Deconstructing the "Good Catholic Girl": A Critique of Sexual Pedagogies for Young Women in Catholic Ethics

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DECONSTRUCTING THE “GOOD CATHOLIC GIRL”:
A CRITIQUE OF SEXUAL PEDAGOGIES FOR YOUNG WOMEN
IN CATHOLIC ETHICS

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

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

KAREN ELIZABETH ROSS

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For my parents, Richard and Martha Ross,
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INTRODUCTION

(CATHOLIC) GIRLS AND SEX

“We are the ones we have been waiting for.”
—Alice Walker

As I sat in the classroom of a Catholic college preparatory school in the spring of 2016, I listened to the energetic chatter of about twenty junior girls who had come to talk about a ubiquitous yet taboo topic in their lives: sex. More particularly, they came to talk about their experiences with sexual education and the narratives given to them about female sexuality within a Catholic context. When I asked them about the messages they remember receiving from their Catholic sexual education, a few girls exclaimed in unison, “abstinence is key!” and burst into laughter. One girl explained that it wasn’t really sexual education, just “abstinence and scary pictures of STDs.” What was shocking to me was the lack of important information about sex and sexual health that was missing in their recollections of sexual education. Instead, they learned about “popping your cherry” (the tearing of the hymen), birth control, vaginal health, and sexual intercourse from friends, twitter, Internet searches, and movie scenes.

For over an hour, the girls discussed the societal expectations they felt to “hook-up,” their attempts to avoid being called a prude or a slut, the “blurriness” of consent, and the sexual education that happened through “word of mouth” among peers. At the end of the conversation, one thing was alarmingly clear to me as a theology teacher and a feminist sexual ethicist: we have a problem with the way we talk about sex and sexuality with Catholic young women and girls. This project is an attempt to understand this problem as it has manifested itself in the
sexual lives and gendered identities of Catholic young women, and propose recommendations for reimagining and reshaping Catholic sexual pedagogies.

1. Introducing the Problem(s): Let’s Talk about Female Sexuality

The narratives and messages given to young women and girls about sex and sexuality from religious leaders, parents, and educators can have lasting psychological, social, and moral impacts. Multiple sociological studies focused on adolescent sexual development have proven the influence of conversations about sexuality on teens’ emotional and physical well-being (especially for girls), and the damaging effects that sex-negative or inaccurate messages about sexuality can have on healthy sexual flourishing.¹ Catholic educational institutions such as parishes, homes and schools have the opportunity to provide young women with a sense of empowerment and support, especially as they are learning about their bodies and their sexuality. Unfortunately, these institutions are also able to produce precarity for young women by leaving topics out of sexual education curricula, sending negative messages about sexuality, or failing to address gender issues that currently affect young women and girls.

In recent decades, Catholic feminist theologians and ethicists, especially those focused on sexual ethics, have critiqued the tradition’s predominant model of female sexuality and femininity. They charge that it is understood within an androcentric and patriarchal framework, defined primarily by a woman’s reproductive capabilities. As feminist theologians have demonstrated, the Catholic magisterial theo-ethical model of femininity has had a powerful impact on women’s sense of identity within the Church, and continues to shape the way that

young Catholic women are taught to think and feel about their bodies and their sexuality.\(^2\)

Despite the efforts of the Second Vatican Council to address the needs and concerns of women as well as men in the modern world, female sexuality in particular has been left widely unaddressed and undeveloped. In the field of Catholic sexual ethics, the Magisterium continues to uphold essentialist notions of sex and gender, and any sexual ethic that has emerged from the hierarchy has “identified women above all else by their capacity for motherhood and domesticity.”\(^3\)

In the fifty years since Vatican II, many Catholic feminist theologians, religious and lay women have continued to press the Magisterium to listen to the lived experiences and concerns of women surrounding their sexuality, and create sexual pedagogies that contribute to the healthy sexual flourishing of Catholic young women and girls. This task involves analyzing the power discourse at work in the dominant gender and sexuality narratives set forth by Catholic sexual education curricula, and understanding which narratives have been prioritized over others. Narratives of exclusion, masked as patriarchal assumptions of gender, must be critiqued and deconstructed in order to formulate liberating pedagogies for those who have been historically ignored and subordinated due to their sex. The Church must find new methods and new stories for sexuality formation that work against patriarchal and kyriarchical structures of oppression, in


order to reconstruct and re-imagine sexual pedagogies for Catholic young women that contribute to their healthy moral, spiritual, and sexual flourishing. 4

2. Primary Research Objectives

The late Anne E. Carr, a pioneering feminist theologian and advocate, described the task of feminist theology as an effort “to correlate the central and liberating themes of biblical and Christian tradition with the experience of women in the contemporary situation.”5 Methodologically, I aim to take on such a task by drawing together traditional sources of theological feminist and sexual ethics with ethnographic data from young Catholic women in the United States. This methodological commitment reflects the liberationist dedication to the “insertion of the theologian in the real life of [the people], understood as a collective, conflictive and active reality.”6 Thus, for this research project I use ethnography in order to understand what narratives and messages young Catholic women have received about their sexuality and gender identity from Catholic sexual education, and how these messages have affected them today.

Dominant narratives about sex, gender and sexuality come in the forms of sexual education manuals; events and curricula promoted by dioceses; media; and stories and lessons enforced by teachers, catechists and parents. Subsequently, it is necessary to ask the following questions of these pedagogies: Is the Catholic teaching on female sexuality and identity relevant to young Catholic females in the 21st century? Is it empowering? Or perhaps a more probing

4 The term kyriarchy was first coined by feminist theologian and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza in her book But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).


question: Does the inability or failure of women to adhere to these teachings or understand their sexuality through the dominant narratives of the Church point to a need for transformation of these theological paradigms of femininity and female sexuality? Implicit in my methodology is the primacy of experience as a theo-ethical category for informing and shaping Catholic sexual ethics. In this project, I aim to explore different ways in which the Church can envision female sexuality in terms of a “liberating Eros” that gives voice to areas of lived experiences that have heretofore been suppressed.

3. Plan of the Dissertation

The argument of the dissertation unfolds in five chapters. The first chapter describes the methodology of the project, beginning with the value and contribution of ethnography as a method for Christian theology and ethics, and some defining characteristics of a Catholic feminist ethnography. Next, I outline the research design, including how I recruited and interviewed eight women to serve as my research collaborators. Finally, I describe my methodological commitments. This discussion of methodology describes my understanding as a researcher in this project and as a member of the Church, as well as the limits and obstacles to my study.

In order to lay the theo-ethical groundwork for the stories shared by the collaborators for this project, the second chapter addresses the major themes the Church has relied upon in its messages about sex, gender, and sexuality since the Second Vatican Council. Here, I identify three major themes within Catholic sexual ethics: essential gendered complementarity, the

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7 See the methodology section of Chapter One for further information on the use of experience as a source for Christian ethics.

primary role of procreation (and its relationship to pleasure), and purity ideals for Catholic
correctly, as they are demonstrated in Catholic pedagogical materials. In the second
part of the chapter, I conduct a small review of sexual education manuals used on the papal,
national, and diocesan levels. Finally, I address the role that experience has played in Catholic
ethics, including discussions about sensus fidelium.

Chapters three and four describe the experiences of the eight young women whom I
interviewed for this project. As young women who were raised in a Catholic environment
(parish, school, or home—sometimes all three), they share their memories of the way their
parents, teachers, and religious leaders talked to them about sex, and how they understood their
own gender and sexuality as girls. Chapter three briefly tells each collaborator’s story, and
chapter four provides a theo-ethical analysis of the interviews by highlighting four primary
themes that emerged. The first theme pertains to the way that the collaborators understand
themselves as young women in the church, which has resulted in feelings of alienation and
abandonment due to limited leadership positions. The second theme points to the gender and
sexual expectations the collaborators felt that contribute to the archetype of the “good Catholic
girl.” In this section I describe the expectation to be modest and the emphasis on purity, to avoid
being labeled a “whore” and to strive to be like the “Madonna.”

In the second part of chapter four I present theme three, which centers around religious
abstinence-only sex education, specifically its effects on the way the collaborators understood
sexual activity, and how it presents “sex-positive” or “sex-negative” lessons. Finally, the fourth
theme addresses the “disconnect” that the collaborators felt between their faith and their
sexuality; consequently, many of the young women turned to the media as a sexual educator
throughout their childhood and adolescence. The “disconnect” between faith and sexuality also
had harmful effects on the ways that two of the collaborators understood the sexual violence they experienced. The silence about sexual violence in Catholic sexual pedagogies contributed to feelings of shame and guilt as the survivors processed the violence they endured.

Using the collaborators for this project as sources of practical wisdom, chapter five presents my recommendations for reimagining and reconstructing Catholic sexual pedagogies so that they attend to the needs and concerns of Catholic young women today. I argue that in order to cultivate a “liberating Eros” within young women and girls, we must draw from feminist theologians and ethicists who have constructed sexual ethical frameworks that encourage young women to delight in their sexuality and seek that which promotes their flourishing. Finally, I propose five imperatives that I think are crucial to creating a liberating and just sexual education for Catholic youth, prioritizing the gendered experiences of young women. The conclusion of the dissertation reflects upon the project’s methodology and the need to confront the unaddressed disconnection between the reality of female experiences and the idealized standards by which females within the Catholic faith tradition are held, particularly in the area of sexual ethics.
CHAPTER ONE

METHODOLOGY OF THE PROJECT

“If we do not tell the truth as it appears to us from our many standpoints, we have no hope either of broadening our range of vision or of finding any similarities between us.”
—Mary D. Pellauer

The inspiration for this research project arose out of the powerful stories told to me by friends, students, peers—fellow Catholic girls—throughout my life. These stories (both mine and others) became sources of moral wisdom and strongly influence how I approach feminist and sexual ethics as a Catholic moral theologian and ethicist. By reflecting on these stories—my own and those of my peers—I have come to understand the powerful role that experience plays in shaping and challenging the moral identity of young women in the Church. This project seeks to examine the feelings and experiences of Catholic young women in the formation of their sexual identities, and understand how Catholic sexual pedagogies are influencing this formation. By utilizing ethnographic method in this research project, I am prioritizing the importance of narrative and experience in the articulation of a Catholic sexual ethic for young women. As Christian ethicists Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen insightfully note:

Ethnography is a way to take particularity seriously—to discover truth revealed through embodied habits, relations, practices, narratives, and struggles. And as it is joined with a

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2 Chapter Two will particularly address the role of experience in Catholic Moral Tradition.
theological sensibility, our conviction is that each particular life, situation, or community is potentially, albeit only partially, revelatory of transcendent or divine truth.³

Drawing on the marginalized voices of young women in the Catholic Church, this project takes seriously the truths (and struggles) hidden in the embodied particularities of female sexuality. This commitment is a reflection of my belief that the narratives of these marginalized young women may reveal transcendent or divine truth.

More specifically, I chose to interview a small group of young, Catholic women for this project in order to bring to light competing discourses prevalent in the construction of sexual identity for young women in the Catholic Church. These discourses are not only theological; they involve cultural conceptions and expectations of female sexuality, purity standards for young women, and Western ideals of femininity and gender identity. Sociologist Lynn M. Phillips, in her research on young women’s reflections about sexuality and domination, notes that we always construct our identities from competing discourses, or a set of prevailing ideas or cultural messages. She explains,

Both produced and reproduced by the institutions and social practices with which we live, discourses subtly instruct us how to think, speak, and act in ways that identify us as part of some socially meaningful group (e.g., a ‘woman,’ a ‘student,’ a ‘good citizen’).⁴

Her work focuses on the tension and digestion of competing discourses by young women regarding sexuality and domination. Likewise, by utilizing ethnography in the form of in-person individual interviews, I hope to learn which narratives and discourses are being prioritized in the education of young Catholic women, which are being excluded or unaddressed by the curricula, and the resulting tensions/competing discourses that may result.

³ Scharen, Christian and Aana Marie Vigen, eds. Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics (London; New York: Continuum, 2011), [xxi].

I am only one among many feminist theologians and ethicists who have challenged the academy and the Catholic Church to pay attention to whose experiences are taken for granted, and whose experiences are ignored in the research that underlies Catholic ethics. Liberation theologies and feminist theologies in particular have prioritized the voices and experiences of the marginalized in order to call attention to whose experiences are assumed as normative and representative in Church teachings. As Scharen and Vigen highlight, liberation theologians “argue that in order to attend to the complexities of human experience as a source of moral wisdom, [Christian theologians] should give special attention to marginalized voices and those voices not typically heard in academic or pastoral contexts.”\(^5\) This project reflects this commitment by bringing the marginalized voices of young women to the forefront of theological and ethical conversation.

In this chapter, I will begin by addressing some of the defining characteristics and contributions of qualitative research, specifically ethnography, as a way of doing Christian theology and ethics. This first section is divided into two parts: (1) The Development of Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics, and (2) Ethnography as Embodied Knowing- a Catholic Feminist Ethnography. The latter is an attempt to flesh out some features of a Catholic, feminist ethnography, understood as a type of “embodied knowing” that is constantly reflecting on the ethnographer’s role as a woman, who in this case is studying women, within a patriarchal context. In the second section, I will name the details surrounding my research design and some of the methodological commitments that guide my project. This discussion of methodology will

\(^5\) Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 98.
serve to demonstrate how I understand my role as a researcher in this project and in the Church, methodological limits and obstacles, and how I chose to structure my research.

### 1.1. The Use of Ethnography in Christian Theology and Ethics

Ethnography is a form of qualitative research that has become a dynamic and valuable process for “doing” Christian theology and ethics, particularly as it has emerged in the past few decades in theo-ethical scholarship. In the field of Christian Ethics, there has been a growing interest in the intersection of social sciences and theological ethics. Christian theologians and ethicists such as Mary McClintock Fulkerson, Susan A. Ross, Aana Marie Vigen, Christian Scharen, Todd Whitmore, Jennifer Beste, Melissa Browning, Emily Reimer-Barry, and Jeanine Viau (to name only a few) have incorporated various kinds of ethnography, a methodological approach traditionally identified with the social sciences, as a way of “doing” Christian Ethics. However, before such incorporation, it is helpful to trace briefly the roots of this methodological approach. As Scharen and Vigen explain in their book, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, “It is necessary to situate the rise of ethnography as a means for doing theology and ethics within the larger rise of the study of culture as a *major grounding discourse* for theology.”\(^6\) Thus, at the onset of this chapter, it is important to understand the rise of the study of culture in the 20th century in order to demonstrate its use in theological and ethical scholarship.

*Ethno* (culture) and *graphy* (writing) is literally translated as “writing culture.” Anthropologist James Clifford describes this writing of culture as a continual process of

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\(^6\) Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 45 (emphasis mine).
“meaning-making.” In his influential book *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Clifford writes:

Ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, tilling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes.

In other words, ethnographers describe and analyze the meanings that people and groups ascribe to their respective cultures, while at the same time participating in these processes of meaning-making. Noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz describes ethnography as contributing “thick description,” a term coined by philosopher Gilbert Ryle, that refers to a kind of description that not only explains *what* but also *how*, thereby placing behaviors and messages into historical and social context in order to unpack the cultural meanings behind the particularities of life. The aim of ethnography, according to Geertz, is “to draw large conclusions from small, but very densely textured facts; to support broad assertions about the role of culture in the construction of collective life by engaging them exactly with complex specifics.”

Ethnography deals with specific locations and interactions, and contends that valuable insight and truth can be gleaned from the particular. This work is often done by attentive study of people in their specific social locations—through listening and observing their words, behaviors, gestures, memories, narratives, experiences and opinions. Ethnographic methods, according to

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Scharen and Vigen, “provide a path by which truth emerges, rather than a way to apply truth.”¹¹ These cultural, religious, or ethical truths (found through experience) are taken seriously as sources of wisdom and insight in ethnography. The knowledge of others gleaned through ethnographic work is used to correct assumptions and misunderstandings, and can be used to offer new ways of understanding and interpreting the world.¹² This is particularly important for theologians and ethicists who are seeking to understand and interpret divine truths present in the world. Thus, ethnographic work is a reflection of a particular way of seeing and discovering that invites the communal and individual stories, cultures, practices and experiences to dialogue with the work of the researcher.¹³

Ethnography originally arose as a method of scientific inquiry within the discipline of anthropology, but has since spread to social sciences, sciences and humanities as a major subsection within qualitative research. Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and E.E. Evans-Pritchard were some of the pioneers of the field in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, their work characterized by venturing into a field site and collecting data personally.¹⁴ The social sciences at the time were “primarily theoretical (detached), and where they had made empirical inroads, these were either quantitative (experimental, statistical) or religious (missionary) in nature.” Adler and Adler note, “This made the methodology seemingly external to the research

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¹¹ Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 17.


¹³ Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, 17.

subjects.” Ethnography arose as a departure from this methodology—ethnographic researchers made it a point to immerse themselves in the field, with the subjects and in their culture, often for extended amounts of time.

When going into a field site, Franz Boas stood out from other anthropologists of the time by seeking to keep cultural and racial bias in check. He did so by making “careful, sustained, detailed observations of what was actually found in the field,” something that is now referred to as thick description. Still, the ethnographers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries worked under the assumption that their research was objective, and that what they observed and experienced could be translated into objective facts. Late 20th century ethnographers such as James Clifford critiqued these assumptions by noting that the historical predicament of ethnography is that it is “always caught up in the invention, not the representation, of cultures.”

Interpretations and observations within ethnography can never fully describe or objectively evaluate the self-understandings and worldviews of the people or culture studied; thus, self-reflection and awareness of the subjective nature of interpretation is necessary for ethnography, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Ethnography is one form of qualitative research, which is an exploratory and open-ended form of research, typically done within the social sciences. Since qualitative research can be done from a wide range of perspectives (empirical, political, sociological, pastoral, narrative-
based, etc.), and with many different specific methodologies (e.g. participant observation, focus groups, one-on-one interviews), it is difficult to encompass it under a single umbrella-like model.\textsuperscript{19} Social scientists Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln offer a possible definition of qualitative research:

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.\textsuperscript{20}

In other words, qualitative research involves using a variety of methods and approaches in order for the researcher to explore the world and understand the way that individuals and communities interpret it and interact within it. Central to the overall goal of qualitative research is the desire to “become immersed in a particular setting in order for the researcher to understand how people make sense of their lives.”\textsuperscript{21} Likewise, in this project it is important to situate the young women within their “natural setting” or context- in this case the social spaces of their parishes, schools, homes and the Catholic Church in the United States, in order to understand how they make sense of their gendered identities and experiences of sexuality.

Qualitative research methods generally consist of three kinds of data collection, according to sociologist Michael Quinn Patton: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (2) direct observation; and (3) written documents, though the categories have become much broader through the development of participatory action research, focus groups, and the use of surveys,

\textsuperscript{19} Swinton and Mowat, \textit{Practical Theology and Qualitative Research}, 29.


\textsuperscript{21} Emily Reimer-Barry, “In Sickness and in Health: Towards a Renewed Roman Catholic Theology of Marriage in Light of the Experiences of Married Women Living with HIV/AIDS” (PhD Diss., Loyola University Chicago, 2008), 43.
to name only a few. For this research project, I have chosen to do in-depth open-ended interviews in order to analyze patterns and themes that emerge out of the narratives provided by eight Catholic young women. The data gathered from these interviews consists of direct quotations from the young women about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge, as well as from field notes taken during the interviews. In Chapter Two, I also analyze written documents by collecting and examining sexual education manuals from various parishes and schools throughout the Archdiocese of Chicago and those put forth by the Vatican and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Open-ended interviews are distinct in that they allow the researcher to work with informants or collaborators to produce a cultural description, since the informants are the “native speakers” of the culture seeking to be understood. In this research project, I will refer to the interview participants or informants as collaborators due to the deep sense of partnership that was demanded in the interview process. The open-ended nature of the interview allows for questions to emerge in the process, and for the researcher to ask questions in such a way that further allows for the collaborator to take the questions in any direction she chooses. At times, this kind of exchange can change the direction of the interview altogether. Through the use of open-ended questions, a researcher is able to have a “structured conversation” with the collaborator that presents itself as a dialogue more than a one-way interrogation. These

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23 More detailed information about the research design is found on p. 31.


questions are not set in stone at the beginning of the process; rather, they are refined during the process and may even change significantly throughout data collection.

The nature of qualitative inquiry is very different from quantitative inquiry in that it values a different kind of data and therefore a different end result. Qualitative research findings (in this case ethnographic findings) are generally “longer, more detailed, and more variable in content” than quantitative findings, which may come in the form of statistics or percentages. The ethnographer seeks to understand “what is going on?” in a specific cultural context, often discovered through prolonged, attentive observation of and discussion with only a few participants.\textsuperscript{27}

Theologian and ethicist Emily Reimer-Barry describes the ethnographic process as “ambiguous and messy” for this reason- the data is complex and hard to categorize. Rather than seeking to yield an unbiased result (which many agree is an impossible feat) that can be generalized to a larger population, qualitative research makes clear that each collaborator “speaks only for her/himself, and cannot be assumed to speak for everyone in her/his social group.”\textsuperscript{28} Such assumptions about the nature of ethnographic data must be checked during each stage of the research process.

As was noted earlier in James Clifford’s critique of the lack of self-criticism in much of early ethnographic and anthropological research, it is imperative for an ethnographer to fully acknowledge the subjective nature of her interpretations and characterizations.\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{itemize}
\item[]\textsuperscript{26} Scharen and Vigen, \textit{Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics}, 108.
\item[]\textsuperscript{27} Reimer-Barry, “In Sickness and in Health,” 45.
\item[]\textsuperscript{28} Scharen and Vigen, \textit{Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics}, 111.
\item[]\textsuperscript{29} Scharen and Vigen, \textit{Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics}, 11.
\end{itemize}
Barry notes in her ethnographic project involving interviews with Catholic women in Chicago living with HIV/AIDS,

Qualitative inquiry recognizes the reality of subjectivity of both the researcher and the collaborator. That this method is subjective does not prevent it from being methodologically sound. In fact, absolute objectivity, whether in qualitative or quantitative methods, is not possible; the researcher always plays a part in describing and interpreting “what is going on.”

Thus, an ethnographer must continuously and critically reflect on her own assumptions, biases and privileges so as to not misconstrue or misrepresent that which the collaborator is sharing about her life, experiences, and understandings of truth.

John and Lyn Lofland, in *Analyzing Social Settings: A Guide to Qualitative Observation and Analysis*, emphasize that “All human observations of the world (whether of the social, the biological, or the physical world) are necessarily filtered. Human perception is always human conception.” In other words, when we observe the world, what we “see” is influenced by our social location, our language, our history, and the cultural narratives told to us. Also, our “looking” is always governed by our prior implicit biases about the social or ethical issue being addressed. Thus, the work of good ethnography ought to be work that reflects a constant questioning on the part of the researcher about whether the data gathered is simply tautology, or data produced in order to confirm one’s own assumptions- in the case of this project, assumptions about the experiences and narratives about young Catholic women in regards to their sexuality and female identity within the Church.

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30 Reimer-Barry, “In Sickness and in Health,” 44.

31 The research design section of this chapter explains how I as an ethnographer sought to continuously and critically reflect on my own assumptions and biases throughout the research process.

1.1.1. The Development of Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics

Some scholars may ask, what is Christian theology and ethics doing “at the table” of ethnography, which is traditionally situated within the social sciences? Can theology and ethics incorporate a non-normative research method such as ethnography into an intentionally normative discipline? Furthermore, how can Catholic ethics in particular take seriously an experience-based methodology? This section will seek to answer these questions by examining the arguments of Christian theologians and ethicists that point to why ethnography deserves a space at the table of theology and ethics, and vice versa.

Theologian Kathryn Tanner identifies the contribution that anthropological understandings of culture have made to theology by suggesting, “Theology [ought to be] viewed as a part of culture, as a form of cultural activity.”³³ Like all cultural activities, theology is historically and socially constructed and cannot be understood on its own without examining the cultural influences surrounding its practice. Tanner notes that cultural anthropology can remind theologians that theology is always a human activity and production. Similarly, Mary McClintock Fulkerson describes her ethnographic work as a participant-observer at Good Samaritan United Methodist Church as a kind of participant “witnessing” that is undeniably theological.³⁴ Specifically, she makes the case that the deep self-reflection involved in her participation in the congregation is “profoundly theological,” since it demands recognition of the

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³⁴ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, forward to *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, by Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds. (New York: Continuum, 2011), xiii.
privilege and bias that comes with the position of “observer.” In sum, in the fields of Christian theology and ethics, scholars such as these have demonstrated that not only do ethnography and Christian theology and ethics work in tandem with one another, but that ethnography can help thicken Christian moral discourse. They maintain that research in the area of morality points to the need for ethnography in order to understand fully the moral landscape of Christians in the 21st century.

In *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, Scharen and Vigen’s main objective is to demonstrate that “in order to do theology and ethics well, scholars need to explore them through visceral ways, within embodied communities, and in particular contexts,” and that ethnography serves as a way to accomplish this, particularly for Christian ethics. The worldly realities presented in ethnographic projects, in all of their messiness and complexity, are places where divine truth is found and expressed. Scharen and Vigen contend that ethnography is properly theological in that it is “an illuminating way to take seriously God’s incarnation in the world.” In other words, ethnography serves as a way to “do” theological ethics while attending to the incarnational nature of Christianity. God’s immanence in the world (a result of the incarnation) is seen most clearly in the particularities of life, or as McClintock Fulkerson names, “places of redemption.”

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35 McClintock Fulkerson, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, xiii.

36 Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, xviii.


Ethnography is theological in its attentiveness to the divine embedded in the particular. Theologians and ethicists who undertake ethnographic research in their projects privilege the particular in order to understand God as She is present in specific places, rituals, texts and practices. As Scharen and Vigen note, theologians and ethicists use ethnography in order to “conceptualize moral agency in relation to God and the world, and flesh out the content of conceptual categories such as justice.”

In this particular project, I use ethnography in order to answer core questions about Catholic sexual ethics as it presents itself in the particular narratives and experiences of young women. In some cases, ethnography fleshes out the content of categories of injustice as well as justice, and how these categories affect conceptions of self-identity and identity within churches.

Todd Whitmore takes the point a step further when he boldly critiques the many Christian ethicists who practice “veranda ethics,” where they observe and write about social, ethical issues from a distance, a method that prevents them from fully “going out to the stranger,” as Jesus instructed. Through his ethnographic work at a displaced persons camp in Northern Uganda, Whitmore demonstrates how this type of “veranda” ethical research, or a “discipline of texts” falls short of understanding the messy and complex embodied reality of the specific issues ethicists seek to address. Noting a “displacement of the particular” in Christian Ethics, Whitmore references the work of Christian ethicist Stanley Hauerwas in making a claim about moral statements. He states that moral statements are intelligible only because there are

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interpretive contexts from which these statements are understood. These contexts are made apparent in the form of narratives rooted in lived experience.\textsuperscript{42} Therefore, Christian ethics must attend to the divine particularities of life in order to imitate Jesus, whose very life displayed distinctiveness, immanence and particularity.

Mary McClintock Fulkerson demonstrates how ethnography is a uniquely theological endeavor in her book, \textit{Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church}.\textsuperscript{43} In her participant-observation at Good Samaritan United Methodist Church, she seeks to understand how their faith community interpreted texts, rituals and doctrines, and in turn how these interpretations affected the community members. Her ethnographic project understands the meaning of particular places—specifically particular rituals and practices within that place—as loci of redemption. She notes, “When understood as \textit{bodied ingress} \textit{ion into the world}, place is truly fundamental in generating knowledge … the world takes shape through our bodies.”\textsuperscript{44} This powerful claim asserts that \textit{all} knowing is embodied knowing, and in the particular place of our body, theological truths can be understood and interpreted. In this project, Fulkerson’s emphasis on the “bodied experience” is particularly important, since in the endeavor of understanding

\textsuperscript{42} Whitmore, “Crossing the Road: The Case for Ethnographic Fieldwork in Christian Ethics,” 278.

\textsuperscript{43} In McClintock Fulkerson’s first book, \textit{Changing the Subject: Women’s Discourses and Feminist Theology} (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), she investigates the relationships between gender, power and language in Feminist Theology, specifically as they affect the subject of women’s experience. In this book, Fulkerson laid a lot of theoretical groundwork that, in effect, made a case for an ethnographic method – however, the book itself did not take that next step of doing the work – \textit{Places of Redemption} then did.

\textsuperscript{44} McClintock Fulkerson, \textit{Places of Redemption}, 25. Quoted in Scharen and Vigen, \textit{Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics}, 64.
Catholic women’s experiences and narratives about their sexuality, I am privileging the body as a place where theological meaning takes shape.

Since Christian ethics, also known as moral theology, deals with human action and responsibility within the world, a Christian ethicist must immerse herself in the complexities and suffering of the world in order to make normative moral claims. This definition brings up a valid concern: “How can a theological ethicist make normative claims about morality while using ethnography, a traditionally non-normative method?” According to sociologists and anthropologists, the aim of ethnography is not to produce any normative claims about that which is being studied, and definitely not to posit challenges of what “ought to be” or what “should be present” in a given community, location or individual narrative. However, Christian ethics as a discipline uses the knowledge gathered from scripture, tradition, reason and experience in order to make normative moral claims, and how such truth ought to be professed in the world. One may speculate, how can Christian ethicists utilize ethnography with these two contradictory aims in mind?

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45 Scholars have long debated the technical differences between Christian ethics and moral theology, especially within Roman Catholicism. Jesuit priests John Ford and Gerald Kelly note, “Moral Theology […] is a science based not only on reason – nor principally on reason- but especially on revelation and on the teaching of the church. Reason is the supreme argument in ethics; authority is the sovereign guide of the [moral] theologian.” Jesuit priest and theological ethicist James Keenan, on the other hand, retorts: “Saying that we are interested in theological ethics is no more a departure from the broader field of moral theology than those who worked on the penitentials, Summae, or casuistry.” In A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences, by James F. Keenan, S.J. (London; New York: Continuum, 2010), 116, 6. For the purpose of this project, I will be using the terms moral theology and Christian ethics interchangeably.

46 Scharen and Vigen, Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics, 73.

47 Scharen and Vigen, Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics, 61.
Fulkerson asserts in *Places of Redemption* that no ethnographic research can be completely neutral or objective, and that there can never be an impartial “view from nowhere”—we are always doing theology from a specific place. As noted earlier, the body is such a place through which particular human experiences are mediated. Through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, the Catholic imagination acknowledges this carnal space through which the divine is revealed. These spaces are never value-free or devoid of moral frameworks. Every viewpoint is a view with certain moral norms shaping it, even within the social sciences. The ethnographer, therefore, cannot pretend to work within a moral vacuum; on the contrary, the moral norms that have shaped a person’s lived space and perspective must be acknowledged and reflected upon throughout each step of the research process.

Through the encounters and experiences with other “spaces” in ethnographic work, the theological ethicist is called to acknowledge and continually “check” the moral frameworks from which they speak. One ought never approach a field site or interview collaborator with a moral theory to be proven or with the assumption that there is a specific truth to be uncovered. Nevertheless, there are glimpses of divine and transcendent truths to be found within specific spaces, positions and bodies; hence, there are normative claims of truth even within subjectivity. Especially when suffering or injustice is revealed through ethnographic research, theological ethicists are compelled to respond by serving as witnesses to the truth. Fulkerson describes this as a “response to a wound,” referring to Walter Lowe’s book *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason*. The wounds of injustice and suffering revealed in particular spaces demand to be addressed by theologians and ethicists doing ethnography, by both attempting to make sense

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of the suffering and doing something about it in a prophetic fashion. This is especially important within feminist and sexual ethics, which is the specific focus of this project.

1.1.2. Ethnography as Embodied Knowing:

Towards a Catholic Feminist Ethnography

This concise summary of ethnographic method is an attempt to outline how ethnography can help thicken Christian (and specifically Roman Catholic) discourse in theological ethics, and is compatible with a feminist theological approach. I chose to use ethnography in this project because it only made sense for me to write about young women in the Church today by first talking to young women in the Church. The role of experience in Catholic moral theology will be further addressed in the next chapter; however, in this section I will address some ways in which ethnography as an embodied theology can help enrich the field of Christian feminist moral theology, and concurrently, this project. This section is divided into three sub-sections: (1) Emphasizing Women Writing Culture; (2) Emphasizing the Experience of the Marginalized in Liberation Theologies; and (3) Ethnography as Embodied Theology. These sub-sections will demonstrate key elements of my ethnographic project, as well as lay the groundwork for my methodological commitments later in the chapter.

1.1.2.1. Emphasizing Women Writing Culture

If on one level, ethnography denotes “writing culture,” then it is necessary to reflect critically on who has historically and socially had the predominant power to shape the way that cultures are described and documented. Additionally, it is important to reflect on what aspects of a given

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49 McClintock Fulkerson, Places of Redemption, 14.
culture (and in this particular case, the Catholic Church) have been implicitly or explicitly overlooked.

For example, in anthropologist Deborah A. Gordon’s pivotal article “Writing Culture, Writing Feminism: The Poetics and Politics of Experimental Ethnography,” she critiques the authoritative anthology *Writing Culture* for its highly androcentric perspective of ethnography. She writes: “For feminists, particularly feminist anthropologists and ethnographers, an important problem with ethnographic authority is its grounding in a masculine subjectivity.”

Ethnography, she notes, has always had a universal referent, which is (implicitly or explicitly) masculine, and always measures feminism in relation to this standard. This particular starting place (masked as a universal) presents a unique challenge for a western feminist ethnographer, since she cannot separate her fieldwork from the capitalist and male-dominant society in which both she and her collaborator(s) exist. She notes that the position of feminist ethnography to a male universal referent is complex and shifting, since “women’s experience” is always particular and “diversely defined.” In other words, even feminist perspectives in a given culture may be diverse due to various socio-historical factors such as race, ethnicity, economic class, position in society, etc. Thus, Gordon urges ethnographers (and especially feminist ethnographers) to

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51 Men cannot separate themselves from capitalist cultures either, and are also strongly affected by patriarchal ideologies prevalent in these cultures. My point here is to demonstrate the specific relationship of women to capitalist, patriarchal societies in which the male is the universal referent.

continue to take seriously discussions about the centrality of power relations, both historically and theoretically.\textsuperscript{53}

As a poignant response to \textit{Writing Culture}, Gordon partnered with ethnographer Ruth Behar to create a feminist ethnographic anthology titled \textit{Women Writing Culture}. The editors sought to answer the following question throughout their collection of essays: “What does it mean to be a woman writer in anthropology, a discipline deeply rooted in the narrative of the male quest?”\textsuperscript{54} They state that part of envisioning a new way to look at ethnography from a feminist lens means seeing the central role of women in the theory and practice of cultural representation.\textsuperscript{55} Women have historically and culturally been observed and categorized within anthropology (and theology!) as “other,” even by women themselves. Thus, Behar and Gordon challenge the woman ethnographer not to delude herself into thinking “her breasts do not matter, are invisible, cancer won’t catch up to them, the male gaze does not take them into account.”\textsuperscript{56} In other words, women ethnographers must be self-critical in their endeavors, acknowledging the patriarchal framework in which they are researching that shapes both them as women and the women that they may be writing about. This self-critique also means acknowledging that the research itself may be methodologically and theoretically patriarchal.

A feminist ethnography that studies the particular experiences of women is also able to inform and create broader claims about the social, political, and economic forces at play in

\textsuperscript{53} Gordon, “Writing Culture, Writing Feminism, 11.

\textsuperscript{54} Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, eds., \textit{Women Writing Culture} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), xi.

\textsuperscript{55} Behar and Gordon, \textit{Women Writing Culture}, xii.

\textsuperscript{56} Behar and Gordon, \textit{Women Writing Culture}, 2.
women’s lives.\footnote{It is important to note here that not all women are equally vulnerable. In other words, some women- white, educated, employed, members of an upper social class- can benefit from certain advantages of a patriarchal society over other women. This is to say that intersectionality is very important and must be reflected upon each time reference is made to “women’s” experience.} Within theological ethics, these broader claims can strengthen or ignite the Christian ethicist’s commitment to bringing about justice, especially for women. The voices of women, brought to the attention of readers through ethnographic study, can have a transformative power since they reflect particular experiences and feelings that have historically and culturally been managed, oppressed, and/or repressed. In encountering a woman, the “other,” an ethnographer is shaped and transformed by her stories in such a way that it ought to propel an ethical response to issues of poverty, injustice, inequality, and marginalization that may be brought to light. This commitment to stand with the marginalized at the margins of society and acknowledge their voices is central to liberation theology, and so ought to be brought into conversation with feminist ethnography within theology and ethics.

1.1.2.2. Emphasizing the Experience of the Marginalized in Liberation Theologies

Since the mid-twentieth century, liberation theology has emphasized the crucial importance of turning to the experience of the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized as a \textit{locus theologicus}. The understanding of theology as critical praxis, enmeshed in the pastoral activity of the Church and the community of faith, is conceptually congruent to the aims of ethnography as Christian theology and ethics. Liberation theologies, dedicated to the idea that the word of God is incarnated in the \textit{cotidiano} (daily life) of a community or individual, is practically applied through ethnographic research that seeks to accompany people through the muddiness of their daily lives. As the most noted liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez wrote in his foundational book, \textit{A Theology of Liberation}, “theology linked with praxis fulfills a prophetic function when
interpreting historical events.”58 The theological ethicist who uses ethnography in order to interpret and make sense of the particular stories and experiences of others echoes the belief that God reveals God’s self in human history through encounters with other people, especially the poor, marginalized, and exploited. By nature of the work, feminist theological ethnography is already prioritizing and participating in this encounter, which not only has the potential to reveal divine truth, but can be an encounter with God Herself.

U.S. Hispanic theologian Roberto Goizueta writes about theological knowledge being found in the particular in his writing about U.S. Hispanic Popular Catholicism. In his book, *Caminemos con Jesús*, he contends that theologians must begin their theological tasks with the question, “What is the particular socio-historical context in which we do our theology?”59 Likewise, theological ethnography must reflect on the socio-historical context of the field site in which the researcher is entering. For this project, it is important to understand the contexts (educational, social, pastoral, etc.) in which the young women have been raised, particularly as they relate to the greater context of the Catholic Church in the United States. For an ethnographic study where no concrete “site” can be mapped (in this case, when the young women come to college from another geographic/social location), the researcher must research the broader socio-historical conditions that the collaborators are experiencing, both secular and religious. For this project, I will research the broader educational/pastoral landscape from which the collaborators draw their narratives through the study of theological education manuals, as well as cultural and


social conditions in the 21st century that may have an impact on the daily lives of the young women.

Although he specifically focuses on popular religious practices among U.S. Hispanics in his theological work, Goizueta emphasizes the fact that theological knowledge is always cultural—shaped by the societal norms of communities of faith. These norms and practices are a locus theologicus, he maintains, the places in and from which we must do our theological reflection. This dedication to the particular as a starting point for theological reflection is another way in which ethnography as Christian theology and ethics has fundamental ties to liberation theology.

In articulating a methodology for this project, the commitments of feminist liberation theologies can serve as starting points for sexual ethical dialogue concerning young Catholic women. Central to liberation theology is a preferential option for poor and marginalized voices, which in this case refers to the voices of young women. The turn to experience, shared by womanist and feminist theologians under the liberation theology umbrella, has “challenged the dominant methods of theological scholarship by attending in a special way to the experience of marginalized [women].” Feminist liberation theologians, often referred to as mujerista theologians in Latin American and U.S. Hispanic/Latino circles, point to socio-historical situations such as war, poverty, and migration as well as more subtle, daily ways in which

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60 Goizueta, Caminemos Con Jesús, 19 (emphasis mine).

61 Vigen and Scharen, Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics, 63.
women struggle against patriarchal oppression as the starting point of their theology. For _mujerista_ theologians such as the late Ada María Isasi-Díaz, the reality of women’s _cotidiano_ (daily life) has and will continue to be the source of feminist liberation theology as long as oppression and injustice continue to be at the heart of women’s daily experience. Feminist ethnography as theology and ethics is actively involved in the “making sense” of women’s daily experience, and taking an extra step to reflect on how lived experience of the marginalized can contribute to a unitive vision of justice and liberation.

In order to concretize the concepts of feminist liberation theology to the daily, lived experiences of young women in the Catholic Church, this ethnographic project is committed to lifting up the desires and hopes of the eight women interviewed. This commitment can be accomplished practically by a collective construction of theo-ethical knowledge on the basis of multiple positions, without claiming to speak universally for all young Catholic women. The hope and argument underlining this work is that by giving voice to the different “contextual wisdoms” of young Catholic women, Catholic feminist ethics can forward the promotion of justice, equality and liberation in a Church that frequently ignores their voices. A feminist ethnography in tandem with the goals of liberation theology will engage in a process of meaning-making for marginalized women, and will call to attention ways in which sexual pedagogies for Catholic young women can be liberating.

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62 As discussed earlier in this chapter, ethnography as situated in the social sciences does not take this extra step of naming injustices found in ethnographic research and making ethical claims about experiences of those being observed/interviewed. This is a substantial way in which ethnography as theology and ethics differs from ethnography housed within the social sciences, and relates to the methodological commitments of liberation theology.

1.1.2.3. Emphasizing Ethnography as Embodied Theology

A feminist Christian ethnography centered on narratives and experiences of female sexuality is a carnal-focused enterprise that coincides with the corporal, sacramental nature of Christianity.

Christian Scharen, in his ethnographic work with urban congregations in Atlanta, reflects:

I pursued studies that position the worshipper and, in a broader sense, the congregation as a whole not merely as object to be understood, as perhaps a part of the burgeoning sociology or theology of the body, but also from the body, requiring submitting myself to the painful apprenticeship in context that allows forging the corporal and mental dispositions that make up the competent worshipper within the crucible of congregational life.  

Instead of viewing the congregation as a group to be studied, Scharen became a member of the congregation, and so sought to speak from within the body of believers. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, within Catholic theology there have emerged specific theologies of the body (most notably the late Pope John Paul II’s collection of addresses regarding human sexuality and the body); however, a Christian ethnography understands its task to be a theology from the body, especially marginalized bodies. This means that the locus theologicus for Christian ethnography must exist in and through bodily experiences and insights (particularly of the marginalized), from which theological truths may be accessed. A theology of the body, on the other hand, has the potential danger of starting from outside of the experiences of marginalized bodies, and imposing incongruent and problematic theological understandings onto these bodies.  

Sociologist Loic Wacquant discusses the dynamics of embodiment in our social understandings in his article “Carnal Connections: On Embodiment, Apprenticeship, and

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65 Here I am specifically referring to Catholic theological and ethical critiques of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, which will be discussed in Chapter Two.
Membership.” By being a participant-observer at a boxing gym on the south side of Chicago, he came to understand the body as a “social spring and vector of knowledge” from which the ethnographer can make sense of the visceral nature of daily life.\(^66\) He writes,

> [My primary interest] is the body as an intelligent and sentient assemblage of shared categories, capacities, and cravings; not only socially constructed, and therefore traversed by vectors of power, but socially constructing; as the fount of communal sense, joint sensation, and skillful action.\(^67\)

In other words, we must not only understand bodies as socially constructed by various discourses of power, but also sites of social construction for a given community. This emphasis on a “carnal sociology” by Wacquant translates well into a “carnal theology,” Scharen argues.\(^68\)

The central truth of the Christian faith, of which Jesus Christ is \textit{par excellence}, is that God chose to dwell among us through the radical, transgressive act of the Incarnation. Theologies \textit{from} the body that take seriously bodily discourse are rooted in the Christian message of God incarnate in the world. As a Eucharistic people, Christians are joined together as Christ’s body and so are called to respond to other members of the body (and so to other bodies) in their different social and cultural contexts.\(^69\)

In a related vein, Catholic Womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland draws attention to the body and formulations of embodiment that “have given shape to the discursive practices and


\(^{67}\) Wacquant, “Carnal Connections,” 454.

\(^{68}\) Vigen and Scharen, \textit{Ethography as Christian Theology and Ethics}, 64.

conceptual frameworks undergirding the work of many theologians of liberation.” She reveals a way of doing theology, like ethnographic research, that places the body at the center of theological inquiry.

Early on in her work, Copeland boldly declares:

The body provokes theology. The body contests its hypothesis, resists its conclusions, escapes its textual margins. The body incarnates and points beyond to what is “the most immediate and proximate object of our experience” and mediates our engagement with others, with the world, with the Other […] But, always, there is a “more” to you, a “more” to me: the body mediates that “more” and makes visible what cannot be seen.

Through the body and through encounters with other bodies, human beings are able to understand truths that cannot otherwise be grasped. For example, the instincts and memories that may have become disconnected from the body by negative experiences may be accessed through certain movements of the body that trigger these memories or interaction with other bodies. This is often the case with childhood traumas and sexual traumas. Likewise, the body may point to experiences that can challenge and resist theological understandings. As Copeland stated above, the flesh provokes theology! The body is both a site and mediation of divine revelation, and also shapes our existence in society.

70 M. Shawn Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being Innovations (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), ix. It is important to note that Copeland herself does not do ethnography. Rather, in her book she performs an archival/document study of female slave narratives.

71 Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 7.


73 Copeland, Enfleshing Freedom, 8.
The body of Jesus Christ is an exemplar of enfleshed freedom, in which Christians participate through the Eucharist, that has the power to transform and unite human bodies. This faith claim compels us to understand the Eucharist as a sacrament through which each individual body (in communion with other bodies) is able to realize enfleshed freedom.\textsuperscript{74} Copeland writes, “The body of Jesus of Nazareth impels us to place the bodies of the victims of history at the center of theological anthropology, to turn to “other” subjects.”\textsuperscript{75} As the body of Christ, Christians are bound to other bodies in their suffering, thriving, groaning and desiring, and are called to imitate Christ in his body’s openness towards all of humanity. Copeland’s understanding of the body as a central point of theological inquiry relates to the claim that ethnography is an embodied theology, and that a Christian feminist ethnography is a form of embodied knowing, especially in terms of unifying and liberating the body of Christ.

As participants in the body of Christ, we “embrace with love and hope those who, in their bodies, are despised and marginalized,” Copeland writes.\textsuperscript{76} The aim of this ethnographic project is to rethink theo-ethical discourse in light of the incarnate experiences of young Catholic women and their understandings of their bodies. Through the use of ethnography as method for doing Catholic Ethics, I will demonstrate how the embodied truths presented in the narratives of young women can be used to reconstruct a Catholic sexual ethic that is based on current issues and

\textsuperscript{74} Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom}, 24.

\textsuperscript{75} Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom}, 84.

\textsuperscript{76} Copeland, \textit{Enfleshing Freedom}, 127.
needs presented by the faithful. Ethnography understood as an embodied theology is able to highlight the ways in which the Catholic faith can be known through the context of bodily, lived experience.

By understanding the dynamics of diverse women writing cultures, the interconnection between feminist ethnography and the experience of the marginalized emphasized in liberation theology, and ethnography as an embodied theology, a feminist Christian ethnographer can begin to understand her work as a pivotal way of doing theology and ethics that takes seriously the role that bodies and understandings of bodies play in theo-ethical discourse. In the next section I will discuss the methodological commitments and research design of this project. The purpose of this methodology is to attend to the stories of the particular women interviewed, especially their feelings and experiences about the formation of their sexual identities as young women in the Catholic Church.

1.2. Research Design and Methodological Commitments

As a Catholic, feminist ethicist, I am particularly concerned with the lived experiences of Catholic young women regarding their sexuality and female identity in the Church as critical sources of reflection and theological examination. It is my contention that the field of Catholic sexual ethics has a responsibility to and for future generations of women to address the beliefs, feelings and experiences of Catholic young women in the formation of their sexual identities. In this study I intend to look at the intersection of current sexual pedagogies for Catholic young

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77 Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience are the sources of Catholic ethics. Therefore, a Catholic sexual ethic cannot be constructed based on experiences alone; these experiences must be supported and upheld by the other three sources. In this dissertation I contend that experience as a source for Catholic sexual ethics must be constantly re-evaluated in light of marginalized voices (in this case, those of young Catholic women).
women and some of the contemporary struggles faced by young women in the Church. My primary research objective is to examine the feelings and experiences of Catholic young women in the formation of their sexual identities, and understand the impact of Catholic sexual pedagogies in this formation.

1.2.1. Research Design

This project utilizes an ethnographic approach, through the use of one-on-one, open-ended interviews, in order to “take the pulse” of select young Catholic women regarding the reception of sexual pedagogies throughout their Catholic upbringing. This is an attempt to deconstruct narratives of sexuality in order to identify what, specifically, is being taught and what is not being taught to young Catholic women throughout their adolescent years, as they develop their identities and sexualities. The foundation of my research rests upon the claim that qualitative ethnographic fieldwork is a legitimate and illuminating primary resource for understanding how sexual ethics curricula and formation (both formal and informal) can shape Catholic women’s lives and identities. Again, even as these eight women do not speak for all Catholic women, in the sharing of their stories and perspectives, others are invited to reflect on areas of converge/divergence with their own experiences. The areas of resonance and disconnect are both instructive. Thus, my overall goal is to learn first-hand about the experiences of Catholic young women and to then reflect upon their stories in light of examples of pedagogical tools/curricula used to promote official Catholic teaching related to human sexuality.

For the first research component of this project, as will be presented in Chapter Two, I explore the following key subject areas in contemporary Catholic sexual pedagogy: gender complementarity, especially as defined by the late Pope John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body*; the epistemological implications of the term “female genius”; the link between sex and gender in
Catholic theological anthropology; and female sexuality—it’s role and moral definition. In these subject areas, I identify recurrent theological themes, ideals and language that may directly or indirectly affect Catholic female experience and understanding of her sexuality and body. These are the questions I hoped to understand: What frameworks are being used in schools, parishes and in the home to speak about female sexuality and female identity within the Catholic faith? How are these teachings being explained and what are the implications of the ways that these teachings are relayed to young Catholic women?

Answering some of these questions has involved a close reading of sexual education manuals put forth by Catholic educational presses, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), and the Vatican. It has also involved research about what kinds of sexual pedagogies are used and promoted in parishes, homes and schools in order to instruct young Catholic women about their sexuality and identity as women in the Church. These samples were obtained by collecting six sexual education materials being used in Catholic high schools and parishes throughout the United States. I intended for this review of literature to be on both a macro level (teachings from the Magisterium, either from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, papal documents, or archdiocesan office) and micro level (handbooks or supplemental articles used in individual parishes and schools). In order to collect these materials I worked with theology teachers, youth ministers, and high school students from the Archdiocese.

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In light of the distinctions made by gender theorists, I understand the term “female” to be a socially constructed term of distinction based on biological features (chromosomes, sex organs, hormones, and other physical features), while the term “woman” refers to the social construction of reality whereby a person is a “woman” based on socially agreed upon criteria (behavior, language, dress, social role and identity). It is important to note that the Catholic Church does not make such distinctions between the terms “female” and “woman”, but rather believes they are both inextricably linked (See Chapter Two for more on this teaching). In this project I use the terms female and woman interchangeably, while acknowledging the difference between the two terms.
of Chicago, following the recruitment guidelines put forth by Loyola University Chicago’s Internal Review Board (IRB).

By putting current sexual pedagogies in conversation with lived sexual experience, Catholic theologians and ethicists can go through the process of what liberation educator Paulo Freire describes as *conscientización*, a process of reflection, awareness, and action.\(^{79}\) I take these steps on a small level by reflecting on the experiences of the young women interviewed, becoming aware of the impact sexual pedagogies have on young women in the Church, and seeking new ways to affect real change for young women in the field of sexual ethics. Thus, for the primary component of the project, presented in Chapter 3, I conducted a small, qualitative study. For this project I sought to recruit 8 female participants between the ages of 18 and 25 for individual, open-ended interviews.\(^{80}\) I understand the experiences and feelings of these young women conveyed in their interviews as necessary in the cultivation of ethical claims about areas within Church teaching that are inadequate or problematic in the depiction of female sexuality. These individual narratives can also help cultivate new ethical frameworks in which sexual ethicists within the Church can re-envision female sexual identity.

My rationale for choosing individual interviews for qualitative research and analysis is that the open-ended interview model creates a more private, personal space in which the collaborator may be able to share personal stories about her sexuality and relationships. The open-ended nature of the interview allowed for new thoughts, connections and stories to arise that strayed from the predetermined topics and questions. These new developments within the

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\(^{80}\) See Appendix A for the specifics provided in the IRB Application for this project, approved by Loyola University Chicago.
interview (whether positive or negative) were fruitful because they contributed to a new way of envisioning and re-defining sexual education for young women in the Church. They also pointed to unforeseen areas in the education of Catholic young women that need to be attended to immediately by me, the researcher, and more broadly by the field of Catholic ethics. For example, the prevalence of the media as an influencer of 21st century sexual education was an unforeseen but important topic that arose throughout the interviews.

Though I suspect there are shared themes in the experiences of young women throughout the United States, for the purpose of keeping this project manageable and focused, I limited my research to the particular geographic location of the greater Chicago area. I interviewed young women from both religious and secular educational backgrounds, with the stipulation that they were raised Catholic and taught about the teachings of the Church in their parish, school, and/or home. It is important that the participants have been raised Catholic (whether or not they still identify as so) since this project deals specifically with the influence of Catholic teaching on the lives of young women raised within the Church.

The model for this fieldwork was guided by the methods put forth by Christian ethicists who have previously integrated ethnography into their theological and ethical scholarship, as discussed in the first section of this chapter. Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen’s book *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* served as a helpful reference point for articulating the role of ethnographic method as theology and ethics, while providing different exemplars of ethnography used in ecclesial, ethical, and theological scholarship.\(^81\) In addition, particular attention was paid to Christian (and Catholic) ethicists who have incorporated

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\(^81\) Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. 
ethnography into writing and research surrounding issues of sexuality and gender identity. Emily Reimer-Barry’s ethnographic work with women living with HIV/AIDS as well as Jeanine E. Viau’s work with queer youth in Chicago—and the corresponding theo-ethical analyses of their fieldwork—have provided scholars a recent example of how Christian ethicists have utilized ethnography to converse with feminist and sexual theological ethics, and were relied heavily upon in the construction of this project.\(^8^2\)

Beyond the discipline of Christian ethics, I relied on the wealth of resources available within the social sciences, particularly in sociology and anthropology, to guide the forming of my questions, the structure of interviews, and the collecting and coding of data. One primary source of reference was the book *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes* from the University of Chicago, which presents a comprehensive series of guidelines, suggestions and strategies for utilizing ethnography in academic research.\(^8^3\) Anthropologist James P. Spradley’s work *The Ethnographic Interview* and Wayne Fife’s comprehensive book *Doing Fieldwork* also served as resources for the implementation of my ethnographic method in this project.\(^8^4\) The ethnographers discussed in the first section of this chapter, particularly those who focused on ethnography as

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necessitating self-reflection, were also influential in shaping my understanding of the field before beginning the qualitative portion of this project.

1.2.1.1. Participation and Recruitment

After having received approval from the Institutional Review Board at Loyola University Chicago, I set out to interview eight female participants between the ages of 18–25. The criteria for participation in this study were the following:

1. Participants must be between the ages of 18–25
2. Participants must be female
3. Participants must have been raised in a Roman Catholic context (either parish, school or home- preferably all three)
4. Participants must currently live in or within fifteen miles of the city of Chicago OR have lived in or within fifteen miles of the city of Chicago in the last five years

The geographic perimeters were set to keep the project manageable, and the time restriction for residency allowed for the inclusion of participants that may have attended high school in Chicago but have left Chicago for college in the last few years. These stipulations also allowed for the inclusion of new residents of Chicago, mostly college students, who have become involved in a Catholic university or parish. For the purposes of the project, I did not establish strict demographic parameters. However, in working with departments and organizations that focus on diverse populations, I hoped to end up with a balanced collection of perspectives. Although I attended to similarities and differences across backgrounds in my post-interview analysis, including issues of sex/gender, race and class, I approached each collaborator as a unique individual with a unique social background, offering a unique contribution.
Recruitment methods relied heavily on the use of technology in order to circulate the recruitment flyer for this project.\textsuperscript{85} I worked within Loyola University Chicago in order to recruit interested young women.\textsuperscript{86} The recruitment flyer, along with an introduction to my research project, was sent electronically to Loyola University Chicago’s Women and Gender Studies department, Campus Ministry, the Theology and Religious Studies Department, and Theology and Religious Studies Department Faculty for distribution (this was primarily done through the attachment of the flyer to their group’s listserv). Some Theology and Religious Studies faculty also distributed the printed flyer to their undergraduate classes. Interested youth were instructed to contact me directly.\textsuperscript{87}

The young women who contacted me about the project had either seen the email distributed to them through the different departments or groups, or had heard of the study through word of mouth. For example, one of my former students is a Residential Assistant in one of the campus dorms, and volunteered to distribute the flyer to her female residents. A few women had not even seen the recruitment flyer, but knew that I was working on a research project about young Catholic women, and contacted me directly in order to participate. More detailed information about the women who participated in the study will be provided in Chapter Three.

\textsuperscript{85} See Appendix A for the recruitment flyer approved by Loyola University Chicago’s IRB.

\textsuperscript{86} Loyola University Chicago was the institution that I partnered with for this project; however, a few women contacted me directly who were not affiliated with LUC.

\textsuperscript{87} It is important to note that women may have self-selected to talk to me in order to express their frustrations with the Church and with Catholic sexual education specifically. Others, perhaps less discontent, may not have been drawn to the flyer or invitation.
1.2.1.2. The Interviews: Consent and Confidentiality

After interested participants contacted me, I gave them further information about the research study and asked them to verify their eligibility for participation. If the young woman met all of the criteria, I set up a time and date for us to meet for the interview on Loyola University Chicago’s Lakeshore Campus. Each interview lasted approximately ninety minutes, and was held either in the Theology Department Library or in a private room in the Information Commons. It was important that the interview was conducted in a neutral location, in order to provide a “safe space” for collaborators to talk about sensitive topics, while also avoiding any type of unintended power dynamic that could be present in a more private or personal location. James Spradley suggests that an ethnographic interview feel like a friendly conversation for the collaborator, so that the interviews do not feel like a formal interrogation; this involves sensitivity to the location of the interview.  

All participants completed informed consent forms before the start of the interview. I read the consent form aloud to each participant, and allowed time for any questions regarding the process. I made it clear at the beginning of each interview that the participants were free to not answer any of the questions and to stop the interview at any time. Each woman was assigned a numerical code and invited to choose a pseudonym for use in the study; pseudonyms were used in field notes and in the dissertation to protect the confidentiality of each participant. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In the interest of time, I hired a professional transcription service, VerbalInk, to transcribe the audio recordings. Participants

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88 Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, 58.

89 For more detailed information about consent forms and measures taken to ensure confidentiality, please see the IRB Application in Appendix B.
were aware that the recordings would be sent directly to the service with the corresponding numerical code and pseudonym, and that I would keep a copy of the audio recordings on my personal computer.\textsuperscript{90}

\textbf{1.2.1.3. Post-Interview Analysis}

In qualitative research, the stages of the research process go back and forth as the researcher collects data, analyzes data, and conducts interviews. After each individual interview, significant themes often arise that need to be noted immediately and also revisited later in the broader research analysis. As Reimer-Barry notes, “the method for analyzing the data involves immersing oneself in the data, which can mean listening again to interview tapes, rereading transcripts, and rereading field notes.”\textsuperscript{91} Since I used a transcription service to transcribe the audio recordings, I made sure to listen to the interview tapes again in order to take additional notes. Within the coding process, I reread transcripts and color-coded recurring concepts and patterns. I used different color highlighter markers in order to differentiate the recurrent themes within each interview transcript.

In \textit{Doing Fieldwork}, sociologist Wayne Fife describes the initial stage of analysis post-interview as alternating between “micro” and “macro” levels of analysis. The micro level consists of the data within each individual interview, in the form of “oral history,” and the macro level consists of the larger historical and cultural environment in which the person’s experience

\textsuperscript{90} All documents, including fieldnotes, transcriptions, and audio recordings were individually password protected on my personal computer to ensure privacy. Consent forms were locked in a file cabinet, to which I only had access.

is situated. Both levels are important when analyzing the data; however it is important within ethnographic research to continue to return to the particularities of the individual’s experience without immediately connecting the individual experience to a larger socio-historical (or ecclesial!) trend. After each interview, I alternated between micro and macro levels of analysis by taking note of recurrent themes and broader societal/cultural trends of sexual pedagogy, all the while returning to the individual experiences and narratives of the collaborator.

The preliminary mapping of relationships between concepts moves from the individual interview to the collection of interviews. The next stage of analysis involves the researcher discerning patterns among concepts, arranging them into specific topics and subtopics. The topics that consistently emerged throughout the interviews were the limited leadership positions for women in the Church, specific gender and sexual standards for Catholic young women, the negative effects of abstinence-only education, and the “disconnect” between the collaborator’s faith and her sexuality. In Chapter Four, I describe these major themes and divide them into distinct subthemes.

My line of questioning focused on the influence of Catholic sexual narratives on the formation of sexual beliefs and female gendered identity. These are some of the questions I intended to explore: What are we teaching young girls, specifically in their adolescent years, in Catholic educational environments about their sexual identities as females? According to these women, what are the most significant issues relating to sexuality that they encounter as Catholic females today? What narratives about sex and gender were the most prevalent/normative in their Catholic upbringing? How do the ways that they were taught about female sexuality affect their

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92 Fife, *Doing Fieldwork*, 120.
sexual experiences—either with themselves or with others? How do young women feel regarding the ideals of female sexuality presented by the Church? Are these ideals sustainable in a modern-day context? What messages about sex and sexuality in particular do they find most affirming and most marginalizing and/or destructive?93

For the third component of the project, discussed in Chapters Four and Five, I placed the insights of these young women in conversation with Catholic tradition, particularly Catholic feminist theological ethics. I sought to uncover ways in which feminist theologians and ethicists have dealt with normative sexual narratives in the tradition and redefined ways in which the Church can understand sexual experience in an inclusive, liberating fashion. I also looked for new approaches to understanding gender in Catholic sexual ethics, beyond the binary frameworks of complementarity and heteronormativity. In this component my goal is to develop a “liberating eros” by drawing upon feminist theory as well as justice-based liberation approaches. I look to the young women interviewed as offering key perspectives in developing these approaches, and discovering what constitute adequate narratives and pedagogical strategies of Catholic sexual ethics.

1.2.2 Methodological Commitments

The methodology of this project is a feminist liberationist hermeneutical approach to Catholic tradition, theory and experience, particularly surrounding theological and ethical definitions of female sex and sexuality. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, I rely on the aims of liberation theology as the foundation from which my ethnographic research emerges. In the spirit of the liberationist commitment to a “preferential option for the poor,” I employ a preferential

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93 See Appendix C for the Interview Script submitted to Loyola University Chicago’s Internal Review Board.
option for the marginalized by seeking to give voice to young Catholic women, a demographic that is often at risk of not being heard within the hierarchy of the Church, or worse, silenced.\textsuperscript{94} The feelings and experiences of young Catholic women, obtained through ethnographic interviews, are the critical centering points of this project’s analysis of Catholic sexual ethics in the 21st century. It is my contention that not enough scholarship in Christian theology and ethics has asked young women what they think and experience, and whether or not their experiences resonate with the dominant narratives of the tradition. In this way, I hope to go beyond a more traditional literary review of formal theology and ethics (whether feminist or otherwise), and prioritize the experiences of young women today as important and necessary for the shaping and directing of Catholic sexual ethics.

In my analysis of the themes highlighted in the ethnographic interviews, presented in Chapter Four, I engage secular feminist theory and gender studies in the fields of philosophy and sociology. Methodologically, I am committed to applying the significant research that has been done in identifying and naming the social and philosophical constructions of sex, gender, and sexuality and their use in patriarchal structures and ideologies throughout history to this study. (Again, no ethnographic project can take place in a moral vacuum). Power discourse in sexuality is brought into conversation with current Catholic theologies of sexuality, with special attention to the ways in which these theologies affect the cultivation of sexual identities for young

\textsuperscript{94} The phrase “preferential option” was first introduced in Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez’ book \textit{A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988). The phrase is now well-known and commonly used within liberation theology and Catholic Social Thought in order to demonstrate a theo-ethical commitment to those oppressed and vulnerable in society, as Jesus did in his life and works. Many liberationist scholars have amplified this term to include not only those in poverty but those who are at the center of other sites of oppression due to race, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, gender, education, immigration status, etc.
Catholic women. I also turn to Catholic feminist theologians and ethicists in order to deconstruct the gendered narratives that have historically been dominant within the Christian tradition.

1.2.2.1. My Self-Understanding as Researcher

As anthropologist Wayne Fife underscores, one of the defining features of sound qualitative methodology is reflexivity, which “refers to both the personal and professional position of the researcher him or herself and the effects that this positioning may have had on the scholarly research and resulting writing product.”\(^{95}\) As stated earlier in this chapter, qualitative research can never fully stand outside of the space that it explores; it can never have an objective, “bird’s eye view” of a community, place, or person. A researcher always enters a field with predetermined biases from her own specific moral and historical contexts, which shape the way that ideas and stories are interpreted. Additionally, it is important for the researcher to resist the urge to make narratives confirm or fit one particular theme or pattern, especially as later interviews are compared to earlier interviews. Rather, each narrative must be granted permission to stand on its own, and reveal its own particular, embodied truth to the researcher.

My position as a researcher demands self-reflexivity in a unique way since I am a part of the community that I am researching. Like the collaborators in my study, I am a young, Catholic woman, who was raised in a Catholic parish, school, and home. My position as a member of the research group that I am studying allows for an empathic listening in a unique way, since I am at times able to relate directly to the experiences or memories that the young women describe. In fact, there were multiple instances during the interviews when I had to stop myself from saying “me too!” However, this positive effect of greater empathic understanding can also potentially

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\(^{95}\) Fife, *Doing Fieldwork*, 149.
have a negative effect of inserting my own experiences and feelings into the young women’s narratives. This type of uncritical ethnography can quickly turn into a form of “navel-gazing,” in which data is produced to only confirm one’s own assumptions about the experiences and narratives of young Catholic women.

In her book *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge*, theologian Natalie Wigg-Stevenson states that theological fieldwork necessitates being able to map the field of study and the theologian’s role within the field, lest the researcher fail to see her implication in it. She rightly acknowledged her impact as a member and theologian in the congregation as she conducted fieldwork in her own Baptist Church. She reflects,

> By studying my own people, I sought out the forms of theological knowledge that are inherent within and produced by practices of belonging. Embedded within my field of study as a member and a leader, I wanted to see what would happen when I deployed my particular theological agency […] within the community to stimulate theological conversation. Rather than reflect on Christian community as Christian practice, I sought to do theological reflection in Christian community as Christian practice.

Wigg-Stevenson saw her role as ethnographer as unique precisely because her knowledge is produced and informed by her membership within the community she was observing. Likewise, in studying my own people within the Catholic Church, my theological knowledge is produced and informed by my own practices of belonging to the community. This research project is within the Church and for the Church, insofar as it is bringing the voices of its younger female members to the table of Catholic theological and ethical conversation. I am a fellow member

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who has the privilege of being able to hear these personal stories of belonging, or in some cases, exclusion within the Church.

As a feminist ethicist, my role as a female ethnographer is distinct in that I am affected by patriarchal structures (or as Behar and Gordon stated, the “male gaze”) while simultaneously naming the dynamics of male power or privilege present in the experiences of marginalized women. Reimer-Barry, in her ethnographic work with women living with HIV/AIDS, warned ethnographers to “listen in solidarity so that feminist theologians do not contribute to the silencing of other marginalized women, thereby contributing to the injustices they are critiquing.”

I may be granted certain privileges that the women I am interviewed are not, for example, or assume that her experience of patriarchal structures in society are similar to my own. Constant self-reflection by any research is essential to the ethnographic project, since the researcher is herself an “embodied subject whose experience arises out of a specific context.”

In other words, it is important to acknowledge the researcher’s own experience (of belonging, of marginalization, of participation, etc.) as constantly affecting the narratives of others, and the way in which they are then re-told and analyzed.

1.2.2.2. My Role as a Member of a “Listening Church”

In Scharen and Vigen’s collection of exemplars in *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, Catholic ethicist Emily Reimer-Barry’s contribution calls for the Catholic Church to be a “listening Church.” I will borrow this concept of being a member of a “listening Church” in

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98 Reimer-Barry, “In Sickness and in Health,” 72.


my methodological commitments to this project. The tradition of Catholic moral theology has historically and methodologically been understood as coming from a Church that “teaches.” In fact, Catholic moral theology arose out of the need to instruct seminarians how to respond to different moral issues and behaviors in the sacrament of Reconciliation.\footnote{Charles E. Curran, \textit{Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History}, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 3.} As will be discussed further in Chapter Two, the use of experience as a primary source for ethics has been much contested within Catholic moral theology. However, by attending to particular experience as being authoritative—especially those experiences of the marginalized faithful, Catholic moral theologians may shape the way that the field is understood by emphasizing the role of the Church as a listening Church, rather than just a teaching Church.

In order to commit to being a member of a listening Church as a Catholic-Christian ethnographer, it is important to practice the habit of empathic listening during research. Especially when a collaborator is talking about sexual or intimate feelings and relationships, a sense of trust needs to exist between the researcher and the collaborator. A collaborator is becoming vulnerable to the researcher by sharing intimate and private parts of her life, and so special care must be taken to respect the sacredness of the relationship that is being created.

For example, in each individual interview, I found it important to start interviews by asking about the collaborator’s day, and have time for “small-talk” before beginning the consent form process. It was also important to let the collaborator know that I care about her experiences that are painful, uncomfortable, and/or sensitive. In sociologist Robert S. Weiss’ book \textit{Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies}, he calls the interviewer a

\begin{quote}
\textit{...}\end{quote}
“privileged inquirer,” and states that as such she must take necessary steps in order to respect a respondent’s integrity throughout the process.\textsuperscript{102}

Reimer-Barry notes that the starting point of empathic listening is changing the way that questions are framed within Catholic ethics. She stated, “Instead of first asking, ‘What does the church teach?’ the researcher [should] ask, ‘What is going on here?’ Thick description precedes normative reflection.”\textsuperscript{103} Ethnography is a way in which Catholic ethicists can prioritize the way that everyday struggles of the faithful can inform Catholic ethics. By committing to empathic listening, a Catholic ethicist can participate in a collaborator’s story, while seeking to understand “what is going on” before making any broad ethical claims. As Mary McClintock Fulkerson writes in \textit{Places of Redemption}, it is important first and foremost to give people a “place to appear, a place to be seen, to be recognized and to recognize the other.”\textsuperscript{104} Empathic listening allows for the collaborator to be seen and recognized, while reminding the researcher of the honor bestowed upon them to do the seeing and recognizing.

\textbf{1.2.2.3. Methodological Limits and Obstacles}

While envisioning the potential contributions of this project to the Catholic Church and the field of Catholic sexual ethics in particular, I must not ignore the obstacles. By challenging the dominant strand of theological anthropology in the field of sex and sexuality, this project is often at odds with official Church teaching and hence may have little power to change diocesan (whether parish or school) pedagogies at their core. Also, I enter this project with a bias towards


\textsuperscript{104} Fulkerson, \textit{Places of Redemption}, 21.
secular feminist and sexual theory, which historically has not been well received by the Catholic tradition. Most recently, “gender theory” has been condemned by Pope Francis in various interviews and general audiences.\textsuperscript{105}

Moreover, throughout this process I must pay close attention to my own hermeneutical bias as a feminist scholar who has refuted many current teachings of the Catholic Church on issues of sex, gender and sexuality in academic papers and presentations. I must also be cognizant of the struggles some young women may have to open up to me in such personal matters such as sex and sexuality. Similarly, the women did not (or could not, within 90 minutes) disclose every story or aspect of their sexual experiences with me. Some of the women were strangers to me when we began the interview and so may have guarded intimate details, while others I had known previously- these factors limit the extent to which I can truly represent their narratives in this project. I must not only be aware of these obstacles but also reflect on how I may be worthy of trust before, during and after the interviews with the young women.

My primary limitation in this project is that this study is in no way comprehensive or quantitative. The persons that I interview cannot be viewed as representative of Catholic young women in the United States today due to their unique social location, race, and class. The fact that my study is limited geographically, and conducted within a higher educational institution restricts the types of women that may otherwise be willing to participate. Additionally, these women were not selected from a random sample but were recruited through a convenience sampling methodology. The structure of a single, in-person interview also limits the scope of the

project since I was unable to meet with the participants for a sustained amount of time. A long-term partnership can contribute to ethnographic projects in a special way since the collaborator and researcher are able to get to know each other more intimately and develop a level of security that is not possible in single interviews.

A final obstacle that I anticipated from the beginning of the project is that the experiences and feelings of the young women I speak with may not align with the problems that I defined in my dissertation proposal. It is dangerous and ethically irresponsible to impose feelings (particularly feelings of shame or exclusion) upon those that I speak with for this project. Within an in-person interview, every translation of what a participant is saying is at the same time an interpretation. Thus, it is important that when reading the transcribed text and coding the data I do not intercept my own judgments into the narrative, violating my privilege of being an arbiter to a person’s truth claim. In order to prevent this, I held myself accountable to my research collaborators by giving them a chance to review the transcript and provide clarification. Some of the collaborators helped to give more detail to situations or had remembered certain pieces of helpful information since the interview took place.

Despite these limitations and obstacles, I hope that my interviews will help the women that I work with to find their own voice within the Catholic tradition and inspire them to envision new, liberating sexual pedagogies for the education of young Catholic women. In Latina artist Yolanda Lopez’s “Portrait of the Artist as the Virgen of Guadalupe,” she depicts herself as the image of the Virgen of Guadalupe. She is running, with the snake in her hand and the cloak over her shoulder, in tennis shoes. This painting is a part of the Guadalupe series, in which the artist depicts Latina women participating in traditional religious (Marian) scenes. The artist understands herself, as Latina, as actively participating in her own Catholic theology; her daily
experience and self-perception is reflected in her religious imagination. Likewise, the experiences and self-perceptions of young Catholic women contribute to their understanding of the Catholic Church. They are always caught up in the production of theological knowledge as members of the Church while at the same time serving as a locus theologicus for Catholic Moral Theology.

CHAPTER TWO

THE VAGINA DIALOGUES: VIEWS AND THEMES OF FEMALE SEXUALITY IN CATHOLIC ETHICS

“Religious traditions do not hesitate to rethink their moral rules in the social, political and economic spheres of human life when situations demand it. All too often, however, a taboo morality (bolstered by both religion and culture) holds sway in the sexual sphere, a morality whose power depends on resisting critical examination, thus preventing the transformation of traditional beliefs as well as practices.”
—Margaret Farley

In the May 2014 issue of *U.S. Catholic Magazine*, Catholic theologian and ethicist Emily Reimer-Barry discusses the “mixed messages” the Church sends to women: namely that the Church claims to exalt women while at the same time leaving many narratives about women out of the tradition. She notes that strong, active women have been influential throughout Church history, yet the language the Church uses about women has been inadequate. She remarks,

One thing I’m concerned about is that there is sometimes a silencing of women within the tradition, or a reluctance to recover difficult stories of women from the tradition. We see it [the most] in sexual ethics. We need to find a language that is empowering for all women—not just women who are virgins, not just women who are mothers.

This project recognizes this concern, and attempts to bring to light the mixed messages girls and young women receive from the Church, particularly in regards to female sexuality and identity. It

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also demands that the taboo morality prominent in the sexual sphere of Catholic ethics undergo critical examination in light of the experiences of young women, echoing Farley’s concern in the above quotation. As Catholic ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill has explained, the Roman Catholic tradition has identified women “above all else by their sexuality defined as capacity for motherhood and domesticity,” which limits the ways in which women can understand themselves as sexual beings.\(^4\) As the interviews for this project will show in Chapter Three, many Catholic young women feel confused and frustrated with this limited portrayal of their sexuality and their role as women in the Church.

This chapter will begin by reflecting on three predominant themes the Church has relied upon in its messages about female sex, gender and sexuality since the Second Vatican Council: essential gendered complementarity, the primary role of procreation (and its relationship to pleasure), and purity ideals for Catholic women, specifically as they are demonstrated in Catholic pedagogical materials. Such a reflection necessitates acknowledgment of the feminist theologians and ethicists who have taken an active part in refuting and questioning these messages as they were being discussed. Thus, this chapter serves as a way to “set the stage” for the stories of the young Catholic women in Chapter Three.\(^5\) The second part of this chapter consists of a brief review of randomly selected sexual education manuals and texts from the Archdiocese of Chicago, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), and the Vatican, in order to see how these messages are being transmitted to the faithful. Finally, the

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\(^5\) As I will discuss further in Chapter Four, the young women interviewed may or may not be aware of the Church’s teachings about sex, gender and sexuality post-Vatican II, or the responses from Catholic feminist theologians and ethicists.
chapter will end with the current discussion about the role of experience in Catholic moral
tradition as a way in which to frame this dissertation project, which prioritizes the role of
experience in Catholic sexual ethics.

2.1. Catholic Teachings and Themes about Sex, Gender and Sexuality since Vatican II

2.1.1. The Dominant Narrative:

Essential Gendered Complementarity

The theological model of human sexuality provided by the Catholic Church has historically
relied upon an essential gendered complementarity. In this model, gender is inherent and
essential to biological sex, both of which are indicative of a person’s sexuality.\(^6\) As Catholic

ethicist Aline Kalbian notes,

\[\text{[Catholic] theological and ethical arguments that govern sexual behavior also reinforce a}
\text{scheme of complementary gender roles intended to maintain the proper order between the}
\text{sexes that Catholicism believes supports the whole of God’s created order […] Marriage}
\text{is premised on an understanding of male and female as separate and distinct yet}
\text{complementary and connected to specific biological sex traits.}\]

Normative interpretations of sex and gender carry an enormous significance when they are
backed by heavy social and psychological sanctions, especially when it comes to understanding
the hierarchy of gender and sexual roles in both the Church and society.\(^8\) The debates about the

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\(^6\) In this project, I will be using the definitions of sex and gender provided by the American
Psychological Association. The APA defines \textit{gender} as “the attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that a given
culture associates with a person’s biological sex.” Sex “refers to a person’s biological status and is
typically categorized as male, female, or intersex.” “Key Terms and Concepts in Understanding Gender
Diversity and Sexual Orientation Among Students,” American Psychological Association, accessed

\(^7\) Aline Kalbian, \textit{Sexing the Church: Gender, Power, and Ethics in Contemporary Catholicism}
(Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 94.

\(^8\) Lisa Sowle Cahill, \textit{Sex, Gender & Christian Ethics} (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge
University Press, 1996), 1
relationship between sex and gender in Catholic ethics, and what this may mean for women in particular, can be more fully grasped by understanding the differing philosophical conceptions of male and female “nature” that were addressed throughout the 20th century.9

In her ground-breaking work *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, Catholic feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther contends that Christian theological anthropology has traditionally recognized a dual structure in its understanding of humanity and human “nature.”10 She parallels the dual understanding of *imago dei*/fallen Adam in Genesis with the historically constructed, dual structure of humanity as male and female, respectively. Though Christian tradition has never denied that both male and female were made in the image and likeness of God, Ruether suggests:

> [There exists] a tendency to correlate femaleness with the lower part of human nature in a hierarchical scheme of mind over body, reason over passions. Since this lower part of the self is seen as the source of sin—the falling away of the body from its original unity with the mind and hence into sin and death—femaleness also becomes linked with the sin-prone part of the self.11

This tendency is due to the fact that males have historically been the monopolizers of “theological self-definition,” according to Ruether. Thus, women have traditionally served as symbols for the lower part of the self, represented specifically in their physical, irrational, sexual nature.12 Ruether explains that patriarchal theology has understood women as subject to men and

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12 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 94.
inferior in nature even in the original creation—before the fall of humanity—and so presumes that they are not able to fully represent the image of God the way that a man does.\textsuperscript{13} She states, “Within history, woman’s subjugation is both the reflection of her inferior nature and the punishment for her responsibility for sin.”\textsuperscript{14}

In her book \textit{Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God}, Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson warns readers of the danger of gender dualism present within theological endeavors. Like Ruether, she notes that within the Christian tradition a number of theologians have separated male and female natures by equating the two with spirit and matter, respectively. This dualism of spirit and matter, which stems from the Greek philosophical tradition (first taken up by Plato and later by Aristotle), is used to differentiate masculine “traits” or “qualities” from feminine ones.\textsuperscript{15} She explains,

\begin{quote}
It starts with the obvious biological sex differences between men and women; then proceeds to assign predetermined personality traits to men and women on the basis of their roles in reproduction; and ends by extrapolating distinct social roles that must necessarily follow. In the concrete, this view identifies masculine nature with what is active, powerful, rational, able to give form—thus what is fit for leadership in the public arena. By contrast, women’s feminine nature is identified with what is passive, malleable, emotional, receptive to form—thus what is meant for nurturing roles in the private realm.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

The Christian anthropological understanding of female nature as distinct from male nature has been perpetuated by influential Church fathers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Johnson

\textsuperscript{13} Ruether, \textit{Sexism and God-Talk}, 95. Here, Ruether cites St. Augustine’s \textit{De Trinitate} 7.7.10 as one example of this message of women’s inferiority and subjugation, along with the theological anthropologies of Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Karl Barth.

\textsuperscript{14} Ruether, \textit{Sexism and God-Talk}, 95.


\textsuperscript{16} Johnson, \textit{Quest for the Living God}, 108.
explains that these thinkers reinforced “grossly misogynist views about woman’s very nature” in their theological anthropology.\(^{17}\) Although affirming women as participants in *imago dei*, Augustine suggests that a woman can only *fully* participate in *imago dei* when she is in partnership with her husband.\(^{18}\) Ruether asserts that Augustine’s theology is “so overbalanced by [woman’s] bodily representation of the inferior, sin-prone self” that he portrays women “as possessing the image of God only secondarily.”\(^{19}\) Thomas Aquinas, one of the most prominent Church Fathers in Catholic moral theology, similarly paints a dualistic portrait of male and female natures by pointing to biological differences as the reason for female inferiority, or “deformity.” Regarding his belief (which he draws from Aristotle) that women are “defective and misbegotten” in their individual nature, Ruether explains,

> By some accident [in reproduction], the male form is sometimes subverted by the female matter and produces an inferior or defective human species, or female. This inferiority touches the entire nature of the woman. She is inferior in body (weaker), inferior in mind (less capable of reason), and inferior morally (less capable of will and moral self-control).\(^{20}\)

In her investigation into the impacts of this Thomistic anthropology, Ruether identifies that women have been included in the “perfection” of nature (despite their individual defective

\(^{17}\) Johnson, *Quest for the Living God*, 108.


\(^{19}\) Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 95.

\(^{20}\) Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 96. Here, Ruether references Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* I, q. 92, art. 1 to support her argument.
nature) through their role in procreation. Thus, woman’s nature in Thomistic moral theology is irrevocably connected with her ability to bear children.

According to Aquinas, even before the fall of humanity males were naturally superior to women in the faculty of reason. In his Summa Theologica, he claims,

> There is another kind of subjection which is called economic or civil, whereby the superior makes use of his subjects for their own benefit and good; and this kind of subjection existed even before sin. For good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in man the discretion of reason predominates.

Thus, in order to promote order within society, it is necessary for “the naturally superior (males) to rule the naturally inferior (females).” The gender dualism present in Augustine and Aquinas’ theological anthropology in regards to activity and passivity and Aquinas’ gendered hierarchy in regards to reason, with its “stunted androcentric imagination,” is still promoted by patriarchal theology today, Johnson contends.

The Thomistic understanding of male and female natures has strongly shaped discussions within Catholic ethics, especially the realm of sexual ethics. For example, as the review of sexual education manuals in this section will demonstrate, essentialist views of female “nature”—derived from Augustinian and Thomistic ideology—seem to define the sexuality of women and

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21 Ruether, Sexism and God-Talk, 96.

22 Thomas Aquinas, ST I, q. 92, art. 1, http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1092.htm#article1 (emphasis mine).

23 Aquinas, ST I, q. 92, art. 1 (Parenthesis added).

24 Johnson, Quest for the Living God, 109. For Aquinas, hierarchy served to create order in the cosmos and is foundational to his understanding of the natural order of creation and how humans can achieve goodness within society. The gender domination of male over female is a direct result of this hierarchical ideology.
girls only in terms of motherhood. However, feminist theologians such as Ruether and Johnson have critiqued these and other patriarchal ideologies from within the tradition, influenced by the secular feminist movement in the mid-20th century and by their conviction that sexism is incompatible with Christian theology and ethics. Echoing the cries of her sisters in the movement, Johnson raises a question for Christian theologians: “What indeed is woman’s nature, and, even more critically, who gets to decide?”

The following section will demonstrate the attempts made by second-wave feminists to critically examine claims made about woman’s nature.

2.1.1.1. Influences of the Second-Wave Feminist Movement on the “Nature of Nature”

Feminists of the period known as the “second wave,” which took place in the 1960s and 70s, protested the past and present patriarchal dominance over women’s bodies and critiqued the notion of an essential female “nature.” Scholars and activists within the women’s liberation movement questioned and deconstructed essentialist beliefs and assumptions that there are predetermined natures for men and women that differentiate the two in both private and public spheres. Feminist scholar and historian Jane Gerhard referred to Betty Friedan’s work as a primary example of this type of radical critique and deconstruction that took place in the second wave:

In her best-seller The Feminist Mystique (1963), Betty Friedan set out [a main] pillar of second-wave feminism—that femininity was a cultural construct permeated with social values that had little basis in biology or genuine female experience. […] Throughout all levels of society, from advertisements to experts, women were taught to channel their energies and creativity into domestic and maternal activities or, as she referred to it, into the female “sex role.” American middle-class white women (or “women,” as Friedan

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referred to them), had lost their sense of self and individuality thanks to the ideology of “the feminine mystique.”

The “feminine mystique,” according to Friedan, is not an essential quality of female nature, but rather an ideological tool used to rob women of their agency and keep them in the private sphere.

The second-wave feminist movement was also propelled in large part by the pioneering work, *The Second Sex*, by French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. In it, she insists that male dominance and female subordination is not a biological phenomenon, as patriarchal thought insists, but a social creation. Throughout history, woman has been denied full humanity, de Beauvoir argues, by being denied the human right to create, invent, and go beyond mere bodily existence to transcendent thinking and construction. She writes, “Man remolds the face of the earth, he creates new instruments, he invents, he shapes the future; woman on the other hand, is always and archetypically Other. She is seen by and for men, always the object and never the subject.” This claim orients women’s subordination as a product of male power and privilege, not a natural biological determination.

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27 In de Beauvoir’s philosophy, transcendence refers to a mode of existence in which a person is able to surpass the basic demands of the present moment and free themselves from their biological fate into an active existence of creativity, intellectualism and constructive work. Immanence, on the other hand, is a state of being that revolves around uncreative chores necessary to sustain life. This state of existence submits a person to their own biological fate and chains them to the realm of the body instead of the realm of the mind, according to De Beauvoir.

Indeed, De Beauvoir was strongly opposed to any type of ideology that promoted women as having special virtues, rejecting any traits as being distinctly “feminine.” She believed that any kind of essentialist feminism that proposed that there are certain innate values in womanhood is simply giving in to the myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state. Perhaps one of her most quoted lines from The Second Sex is “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman,” a bold statement that asserts that female “nature” is not inherent but rather a social construction of reality. A liberated woman, according to De Beauvoir, must free herself from a constrained image of femininity and regain mastery of her own body (which includes taking charge of her fertility), so that she is no longer confined to the realm of immanence.

As a final example of one of the many rich contributions second-wave feminists made to the discussion about male and female natures, I turn to French feminist Monique Wittig, who was heavily influenced by Simone De Beauvoir. Wittig argues that “woman” is a political rather than a natural category. She writes,

For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes preexisting (or outside of) society.

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30 De Beauvoir, The Second Sex, 267.

31 There are many second-wave feminists whom I am unable to evaluate in this brief section for their contributions to discussions about nature and gender. These feminists include bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Gloria Steinem, and Adrienne Rich, to name only a few.

32 Monique Wittig, The Straight Mind and Other Essays (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 64.
For Wittig, not even biology exists before social construction. What this means for her interpretation of sex difference is that the categories of male and female are political and social categories, not natural ones.\textsuperscript{33} She points to LGBTQ persons as examples of persons who do not fit into the “essential categories” of male and female, since they “queer” the concept of dimorphic gender categories (that are a direct product of one’s biological sex) and challenge heteronormativity. She notes that by patriarchal standards, lesbians are not really women, and so they exist in a state of tension between different ideas of what it means to be a woman. Wittig’s analysis of gender as a political construct strongly influenced feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who calls for a “disruption” in the patriarchal foundations of culture that create the concept of gender.\textsuperscript{34}

Due to the ideological contributions of the feminist movement and the concurrent sexual revolution in the Western world, the categories of gender and sexuality have since been treated as social constructions in the majority of secular feminist and gender scholarship, distanced from a person’s biological sex, causing a dismantling of the traditional conceptions of femininity as an inherent essence and female sexuality as intrinsically linked to motherhood.\textsuperscript{35} Through the feminist movement and the sexual revolution in the Western world, women fought for liberation


\textsuperscript{34} Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity} (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1990), 147.

\textsuperscript{35} Within the field of Christian theology, however, it is interesting to note the spectrum of opinions in the nature/nurture debate, distinct from the majority of secular feminist scholars. Many prominent Christian feminists are still not fully convinced that sex and gender norms are all socially constructed, as the majority of secular feminist scholars do. Some of these scholars include Lisa Cahill and Jean Porter, in their books \textit{Sex, Gender, \& Christian Ethics} and \textit{Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics}, respectively.
from the constraints of the idea that “biology equals destiny,” and contended that such ideas about female “nature” and “essence” were in fact socially constructed, historically employed to keep women in a realm of subjugation.36

The ideologies about sex and gender produced from the secular feminist movement were also influencing women in religious traditions, leading to what Johnson refers to as a “spiritual uprising.”37 Within religious communities, feminist theologians and ethicists began to examine the sin of sexism within their own traditions. The complex nature-nurture debate within the many facets of feminism presented many challenges to conventional theological views of male and female natures, including those held by the Catholic Church. The Church saw a need to respond to the feminist movement of the 20th century with its own theological understandings of male and female nature, the purpose of human sexuality, and the role of women in society and the Church.

2.1.1.2. The Catholic Response to the Nature Debate

As the second wave feminist movement and sexual revolution in the Western world began to gain momentum, Pope John XXIII convened a council that brought about major reform to the Catholic Church. The Second Vatican Council, which lasted from 1962-1965, was called to address the “signs of the times” and the needs of men and women of the modern world.38 Ethicist Aline Kalbian contends that it was during this Vatican II era that the Church’s understanding of

36 Gerhard, Desiring Revolution, 47.

37 Johnson, Quest for the Living God, 92.

male and female natures underwent a conceptual shift from “a more hierarchical model to one based on greater equity.”

She notes that the Vatican revised the traditional patriarchal view of the male as inherently superior by asserting that there exists an equal and interdependent relationship between male and female. For example, committed to affirming the dignity of the human person, *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, condemns any discrimination on the basis of sex and proclaims that both spouses “enjoy the authentic dignity of persons” since man and woman are both made in the image and likeness of God.

Furthermore, spouses should strive to be “joined to one another in harmony of mind and the work of mutual sanctification.”

This assertion of equal dignity, however, did not go so far as to validate the claims made about gender during the feminist movement (namely, that it is a social construction), but rather characterized the two genders as equal, but inherently complementary of one another.

Kalbian describes the prominent Catholic doctrine of gender complementarity in sexual ethics as such:

> This doctrine [begins] with the presupposition that male and female are essential and stable genders that exist in a binary opposition. Gender is determined exclusively on the basis of biological sexual characteristics and that identity is firmly grounded in gender assignment; thus, each person lives and experiences his or her identity as male or female. Gender complementarity does not simply tell us about the meaning of gender; it also dictates the appropriate form of relationship that can exist between the genders. That

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39 Kalbian, *Sexing the Church*, 96.

40 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, pars. 52, 60.

41 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, par. 52. Post-Vatican II documents continued to reaffirm this message of equal dignity and complementarity of the sexes, including *Octogesima adveniens*, par. 16 (1971); *Justitia in mundo*, part III (1971); and *Familiaris consortio*, Nos. 22, 23 (1982).
relationship is based on difference. It conveys a sense of the purpose of each gender: each gender is to complement its opposite.\textsuperscript{42}

A version of this concept of gender complementarity existed pre-Vatican II, Kalbian states, though it emphasized a hierarchy between male and female, with females being subordinate to males in the realm of marriage and family, as I described earlier with Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.\textsuperscript{43}

It can be argued that no pope has articulated the Church’s understanding of gender and the concept of gender complementarity as much as Pope John Paul II did throughout his papacy. The late Pope John Paul II was very influential in providing a theological response to the secular feminist movement and sexual revolution of the 20th century by articulating a theology of gender through various letters and encyclicals. In his writings about sexuality and male and female “natures,” collected in what is now referred to as the “Theology of the Body,” he asserts that both sexes have distinct qualities and characteristics that constitute their essence, as given to them by God from the beginning of creation (in the Book of Genesis).\textsuperscript{44} Perhaps the most noted nod to the secular feminist movement, the apostolic letter \textit{Mulieris Dignitatem}, was written in 1988 by John Paul II in order to address the dignity and unique vocation of women. In the letter, he not only asserts the ontological necessity of gender dualism according to Genesis, but also

\textsuperscript{42} Kalbian, \textit{Sexing the Church}, 97.

\textsuperscript{43} Kalbian, \textit{Sexing the Church}, 98. Kalbian provides examples of pre-Vatican II gender complementarity by referencing Leo XIII’s description of male and female sex-roles in the household in the encyclical \textit{Arcanum divinae, On Christian Marriage}, and Pius XII’s address to the Federation of Italian Women, in which he promoted “women’s attributes” for gentleness and motherhood while still promoting her role as man’s helper. See also \textit{Casti connubii, On Christian Marriage} (1930) in which Pius XI discusses marriage, contraception, and the “pedestalization” of women.

upholds and praises the female “genius” as being an innate, divinely ordained gift that gives women a specific role different from men in society and in the Church.45

_Mulieris dignitatem_ not only stresses the significance of female “originality,” also known as the feminine “genius,” but also the view that although masculinity and femininity are distinct, they are equal and complementary. The letter states,

> The personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different. Hence a woman, as well as a man, must understand her “fulfillment” as a person, her dignity and vocation, on the basis of these resources, according to the richness of her femininity which she received on the day of creation and which she inherits as an expression of the “image and likeness of God” that is specifically hers.46

Pope John Paul II condemns any sort of oppression or patriarchal domination of women in societies, and states that all peoples should value and cherish the unique self-gift that women give to others by virtue of their womanhood.47 He warns against the “masculinization” of women, which can be an outcome of women denying their unique capabilities to nurture and bear life in the role of motherhood.48 Even if a woman is physically unable to bear children, or has decided not to marry, the Magisterium holds that women should not reject their female “originality”—doing so will “deform and lose what constitutes their essential richness.”49

What exactly is this “originality” or “genius,” according to the Church? John Paul II describes the female “genius” as being her innate sensitivity towards other human beings.

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46 John Paul II, _Mulieris dignitatem_, par. 10 (emphasis added).

47 John Paul II, _Mulieris dignitatem_, par. 10.

48 John Paul II, _Mulieris dignitatem_, par. 10.

49 John Paul II, _Mulieris dignitatem_, par. 10.
Through the two vocations of motherhood and virginity, according to *Mulieris dignitatem*, women can reach true fulfillment as human beings through a sincere total gift of self, just as the Virgin Mary demonstrated in her *fiat*. He writes,

> The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way—precisely by reason of their femininity—and this in a particular way determines their vocation.”

As John Paul II teaches in his letters and encyclicals on women, there are collective features that make up an unchanging foundation of womanhood—there exists an idea of an “essential woman” or a “universal feminine nature.” Despite the shifts in Catholic sexual ethics that took place during Vatican II towards a more egalitarian, interdependent view of the sexes, the Catholic Church has identified women above all else by their role as helpers and as nurturers, pointing to their biological ability to reproduce as the basis for this teaching.

Aline Kalbian notes that although the contemporary model of gender complementarity seems more equitable by recognizing the equal dignity of male and female, it still represents another sort of hierarchy. She explains,

> It is hierarchical not so much in the sense that one party submits to the other but rather that the designated [sex] role for the female gender is one that is inherently more repressive; they often define the female primarily in terms of her role as complement to the male, as his helper. [Susan A.] Ross describes the characteristics assigned to each

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50 John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*, par. 30 (emphasis added).

gender as follows: receptivity and maternal nurturing are female qualities, and initiation and activity are male qualities.\textsuperscript{52,53}

To counter the famous feminist claim “biology does not equal destiny,” the Catholic Church boldly proclaims that biology \textit{is} destiny, because from the origin of creation male and female were created as embodied creatures with a specific, differentiated \textit{telos}.\textsuperscript{54} Male and female were created with traits that when in union, complement and explain the other. These innate dispositions ought to be exhibited in displays of gender and in sexual behavior, according to each person’s designated sex.

Feminist theologians who were hoping for a more nuanced and liberating teaching regarding gender from the 20th century Church, taking into account the sociological and philosophical claims brought to light by the second-wave feminist movement, were severely disappointed in the essentialist assertions made by the papacy that affirm women’s right to fully participate in the world, yet still relegate them to specific gendered roles because of their biological sex.\textsuperscript{55} Catholic feminist theologian Mary Jo Weaver strongly asserts that the Catholic view of gender complementarity is “a religious form of sex-role stereotyping,” citing the “usual

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Jones, \textit{Feminist Theory and Christian Theology}, 24.
\item \textsuperscript{54} A phrase first coined by feminist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir in her famous work \textit{The Second Sex} (1949) and later incorporated into many political campaigns of the second-wave feminist movement.
\item \textsuperscript{55} It is important to note that there were some feminist theologians who embraced this model of gender complementarity and gender essentialism, calling themselves “New Feminists.” Some of these theologians include Monica M. Miller, Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, Michele M. Schumacher, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese.
\end{itemize}
complementarity choice for Catholic women—motherhood or a convent” as merely another way to keep women in powerless positions in the Church.\(^5^6\) Weaver and other feminist theologians’ bold analysis of the patriarchal undertones present in the Church’s understanding of “nature” presents a central question: what is an authentic way in which to understand male and female “nature” that does not represent and perpetuate the patriarchal subjugation of women?

The young women interviewed for this project have been raised in a society that has been influenced by the feminist movement and sexual revolution that took place in the mid-20th century. The current feminist movement (from the 1980s to present) has been referred to as “third-wave” feminism, characterized by the argument that there are many sexes, sexualities and genders, and that they cannot be categorized in binaries but rather by a continuum. Many of the women used concepts brought to light by these movements in their narratives, such as the idea that gender is a construct, and that sexuality can be understood on a spectrum. At the same time, these women were strongly influenced by their Catholic upbringing, which has denied this view of gender and sexuality construction in favor of inherent, immutable male and female essences.\(^5^7\)

The young women also expressed frustration regarding the Church’s teachings on sex and sexuality, which includes the role that pleasure has in Catholic sexual ethics, a subject to which we will now turn.

2.1.2. The Role of Pleasure in Catholic Sexual Ethics

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, the Church defined the primary purpose and good of all sexual acts within marriage as procreation and understood sexual pleasure as something that

\(^5^6\) Mary Jo Weaver, *New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 50, 52.

\(^5^7\) The tension that these women experience in their faith and in their lived experiences will be further discussed in Chapter Four: Emerging Themes.
merely assists in achieving this purpose. This understanding of the “nature” of sex was strongly
influenced by the moral theology of Thomas Aquinas, who relied upon much of the theology of
St. Augustine. Influenced by the extreme body/soul dualisms present in many philosophies
during his time (Manicheism being one), Augustine was very suspicious of sexual pleasure, even
going so far as to suggest that sexual pleasure is a vehicle of original sin. Augustine condoned
(male) sexual passion within marriage, however, because it is necessary for procreation, but it
should not be sought for its own sake. He emphasizes this belief in Of the Good of Marriage,
where he states that sexual intercourse “for the sake of begetting [children] has no fault,” but that
intercourse for the satisfying of sexual passion is a venial sin.

Aquinas differs from Augustine’s negative view of sexual pleasure by affirming that
sexual desire, like other passions, has a rightly ordered place in the moral life—though it must be
controlled. In his Summa Theologica, Aquinas states, “the use of venereal acts [sexual
pleasure] is most necessary for the common good, namely the preservation of the human race.”
However, Aquinas spends a great deal of time condemning the vice of lust, which occurs when
sexual passion is not rightly ordered by reason towards its proper end—procreation. Aquinas’
sexual ethical framework rests on his view of the natural law, which is the eternal law of God

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58 St. Augustine, “On Marriage and Concupiscence,” Book I, Ch. 27, accessed February 25, 2018,

59 St. Augustine, “Of the Good of Marriage,” sec. 6. accessed February 25, 2018,

60 Lisa Sowle Cahill, “Current Teaching on Sexual Ethics,” in Dialogue About Catholic Sexual

61 Thomas Aquinas, ST II-II, Q. 152 art. 3.

62 Thomas Aquinas, ST II-II, Q. 153.
accessible to humans through reason.\textsuperscript{63} Drawing on a physicalist interpretation of natural law that understands the telos (end, purpose) of marital sex as “generating and bringing up children,” Aquinas asserts that sexual activity between married couples is natural only when procreation is the end goal, not sexual passion.\textsuperscript{64} It wasn’t until Vatican II that the Church began to address the potential of sex to enhance the unity of the married couple. Vatican II introduced an effort on the part of the papacy to re-visit teachings on the purposes of sex and sexuality within marriage, particularly by re-evaluating the traditional Thomistic view that sexual intercourse within marriage must always be directed towards and open to procreation.

In her book \textit{Contraception and the Catholic Church}, Aline Kalbian notes that the documents in Vatican II presented a “broad shift in the Catholic discourse about human sexuality” because of its holistic rather than functionalist view of the human body.\textsuperscript{65} In other words, rather than isolating the purpose of sex to the physical realm (as Aquinas did), the council sought to consider the totality of the human person engaged in sexual acts—mind, body, and spirit. In the conciliar document \textit{Gaudium et spes}, written in 1965, the Church first recognized the love and union between spouses as \textit{equal in importance} to the good of procreation in the

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnote{Thomas Aquinas, \textit{ST} II-II, Q. 91 art. 2. Here, Aquinas offers a definition of natural law: “the rational creature’s participation of the eternal law.” The eternal law intends for humans to flourish, with the ultimate end goal being beatitude, which is perfect union with God.}

\footnote{Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa Contra Gentiles}, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, Book 3 (New York: Hanover House, 1955), accessed on February 25, 2018, http://dhspriory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3b.htm, part II, no. 122. Aquinas’ view on the primary purpose of sexuality revolves around the claim that it is a grave sin to let male sperm be wasted. Rather, it should always be used to promote the multiplication of the human species- to let it go to waste would be going against the intelligent order that pervades all of creation.}

\end{footnotesize}
natural purpose of sexual acts, a change later reflected in the encyclical *Humanae vitae*.\footnote{Gaudium et spes, par. 50 (emphasis added).} However, it is important to note that this recognition of the importance of union between spouses in sexual intercourse did not mention pleasure as a moral good within the sexual act; the physical union of male and female *may* bring pleasure, but does not have to, as I will discuss later in this section.

In the 1968 encyclical *Humanae vitae*, the encyclical letter On the Regulation of Birth, Pope Paul VI acknowledges both the procreative and unitive functions of sexual relations, as *Gaudium et spes* did, yet takes a firm stance against the use of artificial contraceptives, much to the disappointment of many of the faithful and contrary to the recommendation given by the majority report of the Papal Commission on the study of population, family, and birth.\footnote{The Majority Report of the Papal Commission on the Study of Population, Family, and Birth, “Schema for a Document on Responsible Parenthood,” June 4-9, 1966, accessed on February 25, 2018, http://ldysinger.stjohnsem.edu/@magist/1963_paul6/068_hum_vitae/majority%20report.pdf.} The encyclical justifies the Church’s previously held prohibition on the use of contraceptives by affirming the physicalist and relational structure of sexual relations and its finality toward reproduction. The teaching that the use of contraceptives is always morally wrong, the encyclical explains,

> is founded upon the inseparable connection, willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning. Indeed, by its intimate structure, the conjugal act, while most closely uniting husband and wife, capacititates them for the generation of new lives, according to laws inscribed in the very being of man and woman.\footnote{Pope Paul VI, *Humanae vitae* [Encyclical On the Regulation of Birth], Vatican website, July 25, 1968, accessed February 25, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html, par. 12.}

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66 *Gaudium et spes*, par. 50 (emphasis added).


These laws that necessitate that human sexuality be oriented towards procreation are a part of the natural law that governs and orders the whole of creation, the encyclical asserts.

*Humanae vitae* draws upon *Gaudium et spes* and develops it by stating that the unitive aspect of sexual intercourse is just as important as the procreative aspect, and affirms that sex itself is inherently good. Regarding the effect that this reform had on Catholic sexual ethics, theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill comments that this change “opened the door to seeing sexuality much more in relation to the interpersonal qualities of the relationship of wife and husband, and of interpreting the morality of sex in this light.”

Although the language of relationship was important in Catholic sexual ethics before this time, it wasn’t until *Humanae vitae* that union between spouses was considered the natural purpose of sexual intercourse alongside procreation, with “no ranking of these ends,” Cahill notes.

Nevertheless, the encyclical preserved the traditional ban against contraception, stating that it is imprinted *in the very being* of male and female that they must exercise their sexual bodies toward reproduction, and that blocking or denying it through artificial contraception is obstructing “the natural development of the generative process.” Additionally, the encyclical sees contraceptive sex as inherently selfish, due to the belief that sexual union ought to be a

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69 Cahill, “Current Teaching on Sexual Ethics,” 527.

70 Cahill, 527 (Emphasis mine).

71 Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, par. 12, 16. The encyclical does allow for the spacing of births through natural methods such as *Natural Family Planning* (abstaining from sex during fertile periods), because couples are still using the “faculties provided them by nature” (i.e. the natural cycle of the woman).
result of “total self-gift” on the part of the couple (contraception blocks the ability for a spouse to
give of themselves fully, since they are intentionally blocking their fecundity). 72

_Humanae vitae_’s message about the role that humans have in the regulation of birth
refuted the goal of many Catholic women and couples to gain more control over their own
reproduction by stating that divine intelligence in nature is more powerful than human
intelligence, and that human beings should have a reverence for the natural law as interpreted by
the encyclical, which will lead to true happiness and fulfillment. It states,

> Just as man does not have unlimited dominion over his body in general, so alas, and with
> more particular reason, he has no such dominion over his specifically sexual faculties, for
> these are concerned by their very nature with the generation of life, of which God is the
> source. 73

Especially for women, a rational creature’s participation in the eternal law involves recognizing
that the body in sexual intercourse is naturally directed toward procreation, and that this natural
end should not be impeded by artificial methods, in keeping with natural law.

In 1975, under the papacy of Paul VI, a pontifical declaration was written on certain
questions concerning sexual ethics entitled Persona humana. This declaration, given at the
Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in Rome, sought to address the new and emerging
views of sexuality brought forth by the sexual revolution and the feminist movement that the
Church deemed to be in error. This included addressing views of the sexual act that are not
ordered towards procreation, sexual activity outside of marriage, homosexuality and

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72 Pope John Paul II articulated this idea of “total self-gift” in his _Theology of the Body_, in which
he referenced the language of gift used in _Humanae vitae_. _Humanae vitae_ states, “Then, this love is total,
that is to say, it is a very special form of personal friendship, in which husband and wife generously share
everything, without undue reservations or selfish calculations. Whoever truly loves his marriage partner
loves not only for what he receives, but for the partner's self, rejoicing that he can enrich his partner with
the gift of himself” (par. 9).

73 Pope Paul VI, _Humanae vitae_, par. 13.
masturbation, among other topics. In the declaration, criticism was given to new studies in psychology and sociology that went against traditional Catholic doctrine on sexuality, and against the physicalist interpretation of natural law theory that the magisterium had espoused for centuries.

The declaration begins by affirming the value of natural law in creating principles and teachings concerning sexuality, even though throughout history many conditions of human life have changed and will continue to change. It states,

All evolution of morals and every type of life must be kept within the limits imposed by the immutable principles based upon every human person’s constitutive elements and essential relations- elements and relations that transcend historical contingency.\textsuperscript{74}

Persona Humana directly counters the postmodern theory that human nature is a social construct—that there does not exist an absolute or immutable norm for males and females. Rather, there are a “certain number of precepts of the natural law [that have] absolute and immutable value,” which the Church (with the assistance of the Holy Spirit) has interpreted and transmitted to the faithful.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, natural law is not simply an expression of a particular culture in a certain moment of history, Persona Humana states, but is an eternal law that is written by God, existing in the heart of every man and woman, able to be accessed through the human person’s ability to reason.

The declaration reaffirms the finality of the sexual act: mutual self-gift and human procreation, and states that “only in legitimate marriage does the use of the sexual faculty find its


\textsuperscript{75} Pope Paul VI, \textit{Persona humana}, sec. 3.
true meaning,” thereby maintaining the long-standing teaching against sexual relations outside of the context of marriage. Pre-marital sexual relationships, the declaration notes, are not only subject to infidelity and inconsistent desires, but often exclude the expectation of procreation. Likewise, the act of masturbation is pronounced an “intrinsically and gravely disordered action” due to its exclusion of procreation and mutual self-gift. Although psychological and sociological studies have described masturbation as a normal manifestation of sexual growth, the declaration maintains that both the magisterium and the moral sense of the faithful have “no doubt” that masturbation is a grave sin. The declaration as a whole instructs bishops and priests to educate the faithful in sexual morality, in light of the new and emerging secular theories and feminist theologies that negate the traditional principles held by the Church.

In the late 20th century, feminist theologians began to respond to magisterial interpretations of natural law (as professed in Church teachings about sexuality) by offering a feminist interpretation of natural law. These natural law feminists point out that Aquinas himself never implied that there is one definitive way of flourishing for all cultures and all peoples; rather, there exist “particular experiences and shared goods” that can be applied to ethical frameworks for human flourishing. As feminist ethicist Cristina Traina notes, “[feminist

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76 Pope Paul VI, *Persona humana*, sec. 7.


79 Some of these feminists include Cristina Traina, Jean Porter, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Margaret Farley, Christine E. Gudorf, Patricia Beattie Jung, Diana Fritz Cates, and Susan Frank Parsons.

natural law] requires us to think of the world as subject to some unchanging limits but also as
dynamic within those boundaries." One of these dynamisms, feminist natural law theorists
contend, are the particular experiences of gender and sexuality (influenced by patriarchy and
other systems of injustice) that should shape the way that theologians and ethicists talk about
flourishing. Using the wisdom of body, feminists have appealed to the law of nature to make
arguments for the uplifting of the importance of pleasure in sexual ethics (among other things),
particularly for women. I will describe some of these arguments below.

Much to the disappointment of many feminist theologians as well as lay men and women
in the Church, the shift in focus from procreation as the dominant moral standard for sex did not
give way to a broader understanding of the roles of men and women in relation to gender and
sexuality. Scholars have noted that there was some effort within Gaudium et spes to take a stand
for women by recognizing the prevailing discrimination against them; however, this recognition
did not result in any shift away from the essential gendered understanding of a woman’s nature
and sexuality, and what that means for her role within the Church and society. A few decades
later, the 1987 letter “Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and the Dignity of
Procreation,” promulgated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, appealed to the
“unchangeable and immutable laws of human nature” in regard to the roles of males and females
in sexual unions. These laws are “inscribed in the very being of man and woman,” with the two

81 Traina, “Feminist Natural Law,” 79.

sexes bearing distinct characteristics and “sexual designs” that translate into essential gendered differences in society at large.  

Due to the pervasiveness of the Thomistic ideology that sexual pleasure can lead to immoderate concupiscence, and that pleasure is at the lower, inferior level of animals that we must strive as humans to rise above, it is difficult to envision a place for pleasure as a good or the purpose of sexual relations. However, in order to promote a more holistic human flourishing, many feminist ethicists—using feminist interpretations of natural law—insist that we must not be suspicious of or ignore sexual pleasure, but rather elevate it within Catholic sexual ethics. In her significant work *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* Christian ethicist Christine Gudorf makes the case for sexual pleasure, insisting that it be considered a premoral good in Christian sexual ethics. A Christian sexual ethic should encourage sexual pleasure in sex, Gudorf contends, by emphasizing its social as well as its individual functions. She writes, “Body pleasure is a good in that it communicates to us our own goodness. That sense

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84 Corey Barnes, “Thomas Aquinas on the Body and Bodily Passions,” in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 90. Barnes also notes that according to Aquinas, “[There existed] greater sensual pleasure in the state of innocence on account of the purity of human nature and the perfection of the bodily senses. The deformity of immoderate concupiscence that characterizes sex in the state of corruption results not from an increased magnitude of sexual pleasure but from the decreased moderation of reason over the sensual appetite” (90).

85 Gudorf states that a premoral good “does not mean that it leads to moral good, but that it is ordinarily a good, and should be understood as one aspect of the general social good. However, there are always some specific situations in which a premoral good may be outweighed by a conflicting premoral good within the process of moral discernment.” in *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 90.
of self-goodness is essential if we are to understand ourselves as beloved by God, and thus able to communicate God’s love to others.”

Thus, sexual pleasure can and should be considered a good and end of sexual activity (which leads to human flourishing) because of the basic premise that the body is good, and that expressions of our bodies communicate to us this goodness. Considering pleasure, specifically sexual pleasure, as a premoral good means that sexual pleasure is good even before its role or function is morally evaluated in a particular act or situation. This articulation of pleasure as a good and possible end within sexual intercourse adds a missing element to the Catholic Church’s traditional teaching that leaves sexual pleasure out of discussions about what is essential to the goodness of sex. Gudorf seeks to prove, pointing to female biology as a source of knowledge, that “sexual pleasure [is a] divine intention.”

Catholic sexual ethicist Patricia Beattie Jung specifically addresses female pleasure in her article “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure,” by bringing to light the goodness of women’s sexual delight. She states that in order for the Church to bring credibility to its teaching about the unitive purpose of sex—which ought to express a bond between the married couple—female sexual pleasure must be discussed. “The absolute absence of sexual joy in so many women’s lives is in part a consequence of the way good sex has been constructed in Christian moral traditions,” she contends.

According to official Church teaching, the only elements necessary for the completion of the marital act are penile penetration and male ejaculation, which

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86 Gudorf, Body, Sex, and Pleasure, 98.

87 Gudorf, Body, Sex, and Pleasure, 90.

necessarily includes male pleasure, she notes. Women need to only be receptacles of semen in order for sex to be morally good in the eyes of the Church, a fact that Jung believes is contrary to what many women judge as good sex. Jung argues,

It does not take a great deal of moral imagination to recognize that sexual activity not aimed at mutual pleasure will not serve the marital bond, will certainly not be love making and, if repeated, might well prove destructive not only of the relationship but of the self-esteem of the partner whose delight is so devalued.

Jung relies upon the wisdom of the body as a natural law basis on which to make her claim that women’s pleasure should be understood as sacred and necessary for the unity of the couple. Citing the rate of anorgasmia among women (about 10% of all women) and the fact that far fewer women masturbate than men, and at a much later age, Jung states that many women lack the self-knowledge to even know what feels good to them, making it even more difficult to understand what may potentially unite a woman with her partner during sexual intercourse.

Additionally, she notes the work that many scholars such as Naomi Wolf have done to illuminate the important role that the clitoris plays in stimulating female pleasure, contrary to many cultural social scripts given to women. In order to take seriously the Christian affirmation that the incarnation and the resurrection of the body present a positive and beautiful view of the human body with all of its senses, Jung contends that women’s sexual pleasure should be lauded as intrinsically holy and good.

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92 Jung, “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure,” 90. Christian Ethicist James Ellison makes a similar point in his book Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience: namely, that it is inconsistent that the moral codes that govern sexual ethics pay little attention to the goodness of the body and its expressions, considering the immense importance of the Incarnation.
In the 1953 report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, noted sexologist Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues reported that Christianity “definitely and consistently” negatively impacted women’s capacity for pleasure. Alarmingly, the more intense their religious devotion, the fewer orgasms the women reported in the study.\(^{93}\) This staggering statistic that Jung included in her article demonstrates the dire problem that Christianity is facing when it comes to understanding the role that pleasure (specifically female pleasure) has in the moral tradition. Within the Catholic tradition, to put it bluntly, the problem is that the Magisterium doesn’t acknowledge the lack of female pleasure even to be a problem. By turning to the human body as a source of wisdom (designs within the natural process that reveal the eternal law of God), as feminist interpretations of natural law do, it is evident that the clitoris is an important part of female sexual physiology that can aid theologians and ethicists in constructing a more liberating sexual ethic for women.

Christine Gudorf, Patricia Beattie Jung and other feminist sexual ethicists who have argued for sexual pleasure to be seen as an essential good of sex by the Church are concerned that the devaluation of pleasure almost exclusively applies to women since male sexual pleasure is taken for granted in penile penetration and ejaculation; this in turn severely damages female sexual growth and development. What *are* the messages that women are getting about their sexuality, if they are not about pleasure as a gift from God that should be celebrated? Jung suggests that the messages are about virginity, “especially as a sign of being sexually unawakened—of *not* knowing desires and attractions,” and how women should treasure their virginity and sexual purity.\(^{94}\)

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\(^{93}\) Jung, “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure,” 90.

\(^{94}\) Jung, “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure,” 90.
2.1.3. Purity Ideals for Women and the Madonna/Whore Myth

In Peggy Orenstein’s 2016 book *Girls & Sex*, she studied the way in which girls understood their virginity, and how they felt when they lost their virginity. A minority of girls she interviewed cited their religion as being the primary motivation for remaining virgins until marriage, or “saving themselves.” These girls saw virginity as “a gift to be shared with one true partner, but it was also something else: a way to honor God.”95 The “True Love Waits” movement, a product of the Southern Baptist Church in the 1990s, is perhaps one of the largest religious abstinence programs in the country. The movement’s primary goal is to encourage youth to sign a purity pledge in which they vow to remain abstinent until marriage. Orenstein noted that by 2004, “more than 2.5 million had pledged—1 in 6 American girls.”96 Sociologists Peter Bearman of Columbia University and Hannah Bruckner of Yale discovered through their research that when “pledgers” reach their twenties, however, over 80% either deny or have forgotten that they ever pledged at all.97 Orenstein reflects,

> The only lesson that sticks is that [the purity pledgers] remain less likely to use contraception and drastically less likely to protect against disease. Having heard Pam Stenzel warn repeatedly that condoms are useless against infections and that taking birth control pills will leave a girl “sterile or dead,” I guess I’m not surprised. Still, it’s interesting that young adults retain the unsafe-sex messages of abstinence education even as they jettison the rest.98

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98 Orenstein, *Girls & Sex*, 89. Pam Stenzel is one of the nation’s most popular abstinence-only educators. She identifies as an evangelical Christian, and speaks at a variety of schools and churches across the country about remaining abstinent until marriage.
This type of fear-based sexual pedagogy does little to dissuade young people from engaging in sexual activity, and in fact encourages risky behavior when youth do choose to have sex, by condemning birth control and leaving out safe-sex practices.

Abstinence programs such as the “True Love Waits” program are powerful structures of socialization within Christian sexual education in the United States. As I outlined in the first chapter, I am particularly interested in these religious structures of socialization, and how they function in the identity formation of Catholic young women coming into their own understandings of sexuality. Admittedly, one cannot talk about sexuality within Catholic ethics without acknowledging that the themes of gender, pleasure and purity are always overlapping. Hence, drawing on the information from the first two sections, the last theme that I will explore in this section is the sexual standard of purity for women in Catholic theology and ethics—particularly as it is articulated in Catholic sexual education, and how this standard contributes to the prevalence of the “madonna/whore” myth.

In her book *Liberating Conscience*, feminist theologian Anne Patrick observes,

> A patriarchal paradigm for virtue has long dominated Catholic thinking. Its shape has been affected by otherworldly spirituality, the theological and social patterns of domination and subordination, the misogyny, and the body-rejecting dualism characteristic of Western culture.99

She notes that the patriarchal paradigm “articulates many ideals for character but tends to assume that these are appropriately assigned greater emphasis according to one’s gender.”100 For example, all humans are called to be kind and humble, but women are expected to excel in charity and docility due to their feminine nature (as John Paul II described in *Mulieris


100 Patrick, *Liberating Conscience*, 77.
This patriarchal paradigm is particularly evident in the purity ideals emphasized for women in Catholic sexual ethics. Within pastoral sexual education manuals in particular, purity ideals for women in the sexual sphere are vastly different from those for men, by nature of the depiction of female “otherness.”

Patricia Beattie Jung discusses the patriarchal paradigm of purity in her article “Patriarchy, Purity, and Procreativity: Developments in Catholic Teachings on Human Sexuality and Gender.” Regarding the development of the Christian stance on male and female sexuality, she writes,

Within the various dualistic worldviews that pervaded the ancient Mediterranean world, the material world—including the body and its sexual passions and reproductive functions—was thought to be a threat to reason and freedom. Since such visceral emotions were thought to be especially evident in women, femininity was particularly associated with what was irrational, involuntary, intensely emotional, and hence morally dangerous.  

Feminist historian and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza also identifies this dualistic trend amongst the early Church fathers, noting,

Like Philo and Aristotle the Fathers consider man to be the paradigmatic human being and males to be symbolic of the divine [...] their philosophical and theological conceptuality assumes the natural inferiority of women and sees the feminine as symbolic of earthly, bodily, carnal reality.

Hence, due to the “myths of female evil” that pervaded early Christian theology (which began with patriarchal interpretations of Eve and sin in Genesis), purity became especially emphasized for women, since it was important for them to overcome the carnal passions to which they are

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easily susceptible in favor of reason.\textsuperscript{103} This transcendence from the realm of the body and its passions to the realm of reason and freedom was considered more easily attainable for men, due to their ability to control the “visceral emotions” attributed to femininity and their natural closeness to the divine.\textsuperscript{104}

Throughout the development of Christianity, there emerged a “culture of celibacy” that exalted lifestyles that intentionally chose to turn away from sexual activity in order to transform their bodies to imitate Christ. These “pure” bodies were witnesses to the resurrected and pure life found in the Kingdom of Heaven.\textsuperscript{105} The culture of celibacy in the early Church, exhibited in the works of Clement of Alexandria and later in those of Augustine of Hippo, identified those who chose to engage in sexual activity, especially non-coital forms of activity, as less pure than those who remained celibate, since this type of sexual lifestyle represented an abandonment of self-control, reason, and transcendence.\textsuperscript{106} As Jung poignantly quips, “The Church taught that the best sex—even in marriage—was no sex at all.”\textsuperscript{107} This renunciation of sexuality within early Christianity was often connected to women in particular, since they were associated with flesh and sexuality. As ecclesial historian Peter Brown notes, in the second through fourth centuries

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\textsuperscript{103} For example, in \textit{Sexism and God Talk}, Rosemary Radford Ruether points to Philo of Alexandria’s interpretation of Eve in his commentary on Genesis, which charges women with “materiality, irrationality, carnality, and finitude, which debase the “manly” spirit and drag it down to sin and death.” Ruether notes that according to Philo, “The creation of Eve represents the separation of Adam’s mortal, bodily lower half and his soul. With Eve’s creation, Adam becomes seduced to his lower self through sexual desire.” (169) referencing Philo, \textit{Commentary on Genesis}, nos. 46, 53.

\textsuperscript{104} Jung, “Patriarchy, Purity, and Procreativity,” 74.

\textsuperscript{105} Jung, “Patriarchy, Purity, and Procreativity,” 75.

\textsuperscript{106} Jung, “Patriarchy, Purity, and Procreativity,” 75.

\textsuperscript{107} Jung, “Patriarchy, Purity, and Procreativity,” 75.
\end{flushright}
A.D. women were correlated with sexual desire by early Christian figures such as Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, due to their representation of sinfulness and materialness. He writes,

The misogyny to which Tertullian appealed so insistently was, in his opinion, based on unalterable facts of nature: women were seductive, and Christian baptism did nothing to change this fact. The precautions that had been taken to enforce modesty on women, in the pagan world, were merely maximized among the [Christian] saints.\footnote{Peter Brown, \textit{The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity} (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), 82. Brown also notes that in St. Clement of Alexandria’s famous work \textit{The Stromata}, he correlates women with sexual desire and death: “They say that the Savior himself said: ‘I came to undo the works of women,’ meaning by this ‘female,’ sexual desire, and by ‘work,’ birth and the corruption of death.”\textit{Clement, Strom.} 3.6.45 and 3.6.63 (85).}

Thus, the patriarchal paradigm of virtue held women to a different standard of purity due to the polemical tactics used within the early Christian tradition that differentiated the “spiritual, pure” male from the “earthly, impure” female.

Depictions of a number of female Catholic saints are evidence that the sexual purity ideal has remained a powerful one as a demonstration of holiness and devotion to God. Anne Patrick notes that the stories of female Catholic saints such as Maria Goretti in the early twentieth century have promoted the patriarchal paradigm of virtue in regards to upholding the virtue of abstinence even in the face of death, over and against her physical well-being. When Goretti was only 11 years old, the son of the family who lived next door to her tried to sexually assault her; she resisted, and he threatened to stab her if she didn’t stop resisting him. Exclaiming that she would rather die than allow him to commit this mortal sin, Goretti was then stabbed multiple times, and died shortly after. Regarding Goretti’s legacy after her tragic death, Patrick observes,

The saint’s preeminent concern for the spiritual welfare of her assailant (“It is a sin. You will go to hell for it”) reinforced the emphasis on a young woman’s responsibility for the sexual behavior of a dating couple typical for Catholic education of the day […] If their
hagiographers are to be believed, none of these saints ever indulged a sexual thought, but only the female paid for her virginity with her life.\textsuperscript{109}

In this story, not only is the woman called to preserve her virginity no matter what, even in the face of death, but she must also serve as the “sexual gatekeeper” for the man, a concept that will be further discussed in the next section. This example of how St. Maria Goretti responded to threats to her purity paints a grim picture for the value of women’s lives: namely, that her sexual purity is worth more than her life.

Twentieth century German Catholic theologian Alice Von Hildebrand presents a traditional view of female sexual purity in her article “Women as Guardians of Purity.” Her analysis, which highlights the woman’s unique role in safeguarding purity, was later interwoven into John Paul II’s theological anthropology, demonstrated in the \textit{Theology of the Body}. She asserts that women have received a “special mission” from God to uphold the virtue of purity, and so are held to a higher standard due to the responsibility connected with sharing this gift with the Virgin Mary. Von Hildebrand asserts,

\begin{quote}
The fact that the woman's intimate organs are veiled [by the labia and the hymen] gives us a clear message: they belong to God in a special way. Knowing from all eternity that his son was to be incarnated in the womb of a virgin, it was "proper and just" that the latter should have an exterior sign of its sacredness. [...] All women, having the privilege of sharing the sex of the Queen of Heaven, partake of this same privilege.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

Thus, by the nature of her physical body (her genitalia being internal rather than external), women have been called by God to “veil” the gift of their sexuality in a way that men are not naturally called. Responding to Aristotle’s claim that receptivity is the same as passivity, she

\textsuperscript{109} Patrick, \textit{Liberating Conscience}, 80-81.

states that the natural receptivity of the women in the sexual act “implies an intense collaboration with another, a generous giving of oneself to fecundation, and a grateful acceptance of this fecundation.”\textsuperscript{111} Von Hildebrand’s perspective relies upon the belief in a gendered essentialism in which male sexuality is innately more active than female sexuality, and that female sexuality is always passive, or receptive to that activity. This way of differentiating and honoring a woman’s role in comparison to a man’s is what is commonly referred to as “romantic” feminism.\textsuperscript{112}

In her article “Gendered Purity and Embodied Sexual Flourishing,” theologian and ethicist Doris Kieser remarks that in the Hebrew Scriptures, purity is depicted as an indicator of cleanliness, accepting and belonging, and is not always connected to sexuality. The way that purity is understood within the Christian tradition, however, is almost exclusively tied to sexuality in the form of virginity. She observes,

Chastity, abstinence, and purity are invoked as the primary means of securing moral standing, a form of symbolic capital within various Christian communities, wherein a judgment of impurity, particularly for young females, carries stigma, exclusion, and shame.\textsuperscript{113}

She claims that this gendered perception of purity relies on a “benevolently sexist” understanding of femininity, in which those who follow essentialist and patriarchal sex and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{111}Von Hildebrand, “Women as Guardians of Purity,” 14-18.
\item \textsuperscript{112}Rosemary Radford Ruether defines “romantic feminism” as the sense that “women have been bearers of separate values and qualities that are important, and even superior, to those found in traditional masculinity.” \textit{Sexism and God-Talk}, 44.
\end{itemize}
gender roles are rewarded and those who challenge these roles are punished, particularly in the sexual sphere.\textsuperscript{114}

In order to illustrate the ethical problems associated with the contemporary purity discourse within the Christian tradition, Kieser provides two major points pertaining to the current structure of purity. First, she claims that purity “is problematic regarding sexual morality because in practice it denotes a static physical state of virtue (i.e. virginity), in which one can either be or not be, and which is not necessarily affected by personal decision-making.”\textsuperscript{115} According to Aristotelian ethics, virtues are by definition \textit{habits} of morally good action, and so understanding purity as a state (one is either a virgin or not) rather than a habit that can be cultivated and practiced changes the nature of purity altogether. Within the static notion of purity, a person is often deemed as impure after a single event (such as engaging in sexual intercourse) and is labeled as such regardless of any subsequent actions to the contrary. The consequences are severe once sexual impurity is present, as Kieser notes: “Unlike some purities outlined in Leviticus (e.g. menstruation, irregular discharge, dead bodies), contemporary Christian sexual impurities have no redeeming ritual action.”\textsuperscript{116} This value of virginity as the evidence of purity is especially emphasized for women, Kieser adds, which is consistent with gendered social and theological perceptions of sexuality that hold that women ought to held to a higher and stricter standard in regards to purity.\textsuperscript{117}


\textsuperscript{115} Kieser, “Gendered Purity and Embodied Sexual Flourishing,” 110.

\textsuperscript{116} Kieser, “Gendered Purity and Embodied Sexual Flourishing,” 113.

\textsuperscript{117} Kieser, “Gendered Purity and Embodied Sexual Flourishing,” 113.
The second point that Kieser makes pertains to the purity standard for women in particular: purity as it is taught in many Christian sexual pedagogies today is problematic because “it is gendered; females are the primary targets of the message and their sexual bodies are constantly both self- and other-monitored.”

The sexual education manuals I reviewed for this project reflect this gendered depiction of purity, as well as the stories told by collaborators about dress codes in their Catholic schools. Kieser finds examples of gendered depictions of purity in the *Pure Fashion* movement, a faith-based purity program for young women (14-18) initiated by the Catholic group *Regnum Christi*, a subset of the Legionaries for Christ. Kieser notes,

This particular movement focuses on females, hints at the age-old female dichotomy of virgin-whore, a socially adjudicated category, with the understanding that in sexual purity a female will maintain virginity and bodily innocence, and become a confident and competent leader who lives “the virtues of modesty and purity in [her] schools and communities,” as expressed by her modest attire (Regnum Christi 2014).

What is important to note is that there is no similar movement led by *Regnum Christi* to encourage males to protect their sexual purity.

Women are held to a purity standard in regards to dress, sexual activity, and behavior that is stricter and more socially enforced than men, in the attempt to preserve their “innate value and authentic femininity,” as *Pure Fashion* declares in its online introduction. This heavy emphasis on sexual purity distracts from other ways in which a girl or woman can practice virtuous behavior, and implies that this standard is especially important for the preservation of

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femininity. If you are a woman, it seems as if the *only* thing worth focusing on is maintaining one’s own sexual purity (most exemplified in virginity) since it is depicted in many Christian purity movements as the virtue that primarily defines a woman’s character. As feminist scholar Jessica Valenti notes, “We are teaching American girls that, one way or another, their bodies and their sexuality are what make them valuable.”\textsuperscript{121}

When women are unable to uphold this strict, gendered standard of purity, their literal “fall from grace” is quite far - there is no middle space to occupy between virtuous and vicious, good and bad, pure and impure. This sharp dichotomy is decidedly not the same for men, who are given a more holistic sense of moral agency, as the “active” sex; meanwhile, the static “state of bodily purity” is entrusted to women, who are the “receptive” sex.\textsuperscript{122} Thus, in the sexual sphere, when a woman has become impure (primarily marked by the loss of virginity), she alone is blamed for her fall from purity. The difference between purity and impurity for women is drastic, and carries heavy psychological, socio-emotional, and spiritual consequences. I refer


\textsuperscript{122} Kieser, “Gendered Purity and Embodied Sexual Flourishing,” 115. Men may also be held to different standards of purity due to being given more space, agency, and allowances within the patriarchal structure of the Church hierarchy.
along with others to the dichotomous sexual paradigm for women prevalent in both Western culture and the Christian tradition as the “Madonna-Whore myth.”

Within the Catholic tradition, the Virgin Mary is the archetype of femininity and the model of purity which Catholic women are urged to emulate. Rosemary Radford Ruether points to traditional Mariology as one tool of ecclesiastical (patriarchal) triumphalism over women. The Church, Ruether contends, has exalted the symbol of the “spiritual feminine” as Mary and Mater Ecclesia, almost to the status of the divine. This elevation, in turn, has vilified and demonized the sexual and maternal roles of real women. In short, the spiritualization and exaltation of the Virgin Mary as the ultimate model for women has served to repress and relegate the varied sexualities of ordinary women, she states.

In other words, this ideology of the patriarchal feminine represents the un-attainability of the role of both virgin and mother for real women experiencing their sexuality. Consequently, what at first may seem like an emancipatory turn, as Von Hildebrand depicts, the view of a spiritual femininity is in reality set up and against historical women as representatives of carnal

123 Theologian Michael Haag presents the “Madonna/Whore” dichotomy as a political tactic used in Early Christianity in his book *The Quest for Mary Magdalene*. In order to attack Christianity in the 2nd century CE, pagan philosopher Celsus referred to Mary Magdalene as “a frantic and disgraceful woman” and accused Mary the mother of Jesus of being an adultress and so not truly a virgin. Christian theologian Origen responded to this attack by defending the reputation of Mary the mother of Jesus, naming her *Theotokos* and insisting that she was a perpetual virgin. A few centuries later, Pope Gregory confused three different Marys in the Gospels for Mary Magdalene, stating that she “perfumed her flesh in forbidden acts.” Pope Gregory did this in order to combat Gnosticism, a Christian sect who identified Mary Magdalene with Wisdom (Sophia) and the Egyptian goddess Isis. Thus, the elevation of Mary the mother of Jesus to perpetual virgin and God-bearer and the demotion of Mary Magdalene to prostitute and impure woman present the first iteration of the “Madonna/Whore myth.” Michael Haag, *The Quest for Mary Magdalene* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2016), 217-238.

(thus, sinful) femaleness. The view of woman from this “romantic feminist” standpoint sets real women up for failure, and further stamps their gendered identities as being more spiritual, altruistic, emotional, and morally pure than men. For example, the virgin/mother model that Mary provides for women does not leave any room for mothers to want to experience sexual pleasure with their spouse for its own sake, or for unmarried women to experience their sexuality without the goal of motherhood in mind.

If a woman cannot live up to this feminine ideal of “Madonna,” then there are few to no alternatives for women who wish to explore their sexuality within the Christian paradigm. Women who refuse to adhere to the ideals of purity and virginity have often been relegated to the sphere of carnality and passion within the predominant western Christian tradition, and given characteristics seen as morally dangerous. One example is the legacy of the unnamed woman in the Gospel of Luke who washed Jesus’ feet with perfumes, oils, and her hair. Pope Gregory, confusing this woman with Mary Magdalene, declared that she “perfumed her flesh in forbidden acts,” forever dubbing Mary Magdalene the “harlot-saint” of Christian mythology. In the Catholic-Christian narrative, there does not exist a holy and morally ethical view of female sexuality apart from the “Madonna” model; On the contrary, the opposite of the Madonna is the

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125 Ruether, Sexism & God-Talk, 105.

126 It is important to note that official Catholic teaching does not claim that women’s sexuality is dangerous or subversive; however, Ruether makes the point that this discourse has operated in and through the teaching in a sort of “hidden discourse,” fed by the influence of Mariology.

“whore”—a depiction of woman as a temptress and sinner, linked to the immanent/carnal. I maintain that the prevalence of this age-old Madonna/Whore myth has real consequences for the way in which Catholic young women understand themselves as sexual beings.

This overview of the Church’s teachings and narratives on sexuality, gender and the body brings to light certain key concerns that I wish to address in this project. First, what power do these religious narratives about female sexuality have in the formation of adolescent female identities? To what extent do young women today understand and retain official Church teaching about sexual morality? How are the teachings interpreted when they are passed down through various pastoral channels? In an attempt to answer some of these questions, I will move from discussing the official Church teaching and narratives to analyzing the ways in which this teaching is relayed to the faithful in the form of pedagogy.

2.2. Sexual Pedagogies: A Review of Sexual Education Manuals/Texts

In her doctoral dissertation on sexuality education and adolescents, Christian social ethicist Kate Ott investigates the ways in which Protestant congregations provide (or do not provide) education to adolescents relating to issues of sexuality. She observes,

I see Christian institutions wanting “something,” to lead adolescents to right sexual relationships (however they variously define that). However, many congregations are not willing to honestly encourage this process. Encouraging this process means allowing adolescents to ask frank questions, re-think Christian understandings and doctrines regarding sexuality, and educate with the tools moral education yields.\textsuperscript{128}

She remarks that in the field of Christian ethics, there is little to no appropriate sexual ethic directed towards adolescents. Thus, much of religious sexual education is designed without the needs of developing children or adolescents in mind.

In this section, I will investigate Ott’s claim within the Catholic tradition by providing a brief overview of current sexual education manuals/texts provided by the Catholic Church and used within parishes, schools and homes in the United States. I will divide the manuals/texts into three categories, based on their source: papal, national, and local. These are the questions I hope to find answers to: What frameworks are being used in schools, parishes and in the home to speak about sexuality within the Catholic faith? How are these teachings being explained and what are the implications of the ways that these teachings are relayed to young Catholic women? In reviewing these texts I will pay close attention to the ways that the pedagogy is addressing young women and girls, and what language may be significant in the contribution or impediment of their healthy development.

2.2.1. Papal Sexual Education Guidelines

In the Summer of 2016, during World Youth Day in Krakow, Poland, the Pontifical Council for the Family issued a new sexual education alternative for Catholics called “The Meeting Point: Project for Affective and Sexual Formation.” The project is divided into six units, and stems from Pope Francis’ 2016 post-synodal apostolic exhortation on love in the family, Amoris laetitia. Among other issues, the 2016 Synod of the Family addressed the state of Catholic sexual education and maintained that children must be properly educated in sex and sexuality. The post-synodal exhortation affirms,

It is not easy to approach the issue of sex education in an age when sexuality tends to be trivialized and impoverished. It can only be seen within the broader framework of an
education for love, for mutual self-giving. In such a way, the language of sexuality would not be sadly impoverished but illuminated and enriched.\textsuperscript{129}

The exhortation goes on to say that children should be provided with information that is suited for their age, keeping in mind that “children and young people have not yet attained full maturity.”\textsuperscript{130} Consequently, “The Meeting Point” emerged, which includes texts, activity books and movie recommendations aimed at high school-aged students.

The project is spearheaded by the president of the Pontifical Council for the Family, Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, who presented the project in Vatican City in March of 2016. He declares,

Today, adolescents and young people are exposed to a variety of information concerning affectivity in general and the exercise of sexuality in particular. In many cases, these same young people have no criteria for discerning the truth of good human sexuality from the emotivism introduced in many of today’s channels of information and formation.\textsuperscript{131}

He continued by noting that many secular education projects concerning sexuality are at odds with the Christian vision of the body, the complementarity between men and women, the exercise of sexuality, and marriage and the family. These secular pedagogies reflect many cultural tendencies that the Church vehemently opposes, such as the understanding of “sexuality

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{130} Pope Francis, \textit{Amoris laetitia}, par. 281.
\end{itemize}
without limits,” the prevalence of pornography, and the commercialization of the body, among other things.\textsuperscript{132}

The six units build upon each other with the following general themes: 1) God, origin and destiny of humanity; 2) Meeting with the other; 3) Freedom; 4) Transcendence of good choices; 5) Moral dimension of the person; and 6) Love as a personal vocation.\textsuperscript{133} All of the units play with the overarching metaphor of the human person as a “tent.” Just as with the human person, there are different components of a tent that need to be “set up” and understood in order for it to function well on a journey. The recurrent theological and anthropological themes, ideals, and language present in the learning objectives are intended to shape the adolescent’s understanding of his/her sexuality and body in accord with official Catholic moral teaching. Some of these themes include: the human body essentially oriented towards love; personal expression in and through the body; the two-fold realization of the human person in the duality of the sexes; the importance of modesty; and the danger of treating a human person as a thing (through the commercialization of the body, pornography, and “hook-ups”).

The first unit focuses on personal identity and body acceptance, and encourages youth to understand that “you have a body and you are a body” (identified as the two-fold condition of the human body). The human body is essentially oriented towards love—made to freely love and be


\textsuperscript{133} Pontifical Council for the Family, “Presentation by Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia.”
loved—that ought to be realized in the marital union in the form of “mutual gift.” Throughout the course of his/her life, a person expresses him or herself in and through the body in a variety of ways, and these expressions are different between men and women.

To illustrate this point, one of the unit activities invites girls and boys to greet each other and analyze the ways in which girls and boys express themselves in and through their bodies. The lesson states, “The body is the means of expression of the person and there is a concrete difference between the bodily expressions of boys and girls— not just the difference between their bodies, which is innate, but also between the way that men and women express themselves.”

This particular learning objective indicates the anthropological understanding of the project: namely, that male and female bodies are essentially gendered. Although papal encyclicals or addresses such as John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* do not explicitly connect assumptions about gender complementarity with sexual ethics, this unit activity demonstrates the ways in which the “natural disposition and temperament of the female sex”—as *Casti Connubii* termed—has been demonstrated and explained in sexual pedagogies for Catholic youth.

The second unit elaborates on this point further by introducing the idea that from the beginning of creation, there has existed a difference between the sexes which “conditions the whole person”; this difference between man and woman in all of their dimensions is understood as complementarity. As noted earlier, complementarity is the idea that men and women are created with separate (but equal) traits and gifts, and by being innately different from each other

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they are able to complement and explain the other.\textsuperscript{136} Thus, humanity is able to find its full realization only in the unity of the two sexes. The project emphasizes this teaching by asserting that men and women are different in “every aspect of the person”: body, affections, intelligence, sociality and spirituality.\textsuperscript{137} In one of the lessons, students are asked to identify the differences in male and female bodies, and what this means for their different social traits, affections, spiritually and sexuality. The lesson instructs,

Female features are more delicate than male ones, and female genital organs are located inside of the body. Inscribed in the woman’s body is the call to WELCOME both man and baby. Intellectually, man is more analytical and has a greater capacity for analysis [than woman]. Women, since they tend to reveal their affections more, have a greater need for contact with friends and family. Men compartmentalize and internalize their affections to a greater extent [and] relate with others in a more linear way. Spiritually, women tend more toward what is transcendent, while men are more pragmatic.\textsuperscript{138}

The learning goal is to understand how men and women are innately different in all of their dimensions by analyzing children’s toys, commercials and body parts for indications of difference. This further validates the magisterial claim that gender is intrinsically linked to biological sex, and that the two sexes can only be understood in relation to each other.

Another point that the lessons make is in regards to modesty- purity ideals ought to be expressed through modest clothing, language, and behavior. Modesty is defined as “the experience that helps us protect our intimacy and discover the beauty of love.”\textsuperscript{139} The lessons

\textsuperscript{136} In his Letter to Women Mulieris Dignitatem, John Paul II explained complementarity by noting, “In the ‘unity of the two’, man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist ‘side by side’ or ‘together’, but they are also called to exist mutually ‘one for the other’”, par. 7.


\textsuperscript{138} Pontifical Council for the Family, “Second Unit- The Meeting Point,” Lesson 2.1 Educator.

\textsuperscript{139} Pontifical Council for the Family, “Second Unit- The Meeting Point,” Lesson 2.3 Educator.
warn young people that their sexuality and their body can “stir up the attraction of other people” and that based on how one expresses one’s self, a person can “induce others to treat [him or her] as an object.” Consequently, it is important for young people to learn how to rightly order their desires, impulses, and affections and to protect the gift that is their sexuality through modesty. By practicing modesty, a person is “looking after [their] own dignity” in the face of social and cultural forces that may cause a person to lose control of their actions and reactions. One of the activities provided for this lesson involves youth performing a critical analysis of TV shows, movies, ads, and games in order to identify disordered values of sexuality presented by the media that tend to regard persons as objects or separate love from sexuality. The lesson desires young people to conclude,

Society shows me a type of sexuality that is not authentic, that doesn’t correspond with the truth of the person. The value of sexuality is cheapened, reduced to mere genitality. The value of my person is reduced. I stop being me and turn into an object: something that can be desired, bought or used.

Since its release, the project has been criticized by progressives and conservatives alike, for various reasons. The American Life League and the Catholic Media Coalition have critiqued the program for including “sexually explicit pictures” in the lessons, creating a “perverse form of sex

\[140\] Pontifical Council for the Family, “Second Unit- The Meeting Point,” Contents 2.0 Educator. Feminist scholars have identified this type of rhetoric as “victim-blaming,” which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

\[141\] Pontifical Council for the Family, “Fourth Unit- The Meeting Point,” accessed February 25, 2018, http://www.educazioneaffettiva.org/fourth-unit/?lang=en, Contents 4.0 Educator. In this lesson, the instruction to practice modesty is directed towards both sexes. However, in the other manuals that I reviewed, there is an implicit gendered assumption that modesty and chastity are more essential for young women, out of consideration for young men. See examples I cite in the manuals “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality” and Love & Life: A Christian Sexual Morality Guide for Teens.

\[142\] Pontifical Council for the Family, “Fourth Unit- The Meeting Point,” Lesson 4.2 Educator.
education.” Progressive Catholics have disliked the project because it does not depart from the premise that there exists an essential gendered complementarity, which translates into different societal and sexual roles for men and women. Celia Wexler, Catholic feminist and journalist, lamented that the Vatican continues to “sing the same old song” of complementarity, noting, “At the very least, I would like the Vatican to give up this ‘girls are pink’ and ‘boys are blue’ mindset that is generations out of date.”

“The Meeting Point” sexual education project initiated by the Vatican is an update from the manual “Educational Guidance in Human Love” which was released in 1983 by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. This manual provides general guidelines for educators to follow in their pedagogy, encouraging bishops to adjust the guidelines in accord with the specific needs of their local Church. In order for young people to understand the value of sexuality, the manual contends, schools and religious institutions must promote an education for chastity:

Education for Chastity is absolutely essential, for it is a virtue that develops a person’s authentic maturity and makes him or her capable of respecting and fostering the “nuptial meaning” of the body.” It consists in self-control, in the capacity of guiding the sexual instinct to the service of love and of integrating it in the development of the person.

The nuptial meaning of the body is described in John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, referring to the idea that the design of the body naturally orients humans towards a

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marital relationship, which results in fruitfulness.\textsuperscript{146} With this overarching commitment to chastity in mind, the manual lists some of the fundamental principles that must be included in Catholic sex education curricula: The body as an expression of the love of God through the gift of self; the dual realization of the human person in the form of male and female; the complementarity of the sexes; the importance of both unity and fecundity in sex; and the denunciation of the tendency to devalue sex by reducing it to a “genital experience alone.”\textsuperscript{147} The manual also states that affective-sex education must consider the “totality of the person” and so demonstrate the “integration of the biological, psycho-affective, social and spiritual elements” of the human person.\textsuperscript{148}

Guidelines for sexual education within the family emerged from the Pontifical Council for the Family in 1995, titled “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality.” This manual shares the same fundamental principles as “Educational Guidance in Human Love,” but adds special recommendations for parents who must serve as models of sexuality for their children. Through their own example, parents have the responsibility of educating their children on the dignity of marriage and exemplifying the ultimate expression of sexuality, mutual gift of self. The manual also makes claims about the type of leadership mothers and fathers can exhibit to their children:

A mother who values her maternal vocation and her place in the home greatly helps develop the qualities of femininity and motherhood in her daughters, and sets a clear, strong and noble example of womanhood for her sons. A father, whose behaviour is

\begin{footnotes}
\item[147] Pope John Paul II, \textit{Familiaris consortio}, no. 11.
\end{footnotes}
inspired by masculine dignity without “machismo,” will be an attractive model for his sons, and inspire respect, admiration and security in his daughters.\textsuperscript{149}

This statement reaffirms the Church’s view that though equal in dignity, male and female represent two distinct ways of being human in their personalities and their gifts. When describing children’s development, the manual urges parents to protect themselves from ideologies that reject natural tendencies and to promote roles that differentiate the two sexes. During the “age of innocence,” about 5 years old until puberty, girls “will generally be developing a maternal interest in babies, motherhood and homemaking.”\textsuperscript{150} Parents should encourage their daughters to celebrate this femininity, using the Virgin Mary as a model for motherhood.

During a girl’s stage of puberty, parents should guide their daughters “in facing any emotional perplexity, and support the value of Christian chastity \textit{out of consideration for the other sex}.”\textsuperscript{151} This advice can be contrasted with that given to parents about boys going through puberty: “correct the tendency [for boys] to use sexuality in a hedonistic and materialistic way,” instead teaching them to respect women.\textsuperscript{152} In regards to information about reproduction, parents are warned to correct their daughters (and in other sections, their sons as well) from having a “contraceptive mentality,” instructing them about the beauty and gift of motherhood.

At the end of “Educational Guidance in Human Love,” there are examples of methods and ideologies to avoid, which are also in “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality.” One is


anti-natalist sex education, since it is promoted by organizations that promote abortion, sterilization, and contraception. Another ideology to avoid is the “safe sex” model that gives young people information about sex in a “graphic way,” and provides other alternatives than abstinence outside of marriage. Since these manuals have been published, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have also warned parents and educators about “gender theory,” stating that it wrongly disputes the idea that human beings have a nature, given by their bodily identity, which is a defining element of male and female. In his General Audience on Male and Female given in 2015, Pope Francis declared,

I ask myself, if the so-called gender theory is not, at the same time, an expression of frustration and resignation, which seeks to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it. Yes, we risk taking a step backwards. The removal of difference in fact creates a problem, not a solution.153

In this statement Pope Francis is denying that any aspect of gendered expression (dress, behavior, speech, etc.) is socially constructed, and that by attempting to deconstruct these essentialist ideologies of sex and gender feminists are erasing any differences between men and women.

2.2.2. National Sexual Education Guidelines

For most of the 20th century, the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) was an organization in which lay people, clergy and religious worked in partnership with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) in order to discuss the specific needs and concerns of the U.S. Church (in 2001 these two groups combined to form the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops- USCCB). In 1990, the then USCC met to revise Catholic sexual education

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guidelines specifically tailored to the needs of the faithful in the United States. Drawing upon the previous manual, *Education in Human Sexuality for Christians* (1981), the group compiled a manual for diocesan use called *Human Sexuality: A Catholic Perspective for Education and Lifelong Learning*. While recognizing the contributions that the social sciences and physical sciences have made to our understanding of sexuality, the document is focused on Church teachings and scriptural mandates in order to provide a Catholic perspective on sexual education. The majority of the manual is a synopsis of the current papal teachings on human sexuality, particularly as conveyed by Pope John Paul II. However, in each chapter the USCC adds commentary on how these teachings can be framed for the Church in the United States.

In Chapter One, the USCC provides reflections on the Sexual Revolution that occurred in the 1960s in the U.S. Through the ideology that it is necessary to liberate people (particularly women) from restrictive sexual mores and anti-body bias, proponents of the sexual revolution have opened the door to viewing non-marital sexual intercourse as “reasonable and appropriate” in a wide variety of settings that are often “purely recreational and uncommitted,” the document states.\(^{154}\) Admitting that this is not necessarily as clear as cause and effect, the USCC suspects that this kind of sexual license may have an effect on the rise in marital infidelity, divorce, non-marital cohabitation, sexually transmitted diseases, and abortions of convenience. They express concern that a holistic, Christian discussion of sexual morality is lost when sexuality is reduced to a mere “genital expression.”\(^{155}\) Some feminists, such as Peggy Orenstein, share this concern,


stating that casual sex in which girls can “have sex like a guy” (no emotion, objectifying their partners) seems like “a sad, low road to equality.”  

Another topic that is expressed in light of American trends is the universal call to chastity, which ought to be at the center of sex education. Acknowledging the prevalence of pornography, “indecent entertainment” and a culture that “trivializes all things sexual,” the USCC calls for a sex education that encourages chastity for children and adolescents. Nevertheless, they acknowledge the tendency for such an education to shame or discourage young people:

In attempting to present the principles of sexual morality to children and adolescents, the Church strives to assist the young to become aware of Catholic teachings without, at the same time, creating excessive feelings of guilt, shame, or discouragement. In the past, too many adolescents have withdrawn from the practice of their faith and disparaged the Church rather than facing their shortcomings and seek forgiveness, since their exaggerated feelings of guilt seemed, to them unbearable.

Instead of presenting chastity as a vehicle of suppression or inhibition of sexuality, the USCC encourages educators and parents to present chastity as a healthy practice of self-control and moderation in all things.

In Chapter Four of the manual, the USCC addresses special concerns that may arise when educating young people in the United States. Adolescents in the 1990s are raised in an environment that is “at times hostile to Christian values and often exploitive in the way it treats other human beings,” the Pennsylvania Catholic Conference concluded. While wrestling with physical, emotional, and psychological changes, adolescents are also subject to a variety of

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156 Orenstein, Girls & Sex, 140.


pressures in American culture, one being the constant influence of the media and advertisements that often “take advantage of the erotic in order to sell [their] products.”\textsuperscript{159} In light of these pressures, parents and educators ought to express the great responsibility that comes with engaging in sexual activity, and maintain that genital sex finds its full meaning only in the context of marriage, due to its ability to allow complete gift of self. Abstinence should be taught to young people, not just as a “no” to sexual activity but as a “yes” to one’s future and one’s future spouse, the document concludes.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) began working on a pastoral letter on the role of women in the Church and society. Prompted by discussions that were ignited in the United States by the second-wave feminist movement, the bishops sought to address sexism as a form of social injustice, just as they did with racism and economic oppression. As Camilla J. Kari noted in her book \textit{Public Witness: The Pastoral Letters of the American Catholic Bishops}, by releasing such a letter that focuses on the inequality of women in different spheres the bishops “could salvage themselves and their Church from a stance that seemed glaringly out of step with modern sensibilities, and lend their moral authority to the inequities in women’s lives.”\textsuperscript{160} Thus, in 1978 the bishops gathered together a group called the Committee on Women in Society and the Church, whose role was to survey the needs and concerns of women within the Church and society.

The Ad Hoc Committee on Women in Society and the Church presented a report to the NCCB after several meetings with various women’s groups in the Church, including the

\textsuperscript{159} United States Catholic Conference, \textit{Human Sexuality}, 59.

Women’s Ordination Conference (WOC). Some of these groups had concerns with the prohibition of women’s ordination, the discrimination against women in the workplace, violence against women, and the high rates of poverty among single mothers and elderly women. Other groups, such as the Women for Faith and Family, demanded that the U.S. Church take an official stand against liberal feminism. The Leadership conference of Women Religious (LCWR), were above all concerned that a “celibate patriarchy” was writing about women’s lives, stating that this same patriarchy “participated in the devaluation of women.”

The initial reception of the first draft, as well as the subsequent drafts, was mixed. One of the reasons was that the letter was written in a more dialogical way than any of the other pastoral letters. Bishop Joseph Imesch, the chair of the committee on the pastoral letter, acknowledged that the text contained a number of quotations from women, since the bishops did not want to speak about women without letting them speak for themselves. While some criticized this dialogical approach, others found the women’s voices to be very powerful. After listening to many different testimonies, Bishop Francis R. Shea of Evansville, Indiana commented, “The hurts are real, they are deep and much more widespread than I previously thought.”

After four different drafts and a lot of debate about the method and content of the letter, the pastoral letter was voted down by the NCCB in 1992. By the fourth draft the letter had become dominated by traditional Church views, especially in light of John Paul II’s apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*. During the debate before the bishops voted on the letter, some

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bishops expressed concern that the letter would further alienate women in the Church. Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland of Milwaukee warned, “It would add another tremendous crisis to the Church [after the dissatisfaction following *Humanae vitae*]. We would lose another generation of very wonderful women.”164 Conservative bishops claimed that the letter didn’t go far enough in taking a stance against liberal feminism, stating that the letter “exalted the traits and gifts of women while belittling men.”165 Furthermore, in 1989 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then prefect of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, met with U.S. cardinals and archbishops in order to emphasize the role of bishops as teachers as shepherds of the Church, not “supervisors” or learners.166 In the history of the NCCB, the pastoral letter on women took the longest time to be drafted, and was the only letter that failed to receive a two-thirds majority vote. Within the pastoral body of U.S. bishops, there has not been an attempt to resurrect this conversation since the letter’s failure in 1992.

2.2.3. Local (Diocesan) Sexual Education Manuals

Within Catholic school classrooms and parish catechetical programs the papal and national teachings of the Church on sex and sexuality are relayed to youth through Catholic sexual education manuals approved by each diocese. The language and content of the manuals reflect the different stages of child/adolescent development; thus, the manuals are usually divided into middle school and high school levels. One of the manuals used by Catholic elementary schools in the Archdiocese of Chicago (and throughout the country) is called *Family Life*, published by

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the Benziger Family Life Program. As the title suggests, the manual focuses on sexual education understood through the lens of family as the basic unit of society and the Church. In the fifth grade edition, the student workbook addresses the stages of puberty for boys and girls, the male and female reproductive system, the way in which new life is created, and the significance of marriage. One of the skills that the fifth grade program hopes to cultivate in students is the ability to know how to care for and respect their bodies.

In units four through six, the workbook discusses the changes that occur in male and female bodies during puberty. These bodily changes are framed within the context of family: namely, puberty allows boys and girls to become parents. The workbook describes ways in which young people can take care of their bodies through proper hygiene and balanced diets. The units devoted to physical changes in male and female bodies in particular are called “Physical Fatherhood” and “Physical Motherhood,” respectively, again pointing to the family as the primary way in which to understand sexual development. The components of the male and female reproductive systems are explained in detail, though little information is given about the feelings that might be associated with the development of these systems (pleasure or desire). In the unit about the female body, the female reproductive system is discussed alongside childbirth and menstruation. The reason for this is because “Like the male reproductive system, the female reproductive system is designed by God to cooperate in the creation of new life.”

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168 Thomas, *Family Life 5*, 41.
The workbook explains the Church’s teaching of gender complementarity by stating that sexual difference is not so much apparent by what men and women do but who they are. The text notes,

Boys and girls begin to realize their physical differences as they grow older. And these differences show how God wants them to love. The loving of a man and a woman in marriage shows everyone how God loves all creatures. The sexual difference between a husband and a wife is part of God’s plan for new life.169

God’s plan for new life is further explained in unit eight, where sexual intercourse is described as a gift that allows husbands and wives to express their love and create new life. Sexual intercourse is “a special, private expression of love,” given to married couples by God. The workbook describes sexual intercourse as the act when “the husband places his penis in the wife’s vagina and sends millions of sperm cells into her body.”170 The unit explains that learning about this special expression of love will help youth to respect the sexual feelings they will someday experience, and to frame sexuality within the context of creating new life.

Another sexual education manual used within Catholic schools and parishes is the high school level workbook, *Love & Life: A Christian Sexual Morality Guide for Teens*, published by Ignatius Press. Following the call of “The Meeting Point” for an education in chastity, the workbook has a unit on Modesty and Chastity with chapters entitled “Modesty: A Good ‘Put On’” and “The Chastity Generation.” The workbook defines chastity as “the virtue that moderates our sexual desires in accordance with God’s plan for us.”171 Chastity is about self-control, and “to use our sexual powers for selfish pleasure or to join ourselves to another outside

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of the union of marriage are sins against chastity.”  

Citing the sixth and the ninth commandments, the workbook firmly declares that it is a sin to use our “sexual powers” outside of marriage since it violates both the dignity of sex and the dignity of the human person. In order to follow God’s plan for practicing a chaste sexuality, the text teaches students not to rely on the media (movies, magazine articles, product ads) that often promote disordered ideas about sexuality. One of the chapter projects instructs students to bring in an advertisement from a magazine or newspaper that uses sex appeal to sell the product and recreate the ad in order to demonstrate God’s plan for sexuality. Another project has students select a popular song to analyze, while asking questions like “Does it strengthen or cheapen the dignity of persons?” and “Does it encourage sexually immoral thoughts or behavior?”

The workbook reaffirms John Paul II’s teaching about complementarity in Chapter Six, titled “Male and Female He Created Them.” The text states,

God assigned our sex at the moment of conception […] sexual differences are present in every cell of our body and influence our body structure, growth and chemistry. Studies have shown that many behavioral differences, even in children, are biologically based. Male brains work in different ways than female brains. Certain academic strengths were given to the girls and others to boys. Communication skills seem to be distributed differently between the two sexes, as we see that it is sometimes easier to talk to and understand one of your own sex than it is to understand the other.

The complementarity of the sexes even extends to moods and the things that boys and girls care about, especially as they go through puberty. The text describes boys as “emotionally steady” during puberty while girls may exhibit moods like a “roller coaster from day to day.”

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172 Mast, Love & Life, 12.
173 Mast, Love & Life, 23.
175 Mast, Love & Life, 40.
also may be attracted to aggressive activities like “crashing into each other in football and wrestling,” while girls may be more concerned with how their clothes and hair look.\footnote{Mast, \textit{Love \\& Life}, 40.} One of the lesson activities urges students to think about how the two sexes can complement and harmonize one another’s innate strengths and weaknesses in communication skills, household chores, and working on a project together.

In the chapter on modesty, the workbook instructs that a Christian young woman should “dress and act in such a way that helps the young men see her as a person, not as a sexy object.”\footnote{Mast, \textit{Love \\& Life}, 64.} This is particularly important since the text notes,

Teenage girls often don’t realize how quickly a boy’s feelings and desires can be aroused. Men are turned on by their senses more easily than women are. Usually girls even act more flirty when they wear sexy clothes. Immodestly dressed girls could become an occasion of sin instead of the mirror of God’s love and beauty that they should be.\footnote{Mast, \textit{Love \\& Life}, 84.}

Other than choosing modest clothing, both boys and girls should be careful not to walk, stand or dance in certain ways that invite lustful thoughts from others. This includes refraining from “embracing a person passionately” or “prolonged kissing” and keeping “all of your clothes all the way on, all of the time—until your honeymoon.”\footnote{Mast, \textit{Love \\& Life}, 94.} The workbook encourages teens to live a counter-cultural life by practicing the virtue of chastity in the face of the modern “sex-saturated culture” in which we live. At the end of the workbook, students are encouraged to take a pledge for purity, in which they can sign the following pledge in front of others:

\begin{quote}

\textbf{Pledge for Purity}

\textbf{I promise to:}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Dress modestly, avoiding clothing that reveals too much skin.
  \item Avoid provocative hairstyles and makeup that is too bold.
  \item Refrain from suggestive behavior in public places.
  \item Keep all clothes on until婚后.
\end{itemize}

\textbf{Signed:} ____________________________

\textbf{I,} ____________________________, \textbf{am committed to living a pure life and honoring God with my body.}
\end{quote}
2.2.4. Catholic Sex Education: Possible Impacts on Young Women and Girls

The explicit or implicit language used in Church teachings about sex and sexuality, passed down pedagogically through papal, national and local resources can have lasting psychological, social, and spiritual impacts on the moral development of young women and girls. As I explained in the first section of this chapter, many Catholic feminist theologians and ethicists have had problems with the Vatican’s strong adherence to essential gendered complementarity, proposing that this ideology can limit the holistic flourishing of women and girls in the public and private spheres.

The way in which the lesson plans in Catholic sexual education describe this gendered difference, such as with the body language exercise in “The Meeting Point,” begins with the claim that sex is the cause and gender is the effect of personal expression. Thus, masculinity and femininity can be observed in the way men and women greet each other, relate with one another,
and express their emotions, intellectual capacities, and spirituality. Sociologists would argue that instead of assuming that biological sex is the cause of gendered expression, it is important to look at the possible effects that societal constructions of gender can have on individual behaviors. Besides the widespread agreement with social theorists that gender may be a product of culture, one of the concerns that many feminist theologians have with the teaching of complementarity is that although the Church has assured that difference does not mean inferiority, women have historically and traditionally been kept in powerless positions in the Church and society, due to their “feminine” attributes.

Church teachings about female sexuality can be found in sexual education resources as well as in marriage manuals, as Catholic feminist theologian Susan A. Ross discovered when investigating the gendered significance of body-language in pre-Vatican II marriage manuals.\(^{180}\) By paying close attention to language and themes regarding the body and gender in marriage theology, Ross reveals certain key assumptions about female sexuality and purity that were being taught to young Catholic men and women about to enter into marriage. Ross finds that concerning female sexuality in particular, there does not exist a theology of female sexuality apart from procreation. Thus, female sexuality is only significant (or even addressed) in the context of marriage and does not have a place in the spiritual development of young single women unless they are preparing for marriage.

This key assumption can also be seen in the sexual education manuals reviewed for this project. From the papal level down to the diocesan (local) level, female sexuality is only addressed in relationship to motherhood. A woman’s capacity for sexual pleasure was not

mentioned in any of the sexual education manuals reviewed; the clitoris, an organ in the female reproductive system designed for pleasure, was also not mentioned. Within official Church teaching, sexual pleasure is never explicitly discussed, not even in so far as it may aid in the unity of the spouses in the sexual act, as Jung argues.  

In discussions of modesty and chastity, there is a tendency in sexual education to either implicitly or explicitly put more responsibility on women than men. As feminist theologian Barbara H. Andolsen noted in her article “Whose Sexuality? Whose Tradition? Women, Experience, and Roman Catholic Sexual Ethics,” the Church fathers have traditionally sought to “constrain women’s sexuality for the sake of men’s spiritual well-being […] Female purity and chastity safeguarded men’s virtue as well as women’s own.” This trend affirms the notion that women must serve as “sexual gatekeepers” in sexual relationships; in other words, women should be “responsible for the proper regulation of boys' and men's sexuality.” In this understanding of a woman’s role in sexual relationships, men and women differ not only in sexual desire, but in their capacities and needs. Women are assumed to have a greater capacity for controlling their desires, and perhaps may not even be understood as having sexual urges, like men do. In the section on puberty in “The Truth and Meaning of Sexuality,” this ideology is presented when the handbook encourages girls to “support the value of Christian chastity out of

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181 Jung, “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure.”


consideration for the other sex,” with no such mandate for boys.\textsuperscript{184} This puts the responsibility of male sexual agency onto women and girls, and can have a detrimental effect on the psychological well-being of women who are unable to “prevent” men from falling into sexual temptation.\textsuperscript{185} As Jung notes, “The enjoyment of “venereal pleasures” by boys and men, while dangerous, is 1) to be expected and 2) to be restrained, or at least controlled, by “good girls.”\textsuperscript{186}

Another possible influence on women and girls is the lack of descriptive language used when describing sexual intercourse, other than the basic “mechanics.” Besides vaginal-penile penetration, oral sex or other kinds of penetration are not referenced in any of the handbooks.\textsuperscript{187} Scrawled in the margins of the Family Life handbook that I borrowed from a teenage girl from the Archdiocese of Chicago was the comment, “I know NOTHING about actual sex with just this.” She also included a few questions in the reflection portion of the unit: “How do you use a condom? What if you don’t like the opposite sex? When are you ready?” There is no way to know what additional information is provided by the teacher in these units, but the manuals themselves indicate that from global to local, Catholic sexual education is governed by a specific narrative, focused on marriage and the family, that seeks to protect young people from ideologies that oppose or deconstruct this framework.


\textsuperscript{185} The concept of victim-blaming will be discussed in Chapter Four, with the sexual assault analysis.

\textsuperscript{186} Jung, “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure,” 90.

\textsuperscript{187} Regarding same-sex sexual activity, homosexual behaviors are described on the papal and national levels as grave disorders and parents and teachers are instructed to seek help from pastoral counselors who are trained in dealing with these kinds of tendencies.
As I will explore in Chapter Four, the silences in Catholic sexual education curricula may speak even more loudly than the teachings, and young people may choose to go searching for answers to their questions elsewhere. Additionally, the experiences of the faithful may point to variant shades of grey rather than the black and white dichotomy that the Catholic Church has provided in the area of sexual ethics. As noted Catholic theologian and ethicist Charles E. Curran laments,

In the official hierarchical teaching on sexuality the methodology gives much more significance to nature and faculties than it does to the person […] In the contemporary official Catholic teaching on sexual issues there is little or no mention of gray areas. Something is either forbidden or permitted.\footnote{Charles E. Curran, “Official Catholic Social and Sexual Teachings,” in \textit{Dialogue About Catholic Sexual Teaching}, by Charles E. Curran, ed. and Richard A. McCormick, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 551.}

In other words, the ideal expression of sexuality according to Catholic sexual pedagogies (only within the confines of a heterosexual marriage) may not reflect the reality of the context and culture in which Catholic young women and girls are developing and learning. This gap between “ideal” and “real” may hurt young people as they are trying to apply a moral and spiritual framework to the complexities of their lives, particularly in the sphere of sexuality.

\textit{2.3. The Role of Experience in Catholic Moral Tradition}

Christian ethics has traditionally relied upon four sources in the construction of Christian ethical frameworks: scripture, tradition, reason and experience. The Church, in its role as a teacher of morality, draws upon these four sources (known ecumenically as the “Wesleyan quadrilateral”) in order to instruct the faithful. In the past, the Catholic tradition has focused primarily on scripture, and tradition, understood and interpreted through the human capacity to reason; now, more attention has been given to human experience as a source, which “recognizes more than the
rational and also includes an a posteriori way of moral learning.”¹⁸⁹ As Chapter One describes, using ethnography as method in Christian ethics is a way in which to give more attention to the wisdom that experience can bring to the field. This section will serve to discuss how experience, specifically the experiences of Catholic young women, should be taken seriously as a source in the Catholic moral tradition that has tended to prioritize the other three sources.¹⁹⁰

In her book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, Margaret Farley states that experience as a source of moral wisdom is “a more contested source than the other sources for Christian ethics, especially sexual ethics”; nevertheless, she claims that it is the foundational source against which other sources ought to be tested.¹⁹¹ One of the reasons experience may be a more contested source is that it is subject to a variety of different interpretations, and is at the same time already interpreted by the subject who is shaped by social, cultural, and religious norms. Farley goes on to assert that sexual experiences, perhaps more than other experiences, are marked by cultural and religious forces, “even to the point of determining what experiences are possible and what they will mean.”¹⁹² Concerns about moral relativism in the realm of experience may also arise when contradictory or rival experiences are presented as equally revelatory of truth—what Farley refers to as an “anything goes” approach. Thus, it is difficult to


¹⁹⁰ In this section, I defer to Margaret Farley’s understanding of experience, as she provides in her book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2008), 191: “I shall mean by ‘experience’ the contemporary actual living of events and relationships, along with the sensation, feelings, emotions, insights, and understandings that are part of this lived reality.”


¹⁹² Farley, *Just Love*, 190 (emphasis mine).
interpret experience and its meaning for sexual ethics, especially if it stands in contrast with the other three sources of morality, and is used by different scholars to varying ends.

Nevertheless, feminist ethicists such as Farley understand experience to be an important and necessary source of moral wisdom that has often been diminished, especially in Christian sexual ethics. Interpretations of sexual experience, while limited, provide insight to divine truth as it presents itself through the fleshly, imperfect moments of everyday life. In fact, whether consciously or unconsciously, experience is the way in which we interpret and understand scripture, tradition, and reason, as presented through the natural law. As Vigen and Scharen eloquently note, “We mediate all moral and theological knowledge through our flesh—inclusive of bones, hearts, emotions, conscience, and embodied minds.”193 With this in mind, it is still vital to analyze and interpret experiences carefully within ethical discernment, just as with Scripture and Tradition, so that they can be understood cohesively in the greater context of Christian life. Thus, when drawing from the four sources of moral wisdom, Christian ethicists can acknowledge the limitations of experience while still using the knowledge gleaned from it as correction for the other three sources. As Farley expresses,

If experience continues to persuade us, continues to hold “true” so that to deny it would do violence to our moral sensibilities, our affective capacity to respond to the good, and our very capacity for knowing, then it must function also as a measure against which the other sources are tested.194

With regard to experience as an imperative moral source in Catholic sexual ethics, Catholic feminists have often expressed concern over the marginalization and exclusion of women’s experience as revelatory of the divine. In other words, they wonder whose experience counts,


194 Farley, Just Love, 196.
and who is making the authoritative decisions to either uplift or dismiss those experiences in
official Catholic teaching about sexuality. Furthermore, feminist theologians claim that scripture,
tradition, reason and experience within the Catholic moral tradition have been interpreted
through an ever-present patriarchal lens. In feminist theologian Mary Catherine Hilkert’s article
“Experience and Tradition- Can the Center Hold?” she discusses these concerns while providing
possibilities for dialogue based on shifts in understanding about ecclesial authority brought forth
by the Second Vatican Council.195

In the conciliar document Dei verbum, the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation,
Catholic theology on divine revelation changed from promoting a hierarchical model of
revelation to a relational model. Before the Council, revelation was understood as “a body of
supernatural truths that [are] handed down through the twofold sources of Scripture and
Tradition,” interpreted and presented to the faithful by the magisterium.196 Dei verbum presented
an understanding of revelation that is more relational and dialogical, according to Hilkert, by
introducing the possibility of “natural revelation” that “presumes that divine wisdom can be
discovered throughout creation and all of human history.”197 According to Dei verbum,
revelation is a “divine-human friendship in which God invites and human beings respond with
their whole being.”198 This is significant for feminist theologians such as Hilkert because this
dialogue between human beings and God can be located in the everyday events and experiences

195 Mary Catherine Hilkert, “Experience and Tradition- Can the Center Hold?,” in Freeing
Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective, ed. Catherine M. Lacugna (San Francisco,

196 Hilkert, “Experience and Tradition,” 63.

197 Hilkert, “Experience and Tradition,” 64. Dei verbum, sec. 6.

198 Hilkert, “Experience and Tradition,” 64.
of the faithful; revelation is no longer understood as a linear process whereby the two-fold sources of Scripture and Tradition are transmitted from the magisterium down to the faithful.

Tradition, according to *Dei Verbum*, is constantly growing and making progress throughout history by the active workings of the Holy Spirit. The document states,

For there is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke, 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through Episcopal succession the sure gift of truth.\(^{199}\)

While not dismissing the crucial role that the magisterium plays in teaching that which has been entrusted to them as divine truth, this statement locates the locus of revelation in the hearts and minds of believers as well, in the very realities they experience. Hilkert views this as a point of similarity between Roman Catholic teaching on revelation and Catholic feminist theology: “both call for handing on the community’s wisdom through words, rituals, and ‘the entire life of the community.’”\(^{200}\)

Another teaching about divine revelation that has influenced the way that Catholic theologians and ethicists approach experience as a source of moral wisdom is the role of *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful) in the development of tradition. The Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, presents a key passage regarding this concept: “The body of the faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 Jn.


\(^{200}\) Hilkert, “Experience and Tradition,” 70.
This “supernatural sense” describes all people “when, ‘from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,’ it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.” This passage, as well as the general spirit of Vatican II, presents an opportunity for lay involvement in the development of tradition, as opposed to the laity being solely receptors of the tradition. As Catholic theologian Daniel J. Finucane observes in his book *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept in the Post-Vatican II Era*, it is clear that Vatican II recognized that the whole Church and the laity in particular share with the magisterium the responsibility for bringing the message of the Gospel to the world [...] the Council Fathers drew directly on the sense of the faithful as a warrant for this active participation of the laity.

There are two distinct dimensions to this concept of the sense of the faithful, one subjective and one objective. The subjective dimension, *sensus fidei* (an individual’s “sense of faith”), refers to an individual believer’s ability or “instinct” to understand divine truth, mediated through her own experiences. The objective dimension, *sensus fidelium* (a collective “sense of the faithful”) refers to “those religious truths upon which, in light of believers’ concrete experience of living out their faith, the church as a whole has come to some agreement and about which it cannot err.” The latter dimension relies on a universal agreement on matters of faith and morals, while the former can be change from believer to believer but is generally understood as a “supernatural sense” of divine revelation. It is important to note that the *sensus fidei* of an individual must still provide

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“testimony of the Gospel mediated by the Church.” Catholic theologian Jerome P. Baggett notes that both dimensions are significant in understanding the laity’s role in interpreting matters of morality:

Both dimensions of sensus fidei presume that so-called ordinary Catholics have a capacity for engaging in careful discernment with regard to their faith and that the fruits of their discernment should be taken seriously as a source of theological insight by the church as a whole.

What does this perspective mean for the “sense” and “instincts” of Catholic women, and the impact they can have on Catholic moral tradition? Catholic liberation theologian Leonardo Boff states that dialogue between the faithful and the hierarchy is necessary in order to provide “mutual criticism” and for the faithful to provide an “‘outside’ reference point in the world.”

Thus, if the Church is to take its claim seriously that the entire Church—from the Pope to the laity—hold responsibility for providing insight to divine truth, the experiences of women in the Church must be considered.

Unfortunately, throughout the tradition, when women have expressed their opinions on matters concerning the good of the Church (particularly those matters on which they have the most expertise) they have been dismissed or even silenced by the magisterium. Regarding this trend of “filtering out women’s voices” from the tradition Mary Catherine Hilkert proclaims, “If the Word of God has been entrusted to the entire church, feminists question how that Word can be heard and proclaimed if the people of God are not listened to or even consulted.”

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204 Finucane, Sensus Fidelium, 227.

205 Baggett, Sense of the Faithful, 233.

206 Finucane, Sensus Fidelium, 413.

207 Hilkert, “Experience and Tradition,” 76.
of sexual ethics, even when women have expressed their thoughts and concerns over issues that deal with their own reproductive systems, such as the case of the majority report for the Papal Commission on Birth Control, their voices often fall on deaf ears.

In order to give credence to the experiences of Catholic women as potential sources for moral wisdom, this project presents ethnography as a way in which Catholic theologians and ethicists can become aware of the complexities of women’s experience, especially in the realm of Catholic sexual ethics. This exploration challenges traditional Catholic methodology in the field of moral theology because it requires that the magisterium “begin with empathetic listening and descriptive analysis instead of beginning first with normative claims.” Instead of the hierarchical approach characteristic of pre-Vatican II teachings about revelation, ethnography presents a dialogical and relational approach (characteristic of Vatican II) by starting with a person’s particular life experience and listening to the wisdom in her experience—asking questions of her and allowing her to teach rather than just receive. A Catholic ethnography takes seriously particular life experience as a source of moral wisdom, and puts it in conversation with scripture, tradition and reason. In this way the Church is able to be a “listening Church” just as much as she is a teaching or preaching Church.

This chapter has provided a limited and brief overview of only some of the predominant themes the Church has relied upon in its messages about female sex, gender, and sexuality since the Second Vatican Council. The review of sexual education manuals provides a sense of the language and rhetoric that the Church uses to instruct young women and girls about their

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209 Reimer-Barry, “The Listening Church,” 112.
sexuality and their role as women in the Church. Finally, the retrieval of teachings within the tradition that uplift the experiences of the faithful as a source of moral wisdom can help us to consider the important role that ethnography can play in Catholic sexual ethics in highlighting the instincts and experiences of women. The young women interviewed for this project may not be aware of the breadth and depth of Church teachings on sexuality, or the theological anthropological understanding of female nature, but they have been shaped by the “butterfly effects” of these teachings in a variety of ways, which will be presented and analyzed in Chapters Three and Four.

The Catholic moral tradition is a living tradition that continually encounters new and uncharted areas meriting ethical reflection. As Charles Curran articulates, this understanding of moral theology as a living tradition “rests on the traditionally accepted Catholic understanding that each generation must understand, appropriate, and live the Christian message in the light of its own history, culture, and time.” Thus, in the field of Catholic sexual ethics, it is vital to turn to the new generation for insights on how to understand, appropriate, and live the Gospel message amidst the arising challenges of our time. These challenges may include the epidemic of rape culture (particularly on college campuses), the prevalence of social media in the lives of teenagers, and cultural and political conversations about gender fluidity and sexual expression, to name only a few.

Meanwhile, the “mixed messages” that women receive about the value of their voices in the Church, and in interpreting moral wisdom, must be identified and challenged by Catholic theologians and ethicists. As Tina Beattie wrote in her book *New Catholic Feminism,*

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Roman Catholicism exerts a continuing influence on the culture and politics of the world’s nations, and never more so than on issues of gender and sexuality. If the Catholic Church is to continue to be relevant to modern women, it needs to go beyond its traditional anachronistic sexual stereotypes and hierarchies, to present the Gospel in a way that is attentive to the questions, needs and values of the age, without surrendering the central truths of Christian faith.\footnote{Tina Beattie, \textit{New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory} (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 1.}

By asking young women what their questions, needs and values are as they are growing up Catholic in the 21st century United States, this project will take seriously their voices and support justice and liberation for the oppressed and vulnerable—a support that is central to Christian faith.

The lived experiences of young Catholic women have much to offer Catholic sexual ethics in the creation of sexual pedagogies that respond to the challenges and developments of the 21st century. These experiences and intimate senses of the faithful can be used to bring about a just ethic of sex, gender and sexuality that is inclusive of divergent voices (in this case, young women in the Church). Additionally, the advances made in biology, psychology, and sociology in regards to human sexuality (what Farley names “secular disciplines of knowledge”) can provide us with useful information to guide us in moral discernment and identifying just practices.\footnote{Farley, \textit{Just Love}, 188.} Sexual pedagogies, particularly those promoted by religious institutions, can have a powerful effect on the identity-formation of young women, and the way that they feel about their sexuality. The next chapter will provide some stories of how Catholic young women have received and understood these sexual pedagogies, and how that has affected them today.
CHAPTER THREE

CATHOLIC GIRLS SPEAK: NEW VOICES IN A LIVING TRADITION

“Theology done at arm’s length from the reality of the context in which we seek to speak theological words is not worth the paper it is written on.”
——Denise Ackerman

In her newest book, *Girls and Sex: Navigating the Complicated New Landscape*, journalist Peggy Orenstein set out to interview young women from all across the country about sex. Her interviews focus particularly on their experiences with physical intimacy and the way these experiences have affected their identities as young women post second-wave feminism. Orenstein reflects on her initial recruitment process,

> At first, I worried that girls wouldn’t discuss such a personal subject with me. I needn’t have. Wherever I went, I had more volunteers than I could handle. They were not just eager, they were hungry to talk. No adult had ever before inquired about their experience of sexuality: what they did, why they did it, how it felt, what they hoped for, what they regretted, what was fun. Often in interviews, I barely asked a question. The girls would just start talking, and before we knew it, hours had gone by.

Likewise in my experience, the young women who participated in this study were eager and excited to tell me their stories, opening up about the confusing, intimate, and uncomfortable experiences in their lives relating to their Catholic faith and sexuality. They often told me of their

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friends who would love to take part in the study because they too had something to say as young women in the Church. I do not find it a coincidence or romanticizing on my part that I logged in my field notes that most of the women sounded upbeat and vivacious during the interviews- they were excited for their voices to be heard, even if only in a small way.

This chapter serves as an introduction to the eight women that I interviewed for this study, highlighting the primary narratives and messages that each young woman received about sex and sexuality while being raised Catholic. As I explained in greater detail in Chapter One, these young women were between the ages of 18-25 at the time of the interview, and have been raised in a Catholic context (either parish, school, or home- preferably all three). Participants were required to be living in or within fifteen miles of the city of Chicago, IL or have lived within these parameters in the past five years. Though ethnic/racial diversity was not intentionally sought, the eight participants I recruited represent a wide range of backgrounds: German, Filipino, Polish, Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Italian. Many of the young women were first-generation Americans. Due to the recruitment having taken place at Loyola University Chicago, a school that draws students from across the country, participants also represent a wide range of geographic locations.

The interviews took place in Chicago, IL between January and October of 2015. As was noted in Chapter One, each woman selected a pseudonym and no real names are given for institutions and family members. All interviews took place on Loyola University Chicago’s Lakeshore Campus. Each interview lasted approximately ninety minutes, and was held in a private, quiet location on campus, in order to provide a neutral location—a “safe space”—for the collaborators to talk about sensitive topics.
Though each young woman’s story is unique in content, personality, and life experience, there were emerging themes apparent throughout all eight of the interviews. I argue that these themes may point to a larger societal and cultural trend among young Catholic women today. These emerging themes will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four, parts one and two. Although these individuals in no way claim to speak for all young Catholic women in the United States, I maintain that there are particular truths that may be gleaned from their stories that can be understood within a broader theological and ethical context. The truths presented in the narratives of young women—these and multitudes of others—can be used to reconstruct a Catholic sexual ethic that is based on current issues and needs presented by the faithful. I contend that it is imperative for the Church to listen to the voices of Catholic young women regarding their sexual identities in order to bring about a Church that recognizes the struggles, concerns, and experiences of its marginalized members.

3.1. Jade: Virginity, Lourdes, and MTV

“Why did I know what a virgin was, before I knew what sex was?”

When I asked Jade, my first collaborator for this project, what her first experience or memory was about sexual education in her Catholic grade school, she said that she had been struck by this question in her personal reflections. “I thought a lot about this,” she said, “and I think the concept of virgin was in my mind before the concept of sex … I don’t know … but I think there was a deep equation with sex being bad.” Built in with her understanding of sex as a young girl in Catholic school was her initial understanding of virginity, specifically the Virgin Mary, as an ideal for women—a pure, sweet, universal mother figure who was “nice to everyone.” Jade said

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that she wrestled with the limited ideals for women presented by the Church throughout different stages of her life, and constantly lived with the contradiction of seeing herself as “virgin” and “whore”—both, and at the same time.

Jade is a 25-year-old married, Catholic woman in a master’s program at Loyola University Chicago. She volunteers as a sexual assault advocate for the university crisis hotline, which has greatly helped her articulate her own experience of assault as a teenager. She sat across from me on a January evening in one of the student centers on Loyola’s lakeshore campus, and told me the story of her upbringing as a Catholic girl. She was born and raised in the northern suburbs of Chicago, the “North Shore,” and attended a Catholic grade school from pre-school to 8th grade. She identifies as white, a mixture of German and Hungarian. Her school and her youth group (which was part of the parish connected to the school) were the primary sources of both her Catholic identity and her sexual education.

Jade spoke confidently and energetically throughout the interview, using her hands to express her thoughts, eyes bright and shining, earrings dangling. At certain times within the interview, she sat very pensively, trying to parse out where certain messages about her body, her sexuality and her female identity came from. She said that as she was entering into puberty, she felt immense shame and embarrassment about her body, and the changes that were happening to it.

In some ways, there was a communal enforcement of guilt and shame and I can’t really pinpoint where it was coming from. It wasn’t necessarily explicit in sex ed itself but it was like a climate. […] I had all of this guilt and shame about puberty itself. It was like embarrassing and gross and I just didn’t—I didn’t want it. Where did this come from? This is the question that I’m asking!

Looking back, she never equated this shame or guilt directly with the teachings she received in Catholic grade school or in her youth group, which she described as “very politically correct.”
However, many experiences in her youth group (perhaps the *indirect* messages and narratives) which included drinking and “hooking up,” now seem questionable to Jade, particularly the sexual attitudes and activities that were displayed by members and leaders in the youth group but never directly talked about.\(^4\)

Most of the messages Jade received about being a woman and expressing sexuality came from the media, specifically MTV. When she wanted to talk about her personal questions about sexuality, she would often turn to her friends, but never adults. Although she was always an active part of the youth group, she still felt a “disconnect” between her sexuality and her faith.

How did [my sexuality] relate to Catholicism? There was such a complete disconnect. Thinking back on all of these experiences I don’t think—I don’t think people wanted to talk about sexuality in Catholicism, so it just became this ignored part of my life. This part was very informed by media and my peer group but was very much separate from Catholicism. Music video ideals impacted me a lot, and then the Catholic part within that is just kind of like-yeah, just a disconnect, a really huge disconnect.

The influence of music videos, celebrities on TRL (*Total Request Live*, a show on MTV), and the reality TV shows *The Real World* and *Girls Gone Wild* strongly shaped Jade’s understanding of how a woman should act in order to attract attention from men.

Jade correlated the influence of these media sources directly with her memories of being sexually assaulted the summer after her sophomore year of high school.

[On the vacation] this older guy is there and he brings these three big bottles of flavored vodka and is like pouring drinks for all of us. He had this big bag of weed too—this is the first time I’ve ever smoked and drank at the same time and I’d only pecked someone on the lips before, I was so naïve. He said “Come take a swim,” and isolates me from my friends and tries to have sex with me, and it was just like sudden, like- honestly like in MTV it’s like “party, party, party,” people get together, and then the scene goes dark.

\(^4\) For example, Jade told me that “drinking and hooking up was the norm” in her youth group, and that there were cases of sexual assaults that she knew about between the youth leader and teenage participants. She stated that the leader “was totally taking advantage of people.”
Suddenly I was in that dark … I was in that period and I was like way, way over my head …

Looking back on the experience, Jade said that there was this moment where she instantly “normalized” the assault, something that her Women’s Studies classes and training in the Sexual Assault Advocacy program have since allowed her to articulate.⁵

After the assault, Jade began to drink pretty regularly and “hook up” with people, which she described as “everything but” sex (penile-vaginal penetration.) Although she continued to be involved in her youth group, she fell into a period when she stopped attending school and “totally shut down.” During this time, Jade said that she went to a “really dark” place inside herself. She would stay up all night and draw pictures or write poems, which she said was a way to express “all that I felt like I couldn’t say.” Her parents sent her to a wilderness therapy program for three weeks where she was able to work through her feelings- a time that Jade said was very challenging and healing.

One of the turning points in her spirituality and Catholic identity after this period of suffering and isolation was her subsequent trip to Lourdes, France to work in the baths of the Shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, which in the Catholic faith are believed to have healing powers. Jade described this time volunteering in the baths as a feeling of “connection” after feeling so disconnected.

I had been through this internalized, alone suffering and I was on the other side of it. I was in these baths where there were women who came from all over the world. I was watching them as they were naked … I was there holding their arms and dipping them into this water and watching them come up renewed. I had been through all of this

⁵ Gender scholars such as Heather R. Hlavka explain that since objectification, sexual harassment, and abuse are such regular occurrences in women’s lives, experiences of everyday sexual violence are often interpreted as “normal,” or “not that big of a deal.” See Hlavka’s article “Normalizing Sexual Violence: Young Women Account for Harassment and Abuse” Gender & Society 28, no. 3 (June 1, 2014): 337-358.
individual suffering and now I got to witness how much other people are suffering. There was this recognition that everyone is going through an internal sort of struggle, and I had been so isolated …

Jade described the trip at Lourdes with her parish youth group as being very “formative for [her] spirituality,” since she now understood herself as part of a greater community of people who suffer and struggle together in faith.

Her interest in devotion to the Virgin Mary continued throughout college, where she studied Comparative Religion. She wrote a comparative analysis of the Virgin Mary for her undergraduate thesis, a process she described as a “roundabout sort of coming back” to her Catholic upbringing and identity. Her research also brought up questions about the role of Mary as a standard for women.

Being in Lourdes and working in the baths, there was [a feeling of] this all understanding mother who tells you that everything is ok, and it’s like you are washed clean. I had this connection to Mary and then when I started doing research I found that a lot of people have a lot of problems with Mary because they don’t feel like they could ever lift up to that standard, and then this virgin/whore dichotomy … Once you’re not a virgin you’re kind of—that’s it.

Jade expressed a desire for creating more ideals for women besides virgin and whore, and said that she wished that she had been introduced to critical media literacy when she was younger. Through the interview she realized that the media had shaped her narrative about herself and her sexuality more than the Church. Regarding her religious education she remarked, “This is your faith—and you did the worksheets and you went to mass. This is our faith, and that was kind of it.”
3.2. Camille: Human Sexuality, AMDG, and Being a Good Person

Camille is a 21-year-old Filipina-American college student majoring in Advertising and Public Relations, born and raised in San Francisco, California. When I met with her for her interview on an early spring afternoon, she was very confident and outgoing, dressed in a stylish outfit with her hair and makeup neatly done. She began the interview by commenting that she had been in Catholic schooling her entire life, and that it was very important for her to go to a Catholic, Jesuit University. She was raised in a “very strong Catholic family” and went to church every Sunday with her family growing up. She was “completely Catholic” in her upbringing, she remarked with a laugh. Her parents were born in the Philippines, and she was surrounded by a large Filipino-Catholic community in San Francisco, which she said was nice because “people just get you”—particularly when celebrating religious holidays specific to the Philippines.

Camille described her parents as being “very very strong about how they felt” in their Catholic beliefs.

I remember they were- I don’t want to say strict because that’s definitely not the right word- but very firm about their beliefs. I really didn’t understand why when I was little. They were more so “This is just the way it’s always been” rather than “This is what we believe in.”

As a young girl, Camille asked her parents and teachers many questions about being a woman in the Church, particularly about leadership roles.

I remember when I was younger my mom was asking me, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” I was probably in preschool or Kindergarten. I was like, “I want to be a priest. I want to do the Eucharist for mass,” and she said, “oh, you can’t do that, only

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7 Camille specifically mentioned the Filipino Christmas celebration Simbang Gabi, a set of nine night masses traditionally celebrated in the Philippines. She participates in the Filipino Christian Learning Community at Loyola University Chicago, and was part of a group that brought the celebration to campus for students to experience.
boys do that.” I asked, “But why can’t girls do it too?” and she didn’t have an answer for me.

Camille attended a Catholic grade school that was connected to her family’s parish, both of which had a strong Filipino presence and identity. Sr. Alba, a nun from the Philippines, was one of Camille’s grade school teachers and a close family friend. Camille remembers Sr. Alba talking to the girls in her 7th grade class about the female body, an experience that she described as “awkward” and “weird.”

Sr. Alba just started talking about periods and bodily changes, and that’s all I remember because the room just felt awkward. She never really went into the relationship between a guy and a girl and the hormones and the feelings. She didn’t go into sexual intercourse.

Some of her friends in grade school confided in Camille about their sexual orientation and different sexual experiences, but Camille said that the teachers and adults in their lives didn’t “create an environment where we were able to talk about that stuff.”

Camille told me the story of one of her friends in middle school who lost her virginity and didn’t even know that she had had sex with the older boy that she was dating.

My one friend [asked me], “what does it mean when this happens- he inserted his penis into me?” And I’m like, “I’m pretty sure you just lost your virginity”—I remember it so vividly. I knew what it meant to have sex and not be a virgin from the media, like TV and movies. I definitely thought it was stupid that they didn’t tell us “this is what it means to have sex,” because basically she was just uneducated to know what happened.

Camille said that she didn’t think that teachers or adults knew that kids were sexually active at that age, and looking back lamented, “Why did we not talk about this sooner?” When she first got her period, her mom told her that she could now get pregnant and warned her about “guys

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Camille was very active in her parish with her family- she and her sister ushered with her father and she was in the choir. Her thoughts and experiences about female leadership in the Church are further discussed in Chapter Four.
taking advantage,” but Camille said that she “just wasn’t really comfortable” talking to her mom about questions she had about sex and sexuality.

[My mom] could tell that I just felt really uncomfortable talking about it with her. No one openly talked about it, unless needed to. I kinda had my own questions answered because it was this world of the Internet- so like, when I researched periods, obviously I researched sex.

Camille said that she felt like she didn’t know anyone she could talk to about sex and her own sexuality until high school, an experience that she called a “game-changer.” Camille went to a Jesuit high school, which she said provided the challenge she needed to “be a person in this world rather than just going through the motions like a robot.” She described it as such:

[High school] felt so much more open. It wasn’t as structured as middle school or elementary school. I liked it a lot because it wasn’t one-sided. Like, they analyzed both sides of a situation, trying to get all the points of view. The teachers were able to share their identities with you, and I think that’s why I was able to connect with the teachers talking about my personal life. I [thought], “Who do I think would be a good mentor for me since I know I can’t go to my mom and I don’t feel comfortable going to my dad about this certain situation?”

The high school offered a Human Sexuality course, which she said was her “favorite class of all of high school.” The course was a senior year elective, and was taught by a laywoman named Ms. B, who was a mentor to Camille.

[The Human Sexuality course] just felt so real to me, and it’s just something that I definitely can relate to and use in my everyday life. It wasn’t just about biology, [Ms. B] also went into what it means to be in a healthy relationship, what it means to have a healthy sex life, how to take care of yourself if you are sexually active, and stuff like that.

The messages and discussions from the course helped her realize that it was “healthy to talk about sex [and] healthy to have sex.” Camille said that Ms. B made human sexuality a “comfortable subject” to talk about and made it sound “okay” to talk about being a sexual human being and having sexual needs.
Camille’s relationship with her high school boyfriend began junior year (prior to the Human Sexuality course), and was her first “adult relationship.” When they became sexually active, Camille found it difficult to understand what it meant for her to be “a good Catholic girl in a relationship”:

It was kind of weird because when I was sexually active or thinking about it, I wasn’t thinking about what it means to be a good Catholic person in terms of sex. I was just like, “Okay. I’m just a sexual being” rather than focusing on “What does it mean to be a Catholic person in this situation?” And I didn’t really like, put my religion and my sexuality together … it didn’t really come hand in hand to me.

When she decided to have sex for the first time, she said that she felt a sense of relief that she had “gotten it over with.” However, she knew that her mom thought that she was “supposed to wait for marriage” to have sex and that she was “supposed to be the good Catholic girl.” After taking the Human Sexuality course senior year, and meeting people in college who had similar experiences, Camille said that she developed a new understanding of herself as a young Catholic woman who is sexually active:

I think that I’m a good Catholic, despite being sexually active and not being a virgin. At first, when I was in high school, I was kind of just like, “Oh, I don’t really care. I’m gonna leave that separate.” Now that I came here [to college], I really thought about it because there are more people who are in the same situation, and who are open to talking about it.

Camille described the Church’s understanding of sex for the purpose of procreation and “making a family” as different from her own, which she depicted as “more a pleasurable thing.” When I asked her how she would construct a sexual pedagogy for young women, or messages about sexuality that she wished she would have gotten earlier, she emphasized that losing your virginity shouldn’t mean that you are a “bad person”:

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9 Camille’s mom had talked about condoms as a way to prevent pregnancy when she talked to her after her first period, but Camille said that she would never put her on birth control.
I don’t think that there’s any correlation between being a virgin and being a good person. I don’t think that’s truly connected, even though the Church really connects Mother Mary the Virgin as the idol of how all Catholic women should be. I know I’m nowhere close to her [laughs]. Like, for sure nowhere close to her.

When I asked her whether anyone had ever told her that “not being a virgin meant that you were a bad person,” she said no, but that it was part of the “mindset” surrounding her Catholic upbringing. Camille attributed Ms. B. with having affirmed her that she was a good person despite having lost her virginity. She said that the lessons she learned in the Human Sexuality class, including being able to understand what a healthy sexual relationship looks like, was “the most helpful thing in [her] life.” She stated, “The whole [idea that], ‘It’s okay that you’re not a virgin and you’re still a good person,’ it was definitely, like, the most important thing ever [for me].”

3.3. Grace: Faith That Does Justice

Grace met me on an October evening having just returned to campus from volunteering with the Big Brothers Big Sisters Organization in Chicago. She has served as a big sister for a pre-teen girl for three years throughout her time in college.¹⁰ She wore her long brown hair down past her shoulders and had on a beige cardigan with bright, flower-print capri pants. Her friendly, open personality shone throughout the interview through her confident tone and ability to laugh at herself frequently. Grace is a 21-year-old Polish American woman raised in a suburb of Chicago, IL. Being Polish, she said, is “a big part of [her] identity,” as is evident in her narratives about her home life and upbringing in a Polish community near Chicago. She is currently a senior, majoring in Health Systems Management with a minor in Communication Studies.

¹⁰ Grace [pseud.]. Interviewed by author, October 7, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
Grace grew up in what she described as a “traditional household” with her mom, dad, and two younger brothers. Although she described it as “traditional,” she said that it was “a very conflicted household” at the same time since her mom and dad “never had a good relationship with each other.” Her parents are both immigrants from Poland, and Grace is a first generation college student. When speaking of her mom, who has battled with a chronic illness for most of her life, Grace said that she was “the one who literally did everything. She raised her three kids basically on her own.” Her mom was the main influence in Grace’s life growing up in regards to teaching her what it means to be a “good Polish girl,” which included being a faithful Catholic.

Since she was the only girl in her family, Grace felt that there were different expectations for her than for her brothers. She remarked, “[In Polish culture], the stereotypes associated with gender are very present. You [are expected to be] a woman who cleans the house, who cooks, who cleans, who fends for her family type of thing.” Since her mom performed these duties within the household, Grace was also expected to learn them—more so than her brothers, who she described as “getting off the hook a lot more.” “I think it has to do with the fact that I’m a woman,” she admitted. Grace acknowledged that there was also a certain script that a “good Polish-Catholic girl” ought to follow in social settings:

I always have to look nice. I always had to have my hair done, have nice shoes- a whole outfit type of thing. I couldn’t be rude and disrespectful if I disagreed with something because God forbid that I can disagree with someone else because I’m a woman, naturally. And so I think in that way, those are the messages that I received.

As a young girl, Grace was very involved in her home parish, taking an active part in the liturgy for her First Communion, and serving as an altar server. When she became an older teenager, however, she didn’t feel called to serve anymore because she felt as if the Church
“pushed [her] away from it.” Grace went to Polish school from fifth to eighth grade, which she described as “Sunday school into Polish school.” It met once a week for about five hours and covered subjects such as Polish literature, Polish writing, Polish history, and religion (Catholicism). Grace asserted that sexual education or discussions about puberty “definitely weren’t talked about at Polish school or Sunday school.” Nevertheless, Grace said that attending Polish school and being around married couples with many children while growing up influenced her idea of gender roles and the role that sexuality ought to play in her life. She reflected,

It was implied that you have a marriage and you have a family, and there’s all these kids. It’s implied that, like, God forbid you take the risk of having sex [outside of marriage] and that potentially leading to having children, because that’s not ok.

She used the word “implied” often in her interview regarding messages she received about appropriate and inappropriate sexual activity, but admitted that “sex wasn’t talked about in the household, it’s just not a thing you talk about.”

Grace went through sexual education through her public school in fifth grade. She said that the girls were instructed “how your body works” and “your menstrual cycle” but lamented that they never instructed them “what sex looks like, and what you can do to be safe when having sex.” Sex and sexuality was such a taboo subject in her household that she was even afraid to tell her mom when she got her period. Thus, for most of the questions she had about sex and her own sexuality, she turned to her friends, who were a few years older. “I learned [about sex and sexuality] through peers, definitely,” she stated.

Chapter Four will further explore Grace’s feelings and thoughts about how the Church didn’t motivate her to be an “active participant” throughout her childhood.
When Grace began to have relationships in middle school and high school, she was reticent to engage in any level of sexual activity with boys, and so often avoided it and made jokes about it instead. She recalled, “I never wanted to initiate [anything sexually]. I was always nervous ’cause I was like “I don’t even know what this is. Why would I put myself out there and go and touch a boy that way,” ya know?” Part of the nervousness to initiate sexual behavior was also due to having always been told by her parents and Church community that a good Catholic girl should not want to engage in sexual activity before marriage. Her faith at the time was starting to “drift away,” but she still held firm to the conviction that she would not have sex until she was married. When I asked her what supported this belief, even as she was drifting away from the church, she pointed to her religion, saying, “That’s just a part of my religion. I know that’s how it is because my mom [would] be very upset with me […] the body is sacred, you know?”

In relationships, Grace admitted that she “didn’t really know how to say no,” especially when the boy was initiating sexual contact. At that time she felt as if she shouldn’t “do that type of thing” (say no) or else it would “make [it] awkward” or he might even break up with her. This dynamic became even stronger when she got to college and was pressured into more and more. Grace spent the first year of college in a long-distance relationship with her boyfriend from high school, whom she frequently visited. One night at a party, he started pressing her about her virginity, and urged her to trust him with her first time, which she described as “giving me a choice, but not giving me a choice.” Grace explained,

So when it came down to it and he was with me, it led to [sex], and he was very forceful with it. He never asked, “Are you ready for this? Are you sure that you want to do this?” And then another weekend that I came down, it kind of just led to it, and I was like, panicking. I’m like, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” [I didn’t know] how to stand up for myself in the situation and say, “No, I don’t think I’m ready” because I was
constantly being told, “Look, you are ready. If you want this relationship so bad, you can make it work.”

Grace felt a tremendous amount of confusion after these sexual experiences, as well as immense guilt from what she described as a “very toxic, emotionally and sexually abusive relationship.” She said that she “instantly” regretted losing her virginity, and felt as if she was being judged by the Catholic Church and her mother (even though she didn’t know). The expectation of constantly “saying yes” and being pleasing and accommodating throughout her life is something that Grace directly correlated with her inability to say no to the physical, sexual advances made upon her in the relationship.

I always felt this expectation of constantly saying “yes” in my life. If someone came to me for help, I would say yes. I wouldn’t say no. That’s always been a part of my life. I always wanted to make someone else happy. I don’t want to be the person to, like, bring someone down. I don’t want to be the person to stand up for myself when I don’t think something’s right and then get backlash for it.

After having these forceful sexual experiences, Grace told me that she felt as if she had “betrayed the Church” and in a way “betrayed God” by putting herself in that position in the first place. She explained,

I felt like I committed this grave sin, that I was, like, gonna go to Hell and not get absolution because, once again, [sex] wasn’t talked about in the household for a reason, you know. And, like, because I was growing up in that environment, I still should have been able to say no. I definitely fell into that feeling of “Oh my God, I hate myself. Why would I ever do that?” I did this horrible thing. I’m a horrible person in the Church right now.

Grace told me that she was disappointed that her perception of female sexuality within the Catholic Church stems from the negative experiences that she had. She is also frustrated that sex was such a “taboo” subject in both her Church and in her home growing up.

Life happens. I’m not saying that [sex outside of marriage] is always a good thing, but like, life does happen. I’m constantly thinking, “Why did I have to learn from that one
instance and not from when I was a child growing up?” It’s a stigma to talk about [sex] in the first place in the Church, because it’s implied that you just don’t have it.

Now that she has become more exposed to Ignatian spirituality in her years at a Jesuit university, she told me that she has started to “gain perspective of what it means to be a woman of faith.” “I very much cling to this idea that having a faith that does justice is so important in today’s society,” she stated. This includes justice for women within the Church, which she described as a “system” like any other institution. She reflected,

I think in order to do justice for women within the Catholic Church, critical questions need to be asked to the structure, to the Vatican essentially: Why are women feelings these different feelings about feminism or about what it means to be female in the Church? Why are all these women going through these [sexual] experiences that are all very different? The stigma of talking about sex needs to be dismantled. It’s taboo, it’s a stigma … and it’s a mess. No one knows how to talk about it.

3.4. Avery: Ballet, Burlesque, and Sacred Spaces

Avery met with me on a warm August afternoon during the first week of her sophomore year of college. She donned a short, curly pixie cut and red lipstick, and immediately displayed her vibrant personality by punctuating her sentences with melodic laughter. Avery is a 19-year-old Mexican-American young woman from a suburb of Detroit, MI, with majors in English Literature and Sacred Music. “I’m a very comfortable person,” she remarked with a laugh as we began our interview. Avery grew up with her mother, father, and three younger brothers, who were sent to the same Catholic school she was from Kindergarten through 12th grade. The school is connected to a cathedral, which is a national shrine, a place that had a big impact on Avery growing up from inspiring her to major in Sacred Music to increasing her appreciation for aesthetics.

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Avery [pseud.]. Interviewed by author, August 27, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
As a young girl Avery was raised Catholic primarily by her mother, since her father was raised Methodist (he eventually converted to Catholicism when she was 15). “My dad really let my mom kind of take the reins as far as religious education,” she stated. When Avery was seven her family moved closer to the cathedral and so they started going to mass more regularly than before—previously, they would only go to mass for Christmas and Easter. She recalled her first experiences of catechesis when she received her First Communion:

[For my First Communion] I remember how frustrating it was. I really just don’t think that a seven-year-old understands what they’re talking about. Seven-year-olds have a pretty limited vocabulary, and I was doing the best that I [could], as far as I can remember, but it just wasn’t coming. I really didn’t enjoy it.

It wasn’t until Avery joined the treble choir that she really started to feel a connection to the Church and to that cathedral in particular. When she joined the treble choir, which was the cathedral’s youth choir, Avery immediately found a sense of community within the parish and became close to her director, with whom she is still friends today. When I asked her what it was that she was drawn to about being in a church choir in particular, her eyes lit up:

I loved the music—I remember that even now. And I loved the challenge. [Our director] was very demanding, but I always liked that challenge. […] I definitely felt a sense of care, from the older kids to the younger kids. Something about it just … captured me about being in the shrine specifically and being at rehearsals and singing in it was just thrilling to me! There was definitely a lot of personal obsession with the aesthetic, especially when [I was] singing at a Christmas Eve mass in somewhere like the shrine.

For Avery, the most significant messages she received about what it means to be a woman came from her mother, who she described as “very independent” and “the matriarch” of the household. “She has very strong ideas about what it means to be a Mexican woman, especially in the context of being independent and taking care of things,” she affirmed. Avery mentioned that her mom always spoke to her as if she were an adult, which she appreciated. However, when it came to middle school when her mom wanted to talk to her about her body
and sex, Avery shut the conversation down because she was “super frustrated” that they were even talking about it and felt “super awkward.”

I wasn’t interested, and I was kind of like, “I know that I have to learn about sex. I prefer to learn about it in a different context when I’m comfortable.” At that point, I was really not comfortable with it.

Avery told me that she was (and still is) more comfortable talking about [sex] with her peers than with her mom. She noted, “My mom is super relaxed about everything, and then I’ll hit something where she just happens to have, like, a prude [opinion] about just this one thing.”

Avery recounted the sexual education talks at her Catholic grade school in both fifth grade and eighth grade, which she described as feeling “gross and weird” since the speakers were older teachers. She remembered the girls being separated from the boys, and the discussion revolving around how their bodies would start to be changing because of puberty. In the fifth grade program mothers went with their daughters, which is why her mom wanted to talk with her before the program. Nothing about sexual intercourse or sexuality was discussed until eighth grade. She recalled,

[The speakers were] trying their best not to make it too awkward. I was just hoping to get it over with. It kind of made you feel weird talking about it, and it was better to talk about it with your friends than in any sort of official space.

Regarding the content of the eighth grade program, Avery said that medical professionals from the hospital across the street from the school came to speak. They discussed the “actual mechanics of sex” and she remembered all of the answers being “very clinical.”

Despite her insistence on not talking about sex and sexuality openly as a pre-teen, Avery said that she was aware that there was “something like sexuality” from a very young age (about three or four). She wasn’t sure what it was at the time, but she said that she definitely had “an awareness” that it was “a thing” in her life. She added,
What that eventually turned into was just an awareness of my own sexuality and what makes me feel sexy or what I’m comfortable with in a sexual context. Because I already had started growing in that context earlier, I think that it helped me to feel more confident and more comfortable with [sex and sexuality] pretty quickly because it was something that I had already been thinking about for a long time. That’s why I [am able] to have conversations like this.

Avery was a ballet dancer from the age of three up until she was sixteen, and she discussed how ballet shaped the way she viewed her body as a young girl.

In terms of body image, a lot of it was ingrained [in me from] ballet. Ballet affected my body image because I really didn’t have one. My body and its type were being determined by my activity because it was so stringent. I viewed my body in terms of utility; it really wasn’t [about] appearance. I remember at one point, like, feeling really self-conscious. My boobs were super small. I was like, “Wow, I don’t want be in ballet anymore.”

Last year, Avery incorporated her memories of ballet into her gender theory studies by writing an article for the student-run Feminist and Social E-Magazine, BROAD. The article was entitled “Ballet, Burlesque and the Polarization of Women’s Sexuality.” In it she talked about her new-found love, burlesque, and how it has often been criticized for being degrading to women—unlike ballet, it’s more “classy” counterpart. Avery quoted legendary burlesque dancer Dita Von Teese’s answer to the question of whether burlesque degrades women: “You can’t tell a woman what’s going to make her feel sexy.” Avery shared that Von Teese has also expressed that one of the last frontiers of women’s liberation is going to be sexual liberation, when you can “do what makes you feel sexy without being sexualized in a negative way, without being reduced to that sexuality”—a sentiment that Avery strongly shares. Throughout the interview Avery echoed this frustration with the polarization of women’s sexuality.

Avery remembered that when she was in high school there were a lot of discussions surrounding purity, commenting, “I didn’t like that purity was associated with sexuality at all.”
She recalled a few conversations she had with a close family friend who would “talk about purity and considers herself to be very pure.” Avery recalled,

   It wasn’t arrogant the way she was phrasing it, it was just incredibly naïve. And even now [it is naïve to think that] sexuality could taint somebody. I remember being so frustrated with it. I didn’t really want to talk to her about it.

Avery also remembered some messages the girls in her Catholic school received about how a young woman ought to express (or not express) her sexuality through the school’s rigid rules about uniform skirts.

   In eighth grade through high school [we] had to kneel to the ground [to check skirt length]. Some teachers would do the pop test where they would put a pop can next to your knee. If it didn't hit the top of the pop can, it was too short. […] I just now [in college] realized how screwed up it is.

Avery explained that the “skirt test” reminded her of a graphic that she saw online that displayed markings on a woman’s leg that indicate skirt length. Each marking has a different negative connotation, from prude all the way up to slut (graphic below). The culture in her high school surrounding proper skirt length was coupled with the message that young women should “be responsible for keeping [their] legs closed.” Avery expressed, “The social background itself was an incentive [to keep your legs closed] because if you did anything and then it got out, you’re gonna be the talk of the school. You are branded for life.”
When Avery received the sacrament of Confirmation in high school, she said that she “didn’t have any hesitation” about committing herself as an adult member of the Church and was “committed to continuing on [her] faith journey.” This journey became difficult for her as she continued high school:

I was trying to figure things out, continuing my own self-analysis and my faith-life. When I was 15, I really struggled with that. I wasn’t feeling it. […] I didn’t know what I was supposed to be listening for. I didn’t know what I was supposed to be looking for.
Avery’s first boyfriend, who was raised Catholic but became atheist, was the person who strongly influenced the strengthening of her faith again. She told me,

It was him who made me feel secure in my faith because of the conversations we were having, because he was forcing me to really think about it and tell him what I thought about it. He was asking me, “Why do you believe this?” It made me think about [my faith] in a new context, and that really helped me.

When they began to be sexually active, Avery stated, “We went as far as we were comfortable going, and at that point I wasn’t comfortable giving up my virginity.” He respected her decisions and she said that she was just enjoying “what it meant to be sexual.” When I asked her how her faith coincided with the expression of her sexuality at the time, she simply stated,

I really started to feel comfortable in my faith and in this relationship, and therefore my sexuality. It was really starting to fall into place for me. I’m a practicing Catholic, had a boyfriend, and was comfortable having sexual experiences with him.

Avery expressed a lot of hope for the future of the Church, stating that it is important to put teachings “into context” and that the Church is “moving forward.” She pointed out, “People tend to focus on the negative about the Catholic Church, but there are just as many beautiful [aspects] about it.” Regarding messages she thinks are important for Catholic sexual education, she stated,

I think about that phrase, “Your body a temple.” I like that [message] because a temple is not necessarily a place that is cut off from the world. It’s still in relation to the world. A church, a sacred space, is still in relation to the world. [Whether you are] male or female, you choose who to invite within your personal space and who is not [welcome]. Once you respect yourself, you can expect other people to respect you.

3.5. Joan: God as Sex-Positive

“Sex is something that you do not do, do not talk about, or even think about until you’re married. The thing that’s scary for me is that no one said that out loud to me.”

Joan shared this sentiment with me on a chilly winter afternoon on campus, as she sat and wondered aloud multiple times, “who told me that?” Joan is a bubbly, spunky young woman with short brown hair and dark horn-rimmed glasses. She spoke eagerly and enthusiastically about her experiences growing up in Brooklyn, NY, going to college in Boston, and presently pursuing a master’s degree in the liberal arts. Joan’s mother is Puerto-Rican and her father is Italian, and she was born and raised in Brooklyn as an only child. Both of her parents are Catholic, but Joan attributed much of the Catholic identity in her household to her mother’s side of the family. As a family they were very involved in their local parish: her father was a lector, her mom was on the hospitality committee and Joan served as a children’s lector. Joan recalled, laughing,

On Sundays my fun activity with my friends would be to play church. I would go through the ritual using, like, cheerios and stuff. And from childhood I wanted to be a priest. For the longest time I don’t think I really understood exactly what it meant [but] it was what I liked.

Joan reflected that she didn’t really understand what it meant to be a woman in the Catholic Church until she got the response “you can’t do that because you’re a girl,” after telling people of her desire to be a priest. Joan went to Catholic school until fifth grade and then transferred to public school, yet was still actively involved in her parish through CCD classes and the youth group. Though her parents never “pressured her to fit a specific [gender] stereotype,” Joan said that her Catholic elementary school had a “very rigid idea of what girls had to wear” in terms of uniform jumpers, skirts, and matching plaid hairpieces. “I think I definitely felt more like a girl, because you had to wear those things,” she said, “but I was more comfortable in shorts […] you feel weird being the only girl who always wants to wear the shorts.”
When asked what her sources of information were about sex and sexuality when she was a young girl, Joan immediately answered, “television! And friends I guess.” She recalled,

Before seventh or eighth grade, I knew that sex existed, but I don't think I could have, like, really given you a name or just like explained it. I just knew that there was something that happens with the two characters on TV- they kiss … and then it goes dark.

Joan said that she ended up learning about sex in middle school (public school) in health class, but noted, “I actively do not remember what they said.” Although she admitted that she didn’t know a lot about sex in middle school, she pointed out that “all the other people did.”

I was the one that read all the books … I was a nerdy brainiac. I remember reading books in eighth grade that had sex in them, and I didn’t tell my mom I was reading them. Information about sex came specifically from fantasy-like books.

Joan added that although she had crushes on boys in middle school and high school, she didn’t have “options for practical application,” and so she just didn’t think about her own sexuality. “Like a lot of things, it was just compartmentalized […] it was almost a non-issue.”

In high school, Joan was active in her parish youth group (a program called LifeTeen) and attended the National Catholic Youth Conference, but acknowledged that her faith was “disconnected” from the rest of her life. “My faith life was very much a private, personal [thing] separate from the rest of my life,” she said. It wasn’t until her senior year of high school that she had another form of sexual education, but she remarked that it was a “small unit incorporated into the health requirements.” “It was so dumb,” she exclaimed, “and so all of the information that you’re getting is coming from friends and pop culture.” She wondered aloud for a while during the interview, trying to figure out how she received information:

When did I go from not knowing anything, just understanding things in theory to actually knowing? I cannot for the life of me figure out where the information came from, but I know it wasn’t from church and I’m almost positive that it didn’t come from my parents.
Despite not remembering receiving any direct messages about sexuality from the Church, Joan made it clear what she felt like the Church was telling her:

I felt the Church was teaching me, “You can’t have sex.” That makes you a bad person and it’s worse—I don't know why, but it’s worse for girls than it is for guys. And you have no say in the Church hierarchy. You hear all these places that you are not allowed to be in because of your gender.

In regards to gender, she also had a strong idea of what it meant to be a “good Catholic girl”:

[I felt like] I couldn’t [think about having sex] because I’m Catholic. I’m a good girl. You follow the rules and you walk a strict line. You are modest and chaste and smart. School comes first, and boys come second … or third, or fifth [Laughs]. You don’t go out all night, and you don’t bring guys over to your room. You don’t let them think that you like them for the longest time. God forbid you show cleavage—that type of thing.

Joan said that it wasn’t until her freshman year of college that she started to feel more “sex positive.” She defined being “sex positive” as “the idea that sex is a good thing and that it is biologically natural.” She added, “It is one of our privileges as sentient beings to enjoy sex and we should take advantage of it in healthy, fulfilling ways.”

Joan’s classes in Feminist Theology in college really helped shape her personal academic goals as well as her spiritual views. She stated, “It was the first time that I was with other people that were questioning these power structures and really interrogating them. It was really amazing and really devastating at the same time.” She began to lose faith in the Church because of all of the things that she was learning, such as the teaching prohibiting women to become priests, and said that she couldn’t go to church anymore. She reflected, “Looking back I don’t necessarily think or realize that I felt [this way], but looking back on it I think I felt abandoned [by the Church]. Like you’re unwelcome. It was really, really, really hard.” In her categorizations of messages or ideas as sex positive, sex neutral, or sex negative, Joan described the Church as being sex negative. “The idea that sex is beautiful, especially for women was never taught to me
by the Church,” she responded. Joan said that by sophomore year of college she had “freed herself or abandoned the idea of not having sex until [she] was married,” and described her decisions about sexual activity as a product of what she was comfortable with rather than what she had been taught.

After college, Joan joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and met members in her community who had sex positive views and beliefs. One of her roommates really influenced her to “care about religion again” because she was “rooted in and believes in the mission of the Church” and still believes that sex is an “amazing thing.”

[My roommate] was one of the most real, religious individuals in my age bracket that I’ve ever met who is also one of the most sexually liberated. She was really into Mary. She shared this idea of the strength that comes from Mary and why we turn to Mary so often for examples of what it means to be a good woman, a faith-filled woman and a strong woman. Mary is the female face of God—we talked a lot about that.

Joan explained that her roommate demonstrated a “reformist” approach to being in the Church rather than “breaking away.” “She still firmly believed that women have a specific role in the structure,” she noted, “and even if we don’t think it’s a fair role, there’s something worth saving there.”

Joan wishes that she would have been given more positive messages about sexuality and that there are a “variety of options” for sexual expression.

I wish I had been taught that sexuality is a good thing and it is important and worth being explored. God cares more about if we are able to look ourselves in the mirror the next morning and still be proud of the people that we are, than if [we] saved ourselves until marriage. There are a variety of options [of sexual expression] and that’s how God made us.

Joan referred to her liberal arts background when she discussed sex negative messages transmitted by the Church. She commented, “I think that we need to look at who gets to teach and who gets to interpret.” With eyes bright and a smile on her face, she exclaimed,
What would happen if all- if women really realized that [our] sexuality is beautiful?! We would feel so good about ourselves! I personally believe that God thinks that sex is beautiful. In Eden I’m sure that Adam and Eve were having lots of sex and it was great.

3.6. Alexandra: “It’s Your Choice”

“I’ve never really felt empowered in the Church as a woman. I’ve always felt … maybe not oppressed, but just kind of like, shushed.”¹⁴

Alexandra is a very sweet, soft-spoken young woman, who spoke very honestly with me about her strong faith and her struggles with understanding the Catholic Church’s teachings on pre-marital sex and female sexuality. Alexandra is 20 years old, born and raised in a town just outside of Los Angeles, CA. She identifies as Latina (both of her parents are Mexican) and is strongly influenced by the culture since she also grew up in a “very condensed Mexican area” in L.A. She is currently a sophomore at Loyola University Chicago, studying business management and business administration. Going to college in Chicago from L.A., she said, was a way for her to “go out of [her] comfort zone and try to grow and explore the world.”

Alexandra grew up surrounded by family; she and her parents lived with her maternal grandmother until she was four and then lived with her paternal grandparents until she was six when her younger brother was born. Her parents then moved with them into their own house which was a “family house” passed down by her great-grandmother—they lived in a back house while her aunt lived in the front house. Her paternal grandparents and her father raised Alexandra with a strong Catholic identity:

[My dad] grew up Catholic and he still wholeheartedly believes everything. Every time I’m going through a struggle in my life, and I’m talking to my dad, he’s always telling me, “let go and let God” and that God has everything set out for you the way that you need it to be set out.

¹⁴ Alexandra [pseud.]. Interviewed by author, April 2, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
Her grandfather attends mass “almost every other day” and their house is adorned with many crosses and Catholic statues. Her grandmother doesn’t go to church very often because she “has to take care of the house a lot.” She also takes care of the grandchildren, which “takes a lot of energy from her.”

Alexandra remembers her parents and teachers telling her things that girls “shouldn’t do” in public when she was young, recalling a specific incident with her father:

I remember one time I was, I want to say like three or four years old. I had a scratch on my thigh, [and the way I could scratch it] I had to go under the leg; I couldn’t [scratch] under the shorts. My dad freaked out and was like, “You’re not supposed to scratch yourself!” And he was, like, kind of mad. We were at the store. He was like, “You’re not supposed to scratch yourself above—” and he put his hand [up to his leg] “in public! That’s not what girls do.”

In her Catholic grade school, which was kindergarten through eighth grade, she said that there was a “strict code of conduct, strict dress code, and strict rules in general.” She admitted, “I felt like it was mostly [for] the girls, though to be honest.” “The girls had to always be nitpicking at themselves. Otherwise, the principal would get mad.”

In sixth grade, Alexandra’s school had a form of sexual education, where they separated the boys and the girls, and the principal and teacher both talked to the girls “about periods”:

By sixth grade, I had already gotten [my period], so I was like “You guys are a little late, but okay.” [Laughs] They were just like, telling us about periods, and then I don’t think they talked about sex. I think they did talk about like kissing, and kissing diseases like mono and stuff.

Alexandra said that she learned about sex at a young age from her maternal grandmother and her mother. “They both had an in-depth conversation with me,” she stated, “and they were very adamant about saying, ‘Don’t just listen to your friends! If you have questions, ask us. We’ll tell you if they’re right or wrong.’” Both of Alexandra’s parents strayed from the Church’s teachings about contraceptives in their conversations with her.
They [told me] that girls use birth control and guys use condoms. My dad was very adamant: “You always have to have condoms because you don’t want to catch an STD.” Once I got old enough, my mom actually went with me to the doctor to get birth control.

In response to the Church’s stance against the use of contraceptives, Alexandra said that her parents claimed, “we’re in this modern time where no matter what you do, people are going to always have sex. It’s better to be safe than to be sorry.” She said that they conveyed the message that they would like for her to wait until marriage to have sex, but that “ultimately, it’s your choice. It’s everybody’s own choice what they choose to do with their body.”

In grade school, Alexandra said that as a girl she had “negative feelings” about herself in terms of body image. She felt pressure from both the media and her friends, who she described as “naturally thin”:

[On TV] You see these really thin girls and how they always get the really cute boys and how the bigger girls, and, um, I guess the less-attractive girls never did, or if they did, it was some farfetched thing. On Disney Channel and Nickelodeon there were these older actresses and I just [thought], “I don’t look like that,” you know what I mean? So I always felt concerned about my weight.

When she started attending high school, which was an all-girls Catholic high school, she said that she started to think a little differently about body image since she didn’t go to class with boys every day. “It was nice,” she acknowledged, “I had a good sense of ‘girl power,’ you could say. I felt like I didn’t have to worry about my looks or my weight or anything.” She and her friends had what she describes as “explicit” conversations about sex and sexuality, specifically about boys’ sexuality. “There were a lot of questions being circled around,” she said, “and one of our friends didn’t know anything, and during these conversations she would just be like, ‘Wow, I didn’t know.’”
At her high school, they had a “brief” sexual education freshman year, where “it was a running joke that they showed the birth of a baby, and it’s very graphic.” She noted that her health teacher taught both abstinence as well as safe sex, even though it was a Catholic school:

Even though it was Catholic, they were like, “Listen. We know you are probably going to do it at some point, so just be safe.” I mean, they didn’t like, give us condoms or anything, but they just said, “This is how to have safe sex when you’re older and more mature, but also you should wait.”

She noted that even though they talked about the possible repercussions of having unsafe sex, like disease or pregnancy there was no “real explanation of why it’s wrong, why you shouldn’t do it, or anything,” which she described as “having a good intention but poor execution.”

Alexandra confided that she first started realizing “sex’s potential” and her own sexuality more when she had her first serious boyfriend at sixteen. She distinguished the difference between just “messing” around with someone you don’t really care about vs. being sexually active with someone you love:

When you kiss and do things with boys that you don’t really care about, it’s just like, “whatever.” It’s nice, but it doesn’t count. But when you care about someone deeply, you’re in love with someone, it’s just ten times better, like tenfold. You actually feel something rather than just some sort of sexual satisfaction. Like, it’s in your heart as well.

Alexandra told me that she always felt like she had a “strong relationship with God,” even now that she is in college. She prays often about decisions that she is faced with, including whether or not dating a certain boy is the right thing to do. She has often prayed about whether or not to engage in sexual activity with boys. She reflected,

I [thought], “Okay, even though this isn’t what the Church technically teaches, as long as I feel God in my heart, and it’s not hurting anybody, and it’s consensual, there’s no harm in it.” At the same time, sex is also the most ultimate and intimate way of showing a person love; it’s like the most intimate way you can be with another person, or one of the most.
The Church, according to Alexandra, needs to start taking into account “the world we live in” in terms of how sexualized the media is, especially in its portrayal of women. She questioned, “There’s always something for us (women) to be told what to do. If it’s my body, why shouldn’t I be able to make the decision if I have been educated enough about it, you know?”

For the last twenty minutes or so of the interview, Alexandra listed a variety of things that she believes the Church needs to work on in terms of teaching young women about their role in the Church and how they should view their sexuality. When I asked her how she thought the Catholic Church relates to women, she paused, and then responded,

From my understanding the Church very much suppresses women. Women are seen as either very unclean or very pure. There is no in-between. [...] I mean, when you’re very little and you’re just exploring yourself, you think, “Oh, I don’t understand this feeling, but I like it.” At the same time, you don’t. I just freaked out about how something that felt so nice could be so, so evil.

Bringing up the topic of abortion, and connecting it to pre-marital sex, Alexandra spoke frequently of “choice” and being able to make choices about your body. “It’s your body,” she stated, “Nobody should be able to tell you what you can or cannot do … it’s your choice.”

Alexandra shared that she was still a virgin, “in the technical sense,” and marveled at the fact that virginity is “praised in the Catholic world” but seen as “kind of weird” in secular society. She stated,

I’m not waiting until marriage, but if that happens, it happens. I’m just trusting God to be able to guide me in my life because I’ve always felt that sex was a very serious thing. God bestowed sex to us as one of our human traits, and God gave us sexuality as a gift. It should be treasured.

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15 Some of these topics are further addressed in Chapter Four, where I discuss emerging themes from the interviews.
At the end of the interview, she added, “I’m proud of being Catholic. I think that it’s okay to identify as Catholic but not 100% agree with everything Catholicism teaches.”

**3.7. Sarah: The Word that Always Sticks**

I met with Sarah on a bitterly cold February afternoon, when she was in town for a long weekend from Saint Louis University, where she is a first-year student. Sarah is a 19-year-old, German and Polish Catholic female, born and raised in the Chicago area. She attended a public grade school until 8th grade, and then attended an all-girls Catholic high school. “I kind of had a rough middle school experience,” she admitted, “I felt like it would be easier for me to be myself in an all-girls school and to participate in school, and that ended up proving to be very, very true.”

Sarah grew up with two brothers and her mother and father. “When I was little, my family life was very easy,” she remembered, “and then when I was around, I want to say fifth grade, things started getting a lot more difficult.” She recounted,

> I have an older brother, and as he started to grow up he had some issues of his own—he took a lot of that out on me. That’s a time when your self-esteem is very fragile, especially as a girl, and he took all of his anger out on me. At that time my dad was a stockbroker and the stock market was going downhill, he was [experiencing the] recession period. He had a sort of a drinking problem and for the first time in my life, he wasn’t my hero anymore. He was taking his anger out on my family as well as my brother.

Sarah said that she tried talking to her mother about her father’s anger, but that she “was very much on his side,” because she knew that he was stressed about making enough money for the family.

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16 I met Sarah when I was working part-time at her Catholic high school in the Chicago suburbs, and we kept in touch ever since. When she heard about my study through casual conversation, she jumped at the chance to be a part of it.

Sarah’s mother is Catholic and her father is Protestant, and she commented that her maternal grandmother was “very Catholic.” Her grandmother was married to an abusive husband, and ended up getting a divorce. She went to go speak with the parish priest before she filed for divorce, and he tried to dissuade her from doing so—this left Sarah’s grandmother and her mother with a negative view of the Church. “My mom didn’t want to take me to a Catholic Church for those reasons,” Sarah stated.

In middle school, Sarah said that she experienced a lot of bullying from her peers, specifically surrounding her sexuality. When she was in fifth grade, she had her first kiss. She remembered that it was at a skating rink that kids would go to on Friday nights:

It was a silly relationship […] if you held hands with someone they’d be your boyfriend or girlfriend. I remember one night I just gave him a peck, like a little innocent kiss—it was my first kiss and I was so excited about it. It was right when everyone got those Razor phones and they were camera phones, so someone took a picture of it and sent it around school.

Sarah identified this incident as her first experience being “shamed for her sexuality.” She told me that the major messages she received about being a girl at the time was from the media, specifically MTV and TV shows that “sexualized women a lot.” “The big message was that you have to be sexy,” she affirmed.

The public grade school she attended had sexual education in fifth through seventh grade; fifth and sixth grade covered the reproductive system and seventh grade covered different kinds of birth control and provided information about sexually transmitted diseases. During these classes, Sarah was teased about the boy she had kissed: “Why don’t you go study the reproductive system of Darren?” her classmates taunted. Sarah described the sexual education she received at the public school as not being “very biased” since it was so general, but stated, “there are definitely other places where I learned messages about what it means to be a female
and to have sex.” One of these sources was her mother, whom she overheard talking to her older brother about sex. “She told him that he should wait for someone special and that it would be better for him [if he did],” she recalled. “I remember she compared [choosing someone to have sex with] to a buffet and I don’t know why.”

Jason Evert, a Catholic author and chastity speaker, came to speak to her single-sex Catholic school when Sarah was a junior. She was frustrated that a man came to speak to a group of young women about female sexuality:

He talked to us about how we should dress modestly and how we should be modest, and, you know, save it for the right guy. I was just sitting there thinking, “Why don’t we talk to any guys about this stuff ever?” Like, out of all of the speakers they could bring in to an all-girls Catholic school, they talked to us about being modest and waiting for marriage. I think that idea is very much pressed onto women- waiting and just the concept of virginity in general.

Sarah stated that her virginity was very important to her when she was little and she thought about getting a purity ring, which she thinks is “so funny” now because she now views virginity as a “socially constructed idea.” She shared,

I think girls put so much emphasis on their first time. I think people make kind of a big deal about it. I mean I think you should have sex with people who respect you, but I think people are so concerned with quantity rather than quality. People focus so much on the fact if you’ve had sex or haven’t and not [asking] “Is your sex healthy? Do you feel good?”

In her own relationships, Sarah explained that she only wants to have sex with people who respect her and that she “wouldn’t hook up with a guy who didn’t respect [her].” She emphasized that the “quality” of people that she has had sexual relationships with is better than one “bad boyfriend.” Regarding the messages that she received about sexuality from the Catholic Church, Sarah noted, “it’s all about the virginity question”:

That’s the thing that they mostly teach about: how to be modest, how to slow down so you don’t end up having sex, how to save yourself for one person. It’s all they focus on. I
mean, I totally respect people who do want to have sex with one person their whole life and save themselves for marriage. But it doesn’t work out that way for a lot of people and they’re not taught to have healthy sex after that.

The gaps that Sarah saw in Catholic sexual pedagogies reflect a black-and-white model of sexual morality, without equipping youth to critically analyze whether or not their sexual relationships are healthy, or what makes for “good sex.”

Sarah also talked about receiving unhelpful advice from a priest when she went to confession to discuss sexual experiences with a boy who wasn’t respecting her. “He just told me to say a couple ‘Hail Marys’ and then reflect on it and talk to God,” she explained, “which is probably as much advice as he could give.” Sarah reflected that at that time she felt on her own when it came to discussing her sexuality and sex. “I always felt very ashamed, I guess you could say,” she admitted, “I kind of had to just get through it and figure it out myself.”

“We need a sex ed!” Sarah exclaimed when I asked her about the sexual education at her Catholic high school. “There is no sex ed,” she stated, “I mean, very briefly in health class. Definitely a lot less than I learned in seventh grade [at the public school].” She told me a story of the science teacher, who talked to her students about alternate methods of family planning:

She told us that we should not use birth control and that we should use the—I think she called it the rhythm method. I’ve heard from girls in another class that she took out a condom and like ran it under a water faucet and like it kinda poked a hole through it and she was like, “This is why you shouldn’t use condoms.”

That’s the one message I got from [high school], is that you shouldn’t use birth control, which I think is just so wrong because I do know girls who don’t use birth control because their parents won’t allow them to. That just worries me because one of my friends will have sex anyways or do other stuff that she’s probably not very comfortable with. That just hurts me because I don’t think it’s safe.

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18 I will present some ways in which Catholic sexual pedagogies can encourage youth to critically examine sexual relationships and define “good sex” in Chapter Five.
Sarah suggested that Catholic schools talk about “healthy sex,” both physically and emotionally. She also insisted that they talk about birth control that females could use (outside of condoms).

“Girls would ask me about it all the time, because they were scared to ask their parents,” she added, “there was like nowhere to go.”

From middle school to college Sarah has experienced a lot of slut-shaming, which she noted as being “destructive” to her self-esteem. She reflected,

> When people started joking about me being a slut in college I was kinda like, “oh no,” because that happened to me in middle school, and that happened to me in high school. Just because of that one word, it can ruin your reputation. If you say, “That girl’s a slut” it just kinda … it sticks. It’s hard to get rid of that word.

Sarah explained that girls are scared to be labeled a slut and scared to talk about their sexuality in general. “It’s sort of a taboo subject and yet you see it so much in the media,” she pointed out.

“It’s like forced onto us that women should be sexualized, but then we can’t talk about our sexuality either.” Based on her own experiences of not having anyone to talk to about her sexuality, Sarah told me her hopes for the future:

> I hope that we can have more conversation about what it means to be a woman and what your sexuality should mean. It’d be really awesome if we could actually have classes about that or people weren’t afraid to go to them. I think it’s just damaging to your emotional health to not talk about it.

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3.8. Anastasia: Chastity is a Choice

“Chastity is an everyday choice. It’s in the way you dress, it’s the way you treat people, and it’s the way you carry yourself.”

This is the message that Anastasia received as a pre-teen, and then later taught others as a teenager, about chastity and what it means to live a “chaste lifestyle.” The theme of chastity came up frequently in our interview together on a warm fall afternoon.

Anastasia is a 20-year-old Caucasian young woman from a suburb of St. Louis, MO. She is currently a sophomore Honors student at Loyola University Chicago with a major in History and a minor in German Studies. Anastasia is a smart, open and talkative young woman who is the eldest of four. Anastasia’s mother gave birth to her when she was sixteen, a fact that has strongly influenced the way that her mother talks to her about sex and sexuality. “I spent most of my life living with my mom and her dad, because she never left home,” Anastasia recalled. She has one brother and two sisters, born from different fathers, and her mother is now married to her sisters’ father.

Anastasia stated that her grandfather, who would read to her from a children’s Bible each night, taught her about the Catholic faith as a child. The messages about being a woman primarily came from her mother, who always alluded to her own experience with relationships. Anastasia explained,

Because of [her] different relationships with men, and because I would go and visit my dad and he would always have a different girlfriend, [my mom] would say, “Boys are gonna mess up your life. You need to have your life straight. You need to have your career in place before you even consider dating anyone.” Even now she’s like, “you need to focus on school”, because she didn’t get to make that decision.

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Since her father was a chef at a restaurant, when Anastasia went to visit him, she needed to mind her manners at the restaurant:

I was always [on] perfect behavior, like a perfect child. You have to be polite. You have to thank everyone. You have to sit there and look nice. [Laughs] Because I was the little girl, I had to be Daddy’s perfect little angel, and if I [did] something good I [got] something to make up for other things.

Anastasia stated that her complicated relationship with her father has influenced the way she interacted with boys as a girl and affects her relationships with men today. “I still have a weird perception of guys because of [my relationship] with my dad,” she claimed.

Anastasia went to a Catholic grade school and an all-girls Catholic high school in St. Louis. In sixth grade, her grade school held an event where the mothers came with their daughters and the fathers came with their sons and talked to them about puberty and bodily changes. Before this presentation, she had never had any sort of “stereotypical talk” from her mother, but rather found things out on her own through TV shows or fantasy novels. She noted,

I was kind of figuring out ideas about like sex and sexuality and like sexual orientation from [fantasy novels]. [I thought], “This might not be the way things work, but this a possibility of how things work.” [My mom] never sat me down and told me, “Okay, this is how this works,” even just about my body or about sex or anything. I was just kind of like, “This is happening. This is what I did. Did I do something wrong?” like asking more questions after the fact, rather than during.

In eighth grade her school built on the sixth grade presentation with a program called Right Start, which Anastasia described as having a “pro-life aspect” with talks about abstinence. Anastasia shared a metaphor that the speaker gave to illustrate sexual activity:

A woman was presenting, so she got a guy from the audience and put tape on his arm and [said], “Pull it off,” and she’s like, “Okay, well, the first time, it’s fun. Then you put it on someone else, and it becomes less sticky, so sex stops meaning stuff the more you have it with more people.” The more sex you have, the less it means something.
In seventh grade, a group of high school students led a retreat for her grade school which included talks about chastity, called the REAP team (Retreat, Evangelization, and Prayer Team). When she entered high school, she joined the team and began giving talks about chastity as well. She explained,

Every retreat includes some kind of chastity talk, and I remember this guy got up and said, “Guys, we have to be nice and treat [women] like princesses.” Obliviously, I was like a hopeless romantic seventh grader. I was like, “That is so nice. I do want someone to treat me like a princess, to have my best interests in mind.”

When Anastasia became a REAP leader, she said that her reason for practicing chastity was her mother’s situation as an unexpectedly pregnant teenage girl. “I don’t want that to happen to me,” she admitted. Her mother had always told her, “[Sex] is supposed to be something important. You’re supposed to save it.” As a leader, Anastasia signed a chastity card and wore a chastity ring. “You’re not saying sex is a bad thing,” she shared, “you’re putting it on a pedestal and saying ‘It’s so great that you’re supposed to save it for something special.’” She also added that if someone stumbles, that’s fine, a person can “always go back to that lifestyle.”

Anastasia was very well-versed in her Catholic faith as a pre-teen and teen—due to her Catholic school upbringing and involvement in retreat teams and youth group, she always knew how to respond to questions of morality using Church teachings and biblical passages. “I could justify the Church’s teachings on basically anything,” she affirmed. She would tell her classmates, “We have to realize that it’s a Church teaching and this is why, here is the religious backing behind it … ” She pointed out to her friends that the Church is an institution, and if people make mistakes, so can the Church since it is made up of people. At her all-girls Catholic high school, which she depicted as “liberal” due to the viewpoints of some of the sisters who ran the school, she told me that there was less of a pressure to fit into stereotypical feminine gender
roles, and that there were different options for girls to express themselves. In theology class, there was a Christian Life Commitments unit where students could opt to fill out a packet for either married or single life, and were even able to choose a same-sex partner. “They gave you other options besides, ‘you’ll get married,’” she remarked.

In grade school and high school, Anastasia didn’t have any romantic relationships with boys because her mother “would have killed [her].” When I asked her to describe her sexuality at the time, given that she was giving chastity talks, she admitted that her sexuality seemed “muted”:

[My sexuality] was just like a distant thing that I was aware of, but it was like never the time for it. It was like, “This is not the time for sexuality. This is a learning environment. This is a friend environment. This has nothing to do with any kind of sexuality.”

Leaving home and going off to college was a transition that changed Anastasia’s perception of her own sexuality. “I feel like I’m participating more in my own sexuality,” she claimed, acknowledging the lack of consequences in college compared to high school and the independence gained from being able to live away from home.

Before college I had never really been kissed by a guy, and never really participated in any kind of sexuality. There’s not like one day I woke up and was like, “I’m in control of my own sexuality,” but like that kind of starts to dawn on you and then you get to start acting on it I guess.

Anastasia shared with me that she now views chastity as less of a “community” issue and more of a personal issue. However, as she is “experimenting” with her sexuality in college, she still views sex as something that is “supposed to mean something.” She reflected,

I think in this generation it’s difficult because sex can be all you do and you can just leave out the emotion part of it. And it’s just ridiculous to me. Especially with that super Catholic background I’m like, “it’s still supposed to mean something.”
Anastasia confided that she doesn’t feel comfortable being a part of the chastity team anymore, because her views on it have changed since going to college:

> If I don’t personally agree with it I can’t stand in front of a group of seventh and eighth graders and say, “This is how you’re supposed to live your life.” Even if I was questioning it, and I wasn’t even out doing anything that was necessarily against chastity, I was like, “I can’t get up in front of these people.” Maybe this isn’t the right way to live my life; maybe I’m supposed to be doing something else.

Regarding her evolving views on Church teaching in matters of sex and sexuality, she stated, “I feel like the way that the Church views sexuality and gender and sexual orientation is such a black and white thing. I think the moral gray area needs to be addressed more.”

3.9. A Complex Landscape

My goal in undertaking this research project was to find out the narratives and messages girls were receiving regarding sex and sexuality within a Catholic context (specifically as females), and how that affects their identities as Catholic young women today. Essentially, the interviews served as a small investigation into the state of Catholic sexual education today (whether in a formal or informal educational setting). I wanted to know how these messages made them feel, and how it affected their sexual growth as young women. How did these messages affect their relationships—both with themselves and others? How do they connect their Catholic faith with their sexuality? Are they empowered? Do they feel marginalized as young women in the Church? As this chapter has demonstrated, each young woman responded in a unique way to my questions, many of which I was unable to fully depict in these brief snapshots. I found that there were a variety of intersections between secular influences such as the media and literature, societal pressures placed upon women and girls in the physical and sexual realms, and religious teachings and messages about purity, chastity, virginity, and sex. In other words, it’s complicated.
I feel incredibly honored and privileged to have been able to listen to some of the most intimate, confusing, and empowering moments in these young women’s lives. Though each young woman’s story took different directions due to the open-ended nature of the interviews, there did emerge some themes shared by multiple women. In the next chapter I will explore these themes, and provide some theoretical background for each of these themes drawing on feminist theo-ethical scholarship.
CHAPTER FOUR, PART ONE
BENEATH THE PLAID: EMERGING THEMES
IN NARRATIVES OF CATHOLIC FEMALE SEXUALITY

“What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life? The world would split open.”
—Muriel Rukeyser, “Kathe Kollwitz”

Through eight in-depth, open-ended interviews, Catholic young women revealed to me some particular truths about their lives. These truths have the power to inform the field of Catholic sexual ethics, especially when placed into conversation with feminist theory and feminist liberation theologies. Indeed, they have the power to split the world of Catholic moral theology open, if the Church has the courage enough to be a listening Church. In the same way that dioceses all across the United States collected information about what Catholic families need from the Church in preparation for the 2015 Synod on the Family, so too can steps be on the part of Church leaders and educators to listen to the concerns of Catholic youth regarding sexual education in order to re-imagine life-giving pedagogies.

As I noted in the previous chapters, these particular insights cannot be said to be those of all Catholic young women in the United States; it is irresponsible to make sweeping


generalizations about experiences, especially experiences as intimate as sexual ones. However, there are some commonalities in the interviews that may point to greater trends in the way that sexual pedagogies for Catholic young women are received within the Church today. This chapter—divided into two parts—will serve to illuminate these emerging themes by engaging them with secular theories and feminist liberation theologies.

In reviewing the interview transcripts, four prevailing themes become apparent to me in reflecting upon their narratives, which I further divided into eight distinct subthemes. The first two themes are discussed and analyzed in part one of this chapter, and the final two themes in part two. The four overarching themes are: 1) On Being a Woman in the Church; 2) Gender and Sexual Standards for Catholic Young Women; 3) Catholic Sexual Pedagogies; and 4) Faith and Sexuality: The Big “Disconnect.” The first primary theme pertains to the way that the collaborators understand themselves as young women in the Church, which has resulted in feelings of alienation and abandonment. Within this understanding is a strong awareness of the limited options for leadership provided by the Church, on account of their prescribed gender roles. The second theme refers to the gender and sexual expectations for Catholic young women that contribute to the archetype of the “good Catholic girl.” Some of these standards include the pressure to be modest, often exemplified in parochial school dress codes, and the emphasis on being sexually pure like the Madonna, while carefully avoiding the model of the “whore.” The third theme centers around religious abstinence-only sexual education, specifically its effects on the way Catholic young women understand sexual activity, and how it presents “sex-positive” or “sex-negative” lessons for young people. Finally, the fourth theme addresses the “disconnect” that many of the young women feel between their faith and their sexuality. This lack of connection has led to them turning to the media for their sexual education, particularly reality TV
shows, movies, and the Internet. Under this section I also identify the silence about sexual violence in Catholic sexual education, and the effects of this silence on the collaborators who experienced sexual assault.

As I note in Chapter One, the young women who participated in this study were between the ages of 18-25 and were raised in a Catholic context (either parish, school or home- preferably all three). Participants were required to be living in or within fifteen miles of the city of Chicago, IL or have lived within these parameters in the past five years. Though ethnic/racial diversity was not intentionally sought, the participants I recruited represent a wide range of backgrounds: Mexican, Puerto-Rican, Filipino, Polish, German, and Italian. Many of the young women were first generation Americans.³ Due to the recruitment having taken place at Loyola University Chicago, a school that draws students from across the country, participants also represented a wide range of geographic locations including Brooklyn, New York; Los Angeles, California; St. Louis, Missouri; and Detroit, Michigan. All of the young women identified as heterosexual, although in almost all of the interviews the young women mentioned the experiences of those they know who identify as queer Catholics, and their personal opinion of the Church’s position on homosexuality. All of these data points can and should be analyzed in depth, but for the purpose of this study I narrowed the content of the interviews down to four specific themes that surfaced around gender and sexuality.

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³ The young women who were first generation Americans discussed the close connection between their ethnicity and their Catholicism, especially within their homes. For example, instead of only identifying themselves as Catholic, Camille identified herself as Filipina Catholic and Grace identified herself as Polish Catholic.
4.1.1. Re-Introducing the Eight Collaborators for this Study

4.1.1.1. Collaborator № 1

Jade is a 25-year-old Catholic young woman who identifies as “white,” born and raised in the northern suburbs of Chicago. In her interview, she spoke about the role that the concept of virginity played in the formation of her sexuality, and referenced Mary as a spiritual mother during her adolescent years. Jade disclosed that she was assaulted when she was in high school, and described the strong effect that the media played in the processing of the assault and her sexual development in general.

4.1.1.2. Collaborator № 2

Camille is a 19-year-old Filipina Catholic from San Francisco, CA. From a young age, Camille was very involved in her home parish, and expressed a desire to be a priest. She mentioned several incidents in her middle school and early high school years when she and her friends lacked important information about sex and sexual health. However, Camille took a Human Sexuality class her senior year of high school that allowed her to explore the intersection of her faith and her sexuality.

4.1.1.3. Collaborator № 3

Grace is a 21-year-old Polish Catholic young woman raised in a suburb of Chicago, IL. Grace learned many lessons about gender norms and purity standards from her Polish Catholic family and from Polish school. Grace confided that she experienced sexual violence in her high school relationship, and that she had trouble understanding herself as a woman of faith in the eyes of the Church as a result. Later in college Grace began to understand her faith in the context of social justice, and realized that to be a woman of faith is to work for justice in the world.
4.1.1.4. Collaborator № 4

Avery is a 19-year-old Mexican American young woman from a suburb of Detroit, MI. Avery was very active in the church choir from elementary school to the present, and described her spirituality in relationship to music and to the community that she formed at her parish. Avery felt very uncomfortable talking with adults about sex or sexuality as a girl, and so mostly discussed these issues with friends. She expressed a lot of hope for the future of the Church, and suggested that Catholic sexual education teach young women that “your body is a temple,” rather than only emphasize purity.

4.1.1.5. Collaborator № 5

Joan is a 23-year-old Puerto Rican and Italian Catholic young woman from Brooklyn, NY. She went to college in Boston and then joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, where she got to know many different types of people who integrated their feminist beliefs with their Catholic faith. Throughout the interview, Joan struggled to understand why the Catholic adults in her life never presented the message that God is “sex-positive,” and that sex can be good and holy.

4.1.1.6. Collaborator № 6

Alexandra is a 20-year-old Mexican American young woman from Los Angeles, CA. She spoke very honestly about her strong faith and her struggles with understanding the Church’s teachings on pre-marital sex and birth control. Although she knew that it was against official Church teaching, Alexandra learned about birth control and how to have safe sex from her parents and from the teachers at her all-girls Catholic high school.

4.1.1.7. Collaborator № 7

Sarah is a 19-year-old German and Polish Catholic young woman, born and raised in the Chicago suburbs. Sarah told me that she has experienced “slut-shaming” since middle school,
and that it is a word that stigmatizes women and girls. She expressed frustration at the strong emphasis on virginity in her Catholic sexual education, and told me that she hopes that people can start talking about the quality of sexual relationships rather than just the quantity of them.

4.1.1.8. Collaborator № 8

Anastasia is a 20-year-old Caucasian young woman from a suburb of St. Louis, MO. As a girl, she always felt the expectation look nice, to be polite, and to act like “a little princess.” In high school, Anastasia was a part of the chastity team and gave presentations to younger students about how to live a chaste life. Now that she is in college, Anastasia doesn’t feel comfortable being a part of the chastity team because she can’t fully get behind the message anymore- she sees sexual morality as having many gray areas and can no longer portray issues of sexuality as black and white.

4.1.2. Emerging Themes, Part One

4.1.2.1. Theme 1: “I felt abandoned”:

On Being a Young Woman in the Church

Statistically, it is not uncommon for adolescents in the United States to question or stray from their respective religious traditions; adolescence has been identified by sociologists of religion as the “most religiously unstable period of the life course.”⁴ According to a 2007 U.S. religious landscape study done by the Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life, about 80% of those who were raised Catholic and left the faith reported doing so before the age of 24 and about 20% of those who left did so between the ages of 24-35.⁵ These findings show that the

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three most common reasons why Catholics who are currently religiously unaffiliated chose to leave are 1) they “just gradually drifted away from their religion”; 2) their “spiritual needs were not being met”; and 3) they “stopped believing in the religion’s teachings.” Though all of the women interviewed for this project still presently identify as Catholic, many of their concerns are in line with these three reasons why many young Catholics in the United States choose to leave the faith.

Camille described her feelings of exclusion as “not fitting in to my religion” because she thought so differently than certain official Church teachings, particularly those surrounding sexuality. For example, she described the Church as providing certain rules for what she should say and how she should act as a Catholic woman (saying “Our Father” during mass, and waiting to have sex until she was married- to name only a few) to which she commented, “sometimes I just don’t do it because I don’t agree with it.” When I asked her why she didn't agree with saying the “Our Father,” she told me that it was because she learned that God “actually has no gender.” This remark coincides with the third reason given by former-Catholics in the U.S. Religious Landscape Study: participants often stop believing in the Church’s teachings or practices when they reach young adulthood.

Others, like Grace and Anastasia, described “drifting away” from their faith during high school and college, partly due to the influence of peers. Not all of the feelings about religious disillusionment were on the individual level, however. Jade, a Caucasian masters student from the northern suburbs of Chicago, noticed in hindsight that parishioners at her home parish didn’t seem to really believe in the Church’s teachings either. She remarked: “They were a part of the

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6 Pew Research Center, “Faith in Flux.”

7 Camille [pseud]. Interviewed by author, March 26, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
Church but it was like the Church was so out of touch that it was almost like disconnected.”
Perhaps their spiritual needs were not being met, or they had just “gradually drifted away” from Catholicism while still identifying with the community in a cultural sense.

Sociologists of religion Christian Smith, Kyle Longest, Jonathan Hill and Kari Christoffersen tracked a sample of Catholic youth from 2002-2008, spanning the ages of 13-23, and presented the results in their book *Young Catholic America.* Among the 41 youth with which they held qualitative interviews, 29 had left Catholicism altogether, or had become estranged from the Church by the time they reached their third interview, five years later. According to the researchers, some of the observable factors that may have contributed to these emerging adults becoming estranged from the Church include disagreement with the Church’s teachings surrounding premarital sex, the lack of compelling Church programs for emerging adults, and the little apparent effect of Catholic education, all of which will be discussed later in this chapter. Among what they name the “lapsed majority” of emerging adults they interviewed, the researchers observed that while there was a general lack of outrage or bitterness toward the Church (even when they disagreed with it), a few were “mildly disgusted” with “what they see as a patriarchal stance of the Church on women in leadership or with the Church’s views on homosexuality.” In speaking with the women for this project, I too noticed a general lack of hostility towards the Church (despite disagreement with its teachings), yet there exists a

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9 Christian Smith et al., *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out Of, and Gone From the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

10 Smith et al., *Young Catholic America*, 89.

11 Smith et al., 113.
particular gender-dimension that shapes their concerns about being a member of the Catholic Church, and that contributes to some of their feelings of alienation.

For many of the young women I spoke with, their role as young women in the Church is complicated by feelings of abandonment, limited leadership positions and the sense that the Church is silencing them. Joan’s decision to not go to Church anymore when she started college was in part due to the feeling that the Church had abandoned her—and as she noted, “you’re unwelcome.” Learning about feminism in college and how feminists have criticized religion for its patriarchal roots caused Joan to realize her own exclusion from the institution, and so she made the decision to no longer attend mass. “I don’t think I ever forgot about God,” she said, “but I couldn’t go to church anymore.” Alexandra commented on the way she felt that the Church was silencing her as a woman, noting that she “never really felt empowered in the Church as a woman,” but instead just “shushed.”

Camille identified the difficulty of being a woman in the Church when women’s leadership is so often discounted. She reflected:

I definitely think the church probably needs a wakeup call and needs to be more modern. Who were the leaders at the time [the Church was established]? Men. What about a female’s opinion? Doesn’t that matter too? I struggle with it still.

Joan, Alexandra and Camille all described their exclusion as a form of erasure and silencing that had very real consequences to their sense of belonging and value within the institutional Church.

For the eight young women with whom I spoke, there is a particular type of exclusion from the Church on the basis of gender. The predominant gender issues that may contribute to these feelings of exclusion and abandonment that I will focus on in this section are the limited

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13 Alexandra [pseud.]. Interviewed by author, April 2, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
leadership positions for women in the Church, which is partially a result of the exclusion of women from the priesthood.

4.1.2.1.1. The “Stained-Glass Ceiling”: Limited Leadership Positions for Women in the Church

As they were growing up Catholic, several of the young women told me of their desire to take on a leadership role in their parish from a young age. Camille was involved in her parish by being one of the first female ushers, Grace was one of the only female altar servers at her parish, and Avery was very active in the choir. Many of the young women were involved in parish youth groups. However, as they grew older, they got the sense that their presence wasn’t encouraged or valued, and some lost interest in the leadership positions. When Grace was an altar server she noticed that she was one of the only girls who served, and often wondered why people didn’t want her to serve as much as the boys.\(^{14}\) She remembered thinking, “I know I’m one of the only girls. Like, whatever. I’m not gonna be sad because that’s what the Church does, you know?”\(^{15}\) What the Church “does,” in this case, is knowingly or unknowingly discouraging girls from taking on these leadership positions within the liturgy. There was a sense of resignation in Grace’s story, and she told me that when she became an older teenager, she decided that she didn’t want to serve anymore. She recounted,

I didn’t feel like I was called to do that anymore because the Church, in a way, pushed me away from it. It didn’t encourage it. It wasn’t motivating me anymore [by telling me] “Hey, you are an important asset to this parish, and we want you to stay.”

\(^{14}\) In 1994, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments pronounced that bishops could permit females to be altar servers in their diocese, due to a reinterpretation of canon 230. See Mary Kathleen Cahill, “Why the Church Needs Girl Altar Servers,” USCatholic.org, December 2014. Cahill notes that this pronouncement was a permission not a prescription for bishops.

\(^{15}\) Grace [pseud.]. Interviewed by author, October 7, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
Perhaps Grace might have felt differently if there were programs or initiatives in place that ensured that as a young woman, she knew that she was a valuable member of the community with gifts and talents to contribute to the life of the Church.

Joan, one of the young women who expressed a desire to become a priest, echoed Grace’s sense of resignation when she described the limited positions that women have in the church hierarchy. She told me,

There are all these things you cannot do because you are a woman … and I had known that for a long time. You have no say in the Church hierarchy. You hear all these places that you are not allowed to be because of your gender.

Particularly for these two young women, there was a point in their childhood when they realized that they either weren’t encouraged to occupy the same leadership roles as men or boys, or were excluded from them altogether. This exclusion has contributed to a sense that women and girls are “second-class citizens” in an institution that claims to value their presence, while at the same time it discourages women and girls from having any sort of authoritative role in the hierarchy or even in the parish itself, on the basis of gender. Feminist theologians have coined the term “stained-glass ceiling” to refer to the very real limitation that women have in trying to take on leadership roles in various religious institutions—this stained-glass is perhaps the thickest and most formally reinforced in the Catholic hierarchical structure.

When Camille served as an usher with her dad and her sister, she thought it was “weird” because she never saw any other women or girls serving in the same role. She told me that even as a young girl, she felt the urge to break the stereotype that women and girls couldn’t become involved in roles traditionally held by men or boys. She remarked,

[In my parish,] I saw that the Catholic women didn’t have any roles or responsibilities. Besides little things like making sure your children hush during mass. And I didn’t see
anyone active. I definitely broke that [stereotype] a little bit ‘cause I was like, “I want to be active in the Church. Why are guys always doing it, and why can’t girls do it?”

Camille told me that she always questioned why she couldn’t do certain things in the Church—excluding become a priest, and even asked her mom, “Why aren’t I a boy?” Camille and Jade both described the two different options that they saw as available for Catholic women when they were growing up: you could either be a mother or you could be a nun if you wanted to play an active role in the Church. They each talked about how this was very limiting to them as girls, and Jade speculated that this limitation is due to “a lack of communication about women” in general in the Church.

Catholic feminist theologians and ethicists have long discussed the impact that the patriarchal, androcentric hierarchy may have on the spiritual, psychological and moral development of women and girls.\textsuperscript{16} Within parish life in particular, Catholic feminist Mary Jo Weaver reflects that although the American Catholic church has always counted on women to maintain the activity of a parish, “pastoral concern is often either oblivious to women’s problems or hostile to women’s desire for empowerment within the Church.”\textsuperscript{17} This lack of attention and/or hostility puts women in a position where they are simultaneously “revered” for their role as helpers in the parish and actively discriminated against, a form of systematic oppression known as benevolent or “romantic” sexism.


\textsuperscript{17} Mary Jo Weaver, \textit{New Catholic Women: A Contemporary Challenge to Traditional Religious Authority} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 50.
According to a 1980 study published by the LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious) and CARA (Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate), women comprise the vast majority of paid and un-paid non-clerical roles in the parish (around 80% of lay ecclesial ministers are female and 52% of parish staff are female), serving as catechists, secretaries, housekeepers, fundraisers, and choral singers, to name only a few. The key distinction here is that the roles that women play in the parish—while substantial and crucial for the healthy development of the Church—are supportive and not dominant roles. In other words, though women are often the primary legs on which parish life (and the hierarchy) stand, they are denied the ability to hold any kind of leadership role that involves juridical power and decision-making within the Church.

The simultaneous “reverence” for women and discrimination against them is a direct result of the Catholic teaching of gender complementarity, Weaver states. As I discuss in Chapter Two, the ideology of gender complementarity assigns particular natures to men and women based on their sexual differences that translate into different roles in society and in the Church. Thus, if women are “gifted” with a greater propensity for nurturing and “self-gift,” as Pope John Paul II declared, it is natural and even divinely ordained that there exists a division of labor within the parish that assigns women to maternal and supporting positions, or “child/church/kitchen” jobs.

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19 Weaver, *New Catholic Women*, 51.

20 Weaver, 65.
The narratives told by the participants of this study about the kinds of roles they are encouraged or permitted to occupy demonstrate the fact that women in the Church consistently encounter benevolent or romantic sexism through the ideology of gender complementarity, which reinforces gender role oppression while claiming to honor women for their “innate” purity, sensitivity, and altruism. Jade reflected upon the gender-discrimination that women experience in the Church in our interview, lamenting, “I think the painful part about it is that women run the Church. Women have so much power in the Church and yet they’re treated like servants in a lot of ways.” Even though she presently identifies as Catholic, it is interesting to note that she still distanced herself from her Catholicism by referring to Catholic women as “they” instead of “we.” In this statement Jade is highlighting the fact that although women hold the majority of paid positions in the Church, they are still barred from the positions that hold the most institutional decision-making power.

4.1.2.1.2. Pink Smoke and Childhood Dreams: Girls’ Desire to be Priests

Out of the eight women I interviewed for this project, two mentioned that they had the desire to be a priest when they were little, and four discussed how the exclusion of women from the priesthood has affected the way that they see themselves as women in the Church. From childhood Joan wanted to be a priest, and invited her friends over to “play mass,” using cheerios as substitute Eucharist wafers. When someone told her “You can’t be a priest because you’re a girl,” she replied, “I’ll be a deacon then.”21 Due to the realization that she couldn’t fulfill either

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21 Theologian Phyllis Zagano’s work presents historical and biblical exegesis to support the Catholic Church’s ability to ordain women to the diaconate. In August of 2016 Pope Francis created a commission to study the possibility of allowing women to serve as deacons in the Catholic Church.
of these desires because of her sex, Joan resigned herself to the fact that she could “never take an institutionalized role” in Catholicism. She recounted how she felt about this exclusion:

I knew that the Catholic Church thought there was something wrong with me and that if I felt a calling to be a priest the closest I could get would be a nun. Like if I felt that calling, an accident of fertilization is why I couldn’t do it.\(^\text{22}\)

Unfortunately, Joan’s understanding of the doctrinal teaching barring women from the priesthood is directly tied up with her own perceived value as a woman—that women have “something wrong with them” or might be biological accidents.

Although she never expressed a desire to be a priest, Alexandra also commented on the fact that the “highest” a woman can go in the hierarchy of the Church is by making a commitment to the religious life. She critiqued,

Women can’t be priests and the highest a woman could get is a nun. But at the same time, even nuns are taken advantage of. I guess they think that a woman can’t handle the response of God in their life as much as a man could.

According to canon law, women religious are considered to be members of the laity and so technically no “higher” than another layperson; however, one of the overall points that Alexandra made concerns the lack of options she perceives women to have if they wish to devote their lives to religious life or service in the Church.

Camille also expressed a desire to be a priest when she was little, “playing Eucharist” with her sister using potato chips. She asked her mother and her teacher, Sr. Alba, why girls weren’t allowed to become priests, and they responded with answers about “the way things are” in the Church. When she asked Sr. Alba if there would ever come a time when women would be allowed to become priests she replied, “I don’t know Camille, but I feel like you would be able

\(^\text{22}\) Whether Joan is aware of this or not, here she is referencing Thomas Aquinas, who stated that women were “defective males” due to an accident in the fertilization process. See \textit{ST} I, q. 92, art. 1.
to make some changes, if anything.” Now, as a college student, Camille is still upset about the inequality present in the Church, especially in regards to the priesthood. She admitted,

I feel really upset about the whole females can’t be priests thing. I just think that’s not fair. I’m a minority in the sense that I’m Filipina and I’m a person of color. And I also correlate that with being a minority [by] being female. You think that the church would be the one place where there’s an equal playing field!

Weaver agrees with this sentiment that there is incongruity between what the Church teaches about equality and how women are treated in the Church, especially in light of the teachings put forth by the Second Vatican Council about social justice. She concludes, “Catholics have an impressive history of social justice advocacy and, at the same time, a depressive history of discrimination against women.”

Sarah described the impact that an all-male clergy may have on girls when she returned to her own experiences of trying to relate to the priests that she knew. She noted,

People look up to their clergy and their priests as people to connect with. I feel like priests act like a middle-man between God and the people. So if a woman can’t be in that position, then I think it kind of just unconsciously sticks. I think that because women can’t be in that sort of position of power that it puts it in people’s mind that [women] are maybe not as powerful or not as equal to [men].

Sarah referred to messages that “unconsciously stick” frequently throughout her interview, this one being that if women can’t be seen as acting in persona Christi by serving as priests, the underlying message given to members of the Church is that women are inherently not as equal or as “fit” to occupy this sacred role as men. Grace commented on what this message means for her as a Catholic woman by questioning, “What makes me different as a woman that I am not smart enough or not more well-versed in religion than a man who is studying to be a priest?”

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23 Weaver, New Catholic Women, 49.

questions reflect the sentiment felt by many of the young women with whom I spoke: despite the insistence by the magisterium that women are equal and valued (through their unique feminine genius), young women and girls experience a sense of personal devaluation and communal discrimination in the Church on the basis of gender, especially when attempting to serve in leadership roles. The current exclusion of women from the priesthood serves as a prime example of this discrimination.\footnote{25}

Catholic women who believe that women’s ordination is imperative to the recognition of women’s dignity and equality in the image and likeness of God have been advocating for “pink smoke in the Vatican” for decades.\footnote{26} An alternative to white smoke, the signal that a new pope has been chosen, pink smoke symbolizes to the women’s ordination movement a female pope (albeit gender stereotypical in color). Although the feminist case for women’s ordination is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I will provide a few examples of the ways in which feminist theologians and ecclesiologists view the subject as necessary for the flourishing of women in the Church.\footnote{27}

\footnote{25} Some Catholic women do not share this view of discrimination, particularly those who consider themselves “New Feminists”- women who adhere to the ideology of gender complementarity put forth by Pope John Paul II.

\footnote{26} In 2011, a documentary entitled *Pink Smoke Over the Vatican* was released that used the term “pink smoke” to refer to a female pope. The documentary concerns the illicit ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church.

In her controversial book *Woman at the Altar: The Ordination of Women in the Roman Catholic Church*, former nun and theologian Lavinia Byrne argues that the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on the universal call to holiness of *all* the baptized (expressed in the document *Lumen Gentium*, Ch. 5 Nos. 39-42) brings forth a theology that includes women’s ordination to the priesthood.\(^{28}\) Additionally, statements in *Gaudium et Spes* affirming the human rights and dignity inherent to all and the corresponding declaration that racial and gender discrimination is against the will of God pave the way for a new understanding of women’s participation and leadership in the Church and society, Byrne claims.\(^{29}\) Unfortunately, many women like Byrne who were hopeful for more inclusivity in the post-conciliar Church, especially in regards to the all-male priesthood, found that “the justice agenda [of the Council] hinted at words like ‘equity’ [but] would actually fail women.”\(^{30}\) Nevertheless, Byrne claims that by using tradition as a source (which includes uncovering suppressed stories about women leaders in early Christianity), women are able to make the case for ordination to the priesthood and in doing so assert their rightful visibility and power within the Church. The very *catholicity* of the Church is at stake in the issue of women being granted entry into the priesthood, she asserts—the universal

\(^{28}\) Lavinia Byrne, *Woman at the Altar: The Ordination of Women in the Roman Catholic Church*, 1st ed. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 8. This book was highly controversial when it was published in the United States; the local bishop ordered the Liturgical Press of St. John’s Abbey in Minnesota to destroy all copies of the book due to its support of the ordination of women, among other things. The Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith later demanded that Byrne make a public statement affirming the Church’s opposition to the ordination of women and she refused, thus beginning a journey that would end in her resignation from her religious order. See “A Nun on the Run from Rome,” *BBC*, January 12, 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/600437.stm.

\(^{29}\) Byrne, *Woman at the Altar*, 29.

\(^{30}\) Byrne, 30.
call to holiness includes everyone. She believes that women at the altar would make a profound impact on the life of the Church in general and women in particular: “A woman who comes to the altar as priest is a woman who moves from comparative invisibility to a place where the glory of Christ is recognized in her,” she reflects.

In her work *Discipleship of Equals: Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation*, feminist theologian and biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza discusses feminist struggles in the Catholic Church and in Catholic theology, including that of women’s ordination to the priesthood. Departing from the primary arguments made by many feminist theologians about concrete steps towards inclusion and visibility in the church, Schüssler Fiorenza claims that women should not begin by concentrating on the priesthood or the diaconate—positions she terms the “lowest rung on the hierarchical ladder.” In line with the Second Vatican Council’s emphasis on ecclesiastical ministry being entrusted to all the faithful, she urges women to insist that “as baptized and confirmed members of the church they are entitled to hold responsible leading positions” which need not include ordination. In this way, the Church can become the true ecclesial community of equals that Vatican II envisioned, dismantling the current “clerical, celibate, and hierarchal form of the Catholic priesthood. A woman entering into a role in which the dualism of giver/receiver, teacher/learner, active/passive, (read: ordained/laity) still exists does not contribute to the flourishing of women and men in the Church, she concludes.

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31 Byrne, 9.

32 Byrne, 1.


34 Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*, 35.

35 Schüssler Fiorenza, 89.
In her interview, Jade made a similar statement about women priests, as she was reflecting upon what it would mean for women to hold this office as it currently exists. She commented,

In the New York Times, there were pictures of a bunch of women in the full [priest] outfits and they just looked like old, white men. They looked exactly like priests and it was a jarring feeling to me because I felt like, “Well this isn’t right. Are women just going to step into the shoes of what’s been the male patriarchal role in the Church?”

For young women like Jade, a new ekklesia is necessary in which women can claim their authority and power without replicating the patriarchal structures that created their oppression in the first place.

4.1.2.1.3. From Abandonment to Inclusion: Young Women as Participants in the Church

Statistically, it is not uncommon for Catholic emerging adults in the U.S. to become estranged from their faith due to disagreement with the Church’s teachings, the feeling that their spiritual needs are not being met, or gradual drifting away from the Church towards other social groups. However, Joan’s feelings of abandonment and Alexandra’s feelings of being silenced by the Church represent a particular gender-dimension to this trend that can be linked to the discouragement women and girls feel when they seek to hold certain leadership positions within their religious institutions. The “stained-glass ceiling” that young women encounter within the Church produces a sense of resignation that their presence isn’t valued or encouraged, particularly in discussions about women being excluded from the priesthood.

When they described the lack of leadership positions they could occupy in the Church as women, the collaborators for this study had a very clerical view of Church leadership. Aside from the option to become a member of a women’s religious order, none of the young women mentioned any other positions of leadership a woman could hold, such as a religious education
teacher, director of religious education (DRE), social justice activist, or theologian. Although I know they are aware of these roles due to their stories about female youth ministers, teachers, and theology professors, it is significant that none of the young women understood these roles as “leadership” positions in the Church, and still acknowledged their feelings of exclusion and invisibility in the Church structure on the basis of their sex. Perhaps this is due to the fact that ordination carries with it great juridical power in the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, and women and girls are prohibited from taking part in that form of leadership. For these young women, leadership was primarily understood as clerical power, which is incongruent with the Second Vatican Council’s message about the universal call to holiness. The (overwhelmingly female) laity who serve as ministers and educators within the parish are not subordinate to or supportive of the priest, but are divinely instituted ecclesial ministers who are responsible for the formation of others through a unique form of leadership.

In their interviews, the young women I spoke with were negatively impacted by a religious tradition that teaches one thing yet practices another; Gaudium et Spes declares that “in Christ and in the Church [there is] no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or sex,” yet women are still barred from “sacramental, doctrinal, and governing power” based on their sex, seen specifically in the priesthood.\(^36\) In order to reconcile this cognitive dissonance, Joan separated her thoughts about what she thinks God wants from how the institutional Church functions. She reflected,


\(^37\) Schüssler Fiorenza, Discipleship of Equals, 239.
At the end of the day I believe that God will love me whether or not I go to Church. If the institution is gonna make me feel bad about myself or make me feel sad about myself, [then] I don’t need it. And I don’t think God would want that.

Instead of turning a blind eye to young women who feel alienated, the Church has an opportunity to welcome and include them- women like Joan and Alexandra merely want to be affirmed and treated as *imago dei*, given the ability to fulfill their vocations so that the divine presence of Christ can be experienced through them, as women.

4.1.2.2. Theme 2: “I’m Catholic. I’m a Good Girl”:

Gender and Sexual Standards for Catholic Young Women

Young women’s understandings of their gender-identity and sexuality go hand in hand, influenced by their cultural and religious upbringings which include messages that they receive from parents, teachers, religious leaders, friends, and the media. For the Vatican, proper conduct in sexuality naturally follows from a person’s biological sex, and sex and gender are interchangeable, as I explained in Chapter Two. In other words, there are clear moral norms about gender and sexuality that magisterial teaching correlates directly with a person’s biological sex. The gender messages the collaborators for this project received about being a woman in the Church are fraught with double standards, such the expectation to dress or act more modestly than men and be responsible for both their own sexual restraint *and* that of their male counterparts, which will be demonstrated in this section. These double standards contribute to a nearly impossible expectation of sexuality for Catholic women and girls.

Within the interviews, a common theme in regards to gender expectation came in the form of dress code rules, often imposed by Catholic schools, and instructions about modesty from teachers and parents. As girls, these women were taught to dress and act a certain way in order to be considered a “good Catholic girl.” One of the most prominent standards of sexuality
that I observed in the interviews was the virgin/whore dichotomy articulated by the young women, which I referred to as the Madonna/Whore Myth in Chapter Two. In this way, a girl can only be considered a “good Catholic girl” by remaining a virgin until marriage and upholding gendered purity standards taught by youth ministers, teachers, and priests.

As I explained in Chapter Two, the Madonna/Whore myth is the dichotomous sexual paradigm for women prevalent in the rhetoric of both Western culture and Christian tradition that provides only two options for sexual expression: a woman can either be like the Madonna (“pure” in dress, sexual activity and behavior, submissive, passive, spiritual) or the Whore (“impure” in dress, sexual activity and behavior, dominant, temptress, active, carnal). Although the role of mother seems to present a third option, feminist theologians such as Doris Kieser note that mothers are covertly asexualized due to the theology of gender complementarity—a mother’s sexuality is defined only in relation to reproduction and so her sexual desire is discreetly “tucked away.”38 The danger of the dual paradigm for female sexual expression is that it views sexual purity as a state rather than a virtue to consistently practice—once a woman has “fallen” from the category of “virgin” she is automatically categorized as the whore (whether or not any sexual activity took place). Although this paradigm is not founded in official Roman Catholic teaching, it is expressed explicitly and implicitly in Christian rhetoric, one example being in the Catholic sexual education manuals I reviewed in Chapter Two. Unprovoked, many of the young women I spoke with mentioned this dichotomy. As Jade put it, “Either you’re a good girl or you’re a bad girl”- there’s no in-between. She went on to express her own feelings about managing both of these labels in her own life:

[As a teen], I categorized myself as virgin and the whore, both at the same time. You know it was a very confusing guilt/shame kind of complex. Your entire worth is dependent on your sexual status.

The young women like Jade who mentioned this dichotomy expressed frustration and confusion about navigating this standard throughout their adolescent years while remaining Catholic, especially since the Church was telling them something very different from what their friends talked about or how the media portrayed sex. In this section I will first address the modesty messages that the young women received in the form of dress code rules, and then discuss the ways in which this Madonna/Whore myth manifested itself through various gender and sexuality expectations for the young women I with whom I spoke. I will also provide feminist theological and ethical commentary on these messages.

4.1.2.2.1. “My Short Skirt”: Modesty Messages and Double Standards for Girls

For those who went to a Catholic grade school or high school, some of the first messages many of the young women received about what it means to be a Catholic girl came in the form of dress code requirements, which were subtly or not so subtly laced with messages about modesty and purity. For Alexandra, Joan, Camille and Avery, the dress code for girls in their Catholic grade school taught them lessons about what girls “shouldn’t do” if they wanted to be respectable, holy, and “good”—not wear their skirts too short or sit with their legs spread open, for example. Alexandra described her strict dress code in grade school as “mostly for the girls,” since it seemed as though the girls were always the ones who “had to be nitpicking at themselves,” compared to the boys who did not. Wearing skirts along with matching socks and hairpieces reinforced gender norms for girls in a way that differentiated them from the boys in their classes from a young age.
When I asked what it meant to be a Catholic girl at that time in their lives, the women spoke of their uniforms as indicative of their gender-identity. Joan remarked that she “definitely felt more like a girl” because she was required to wear all of the matching bows and accessories if she wanted to put her hair up; she felt more like a girl when she wore skirts, even though she told me that she preferred to wear shorts. Camille noted,

I think to be a girl- a Catholic girl, the uniform played such a big part in it. I remember the skirt had to be a certain way, it had to be a certain length. You had to wear certain socks. While guys kinda just got to do whatever they wanted, which was super unfair.

Not only did the skirts and matching accessories reinforce their “femininity” over and against the boys, but the rules were enforced more strictly- a double standard that the women noticed when it came to dress-code regulation.

In grade schools and high schools across the country there have been many recent controversies regarding dress codes and the ways in which students believe that these rules are disproportionately targeting female students with curvy, developed body types. In Evanston, IL, controversy arose when a middle school banned leggings for being too tight- only allowing them when a long shirt or dress covered a girl’s bottom. Parents and students who were upset with this policy claimed that there is inconsistency in the enforcement of this rule, as some girls are “dress-coded” more than others, “perhaps because they are more physically developed.”39 Here, it is clear that the “problem” is not just in the display or exposure of female bodies, but in the fact that some female bodies represent sexuality and fertility more than others (read: carnality and danger), and so need to be controlled in order to uphold the patriarchal status quo.

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Similarly, a Catholic high school in Chicago was recently criticized for their prom dress policy, which some argued contributed to body-shaming, specifically fat-shaming, since the same dress can be considered appropriate on one girl and not on another. The school released a statement that they created a stricter prom dress policy in order to promote Catholic, “moral values which include modesty.” One Catholic high school in Connecticut banned skirts all together from their uniform, due to concerns about “rising hemlines” and the risk of girls being objectified and harassed. A common theme in all of these stories is the notion that girls can be a “distraction” based on what they wear, and it is their responsibility to prevent boys from objectifying them. Dress code regulations often sexualize a girl’s body in a way that puts the emphasis on her body alone and the way her body is viewed.

It was only in college that Avery realized that the practice of her teachers forcing a girl to kneel down and putting a pop can next to her knee to see if her skirt hem hung lower than the top of the pop can was “screwed up.” She made the connection between this practice and the societal tendency to label a girl as either a “prude” or a “slut,” depending on the length of her skirt or the height of her neckline. Both the label “prude” and the label “slut” have negative connotations, and so Avery was very cognizant of the fact that as a young woman she couldn’t

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42 According to the dress code regulations at Avery’s Catholic school, a pop can served as a makeshift ruler for determining the appropriate length of a uniform skirt; if a skirt was shorter than the height of a pop can then it was too short to be worn at school.

43 Avery [pseud.]. Interviewed by author, August 27, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
really “win” either way. She also mentioned that the culture in her Catholic high school surrounding proper skirt length contributed to the message given to girls to “keep their legs closed.” Journalist Peggy Orenstein comments on the significance of gendered dress code enforcement in schools:

Boys run afoul of dress codes when they flout authority: “hippies” defying the establishment, “thugs” in saggy pants. For girls, the issue is sex. Enforcing modesty is considered a way both to protect and to contain young women’s sexuality; and they, by association, are charged with controlling young men’s.44

There are underlying reasons behind why dress code is enforced that point to the way that institutions understand women’s sexuality: as something that needs to be controlled by women, for men.

Some of the gender messages the young women received came from their parents, and extended beyond dress to behaviors that are expected from a “good” girl. Grace discussed at length the way that she was expected to dress and act as the only girl in her conservative Polish Catholic family.45 Other than looking nice and dressing nice (in typical “feminine” clothing like dresses and nice shoes) she also mentioned that she learned to be agreeable, not speaking up when she disagreed with someone. She picked up on the ways that she ought to act as a girl by taking note of what was said about other girls who were not dressed appropriately or who were


45 In Grace’s household, her Polish heritage and her Catholic faith were deeply intertwined, and so she attributed the lessons she received about how to be a “traditional Catholic woman” (cooking, cleaning, taking care of the family) to her family’s ethnicity and religion. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center report, Catholics are more likely than other Americans to be immigrants or children of immigrants (about 27% of U.S. Catholic adults were born outside of the U.S.). This affects the influence of ethnic background in the religious education of immigrant children. Michael Lipka, “A Closer Look at Catholic America,” Pew Research Center (blog), September 14, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/09/14/a-closer-look-at-catholic-america/.
disrespectful. Grace narrated a typical conversation that would take place in her household: “I really didn’t like the way she looked. She did not look appealing. She did not look like she should. She should have done this. She should have done that.” Grace admitted that it was judgmental, but told me that it had to do with the environment she grew up in that had a strong emphasis on appearance and first impressions, especially for girls. Part of the lessons she learned about appropriate appearance centered around “covering up.” She mentioned,

> In terms of being a woman, my mom always taught me to be classy. Longer dresses, longer skirts, not these super skimpy outfits. [She said], “Make sure that you are covering your body and not showing off all these different things.”

Her brothers didn’t have these same kinds of expectations about being pleasing or dressing a certain way, a double standard that Grace acknowledged in her interview.

Anastasia listed the ways in which she tried to be “daddy’s perfect little angel” growing up, and how she was taught to learn stereotypical “feminine” attributes to please her parents and her teachers.46 In order to be the “perfect child” and have “perfect behavior,” she was expected to “be polite,” “thank everyone,” and “sit there and look nice” when she was visiting her dad at his restaurant. A similar message about being a “princess” who must be treated right by a prince was sent to her by a youth ministry team called REAP (Retreat, Evangelization, and Prayer team) when she was in middle school. One of the team leaders (a young man) told her youth group that men and boys should be nice to women and girls and “treat them like princesses.” Anastasia reacted positively to this message at the time and thought, “I do want someone to treat me like a princess. I do want someone to have my best interests in mind.” Although this message did not necessarily delineate how she was supposed to act as a girl, it still conveyed ideas about how

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men should relate to women, and what women are naturally called to be (princesses waiting to be rescued by a prince.)

Theologian Cara Anthony critiques the recent Christian discourse about modesty exemplified in the young women’s stories, since it is commonly restricted to only the physical and sexual elements of modesty, “thus becoming a means of control over bodies, especially women’s.”47 She points out that within Thomistic tradition modesty refers to “the proper regulation of human assertiveness,” which includes physical and mental modesty, so that others can exercise their own autonomy and freedom.48 What is missing in current Christian discussions about modesty, Anthony contends, is the acknowledgement that the “male gaze” is an immodesty of thought that reflects the unjust power relationships between men and women, particularly when it comes to sexuality.49 She argues that the Christian emphasis on modesty of dress and body (primarily for women) still teaches women to view themselves as objects of “male perusal,” which erodes a woman’s holistic sense of self just as much as the mainstream media can through ads, songs, or movies that objectify and commodify women’s bodies.50 She states, “Only when the primacy of the male gaze is challenged can women escape the limited choice of either hiding their bodies from men or revealing their bodies to men.”51 In other words, the unequal and incomplete emphasis on physical modesty for women and not men does not get at the root of unjust power relationships between men and women in the Church and in society.

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As I found in the religious sexual education manuals outlined in Chapter Two, there is a heavy emphasis on modesty and chastity for Catholic young women that puts a disproportionate amount of responsibility on women/girls to keep men/boys from being seduced or tempted by lust. In the texts there are instructions for Christian young women to dress and act in ways that encourage “respect” rather than objectification or even harassment. In the pre-Vatican II marriage manuals she studied, feminist theologian and ethicist Susan A. Ross found these types of messages as well; namely, that during courtship, “all attention is focused on [women] restraining male sexuality and preserving the “sacredness” of femininity.”^52 Before marriage, it is the woman’s responsibility to “lead the man away from his physical desires”; after marriage, however, the roles change and the man is responsible for leading the woman away from the realm of the body to the spiritual realm.\(^53\) The young women I spoke with understood these messages primarily through their articulation in dress code regulations and ideas passed on to them by their parents, though they might have also recognized this kind of language in their religious sexual education as well. These messages affirm the belief that women ought to be held to modesty standards in regards to dress, sexual activity, and behavior that are stricter and more socially enforced than men. The messages also reinforce the idea that young women and girls need to be “pleasing” to others by taking on a passive, submissive role in the presence of active masculinity. In the next section, I will further explore the sexual standard of purity that the young women articulated, and how this standard contributes to the prevalence of the Madonna/whore myth.

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4.1.2.2.2. “There’s (Still) Something about Mary”: The Pervasiveness of the Madonna/Whore Myth

Beyond dress code and behavioral expectations, the young women I spoke with recounted the different messages they received about sexual purity growing up, which held virginity as the defining factor of what makes a “good Catholic girl.” These messages about purity and virginity directly contribute to the maintenance and promotion of the virgin/whore dichotomy, also known as the Madonna/whore myth. Alexandra described this dichotomy succinctly: “Women are seen as either very unclean or very pure. There is no in-between.” Many of the young women told me of the pressure that they felt to “be pure” and to remain a virgin if they still wanted to call themselves Catholic. Tied with this pressure is the Catholic teaching that sex before marriage is forbidden, and the implicit idea that “it’s worse for girls than it is for guys” if they have sex before marriage. The Madonna/whore myth relies upon the pressure that women feel (and often impose upon themselves) to be identified as a Madonna, or else she becomes her deviant adversary, the whore; there exists no alternative mode in which a woman is permitted to express her sexuality apart from these two ways.

Joan received a variety of messages about what it means to be sexually pure and chaste as a Catholic girl, which primarily centered upon her behavior with the opposite sex. The lessons she received about being “modest and chaste” prescribed the way that she should interact with men and boys: taking on a passive role by not “bringing them back to her room” or showing romantic interest in them before they initiated anything. Anastasia spoke a lot about chastity in her interview since she was on a chastity team in high school. Through her youth group, she was taught that “chastity is a choice” in the way that a person chooses to dress, treat people and
“carry themselves.” A part of this choice for women and girls is to dress and act with self-restraint, and to view their sexuality as something to guard and put on a pedestal.

Alice Von Hildebrand’s theology on “women as guardians of purity” and “the privilege of being a woman” includes this type of glorified and “romantic” sexual passivity for women. Purity and chastity, while important for both sexes, is a woman’s “special mission” and responsibility due to her biological sex. Other “New Catholic Feminists” (those who follow John Paul II’s ideology of the complementarity of the sexes) also promote this idea that women’s sexuality ought to be protected and treasured (usually by a man), and that women are innately receptive to the active male—this ought to be seen as a divine gift, not a burden. On the other hand, Avery was suspicious of the messages she heard about purity from her friends. The ambiguity surrounding the term “pure” made her very uncomfortable, and she didn’t like that it was primarily associated with female sexuality.

The social status of virginity and being able to call one’s self a virgin was paramount to the participants’ understanding of their sexuality as Catholic women. As Alexandra identified, “virginity is praised in the Catholic world,” particularly as it pertains to women and girls. Sarah

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54 According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, chastity can be defined as “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.” Thus, as a virtue, chastity includes “an apprenticeship in self-mastery which is a training in human freedom.” Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 2337-2339.

55 Other than her article “Women as Guardians of Purity,” which I referenced in Chapter Two, Alice Von Hildebrand is also known for her book *The Privilege of Being a Woman* (Ypsilanti, Mich: Veritas Press, 2002), which highlights the maternal and virginal role of Mary as exemplary of the “feminine gifts” of purity.

spent a lot of time talking about virginity in her interview, since it was simultaneously very
important to her as a girl, and also a source of shame since others assumed that she wasn’t a
virgin. As I summarized in Chapter Three, Sarah critiqued the Church for making sexual
education “all about the virginity question” and teaching girls “how to be modest, how to slow
down, and how to save yourself for one person.” She now thinks that virginity is a “socially
constructed idea” and wonders “why everyone makes such a big deal about it” when they should
be focusing on whether or not the sex is “healthy” and that a sexual partner is being respectful.
Sarah repeatedly questioned the idea that a Catholic woman should be judged by the quantity of
sexual partners she has (which ideally should be only one, according to the Church), instead of
looking at the quality of those relationships.57

Grace discussed the pressure she felt to remain sexually abstinent until marriage, saying,
“I couldn't have sex because … I just couldn’t, I’m Catholic. I’m a good girl.” When she did
have sex in college, Grace told me that she felt like she was being “judged by the Catholic
Church” and by her mother, even though she never felt like she could tell her. She “hated the
idea” of going to confession because she didn’t want to tell the priest that she “did this horrible
thing” and felt as if she was “a horrible person in the Church” because she was no longer a
virgin. This feeling of guilt and shame is complicated by the fact that she did not fully consent to
her first experience of sexual intercourse, which I will discuss later in this chapter. Looking back
at her feelings surrounding her first time, she acknowledged that talking about sexuality and
acting upon it is “taboo” for women and not so much for men. Still, Grace asserted, “In
accordance with the Church, I’m still a woman of God. I’m still in a relationship with God even

57 In Chapter Five I will draw from feminist theologians and ethicists in order to propose some
ethical norms for evaluating the quality of sexual relationships, as opposed to only discussing quantity.
though I guess I am a sinner, in a way.” Grace thought that having sex before marriage made her a sinner in a very grave and possibly damning way in the eyes of the Church, and struggled to assert her identity as a woman of God despite this sexual act.

Many of the young women correlated virginity (or the “loss” of virginity) with whether or not they were a “good person” or a “bad person,” respectively. In other words, their moral identity is almost solely connected to their sexual behavior, specifically whether or not they are virgins. This ideology is evident in Camille’s insistence that she wasn’t a “bad person” because she was no longer a virgin—throughout our conversation it was apparent that she was having a hard time navigating between her perception of what the Church thought of her and what she thought about herself. After she had sex for the first time, Camille admitted that she “definitely felt weird” because she thought, “Wait a second. I’m supposed to be the good Catholic girl.” This was a message that she had internalized from her parish, her school, and her family, though it was never explicitly stated. Now that she is in college, Camille wants to combat this idea that she is somehow a “bad person” because she is sexually active. She stated,

I think [it’s] important to make that distinction that there’s no correlation between virginity and how good of a person you are. As long as it’s healthy and you’re practicing a mentally and physically healthy [sexuality] … I think you’re still a good person.

Sarah echoed this sentiment by claiming that virginity has nothing to do with someone being “good” or “bad”—it is merely a matter of when and how someone experiences their sexuality.

Feminist sexual theologians and ethicists have long noted the precarious nature of the way the Catholic Church talks about female sexuality. From the gendered state of purity that Doris Kieser names “a form of symbolic capital within various Christian communities,” to virginity pledges incorporated into sexual education manuals and programs, young women and girls are strongly encouraged to hold purity and virginity as the primary standards by which they
will be morally judged within Catholic sexual ethics.\textsuperscript{58} Similar to findings related to dress codes, surveys done by social scientists verify this gendered emphasis: in a 1991 sociological study of parent-teen communication about sex, Jaccard and Dittus found that parents are “more likely to discuss the emotional impact of sex, the potential loss of respect, and the virtues of virginity with girls than with boys.”\textsuperscript{59} Despite the good intentions that may be behind some of these lessons, their impact can be extremely damaging to the sexual and socio-emotional growth of young women and girls when virginity is understood as a litmus test for her worth and how others will treat her.

Whether or not the young women I spoke with believed that sex should be “saved” for marriage, or that their virginity defined their worth as a Catholic woman, they expressed feelings of frustration, guilt, and confusion about their moral identity when they strayed beyond the often blurry boundary of virginity. Patricia Beattie Jung’s speculation that the primary messages women and girls receive are about virginity, as “a sign of being sexually unawakened,” were in line with the stories the young women told in their interviews.\textsuperscript{60}

The concept of virginity as a moral status—a determining factor in whether or not someone is a “good person” or “bad person”—contributes to a truncated view of sexual ethics, particularly for women. Christian sexual ethicists such as James Nelson, Margaret Farley, and

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Christine Gudorf have sought to take the emphasis off of “act” or “status-centered” theological frameworks for sexuality in favor of “relation-centered” frameworks.\(^{61}\) Their work coincides with Sarah’s opinion that Church leaders and ministers should be having more discussions about the quality of sex: whether it is nonviolent, consensual, and emotionally and physically healthy.

In Gudorf’s argument for a new theological framework for sexuality, she critiques the traditional Christian framework for sexuality:

> The overall framework [of traditional Christian sexual ethics] still suggests that it is the physical structure of the act or the status of those engaged in the act, rather than the qualitative nature of the relationship in which the act occurs, or the motives emerging from that relationship or lack of it, or the consequences of the act on persons, which determine the morality of the act.\(^{62}\)

The young women I spoke with had different intentions behind their sexual activity (as did their partners), and experienced a variety of consequences as a result of engaging in sexual intercourse—in fact, Camille remarked with surprise that she didn’t feel very different after her first sexual intercourse and didn’t experience any negative consequences after having crossed the taboo “virginity” threshold. In sum, there are more factors at play than virginity when discussing the ethics of sex and sexuality.

Discussions about female purity and virginity within Catholicism inevitably lead to conversations about the archetype of purity and virginity, the Virgin Mary. While all Catholic women and girls are taught to emulate her, her immaculate status as both virgin and mother is an impossible standard for real women to uphold. Avery remarked, “Being Catholic, [you are taught] to love the Virgin Mary, who somehow managed to reproduce and give birth … while

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remaining a virgin.” As I described in Chapter Two, feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Reuther critiques traditional Mariology for elevating Mary to the status of the divine, in turn demonizing the sexual roles of real women.\footnote{Rosemary Radford Ruether, \textit{Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 145.} Many of the young women mentioned the role that the Virgin Mary plays in their spirituality, and the difficulty they experience trying to identify with her, particularly in matters of sexuality.

Grace said that for her, there is a strength that comes from Mary since she is an example of “a faith-filled woman and a strong woman.” However, Grace immediately noted that a Catholic understanding of Mary “always comes with the difficult virgin/whore dichotomy.” Camille reflected on conversations she had with her close friend about whether or not she was a “good person” after having had sex for the first time, and said that the Church correlated “goodness” with the Virgin Mary. Acknowledging that the Virgin Mary is the “idol of how all Catholic women should be,” she admitted, “I know I’m nowhere close to her. I think it’s so unrealistic- it’s like, how are we supposed to model after somebody when we could never be both [virgin and mother.]” Camille didn’t see Mary as a realistic role model for her as a Catholic young woman since she firmly believed that a woman like her could still be considered “morally good” and be sexually active. For Camille, there weren’t any moral exemplars to look towards and follow besides the Virgin Mary for Catholic women.

When I asked Jade what virginity meant to her, she immediately answered that virginity referred to the Virgin Mary. She described the Virgin Mary as “an ideal for women—a pure, sweet, universal mother figure who was nice to everyone.” Since Jade learned about Mary being a virgin (abstaining from sex) \textit{before} she learned about sex, she placed a high value on virginity.
and consequently attributed having sex with not being able to live up to this ideal portrayal of womanhood. “There was a deep equation with sex being bad,” she commented, in contrast to her understanding of the perpetual virginity upheld by the Virgin Mother. Later in college she started to do research on different cultural understandings of Mary, since she wanted to find ways of relating to Mary other than by following her example of virginity. She acknowledged,

A lot of people have a lot of problems with Mary because they don’t feel like they could ever live up to that standard and then this virgin/whore dichotomy which I definitely felt as well … there’s no middle ground and once you’re on the other side there’s no turning back. Once you’re not a virgin, that’s it.

Jade also had very positive experiences that influenced her perspective of Mary when she went to Lourdes with her youth group during high school. Being in Lourdes, she understood Mary as “this all understanding mother who tells you that everything is okay.” By being in the healing baths of Our Lady of Lourdes, she felt as if she was being “washed clean” of her struggles with depression. For Catholic women like Jade, “mother issues” with Mother Mary are complicated, as are many human relationships between mother and daughter.

Theologians and religious historians have named Mary one of the most influential models of what it means to be a woman within Christianity particularly and in major world religions, broadly.\(^{64}\) As the young women I spoke with expressed, emulating Mary proves to be a complex task, since she “symbolizes characteristics that are ether mutually exclusive or a logical stretch.”\(^{65}\) Her paradoxical role as both virgin and mother provide women around the world a


model of purity and holiness, while also highlighting an unattainable standard for their own sexual identities and expressions.\(^{66}\)

Some feminist theologians, such as Latin American feminist Marcella Althaus-Reid, call for a complete dismantling of the ideology of Mary’s perpetual virginity as a model for female sexuality within Christian theology. Althaus-Reid believes that virginity is a damaging spiritual archetype for women’s sexual expression, especially in developing countries, where “poverty and virginity do not fit together in the lives of women.”\(^{67}\) She boldly argues:

> In worshipping Mary women need to go through a spiritual clitoridectomy, in the sense of mutilating their lust, in order to identify with the Virgin, get her approval of their behaviour and never question the social and political order built around such religious ideology.\(^{68}\)

Althaus-Reid cites conditions of violence, economic instability and sexual bondage in Latin America as social and political conditions that dictate a woman’s sexual experience and rob her of her own ability to “discover the divinity of lust” in her life.

Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson provides a historical account of the early Christian concept of virginity as she warns Christians of the problems that arise in uplifting Mary as a model of perpetual virginity for women. Citing the decisions of early Christian women to be virgins in order to escape the social control of men, she notes that male Christian thinkers thus attempted to regulate female virgins by constructing Mary as a “silent, submissive, and obedient”

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\(^{66}\) It is important to note that some feminist theologians praise the paradoxical title of Virgin/Mother, including Tina Beattie and Chung Hyun Kyung. Tina Beattie claims that this juxtaposition “challenges social and linguistic values structured around binary opposites” and points to the miraculous nature of graced reality. Tina Beattie, *God’s Mother, Eve’s Advocate: A Marian Narrative of Women’s Salvation* (London; New York: Continuum, 2002), 87

\(^{67}\) Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 49.

\(^{68}\) Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 49.
model of virginity. By controlling the image of Mary as virgin, early Christian fathers shifted the concept of virginity from being a socially liberating option of the time to a way in which women’s sexuality could be controlled. Thus, she concludes that Christians ought to be critical of the traditional interpretation of Mary as virgin, since in it exists an underlying “fundamental hostility to women’s sexuality.”

The theological construction of Mary’s virginity extends beyond Mary as a religious figure and points to broader understandings of women’s bodies and sexuality in religion and society today. In Elizabeth Morgan’s article, “Mary and Modesty,” she identifies Mary as the embodiment of the Western struggle between modesty and sensuality. She notes,

> We might look to such a figure [inviolate bride, virgin mother] to discover how we in the West have come both to exalt and to fear the potent force of female sexuality/procreativity, as well as to understand our need, shared with other cultures, to cover this power with the mantle of respectability.

In other words, Morgan believes that Mary as a symbol of female sexuality represents the tension apparent in Western culture and patriarchal religions between revering and needing to control the “sexually potent” female body. Thus, Catholic women who seek to imitate and honor Mary are also caught in this tension, and may experience their own bodies as simultaneously put on a pedestal and needing to be controlled by patriarchal structures such as the Catholic Church. These feminist critiques of traditional Mariology and the theological construction of virginity can serve as an affirmation of many of the concerns the young women in this project expressed about looking to Mary as a model for their own sexuality as Catholic women. It is important to note

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that only Jade was able to come into contact with some of these feminist critiques through her research on Mary, which may highlight the distance between traditional Catholic pedagogy and feminist, liberationist reconstructions of theology and ethics.

Some of the young women described the repercussions they would face if they intentionally or unintentionally deviated from the “Madonna” model of sexuality—they were afraid of being labeled a “whore” or a “slut,” a practice commonly known as “slut-shaming.” “Slut-shaming” can been defined as “the practice of maligning women for presumed sexual activity.”

According to a nationally representative 2011 survey done by the American Association of University Women, 46% of girls reported having experienced slut-shaming in middle school and high school, compared to 22% of boys. These experiences not only affected self-esteem, but also education and health: out of those who experienced slut-shaming, 37% of girls did not want to go school and felt sick to their stomach, 22% of girls had trouble studying and 11% of girls stayed home from school as a result of their experience. Sarah reflected on the impact that slut-shaming had on her self-esteem as a young girl, and confided that it still affects her today. She commented,

[Being called a slut throughout my life] was very destructive to my self-esteem. From fifth grade people called me that and it’s not a nice adjective. It’s never been fair to me that none of the guys I’ve ever been with [sexually] have ever been called a slut. […] It kinda sucks that it ruins our reputation just because of that one word, and I feel like people don’t even need to back it up with something. If you call a girl a slut it’s hard to get rid of that word. It just kinda … it sticks.

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Now that she is in college, she admitted that some of her friends make jokes that she is a slut, but that sometimes she can’t tell if they are actually joking or not. Although she admitted that lately she has felt more ashamed of herself for her sexual activity, she said that she felt like she shouldn’t have to feel these feelings of shame about expressing her sexuality in a way that is healthy for her.

Within her parish and her home, Grace received warnings about not becoming like her girl friends who were sexually active. “That was what the ‘other’ girls do that you don’t want to be a part of, because they have a bad reputation,” she remembered her mother saying. The specifically Catholic messages that some of the young women received about avoiding a negative reputation came in the form of presenting virginity as the only option for preserving one’s “good” reputation. Camille remarked that within the Catholic culture in which she was raised, there is an unstated tenet that if “you’re not a virgin, then you’re a slut,” and that she was actively trying to combat this false dichotomy in her own life. However, when she told me about being sexually active in college, she stated, “It’s not like [my friends and I] are acting like sluts” in a defensive tone. Clearly, the dichotomy still affects her even when she acknowledges the absurdity and danger of its presence.

Alexandra struggled with the fact that her friends felt guilty when they had sexual intercourse for the first time, simply because the Catholic Church teaches that “sex before marriage is bad.” She stated,

I’ve had friends who have lost their virginity and felt so guilty, so far away from God. It’s just unfair because at the time they were like, “You know, this is what I wanted to do. I was in love. I was safe. I was protected. I was in a good environment.” There was nothing negative about the situation, but the fact that the Catholic Church says sex before marriage is bad, my friend was very guilty. I felt bad because it should be a really good experience, you know.
In this statement, Alexandra articulated a common theme amongst the collaborators for this project: it is difficult and often painful to ascribe to the Madonna/Whore myth, especially when it is intricately linked to religious identity. Moreover, the paradigm does not allow for nuance and context even if the sexual experiences feel healthy and positive.

Messages about modesty, purity and virginity within Catholic sexual pedagogies are disproportionately directed towards women and girls, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Evidence of this gendered emphasis of purity can be found in religious sexual education manuals such as the ones I reviewed briefly in Chapter Two, as well in some of the messages that young women receive from parents, teachers, and religious leaders about their sexuality. Virginity has been peddled as a status symbol within Catholic culture, and has proven to be one of the only determining factors in a young woman’s moral identity, at least from the perspective of the young women with whom I spoke.

In all, the young women interviewed for this project seek new ways in which to understand and express their sexuality as Catholic women. They want to be seen as more than “frisky young women who need to be controlled” through dress code regulations and modesty lessons. They also desire more ideals within the faith tradition besides “virgin” and “whore” to look towards for the cultivation of their own sexual identities. Cardinal León Joseph Suenens articulated the double bind that Catholic women are in quite succinctly in his work, The Nun in the World: Religious and the Apostolate:

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74 Grace [pseud.], Interviewed by author, October 7, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
Woman has the awe-ful choice of being Eve or Mary: she is rarely neutral. Either she
ennobles and raises man up by her presence, by creating a climate of beauty and human
nobility, or she drags him down with her in her own fall.75

In both of these choices, female sexuality revolves around and is responsible for a male’s moral
and spiritual standing. It must be the constant task of Catholic theologians and ethicists to disrupt
these archetypes in order to empower many different expressions of female gender and sexuality
that promote the dignity, flourishing and pleasure of women and girls.

75 Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens, *The Nun in the World : Religious and the Apostolate*, Ex-
4.2.1.1. Theme № 3: “Sex is something that you do not do, do not talk about, or even think about until you’re married”: Catholic Sexual Pedagogies—Taking the Sex out of Sex Education

The primary way that Catholic youth receive messages about sex and sexuality is through abstinence-only sexual education, usually provided by Catholic grade schools and high schools, although some parishes also provide these programs. For the young women I spoke to in this study, the religious abstinence-only education that they received left them ill-equipped to make informed decisions about sexual activity, in part because they didn’t think that it was something that they could talk about openly with trusted Catholic adults and leaders. In a variety of particular ways, their stories demonstrated that they wanted more from their churches, parents and teachers when it comes to sexual education.

In his sociological analysis of sex in the lives of American religious teenagers, Mark D. Regnerus identified that in general, adolescents actually know very little about sex and related topics. When given a survey testing knowledge about sexual development and pregnancy risk,
teens “often answer correctly no more than 50 percent of the time,” Regnerus notes.\(^1\) Additionally, adolescents who say that religion is “very important” to them score lower than less religious adolescents in these surveys, and score even lower if they have taken an abstinence pledge.\(^2\) It is important to keep in mind that even though religious teens and those who have taken abstinence pledges know less about sex and sexual development than non-religious teens, more than 50% of teens who claim that religion is “very important” to them still engage in some form of sexual activity by age 18.\(^3\) Thus, even though religious teens tend to delay first sexual intercourse, many of them still engage in sexual activity before marriage with incomplete or inaccurate information, resulting in risky sexual encounters.

As some of the most important moral educators for youth, those adults who teach and speak on behalf of the Church have a responsibility to provide moral guidance and accurate information to teens about their bodies and their sexuality. In the first section of this theme I will lay out some of the effects of abstinence-only education provided within a Catholic environment, as the collaborators for this project illustrated. I will also pay particular attention to the possible effects of abstinence-only education on the sexual development of Catholic young women.

At the beginning of his study, Mark Regnerus remarked that as a society, “we are caught somewhere between understanding sex as sacred and thinking it profane.”\(^4\) Through the interviews, I found that this is especially the case for discussions about sexual pedagogy within


\(^2\) Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 73.

\(^3\) Regnerus, 121.

\(^4\) Regnerus, 4.
the Catholic tradition. While official Catholic teaching holds sex as a sacred gift from God and the human participation in God’s love for God’s people, the ways in which many teenagers receive messages about sex and sexuality often portray sex as something shameful and even dirty. In the second subsection of this theme, I will observe the ways in which the language surrounding sexual intercourse within Catholic sexual pedagogy was understood by the collaborators as either “sex-positive” or “sex-negative.” By examining these interpretations I am not so much concerned with reforming or affirming the Church teachings themselves but understanding how young women are receiving these teachings.

4.2.1.1.1. The “Tape Test” and Other Effects of Abstinence-Only Sex Education

A common theme among the collaborators for this study regarding the Catholic sexual education they received is the lack of information about sex, which led them to seek information from other, often unreliable, sources. Since Catholic sexual pedagogy is primarily modeled through abstinence-only-until-marriage programs, the majority of the young women were given a “just don’t do it” message, without fully understanding what “it” meant; these programs also tend to exclude basic reproductive health and wellness information. Some of the young women talked about ways in which their schools or their parents gave them information about birth control despite the official Catholic teaching against it, but they acknowledged that this was outside of the norm. Some of the troubling effects of abstinence-only sex education I found in the interviews were the scare-tactic narratives that a few of the young women described, which came

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in the form of gendered messages about loss of worth and dignity if they engaged in sexual activity.

For most of the young women I interviewed, the formal sexual education received in Catholic grade school or through their Catholic parish was almost exclusively about bodily changes and menstruation. Whether in reality sexuality or sexual activity was addressed at all is unknown; however what is most revealing to this study is that even if it was it was not remembered. Although she remembered having specific discussions about puberty and menstruation with the boys separate from the girls, Grace told me with confidence that sex “definitely wasn’t talked about” at Polish school, Sunday school, or in her home. She recalled,

I never once remember sitting in a class [where they said], “Look, this is what sex looks like, and this is what you can do to be safe when having sex or how sex [can be unsafe],” and things like that. I understood that sex is like, when a man and a woman essentially join together.

Grace also attributed her ignorance about sex to the idea that “God forbid sex was talked about in the household,” because it was just assumed that you just don’t have it until you are married. Although Joan transferred from a Catholic elementary school to a public school for middle school, she didn’t remember learning anything about sex at school or at church, even though she said that she knew that there were girls and boys in her class already having sex. She reflected on her own experience of puberty and how she related it to sex and her own sexuality:

I felt [that] my body maturing as an individual was very disassociated from sex as an act. I remember talking to my mom after I had my period and she explained to me, “This is why this is happening, you could get pregnant now,” but it was never something I necessarily associated with sex.

By the time Joan received formal education about sexually transmitted infections and reproductive health information she was a senior in high school, when she remembered thinking, “This is useless. They’re too late.”
The lack of concrete information about sexual intercourse and possible health issues surrounding sexual activity can lead to dangerous consequences, as demonstrated in the story Camille told of her friend who had sex with an older boy without knowing that she did. Her friend was in middle school and the older boy that she was dating was in high school—he penetrated her, and she didn’t know what that meant. Camille had a number of friends who didn’t realize that they had engaged in sexual intercourse when they were only 11 or 12 until they were 13 or 14. Camille’s exasperated question, “Why did we not talk about this sooner?” presents immediate urgency when one considers what might have happened if her friends had been given more information about sexual activity from their Catholic school, or trusted adults. Camille noted that her friend was just “uneducated to know what happened,” and wondered why the adults and teachers in her life assumed that they weren’t sexually active at that age, when so many of her peers were.

In her dissertation, *The Education of Deciding Morals: Adolescents, Sexuality Education, and the U.S. Religious Economy*, Christian social ethicist Kate Ott develops the concept of religious economy, first coined by a variety of social scientists in the early 1990s. In her project, she uses the concept of religious economy to name “the socio-cultural structures that contribute to as well as impede healthy development,” particularly as they are seen through organized religious activity and ideology-promotion within society. Within sexuality education, Ott

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identifies abstinence-only-until-marriage programs as tools of the current U.S. religious economy, which prey on “fear of sexual desire to enforce hetero-normativity and abstinence promotion.”\(^8\) Beyond their proven ineffectiveness, Ott contends that abstinence-only-until-marriage programs “teach gender stereotypes as ‘morally correct,’ restrict sexual expression to sexual intercourse in marriage, and leave youth ill prepared to deal with the reality of their sexuality and sexual relationships.”\(^9\) This latter point is clearly illustrated in Camille’s friends’ lack of education about sex, and in Joan’s lack of information about STIs until her senior year of high school. Ott argues that despite the continual promotion of abstinence education by the U.S. religious economy, youth aren’t remaining abstinent until marriage, and may be engaging in sexual behaviors that open them to health risks, due to lack of accurate information from religious institutions. She concludes,

> All of these youth need accurate prevention information, honest discussions on sexuality and evaluative measures for relationship building. Providing this information does not encourage behavior, it allows youth to prepare and make well-informed decisions.\(^{10}\)

Based on the stories of the young women I spoke with for this project, many of them lacked accurate prevention information from the Catholic institutions in which they participated. This frustrated them and often resulted in turning away from the Church as a valid source of moral wisdom for their own sexual decision-making.

Moreover, many of the young women conveyed their sense of uneasiness and discomfort in receiving information about puberty and sexuality from their teachers and parents. There is perhaps no good way to go about speaking to a child or student about sex and their body without

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\(^9\) Ott, “The Education of Deciding Morals,” 44.

\(^{10}\) Ott, “The Education of Deciding Morals,” 104.
either party feeling a sense of discomfort, but in many cases in the young women’s childhoods, this discomfort led to silence. Avery’s depiction of her sexual education talks at her Catholic school being “gross and weird” and “too personal” led to her talking about sex primarily with her peers. Camille didn’t want to talk about sex with her mom because she felt “really uncomfortable” talking about it with her, but also because in her family, school, and church community, “no one openly talked about it.” Anastasia didn’t remember having a “stereotypical talk” with her mom where she was told, “This is what you do, this is what to expect,” and so she found herself asking questions after she engaged in sexual activity, instead of before. She often wondered, “Did I do something wrong?” when reflecting back on her sexual encounters.

The sexual education manuals and letters put forth by the Church on the magisterial and national level all stress the importance of parent involvement in the proper moral education of their children, specifically in regards to sexual morality. For example, in “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family,” parents are instructed to educate their children on the dignity of marriage and exemplify the ultimate expression of sexuality through their marital bond, as I outlined in Chapter Two. Citing the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio: On the Christian Family in the Modern World*, the manual asserts that sex education is a basic right and duty of parents since it is such a “delicate area.” The manual warns,

If in fact parents do not give adequate formation in chastity, they are failing in their precise duty. Likewise, they would also be guilty were they to tolerate immoral or inadequate formation being given to their children outside the home.11

Unfortunately, according to many of the young women I spoke with, their parents often lacked the vocabulary or adequate preparation to talk to them about sexuality as it related to their own lives. Still, a parent’s role is of vital importance. According to the *National Survey of Adolescent and Young Adults Sexual Health Knowledge, Attitudes and Experience* done by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 15-17 year old participants ranked parents as equally influential as sex education class and friends in learning about relationships and sexual health.\(^{12}\)

One of the intended or unintended consequences of sexual pedagogy focused on abstinence as the only virtuous and acceptable option is a rhetoric based on fear or “scare” tactics in order to dissuade young people from engaging in sexual activity before marriage. Anastasia’s story about the sexual education speaker at her Catholic school in eighth grade presents an example of a scare-tactic intended to correlate sexual activity before marriage with losing the “meaning” of sex (with an underlying message about a person’s worth). Using the analogy of tape sticking to a person’s arm for having sexual relations with someone, the lesson that the students were supposed to take away is that sex becomes less meaningful the more you have it with different people. By association, the “tape” (read: the person) becomes “less sticky” the more that it sticks to different people. These types of analogies not only paint sex and those who engage in it in a negative light—tape loses its purpose once it loses its “stickiness,” but also prohibit honest conversations about what makes for a fulfilling, healthy and flourishing sex life.

Sarah described another scare-tactic used by her science teacher at her all-girls Catholic high school. In an effort to teach her students not to use condoms, her science teacher ran a

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condom under a water faucet and the condom started leaking. She then told the class, “This is why you shouldn’t use condoms.”¹³ Many of Sarah’s classmates knew that their parents wouldn’t put them on birth control, so some had unprotected sex or did “other stuff that [they were] probably not very comfortable with,” which worried Sarah. In this case, the scare-tactic did not fulfill its purpose of teaching young women not to engage in sexual activity until marriage, but rather led to more risky, uninformed sexual behavior.

Two of the young women interviewed, Sarah and Anastasia, reported having taken purity pledges as part of their Catholic sexual education. The sexual education manual *Love & Life: A Christian Sexual Morality Guide for Teens* I reviewed in Chapter 2 contains a purity pledge at the end of the manual, in which a student promises to be pure “in thoughts, words, and actions” now and throughout his/her vocation.¹⁴ Statistically, purity or abstinence pledges have not been successful at reducing pre-marital sex or sexual activity among those who take the pledge. As I referenced briefly in Chapter 2, sociologists Peter Bearman and Hannah Brucker have researched “pledgers” throughout the course of their teens and twenties and found that although purity pledges did succeed in delaying intercourse by about two to three years, most pledgers did eventually engage in pre-marital sexual intercourse.¹⁵ Sarah told me that she

¹³ Sociologist of Religion Mark D. Regnerus identifies this type of rhetoric used in abstinence education programs (claiming that condoms do not prevent pregnancy and will not protect them from sexually transmitted diseases) and proposes that this might by why evangelical teens are the group least likely to use condoms. Mark Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 91, 141.


thinks that it’s “so funny” that she once thought that purity and virginity were so important, since she now views virginity as a socially constructed idea that constricts women’s sexual expression. Anastasia is more hesitant about her decision to no longer abide by her purity pledge and give up her leadership position on the chastity team. She didn’t want to get in front of a group of eighth graders and tell them, “This is how you’re supposed to live your life,” if she wasn’t sure anymore. Her evolving views on the way she should understand and express her sexuality as a Catholic woman reflect her desire that the Church addresses the “moral gray area” more rather than understanding issues of sex and sexuality in “black and white.” Given their overall ineffectiveness, the existence of purity pledges calls into question whether the purpose of faith-based sexual education should be “risk prevention” or “risk reduction,” as I will discuss in more detail later in this section.

Moreover, it is important to note that not all of the information that the young women received about sex and sexuality from Catholic “sources” (self-identified Catholic parents, Catholic school teachers, etc.) was in line with abstinence-only-until-marriage pedagogy. Some of the young women received information that they knew was contrary to official Catholic teaching from their parents or from teachers. Alexandra remembered that her Catholic grade school principal and teacher talked to the girls about their periods, but didn’t talk to them about sex—instead, she received information about sex from her mother and grandmother, who also instructed her to talk to them if she had questions and later went with her to get birth control. The sentiment that Alexandra’s parents had regarding contraceptives—“We are in this modern time and no matter what you do, people are going to always have sex. Better to be safe than to be sorry!” is one shared by many U.S. Catholics. According to a study done by the Guttmacher
Institute, 87% of U.S. women who identify as Catholic and are of reproductive age (15-44) use a method other than natural family planning to regulate fertility.\textsuperscript{16}

In addition to her parents, Alexandra also reported that her health teacher at her all-girls Catholic school taught both abstinence and safe-sex practices. She told me that even though it was a Catholic school, her teacher explained how to have safe sex while still urging students to wait until they were older, more mature, and were preferably within the context of marriage. Camille’s positive experience with the Human Sexuality course that she took her senior year at a Jesuit high school presents affirmation of another alternative (albeit non-traditional) model for the teaching of sexual education and sexual ethics within a Catholic context. In the course, Camille said that the teacher, Ms. B., talked about human anatomy but also what it means to have a healthy relationship, how to take care of yourself if you are sexually active, and how to have a fulfilling sex life. Camille’s feeling after taking the course, that “it was healthy to talk about sex and healthy to have sex” combated the messages received from her parents and elementary school teachers that “It’s not okay to talk about at all.”

When I asked Alexandra and Camille if the teachers were even able to talk about contraception and safe-sex practices at a Catholic school, they both shrugged and said yes. Although these two stories represent instances when Catholic school teachers departed from traditional abstinence-only pedagogy (and subsequently, official Church teaching that prohibits sexual activity outside of the confines of marriage), they are indicative of the possibility that Church teaching is not being applied at all times in Catholic educational settings, “on the ground.”

Christian feminist theologians and ethicists have discussed some problematic aspects of abstinence-only education by analyzing it from a variety of perspectives, some of which include viewing the ways in which abstinence-only faith-based programs portray sexual activity, and subsequently, the sexual person, as well as by observing the gender roles and stereotypes at play in these programs. In her argument for the promotion of pleasure as a pre-moral good, Catholic sexual ethicist Christine Gudorf critiques the ways in which current abstinence-only education vilifies sexual activity and sexual pleasure. She states,

> It is a serious mistake—and severely short-sighted—to aim sex education at discouraging sexual activity among the young. The primary goal of sex education should be providing the student with the tools and skills—cognitive and emotional, communicative and meditative, technical and moral—to construct a responsible, satisfying sexual life for her/himself both in the present and into the future.\(^{17}\)

In other words, as I explained in the previous section on virginity, she asserts that sexual pedagogy ought to be concerned with giving young persons the moral tools and comprehensive information in order to make healthy decisions about their own sexuality, instead of focusing on an acts-centered sexual ethic that is only concerned with steering youth away from sex. Gudorf claims that in the U.S., sex education (both private and public) actually *supports* and is founded upon sexual ignorance, specifically because sex and sexuality are viewed as private rather than public moral issues.\(^{18}\) From a Christian theological perspective, she asserts that “a major purpose of [religious] sex education should be to make us better able to be good lovers of our partners,” due to the call of every Christian to love their neighbor; the sexual bond is a particular form of


this kind of sacred love. Gudorf believes that focusing on the negative consequences of sex, like abstinence-education programs often do, takes away from the promotion of sexual pleasure and healthy sexual partnerships, to which I would also add the promotion of self-love as sexual beings.

Other problematic aspects of abstinence-only education that a few feminist theologians and ethicists have observed is the reinforcement of gender binaries and the separation of the sexual act from the sexual person within the pedagogical rhetoric in these programs. Drawing upon ethnographic fieldwork from her time observing and interviewing performers in a drama and dance abstinence-education troupe, Christian ethicist Melissa Browning proposes that abstinence-only faith-based education programs are not only ineffective at preventing sexual intercourse before marriage, but are also participating in the construction and promotion of harmful gender binaries. In the abstinence-education program that she observed, young men and young women were encouraged to “wait” to have sex until marriage for different reasons according to gender. She observed, “Girls were encouraged to wait for a fairy-tale ending while boys were encouraged to wait to learn responsibility and to exchange pleasure now for greater pleasure later.” This observation coincides with the stories I highlighted in the previous section that point to differing sexual standards for men and women. Aside from reinforcing gender binaries that promote passivity and subordination for women, this type of rhetoric also negates the existence or importance of female sexual pleasure.

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Browning also critiques the eschatological nature of abstinence-education rhetoric that sets up sex within marriage as the ultimate end or the “salvation” for sexual desire.\textsuperscript{21} In this way, abstinence-education presents an “all or nothing” view of sexual activity, and the way a person is able to be moral in the sexual sphere. While in the field she heard statements about how sex would only be pleasurable if one waited until marriage, and that “one mistake could change your life”—claims that put enormous pressure on young people to abstain.\textsuperscript{22} Browning critiques,

By focusing on one response in one moment, this type of logic neglectfully ignores that as moral people we are the sum of our actions and embodiment. It implies that morality is not an embodied process, but the result of a quick test—that morally, we are made or unmade in one moment.\textsuperscript{23}

In sum, abstinence-education misses the mark by focusing on sexual acts as separate from the sexual person, with a particular act deemed as eternally defining. This pedagogical strategy is particularly damaging to the sexual development of young women and girls, since they are already wrestling with gender expectations that view women’s virginity as a litmus test for their entire sexual morality.

The effects of abstinence-only education programs on the young women I spoke with are varied, but all point towards a need for revision in the ways in which Catholic institutions (and the parents, teachers, and leaders who represent these institutions) speak to young women and girls about sex. Based on the proven ineffectiveness of abstinence-education within faith-based settings at delaying sexual activity or first intercourse, new pedagogies need to be constructed that treat abstinence as “a servant virtue because it serves life and love,” not a


\textsuperscript{22} Browning, “Acting Out Abstinence, Acting Out Gender,” 153.

virtue on its own, as Browning suggests. I will further explore these new ways to construct sexual pedagogies that serve the needs of Catholic young women in Chapter Five. The next aspect of sexual education that I observed in my interviews is the portrayal of sex itself as either good or evil, which I will identify as “sex-positive” and “sex-negative” messaging, respectively.

4.2.1.1.2. God is “Sex-Positive”: Sex-Positive and Sex-Negative messages within Catholic Sex Ed

In her interview, Joan defined the term “sex-positive” as “the idea that sex is a good thing and that it is biologically natural.” She added, “It is one of our privileges as sentient beings to enjoy sex and we should take advantage of it in healthy, fulfilling ways.” Joan first learned the phrase from her Women and Gender Studies courses, but it is now used frequently in popular culture in order to describe ways in which people or institutions encourage and celebrate healthy views of sex. According to the Women and Gender Advocacy Center at Colorado State University, sex-positivity is “the idea that all sex, as long as it is healthy and explicitly consensual, is a positive thing.”

In most of the blogs and online magazines that I found, people used the term “sex-positive” to combat the sentiment that sex is “dirty” or “bad” and that a person should feel guilty for enjoying and having sex. As I will discuss below, the core of Catholic teaching about sex celebrates sex and holds it as sacred, so long as it is between a husband and a wife and involves a total gift of self through openness to procreation. However, the language used to teach young people about sex and sexuality in Catholic sexual pedagogy is often received and understood to be “sex-negative”, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

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Although she couldn’t quite pinpoint where her feelings came from, Jade experienced an immense amount of guilt and shame about her body as she was going through puberty. The “communal enforcement of guilt and shame” about puberty and anything involving sexuality in her youth group and Catholic grade school affected the way that Jade viewed her body and future sexual encounters, although she was aware of the hypocrisy among many members of her youth group when it came to sex, including the leaders. As I explained earlier in this chapter, Jade learned about sex by first learning about virginity (connected to the Virgin Mary), and so she thought that there “was a deep equation with sex being bad.” She noted that none of these things were explicitly stated in her Catholic sexual education lessons or by her youth group leaders, but was part of the “climate.” Jade reflected that the lack of honest dialogue about sex and sexuality among members of the Church, as she experienced in her own parish and school environment, “shuts down so much [that] if you feel sexual it’s a sin.”

Alexandra received messages about sexual pleasure being bad and something that Catholic girls shouldn’t enjoy. Thinking back to when she explored her body as a girl, Alexandra told me that she didn’t understand the sexual feelings she was experiencing, but that she liked it—but at the same time, she felt as if she shouldn’t like it. She confessed, “I just freaked out about how something that felt so nice could be so, so evil.” She told me that she didn’t think that the Bible or Church teaching talked about female pleasure because it was so taboo. She joked, “Oh my God, it’s so complex and so dirty and so unpure,” especially since women were only supposed to be “vessels for reproduction.” Alexandra connected sexual acts such as masturbation with grave moral judgment; she told me that if she didn’t confess the fact that she masturbates to

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25 I will discuss more about Jade’s feelings of shame surrounding her sexual encounters in the following section.
a priest, she would go to hell. She disclosed, “It’s really scary to think that [I] could be punished, the heaven and hell thing. You know, Catholicism is based around guilt.” Alexandra understood sexual pleasure as inherently sinful, and something that should not be enjoyed, even in the context of marriage. Christian ethicists such as Christine Gudorf and Patricia Beattie Jung criticize the Church for this very reason, and understand sexual pleasure to be good and necessary for the unity of partners, as I discussed in Chapter Two.

When Joan defined sex-positivity, I asked her if she thought the Church was sex-positive or sex-negative, based on her own experiences being raised Catholic. She immediately answered, “sex-negative!” and told me, “The idea that sex is beautiful, especially for women, was never taught to me by the Church.” A few times during the interviews, such as during this one, I would inform the collaborators that official Church teaching never states that sex and the expression of sexuality by themselves are intrinsically evil … on the contrary! When I told Joan this, she was surprised, and talked to me about how she thought that the message of sex being good was lost in her Catholic upbringing. She pondered,

I think [the message of sex being good] was disconnected because it has a lot to do with who gets to teach and who gets to interpret. If you’re gonna go the incredibly cynical feminist route, which I tend to go a lot, it’s [because of] the patriarchy, it’s the man trying to bring everybody else down.

The feminist theology courses Joan took in college undoubtedly discussed the role that hermeneutics plays in theological discourse, particularly surrounding issues of sexuality. Still, Joan didn’t seem to really grasp the fact that sex for women could be regarded as holy, fulfilling and good by the Church. Joan struggled with the teaching that the purpose of sex ought to be procreation, and asked me,
What happens when you just wanna have sex because you wanna have sex? I don’t wanna family, I don’t want to be tied down, is [sex] still beautiful then? Is sexuality beautiful only in a certain context?

Many feminist sexual ethicists have sought to address these questions in their work, in attempts to construct a more sex-positive sexual framework within Christianity. However, in Joan’s lived experience, there haven’t been many Catholic outlets where she could discuss these concerns she has with Church teaching on sexual ethics.

Not all of the messages that the young women conveyed in their interviews were sex-negative. Anastasia received messages that can be considered sex-positive through the chastity team, which she later joined when she was in high school. When she was being trained as a chastity team leader, she was told not to talk about sex as a bad thing, rather, “You should put it on a pedestal and say, ‘It’s so great that you’re supposed to save it for something special.’”

As I referenced in the previous section, this type of language can be problematic due to its tendency to promote benevolent/romantic sexism—women are placed on this pedestal as well, in charge of guarding the sexual act from the active, sexual male. Placing sex on a pedestal to be reserved for marriage is also unrealistic, feminist theologians such as Doris Kieser would argue, since many teens do end up engaging in some form of sexual activity.

Other collaborators told me about the ways in which they connected sex-positive messages with spirituality for themselves. Sarah’s conversation with me about sex was based on the values she thought were important for healthy sex, like respect between partners and emotional maturity, rather than quantity of partners. Grace believed that sex-positivity did not

26 A few of these frameworks will be discussed in Chapter Five.

mean that a person should just have sex with anyone (“willy nilly” as she put it), but should recognize that “the body is sacred” and that it is a “responsibility” to have sex. Avery articulated a developed understanding of the body as a temple in order to describe sex-positivity and spirituality in her interview. As I wrote in Chapter Three, she explained,

I think about that phrase, “The body is a temple.” I like that because a temple is not necessarily a place that is cut off from the world. It’s still in relation to the world. A church, a sacred place, is still in relation to the world. You choose who to invite in your personal space, either male or female, and who not to invite. That’s what it comes down to is [when you] start to respect yourself, you can expect other people to respect you. If you do not respect yourself, then you’re not as able to draw up those boundaries in a healthy way.

According to this model of the body as a temple, sex-positivity means understanding that sex involves the union or interaction between two sacred spaces; therefore, healthy sex must involve respect between persons and respect of self, as well as a clear understanding of another person’s boundaries. Connecting with this concept of the body as sacred, Jade speculated what it would be like if Catholic young women understood their bodies as “gateways towards spirituality,” experiencing the Holy Spirit in and through their bodies. Although these young women did not receive these messages from Catholic sources in their lives, they were able to construct useful ideas of how the secular concept of sex-positivity can connect to spirituality.28

One of the ethical problems with the concept of sex-positivity as it is currently presented in women and gender studies curricula and in popular feminist media sites is the lack of criteria for what is considered “positive.” Most secular sources define sex-positivity in such a

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28 As I will articulate in Chapter Five, Catholic teaching does hold that human sexuality and sexual intercourse are sacred. Although his ideology rests upon gender essentialism and complementarity of the sexes, it can be argued that Pope John Paul II created a specific kind of “sex-positive ethic” in the Theology of the Body. However, other than Anastasia, the young women I spoke with did not receive this message that their sexuality was holy and that sex is good in their Catholic sexual education.
general sense that it teeters on moral relativity, holding informed consent as the only standard for what is positive. In her article in the feminist online site *Everyday Feminism*, sex educator Melissa A. Fabello stated that sex-positivity must be accompanied by critical ethical analysis in order to be healthy for women. She identified that sexual decisions are not made in a vacuum, and that we must ask “whether or not the sexual availability and flexibility of women is really liberation or if it’s ‘new sexism,’” since it is extremely difficult for women to untangle themselves from patriarchal socialization that objectifies women’s bodies. Feminist Christian ethicists are likewise concerned with discussions about what is “good” and “liberating” for women that result in an “anything goes” mentality surrounding sexual ethics. I will discuss some ways in which some scholars have re-envisioned sex-positivity in a Christian framework in the next chapter.

As this section has demonstrated, utilizing abstinence-only education as the primary vehicle through which Catholic sexual pedagogy is relayed to youth has effectively taken the sex out of sexual education, leaving many young women (such as the ones with whom I spoke) with a sex-negative understanding of what the Church teaches about sex and sexuality. Additionally, the ways in which sex is discussed within this abstinence-only model often

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29 Some of these sources include the Huffington Post, which defines sex-positivity as “The idea that one’s sexual preferences are a matter of personal choice, and that within the confines of informed consent, those preferences should not be subject to the moral imposition of others.” Eric Barry, “I’m Sex-Positive, and Most People in Chicago Have No Idea What That Means,” *HuffPost*, accessed February 25, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-barry/sex-positive-most-people-in-chicago_b_4733910.html; and USA Today, which defines sex-positivity as being “comfortable with one’s own sexual identity and with the sexual behaviors of others, with the purpose of promoting healthy, smart, safe, and consensual sex.” Sophia Tulp, “What Does ‘Sex Positive’ Mean? Your Questions, Answered,” *USA Today College*, March 27, 2017, http://college.usatoday.com/2017/03/27/what-does-sex-positive-mean/.

reinforce gender stereotypes and alienate those young people who do engage in sexual activity, especially those who have taken purity pledges and do not feel comfortable talking to religious leaders or trusted adults about their sexual experiences. If young people are not getting adequate information about sex from their parents, schools, or houses of worship, they often turn to readily available and convenient sources such as TV, movies, and social media for their sex education. The last theme will discuss these silent and not-so-silent sources that take the place of religious institutions in the education of Catholic young women.

4.2.1.2. Theme № 4: “How do you stop living two separate lives?”:

Faith and Sexuality—The Big Disconnect
The last major theme that I identified throughout the interviews is the sense of separation many of the young women felt between their Catholic faith and their sexuality. In her national study about sex and faith on college campuses, religion and society scholar Donna Freitas found that many of the students who identified themselves as “religious” (evangelical students excluded) were confused about how to relate sex and the soul. Freitas states, “In their campus communities religion is a private affair and in their religious communities (if they still have one) sex is a private affair. So religious views about sex go unexamined.”

31 The Catholic students she interviewed perceived Catholic teachings on sex as being about “rules and shame,” “ridiculous,” and not applicable to their lives.32 However, very few could articulate actual Church teachings about sex, other than “not to have it.”33 Freitas describes interviewees as laughing at many of the


32 Freitas, Sex and the Soul, 196.

33 Freitas, Sex and the Soul, 196.
questions about sex and religion, saying, “And they laughed because they were confused about the prospect of their faith having anything useful to say about these things.”

The Catholic young women I spoke with were similar to the Catholic college students Freitas described in that they found it difficult to connect Catholicism with their experiences of dating or “hooking up,” in part because they thought that their sexual activity had already exceeded the boundaries of what Catholicism allows. Additionally, the transition of living at home in high school to being on their own in college played a significant role in the way many of the young women expressed themselves sexually, since college provided a sense of freedom and access to new experiences they might not have had in high school. Anastasia told me that once she started college she felt like she was “participating more” in her own sexuality. She commented, “Before college I had never been kissed by a guy, never really participated in my sexuality. So I get to college and everyone’s on Tinder and I was like, “Okay. Cool. Let’s try it out.” However, she is still working out how to incorporate her moral beliefs with her sexual activity, and she often wonders, “What am I going to get out of this?” Freitas’ goal is to help college students like Anastasia navigate their sexuality in relation to their spirituality, not separate from it—a process that she believes should begin before students even arrive on campus.

When I asked the collaborators for this project how they understood the relationship between their Catholic faith and their sexuality, many used the word “disconnect” to

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34 Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 196.

35 Citing multiple sociological studies of religious youth, Freitas notes that something important is happening in the religious and spiritual lives of America’s youth when they go away to college. She writes, “It would seem that only about 47% of high school students are retaining the traditional religious affiliations of their families after leaving home, and even more are questing once they walk through the campus gates.” Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 10.
explain the separation that they felt between the two. Jade described the relationship between her sexuality and Catholicism as a “complete disconnect,” attributing this separation to the fact that people didn’t seem to want to talk about sexuality within the Catholic institutions she was a part of, and so it became an “ignored part” of her life. Joan also called the feeling of separation of her faith from her sexual experiences a “disconnect,” explaining that her faith life was very personal, private and separate from the rest of her life. In both of these cases, their faith was relegated to the private sphere during a crucial developmental time in their lives when they could have benefitted from public, communal discussions about sexual morality. In his sociological study of Catholic youth in the U.S., Christian Smith affirms the pervasiveness of these kinds of sentiments and concludes that most emerging adult Catholics are not living out the Catholic Church’s teaching on sex and sexuality; however, he identifies a small minority of practicing Catholics who are still trying to heed the teachings of the Church, even if they do not succeed.\footnote{Christian Smith, ed., \textit{Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out Of, and Gone From the Church} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 229.}

Grace noted that since there is seemingly no intersection between religious education and sexuality, “people are doing whatever the hell they want.” She reflected,

\begin{quote}
In a way, I think religion is isolated from [discussions about] sexuality. In my religion classes, we never talked about sexuality in depth at all. So then here you are, this confused teenager going to Sunday school and then all of these people [are] being frisky. It’s like, “What do I do?”
\end{quote}

Grace connected this gap in her religious education in matters of sexuality to her intimate experiences as a young adult by stating that if a person doesn’t have this kind of moral education at a young age, it is difficult to try to make those connections later in life. The separation of the lessons she learned in Polish school on Saturdays and Sundays from the realities of her daily life
as a teenager confused her, and she wished that the Church had addressed these conflicting views in a way that she could understand. I will further discuss Grace’s experiences with sex and her Catholic faith later in this section.

Sarah’s experience going to reconciliation at her Catholic high school and not receiving the guidance that she wanted or needed demonstrates an instance when a Church leader (in this case, a priest) did try to bridge the gap between sexuality and morality, but did not do so effectively. When she confessed that she had been sexually involved with a boy who wasn’t respecting her, the priest told her to “say a couple Hail Marys and then reflect on it and talk to God.” She acknowledged that the fact that he was not only male but also celibate most likely hindered his ability to give good advice to her about sexuality. 37 Discussions about priestly celibacy aside, this experience points to the need for different people with different life experiences (married, single, male and female) to be actively involved in the religious education of young people. Young women and girls may be able to discuss the gender dynamics involved in relationships and sexual experiences more openly with other women, and vice versa for young men and boys. There exists a need for religious leaders to become more involved in the sexual education of the youth in their religious institutions, and for more adults to join in this responsibility.

For those collaborators who told me that they did not choose to remain abstinent until marriage, they found it difficult to think about their Catholic identity when they were making personal decisions about sexual expression and activity. Camille and Joan both

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37 This priest’s inability to give pastoral advice regarding Sarah’s sexual relationship may have nothing to do with his celibacy but rather the lack of training he received to discuss matters of sexual morality with young people.
mentioned that they never thought about what their Catholic faith would have to say about their sexual activity (in terms of ethical conduct), since they already knew that they had violated the Church’s teachings about sex before marriage to begin with. Camille mentioned that she never thought, “What does it mean to be a good Catholic person in terms of sex?” when she was sexually active. It wasn’t until college that she even thought that she could think about human sexuality and religion as aspects of life that could inform each other. Although Joan didn’t remember receiving any direct messages about sexuality from the Church, she knew that the Church would condemn the pre-marital sexual activity she was engaging in. She wondered aloud,

How do you stop living two separate lives? Here is my sexually liberated womanhood and here is my Catholic faith—can they overlap? I don’t forget that I’m Catholic when I’m having sex, but I’m also not thinking about it … but it doesn’t go away. How do you find a place where those two lives are able to co-exist without feeling like I [broke] a rule?

It is the task of Catholic sexual ethicists to answer this question by creating a space where young women’s sexuality and their Catholic faith can not only co-exist but also inform and explain each other. Furthermore, the “private” space of sexuality must be explored and illuminated in the public sphere; ethicists have a responsibility to examine the gendered power dynamics at play in sexual encounters, and to provide young people ethical tools to use when they begin to explore their sexuality.

Not all of the young women I interviewed felt a separation between their faith and sexuality—Avery exclaimed, “It’s all in line for me!” when she talked about her sexual choices and identifying as a Catholic woman. When she decided to become sexually active with her high school boyfriend, Avery told me that she felt comfortable with her choices because she was “doing what felt right” for her. She elaborated,
In the context of this relationship, I really loved this guy, and I was comfortable doing [sexual] things with him. I talked to people who had some sort of moral crisis, and I didn’t. I really started to feel comfortable in my faith and in this relationship and therefore my sexuality. It was really starting to fall into place for me.

She acknowledged that this feeling of total comfort being sexually active outside the context of marriage is not common compared to the feelings of some of her Catholic girlfriends, and that it made her feel “something of a minority.” One of her friends asked, “How can you be Catholic and still do anything sexual? That makes you a hypocrite”—to which Avery answered, “I put it into context.” Avery described the Church as a large institution that is gradually and slowly “moving forward,” and that Catholics should focus on the beautiful aspects of the Church.

Due to the sense of separation of religious identity and sexuality, many of the young women I spoke with looked to the media and internet for information about sex and sexuality, without the moral guidance that religious sources usually provide in navigating these issues. Since many acknowledged that the Catholic educational environments in their lives failed to provide them with the tools with which to make moral decisions about sex and sexuality, young women viewed TV shows and movies as educational resources which taught them how to express their sexuality as young women.

In the first section of this theme, I will discuss some of the effects this has had on the collaborators for this project, and analyze the role of the media as an ever-present “super-peer” and sexual educator for Catholic adolescent girls. The second section will address the lack of agency that some young women experienced because of the silence of Catholic sexual educational programs about sexual violence and the concept of consent. In both of these sections, I hope to demonstrate that the “disconnect” between Catholic faith and sexuality many of these
young women feel has real consequences on their sexual experiences and the way that they feel about themselves as moral agents.

4.2.1.2.1. The Effects of Media as a “Super-Peer” for Catholic Young Women

Since many of the collaborators for this project claimed that the Catholic educational environments in their lives failed to provide them with the tools they needed to make fully-informed moral decisions, TV shows, movies, and the Internet served as educational resources that taught them how to understand the world around them. In particular, they stated that they did not receive much moral guidance about issues surrounding body image, sexuality, and sexual violence as teens, a time when they acknowledged that they most needed it. Based on some observable themes throughout the interviews, the “disconnect” between Catholic faith and sexuality for young women led to a reliance on media (rather than parents, teachers, or religious leaders) in order to provide information and moral lessons about sex and sexuality.

Researchers of adolescent health have coined the phrase “super-peer” to refer to the crucial role that mass media plays in the development and education of teenagers today.\(^{38}\) It is “super” in that it takes the role of peer to an extreme degree—media messages are constant and ubiquitous, and almost impossible to avoid. Additionally, pre-teens and teens turn to mass media sources (particularly the Internet), when they have personal questions, like they would with a peer. According to a national study conducted by *Common Sense Media*, a non-profit media literacy organization, on any given day American teenagers (13-18 year olds) average about nine

\(^{38}\) For example, this phrase is used in Diane E. Levin, Ph.D. and Jean Kilbourne, Ed.D.’s book *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and What Parents can do to Protect their Kids* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2009), 149.
hours for screen media use, excluding time spent at school or for homework.\textsuperscript{39} Parents, teachers and religious leaders cannot begin to compete with this type of exposure, but there is an opportunity for guidance as young people navigate the messages about sex and sexuality brought forth by TV, movies, and music.

In her article “Teens, sex and the media: Is there a connection?” Dr. Christina Grant notes that messages about gender roles, body image, and sexual behaviors are “bombarding teens at a stage when they are in the midst of developing their values and beliefs.”\textsuperscript{40} In this way, media may substitute as a sexual and moral educator, in the place of Catholic adults. Adolescents may also lack the cognitive development needed to be able to critically analyze media messages before directly applying them to their lives. Teenage girls are an especially vulnerable population when it comes to these messages, since women’s bodies have systematically been at the center of scrutiny and objectification by popular media and advertisements for decades. Within sexual interactions portrayed on television or in movies, women and girls often lack agency and consent is rarely addressed, a subject that I will address in the following section.

When I asked Joan, “What were your sources of information about sexuality in [middle school]?” she immediately responded, “Television. And friends, I guess. All of the information [we were] getting was coming from friends and pop culture.” She told me that she couldn’t watch certain shows until high school, because “you cannot watch anything that alludes to sex.” She admitted that she didn’t even really know what sex was at the time, but knew that she

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\textsuperscript{40} Christina Grant, MD FRCP, “Teens, Sex, and the Media: Is There a Connection?” \textit{Paediatrics & Child Health} 8, no. 5 (May 2003): 285-86.
\end{flushright}
couldn’t watch TV shows or movies that contained sexual scenes— a limit placed upon her by her parents. She stated, “I don’t think I could have explained [sex], I just knew that it was something that happens when the two characters on TV kiss and then it goes dark. And then something happens.” Jade also referenced the screen going dark when two characters begin to kiss on TV and realized in her own sexual encounters that she was “in that dark” and didn’t know what to do.41

By highlighting these messages, I am not suggesting that shielding young people from sexual content is wrong in and of itself. In fact, a study on adolescents’ sexual behavior showed that of 391 adolescents observed, the ones who watched television with more sexual content were more likely to have had sexual intercourse across gender, race, social class, and even pressure or lack of pressure from peers.42 What I am more concerned with is the lack of information that young women and girls have to “fill in the gaps” when adults in their lives do not talk with them about these issues. Some of the young women, like Camille, were instructed not to watch TV shows or movies that contained sex scenes, but watched them anyway. Camille admitted, “I knew what it meant to have sex and not be a virgin from TV and movies. I went to the media with questions I had.”

Both Camille and Jade mentioned that “reality” TV shows such as The Real World, Teen Mom, and Girls Gone Wild on MTV informed their perception of how women can and ought to express their sexuality in order to attract attention from men. Camille, now a Communications Management major, reflected on the way she used to process the messages sent by reality

41 I will further discuss Jade’s narrative in the following section.

television: “Even though I know that not all media accurately portrays how real life is, it stuck with my friends and me when we were younger. Cause it actually did reflect some sort of reality to us.” Camille and her friends may not have had the cognitive developmental ability yet to differentiate simulated reality from reality, a skill that they could have been taught. Referring to topics like sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation, she commented that the adults within her Catholic school, parish and home just “didn’t create an environment where we could talk about that stuff.” Instead, she and her friends turned to media and “the world of the internet” in order to seek answers to personal questions.

As I described in her narrative in Chapter Three, although Jade attended a Catholic grade school and was very involved in her parish youth group growing up, most of the messages she received about being a female and expressing her sexuality came from the media, specifically reality shows on MTV. “I watched a lot of MTV and I watched movies and things and I felt like I knew more than a lot of my friends about sex,” Jade commented. She told me that music video ideals impacted her a lot, particularly in regards to body image and the way women dressed in order to attract attention and be “sexy.” “I wanted to be like the people in the music videos,” she admitted. Like Camille, Jade realized that she wasn’t able to critically analyze reality TV shows when she was younger, and so she took lessons about gender and sexuality directly from the shows. She reflected,

Media shapes our narratives. It shapes the way we respond to things. And while it seems obvious that The Real World isn’t actually the real world- it was to me. I feel like media literacy is really important, like having tools to be able to say “This isn’t reality. This is a portrayal. What are they portraying?” Critical media literacy would’ve been really helpful for me.

Jade commented that since her faith was so disconnected from her quest to learn more about her own sexuality, the media informed this area of her life more than anything else.
In their book, *So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood*, social science and education scholars Diane E. Levin and Jean Kilbourne identify the mass media as important sex educators for American youth as they simultaneously teach them about sex and also sexualize them, showing them how to be “sexy.” Throughout the book Levin and Kilbourne point to the different ways that popular culture sexualizes and objectifies children at different stages of their growth, exposing them to sex and messages about sexuality as early as five and seven years old.43 This escalates as children enter adolescence and are exposed to a barrage of messages about gender, sex, and sexuality from advertising, fashion, films, the Internet, magazines, music, television, and video games. Sarah told me that she was very much affected by the music videos and TV shows she watched with her brother that sexualized girls and women. She commented,

I’d watch music videos that would sexualize women a lot. The big message is that you have to be sexy. Sexuality is sort of a taboo subject and yet you see it so much in the media. It’s like forced on us to be sexualized, but then we can’t talk about sexuality either.

This paradox that it is taboo for young people to talk about sexuality at school, at Church, and at home and yet they are constantly exposed to media messages that “force” them to be sexualized frustrated Sarah as she was growing up in a Catholic environment. Additionally, when she tried to emulate some of the messages given to her about how to be “sexy,” she was labeled a “slut.” Sarah soon discovered that teenage girls are caught in a double bind where they must avoid being a “prude” but also be careful not to be “too sexy.”

43 In Chapter One, “Never Too Young to Be Sexy,” the authors tell the story of a five-year-old boy who told his kindergarten teacher that he had been allowed to see “wrestling girls with big boobies” on TV late at night with his big brother, and the story of a seven-year-old girl who came home to her mom and asked, “Mom, what’s a blow job?” Levin and Kilbourne, *So Sexy So Soon*, 18-22.
Grace also commented on the powerful role of the media in the sexualization of adolescents, particularly when it comes to the gender dynamics in sex scenes. She stated,

The media sexualizes a lot of things, [and] forces young teenagers to have these images of sexuality. A lot of times those images [show] women succumbing to these men. […] It’s always a negative view of the woman as submissive and that she can’t fend for herself.

At the same time, Grace acknowledged that women are also seen as dominant in some media messages, being “very involved in their sex life from the get-go, out of wedlock.” Like Sarah, Grace referred to the double bind that women find themselves in, based on media messaging: it’s ok to be sexually active at a young age, but you need to “play your cards right” so you won’t be labeled a “slut” or “whore” by society.

Levin and Kilbourne point to research that has been done on the effects of communication on young people to argue that as a super-peer, the mass media has “at least as much influence on teen sexual behavior as religion, parents, and peers.” They also point out the lack of effective sexual education in many young people’s lives, especially when it comes to knowing how to interpret messages from TV, movies, and the Internet. Consequently, “although most of the messages about sex in the media are inaccurate, misleading, and distorted, young people generally accept them as fact, given the absence of accurate sex education in their lives,” they conclude. What is interesting to note for the purpose of this project is that even though abstinence-only education is still being widely promoted in both private and public schools in the U.S., the media is still a primary sex educator for young people—all the while parents, teachers and religious leaders often remain silent.

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44 Levin and Kilbourne, So Sexy so Soon, 148.

The pervasiveness of social media, the internet, and “reality” TV shows that openly discuss sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual relationships influenced this generation of young women in a way that the Church has had yet to address in any type of formal way in parishes and schools. Some teachers, like Ms. B who taught Camille’s Human Sexuality course at her Jesuit high school, have been able to integrate media literacy lessons into their own pedagogy, but these examples are few and far between. Likewise, a few Christian theologians and ethicists have started to discuss the media’s influence on theological understandings of relationships, sex, and gender roles. However, I argue that academic research on such topics has yet to reach the ground in any sort of significant pedagogical way. In order to better prepare Catholic young women and girls to make fully-informed, healthy moral decisions about sex and sexuality, parents, teachers, and Church leaders must be aware of the commanding influence of the media as a “super-peer” for young people. Social scientists like Mark Regnerus warn that if adults fail to address this influence and focus instead on creating new iterations of abstinence-only education, “Parents, educators, and politicians [will be] truly fiddling while Rome burns.”

4.2.1.2.2. The Silence about Sexual Violence in Catholic Sexual Education

While a comprehensive analysis of how Catholic ethical pedagogy has engaged the structural issue of sexual violence is beyond the scope of this project, the fact that two out of the eight women I interviewed spoke about sexual violence that they experienced needs to be addressed. The “disconnect” that many of the young women felt between their Catholic faith and their sexuality became even wider and more precarious when sexual violence occurred. Across the

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47 Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 81.
board, the collaborators for this project expressed frustration with the lack of discussion about consent in their sexual education. However, what is particularly troubling is that the two women who disclosed that they had been assaulted described the negative role that their Catholic faith played in the processing of the assault, to the point where their perception of how the Church would respond to what happened to them actually contributed to victim-blaming and shame. Both young women exhibited a lack of agency when faced with coercion, and emphasized that they “didn’t know how to say no.” While one can argue that many cultural factors contribute to the prevalence of rape culture today (the promotion of hyper-masculinity, the normalization of sexual aggression in the media, and hetero-relational victimization, to name only a few), religious institutions are also responsible for producing precarity for young women when they leave topics like consent or sexual violence out of sexual education curricula.4849

Grace’s experience of forceful sex initiated by her boyfriend demonstrates how the emphasis on being a “pleasing” Catholic woman can lead to detrimental consequences when women feel unable to articulate their feelings or refuse a sexual experience. In her narrative, she directly correlated the expectation of constantly “saying yes” and being accommodating throughout her life with her inability to say no to the physical and sexual advances made upon her in the relationship. The gender messages that she received in her Polish Catholic community about dressing in a pleasing way (modestly), making sure that she didn’t cause conflict, and


49 According to feminist philosopher Judith Butler, precarity “designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.” Judith Butler, “Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics,” AIBR, Revista de Antropologia Iberoamericana 4, no. 3 (September-December 2009): x–xiii, ii.
making sure that everyone around her was happy didn’t give her the tools to “say no” or to assert her opinion about what level of sexual activity was comfortable for her in the relationship.\textsuperscript{50} She was nervous about “making it awkward” and was fearful that he would break up with her if she didn’t give in to his advances. When he started to have forceful sex with her, she started to panic, thinking to herself, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.” She told me that she didn’t know how to stand up for herself in the situation because he constantly insisted, “You are ready.” Listening to this story, the lack of agency that she felt was disheartening and troubling, especially since she could have been taught self-advocacy through her Church or home.

Social scientist Lynn M. Phillips describes the archetype of the “Pleasing Woman” and the consequences of promoting this model to young women in her book Flirting with Danger: Young Women’s Reflections on Sexuality and Domination. According to Phillip, the “Pleasing Woman” is pleasant, feminine, and subordinate to men. She is sexually “pure,” self-sacrificing for men and children, and is supposed to lack (or at least ignore) her own desires.\textsuperscript{51} Through the messages sent to her at home and by her Polish Catholic community about being a “Pleasing (Catholic) Woman,” Grace internalized the idea that her “good” womanhood rests upon denying her own desires within a relationship. Grace told me that she had sex with her boyfriend “because it’s what he wanted in the relationship.” Even though she was reluctant to have her first sexual intercourse with him, she told me, “When you’re in bed with someone, it’s uncomfortable to be like, ‘No this is my body, and I don’t want you touching me like that.’”

\textsuperscript{50} As I discussed in Chapter Two, this lack of agency relates to the idea of receptivity, modeled by Mary, that is promoted by the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

\textsuperscript{51} Phillips, Flirting with Danger, 39.
Catholic parents and educators have a responsibility to teach young women like Grace that this type of assertion and self-advocacy is not only good but just.

According to Phillips’ analysis, the Pleasing Woman’s socially-expected fragility and “innocence” equates any form of sexual expression with guilt. Grace’s guilt after her sexual abuse was compounded by the fact that she thought that she was a sinful woman in the eyes of the Church and that she “betrayed God” by having pre-marital sex in the first place. Not only did she think that by having pre-marital sex she committed a grave sin that did not warrant absolution, but that since she grew up in a Catholic environment, she somehow deserved the consequence of abuse since she “should have been able to say no” to sexual activity to begin with. This type of internal victim-blaming ignores the fact that she was sexually assaulted and instead focuses on the fact that she “did this to herself” by having pre-marital sex. It was not until Grace’s involvement in Campus Ministry in college that she began changing her perception of how her Catholic faith could be a positive influence in processing the assault. She reflected,

> Coming to [college] and being told that it’s okay to stand up for yourself and that to serve as a member of the [Catholic] community you must embody a faith that does justice made me realize that I’m actually not a bad person by the Church.

Still, she laments that not having a good sexual education that taught her about sexual violence and the idea of consent “emphasizes the feeling of betrayal towards the Catholic Church.” For Grace, the lessons about sexual justice and agency came a little too late to avoid these feelings of self-blame and betrayal by her Catholic faith.

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52 Sexual assault advocacy programs teach that one should use the language of the survivor when speaking about the sexual violence they experienced. Thus, I am using the terms “abuse” and “assault” only when the collaborators explicitly named these terms to define their own experience.
When Jade described her experience of sexual assault on vacation after her sophomore year of high school, she mentioned the heavy influence of media sources (specifically MTV *Spring Break* and *Girls Gone Wild*) on her perception of what it means to be a woman in control of her sexuality. These media sources took the place of the Catholic institutions in her life when it came to sexual education, but at the same time failed to provide enough information to know what to do when the “screen goes dark” and you feel out of control in a sexual experience. The MTV shows she watched set “a certain standard about adulthood—this kind of rebellious, do what you want mentality,” she remarked. During her teenage years, she sought to emulate the kind of rebellious, sexually-liberated woman she saw on TV and in music videos, an archetype that Lynn Phillips calls “The Together Woman.” The Together Woman is mature, sexually experienced, fully autonomous, and entitled to sex without personal responsibility.\(^53\) The Together Woman can and must “have it all,” as her foremothers from the second-wave feminist movement promised.

Jade attempted to be “The Together Woman” throughout her teenage years, and sought to maintain this image even after she was assaulted. She confided,

> I was playing this kind of game: “I’m liberated, I do what I want.” I [acted like I was] sexually sophisticated and yet I was extremely immature. It was very psychological—I would gain power by asserting [myself] and if the other person showed vulnerability then I got the power.

Thus, in order to preserve her power in a situation where she was left extremely vulnerable, Jade told me that she “normalized” her assault. She told her friends on vacation with her that the sexual activity she took part in with the older boy was “no big deal” and decided to pretend as if she chose it, in order to seem mature and liberated. Phillips argues that the “Together Woman

\(^{53}\) Phillips, *Flirting with Danger*, 47.
Discourse” promotes the idea that victimization is “an admission of failure,” and so many young women refuse to admit that they experienced unwanted sexual contact in order to avoid seeming naïve or “dumb.”

For Jade, the “Together Woman” façade only lasted for so long—she ended up experiencing deep depression, and didn’t talk about the experience with anyone in her Catholic community because of the “split” she felt between her faith and her sexuality.

Unfortunately, stories of sexual violence like the ones told by Grace and Jade are not uncommon, especially for teen and college-aged women. Studies on sexual violence have shown that from a quarter to a third of all women experience some type of sexual abuse by the time they are eighteen, and as many as one-third of college-aged women will be victims of non-consensual sexual contact during their undergraduate careers. Catholic institutions are not immune from the widespread reality of sexual assaults taking place on college campuses, in parishes, or in high schools. In fact, I contend that by leaving sexual violence unaddressed in their sexual pedagogies, these Catholic institutions may be contributing to the prevalence of rape culture. Christian ethicists like Margaret Farley, Marvin Ellison, and Marie Fortune have incorporated discussions of consent into their sexual ethical frameworks, as I will highlight in the following chapter. However, the challenge for Catholic parents, educators, and leaders must be to take the academic research on such topics and “bring it to the ground” in a significant pedagogical way. The “disconnect” that young women may feel between their faith and their

54 Phillips, *Flirting with Danger*, 95.

sexual experiences must be addressed, lest they miss out on important moral lessons about media literacy and sexual violence.

4.2.2. What We Know Now: Some Thoughts for the Journey

As the interviews demonstrated, the narratives and messages given to young women and girls about gender, sex and sexuality in religious sexual education curricula can have lasting psychological, social, and moral impacts. Religious institutions such as parishes, homes and schools have the opportunity to provide young women with a sense of empowerment and support, especially as they are learning about their bodies and their sexuality. Unfortunately, these institutions are also able to produce precarity for young women by leaving topics out of sexual education curricula, or failing to address gender issues that currently affect young women and girls. Above all, Catholic young women and girls just want to be heard by the parents, educators and religious leaders in their lives. Only when adults in the Church are able to listen to the needs and experiences of Catholic young women—some of their most vulnerable members—can they provide them with the guidance they need to navigate issues surrounding gender, body-image, sex, and sexuality. In the following chapter, I will propose some ways in which Catholic sexual ethicists can re-imagine a liberating sexual ethic, based on what these interviews uncovered about what young women want and need from the Church.
CHAPTER FIVE
TOWARDS A LIBERATING EROS FOR CATHOLIC YOUNG WOMEN

“What would happen if women really realized all this stuff? We would feel good about ourselves and be sexually satisfied.”
—Joan

In any Christian ethical project, with every deconstruction must come an attempt at construction. The young women with whom I collaborated for this project are sources of practical wisdom. Their stories illumine the role that experience plays as a source for Catholic ethics. If we take them seriously, theologians and ethicists can begin to imagine theological sexual pedagogies that attend to the needs and concerns of many Catholic young women today. In this final chapter, I will identify the specifics needed for a Catholic sexual pedagogy that contributes to a “liberating Eros” for young women. To be clear, in this endeavor I do not intend to present a precise blueprint for Catholic sexual education curricula (though this kind of project may emerge as a result of this dissertation). Instead, borrowing from the mujerista notion of proyecto historico, I offer an “articulation springing from lived experience [of] the specifics needed for liberation.”

In other words, I will provide some concrete ways in which current Catholic sexual pedagogies can be restructured in order to promote intimate justice and erotic liberation for young women.

By developing some challenges for the Church about what kinds of narratives and experiences should be prioritized and included into theo-ethical discussions about sexuality,

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particularly female sexuality, I seek to provide suggestions for how the Church can give voice to young women who feel silenced or excluded from the body of Christ. Thus, in the following pages I will explore different ways in which the Church can accompany women on their journeys toward understanding their sexual identities in a place of healing, empowerment, and justice.

One of the primary goals of Christian sexual ethics should be to convey issues surrounding sexuality as issues of social justice, in addition to treating them as private, individual moral issues. According to Christian sexual ethicist Miguel De La Torre, justice-making involves “the fostering of non-oppressive structures,” which includes asking critical questions about power and inequality in sexual relationships. For Christian ethicist Anne Bathurst Gilson, justice “is about sharing power; it is about power-with.” Within intimate, sexual relationships, this involves creating standards for right relation and lovemaking that hold a preferential option for those groups whose voices are rarely heard in the creation of moral pedagogies; in this project, I identify one of these marginalized groups as Catholic young women and girls.

In this chapter, I will begin by summarizing what the collaborators for this project said that they wanted out of their Catholic sexual education, and their hopes for the future of Catholic sexual ethics. In the second section, I will discuss useful ways in which theologians and ethicists are constructing sexual ethical frameworks that encourage young women to delight in their sexuality and seek that which promotes their flourishing. Finally, I will propose five norms that I think are crucial to creating a just sexual education for Catholic young women.

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2 Miguel De La Torre, foreword to *A Lily Among the Thorns: Imagining a New Christian Sexuality* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), xiii.

5.1. What (Catholic) Women Want:

Hopes for the Future of Catholic Sexual Education

At the end of each interview, I asked the young women about their hopes for Catholic sexual education, based on the experiences they shared with me about their own instruction. I wanted to know, “What would you have liked Catholic leaders, parents, and teachers to have talked with you about regarding sex and sexuality?” Some of the common themes I noted in the previous chapter point to gaps within Catholic sexual pedagogies that can be addressed by providing young women with more information. These educational gaps are significant and troubling, such as the lack of comprehensive information about sexual health and wellness for young women and men alike. The story of Camille’s friend who didn’t realize that she had engaged in sexual intercourse is one shocking example of failure on the part of sexual educators to provide youth with information that can save them from harm.

Moreover, some of the themes signal a need for reform in the way that parents, teachers, and Church leaders portray and teach major ideas within Catholic sexual ethics. For example, Augustine’s long shadow over Catholic sexual ethics has ingrained the message that sex and sexual desire is sinful; this message has prevailed over the Catholic theological assertion of the beauty of the sexual body and the sacredness of sex. These miscommunications and long history of sex-negative theology point to a need for a more intentional and thick sexual education for Catholic youth, with particular attention paid to the way messages about sex, sexuality and gender are received. In this section, I will provide a few examples of things that the collaborators

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for this project said that they wanted or needed from their Catholic sexual education, and the ways they would construct a Catholic sexual ethic for the future.

5.1.1. Desire to Break the Silence about Sex and Sexual Wellness

For the most part, silence about important issues like sexual health and wellness, the “mechanics” of sexual intercourse, and sexual violence were the status quo for the young women I spoke with as they navigated the complex matrices of their adolescent lives. In their interviews, they insisted that as girls and young women, they need Catholic adults to be available and willing to have open conversations with them about sexual desire, their bodies, and healthy sexual relationships, even if it seems premature. Camille’s observation that she didn't think the adults in her life knew that her peers were sexually active points to a need for religious communities to have these conversations with youth early and often. Additionally, silence about sexual violence can lead to confusion about how to understand consent, which I will address later in this chapter. Grace told me that she wished that she had learned about sexual assault and the differences between a healthy and unhealthy relationship from a priest or her mother when she was younger, instead of as a college student, following a painful experience.

Alexandra echoed Camille’s concern about needing more information about sex and sexual health at an earlier age, stating that the Church needs to take a different approach to sexual education than “shielding kids because of their innocence.” She suggested that parents, teachers, and religious leaders talk about sexual desire and explain the “mechanics” of sex and different kinds of sexual activity, since “teenagers just become more curious.” She also wanted to know why the adults in her life believed that having sex before marriage would be harmful for

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5 Alexandra [pseud.], Interviewed by author, April 2, 2015, Chicago, Illinois.
her, instead of just saying, “don’t do this.” Developing sexual pedagogies that encourage adults to have specific and direct conversations with pre-teens and teens about sex does not negate the Church’s teaching about the immorality of pre-marital sex, but rather opens doors of communication with Catholic youth early so that they can be guided in their moral development as they confront multiple conflicting messages about sex and sexual relationships. In the case of Catholic young women and girls in particular, Avery told me that she wanted Church leaders and educators to “invite women to talk about their experiences,” since she realized that so often women aren’t asked to contribute to conversations about sexual ethics. Hopefully, this project serves an example of what it looks like to be a “listening Church,” attentive to the gendered experiences of young women and girls, which have often been overlooked or ignored.

5.1.2. Desire for Moral Autonomy in Matters of Sexuality

In each of the interviews, I noticed that in various forms the young women expressed a desire for moral autonomy—they wanted the adults in their lives to empower them to exhibit moral agency in matters of sexuality, rather than being told what to do. Thus, in imagining a sexual education that encourages their healthy moral and sexual development as young women, many of the collaborators told me that they wanted lessons that emphasized moral autonomy, and wanted to talk about sexual morality as more than just “black and white.” Some of these comments teetered on moral relativism, such as the following statement from Grace:

At the end of the day, if you consider [having premarital sex] a sin or not, it’s your personal opinion and your choice. And the way you are empowered to do so is your free
will. [...] You can’t just like willy-nilly tell people “Go have sex,” but at the same time you can’t tell them that they can’t.\textsuperscript{6}

In this statement, Grace understands sin as a matter of personal opinion, which is problematic since conversations about morality would no longer be possible if they are reduced to personal opinion. However, she is also emphasizing her own capacity for self-direction, based on her freedom of will, which is an integral part of moral development.

Psychologists have identified self-determination as important to the psychological, emotional, and sexual health of adolescent girls.\textsuperscript{7} Unfortunately, many adolescent girls experience diminished moral agency during this important time of their development due to the loss of their own authentic voice in favor of “socially acceptable” (read: pleasing) selves.\textsuperscript{8} For example, Grace and Anastasia always tried to be pleasing as girls by making sure that they behaved in ways that were accommodating to others; as a teenager, Grace later reflected that she didn’t know how to say “no” to people, even if she wanted to. In order to cultivate sexual self-determination among young women and girls, Catholic sexual pedagogies can empower girls to become thoughtful moral agents instead of assuming blind obedience to abstinence; in this way,

\textsuperscript{6} Grace [pseud.], Interviewed by author, October 7, 2015, Chicago, Illinois. Young women like Grace may be forced to express their beliefs about the morality of pre-marital sex in a relativistic way due to the fact that the Church does not provide adequate tools (i.e. moral principles from which to draw) to discern whether an individual act or the act in general is moral.


\textsuperscript{8} Doris M. Kieser, \textit{Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls: Embodied Flourishing} (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 90. Kieser attributes the pressure put on women and girls to be “pleasing” to the ideology of gender complementarity, which categorizes females as being inherently giving, nurturing, and receptive to their male counterparts.
they can start practicing the habits (virtues) for responsible decision-making about sexual activity and relationships.9

Instead of only hearing messages of “don’t do it” due to their abstinence-only education, the young women I spoke with told me that they wanted to talk about the morality of sexual activity in a more nuanced and complex way—they understood that sexual activity did not happen within a moral vacuum. Anastasia, who was very well versed in Church teaching about sexuality and gender, admitted that the Magisterium could not just say “you can do whatever you want now, there are no rules anymore,” yet she still wondered why the “moral gray area” wasn’t addressed more in the realm of sexual ethics. The “black and white” sexual morality that Anastasia felt being pushed in her youth group and at home caused her to rethink her role as a chastity leader, since she “didn’t want to be a hypocrite” like she saw in so many of her peers. Joan also expressed a desire for nuance within her sexual education when she told me that she wished she “had been taught variety and that there isn’t only one way of doing things.” The young women I spoke with didn’t want to be “bad Catholic girls,” but at the same time they wondered whether there was more than one way to express goodness, and if they could make decisions about their sexuality—apart from the decision to stay abstinent until marriage—that were holy and fulfilling.

5.1.3. Desire for Broader Categories for Female Sexuality

The dichotomous sexual archetypes available for Catholic women, the Madonna or the whore, the “good girl” or the “bad girl,” were harmful to the healthy development of the young women I spoke with for this project. They wanted to see more examples of how a Catholic woman can

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9 In part III of this chapter, I will discuss some virtues that can be developed in Catholic sexual education that keep in mind the vulnerabilities of young women and girls.
express her sexuality other than through the role of mother or virgin. They also wanted to talk about how they could still be a “good Catholic girl,” even though they had made the decision to be sexually active. Camille told me that if she were to teach Catholic sexual education, she’d stress that “it’s okay to be a sexual being” before marriage and that understanding what a healthy sexual relationship looks like is really important for women.10 Sarah told me that she wished that sexual education would go further than “saving yourself for one person”—she wanted to talk about how to have “healthy sex,” which she described as making sure that her partner respected her, and that she respected herself.11 In sum, the young women I spoke with wanted to voice their complex sexual desires and their opinions about healthy sexual relationships without being categorized as “bad” or impure. They also expressed a need for a more robust sexual education curriculum that wasn’t only focused on abstinence and virginity. Christian ethicist Melissa Browning echoes this concern, stating that abstinence-only sexual education “asks young people to wait for a fairy tale that is not true to life rather than teaching them to discern the conditions for a sexuality that is just and life-giving.”12 When young women find themselves acting outside of this fairy tale, they express having little to no criteria for how to practice good and holy behavior outside of virginity.

10 The official teachings of the Catholic Church about sexuality align with this statement—a person can express her sexuality in different ways other than sexual intercourse before marriage. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sexuality can be expressed in a general way as “the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.” Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Revised in Accordance with the Official Latin Text Promulgated by Pope John Paul II* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 2332. However, Church teaching would not go so far as to say that healthy sexual expression outside the context of marriage could include genital expression with a partner, as Camille and other collaborators suggested.

11 I will develop this idea of what makes sex “healthy” later in this chapter.

Current patriarchal discourse about sexuality is structured so that “morally upstanding girls do not talk about or demonstrate their sexuality,” Catholic feminist theologian Doris Kieser notes, because their “explicitly sexual, menstruating bodies are inappropriate for theological discussion.” The young women I interviewed for this project alluded to this discourse as they told me about their yearning to understand themselves as sexual beings, while at the same time getting the sense that this desire was inappropriate or taboo within Catholic educational settings. Grace expressed that she wanted to know herself as loved by God, even though she didn’t follow the delineated path set forth by the Church to reserve sexual intercourse for marriage. She, like the other collaborators for this project, wanted to be presented with broader categories for female sexuality other than motherhood or virginity.

In addition to their desires for a renewed Catholic sexual education, Avery and Jade also commented that in general, they would like for there to be “less of a gender separation between men and women in the Church,” since they observed that not everyone adheres to their assigned gender roles. As I noted in the previous chapter, the collaborators for this project didn’t feel encouraged to occupy leadership roles within their parishes when they were girls, and were disappointed that they were barred from the priesthood because they were female. When she reflected on how the Church could “do justice” for women, Grace said that critical questions about inclusion and the variety of female experiences that are silenced “need to be asked to the structure [the Vatican].” Jade affirmed this sentiment, mentioning that Catholicism “is a big tent and there are a lot of different perspectives.” This wish to talk about their varied experiences as

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13 Kieser, Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls, 155.

14 Avery [pseud.], Interviewed by author, August 27, 2015, Chicago, Illinois. Avery and Jade both described gender as a social construct that does not necessarily align with one’s biological sex. In particular, Avery described herself as having a strong “taste for androgyny.”
women in the Church was a thread that wove through all of the interviews; as Joan commented, “there are a variety of [sexual experiences] and that’s how God made us.”

5.2. Cultivating a Liberating Eros for Catholic Young Women

By listening to what Catholic young women want and need out of their sexual education and from the Church in general, theologians and ethicists can begin to construct sexual ethical frameworks that hold a preferential option for these vulnerable members of the community. I propose that one of the ways that Catholic sexual education can empower young women to delight in their own sexuality and bodies is by helping them cultivate a liberating Eros. Christian sexual ethicists who are critical of the sex-negative messages that run deep within Christian tradition and the effects that these messages have had on sexual minorities have developed theologies centered around Eros in order to promote intimate justice for all members of the Church. Additionally, feminist theologians have drawn from the natural law tradition in order to understand sexual flourishing in light of the particularities of women’s lives, while at the same time acknowledging universal goods that all humans share.

5.2.1. A Sexual Ethical Framework that Embraces Eros

Eros, the name for the god of sexual attraction in Greek mythology, was described by Plato as a vital force and a yearning for the Good that manifests itself physically through sex and sexual instinct, but is not limited to that form of expression since it is a metaphysical and spiritual desire. During the second-wave feminist movement in the late 1960s and 70s, feminist

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15 Though all of the young women identified themselves as heterosexual, many of the participants mentioned the experiences of LGBTQ persons that they knew, and expressed frustration and confusion about the Church’s teaching against homosexual sexual activity.

theologians and ethicists began to retrieve and re-claim *Eros* from what they identified as the patriarchal suppression of the erotic throughout the Christian tradition.

Marvin Ellison, an openly gay Christian sexual ethicist and ordained Presbyterian minister, observed that the Christian tradition has unjustly controlled the erotic expression of sexual and gender minorities and thus helped to shape the “prevailing body-denying, sex-negative paradigm of human sexuality” that exists in Western culture. This (malestream) theological suppression of erotic expression and yearning has particularly thwarted the holistic development of women and girls, sexual ethicists like Ellison have noted, since it is denying a vital, creative part of women and separating their minds and soul from their bodies. Based on the lack of discussion about sexual pleasure and sexual desire in the Catholic sexual pedagogies described by the young women I spoke with, the feminist retrieval of *Eros* can be useful for constructing a liberating Catholic sexual education.

Although it doesn’t approach the reclamation of *Eros* from a theological perspective, Black feminist Audre Lorde’s essay “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power” has been a foundational text for feminist theologians and ethicists concerned with the erotic liberation of women. Lorde understands *Eros* as “a lifeforce,” “creative energy empowered,” and the capacity for joy and deep connection that is embedded within each person. Lorde contends that by awakening the erotic within and drawing power from it, women are able to more fully love and

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18 I will discuss the importance of female sexual pleasure in section III of this chapter.

respect themselves. However, she explains that the erotic within women has been misunderstood and misappropriated as pornographic, which is the opposite of the erotic since it is “sensation without feeling.” According to Lorde, in order for any oppressive structure to perpetuate itself, it must “corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.” The corruption and distortion of female erotic power has resulted in women and girls not being able to trust their embodied knowledge and their own experiences.

This disconnect between women and their erotic power can be observed in self-doubt about experiences of sexual violence—“I shouldn’t have been in that position in the first place,” or relying on patriarchal interpretations of sexuality to control narratives about women’s bodies—“How could something that feels so good be so, so evil?” Through this repression of Eros, Lorde argues that women have “been raised to fear the YES within ourselves, our deepest cravings.” If the Church hopes to raise young women and girls who are not afraid of their own erotic desires (and of their own flesh), sexual pedagogies must be structured so as to facilitate erotic self-knowledge, as I will propose later in this chapter.

Christian sexual ethicists such as Carter Heyward, Marvin Ellison, and Anne Bathurst Gilson have defined Eros in relation to the Christian call to love God, self, and others. Carter Heyward, the frontrunner of the movement to elevate Eros within Christian theology and ethics, contends,

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The erotic is our most fully embodied experience of the love of God. As such, it is the source of our capacity for transcendence, the “crossing over” among ourselves, making connections between ourselves in relation. The erotic is the divine Spirit’s yearning, which is our most fully embodied experience of God as love.24

Here, Heyward is making a radical claim that the erotic is not something separate from or antithetical to our experience of the divine, but rather the most fully embodied experience of the divine that humans can have. This embrace of Eros as human’s experience of the love of God stands in opposition to Christian taboos around sex and sexuality as being something that can hinder or block a divine encounter.

Thus, by controlling the erotic and muting it in a misguided attempt to instill fear in youth about pre-marital sex by not talking about it, sex educators are separating youth from their ability to connect with the love of God, themselves, and others in and through their bodies and their sexuality. Of course, it is important that youth learn how to do this responsibly, as I will discuss later in this chapter through the encouragement of the virtues of prudence and appropriate distrust in sexual pedagogies. In this regard, embracing a liberating Eros means discussing moral norms for justice within sexual relationships in order to express what Anne Bathurst Gilson calls a “body-centered love marked by a yearning, a pushing and pulling toward erotic mutuality” for all.25

5.2.2. Sexual Flourishing for Young Women

Christian ethicists who advocate for a sexual ethical framework that embraces Eros do so because they believe that when the erotic within one’s self is nurtured and celebrated, it

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contributes to sexual flourishing, which can be described as “an embodiment of [humans’] relationship with the Divine.” As I outlined in Chapter Two, Catholic feminist ethicists such as Margaret Farley, Cristina Traina and Lisa Sowle Cahill have drawn from the natural law tradition in order to create sexual ethical frameworks that promote the holistic flourishing of women. This involves identifying universal human goods, such as reproduction, while at the same time accounting for women’s particular experiences living and seeking moral goodness within a patriarchal context. For Catholic young women, it is especially important to cultivate sexual pedagogies based on the particularities of their lives, since the androcentric sexual narratives they are currently being told are not reflective of their nuanced, vulnerable embodied experiences as young women.

In her foundational book *Sex, Gender & Christian Ethics*, Catholic ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill argues that Christian feminist ethicists must be able to define universal human goods that are foundational to sex and sexual relationships while also attending to the particular social and cultural bodily experiences of women. Responding to the postmodern turn made by many feminists to deconstruct any morally objective claims that can be made about biological sex, she criticizes that they “throw the baby out with the bathwater” and thus cannot make any claims about sexual justice or sexual freedom for women. She believes that it is possible and necessary to discuss shared goods that contribute to human sexual flourishing across cultures and time and also be critical of the ways in social constructions of gender are “parading around as timeless absolutes.” Taking into account particular experiences of women’s bodies and shared goods


that ought to be upheld in all relationships and communities, Cahill states that embodied sexual flourishing depends upon “the realization of the equality of the sexes, male and female; and in their sexual union, on the further values of reproduction, pleasure and intimacy.”

Gender inequality, the suppression of sexual pleasure (Eros), and patriarchal domination and violence are particular social, cultural, and ecclesial realities experienced by women that go against these shared universal values and so must be confronted in sexual ethical frameworks in order to promote the flourishing of women and girls.

In her book *Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls: Embodied Flourishing*, Catholic feminist theologian Doris Kieser draws from her experiences as a psychologist working with adolescent girls in order to propose ways in which Christian sexual ethical frameworks can promote the embodied flourishing of girls, given the specific social, psychological, and cultural forces at play in their sexual development. Like Cahill, Kieser believes that there must be a balance between the affirmation of universal goods and the representation of these goods in particular ways in theological and ethical conversations about sexuality. In addition, she heavily critiques the lack of attention paid to the variety of human sexual experiences, which has resulted in insufficient content for the sexual education of adolescent girls. Sexual flourishing, Kieser states, is “the integrated, complex reality of the deciding person in her physical, spiritual, affective, cognitive, and relational well-being: developing, choosing, and thriving in relationship with God.”

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28 Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, 110.


development of girls, Kieser argues that adolescent girls experience multiple barriers to flourishing based on their gender socialization (often expressed as benevolent sexism), societal and theological messages about female pleasure and desire, and lack of community support as they enter puberty and menarche.

Among Kieser’s recommendations for enhancing the sexual flourishing of adolescent girls, many of which I incorporate in the following section, is the “recognition that sexual development occurs within a communal context.”31 She states that adolescent girls need the support of parents, teachers, and the community as a whole in order to embrace their own erotic power, learn about their female sexual well-being and safety, and know how to develop healthy sexual relationships.32 The communal context in which adolescent girls are experiencing and learning about their own sexuality has an ability to impede their flourishing by privileging male sexual pleasure, failing to understand the developmental realities of adolescents in the 21st century (like the influence of media), and assuming heterosexuality—among many other things—in sexual pedagogies.33 Kieser warns,

When all sexual expression among adolescent females is viewed with suspicion, negatively framed, or silenced, girls learn early that their sexuality is dangerous and that they will be ostracized for non-normative sexual expression; that silence serves not to protect them sexually, but to isolate them.34

Thus, Catholic communities have a responsibility to their youth—especially young women—to provide more than risk-prevention sexual education paradigms; they ought to ensure that

31 Kieser, Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls, 156.
32 Kieser, Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls, 156.
33 Kieser, Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls, 149.
34 Kieser, Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls, 156.
Catholic young women and girls are able to flourish as sexual beings. In the following section, I will lay out some practical norms for the facilitation of such flourishing, given the concrete needs that young women have expressed in this project.

5.3. Practical Pedagogy: Norms for a Just Sexual Education

While not claiming that the young women I spoke with for this project point to a universal experience shared by Catholic young women in the United States, I argue that the similarities in their particular experiences and their desires for a different sexual education than the one they received warrants consideration for what can be improved or transformed in current Catholic sexual pedagogies. Thus, borrowing from Margaret A. Farley in her pivotal work *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, I am proposing the following norms for just sexual education within a Catholic ethical framework. As Farley stated, these norms are “not merely ideals; they are bottom-line requirements” for sexual pedagogies that will serve the holistic flourishing of Catholic young women.\(^\text{35}\) Although I have retrieved these norms with the needs of Catholic young women and girls in mind, I argue that the actualization of these norms in Catholic pedagogical frameworks will benefit both young women and men, since both are affected by misinformation about sex and lessons that enforce harmful gender stereotypes, albeit in different ways. This list is not exhaustive, but may serve as a starting point for theo-ethical discussions about pedagogies that can provide intimate justice for young Catholics.

5.3.1. Norm № 1: The Consistent Articulation of the Sexual Female Body as Sacred

Through dress code regulations at Catholic schools that unintentionally or intentionally result in the policing of some bodies over others (i.e. the curvy, pubescent female body) and the narratives told to young women and girls by Catholic adults and peers about the need to guard their sexual purity at all costs in order to avoid staining their moral character, young women may get the inaccurate idea that their sexual bodies are fundamentally dangerous, evil and in need of control.\(^{36}\) Theologically, while the body can certainly be a site of sin and risk, it can also (and most importantly) be a site of divine grace and goodness, particularly in regards to sexuality.\(^{37}\) In her 2017 book *Sex on Earth as it is in Heaven*, Catholic sexual ethicist Patricia Beattie Jung argues that despite Christianity’s “conflated heritage” surrounding body discourse, “It can be said *without question* that Christianity celebrates the body as good.”\(^{38}\) Jung describes the two parallel—though not contradictory—messages about the human body:

> Sometimes, Christians celebrate human embodiment, and even sexuality, as sacramental, that is, as a dimension of reality that enables God’s presence and grace to be made tangibly manifest in the world. Such claims have deep roots in Christian understandings of creation and redemption. At other times, Christians denigrate the body, and sexuality, treating it with suspicion and loathing. Such claims have deep roots in Christian understandings of sin and “the Fall.”\(^{39}\)

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\(^{36}\) Paradoxically, the body is understood as full of grace, pure, stainless, and divine *except for* when a woman expresses her sexuality in any context other than marriage (and even within marriage, if not open to procreation).


\(^{39}\) Jung, 13.
Unfortunately, the ways that the Catholic young women interviewed for this project understood theological messages about their bodies tended towards the latter understanding, with little to no acknowledgement of their female, sexual bodies as being full of grace or sacramental.

Thus, Catholic sexual pedagogies must be structured in ways that consistently and adamantly proclaim that the sexual female body is fundamentally sacred and good, rather than inherently dangerous and needing to be controlled.\textsuperscript{40} Though bodies can certainly be used in evil ways that promote sin and suffering, they were made for goodness and so must always be presented as such in Catholic educational environments. This theological point may seem obvious to those trained in Catholic theology and ethics, but the conversations I had with Catholic young women point to a major miscommunication about the theological understanding of the sexual body among young people today. The denigration of the sexual female body in particular has been the byproduct of centuries of patriarchal interpretations (that have relied upon essential gender and sexual dualisms) within Christian theology, which have disproportionately focused on the negative aspects of female sexuality and expression.\textsuperscript{41} These patriarchal

\textsuperscript{40} Christian ethicist James Nelson seeks to reintegrate embodiment into Christian sexual theology by deconstructing the mind/body dualism that exists in traditional Christian thought. In his writings he claims that by uplifting the rational mind as the ultimate expression of self and dismissing or condemning certain expressions of body, Christians are rejecting the fundamental meaning and message of the Incarnation. “The Incarnation—the complete unity of human and divine natures in the fully embodied Word—is nullified if we accept the Gnostic-influenced, anti-sexual attitudes of the Fathers and their theological successors.” James B Nelson, \textit{Between Two Gardens: Reflections on Sexuality and Religious Experience} (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 18-20.

\textsuperscript{41} Citing Barbara Hilker Andolsen’s article “Whose Sexuality, Whose Tradition? Women, Experience, and Roman Catholic Sexual Ethics,” \textit{Religion and Sexual Health: Ethical, Theological, and Clinical Perspectives}, ed. Ronald M Green and Earl E. Shelp, vol. 1 (Netherlands: Springer, 1992): 55-77, Doris Kieser states, “Ironically, while procreativity (which is located in the female capacity for pregnancy) has been very much privileged in the history of Christian sexual theology, females’ menstruating and reproducing sexual bodies, and any pleasure deriving therefrom, have been considered suspicious, when considered at all.” \textit{Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls}, 145.
interpretations must be condemned as being theologically problematic and harmful to the healthy spiritual, emotional and psychological development of young women and girls. Catholic sexual educators can avoid portraying the female body as dangerous or in more need to be controlled than male bodies by changing the way that modesty discussions are framed, and by helping young women and girls understand their bodies as sacred temples, while at the same time fostering the virtues of appropriate distrust and prudence.

Avery’s depiction of the body as temple, influenced by her love for the liturgy and religious architecture, can serve as a useful pedagogical tool to convey the beauty and sacredness of the female body. As Avery noted, a temple is “not cut off from the world [but] is a sacred space in relation to the world.” This symbolism originates from 1 Corinthians, where Paul admonishes the church in Corinth on matters of sexual immorality, particularly in the ways they are using their bodies. He asks,

Do you not know that your body is a temple (or sanctuary) of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.\(^\text{42}\)

Combating the spirit/body dualism prevalent in Hellenistic thought, Paul emphasizes the belief that divinity is revealed in and through the flesh, and so the body must be treated as a sacred place. This view of the body and its passions as holy and worthy of respect can teach young women and girls that God is intimately connected to their bodies in light of the Incarnation. When Jesus Christ became fully human, fully embodied, and able to experience the myriad of human bodily experiences, God revealed holiness in and through the flesh, and also revealed the body's ability to suffer. Catholic sexual pedagogies ought to help youth understand that they are

\(^{42}\) 1 Cor. 6:19-20 (NRSV).
able to participate in the Incarnation by expressing divine love in and through their bodies—this is an especially important and empowering message when we speak of vulnerable bodies, such as young female bodies.

Insofar as the body can be a site for divine revelation, it can also be a site of pain, suffering, and sin. Temples can be debased and destroyed; so too can bodies. Historically, female bodies have been especially subject to suffering and debasement, as a result of various kyriarchal structures and practices such as sex trafficking, pornography, and sexual violence. Catholic sexual education has the opportunity to denounce these practices, as well as any messages that contain somatophobia or fear of the flesh (especially female flesh) by naming the female body as a site of divinity and liberating Eros. Just as Catholic Womanist theologian Shawn Copeland named racism as "lethal to black bodies" and thus "to the body of Christ," so too is sexism and sexist language lethal to female bodies (especially black and brown female bodies). Like racism, sexism "spoils the spirit and insults the holy; it is idolatry," to borrow from Copeland's argument in her book Enfleshing Freedom.43

Although none of the young women interviewed for this project mentioned this source specifically, John Paul II’s Theology of the Body presents a very similar framework for understanding the body as sacred and designed for sexual goodness. However, as a feminist ethicist who is suspicious of the benevolent sexism present in Theology of the Body’s depiction of gender and sexual complementarity, I argue that young women and girls need a theology of the body that affirms varied sexual experiences that may depart from gendered assumptions about the female sexual body. As a psychologist and theologian concerned with the sexual

flourishing of adolescent girls, Doris Kieser explains the problem of gender and sexual complementarity well:

The [magisterial] conflation of sex and gender, coupled with an understanding of gender development void of concrete and particular realities of adolescent females, effectively objectifies adolescent females and locates all sexual meaning in their reproductive bodies. Such an objectification within a heteronormative assumption requires that females be feminine (in some externally defined way), regardless of their own perceptions and experiences of sex and gender.44

The young women I spoke with were negatively affected by the limitations placed on them due to restrictive gender norms, such as the lessons they learned about needing to be accommodating, quiet, and modest—the “tyranny of nice and kind,” as Barbara Blodgett puts it.45 Additionally, they struggled to always correlate their sexual bodies with reproduction, exemplified by Joan’s question “I don’t want a family, I don’t want to be tied down … is sexuality beautiful only in a certain context?”

Understanding the body as a sacred space requires that a person do whatever she or he can to protect it from harm. Therefore, careful to avoid any form of body-shaming or sexuality-shaming, Catholic educators and parents can teach youth how to exercise the virtues of appropriate distrust and prudence in order to honor the sacredness of their sexual bodies. In her book Constructing the Erotic: Sexual Ethics and Adolescent Girls, Christian ethicist Barbara Blodgett argues that instead of only encouraging adolescent girls to cultivate a liberating Eros, it

44 Kieser, Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls, 123.

is helpful to construct a sexual ethic that is based on teaching appropriate distrust.\textsuperscript{46} Blodgett identifies the social context in which adolescent girls are morally and psychologically maturing as ambiguous, sending them mixed messages about being female and having erotic feelings (influenced by kyriarchal and patriarchal social structures).\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, she suggests that by encouraging adolescent girls to develop appropriate distrust, they will be learn how to be vulnerable sexually only when proper trust between persons has been established.\textsuperscript{48} Blodgett holds that distrust is not necessarily the absence of trust, but “describes a different relational choice that still allows two people to act in concert but with more safeguards erected around their relationship.”\textsuperscript{49} Since adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to being coerced and manipulated by gendered power dynamics (and have not developed a mature sense of self-advocacy and moral agency), cultivating the practice of appropriate distrust can help Catholic girls journey through the precariousness of adolescent sexual development while still protecting their bodies from undue vulnerability.

In lieu of perpetuating double standards surrounding gendered sexual purity, theologian Doris Kieser suggests helping Catholic adolescent girls develop the virtue of prudence in the ways they choose to engage their sexual bodies. Encouraging the practice of prudence not only

\textsuperscript{46} Barbara Blodgett, \textit{Constructing the Erotic: Sexual Ethics and Adolescent Girls}, vii. Although I will not engage her argument here, I acknowledge her concerns that adolescent girls’ experience of the erotic is often anything but liberating, given that they are trying to understand their sexuality in the midst of a highly patriarchal environment that essentializes gender.

\textsuperscript{47} Blodgett, \textit{Constructing the Erotic}, 161.

\textsuperscript{48} For an example of what morally proper trust looks like, Blodgett turns to feminist philosopher Annette Baier, who has created a “trust test.” Her test has two conditions for determining whether trust is improper or proper: “that it can withstand to be made explicit, and that the trusted person be given a chance to withdraw.” Blodgett, \textit{Constructing the Erotic}, 167.

\textsuperscript{49} Blodgett, \textit{Constructing the Erotic}, 171.
fosters a constant habit of evaluating the morality of sexual actions and expressions, but also allows for young women and girls to develop self-determination and moral agency, a skill in which the collaborators for this project appeared to lack. Kieser identifies prudence (or practical wisdom) as an appropriate virtue for adolescents to cultivate given the often complex and confusing “embodied reality of sexual morality,” especially for young women. When articulating the sacredness of the female sexual body, lessons in cultivating prudence as a moral habit can reframe harmful gendered messages about modesty and purity into conversations about how to discern who and what to allow into sacred bodily space.

5.3.2. Norm № 2: Emphasis on the Goodness of Sex and Female Sexual Pleasure

Moral lessons about the goodness of the body ought to go hand in hand with the conviction that sex and sexual pleasure are good and gracious gifts from God. Like the body, these gifts can be used to harm the self and others, leading a person to sin and suffering, but they can also be understood as pathways to erotic liberation, particularly for women. Joan’s idealistic depiction of the Garden of Eden, where she described Adam and Eve having “lots of beautiful sex” was contrary to the messages that she internalized growing up in a Catholic environment, to the point where she thought that the Church taught that sex is evil. The same can be said for Alexandra, who wondered why “something that feels so good could be so, so evil.” Thus, Catholic sexual pedagogies must explicitly recognize the inherent goodness of sex and sexual expression before articulating the ways in which sexual desire or certain forms of sexual activity can lead to sin. In


this way, messages about sexual pleasure can empower Catholic young women and girls to view their sexual bodies and the pleasure that flows from them as an innate desire for relationship with God and others, rather than something that ought to be suppressed or denied.

Christian theologians have always interpreted the illustration of sexual desire and union in the second Genesis account—specifically the unashamed nakedness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and their union as one flesh—as good and the way God intended humans to express themselves.\textsuperscript{52} Joan was not wrong when she imagined the goodness of sex in the Garden of Eden, which was free from selfish or imbalanced desires (like dominance or coercion). In his 2016 post-synodal exhortation \textit{Amoris Laetitia} (The Joy of Love), Pope Francis echoed this sentiment regarding the joyful sexual union that was modeled in the Garden. He notes,

The very word “to be joined” or “to cleave”, in the original Hebrew [found in the Genesis 2 account], bespeaks a profound harmony, a closeness both physical and interior, to such an extent that the word is used to describe our union with God: “My soul clings to you” (Ps. 63:8).\textsuperscript{53}

Thus, the physical and spiritual union found in the sexual relationship between Adam and Eve is a small taste of humans’ capacity to be united with God. Although Pope Francis makes it clear that sexual intercourse is best within a conjugal union, he affirms that God created sexuality as a gift to God’s creatures that needs to be cultivated and directed from an early age.\textsuperscript{54} Sex education, he states, must therefore direct sexual desire through “a process of growth in self-knowledge and self-control capable of nurturing valuable capacities for joy and for loving

\textsuperscript{52} Genesis 2:18-25 (NRSV).


\textsuperscript{54} Pope Francis, \textit{Amoris laetitia}, par. 150.
This process not only involves teaching that sex is a gift from God designed to invoke joy and love, but also that sexual desire is integral to that gift, and must be explored by Catholic young women.

The topics that were not addressed in the collaborators’ narratives are just as significant as the topics that were. None of the young women I spoke with remembered learning about sexual pleasure as a positive aspect of sexual flourishing—on the contrary, the way that the young women described the Church’s teaching about sex primarily focused on procreation, with no concern for pleasure, though Alexandra and Anastasia did mention the unitive potential of sexual intercourse. As I noted in Chapter Two, Catholic feminist sexual ethicists like Christine Gudorf and Patricia Beattie Jung have noticed the absence of discussions about sexual pleasure more broadly and female sexual pleasure more specifically as a moral good within Catholic sexual ethics. Jung argues that the lack of attention to female pleasure in sexual relationships is a moral injustice, since it promotes a gendered power imbalance that thwarts the unity of the relational bond. Since the Church’s current construction of what makes for “good sex” (penile penetration and ejaculation) automatically includes male pleasure but does not always include female pleasure, Jung offers the critique that current Catholic moral discourse about sex “trivializes the unitive value of sexuality for women.”

If Catholic young women are not taught the goodness and importance of their own sexual pleasure, they may not explore what brings

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them delight and joy; or even worse, they may not realize that their sexual pleasure is valuable in an equitable partnership.\textsuperscript{57}

In her article “The Moral Significance of Female Orgasm,” Christian ethicist Mary Pellauer argues that by experiencing the gift of joy and pleasure in their bodies, women can deepen their relationships with others and the world around them. Discussing the particularly transcendental experience of orgasm, she poetically writes,

In one sense, whether orgasm is a gift from a partner is beside the point. Orgasm is a gift I receive from my own body. My very flesh has this capacity to burst me open to existence, to melt me down into a state in which my connections to the rest of the universe are not only felt, but felt as extremely pleasurable, as joyous.\textsuperscript{58}

Suppressing this joy and arousal by not speaking about it, or by discouraging girls from understanding what brings them delight in their own bodies inhibits their relationships with others as embodied beings. As Pellauer notes, “ecstasy spills over to the world outside the bed” by allowing the person experiencing ecstasy to see joy in all of God’s creation and resist those relationships that do not respect the importance of their pleasure as women.\textsuperscript{59} Catholic young women and girls can benefit from sexual pedagogies that frame orgasm as a gift from their own bodies, and can help them become aware of the importance of shared pleasure in their relationships.

In a patriarchal environment that often encourages women and girls to care for others at the expense of their own needs and desires, Catholic sexual pedagogies that nurture the

\textsuperscript{57} Within Judaism, the marriage contract (the \textit{ketubah}) upholds a woman’s right to sexual pleasure by obligating the male partner to satisfy his female partner sexually.


\textsuperscript{59} Mary Pellauer, “The Moral Significance of the FemaleOrgasm,” 181.
awareness of female bodies and what brings them pleasure can encourage girls to prioritize their own desires, so that they can recognize their worth as sexual persons. The ideology of gender complementarity within official Catholic teaching works to reinforce the receptivity and passivity of women, rather than assert agency and initiation. This gender stereotype hinders the ability of women to seek that which delights them, since their “feminine genius” dictates that they be primarily caregivers and nurturers of others, in accord with their natural gifts. However, if Christians understand sexuality in light of the Incarnation, then they must teach young women and girls to take an active role in bringing forth the divine in and through their own body and its passions. As theologian Anne Bathurst Gilson notes, “To the extent that we call forth God’s presence in our sexual pleasuring, we are participating in God’s sexuality. We are participating in making God incarnate; we are participating in the coming of God.” Conversely, denying or suppressing the discovery of this pleasure can result in a sexual pedagogy that teaches women to block this expression of the divine and hinder their own flourishing as Christians who are called to participate in the coming of God here on earth.

In the attempt to steer youth away from the vice of lust (a vice of excess), Catholic sexual pedagogies have over-corrected by failing to articulate the divine goodness of sex and sexual pleasure, resulting in a vice of deficiency. This deficit has an especially negative effect on young women and girls, who have been conditioned to embrace passivity (through the ideology of gender complementarity) and to ignore the importance of their own sexual pleasure in

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61 In her book *Sex on Earth as it is in Heaven*, Patricia Beattie Jung notes that Thomas Aquinas mentions this vice of deficiency in the *Summa Theologica*, naming it “insensibility.” However, he doesn’t seem to believe that this vice is of moral concern, since he presumed it was “not found in many, since men [sic] are more inclined to pleasure.” (II-II, Q. 153, art. 3.3).
relationships. In order to help youth nurture virtuous experiences of sexual pleasure within their own bodies and in their relationships with others, Catholic moral theology must construct new ways to emphasize the moral goodness of sexual pleasure while still encouraging “disciplines that curtail its lustful expression.” Sexual desire is holy insofar as it strengthens the relationship between oneself and God and oneself and others; it has the ability to express what is beautiful about the body, and draw persons towards relationship and unity. Unfortunately, when this message is not included in Catholic sexual pedagogies, young women and girls may not turn to adults in the Church for moral guidance about sexual decision-making, or deem the Church’s lessons irrelevant to their varied experiences of sexuality. As Christine Gudorf notes,

> Until we construct sex education programs in which we acknowledge to our children that sex is pleasurable, that the pleasure in sex can be a powerful positive force by supporting love and relationship and community, they will continue to disregard sex education programs.

Thus, in order to construct a sexual ethical framework that holds a preferential option for the needs and experiences of Catholic young women, Catholic sexual pedagogies must stress the importance and goodness of female sexual pleasure.

### 5.3.3. Norm № 3: Relation-Centered versus Act-Centered Language for “Sex-Positivity”

The section on sex-positivity in the previous chapter illuminated the enormous void that exists in the collaborators’ understanding of values and criteria for what makes sex good. These values can not only be mined from the Christian ethical tradition, but also point to core human values of what makes for right relationship and sexual flourishing. Although mutual consent is important

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62 Jung, *Sex on Earth as it is in Heaven*, 142.

(as I will address later in this chapter), it is not sufficient for sexual pedagogies that aim to take seriously the healthy spiritual, emotional, and psychological development of young women and girls. In an effort to stress an abstinence-only-until-marriage message, many Catholic pastoral programs do not discuss just and life-giving ways to engage in sexual activity until marriage preparation (often called pre-Cana). This omission leaves a large gap in between sexual education programs in elementary school and high school (assuming that there was some discussion of this during this time) and marriage preparation programs for Catholic youth to talk about how they should enter into right relationships with sexual partners. One of the ways that Catholic sexual education programs can remedy this is by having discussions with young people about what makes for “good sex” throughout each stage of development, asking the questions: “what does it look like, what does it value, and what does it reject?”

Christine Gudorf’s call for Christian sexual ethics to move from an act-centered ethic to a relation-centered ethic is a helpful way to frame discussions about the value and meaning of sexuality for youth. Contrary to the way that many abstinence-education programs present an “all or nothing” view of sexual activity, warning youth that a person’s morality can be determined by a single act (pre-marital sex), Gudorf proposes that adults help children at all levels develop the skills to “construct a responsible, satisfying sexual life for [themselves] both in the present and

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into the future.”\textsuperscript{65} This involves discussing sexual activity in terms of right relationship, identifying traits of healthy vs. unhealthy sexual relationships. Although this list is by no means exhaustive, I propose three criteria for “good sex” that Catholic sexual pedagogies can incorporate into their curricula that keeps in mind the needs of young women and girls. These criteria, which prescribe what Miguel De La Torre coins as orthoeros (correct erotic sex), are mutuality, gender equality (balance of power), and respect for persons, which includes respect for the other’s sexual health and autonomy.\textsuperscript{66}

5.3.3.1. Mutuality

Taking into account what Doris Kieser describes as the “current Western heteronormative social structure [which] supports a tacit relational bias toward male sexual privilege,” Catholic sexual pedagogies ought to emphasize mutuality in sexual relationships for them to be life-giving and just.\textsuperscript{67} The staggering statistics about the lack of pleasure that women experience during sex—26% of women in the U.S. state that they don’t regularly have orgasms and 23% report that sex is not pleasurable—point to a need to highlight the importance of mutuality in sexual relationships, especially if we are to take seriously the unitive aspect of sex, as I discussed earlier.

\textsuperscript{65} Christine Gudorf, \textit{Body, Sex, and Pleasure}, 157. Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre identifies the “acts-centered” rhetoric of the U.S. Religious Right in the late 20th century. He states, “In its campaign against sexual immorality, the U.S. Religious Right reduces sex to an act involving nothing more than the genitals, with emphasis placed on who you have sex with and the sexual act itself, rather than defining relationships in which sex can and should occur.” De La Torre, \textit{A Lily Among Thorns}, (xi).

\textsuperscript{66} De La Torre, \textit{A Lily Among the Thorns}, 73.

\textsuperscript{67} Kieser, \textit{Catholic Sexual Theology and Adolescent Girls}, 159.
in this chapter. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to placing others’ needs before their own, due to the social and theological pressure to be sexually available for males; socially through the pressure placed upon women and girls by popular culture to be sexually desirable for the male gaze, and theologically through the Magisterium’s theological anthropology of gender complementarity, which holds that a woman’s “feminine genius” places them distinctly in a service role, attending to men’s needs in general. In order for young women and girls to prioritize their own needs and desires to the extent that they prioritize those of their partners, discussions about good sex with Catholic youth must focus on mutuality.

In her book *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, Margaret A. Farley critiques traditional interpretations of heterosexual sex that “are steeped in images of the male as active and the female passive, the woman as receptacle and the man as fulfiller, the woman as ground and the man as seed.” She notes that scientific advancements in understanding the human reproductive system have shown us that there isn’t one reproductive organ that is active while the other is passive; on the contrary, both partners (in both heterosexual and homosexual

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69 For example, in his 1995 *Letter to Women* presented to the General Assembly of the United Nations, Pope John Paul II stated that “[There exists] a certain “help” which women, according to the Book of Genesis, are called to give men […] For in giving themselves to others each day women fulfill their deepest vocation. Perhaps more than men, women acknowledge the person, because they see persons with their hearts.” [https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html). See also the compilation of his Wednesday audiences, now referred to as *Theology of the Body*, as I referenced in Chapter Two.

70 Farley, *Just Love*, 221.
relationships) can demonstrate an “active receptivity and receptive activity.” Farley states,

[Mutuality] entails some form of activity and receptivity, giving and receiving—two sides of one shared reality on the part of and within both persons. It requires, to some degree, mutuality of desire, action, and response.

Practically, mutuality can be demonstrated by asking a sexual partner what he or she desires within the relationship and what brings him or her pleasure. This conversation can also be a way to ensure consent in each stage of a sexual encounter. Holding mutuality as a norm of good sex ensures that the goal of sexual activity be the spiritual, emotional and physical fulfillment of both partners, instead of the goal being ejaculation, which only prioritizes the male’s (physical) needs. Discussions about mutuality can help Catholic youth identify relationships in their own lives that take into account both partners, and can help young women and girls think about their own desires and needs in relationships.

5.3.3.2. Gender Equality (Balance of Power)

When a relationship is mutual, each person has a sense of the other’s dignity, regardless of sex or gender, and power is shared between partners. Thus, intertwined with the norm of mutuality, the second norm for good sex that I suggest be included in Catholic sexual pedagogies is gender equality, which involves an equal balance of power and vulnerability within relationships. Due to the influence of social media and the public recognition of patriarchal structures, practices and attitudes (by the activism of popular celebrities and the hard work of feminist activist movements and non-profit organizations) the third wave feminist movement has become widespread in

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71 Farley, *Just Love*, 221.

72 Farley, *Just Love*, 222.
popular culture today—especially among young women and girls. However, I argue that since what happens within intimate relationships is still largely viewed as a “private” matter and not a public or social justice issue (except in the case of sexual assault), there still exists a lack of discussion about imbalances of power that can take place in sexual relationships due to internalized heterosexist ideologies.

As Christian feminist ethicist Karen Lebacqz wrote in her article “Appropriate Vulnerability: a Sexual Ethic for Singles,” within sexual relationships people are particularly vulnerable. She writes, “Sexuality has to do with vulnerability. Eros, the desire for another, the passion that accompanies the wish for sexual expression, makes one vulnerable … capable of being wounded.” As I have noted throughout this chapter, adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable and capable of being wounded due to the gendered socialization that they receive through social and cultural messages to be agreeable and to avoid causing conflicts that might result in hurt feelings or a retraction of (male) desire. Psychologists Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan found that adolescent girls are faced with a “central relational crisis” when they disagree with authorities and disrupt relationships by speaking up for themselves; however, to not advocate for oneself inevitably leads to an imbalance of power in relationships and psychological confusion for young women. When these relationships are shaped and highly influenced by a

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73 Perhaps more than any other feminist movement in Western history, young girls are aware of the ways in which sexism can have an effect on their future careers, their reproductive choices, and the ways in which they choose to act or dress.


patriarchal culture that eroticizes a dominant/submissive model of sexuality, women and girls are in a precarious position to advocate for equal power in their sexual experiences.

Considering the importance of equality in relationships requires acknowledgement of all of the ways in which certain social groups have power over others; economic and social status, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and gender roles all carry with them socially constructed advantages of power and privilege that contribute to systems of oppression. As pioneering feminist theologians such as Elizabeth Johnson, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, Shawn Copeland and Mary Daly have sought to demonstrate in their work, religious institutions such as the Catholic Church are not immune from the social sin of sexism in particular; on the contrary, they have contributed to its power in many ways. Due to the pervasiveness of this social sin, it is crucial for Catholic pedagogies to acknowledge the ways in which sexism manifests itself not only in society at large, but also in the intimacies of a sexual relationship.

An abuse of power in a relationship can exhibit itself in a variety of forms: emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually, and can lead to dependency and limitation on the part of the person who is subject to such harmful power. According to the organization OneLove, a national movement that seeks to educate young people about abusive and unhealthy relationships, if one partner is overly jealous, manipulative, intense, or belittling of the other

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partner, it is a sign of an unhealthy or dangerous relationship. Rushing the pace of sexual activity, or asserting sexual dominance without regard for the other person’s needs or wants is a way that abusive power can manifest itself in the bedroom. Talking about these examples with youth can help them identify ways in which their own relationships are equal or unequal in power and vulnerability. As Margaret Farley notes, the requirement of equality in a sexual relationship “rules out treating the other as property, a commodity, or an element in market exchange.” In order to confront the social sin of sexism, in which the lord/father/male exhibits power over and against women and children, Catholic sexual pedagogies must reaffirm the equality and dignity of the sexually marginalized (in this case, women), and denounce harmful imbalances of power in sexual relationships.

5.3.3.3. Respect for Self and Partner

Lastly, drawing together the previous criteria of mutuality and gender equality, sex and sexual relationships can be holy and fulfilling if both partners practice respect for themselves and each other. In the sexual sphere, respect can be expressed by recognizing a person’s own bodily autonomy—their ability to make decisions about their body as well as the ability to make moral choices surrounding sexuality. Respect can also mean putting another’s own spiritual, psychological, emotional, and erotic flourishing at the same priority as one’s own. As I argued earlier in this chapter, Catholic sexual education can draw from incarnational theologies in order to affirm the sacredness and beauty of the body and sexual pleasure; from this starting point,

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78 Farley, Just Love, 223.
Catholic sexual education can help guide students to conclude that the sacramentality of the body demands respect and reverence, especially within an intimate relationship.

In her article “A Feminist Version of Respect for Persons,” Margaret Farley draws upon Immanuel Kant in order to claim that human beings demand respect because they are autonomous beings, and so are able to make moral choices by their own reason and will.\textsuperscript{79} The claim to bodily autonomy is particularly significant for the feminist movement as an “important bulwark in women’s struggle against exploitation and oppression.”\textsuperscript{80} A person’s autonomy obligates others to treat her always an end in herself, and never be used as mere means. Unfortunately, within patriarchal societies and cultures throughout the world, women’s bodies are often used as means to an end, objectified in order to provide pleasure and capital for men’s profit. Treating a woman with respect, therefore, entails recognizing her own moral agency and the dignity of her body. In sexual relationships, this means providing the other person with full disclosure about one’s intentions, respecting their ability to make decisions about their bodies based on all of the relevant information.\textsuperscript{81}

Farley does not stop at autonomy alone in defining the obligating features of personhood. Her understanding of autonomy is necessarily situated within a community, and so she believes that relationality defines humans just as much as moral autonomy does; in fact, the two are dependent on each other. In sexual relationships, individuals not only belong to themselves, but


\textsuperscript{80} Farley, “A Feminist Version of Respect for Persons,” 184.

\textsuperscript{81} Providing relevant information can include information about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or information about birth control, as well as a person’s intentions for the relationship.
also give themselves to another person, she notes. In their relationality, persons are ends in themselves (and so must be respected) “because they can know and be known, love and be loved, as both embodied and free.” Catholic sexual pedagogies can teach respect for persons by acknowledging both autonomy and relationality as central features of personhood. Respecting relationality in sexual relationships can be demonstrated by putting a partner’s own flourishing at the same priority as one’s own. A person can ask themselves, “Is the relationship bringing out the best characteristics and virtues in myself? In my partner?” In this way, Catholic youth can value their own abilities to love and know another person in an intimate way, and respect that feature in others as well.

5.3.4. Norm № 4: Critical Media Literacy

Young women like Jade, Camille, Grace and Sarah may have been able to navigate the messages they received through media about female sexuality in healthy ways if the adults in their lives had helped them develop critical media literacy skills. As I noted in the previous chapter, American teenagers are consuming media at such staggering rates (about nine hours a day, excluding time spent at school or for homework) that it is unrealistic to expect parents, teachers and religious leaders to always be able to monitor the sexual images, scenes and language that youth are receiving through various mediums. What Catholic educators and adults can do, however, is provide children and teens with the critical media literacy skills from an early age to

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be able to navigate morally ambiguous and often unrealistic messages about sex and sexuality.  

With these skills in place, media messages can be interpreted against a Christian moral framework that values human dignity, equality, and respect for persons—essentially, advocating for “justice between the sheets” (and on the screen).  

Catholic educators do not need to look far to find useful resources for teaching media literacy to youth, which can be communicated alongside basic principles of Catholic social teaching. One of these resources is Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization created to empower teachers, parents, and policymakers to help children navigate media and technology in healthy ways (conveyed succinctly by one of their core beliefs: "We can't cover their eyes but we can teach them to see"). Some of the ways they do this are by providing school communities with a digital citizenship curriculum for grades K-12, and giving parents tips on how to address violence, gender stereotypes, and sexualization in the media. In regards to gender and body image, they instruct adults to help youth "question assumptions about appearance" in the media, specifically by challenging stereotypes about gender and body types, and identifying examples of

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85 I borrowed this phrase from Christian ethicist Miguel De La Torre, whose new book Liberating Sexuality: Justice Between the Sheets, (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2016), challenges Christians to view issues of sexuality as social justice issues—beyond the misinterpreted “private realm” of the bedroom.

"gender-positive media."\textsuperscript{87} In order to navigate the highly sexualized content in media, they instruct parents to help both boys and girls understand that they are inherently valuable as people, not defined by their "attractiveness" or sexual desirability. One of the lessons for parents states, "Talk to your sons about how society sells girls short by over-valuing how sexy they look. Help boys understand that girls are \textit{human beings}, not sexual objects."\textsuperscript{88} This lesson can be paired with the foundational principle of Catholic social teaching: human dignity. This principle states that since all humans are made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26), every person ought to be treated with dignity and respect; the media's over-sexualization of women goes against this basic principle by treating women as objects, not as \textit{imago dei}.\textsuperscript{89}

Another principle of Catholic social teaching that can be taught alongside critical media literacy is the mandate for Christians to hold a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable. Although early social encyclicals promoted care and protection for the most vulnerable members of society, it wasn’t until the development of liberation theology in Latin America that theologians began to situate theology and ethics alongside the realities of the most poor and


\textsuperscript{88} "Sex, Gender, and Body Image,” Common Sense Media, accessed December 24, 2017, (emphasis mine).

\textsuperscript{89} The principle of human dignity can be found in various documents describing Catholic social teaching, such as Catholic Church, ed., \textit{Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church} (Città del Vaticano: Washington, D.C: Libreria Editrice Vaticana) and Thomas Massaro, \textit{Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action}, 2nd classroom ed (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012).
vulnerable in order to advocate for liberation. In the existing patriarchal culture in the U.S. (which is dominated by white males), racial and gender minorities are disproportionately affected by systems of structural oppression, which has subjected many to poverty, violence, and political and social vulnerability. Women’s bodies are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and dehumanization through the sexualization of their bodies in mainstream media and through pornography. This reality must be addressed in Catholic sexual pedagogies in order to bring about liberation for women and girls, in an effort to build the kingdom of God here on earth. One of the ways to do this is by giving Catholic youth the tools to identify messages about sex and sexuality in the media that hurt women and girls by promoting sexism and gender stereotypes.

The 2011 documentary film Miss Representation, which exposed the ways in which mainstream media sexualizes and objectifies women and promotes gender stereotypes, created The Representation Project in order to provide media literacy curricula to educators and parents. One of the central learning goals of the curriculum is for students to be able to “recognize the ways stereotypes of femininity (the quality and nature of the female sex) or masculinity (the quality and nature of the male sex) limit girls and boys.”

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91 Of course, there are also many messages in the media that deny the human dignity of LGBTQ persons, who are also severely affected by the heteronormative, patriarchal structures in power.

curriculum provides instructs students to find images of men and women from popular advertisements and list how the images portray men and women. Then, the students are prompted to enter into a discussion about gender stereotypes, and how they can be harmful. In order to evaluate and judge the “reality” behind advertisements, “reality” TV shows, or TV shows and movies in general, young people can learn to ask questions like, “What messages do you think this TV show/advertisement/music video is trying to send about women?” or “How are the characters being portrayed in this violent/sexual scene?” These types of exercises can guide Catholic youth to hold a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable by identifying the ways in which vulnerable bodies are being used and oppressed within popular culture. Only when sexism in the media is identified and critically analyzed can youth begin to imagine ways in which to transform unjust social structures that hurt women and girls.

5.3.5. Norm № 5: Sexual Violence Prevention Education

As I noted in the previous chapter, most secular feminist depictions of "sex-positivity" provide little to no specific criteria for what ought to be considered "positive" or good about sex other than the standard that sex must be mutually consensual. In the previous sections I have attempted to delineate a few more criteria for sex-positivity using a Christian framework, such as mutuality, gender equality and respect for persons. Nevertheless, despite the lack of a comprehensive description of what makes sex "positive" in many secular feminist discussions, they are not wrong in demanding that the topic of consent be a baseline requirement of any sexual education. Sexual violence prevention education that highlights the importance of mutual consent is an imperative component of any Christian sexual pedagogy due to the harm that sexual violence causes to the dignity of persons, especially women and girls.
Statistically, Catholic institutions are not immune from the widespread reality of sexual assaults taking place among adolescent and young adult populations—particularly on college campuses—and may in fact be contributing to the prevalence of rape culture by leaving sexual assault unaddressed in its sexual education. In fact, according to a recent article in the *National Catholic Reporter*, Catholic theologians and victim advocates argue that the Church’s silence on the issue—“combined with teachings and systems that contribute to a culture in which sexual violence against women is rampant”—makes the Church complicit. 93 Although sexual violence statistics are problematic due to the frequent lack of reporting, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) notes that women ages 18-24 are at an elevated risk of sexual violence compared to any other age group (which is almost the same age-range as the collaborators for this project, 18-25). 94 As the narratives provided by Jade and Grace reveal, both of whom told me that they experienced sexual violence, Catholic sexual education must be constructed in such a way that challenges and eliminates the Church's intended or unintended participation in a culture that promotes and tolerates gender-based violence. I argue that this involves constructing Catholic sexual pedagogies that prioritize consent-centered sexual violence prevention.

In her seven norms for "just sex," Margaret Farley recognizes the importance of consent in Christian sexual ethical frameworks. Sexual violence is prohibited by the norms "Do No

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Unjust Harm" and "Free Consent," both of which hinge on the moral conviction that all persons have a right to determine their own actions and their relationships, particularly in the sexual sphere.\textsuperscript{95} With this right comes an obligation to respect the moral autonomy of others, since humans are never to be treated as means to an end, but as ends in themselves.\textsuperscript{96} By respecting the right of all people to determine their own actions and relationships (i.e., being able to say “no” to unwanted sexual advances), Christians must understand free consent as a baseline requirement of justice in sexual activity. According to Farley, the norm of free consent means, “any harmful use of power against unwilling victims is never justified.”\textsuperscript{97} It also means that any “seduction and manipulation of persons who have limited capacity for choice because of immaturity, special dependency, or loss of ordinary power” is immoral.\textsuperscript{98} Thus, teaching Catholic youth about consent involves not only delineating the absolute right of persons to choose sexual actions and relationships without force or coercion, but also making it clear that consent cannot take place when there is an imbalance of power or a limited capacity for choice. This can happen when there is inequality among persons in a sexual relationship, such as the power differential between an adult and a minor, or when there are factors that limit a person’s capacity to make clear decisions, such as alcohol or drug consumption.

In her book \textit{Love Does No Harm: Sexual Ethics for the Rest of Us}, Rev. Marie M. Fortune identifies the patriarchal culture in which women and girls currently live and make

\textsuperscript{95} Farley, \textit{Just Love}, 219.

\textsuperscript{96} Farley, \textit{Just Love}, 218. Here, Farley is drawing from philosopher and ethicist Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative, which states that humans, as rational beings, must never be treated as a “means to an end.”

\textsuperscript{97} Farley, \textit{Just Love}, 219.

\textsuperscript{98} Farley, \textit{Just Love}, 219.
decisions as complicating women’s moral agency and limiting their ability to make free, consensual decisions in sexual relationships. She cites the dominant/submissive paradigm present in contemporary heterosexuality (similar to sociologist Lynn Phillips’ “Love Hurts” discourse) as contributing to young women’s loss of self in their intimate partnerships, and consequently the diminishment of their moral agency. Additionally, the sexual dualism that assigns passivity and receptivity to the female and activity to the male puts young women and girls in a vulnerable position when they are unable to advocate for themselves—unable to “say no” or to actively pursue liberating Eros during a crucial time in their sexual and spiritual development. Thus, Fortune advocates for a sexual ethic that challenges the dominant/submissive model of intimate relationships, particularly for the sake of women and girls, who often find themselves powerless and particularly vulnerable to forms of sexual violence exhibited through coercion, manipulation, threat, and physical force. For Fortune, authentic consent is only possible when all persons have “information, awareness, equal power, and the option to say ‘no’ without being punished as well as the option to say ‘yes.’”

Sexual pedagogies that articulate these ways in which consent can be practiced and understood is one of the first steps that Church leaders and educators can take to create a consent-centered sexual education.

Identifying the lack of assertiveness and self-advocacy skills in adolescent girls, clinical psychologist Lorelei Simpson Rowe and her colleagues at Southern Methodist University developed a training program to work with girls on “crucial defensive skills” for intimate

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100 Fortune, Love Does No Harm, 38.
relationships. One of the most alarming things that Simpson Rowe and her colleagues noticed about girls’ self-advocacy was that the girls in her program felt guilty and uncomfortable saying no, worried that they would hurt boys’ feelings, much like Grace described in her interview. She observed,

Girls have all this modeling for being nice and polite and caring and compassionate about others’ feelings. These are wonderful things—good characteristics. But because they’re so ingrained, a lot of women think this is how they’re supposed to be when faced with an unsafe situation, and they’re afraid of being seen as rude.

Based on my collaborators’ stories about learning how to be “pleasing” and needing to care for others in particular way due to their gender (often self-sacrificing), I argue that Catholic narratives about female sexuality are hindering young women and girls from being able to put up healthy boundaries in their relationships, just like Simpson Rowe noted. While it is important to emphasize that sexual violence is never the fault of the victim, Catholic sexual pedagogies can also teach young women and girls how to identify coercive behaviors and teach assertiveness as a matter of justice.

Catholic institutions can learn from the many secular sexual violence prevention education programs that currently exist—some funded by the government and others developed through non-profit organizations. For example, within the Greater Chicago area, the organization Rape Victim Advocates provides prevention education workshops to students in elementary school through college, teaching participants “how to identify elements of rape culture, identify

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and reduce risk factors, and become agents of change within their own communities.”¹⁰⁴ These programs are designed to educate youth by debunking common myths about who is affected by sexual violence, who are the perpetrators of sexual violence, and addressing victim-blaming rhetoric as harmful to the healing process of survivors. Of course, even the most comprehensive prevention education models will not always succeed in preventing sexual violence. However, providing young men and women with information about the nature of consent (the rights and duties they have when engaging in sexual activity) and affirming the dignity of survivors of sexual assault is a crucial step in empowering Catholic youth with knowledge about healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships.

5.4. “Justice Begins by Listening”:

Drawing Practical Wisdom from the Margins

In this chapter, I have attempted to construct norms and standards for Catholic sexual pedagogies that promote liberating Eros for young women and girls, and contribute to their sexual flourishing. By constructing a pedagogical framework based on the practical wisdom of Catholic young women and girls, I am modeling what I hope to be a sexual ethical project that takes into account the lived experiences and voices of those on the margins of society and the Church. Similarly, I hope that Catholic theologians and ethicists will acknowledge the importance of listening to the narratives and experiences of Catholic youth as they are creating frameworks for justice. When describing the role that feminist epistemology plays in constructing new moral frameworks, philosopher Iris Marion Young affirms that “a sense of justice arises not from

looking [on from a distance], but … from listening.” Thus, in order to create Catholic sexual pedagogies that reflect a feminist, liberationist commitment, Church leaders, parents, teachers, and scholars must begin with “hearing silence,” and then asking those on the margins to speak from their particular spaces of suffering, questioning, and yearning.

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105 Iris Marion Young, as quoted in Marvin Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 11.

106 Barbara Hilkert Andolsen used this phrase in her article “Whose Sexuality? Whose Tradition? Women, Experience, and Roman Catholic Sexual Ethics” when she describes the need for a feminist Judaism.
CONCLUSION

#TELLITTOFRANCIS: LISTENING TO THE EMBODIED TRUTHS OF CATHOLIC YOUNG WOMEN

As I am writing this conclusion, the Vatican is preparing for the XV Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops concerning the topic of Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment. Surveys and discussion boards are being posted on social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram asking Catholic youth from around the world to join in the pre-synodal conversation by offering their thoughts and insights on what they need from the Church as young people. Some of the questions for youth on the synod’s website and corresponding Facebook page include, “In what manner does the Church listen to the lived situations of young people?”; “What do young people really ask of the Church in your country/countries today?”; and “What formation is offered to support the engagement of young people in society and civil life, for the common good?”¹ In his social media invitation to young people—calling for responses from both active and inactive members of the Church—Pope Francis asks that they use the hashtag #TellittoFrancis.

This type of widespread digital conversation is a promising opportunity for the Church to become a “listening Church,” as I described in Chapter One, and may present an opportunity for

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the Magisterium to “hear silence,” and then ask for those on the margins of the Church to tell their stories. As theologian Rebecca Chopp so rightly notes, language is political, and the act of prioritizing the voices of those who have been silenced has the potential for “emancipatory transformation.”

Although the questions being asked for the pre-synodal gathering are not specific to Catholic sexual education or gender formation, discussions and topics that youth bring to social media may touch on these issues. My hope is that Catholic young women who feel excluded from the Church, like many of the collaborators for this project, feel welcome to take part in the conversation and share their stories.

In this project, I sought to prioritize the role of experience in Catholic ethics by inviting Catholic young women into a conversation in which they are given space to reflect on the sexual narratives told to them throughout their lives, and express feelings and experiences in an open, safe environment. I believe that this work at the intersection of gender, sexuality, ethics and ethnography is essential to the field of Catholic sexual ethics because it brings new stories forward about the experiences of young women and girls, and treats them as sources of practical wisdom. As I have shown in the previous chapters, the stories shared by the collaborators for this project have shed light on the ways in which patriarchy functions in church and culture and the ways in which Catholic pedagogical strategies have often been oppressive and damaging to the healthy sexual flourishing of young women and girls.

In envisioning the final goal of this project, I hope that Church leaders, teachers, and parents begin to critically reflect on the ways in which we are educating young women and girls in the areas of sexual education and gender development. This critical engagement with

\[\text{Rebecca S Chopp, } \textit{The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language and God} \ (\text{Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Pub, 2002}), 3.\]
pedagogical narratives and materials may involve imagining new manuals for sexual education, creating groups of support and discussion for Catholic young women and girls in schools, homes and parishes, and inviting teachers and leaders with different perspectives and experiences into conversations about sexual education curricula development.

1. Limitations of Catholic Sexual Pedagogies

Despite the opportunities for “emancipatory transformation” of Catholic sexual pedagogies I have mentioned thus far, there are many hard limitations to the types of reform that can realistically take place on a pedagogical level. In many ways, official Church teaching does not allow for young women (and men) to exhibit the moral agency they may desire in matters of sexuality. Catholic sexual pedagogies may be limited in their ability to empower youth to become thoughtful moral agents about their sexuality and sexual activity, since the Church teaches that abstinence is the only morally righteous option for the expression of sexuality outside of marriage. However, I argue that even within the confines of official Church teaching, educators, parents, and Church leaders can help young women develop well-formed consciences and provide them with moral norms and guiding principles with which to “discern the conditions for a sexuality that is just and life-giving,” instead of utilizing “just don’t do it” scare-tactic strategies. A successful pedagogy is one that allows students to question, seek answers, and reach the intended learning goal themselves by prudently using the tools given to them.

To be clear, I believe that much work needs to be done in changing and reforming official Church teachings surrounding sexual ethics—work that has already been taken up by many of the Christian sexual ethicists I referenced throughout this dissertation. Although a comprehensive

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theo-ethical argument against Church teachings on gender, sex and sexuality that I believe are
damaging to the moral, psychological, and spiritual growth of Catholic young women is beyond
the scope of this project, my work here is not neutral. By listening to and prioritizing the needs
and desires of young women for ways to think ethically about having sex or enjoying sexual
pleasure outside of marriage, I am taking seriously their challenges to official Church teaching.
A truly sex-positive sexual ethic for young women must go beyond “don’t do it—but if you do,
here is how to avoid infection or pregnancy.” It must explore the conditions in which sex and the
experience of sexual pleasure can be good outside of marriage, a possibility that is in direct
opposition to Church teaching.

Although all of the collaborators for this project identified as heterosexual, it is important
that I note the overwhelmingly heteronormative ideology that pervades all of Church teaching on
sexuality. All of the Catholic sexual education manuals and Church documents that I reviewed
for this project assume heterosexuality, without consideration for any youth who may be sensing
their own non-heteronormative desires or identities. Many theologians and ethicists have noted
this silence within Christian sexual pedagogies, and sought to liberate Christian narratives from
these patterns of exclusion, or as Catholic ethicist Jeanine E. Viau puts it, “Queer crucifixions.”\(^4\)
Listening to the experiences and desires of Catholic young women who do not identify as
heterosexual, and who want the expression of their sexualities affirmed and validated within
Catholic sexual pedagogies would also pose a challenge to official Church teaching on sexuality.

\(^4\) This phrase comes from Jeanine E. Viau’s doctoral dissertation, “Breaking the Silence, Living
Resurrection: A Study with LGBTQ Student Activists at Two Urban Catholic Universities,” Loyola
University Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2014. Other theologians and ethicists who have critically analyzed
Christian sexual ethics in light of the experiences of queer persons include Marcella Althaus-Reid, Traci
West, Marvin Ellison, and James B. Nelson, to name only a few.
2. My Hopes for the “Good Catholic Girls”

In her book *Woman: Survivor in the Church*, theologian Joan Ohanneson beautifully reflects on women as survivors in the Catholic Church, proclaiming,

On reflection, it seems to many that [women] have survived the impossible! They have survived the messages they have received about their bodies, the guilt which almost drowned their souls. [...] They have survived as long-suffering mother, silent sister, dutiful daughter, uncomplaining domestic worker. They have survived their silence, their humility, their subservience. They have even survived their own church history, which, until now, has largely been a legacy of anonymity.\(^5\)

My hope is that Catholic young women and girls no longer feel as if they have merely survived in silence—as the dutiful daughter, the “good Catholic girl”—but have *thrived* within the Church. I hope that they do not feel constrained by sharp gender roles in which they are stuck with Madonna/whore alternatives, or by the cage of complementarity. I hope that they learn to embrace their own sexual pleasure as divine, and their bodies as sacred temples. I hope that, as Womanist ethicist Emilie M. Townes so eloquently notes, they may go about the business of “crafting moral thought that is not terrified of the curve of our hips, the arch of our backs [...] the deep moans and shouts of our ecstasies.”\(^6\) That they can gather in circles of other women and girls and talk about their experiences of sexuality and gather information from trusted sources.

When I think about the my hopes and wishes for the next generation of Catholic girls, I see and hear the faces and voices of the young women in the gender empowerment and equality club I moderated when I taught ethics and social justice at a local Catholic high school. Every week they told me about their desires to feel confident in their bodies and in their sexualities, and the struggles they faced trying to talk about these issues within Catholic environments. We, as a

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Church, as a society, need to do better and be better for them. They deserve to have liberating, comprehensive sexual pedagogies that contribute to their healthy sexual flourishing, and to a Church that values intimate justice. They deserve to have their voices heard loudly and strongly, with enough power to shatter any glass ceilings that stand in the way of their erotic liberation—even stained-glass ones.
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER
Deconstructing the “Good Catholic Girl”
A Research Project in Collaboration with Catholic Young Women

Calling Catholic Young Women!

Are you a Catholic young woman between the age of 18 and 25? Are you interested in the connection between your religion and sexuality? Are personal and communal stories important to you? **Do you have something important to say as a woman in the Church?**

This is a research study about the relationship between the experiences of Catholic young women and what they were taught about their sexuality as women in the Church. Participants will have the opportunity to talk about experiences in school, church, sexual education, and stories and lessons told to them about their sexuality.

If you are interested in any of these topics, please see the attached page for more information. Please contact Karen Ross at kross5@luc.edu if you are interested in participating or if you have any questions or concerns.
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
Loyola University Chicago

You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Karen Ross for a
dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Susan Ross in the Department of Theology at Loyola
University Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you are a Catholic female between the ages of 18 and
25, and have been raised in a Catholic context (either in a parish, school, or home). You also live
in or within fifteen miles of the city of Chicago OR did live in or within fifteen miles of the city
of Chicago in the last five years.

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to examine the pedagogical experiences of young Catholic women
who have been raised in a Catholic environment regarding their gender identity and sexuality.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to discuss your experiences of being raised in a
Catholic environment and how you were taught about your female gender identity and sexuality.
Questions will revolve around feelings about gender identity, sexual identity, and sexuality as a
young woman in the Catholic Church, memories of narratives and teachings prevalent in your
particular Catholic upbringing, and feelings about sexual relationships with yourself and others
as a result of those teachings and narratives. The interview should take no more than 90 minutes.
The interview will be audio-recorded.

Written consent indicates that you agree to participate in this research study. You will be given
a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Risks and Benefits:
There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those
experienced in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation, but this study may offer you an
opportunity to think about your experiences in new ways, potentially creating new possibilities
for healing and new personal insights. There is little to no research engaging young Catholic
women in the field of theological ethics, and so your stories will contribute to new knowledge in
the academy and in the Catholic Church. This study can potentially produce larger social benefits
within the Catholic Church and Catholic institutions such as parishes and schools by improving
their sexual education of young women.

Confidentiality:
You will be given a pseudonym and corresponding numerical code for this interview. All
recordings will be secured in a locked file cabinet in the investigator’s private residence. Digital
audio recordings will be saved on the investigator’s personal laptop and password protected.
Only the investigator will have access to these passwords. Audio-files will be deleted at the conclusion of this study.

I have employed a professional service, Verbal Ink, to complete the interview transcription. The company and their individual transcriptionists are subject to strict confidentiality agreements. The audio interview files will be shared with the service once they are given pseudonyms and numerical codes by me, the investigator.

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

**Contacts and Questions:**
If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Karen Ross at kross5@luc.edu or the faculty sponsor Dr. Susan Ross at sross1@luc.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

____________________________________________________
Signature of Participant Date

____________________________________________________
Signature of Researcher Date
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interviews will last 90 minutes. At 45 minutes, I will ask the participant if she wants to take a break. The interviews will be open-ended. This protocol is a guideline for the topics I want to cover with each participant. However, apart from the basic demographic questions, I will not ask every question to every participant, and follow-up questions may vary based on the participants’ responses.

**Basic/Demographic**

1. How old are you?
2. How would you describe your race and/or your ethnicity?
3. Are you currently living in Chicago or within 15 miles of the city? If not, did you live or attend school within 15 miles of the city in the last 5 years?
4. Are you currently in school? If not, when was the last time you were in school?
5. Tell me about the middle school and high school you attended. College? Public or private? Religious affiliation?
6. Tell me about your family.
7. How would you describe your religious background?

**Defining Gender, Sex and Sexuality/Sources and Experiences**

8. How do you define your sexuality? Sex? Gender?
9. Follow-up with questions that ask for meaning and clarification, for example, what does that mean to you? Or tell me more about that.
10. How did you come to know this about yourself? Tell me about an important moment for you.
11. How do you express your gender and sexuality?
12. Tell me about some of the experiences you have had related to your gender, sex, and/or sexuality.
   12.1. What is one of the best experiences you can remember? Tell me about it.
12.2. What is one of the hardest experiences you can remember? Tell me about it.

13. How has your family helped shape your gender and sexual identity? Your peers? Tell me about some of these experiences.

14. What were/are your sources of information about gender, sex and sexuality?

14.1. Tell me about the information you received/receive at home.

14.2. Tell me about the information you received/receive at school.

14.3. Other sources.

15. How do you define a healthy sexuality?

15.1. How did you come up with this?

15.2. How did you learn what a healthy sexuality is?

15.3. When you have a question about sex, gender, sexuality, or relationships, where do you go? Who do you ask?

16. What are/were your sources of support with issues of gender and sexuality? Family? Organizations? Friends? Teachers? Church?

**Religion (all participants must be Catholic women)**

17. Tell me more about your Catholic upbringing/background.


19. How has the Catholic tradition affected you?

20. Is your Catholic identity important to you? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

21. What stories or scriptures were important in your Catholic upbringing?

22. Which of these stories are important to you? Or which of these stories do you remember most clearly? Give me an example. Tell me the story. Why is this important to you? How does it connect to your experience?

23. Are there any stories that you remember about sex, gender or sexuality? Tell me the story. What do you think about this story?
Religious Education/Sexual Education

24. Tell me about the way that your family, school, or church talked to you about your sexuality.

24.1. Do you remember any stories or themes that were emphasized in your sexual education?

24.2. Who told you these stories?

25. Which of these stories/lessons do you remember most clearly? Give me an example. Tell me the story.

26. What did you learn about being a woman in the Catholic Church? How do you understand this today?

27. In your experience, what does Catholicism have to say about sex and sexuality?

28. What did you learn growing up?

28.1. Tell me about your experiences with Catholicism and sexuality.

28.2. What are your sources of information? For example?

29. In your experience, what does the Catholic Church teach women about their sexualities?

29.1. How do you know this?

29.2. Tell me about a story or lesson that stood out to you about female sexuality.

29.3. Who told the story? Where was it told?

29.4. Was it empowering? If yes, what made it empowering? If no, why not?

30. What experiences have you had with Catholic individuals or communities that were negative regarding your sexuality? Tell me about a specific experience you remember.

31. What experiences have you had with Catholic individuals or communities that were positive regarding your sexuality? Tell me about a specific experience you remember.

32. In your experience, how do people talk about the relationship between Catholic teaching and sexuality?

32.1. Tell me about a specific experience.
32.2. What was said about Church teaching?

33. How do you feel when people talk about the Catholic Church and female sexuality? Tell me about a time you felt this way.

34. What spiritual experiences have you had that were most affirming? Tell me about this experience.

35. How is spirituality empowering for you as a woman?

35.1. If not, what are sources of empowerment and affirmation for you?

35.2. When was the last time you felt this way? Tell me about this experience.

36. Is your spirituality connected to the way that you view sexual relationships? If yes, how so? If no, how are they disconnected?
BIBLIOGRAPHY


———. “The Bridegroom and the Bride: The Theological Anthropology of John Paul II and Its Relation to the Bible and Homosexuality.” In *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward*


VITA

Karen Elizabeth Ross was born in Kalamazoo, MI, where she attended Catholic schools from K–12th grade. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Dayton, where she majored in Religious Studies and minored in Sociology and Spanish. She also holds a Master of Arts in Theological Studies from the University of Dayton. At Loyola University Chicago, she was a research and teaching assistant in the Theology department for three years, and served as a teacher of record for three years. During her time in the doctoral program, she taught ethics for two years at Loyola Academy, a Jesuit college preparatory school in the northern Chicago suburbs, an experience that inspired her research for this dissertation project. She received the Arthur J. Schmitt Dissertation Fellowship for the 2017-2018 academic year, during which she served as a Retreat Intern at the Br. David Darst Center in Chicago, IL.

Regarding research, she has presented at local, regional, and national conferences, and is an active member of Catholic Theological Society of America and Society of Christian Ethics. She will present her dissertation research this summer in Sarajevo for the Third International Conference of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church. Her research interests include feminist theology, Catholic feminist ethics, Catholic sexual ethics, liberation theologies, and the intersection of adolescent development, gender theory and sexual ethics. She intends to publish her dissertation project for both academic and public audiences.