth as dirty or through the lens of conservative church fathers.

Because we now claim the power of women to name as holy the waters of birth that break on each human person. This is each one's first baptism, the moment of each one's entry into the world. In the past the experience of giving birth has been called unclean, but we now recognize the sacredness of our mother's blessed water.

Because women have always baked the bread which men have blessed in their rituals and we now claim that bread to be holy by ourselves when we call on the name of God to offer thanksgiving.⁵²

Their words also reflected the movement's conviction of women claiming church for themselves and the importance of a women's community. Like many feminists at the time, they hoped for and believed in the possibility of women coming together in solidarity; that all differences, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, or otherwise could be overcome and women could find a universal commonality. Together as women they would create new institutions and structures for and by each other that would change society and Catholicism. They also refrained from male language when speaking of God, and brought women to the center, rather than the periphery of the service.

Women are at one with Mother Earth—food gathering, seed planting, garden cultivating—women are at one with the sources of nourishment and the resources of survival.

⁵² Ritual Meal itinerary, 12 November 1983, Box 8, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

Because women have too often set the festive tables where wine was used to make rejoice, but have not been allowed to join in the celebration. Tonight, we will celebrate as WOMAN CHURCH.

As Woman Church we claim a new baptism—a baptism into a church which acknowledges that it is guilty of sexism, racism, classism; a baptism into a community of believers willing to struggle toward more just relationships.

And we claim the power of women's healing. We join in solidarity with mothers around the globe and search for ways to heal the wounds of war.

As activism for women's ordination shifted to great systemic changes, like a total reevaluation of the priesthood and leadership, the women of Women-Church also sought to break down barriers of power and authority in worship practices and like women in the secular women's liberation movement, they rejected a traditional hierarchy.

We name service anew and claim the transforming power it has. We do this remembering the words of Jesus: "I have not called you to be servants, but to be friends."

So as friends always do, we sit down at table together. Let us as Woman Church create our tables of sharing. As sisters, let us each set our own place at table—a sign of the equality we share and of the pledge we make to claim the power of true leadership in service, in friendship.

While the service was as diametrically opposed to a traditional Catholic mass as one might imagine, this was not a rejection of faith in God or Jesus. As Ruether argued earlier at the conference, the church excluded women. Those who subscribed to the idea of Women-Church still maintained a strong faith, and like most religious individuals, they assumed their beliefs to be a true reflection of what their religion really was. The faith these women lacked was in the institutional Catholic church, a literal reading of biblical texts, and a patriarchal understanding of Christianity. The conference also set a precedent

as to what eucharist could be that had a lasting effect on Catholic feminists. “To me, Eucharist doesn’t have to take place in a church with an ordained person. Eucharist to me is every time I gather with someone [...] in a conversation or group [...],” argued Quinn.⁵³ “And I think we as women have to redo the sacramental system [...] We need to claim when it is Eucharist, when it is a sacred moment between two people or between several or many.”

Small Women-Church organizations and services existed prior to the 1983 conference, but afterwards they proliferated and sprung up all over the country. Women routinely gathered together and celebrated their own, unique version of mass. For instance, CCW held services twice a month, and a CWW offshoot, Chicago Women-Church had monthly or bimonthly liturgies. Groups also housed lectures and discussions in the vein of consciousness-raising sessions. The creation of Women-Church and the independent liturgies were incredibly profound for many Catholic women. Some commented that Women-Church replaced going to institutional church services because it was too painful and they felt so isolated in what they now viewed as a man’s space. “I can’t attend mass [at my area church] anymore nor with any of these sexist churches,” wrote a member to the organizers of the conference, “even though I strongly believe in the Eucharist faith tradition.”⁵⁴ Others who had long left the Catholic faith rejoiced at finding Women-Church, as the alternative service and theology allowed some women to

⁵³ Donna Quinn, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

⁵⁴ Correspondence from Marian Shields to “Woman-Church,” September 25, 1983, Box 8, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA

reconcile their uncertainty with Christianity and their desire for a spiritual community. For some, finding Women-Church meant reclaiming their spiritual side, even if their current vision of God was nothing like their previous interpretations. For many women, Women-Church was an invaluable experience. “I have been more than half-out of the Church since reading Mary Daly [...] and had learned about more feminist issues thru very ‘anti-religious’ women,” wrote a Woman-Church member.⁵⁵ “To see one’s own painfully individual journey validated by a community has to be one of life’s major moments.”

The definition of what Women-Church was and could be expanded. After the 1983 conference, Women-Church advertised and welcomed any woman, not just those with Catholic roots. What originally began as a crusade for women’s ordination in Catholicism had evolved into a group of disgruntled Catholic women claiming church for themselves, and then to a broad, non-denominational collection of women who came together under the guise of women’s spirituality, and more simply as women. Religion, class, race, residency, or political beliefs would not bring women together or separate them. Women of all backgrounds could universally come and work together as women, they argued.

This optimism, and some might add naiveté or ignorance, that women could overcome vast differences because of their gender is similar to expectations and attempts made in the larger women’s liberation movement. A growing critique by women of color

⁵⁵ Correspondence from Carol Stringer to “Woman church,” November 16, 1983, Box 8, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

by the late 1970s challenged feminism's assumption of a universal sisterhood, claiming that feminists consciously or subconsciously improperly prioritized gender over all else and that mainstream issues of the larger movement were those of primarily white, middle class women. The assumption, women of color argued, was for women to overlook the concerns of their own group (ethnic, racial, or class) and value the issues of white, middle class women. One of the most famous critiques of universal sisterhood was from African American poet and writer Audre Lorde's "An Open Letter to Mary Daly."⁵⁶ She critiqued Daly's Anglo-centrism in *Gyn/Ecology*, arguing that "[...] to imply, however, that all women suffer the same oppression simply because we are women, is to lose sight of the many varied tools of patriarchy. It is to ignore how these tools are used by women without awareness against each other."⁵⁷

While Catholic feminists and WCC, now calling themselves Women-Church Convergence, wanted to be racially and ethnically diverse and to represent the needs and concerns of all women, this was much easier said than done. Minority women complained about being used as token representatives, being overworked, and relegated to issues of racism.⁵⁸ Eventually, the relationship between WCC and Las Hermanas suffered and then ceased because of claims that WCC marginalized and ignored Latina women's suggestions. The women of WCC were tremendously hurt and disappointed by

⁵⁶ Audre Lorde, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, California: The Crossing Press, 1984).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁸ Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement" in *What's Left?: Liberal American Catholics*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 58-61.

these accusations and the dissolution of the relationship with Las Hermanas. WCC argued that they should examine their own overt or internalized racism and they vowed to be more inclusive, hoping that minority women would make up at least a quarter of their membership, but it is hard to determine what legitimate efforts were made to draw women of color into WCC. These efforts were made more difficult as major groups, like Las Hermanas and the National Black Sisters Conference, distanced themselves from the Women-Church movement, making an already predominately white movement even whiter and less appealing to women of color. By the end of the 1990s, even though the rhetoric of inclusivity and diversity was strong, the Women-Church movement was largely white, more so than it had been almost two decades previously.⁵⁹

By the late 1980s, the Women-Church movement fractured into sects who labeled themselves Catholic, post-Christian, ecumenical, or Goddess-centered. The lack of cohesiveness, and a drifting towards secularism was evident at the second major Women-Church conference in 1987. Speakers included familiar Catholic feminist favorites, like Ruether and Sister Theresa Kane, but also secular women's liberation spokeswoman and *Ms.* founder Gloria Steinem. The movement had grown, as evidenced by the unexpectedly high turnout of approximately 3,200 compared to the first conference attendance of 1,400. But with this growth came a lack of structure and an array of ideas for how to perform and be Women-Church. The first conference was about acknowledging that Catholic women could and were celebrating their faith creatively and

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

unifying women. The latter conference's tone and approach is exemplified in the chosen title, "Claiming Our Power."

There was a eucharist meal, and as at the first conference, this was a very popular concept and event. But the service and the conference as a whole had moved away from their Catholic roots. Many women were taken aback by the liturgy service that included the consecration chant "I am holy" seven times. "Not God, mind you, but 'I,' not even 'we.' It scarcely moved much beyond such sentiments," wrote an attendee.⁶⁰ "Doesn't the discipleship of equals require that we be following someONE? And to use bread and wine without any reference to Jesus the Christ, or at least to the Exodus and Passover, caused me confusion about what we were doing." Ruether, while understanding the intention of the chant and the need for women to move away from a traditional pejorative image of women, was also bothered by the chant and unfocused spirituality of the liturgy. She wrote that the phrase "I am holy" "threatens to become simply self-sacralization."⁶¹ Reflecting on the service she also wondered "where we are going with our understanding of liturgical theology." Many worried that the movement was too individualistic and that it had lost its spiritual core.

A liturgy that goes too long without bringing in that awareness of negative reality is in danger of becoming a new ideology and escapism. We flee into a make-believe garden of Eden of milk and honey, balloons and clowns, into a pretense that we all "love each other," and blank out the truth. Such make-believe is possible only for comfortable women who sit on top of the oppression of most of the rest of the world. If we confuse this kind of comfort with holiness and

⁶⁰ Karen Sue Smith, "'Claiming Our Power': Dialogue, Worship, & Development," *Commonweal*, November 6, 1987, Box 9, file 3, CCW Collection, WLA.

⁶¹ Ruether, "Theology and Liturgy in Women-Church," 1987, Box 5, file 4, CCW Collection, WLA.

redemption, we shall fail indeed to make Women-Church any more than a new form of idolatry.

Small, local gatherings had similar services that combined elements from Catholicism, Judaism, Goddess-worship, Wicca, secular feminism, and beyond, with the imagination the only barrier. Others groups had services that resembled Catholic ones, and had a great emphasis on and worship of Jesus and God. The loose, gradually expanding definition of what Women-Church was defined its success and failure. Most of the women came from Catholic roots, but there was no standard for Women-Church services. WCC and local Women-Church groups struggled with defining what it was they were, what their theology was, if they should even have a unifying theology, and what their services should represent. But, like any social movement, especially second wave feminist movements, there was no consensus and an aversion to leadership roles and hierarchy, leading to a mishmash of ideas, disorganization, and arguments over influence and power. While the range of ideas and services allowed many women to feel welcome and to creatively define how they would practice their faith, to others, women's liturgies seemed watered-down and lacking any spiritual or critical substance.

If any congregation and a collection of their religious leaders were polled regarding what the dogma actually says, moral ethics, and opinions of how the faith should be practiced, there would surely be numerous perspectives. Lack of unity was not unique to Women-Church. But what was problematic about Women-Church, and why they were doomed to have discord, was that they were unable to state a core theology or dogma and instate new traditions and practices. They obviously could not create and

dictate as such; that would go against the entire spirit of the movement. But the lack of a core leadership, guidelines, and theology resulted in an unfocused faith, where essentially “anything goes”—as far from traditional Catholicism as one can imagine. While major religions like Catholicism are criticized for their rigidity, emphasis on tradition and ritual, and their top-down approach, this strict approach certainly has its advantages for maintaining a vast, worldwide collection of members.

The Women-Church movement dwindled by the turn of the twenty-first century. Small, consolidated groups do still meet and perform their own rituals, but overall the intensity of the movement and Catholic feminism has waned. No singular reason points to the decline, but rather a collection of problems that faced Women-Church throughout its prominence. One aspect was the burnout that many women felt. After years of seeking changes to the institutional church and then debating and working towards a creation of a new form of worship, they were exhausted at what seemed to be a never-ending debate. Personal disagreements with members and problems over the amount of influence and leadership some groups and individuals had or were perceived to have also created tension. Also, an undeniable element for the decline was that many of the members of Women-Church were aged and dying, with few new members to carry on the legacy. The lack of cohesiveness and Catholic-center was another reason why some left. Furthermore, minority women had always struggled to feel at home with Women-Church.

For some, Women-Church became less essential. Perhaps the reevaluation of church sacraments and organized religion led them to reconsider the necessity of collective worship all together. Quinn explains:

If I pray with others that's fine, that's like a plus in my life. If I pray alone, I'm never alone because I'm always surrounded and talking to my brother and sister and I'm always talking to those people that have gone before us, they're the ones that continue to lead us, I never forget them. [...] So, I guess you figure out if you're creative, which women are, you figure out other ways to pray, other ways to celebrate the scared.⁶²

Catholic feminism at large, but especially the Women-Church movement, demonstrate the problem with pigeonholing a social movement or activist group as radical or liberal, something that is often done when discussing feminist activism.⁶³ Liberalism is defined by those who work to alter a system; those who are radical call for the overthrow of these structures and work to build new models. The women of Women-Church cannot be labeled easily as liberal or radical, or of only trying to improve upon an institution or demanding a new one. Also, activism has to be considered within context—what is considered radical in religious circles, may not seem radical or even liberal in secular ones.

On the one hand, it can be argued that the creation of Women-Church as an alternative form of Catholicism was in many ways one of the most radical acts of

⁶² Quinn.

⁶³ Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Echols challenges the notion that liberal and radical activism did not intersect; that radical activists were uninvolved with systemic change, and that liberals were only interested in working within the current framework.

feminism in the late twentieth century. These women, in disapproval of the church hierarchy, found a feminist interpretation of their faith and loudly and actively ignored church protocol. Women claimed that their positions were true to Catholicism and that one of the oldest, most influential institutions in the world was challengeable, sinful, and unnecessary. Yet, many did this while maintaining their role and privilege as women religious, as active Catholic laypersons, all while still working to transform the institutional church. WOC still fights for women's ordination, and some members of Women-Church have been ordained in the Catholic faith, against the orders and recognition of the official church.

Some, like Sister Donna Quinn, are unable to be categorized. Her feminism, rather than her Catholicism defines her.⁶⁴ She has been a tireless advocate for women in and outside of the church for most of her adult life. She helped create the foundation for the Women-Church conferences that helped shape the movement; a movement that preached that women were church and did not need the blessing of male authority figures to claim this rite. While a participant in and an organizer of Women-Church services and conferences, she still criticizes the church for its status on women's ordination. She maintains her title and status as a Catholic nun, yet does not attend institutional services, and has not for years, except for friend and family weddings and funerals. She has little desire to follow or preach church dogma, finding much of it flawed, but she has a strong spiritual core and personal faith. She values the practice of eucharist, but claims to perform it and experience it without the need of a priest or even a ceremony or blessing.

⁶⁴ Quinn.

The aforementioned cannot be defined unambiguously as radical or liberal. While she is just one example of a member of Women-Church, she is a representative of the fluidity of the Catholic feminist movement, and feminism in general.

Women-Church also shows the vast reach of the feminist movement, which was a major influence on the participants. Even though by the mid-eighties the media essentially called the feminist movement over, clearly, feminist activism had not extinguished. Also, when we speak of feminism in the second half of the twentieth century, we tend to think of an ideological and literal break between “second-wave” and “third-wave” activism and thought: second-wave feminism referring to feminist activity beginning in the mid 1960s and ending with the failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, and third-wave beginning in the late 1980s and continuing to the present. Typically, second-wave feminism is defined as the movement that was interested in improving the status of women in the workforce, overturning gender roles, obtaining abortion rights, and confronting and eliminating the sexualization of and violence towards women. Third-wave feminism is often described as being more interested in sexual liberation and working towards the creation of a feminism that is inclusive, but does not assume a universal woman’s experience. It is necessary to distinguish between divergent ideologies, main issues, and strategies when considering feminism since the sixties, as certainly these elements have changed over time. But viewing feminism in such limited frameworks has hidden the range of activism and theory that exists outside of these two

definitions and time periods, like Catholic feminism and the development of Women-Church.

Even though Women-Church did not develop into the major movement that Catholic feminists hoped for, that is not to say that the experience many had with Women-Church was not valuable. For many women, their experience with Women-Church was eye-opening and life-changing. It is also impossible to ascertain or evaluate the effects of individual faith. The 1980s saw the rise in conservatism and the Religious Right, affecting the face and tone of politics and public policies in the United States ever since. The progressive Catholic resurgence did not have such a great impact. But, perhaps instead we can view Women-Church as one of the last major efforts of the once idealistic and optimistic leftist, American, Vatican II-Catholics, and one example of the ubiquitous impact of the feminist movement.

CONCLUSION

The early 1960s provided a perfect storm for the origins of American Catholic feminism. The Second Vatican Council and the Sister Formation Movement set the stage for reforms and led to unintended revolutionary consequences. A sense that the church could be of and for the people, rather than a total top-down approach led to increased lay involvement. Also, that one of the oldest institutions could change was monumental and inspired Catholics to envision further changes. The changes created by Vatican II and Sister Formation especially affected women religious. These female-centered communities, who had a history of social justice work, eagerly took to a more democratic approach to their organizations and fostered feminism and bonds of sisterhood. As women and minorities challenged discrimination and demanded social change, liberal and feminist Catholicism blossomed.

The development of and demand for the contraceptive pill also had a great effect on Catholic laity. The church revisited the issue of contraception, setting up a panel that included a lay married woman, and including testimonies from married Catholics. Though the panel's majority position was to allow the practice of birth control, the pope disagreed, maintaining that artificial contraception was sinful and unacceptable. Here was a major shift in American Catholicism; the institutional church declared one thing, and American Catholics practiced another. The authority of Rome in American Catholics'

lives diminished as the majority chose to use or excuse the practice of contraceptives. If the church was wrong about birth control or did not understand women's experiences, some Catholics wondered, what else was it wrong about? What else could be questioned?

In many ways the development of Catholic feminism parallels that of the larger feminist movement. Catholic feminism challenged traditions, gender roles, and dogma that they viewed as sexist and discriminatory. What started out as diplomatic and optimistic demands for liberal alterations of church practices and a more inclusive church developed into radical arguments and view of the church as so flawed that nothing short of revolutionary changes would make the institution and Christianity in general a hospitable place for women. Like the radicalization and proliferation of secular feminism, a variety of theories and demands grew as frustration about inaction or insufficient action rose.

Both the secular and Catholic feminist movements challenged patriarchal, institutional religion, but Catholic feminists were optimistic that the church would and could change, and that religion was valuable. Rather than only fight for social progress outside of the church, Catholic feminists viewed the church as worth fighting for. The most typical answer as to why they stayed in the church while disagreeing with so many of its practices was that the church was just as much their home as it was for conservatives and traditionalists. The message of Jesus had been corrupted and misused, they argued. The church was to serve the congregation, the poor, and those in need, not the hierarchy; Jesus was a feminist who preached universal freedom and love and

acceptance of everyone, they argued. That the current church failed to do this did not mean that progressives should abandon the church, but was more reason to fight. If feminists and social justice liberals walked away from the church, who would be there to demand change and steer the church in the right direction? If feminists left the church, what would be left for their daughters? Furthermore, while the church was patriarchal, so were society at large and other religions. “Other institutions might have a few more options,” explained Sister Marge Tuite, “but most of them have a basic patriarchal structure.”¹ To think that one could avoid patriarchy was naive.

Frustration and a rise of liberalism led to agitation for women’s ordination, female altar servers, a reinterpretation of dogma and practices, a new priesthood, and eventually a grassroots, female-centered and led worship services and community, Women-Church. Catholic feminism was grounded in a history social justice work and a liberal interpretation of the Bible that stressed equality. But activists would grow to associate more with women and the belief in sisterhood rather than with Catholicism. They emphasized the experience of women at large and in the church, bringing attention to sexual abuse, gender inequality, and complexity surrounding birth control and reproductive rights. Catholic feminists, by and large, would support the legality and necessity of safe and available birth control and abortion services, siding with women instead of the institutional church. Similar to the larger feminist movement, Catholic feminism held the belief of a universal sisterhood. Often, gender trumped race, class and

¹ Marjorie Tuite interview by Ronni Schier September 27, 1985 and November 14, 1985, Box 2, file 25, Marjorie Tuite Papers, WLA.

sexuality, as Catholic feminists presented the idea of common women's experience.

Generally, the major concerns of white feminists were not the same as those of feminists of color or working class women, leading to a critique that Catholic feminism, as well as second wave feminism, was primarily for white, middle class women and that the issues of women of color were ignored or viewed as less important.

Secular feminism has benefited from longevity. The critiques made by women of color, lesbians, and working class women have expanded the definition and reach of feminism. Presently, feminists often embrace the idea of a multitude of experiences, rather than a universal female one. While some argue that modern feminism is too broad and that "anything goes," the expanse, fluidity, and willingness to understand differences, race, class, and sexuality has opened up feminism and allowed it to flourish and be defined and adopted by new generations.

Catholic feminism, though, as a movement has not had the same success. Activists and feminist women religious were not able to maintain the enthusiasm for a feminism rooted in Catholicism or the optimism to fight for feminist change in the church. The generation of "Vatican II Catholics" and "new nuns" is aged and dying out and younger generations have not been drawn to Catholic feminism. I theorize that many feminist and progressive women today are not as willing as their foremothers to stick with the institutional church. To many feminists and liberal women the Catholic church's resistance to feminism, gender equality, and birth control, make it appear old fashioned, out of touch, and lacking authority. Especially to American women who tend to value

democracy, the idea of infallibility and the unwillingness of the church to consider female voices or gender equality is bothersome. But I hesitate speaking so broadly. More work needs to be done to determine how the rise of feminism has impacted younger generations of the Catholic church. Weekly church participation is down, but to what extent is feminism responsible for this?

One of the most common explanations for why women religious joined an order in the first place was that there were limited options for women, and that they saw sisters as strong, respected women. Since the feminist movement, the opportunities for American women have expanded exponentially. Some sisters and former sisters have said that if they were a young woman today they would most likely not join an order, but instead join the Peace Corps or work in social service. With the massive decline of new recruits to orders, especially amongst young women, it seems logical that many American women feel the same way as older sisters—that one does not have to sacrifice having a partner or family or be a part of a religious organization to participate in the greater good. Likewise, the fewer the sisters there are, the less likely younger women are encouraged and inspired to become nuns.

Surprisingly, many feminist nuns are not disappointed with the decline of women religious. Sister Donna Quinn says that she is not bothered by watching women leave their orders. “[...] I think we’re all evolving, and I don’t think we ever should be stuck in how the priesthood is now or stuck in how nunhood is now,” she says. “Communities will spring up, they will be different, they will be what is meant to be and what is meant to

address the injustices all over the world.”² Former sister Fran Belmonte concurs. “The orders are dead,” she says, but does not mourn the loss and instead is happy with the progress made.³

Another generation goes about justice in ways that are available to them that weren't available years ago [... The orders] have done wonderful work and they may live on as something else, I don't know. But orders as we knew them are gone. But part of their work was to put themselves out of business and they have. That's a very positive thing. One of the things that they did was to put strong women in ministry, but one of the things they tried to do was to open the doors for other women. Now between what they have done, there are many more doors open for women—ministerial doors that you don't have to be a nun for—and because the world has changed technologically and every way, there are more options, so the point is they worked.

Activists, by and large, feel similarly about the Catholic feminist movement as a whole—organizations dissolved and Women-Church groups have dwindled, but there has been great process outside of the church, and that is what matters, they argue. While some gave up hope that the institutional church would change and felt defeated, others remain hopeful for the future of the church, and focus on the successes rather than the failures. After the reforms of Vatican II, the institutional church changed very little, but the same cannot be said for American nuns and laywomen. The present church is not the church Catholic feminist want to leave for their daughters and future generations of women, but they hope and have faith that women will find their own spiritual and ethical community through feminism and outside of an institutional church. The feminist movement altered the social landscape; women fought for and expected legal and social

² Donna Quinn, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

³ Fran Belmonte, interview by Alexandra Michaelides, March 2009.

equality and the church's arguments about the natural, limited role of women and the sinfulness of birth control were not as easily accepted. "Here's the kicker," said Belmonte, "these guys can't put the toothpaste back in the tube. They are trying really hard. And the louder they scream, I'd figure the more they're figuring out that they can't put the toothpaste back."⁴

⁴ Belmonte.

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