

CATHOLIC SOCIAL JUSTICE ALIGNS WITH REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

CONSCIENCE

THE MAGAZINE OF RELIGIOUS & REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM



The Theology Issue

VOL. 44 | NO. 1 | 2023



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Executive Editor

Jamie Manson

Managing Editor

Kate Hoeting

Design and Production

Wesley Wolfbear Pinkham
Rebekah Longoria

Design Concept

Design Action Collective

Copy Editor

Renée K. Gadoua

With Thanks To

John Becker
Dayspring Cabaniss
Molly Lesser
Steph Hanson-Quintana
Manuela Tironi
Ashley Wilson

Conscience is published by
Catholics for Choice
ISSN 0740-6835

2000 14th St. NW, Suite 104
PO Box 73008
Washington, DC 20056
+1 (202) 986-6093

[www.catholicsforchoice.org/
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Catholics for Choice — which serves the pro-choice Catholic majority — encounters, educates, and emboldens people of faith who support reproductive freedom.

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CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

“The profound Catholic division on abortion indicates that there is more than one reasonable stance in play,” theologian Lisa Fullam writes in this issue of *Conscience*. Since *Roe v. Wade* fell in June 2022, the Public Religion Research Institute found that support for abortion among U.S. Catholics has only increased, with a stunning 63% saying it should be legal in all or most cases and only 7% saying it should be illegal in all cases (which is the Catholic church’s official position).

Given that any questioning of the church’s position on abortion remains unmentionable within the walls of our church, we recognized a clear mandate to provide Catholics and other people of faith with the theological resources they need to either fortify their pro-choice values or help guide them in their discernment of the issue’s moral complexities.

In our theology issue, Craig A. Ford Jr., an assistant professor at St. Norbert College, starts with a persistent question: Since American bishops often support laws that will take away civil liberties, why should we stay Catholic? Theologian Emily Reimer-Barry names the many commonalities between the reproductive justice and Catholic social justice frameworks and contemplates whether abortion bans align with our faith tradition’s values. Lisa A. Fullam unpacks church tradition on conscience generally and abortion specifically. At the heart of her argument is the belief that “formation of conscience is a matter of growing into our lives as disciples of Jesus.” We also go into the Catholic history in an interview with Theresa A. Yugar, one of the leading experts on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, who explores why the prophetic, feminist Mexican nun had a deep intolerance for illogical reasoning.

These pieces are rich contributions to the legacy of resources built over the past 50 years at Catholics for Choice (an anniversary that we will celebrate in our next issue!). Together, they are the perfect companion for those longing to engage in thoughtful conversation about abortion. Our latest issue honors what progressive Catholics know intrinsically: Our tradition abounds in wisdom about equality, justice, and dignity — for those who have the intellectual courage to seek it.



Jamie Manson
Executive Editor



**WOMEN'S
RIGHTS
SHOULD NOT
STOP AT THE
DOOR OF THE
CATHOLIC
CHURCH**

CATHOLICS
CHOICE



On International Women's Day, Catholics for Choice partnered with Women's Ordination Conference to post these signs on St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. Photo Credit: Manuela Tironi/CFC.

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CONSCIENCE is our longest-running publication: CFC activists wrote the first issue on their communal typewriter in 1974. Since then, we've kept close tabs on all things related to religious and reproductive freedom. We're proud to feature writing by brilliant and audacious scholars, faith leaders, and everyday current (and former) Catholics in our biannual issues.

Join our community at catholicsforchoice.org/conscience-magazine.

In the past six months, we've closed the door on the year that overturned *Roe v. Wade* and started a new year that brings fresh challenges and opportunities. Catholics for Choice is ready to keep up the fight — from abortion access to marriage equality, and beyond.

Voters Care about Abortion

In November, outraged by the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, pro-choice voters turned out in droves across the country to express their views. Abortion rights turned out to be popular indeed: Catholics for Choice tracked ballot initiatives in six states — California, Vermont, Michigan, Kentucky, Nevada, and Montana — and despite the Catholic hierarchy's efforts, we won in every state.

“You have a situation in which Catholic conferences and bishops are spending millions and millions of dollars to pass legislation and amendments that the majority of the church does not want. I would invite the hierarchy to reflect on that — the way it's spending its money ... does not reflect the values and convictions of its own people.”

— CFC President Jamie Manson,
Religion News Service,
Nov. 9, 2022

CFC President Jamie Manson speaks at the launch event for the Equal Rights Amendment Caucus, launched by Rep. Cori Bush (MO-1) and Rep. Ayanna Pressley (MA-7) on March 28, 2023. Photo Credit: Aisha Biyo.

CFC Voices Are Loud & Proud

CFC spokespeople continued to receive recognition for prophetic witness about reproductive justice and women's rights in the church. In December, Religion News Service named CFC board member and faithful abortion provider Dr. Jennifer Villavicencio one of 15 “up-and-coming faith influencers.” Likewise, *USA Today* profiled Jamie as one of six religious leaders fighting to expand abortion access after *Roe v. Wade*.

“Lack of reproductive health care is causing enormous suffering and death, especially among marginalized communities we're supposed to prioritize as Catholics.”

— CFC President Jamie Manson,
USA Today, Feb. 13, 2023



To counterprotest, CFC activists plastered pro-choice messages along the route of the so-called “March for Life.”

Photo Credit: Re:Action/CFC.



Countering the ‘March for Life,’ Again

For January’s so-called “March for Life,” CFC followed last year’s historic projection on the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception with a series of powerful counterdemonstrations.

The highest-profile event was the peaceful disruption of an intimidating anti-choice protest outside Planned Parenthood of Metropolitan Washington, D.C.

Our activists unfurled from the rooftop of the health center banners that boldly proclaimed, “Most people of faith support legal abortion” and “Catholics support abortion providers, abortion seekers, abortion access.”

See page 32 for photos of the banner drop.

CFC and our spokespeople were also featured prominently and frequently in the media:

- “Midterms reinforce Christian voter trends on abortion, GOP,” Associated Press, Nov. 11, 2022.
- “The Fight to Treat Patients at Catholic Hospitals,” Rewire News Group, Dec. 5, 2022.
- “Despite Benedict’s many investigations into theologians, theology flourished,” *National Catholic Reporter*, Dec. 31, 2022.
- “Tyre Nichols police beating video prompts faith leaders to react with grief, goals,” Religion News Service, Jan. 28, 2023.
- “Critics Charge That Conservative Donors Are Pushing the American Catholic Church to the Right,” *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*, March 7, 2023.
- “Catholic Prayer App Hallow Platforming ‘Fringe Elements’ On Catholic Right,” VICE World News, March 7, 2023.



What Difference Does It Make?

Staying Catholic Despite the
Political Face of U.S. Catholicism



CRAIG A. FORD JR., PH.D.

Many of us are familiar with the official political stances of the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, particularly as seen in the positions of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). These official stances become all the more inflammatory to the extent that they touch the central nerve of the U.S. culture wars — topics related to gender equality, reproductive healthcare, and the dignity of LGBTQIA+ people. The USCCB takes a uniformly resistant posture, to say the least.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR WHOM?

In this vein, we can recall the USCCB's reaction to the Equality Act, a bill proposed to expand the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to include sexual orientation and gender identity. According to the USCCB, enacting such a law would result in numerous moral catastrophes (including, they claim, expanded abortion access). But if you read the USCCB's position statement, you'll find that the crux of their opposition to nondiscrimination protections for LGBTQIA+ people is their belief that such laws violate the religious liberty guaranteed by the First Amendment.

In fact, so uncompromising is this religious liberty objection that the USCCB raised it again against the Fairness for All Act, which expanded protections both for LGBTQIA+ people and people inclined to make religious liberty objections. The USCCB raised these objections even though the Fairness for All Act received support from other conservative religious organizations, like the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, who had opposed the Equality Act.

Unyielding political stances of the USCCB based in First Amendment religious liberty claims are very familiar to progressive Catholics who, like most other Americans, support abortion access. Another in the endless list of examples includes the protracted and historic opposition to the Affordable Care Act, which was substantively based on the claim that the law would expand abortion access as a component of reproductive healthcare.

But such stances place progressive Catholics in a difficult position.

For many, integrity is central among their concerns. How, after all, can we be a part of a religion that, on the one hand, preaches a preferential option for the poor and vulnerable, and, on the other, officially espouses positions that make the lives of women, LGBTQIA+ people, and other marginalized people harder?

The situation becomes even more alarming from my vantage point as a moral theologian because it's not just the politics of the USCCB that appear unyielding, it's their theology as well. Consider the USCCB's theological opposition to abortion, which is squarely based on the claim that every abortion constitutes an unjust killing of an innocent person, and — for that reason alone — cannot be countenanced in a society that values the dignity of each and every person.

So unyielding is this position that Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, wrote not only that abortion was the moral equivalent of murder, but also that when someone seeks abortions “out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family,” such situations, “however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being” (para. 58).

Unyielding political stances of the USCCB based in First Amendment religious liberty claims are very familiar to progressive Catholics who, like most other Americans, support abortion access.

The implication here is chilling: In the mind of this former pope, people have an obligation to carry pregnancies to term, even in the face of death.

With hardline positions like these, what difference does it make to remain in the Roman Catholic Church, especially as a layperson? Why not go to another religious community where the theological and political stances are not so intransigent — a community without such a tight alliance between the politics of the Roman Catholic Church and U.S. political conservatism?

The difference that our presence makes — and I see this as a reminder of something that we perhaps often forget — is that the possibility of any development in official Catholic teaching depends on the presence of those that model Jesus’ ministry of compassion within the church’s institutional context. This ministry of compassion does not consider adherence to doctrines the ultimate measure of fidelity, but instead leaves space for God to breathe new life into doctrines to achieve a deeper understanding of God’s will in light of our human journey toward holiness and flourishing.

CHRISTLIKE COMPASSION

I’d like to suggest that one way to model Christ’s compassionate presence is to, like Jesus, approach those who believe that their faith commits them to rigid moral positions and to ask them what difference

Compassion may open up new answers to these questions within the institutional context of the Roman Catholic Church, but only if progressive Catholics stay to witness to those sorts of answers.

it makes to take human experience seriously. In the context of abortion, this means asking what difference it makes when one takes seriously the experiences of pregnant people who believe that abortion is the right choice for them at a particular moment in their lives.

One observation, which any reasonable person should be able to make, is that because pregnancy is the singular medical condition where one form of human life is completely and totally dependent on the physical existence of a different person, moral analogies concerning abortion — especially those that invoke murder — fail very quickly.

At the very least, establishing that the life in the womb is a person — which is often the assumption of those who morally oppose abortion — is not by itself sufficient to require that that life in the womb must be carried to term, nor is it sufficient to establish, as John Paul II maintains, that the pregnant person must sacrifice their own life for the life in the womb.

One needs more arguments than that. Some Christian theologians — even those with impeccable “pro-life” credentials — recognize this difference and have declined to make those arguments. Take, for example, the 2015 book *Beyond the Abortion Wars* by Charles Camosy, a pro-life theologian who recognizes the personhood of the life in the womb but says that such personhood does not require a “duty to aid” the fetus when the pregnant person’s life is threatened or when a person has become pregnant because of sexual violence.

That’s one difference that taking the existence of the pregnant person seriously makes: It may guide people to notice possible deeper understandings of God’s will beyond official theological and political statements.

If situations like these make a deeper understanding of God’s will possible, what difference does a pregnant person’s experience make in other situations — for example, where the pregnant person does not believe that it is financially or emotionally wise to bring pregnancy to term at a certain time and so seeks to terminate the pregnancy in the

first trimester, when 93% of abortions occur (Pew 2023)? To be clear, much ink has been spilled on this question — and I hardly have the space to evaluate those arguments here — but my point doesn't require that I do so.

Instead, my point is to show that Christ's compassion may open up new answers to these questions within the institutional context of the Roman Catholic Church, but only if progressive Catholics stay to witness to those sorts of answers. That is, once again, the difference that our presence makes, not just to abortion but to matters related to other justice issues — racial justice and justice for LGBTQIA+ people included.

For the inspiration to persist in offering just such a compassionate presence, I can think of no better source than Scripture. And, of all places, I find inspiration in Jesus' encounter with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11). This may seem to be a strange place to find inspiration, though, especially because the final two verses are often weaponized against the compassionate stances progressive Catholics extend.

In the story, Jesus intervenes in a situation where religious leaders are about to stone a woman who has been caught in adultery. The leaders say to Jesus, "Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women" (8:5). In response, Jesus maintains that the only people qualified to throw stones at her are the sinless. The leaders retreat, leaving the woman alone with Jesus. Here are the final two verses:

"Jesus straightened up and said to her, 'Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?' She said, 'No one, sir.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you. Go your Way, and from now on do not sin again.'"

Those who take moral postures similar to the public positions of the USCCB and Pope John Paul II readily concede that Jesus had compassion for sinners. Given their public posture, the USCCB would say that there are some sinners whose life choices apparently deserve public intervention — women who choose to receive abortions and LGBTQIA+

people who choose to follow their consciences into intimacies with those of the same gender or who choose to live with integrity within the gender identity to which they feel called.

But people who take such moral postures go further, counseling that such compassion must always be tempered by the respect for God's will. One must always be compassionate, in other words, but one must also not retreat from the truth in doing so.

In principle, I have no problem with such an interpretation. But such an interpretation becomes problematic for me to the extent that "truth" is always understood to consist in the current official positions of the Roman Catholic Church.

This seems wrong for two reasons: First, as history has revealed, the official moral positions of the Roman Catholic Church have changed, sometimes even reversed, as the late federal judge and Catholic intellectual John Noonan famously demonstrated. But second, such an emphasis also misinterprets the story.

The story is not about how a moral law can be applied in such a way as to withhold an otherwise valid condemnation. The story's message is that we should avoid putting ourselves in the position of the religious leaders whose interpretation of the moral law is marked by uncompromising intransigence.

In other words, when we behold the moral decisions others make, we should identify with Jesus, who invites all of us into a deeper understanding of God's will. We must imitate his compassion.

What difference would it make in our advocacy for justice — reproductive and otherwise — if our church imitated Jesus rather than the religious leaders? The answer is all the difference in the world. But if we want to see it happen, we progressive Catholics need to be there to make the point. **C**

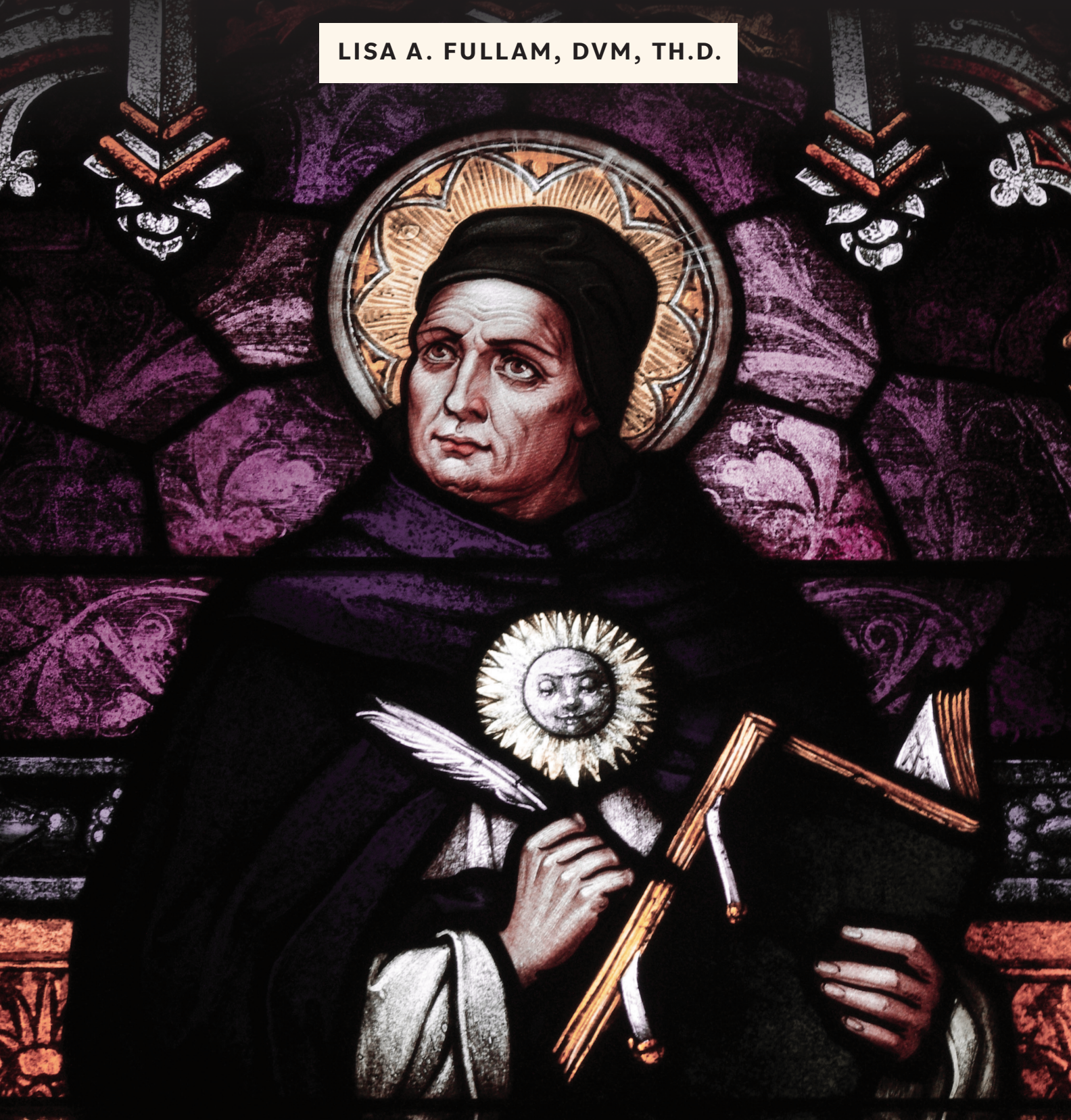


CRAIG A. FORD JR., PH.D. (*he/him*)
is assistant professor of theology and
religious studies at St. Norbert College.

Abortion in the Catholic Conscience

The Truth about Catholic Teaching

LISA A. FULLAM, DVM, TH.D.



To be a Catholic in the United States is to know that official Roman Catholic Church teaching often causes frustration with church leadership. This is usually not about issues that are central to the faith like the various elements of the creed, but about stickier moral matters like Communion for the divorced and remarried, same-sex marriage, capital punishment, women's ordination — the list can go on.

While official teaching on questions like these may be clear, for many Catholics that's not the end of the matter. Most Catholics are taught that we must always obey our conscience. In these moral matters, our conscience may disagree despite efforts to make peace with official church teaching. Here, I unpack some aspects of church tradition around conscience generally, then about one of the most contentious Catholic topics in our day: abortion.

CONSCIENCE

In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes of conscience as reflecting a law written on our hearts, a theme that was picked up in the Vatican II pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*:

“In the depths of [our] conscience, [we] detect a law which [we do] not impose upon [ourselves], but which holds [us] to obedience. ... For [we have in our] heart a law written by God; to obey it is [our] very dignity; according to it [we] will be judged. [Our] conscience is [our] most secret core and sanctuary. There [we are] alone with God, whose voice echoes in [our] depths. In a wonderful manner conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor” (para. 16).

This is a rich passage: While decisions of conscience are intrinsically matters of reason, there is a profound spiritual resonance in Catholic teaching on conscience. In conscience, we strive

to hear that echoing voice of God and respond to it in the moral questions of our lives. Our ongoing practice in discerning and acting is our work as disciples of Jesus.

Decisions of conscience are our best understanding of how God is calling us, here and now, in the particular situations of our lives. Further, conscience does not concern only acts that we do or fail to do, but is about the kind of people we strive to be and to become in light of our most deeply held values. Conscience calls us to justice, to courage, to solidarity with the poor and outcast.

We must never violate our conscience. Here's why: If after diligent prayer, thought, study, and consultation, our conscience tells us one thing, then acting otherwise is to go against what we believe is our best interpretation of God's voice echoing in our depths. Going against our conscience is always a sin — it always disrupts our relationship with God to violate conscience. Likewise, it is always wrong to order or force someone else to violate their conscience.

Here's the catch: None of us has direct, unmediated access to the mind of God. And since conscience is a rational process of interpreting and applying the call we hear, we can also make mistakes in moral reasoning. Or we can make mistakes of fact about a situation at hand. So here we are: obliged to obey conscience, even though we know we can be wrong.

This is where formation of conscience enters. A well-formed conscience is better at determining the morally right course of action and is eager to seek that truth. Forming conscience involves more than getting better at the nuts and bolts of moral reasoning. Formation of conscience is a matter of growing into our lives as disciples of Jesus.

How do we start? There are a host of resources for formation of conscience, but I can only offer here a brief list to consider: prayer; study of Scripture; study of science, history, and philosophy; imagination, including the arts; practices of social justice that reorient our moral vision in line with that of Jesus; pondering the witness of saints — official and

unofficial — who show us the way of Christ.

The church's official teaching claims a privileged place in the Catholic moral repertoire, too, since it represents our community's discernments across the centuries. Know what the church hierarchy teaches — but also know why and in what context those teachings arose, because often throughout history important teachings have changed.

The formation of conscience is not an individual or isolated process, but one undertaken in community. Our spiritual lives are communal: We gather to pray, to study, to encourage and persuade one another on the right course of action, especially on difficult questions.

Conscience formation is a reciprocal process — we form and are formed in dialogue with others. In the chapter on conscience in Ronald Hamel's and Kenneth Himes' 1989 *Introduction to Christian Ethics*, Bernard Häring writes that:

“the uniqueness and creativity of conscience is not just for one's own sake; it is for co-humanity in and for the reciprocity of consciences. Hence, discernment concerns the common good in Church and society, and the good of each of our fellowmen. ... We have to listen to the prophets even if they shake us and unmask our errors (270).”

Sometimes, official church teaching is presented to Catholics as binding on their consciences, that to oppose official teaching is proof that one's conscience is not rightly formed. There are central teachings of the faith, certainly, and disagreement with those do place one outside the church.

For example, if a person does not believe in God, or thinks Jesus was a notable moral teacher but not God's begotten Son, then they dissent on definitions that are central to Catholic identity.

But much of the time moral squabbles about church teachings are about matters on which there is significant doubt, or about which people

of goodwill disagree. This isn't a new problem: Deep in Catholic teaching exist tools for wrestling with doubtful or contested issues. Two of these are *epikeia* and *probabilism*.

Rooted in the work of Aristotle, *epikeia*, which is Greek for “reasonableness,” presumes that the intention of a lawmaker is to serve justice — where obeying a rule or law would create injustice, the just person disobeys, serving both justice and the (presumed) intention of the lawmaker to legislate for the common good.

St. Thomas Aquinas uses this example: If a madman lends his sword to another, then demands it back when in a fit of murderous rage, *epikeia* demands that the sword not be returned. The rule about returning goods to their owners on request is usually just, but not in this kind of situation. A more contemporary example might be whether one must stay with an abusive spouse: Usually it's a good idea to try to sustain a relationship that we promised would last our whole lives. However, when one partner abuses the other, then justice and an eye for the common good demand that we break the usually good rule in the name of self-defense or the defense of children. The rule does not apply.

Probabilism recognizes that in some complex moral questions, there is more than one reasonable stance, and says that one's conscience is free to hold any probable opinion, that is, one that is supported by knowledgeable parties or strong arguments. *Probabilism* shines when there is legitimate pluralism on a moral question, and perhaps especially where moral questions are developing as a matter of increasing knowledge or, sometimes, when under-recognized voices are finally being heeded.

What is probable, then, can change over time — while it may once have been reasonable to doubt anthropogenic climate change, the scientific evidence is now sufficiently strong that climate change denialism is no longer sensible.

These tools for difficult questions recognize that moral issues may not be simple, straightforward,



St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City Photo Credit: Tomas Anunziata/Pexels.

or settled once and for all. These are resources in Catholic theology that recognize the dynamism and complexity of moral life. They help us work through times and situations in which it can be hard to make out that voice that echoes in our depths.

ABORTION

Catholic magisterial teaching on abortion is very clear: Direct, intended termination of pregnancy from conception is condemned. The central issue in Catholic tradition is the question of the moral status of the embryo: When is a developing embryo to be considered a person, a bearer of rights, including a right to life?

This question has had a complicated history in Catholic tradition. For example, before the discovery of the mammalian egg in the 19th century, there was

no clear understanding that the woman provided much to the developing embryo beyond nourishment. “Quickening” (the point at which the woman becomes aware of fetal movement) was used as a marker for personhood by a number of pre-modern Christians, including Aquinas (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 64, a. 8, a.d 2). Some early church teaching

The profound Catholic division on abortion indicates that there is more than one reasonable stance in play.

also connected abortion to concealing sexual sin or regarded it as equivalent to killing babies by exposing them to the elements. In the contemporary era, ethicists propose various developmental markers like individuation (the point after which an embryo can no longer split into twins or combine with another embryo into a single organism), implantation into the uterus, a fetal heartbeat (about 10 weeks' gestation), or viability outside the uterus as reasonable markers for declaring fetal personhood.

These different stances demonstrate that fetal personhood is ultimately a philosophical determination, while biological development is a continuum from fertilization on, with several points as reasonable markers for personhood. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith made the distinction between the biological continuum development and the philosophical line of personhood explicit in its 1974 *Declaration on Procured Abortion*:

“There is not a unanimous tradition on [when a fetus becomes a human person] and authors are as yet in disagreement. For some it dates from the first instant; for others it could not at least precede nidation. It is not within the competence of science to decide between these views, because the existence of an immortal soul is not a question in its field. It is a philosophical problem.”

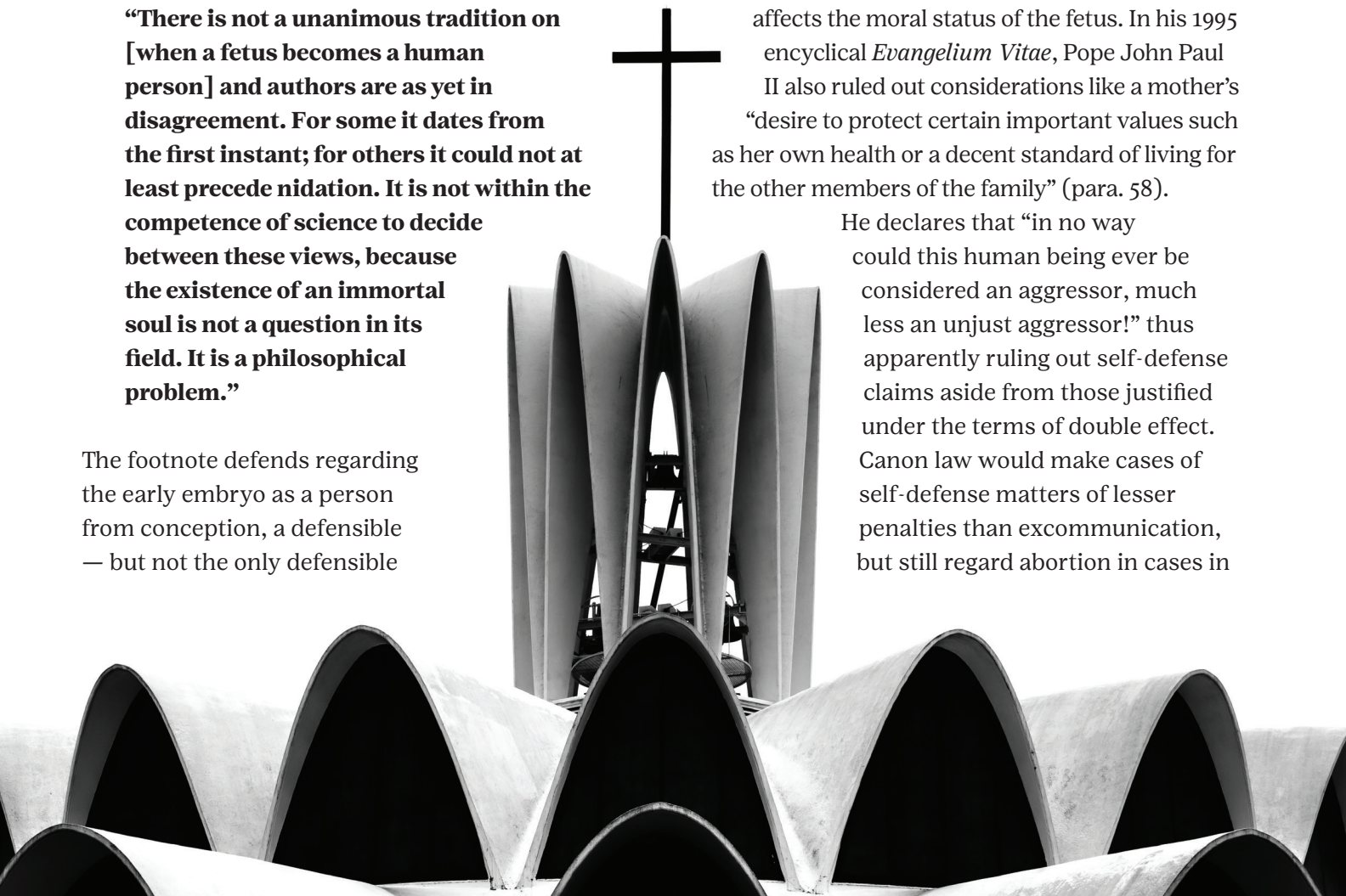
The footnote defends regarding the early embryo as a person from conception, a defensible — but not the only defensible

— stance. No subsequent Vatican document has authoritatively taught the personhood of the early embryo, despite declaring that biology makes such a stance compelling. Despite this nuance, abortion is utterly condemned: *Gaudium et Spes* declared that “abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes” (para. 51).

In canon law, procuring abortion imposes *latae sententiae* excommunication on the responsible parties. That is, they are excommunicated by the act itself, and until they seek absolution, are excluded from the sacraments. Some exceptions — being too young to be morally responsible, being mentally ill, or acting out of compulsion or great fear — mitigate the person's moral responsibility, but not the wrongness of the act itself, which is regarded as intrinsically evil (never justifiable under any circumstances) and gravely immoral.

Finally, since magisterial teaching focuses on personhood, there is no logical exception for cases of rape or incest, since neither crime against the mother affects the moral status of the fetus. In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II also ruled out considerations like a mother's “desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family” (para. 58).

He declares that “in no way could this human being ever be considered an aggressor, much less an unjust aggressor!” thus apparently ruling out self-defense claims aside from those justified under the terms of double effect. Canon law would make cases of self-defense matters of lesser penalties than excommunication, but still regard abortion in cases in



which the mother's life is threatened a matter of grave evil, even if not a matter of *latae sententiae* excommunication.

WHAT'S A GOOD CONSCIENCE TO DO?

First, magisterial teaching can never displace the role of conscience. It is with our decisions of conscience that we stand before God, after all, and appealing to authority never supplants the moral maturity that conscience demands.

Aquinas made this clear when he said that if your conscience puts you at odds with the official teaching of the church, it was better to die excommunicated than to violate conscience.

Second, listen to both sides with love. Catholics, regardless of how they feel about abortion, might all agree that no one should be forced by economic or other social forces into abortion. Catholic social teaching, with its emphasis on special care for the poor, should be a resource for both sides.

Third, it's past time that we examine the gaps in magisterial teaching on abortion. Most glaringly, magisterial teaching downplays (or for Pope John Paul II, discounts) the woman involved. The very nature of pregnancy requires a more subtle theology of pregnancy than we have and a more pastoral approach to abortion.

Fourth, remember *epikeia*. While Catholic tradition would not allow abortion to be regarded as a trivial choice — still there are times when justice requires us to affirm the rightness of terminating a pregnancy. Situations of rape or incest might be considered here. The question of maternal well-being and risk, physical and mental, should never be ignored in a truly Catholic approach to abortion because women are part of the common good.

Further, probabilism recognizes that some complex moral questions inspire more than one reasonable stance. One's conscience is free to hold any probable opinion — that is, one supported by knowledgeable parties or by strong arguments. The profound Catholic division on abortion indicates that there is more than one reasonable stance in play.

Fifth, remember the reciprocity of conscience. Open and respectful dialogue on difficult questions is hard in polarized times, but worth it. The flood of articles after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* telling how abortion restrictions threatened women's lives and health, even women with health conditions unrelated to pregnancy or whose pregnancies were medically doomed, highlighted one side of an emerging conversation in which reasonable people can learn from each other.

These dialogues are opportunities for insight on all sides. Hurling charges across protest lines simply hardens our hearts and those of the people we oppose. We would do well to emulate the nonviolent resistance of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. and speak the truth in love. After all, conscience formation is growth in discipleship. It does not mean that we abandon what we believe to be true — that would violate conscience — but that we aim for a community of love even — perhaps especially — in wrestling the hard questions. [L](#)



LISA A. FULLAM, DVM, TH.D.

is professor emerita of moral theology at Santa Clara University.

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The Shared Strengths of Catholic Social Teaching and Reproductive Justice

A Catholic Theologian on How They Align — and Where They Don't

EMILY REIMER-BARRY, PH.D.

As a scholar of Catholic sexual ethics, I see shared concerns in reproductive justice (RJ) and Catholic social teaching (CST). CST speaks to the importance of carrying forward Jesus' healing, inclusive, and justice-oriented ministries in a world that remains deeply polarized and unequal.

While RJ and CST are different, they both make claims about human rights and the challenges of building just communities. By listening to scholars from the RJ movement, I have come to appreciate in a deeper way how my Catholic faith compels me to work for gender justice in our broken world.

“Reproductive injustice” describes the reality of U.S. culture today; we are far from what Pope John Paul II called a “culture of life.” Instead, at least 1 in

7 children has experienced child abuse or neglect in the past year, and 1 in every 8 children is at risk of hunger, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

According to 2018 U.S. Census data, women of all races earned an average of 82 cents for every \$1 men earned. Among female undergraduate students, 20% have experienced a completed or attempted rape. On a typical day, domestic violence hotlines in the U.S. receive over 19,000 calls, the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence found in 2020.

Catholics cannot close our eyes to these realities, which create disproportionate suffering for women and children of color. Women making decisions about their fertility do so in this climate of structural injustice.

UNDERSTANDING REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE

Reproductive justice is a framework that teaches that coercion of pregnant people is wrong, structural barriers to healthcare equity are wrong, and social justice includes advocating for the moral agency of pregnant people and people who parent.

The framework brings attention to enslaved women's lack of bodily autonomy in U.S. history; the horrors of sterilization campaigns that targeted Black, Indigenous, and Latina women; the disproportionate rates of maternal and infant mortality communities of color face; and the difficulties of accessing affordable reproductive healthcare. By centering women of color and vulnerable pregnant people and their children, the RJ movement uplifts stories of survival, resilience, and flourishing.

From the beginning, RJ has encompassed much more than access to legal abortion. Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, two leading reproductive justice scholars, explain that a key aspect of the RJ movement is critiquing the “concept of choice,” which “masks the different economic, political, and environmental contexts in which women live their reproductive lives” (2017, 47).

This intersectional approach seeks honesty about the realities of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and heterosexism. As an example, RJ activists argue that parenthood should not be a right limited to the wealthy — many people seek abortions because they cannot afford to parent. A just society would imagine the care and support of children as a collective responsibility, but that is not the reality that many women experience today.

WHAT REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE AND CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING SHARE

It is not difficult to find areas of common ground between RJ and CST frameworks with regard to social welfare policies and the need to reform unjust structures. RJ and CST both understand the human person as social by nature and deserving of fair treatment.

SisterSong defines reproductive justice as “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”

Check out *SisterSong*, *the Afiya Center*, *SisterReach*, *In Our Own Voice*, and many more Black women-led organizations doing the work of reproductive justice.

Further, RJ and CST assert that bodily integrity is a fundamental human right, as described in Pope John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, or *Peace on Earth*.

Both frameworks articulate that good sex requires consent and mutual respect and that gender-based violence is contrary to human flourishing. Both promote the preferential concern for the vulnerable and emphasize the government's role in providing for the welfare of all.

Leaders of these movements support universal preschool, expansion of Medicaid, paid family leave, affordable childcare, access to high-quality prenatal and postnatal care, gun control legislation, and social programs like SNAP and the child tax credit.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING AND ABORTION BANS

Given the many shared strengths of RJ and CSJ, do abortion bans align with the principles of CST? When Catholic bishops support legal protections for the unborn, they unfairly undermine the moral agency of pregnant people — many of whom suffer because of the reproductive injustice endemic in our society. CST calls us to demonstrate special concern for the marginalized and poor, and abortion bans disproportionately impact poor pregnant people (Guttmacher Institute 2023).

Abortion bans are not mechanisms of support but rather lead to control and incarceration, further eroding trust between pregnant people, law enforcement, and healthcare providers (Goodwin 2020).

By supporting the criminalization of abortion, Catholic bishops have created confusion because CST claims that political persuasion is the best method for securing the common good. The church is not supposed to coerce, but rather persuade (Pope Paul VI 1971). In a pluralist society, conformity to church teaching cannot be the standard for mutual respect in the public square.

Regarding the appropriate role of the church with government, *Gaudium et Spes* declared that the church has “no proper mission in the political, economic, or social order” (para. 42).

Further, freedom from coercion in sexual relationships and explicit recognition of the equal rights of women are key components of CST (Pope John XXIII 1963). In Catholic teaching, women do not have instrumental value but rather intrinsic value. Such a claim should inform our approach to reproductive health and justice.

Studies by the Pew Research Center indicate that Catholic views on abortion are not monolithic (2020, 2022). Catholics understand the complexity of the issue and the importance of considering the moral agency of the pregnant person and her unique situation. A majority of Catholics in the pews support legal abortion at least in some cases, and only 1 in 10 believe that abortion should be illegal in all cases (Pew 2022).

Catholics understand that coercing pregnant people does not lead to justice. Instead, our Catholic faith compels us to think creatively about how best to accompany pregnant people in difficult discernments while working on social justice initiatives that will transform the structures that undermine women’s full participation in church and society. [E](#)



EMILY REIMER-BARRY, PH.D. (*she/her*) is a Catholic moral theologian and associate professor at the University of San Diego. She is writing a book on reproductive justice and the Catholic church.

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Nasir al-Mulk Mosque in Shiraz, Iran
Photo Credit: MehmetO/Alamy.

Our Religions Support Reproductive Freedom

This issue of *Conscience* focused a lot on Catholic theology. But don't just listen to Catholics: People with all sorts of religious backgrounds know that abortion should be legal.

ALIZA KAZMI, MPP

Islam Supports Reproductive Justice

Sexual health and free will in the Quran

The Islamic tenet of *hurma* demonstrates sacred bodily integrity — the idea that everyone has inviolable limits or boundaries that are personal and specific to them, as a matter of basic human rights and dignity.

This is at the core of why HEART, along with a majority of Muslims in America, believe that every person has the right and responsibility to make decisions over their own reproductive health — including ending or carrying pregnancy.

No Muslim is obligated to marry or reproduce. In fact,

people who have the ability to get pregnant have, historically, controlled pregnancy prevention and termination on a private basis. Numerous discussions of specific abortifacients in classical Islamic medical manuals indicate the normalcy of abortion in earlier times.

Generally, Islam uplifts free will — even being a Muslim is a choice free of compulsion (Quran 2:256). Further, Muslims believe that only God (not the government nor any other entity) can grant sovereignty to humans (3:26). While we trust that ultimately

all lies within God’s power, human agency is simultaneously foundational to the Quranic worldview. Free will is also intertwined with accountability at the personal, social, and religious levels based on the context of any decision a person makes. Muslims can choose abortion upon engaging different Islamic and medical guidance as well as considering our own needs, values, and principles.

God also commands Muslims to “take care of your own souls” as part of asserting each person’s individual accountability to God. We must ultimately be concerned with our responsibility over ourselves rather than the choices of others (Quran 5:105). Even Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was responsible for neither forgiveness nor retribution of others: Throughout the revelation, God reminds him that “to God is the reckoning” (6:107).

Muslim scholars have a range of approaches to abortion: Some forbid it, some disapprove without forbidding it, and some conditionally or even unconditionally permit it. Much of the discussion centers different interpretations of when ensoulment occurs.

However, viewpoints also reflect considerations such as the safety, health, and wellness of the pregnant person. The range of positions suggests flexibility in the way that Muslim societies have historically approached this issue. This diversity is in part due to the inherent fallibility of Islamic legal traditions, which are limited, human interpretations of the will of God, the All-Knower (2:255, 12:76). Muslims have options when it comes to determining which Islamic rules they use as guidance in their personal lives.

All Muslims are responsible to God as maintainers of justice

(4:135). We are compelled to understand and transform systemic injustices relating to economic and gender hierarchies — including through considering unique lived experiences related to health and safety. Historically, but especially now, the ability to control one’s own body is a privilege for some unavailable for many. This raises a serious spiritual and ethical concern for all Muslims because part of our faith in the oneness of God is to struggle toward human dignity and equity. [L](#)



ALIZA KAZMI, MPP (*she/her*)

is co-executive director of HEART (hearttogrow.org). She is a survivor and a Pakistani Shia

Muslim American. Born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area, Aliza has more than a decade of advocacy work experience and holds degrees from U.C. Berkeley and the University of Michigan.



REV. ERIKA FERGUSON

Our Spiritual Futures

Envisioning the world we hope to achieve

Imagine a future when the topic of abortion has ceased to be divisive. Imagine a time when abortion is no longer controversial within religious communities, and it is no longer the hot-button darling of partisan politics. How might we get there?

First, we need a public outcry about women's rights being taken away. The movement for reproductive health, rights, and justice must become the galvanizing issue in the United States. Acceptance of abortion would require religious leaders to experience a call to conscience, and after much dialogue, deep reflection, and prayer, these leaders' views would reflect the views of the communities they serve. Then, they might join political leaders to draft a reproductive manifesto that becomes the foundation for change.

Working together, our leaders can pass dramatic and inclusive laws based on a new framework of a combined religious, spiritual, and secular understanding of living.

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Sculptor Barnett Newman's Broken Obelisk adorns the entry and reflection pool at the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas, from which author Rev. Erika Ferguson received the Oscar Romero Award for her reproductive justice work.

Photo Credit: Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.



◀ In November 2022, Catholics for Choice gathered these indomitable faith leaders in Washington, D.C., to envision a future like the one Rev. Erika Ferguson (back row, fourth from the left) describes. Photo Credit: Jim Heine Photography/CFC.

Our society would prioritize ideas that center the rights of humanity in matters of reproductive health, rights, and justice. It would create a spiritual renaissance.

This high spiritual awareness, along with the recognition of the importance of women’s health and autonomy, would lead many religious leaders to reconsider their stance on abortion, and cause miracles to take place.

While this may sound far-fetched right now, my spiritual belief and my deep faith allow me to offer this vision of the modern-day miracle. As a minister for nearly 20 years with a focus on reproductive justice and a vow to support and lead a new wave of possibilities for us as religious people, my faith demands that I speak and teach about miracles.

We must work for all of us to move from a place of fear to a new land where deep, mature spiritual love lives. When love is in action, it requires justice, and in my spiritual life, justice looks like bodily autonomy.

I hold my work as a minister in the reproductive movement to be sacred. I believe it is entirely possible for each of us to have a high regard for the spiritual nature of freedom. This is my vision and the vow I make for a world that works for everyone. **E**



REV. ERIKA FERGUSON (*she/her*) is an interfaith minister who focuses on reproductive health, rights, and justice.

In Texas, she leads the Tubman Travel Project, which aids people seeking abortion care outside the state.

“My role as a spiritual leader involves advocating for the reproductive health and well-being of all.”

The Sixth & I Historic Synagogue in Washington, D.C. Photo Credit: Chon Kit Leong/Alamy.

RABBI JODIE SIFF

Tzedek Tzedek Tirdof

Justice, justice you shall pursue

Working as a Planned

Parenthood teen advocate was a transformative experience that shaped my decision to become a Reconstructionist rabbi who supports reproductive rights.

As I stood side by side with people of all faiths at pro-choice protests, I learned to listen to people's stories and experiences.

I found that many young people had complex and nuanced views about reproductive rights, shaped by their personal experiences and the experiences of people around them.

By listening to their stories, I came to better understand the range of factors that could influence perspectives on reproductive rights, and I was able to help people find their own authentic voices on these issues.

This understanding, in turn, inspired me to pursue a career in the rabbinate, where I could use my love of Jewish tradition as a platform to advocate for these issues and promote social justice.

In Reconstructionist Judaism, we believe in the importance of ethical decision-making and

the need to engage in ongoing dialogue with others. Today I belong to several interfaith clergy associations that require me to use the listening skills that I learned working as a teen advocate. My role as a spiritual leader involves advocating for the reproductive health and well-being of all.

As a rabbi, I believe in the importance of embracing change. I love that Judaism and the texts that form its foundation challenge me to find my voice in ancient tradition. The principal concept of *pikuach nefesh*, which holds that preserving human life is of the utmost importance, appears

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in several places in the Talmud, a rabbinic text of Jewish law and tradition.

In cases where a pregnancy threatens the life or health of the mother, Jewish law allows for abortion to save her life. This is based on the principle that the mother's life takes precedence over that of the fetus. Being able to read the text and interpret it as evolving is essential to my Jewish identity.

The commandment “tzedek tzedek tirdof,” translated as “justice, justice you shall pursue,” compels us to advocate for the health and well-being of all members of our community, including their reproductive health (Deuteronomy 16:20).

As a leader in the Jewish community, I feel it is my duty to pass these values on to future generations, l'dor v'dor, so that they too may work to create a more just and equitable world. **■**



**RABBI
JODIE SIFF**

(she/her)
grew up
at the
Recon-
structionist

Synagogue of the North Shore, New York, where she has served as rabbi for 24 years. It is her life's mission to guide individuals to create meaning through a Jewish lens, within the context of community.

ADVOCATE SPOTLIGHT

Donna Tarney

The Advocate Spotlight features the providers, activists, and advocates fighting for reproductive freedom. We spoke with Catholic educator Donna Tarney about why she advocates for abortion rights.

Consider two women, friends of mine, who share astoundingly similar stories. Both women (let's call them Jill and Sally) were cradle Catholics who already had children. Both women were beyond four months pregnant.

Both were told that their baby boys had rare, fatal brain conditions that meant the baby would be stillborn or survive only a few minutes after birth. My friends weighed the options their caring doctors presented.

Jill and her husband decided to continue the pregnancy. Sally and her husband decided the best option was abortion. Both babies died, and both families were devastated. Jill's local church supported her family throughout the process. Sally's church told her she was a sinner.

In 1986, when I was 16 years old, I found out I was pregnant. A cradle Catholic, I had aunts who were nuns, one uncle who was a priest, and another who was a deacon. The year before,


I had given an anti-abortion presentation in my religion class. My mother had died, and I was left with a father who repeatedly told my siblings and me that if we ever got pregnant, his home would not be our home. Talking with no one, I chose abortion. I did not tell another soul until I was in my 30s.

All over our country, situations like these play out on a daily basis. Catholics who love and live their faith, know church teachings, and truly value life face complicated pregnancies worsened by complicated lives. They struggle to discern whether to keep or end the pregnancy.

The Catholic church often provides platitudes — promises that God will be with us during suffering — but no other assistance. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly states that abortion is a sin, and choosing abortion will incur a “*latae sententiae*,” often translated as “automatic excommunication,” no matter the circumstances.

The child's life, even if that life ends shortly after birth, seems to be valued over the mental and physical health of the mother and her family.

The institutional church calls lots of other things sinful as well. Many Catholics, whether ordained or lay, focus on abortion while ignoring the myriad other "sins" within their own communities and families. They often forget that the catechism also mandates the civil authority to protect a person's freedom, especially in the realm of religious and moral matters.

The hierarchy celebrated when *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. Perhaps they do not understand that the Supreme Court's decision stands in direct opposition to our God-given right to exercise personal freedom. If church leaders and anti-choice Catholics want to live the Gospel, they should share their beliefs, pray for their souls, and leave the rest to God. This would be a radical step toward peace. May we all live to see that day. 



DONNA TARNEY

(she/her) is the former executive director of Call to Action, which challenges Catholics to act for justice and

build inclusive communities. Currently an annulment advocate, she earned a master of arts in religious education from Loyola University New Orleans and spent 22 years in Catholic education.



“Every human person, created in the image of God, has the natural right to be recognized as a free and responsible being. All owe to each other this duty of respect. The right to the exercise of freedom, especially in moral and religious matters, is an inalienable requirement of the dignity of the human person. This right must be recognized and protected by civil authority within the limits of the common good and public order.”

— *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1738

God Gave Women Intellect to Use It

A conversation about Catholic nun and feminist icon Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz

THERESA A. YUGAR & KATE HOETING

Hailed as the first feminist of Latin America, **Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz**, OSH, was a 17th-century Mexican nun known for her theological writings on conscience, free will, and women's education.

Conscience's Managing Editor Kate Hoeting spoke with Theresa A. Yugar, a leading scholar in the study of Sor Juana's feminist thought.



Kate Hoeting: Let's start by putting us in Sor Juana's world. What were the key theological and political contexts of the Mexico she knew?

Theresa A. Yugar: Sor Juana was born in 1648 — more than 130 years after the Aztec Empire had been destroyed — in what is now known as Mexico. Her world was a product of that colonialization process.

Both the church and Spain had political authority over New Spain, and they were all men. People like the Spanish nun St. Teresa of Ávila wrote about having mystical experiences during prayer, which suggested women could claim direct authority to God.

The church opposed this. They wanted women to either be married or to be the bride of Christ, because in both situations, men and the church could govern women's authority. They didn't want women to be thinking independently of the clerical establishment.

Kate: How did Sor Juana's upbringing influence her?

Theresa: Sor Juana lived in a society controlled by men, but she grew up in a family of women. Her mother, Doña Isabel Ramírez, was Criolla, meaning she was the daughter of a Spaniard born in

Opinions are essential to Sor Juana's understanding of Christianity. For her, there was room for different opinions.

New Spain. Doña Isabel had four daughters with two men — so Sor Juana was illegitimate according to the clerical church — and chose not to marry.

It was not acceptable in Sor Juana's society to be independent, but her mother was. And although Doña Isabel could neither read nor write, she managed a hacienda.

This patriarchal culture said women were foolish and irrational, yet Sor Juana knew from experience that this was not the case. She could draw from her experience — her truth as a woman — to dispute the church's argument that women were incapable of reason.

Kate: Then Sor Juana became a nun. So just like her mother, Sor Juana managed to avoid getting married in a society where becoming a wife was the dominant expectation for women.

Theresa: That's right. I think that Sor Juana is a reflection of her mother. I think Sor Juana was sitting at the table listening to her mother, and that her mother had opinions. Opinions are essential

to Sor Juana's understanding of Christianity. For her, there was room for different opinions. Yes, there were official church teachings and doctrines. There was the Hebrew and the Christian Testament. Yes, there was Jesus. But if you could articulate and support your opinion well, there was room for it.

Kate: But Sor Juana didn't think just any old opinion was good, right?

Theresa: Yes, that's right. To her, it's important to know what you are talking about when you critique things. She drew from church fathers, Scripture, and secular sources.

A great example of this is *La Respuesta (The Answer)*, which was a theological treatise she wrote to criticize the Portuguese Jesuit António de Vieira, who argued that God's greatest gift was God's love for human beings. But Sor Juana said that the greatest thing God did was withhold God's love in order to allow them to exercise free will. She says that free will is an important part of being Christian.

Kate: Did Sor Juana face any repercussions for critiquing a Jesuit?

Theresa: Bishop Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz asked her for a copy, and she said he could if he only used it for personal prayer. Well, he published it. And he wrote his own little letter critiquing her. He said that it would be better for her to study sacred works if she cared about her salvation.

This upset her. She penned a response to the bishop's assertion that women should not read and write, that they're subordinate to God. She wrote about the primacy of conscience. She told the bishop that he did not have the power to judge her salvation. Only God does.

Kate: It sounds like according to the church hierarchy at the time, the main qualification for being educated

was being a man. How do you think Sor Juana's idea of education differed from that of men at the time?

Theresa: She drew from Greco-Roman myths, Aristotle, Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Athanasias, Jerome, St. Paul, and more. She drew on science, on Christian tradition, and on the Bible to inform the way that she understood Catholicism.

She also looked at plants to understand God's nature. She knew Nahuatl, Latin, and Spanish, since she lived with Spanish, non-Spanish, and Indigenous people. That's how she understood there are many different ways of knowing. She says that her desire to learn was an impulse given to her by God.

Experiential wisdom was just as important as academic knowledge for Sor Juana. She watched her family's experience with men, not just her

mother's, but also her two older sisters' who were both abandoned by men. She said it was better for women to be educated by women, because being educated by men could cause innumerable harm and women could be violated.

She kept her two younger stepsisters in the convent with her so that they wouldn't be abused before they got married. She knew that men were not these elevated beings.

She found that the men in her spheres were not all that educated. In *La Respuesta*, Sor Juana wrote that Aristotle could have written more if he knew how to cook.

Kate: When you talk about her theological perspectives on conscience and how to form a good conscience, it sounds like verbatim canon law. Canon 748 says, "All persons are bound to seek truth in those things which regard God and his church, and by virtue of divine law, are bound by the obligation and possess the right of embracing and observing the truth which they have come to know." So in my reading, all people have a duty to seek their own truth through God and church, and we all have an obligation to observe and respect that truth.

Theresa: Prophetic!

Kate: That's what Aquinas



Today, Mexico honors Sor Juana by featuring her image on the 200 peso bank note.



To learn more about Sor Juana, check out Theresa A. Yugar's animated TED-Ed video "History's 'worst' nun."



says too! He says that conscience is connected to both reason and will, and that it is possible for sin to exist in conscience, but at the end of the day "He who acts against his own conscience always sins." In her time, Sor Juana has the hierarchy saying that she's wrong, that what she's saying is heretical. And yet today, the things she says are in canon law! They're in the catechism!

Theresa: That's why she was a feminist. She was way ahead of her time. And sadly, the challenges she faced then are the same as what we're facing now as women in the church.

Kate: What does Sor Juana mean to you?

Theresa: For me, personally, she's a role model. She's a source of inspiration. As a Latina feminist theologian, I'm fascinated that I didn't learn about her during my 16 years of Catholic education.

I see myself in Sor Juana,

and it saddens me that there are so many women in the church who are serving God, and yet we're just not respected. Church doctrine still undermines us. We're still the subordinate sex.

But there are still prophetic people like Roy Bourgeois, who was dismissed from the priesthood for participating in woman's ordination in 2008. We have Catholic sisters like Margaret Farley, Elizabeth Johnson, Joan Chittister, and Ivone Gebara.

Sor Juana spent 25 years as a nun. They silenced her. Recently, the church silenced Ivone Gebara because she said that the church cares more about the planet than women.

Kate: We have seen that too at Catholics for Choice. Pro-choice Catholics have faced immense pressure and continue to do so. But we know that while our work is morally complex, people must follow their God-given conscience, even when there are a multitude of perspectives on an issue.

Theresa: Sor Juana would respect that there are different opinions and perspectives. What she didn't tolerate was illogical reasoning. She was a woman, and women should not have been writing. She said that people had free will. She dared say that she, too, was a source of authority in the church. **Q**



THERESA A. YUGAR, M.DIV., PH.D. is the author of *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Feminist Reconstruction of Biography and Text* and chief co-editor of *Valuing Lives, Healing Earth: Religion, Gender, and Life on Earth*.



KATE HOETING, MTS (she/her) is writer and managing editor at Catholics for Choice.

What's Up at CFC?

A few months ago, Catholics for Choice hosted a group of undergraduate students participating in an alternative spring break in Washington, D.C. As I spoke with them, I shared that more than a decade of this work has taught me that our collective power is in our relationships. By being clear about whom we love, we can generate change that will transform the material conditions of people's lives for good.

I asked the students, "Who do you love? Who are your people?" We named our loved ones and, grounded in a sense of belonging, moved on to learn the basics of community organizing. I hope that the students left knowing that this moment calls us to be both bold and rigorous: bold in deepening our connection and rigorous in our organizing work. It is precisely this commitment to deep and lasting connections that has been at the heart of CFC's work in the last six months.

We once again started the year by taking direct action during the weekend of the so-called "March for Life." As Catholics for Choice, we are uniquely positioned to counter harmful assumptions about Catholics and their support for abortion rights. Moved by this mandate, we organized during the march's annual clinic protest to send a clear and powerful message: Blessed are the abortion seekers and the abortion providers!

My colleagues climbed to the roof of D.C.'s Planned Parenthood clinic to drop a banner declaring our unwavering love for abortion seekers and abortion providers. Afterwards, we heard from many pro-choice Catholics who felt moved by our direct action. Our message resonated with people of faith, many of whom signed a petition supporting reproductive rights or joined our organizing efforts. We are pro-choice because of our faith and not in spite of it.

At the end of January, CFC marked the beginning of the 118th legislative session by organizing more than 40 lobby visits with elected officials and legislative staff. Pro-choice Catholic advocates from all over the country connected with those who represent them in the halls of power.





◀ Members of CFC staff traveled to New Mexico to meet with partner organizations, including the New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.

We shared our stories and asked representatives to support important legislation that will advance our reproductive rights. I wrapped up the lobby visits feeling humbled by the growing sense of community and power emerging at CFC.

In February, CFC President Jamie Manson, Policy Director Shannon Russell, and I traveled to meet abortion providers, legislators, and the pro-choice faithful in New Mexico. Invited by our partners at the New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, we connected with elected officials working to pass state legislation that will secure abortion access and gender-affirming healthcare.

Our team facilitated trainings about pro-choice Catholicism for abortion providers and clinic staff. Additionally, we broke bread with

faithful pro-choice Catholics who inspired us with their unwavering faith and commitment to the movement for reproductive rights.

It's been a full and fulfilling season at CFC! From dropping banners to having one-on-one conversations with advocates, personal connection has been the building block of our deepening relationships.

I believe that we show up most powerfully for ourselves and the movement when we feel connected, known, and beloved. As always, know that at CFC, the door to connection and community is open for advocates like you. We can do more together than we can ever do apart.

If you'd like to get involved with CFC, reach out to CFC Organizing Manager Steph Hanson-Quintana at activists@catholicsforchoice.org.



▲ CFC President Jamie Manson with New Mexico's Lieutenant Governor Howie Morales



STEPH HANSON-QUINTANA (*she/her*) is the organizing manager at Catholics for Choice. She

supports collective efforts to represent the pro-choice Catholic majority in our communities and on Capitol Hill. Steph holds an M.Div. from Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York.



Photo Credit: Jordan Ferney

Reviews

STEPH BLACK

Ejaculate Responsibly

By Gabrielle Blair
Published by Workman Publishing,
2022, 144 pages, \$15

I was riding a bus in 2018 when I opened Twitter and read, “I’m a mother of six, and a Mormon. I have a good understanding of arguments surrounding abortion, religious and otherwise. I’ve been listening to men grandstand about women’s reproductive rights, and I’m convinced men actually have zero interest in stopping abortion. Here’s why...”

Gabrielle Blair later turned her viral thread into *Ejaculate Responsibly: A Whole New Way to Think About Abortion*. The book is revolutionary — a manifesto calling straight, cisgender men to take ownership of their fertility.

On March 2, 2023, Blair spoke at Sixth & I Historic Synagogue in Washington, D.C., with writer and transgender activist Charlotte Clymer. While men cause 100% of unwanted pregnancies, women bear the responsibility of managing their fertility as well as their partner’s, Blair said.

“Fertility is seen as a women’s issue, despite the fact that women are only fertile for approximately 24 hours every 28 days, whereas men are fertile at all times for their entire lives,” said Blair. Taking birth control, purchasing Plan B, having abortions, or even giving birth are a woman’s job.

When it comes to using an IUD, taking a pill, getting a shot, or wearing a ring or patch, a woman is essentially “on the job” 24/7 — not to mention all the work that goes into getting the prescription in the first place — regardless of whether she plans to have sex. Men can walk into any bodega, buy a box of condoms for a couple bucks, and hold onto it until they need it. It’s also worth noting women buy nearly one-third of all condoms sold in the United States.

Clymer, who spent time on staff at Catholics for Choice, also discussed what she called the “surprisingly misogynistic” relationship between birth control and the Catholic church.

As Blair explained, most birth control pill packs include three weeks of birth control pills and one week of sugar pills. The sugar pills do nothing more than allow the body to mimic a period that is not medically necessary. This artificial week of bleeding, Blair said, “was created in an attempt to convince the pope” to accept the birth control pill. As we know, that attempt failed.

When the conversation transitioned to audience Q&A, a Mormon woman from Virginia asked how to navigate these conversations with kids. “Talk in age-appropriate ways about sex in as normal of a way as possible.” Blair said. “When parents feel weird about a conversation, so do the kids.”

Asked about moving the needle in religious communities that prioritize abstinence and men's sexual needs, Blair talked about the importance of using social pressure for good. She recounted how when she grew up, no one wore seat belts, but when a group of “cool” teenagers from the city came to her town, they refused to start driving until everyone in the car had buckled.

From that day on, she buckled her seat belt. “In the same way that I would now never drive without a seat belt, I want men to feel like they would never ejaculate irresponsibly — and say so to their friends,” she said.

As I took notes throughout the talk, I realized that I regret times I tried to act like the “cool girl” by not requiring my male sexual partners to wear condoms because I had an IUD. I took men at their word when they told me that they didn't have an STI, something they might not have even known about — or worse, could have lied about. I'm now happily married to a woman, so I will never get the chance for a do-over with a male one-night stand (which is totally fine by me), but part of me wishes I could have been like those teenagers who couldn't imagine starting the car before everyone had buckled.

Did the men I slept with refuse to wear condoms with future partners because I had been the cool girl who didn't? There are so many societal pressures — and

even the potential threat of violence — that explain my desire to be the chill, easygoing girl. But I wish I'd been the cool girl who casually and assuredly puts her clothes back on instead.

I'm not the only one who had a strong reaction to the conversation between Blair and Clymer. Sam, a 20-year-old man from Maryland, learned about the book when his conservative, religious aunt mocked it.

He later asked his mother to drive him to the book talk to hear for himself what it meant to ejaculate responsibly.

“I definitely plan on learning more about my fertility and being more comfortable talking about this with female partners in the future,” he said.

Corinne, also 20, told me that she has never had a sexual partner, but when her mother left the book on the kitchen counter, she picked it up and began to flip through it. “This book will empower me when I do decide [to have sex].”

Last year I gifted five copies of *Ejaculate Responsibly* to men in my life. I expected them to

laugh off the gift as another of my abortion-related antics, but I was pleasantly surprised. All were curious enough to at least read it and learn more about the attention-grabbing title.

Blair holds, as she puts it, “a baseline belief that people are good and want to be good.” People of all genders want cis men to be part of the solution to the abortion rights crisis.

Blair's work offers men options beyond donating money or attending protests: It invites them to reframe their entire approach to sex. Her book and the conversations it provokes may usher in a new era in which men, rather than women, are the subject of the autonomy and reproductive rights conversation. **C**



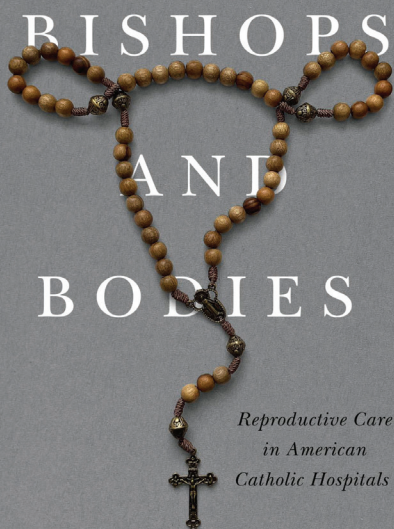
STEPH BLACK

(she/her) is a Jewish activist and writer based in Washington, D.C., where she fights to expand abortion

access and reproductive justice. Read her writing, follow her work, and subscribe to her newsletter at www.stephblackstrategies.com

Did you know? John Rock, who invented the birth control pill, was a devout Catholic.

But don't praise him as a reproductive rights hero. He launched the first clinical trials of the pill in Puerto Rico, where patients reported widespread adverse reactions to the high dosage. Three women died during the study, possibly as a result of the pills. The scientists did not investigate their deaths.



LORI FREEDMAN

ELIZABETH REINER PLATT

Bishops and Bodies

By Lori Freedman
Published by Rutgers University Press
2023, 228 pages, \$30

Shortly after the Supreme Court issued its opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, horrific stories began to emerge from hospitals across the country. Terrified of violating abortion bans that carried criminal sentences, doctors turned away pregnant patients experiencing medical emergencies — sending them across state lines or telling them they must wait to get sicker before they could receive treatment for an ongoing miscarriage, ectopic pregnancy, or fetal anomaly.

To many, these denials of emergency medical care

An infusion of government funds has allowed Catholic systems to flourish without altering their religious policies.

seemed to be an alarming new consequence of the Supreme Court's decision. Lori Freedman, however, has documented such stories for well over a decade. We would do well to study her work carefully — including her forthcoming book *Bishops and Bodies* — in this critical moment.

Bishops and Bodies is the culmination of Freedman's extensive research into Catholic hospitals, which operate under a set of guidelines called the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care* (ERDs).

Authored by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the ERDs prohibit doctors working in Catholic facilities — which occupy a large and growing share of the U.S. healthcare industry — from providing patients with routine reproductive health services including contraception, sterilization, abortion, certain infertility treatments, and care for gender transition. Freedman argues persuasively that these restrictions result in “doctrinal iatrogenesis,” a phrase she coined to refer to medical harm that is the result of religious ideology.

The stories of doctrinal iatrogenesis in *Bishops and Bodies* speak for themselves: a woman with multiple medical problems whose doctors scheduled her

C-section a full two months before her due date to guarantee that she could receive a sterilization under bishop-imposed hospital rules, leaving her newborn in need of intensive care. A woman forced to listen to her fetus' heartbeat for eight hours during a painful second trimester miscarriage before the heartbeat finally stopped and she was able to receive treatment. Women compelled to carry pregnancies to term even after learning their fetuses have fatal anomalies, such as acrania (the absence of a skull). Sexual assault victims denied emergency contraception because they had ovulated recently and therefore might already be pregnant — meaning that care is withheld from precisely those who need it most.

In addition to these gut-wrenching stories, Freedman regularly situates the ERDs in the larger context of American healthcare, showing how flaws in our medical and legal systems both allow and compound the harms of Catholic restrictions.

For instance, because we lack universal health insurance, some patients find that their insurance policies cover only Catholic hospitals. The sale of public hospitals to private religious institutions has added

to the dearth of non-Catholic options for care, especially in rural communities. Broad protections for religious restrictions under federal law have stymied state efforts to ensure greater access to reproductive care.

An infusion of government funds has allowed Catholic systems to flourish without altering their religious policies. And our capitalist approach to healthcare delivery has offered the illusion of choice, leaving patients blaming themselves for their own poor treatment for not having sought care elsewhere.

Freedman's book opens the door to several questions without easy answers. What lessons from years of research into religious hospital policies are most relevant in our current moment, when doctors at religious and secular hospitals alike fear not just violating their hospital's internal rules, but going to prison? What steps must we create to ensure an eventual return not merely to the pre-*Dobbs* days of reproductive healthcare that varied wildly based on patients' race, class, and zip code, but to something better?

Perhaps the most significant question Freeman raises is how do we both recognize abortion as necessary healthcare for everyone and avoid pernicious narratives of "worthy" and "unworthy" abortions, while also acknowledging the specific horror of being turned away during a medical emergency — of

being told you must wait until your life hangs in the balance to get treatment? Addressing this problem thoughtfully holds serious consequences, as the stigma of abortion and its removal from routine healthcare in both the medical community and the public eye offers a partial explanation for our current crisis.

Bishops and Bodies memorably demonstrates the power of abortion stigma through the stories of two Catholic women who objected not to receiving abortion care itself, but to the fact that the treatment they received for serious health complications was viewed as an "abortion."

In one instance, a woman who was treated for an ectopic pregnancy lamented that "the word abortion being used was just as traumatic as my loss." A second patient, whose fetus was diagnosed with anencephaly, was able to convince a clergyman at a Catholic hospital to approve her abortion in the hospital after explaining that receiving care in an abortion clinic posed a threat to her religious identity.

While we have allowed ourselves to imagine abortion, and really all reproductive healthcare, as somehow distinct from other forms of medicine, Freedman shows this to be a mirage.

Reproductive care is an essential part of treating patients who walk in the hospital door for everything from cancer to heart failure. As one doctor she

interviewed explained, it would be impossible to simply remove reproductive healthcare from Catholic facilities — to accomplish this, "you have to never admit a woman to your hospital."

So, with reproductive healthcare both indispensable and routinely denied, where does that leave us? As Freedman notes, patient education on religious healthcare restrictions may be helpful, but it is insufficient when no other source of care may be available. While many, as she explains, "urge individual solutions to large structural problems," eliminating doctrinal iatrogenesis will require far more of us.

It will require dramatic new approaches to how healthcare is conceptualized, regulated, and delivered. Furthermore, it will require a new understanding of religious liberty as a right that must protect first and foremost the ability of individual patients — not massive healthcare systems — to honor their own religious and moral values. **C**



ELIZABETH REINER PLATT

is director of the Law, Rights, and Religion Project, where she has co-authored two

reports on religious healthcare restrictions: *The Southern Hospitals Report: Faith, Culture, and Abortion Bans in the U.S. South* and *Bearing Faith: The Limits of Catholic Healthcare for Women of Color*.



Women Talking follows a group of women in a religious colony as they figure out how they might move forward to build a better world for themselves and their children. Stay and fight or leave. They will not do nothing. Photo Credit: Amazon Prime.

KATE MCELWEE

Women Talking

Written and directed by Sarah Polley
Published by Amazon Prime 2022

Set in an isolated, unnamed religious community, *Women Talking* opens with one woman, Ona, awakening with the realization she had been raped. She's one of dozens of women and girls that men of the colony have raped in their beds at night. Two male attackers are caught and sent to a local jail, and all the colony's men go to bail them out.

The women, left alone in the colony, call a vote that serves as the basis for the film: Do nothing, stay and fight, or leave. A group of women gather in a barn's hayloft to reach consensus and devise a plan.

Written and directed by Sarah Polley and based on Mariam Toews' eponymous 2018 novel, *Women Talking* is a story of faith, forgiveness, violence, power, and love.

The women confront the violence that surrounds them and their own complicity in it. They find guidance in their faith, yet come to recognize its patriarchal paradoxes.

The women can neither read nor write, yet eloquently express vulnerability, anger, and grief. They challenge each other to understand not just what they're fighting to destroy, but what they're fighting for: a vision of self-determination and, I suggest, an articulation of reproductive justice.

Watching this film, I found myself whispering to my sister, "I have been at this meeting." I could

Content Warning: This movie features heavy themes of assault and rape.

have cast this film with people I struggle alongside in my work for Catholic women's ordination. While the details of the physical violence these characters endure are particular to this film, the spiritual violence of patriarchy is familiar to many Catholics.

Certainly, we have asked ourselves again and again: What parts of our faith bring justice, and what parts are tools of oppression? What trauma have we inherited? What is our responsibility in healing pain?

In fact, I hear the question, "Why do you stay?" almost daily. It is a question I ask myself, too. My answer has changed over time, but today, I find the question too small. For me,

“staying” is not static but an enduring commitment to bear witness to the injustices in the church. I benefit from a long tradition of feminist theology that reclaims and asserts women as protagonists, priests, and prophets — image-bearers of Christ who hear God’s call to equality and liberation. And therefore, I stay in my faith.

I stay in the sacramental life and theological tradition of the church. And I stay with women on the prophetic edges, in all their beautiful complexity, pain, and resiliency. Yet in staying on that edge, you also leave something behind, a tension the film portrays in depth.

Polley’s reimagining of the colony women’s moral interiors comes to life through her powerful script, for which she won the 2023 Academy Award for best adapted screenplay. Set largely in one room, the film has the intimacy and pace of a stage production, and much of the dialogue comes directly from Toews’ novel.

However, while the uniqueness of showing women simply talking cannot be overstated, the dialogue can creep into soliloquy, and while beautiful, can turn the characters into symbolic message-bearers rather than fully formed characters. Nevertheless, the dialogue is deeply effective.

Although the characters do not have the feminist footnotes, the barn is a laboratory of feminist

theology, of women-church — and its limits — in praxis. One of the most powerful moments in the film is when the character Ona, played by Rooney Mara, articulates the world they would want their children to inhabit: “Men and women would make all the decisions for the colony collectively. Women would be allowed to think. Girls would be taught to read and write. The schoolhouse must display a map of the world so that we can begin to understand our place in it. A new religion, taken from the old, but focused on love, would be created of the colony. Our children would be safe.”

In addition to its stellar script, the film invites viewers into a sacred space of women not just talking to one another, but loving one another. We witness women ministering in the laying on of hands, listening, interpreting Scripture, and affirming their relationship with God — a God who sees them, a God who knows justice, and a God who will find them if and when they leave the colony — without men as intermediaries.

Women Talking is inspired by true events, first reported by Jean Friedman-Rudovsky, that took place in a Mennonite community in rural Bolivia. Between 2005 and 2009, men in the colony raped more than 100 girls and women they sedated with cow anesthetic. Court-ordered medical reports revealed the

survivors ranged from age 3 to 60, including disabled and pregnant women, one of whom was forced into early labor by her rapist, her brother. In the film, Polley chose to show only the aftermath of such violence, casting a haunting shadow over the colony.

Friedman-Rudovsky returned to the community years after the trial and learned that, despite the convictions, widespread sexual violence continues. Following the trial, the community offered neither trauma counseling nor therapy. Isolated by language barriers, the women would have had to weigh social and personal costs to reach counselors beyond the colony.

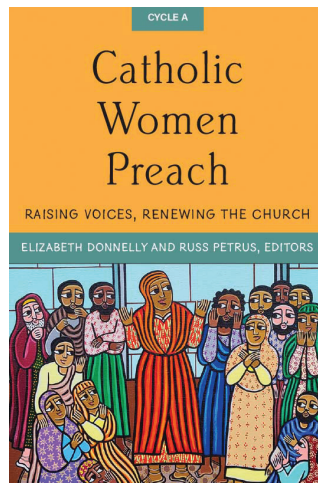
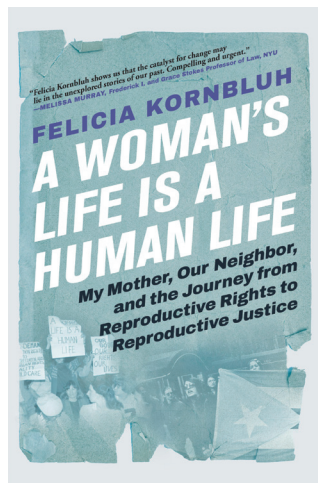
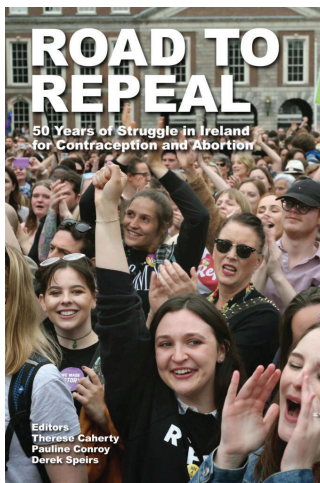
This film offers a privileged glimpse of women in an upper room forging a path toward reconciliation with themselves, their faith, and the community. Bearing witness to the pervasive pain and violence of patriarchy is a step on the journey of our collective healing.

If women talking makes that more mainstream, well, let’s keep talking. **E**



KATE MCELWEE (*she/her*) serves as the executive director of the Women’s Ordination Conference.

A graduate of Mount Holyoke College and SOAS-University of London, Kate is an internationally respected activist and thought leader working to advance women’s ordination and gender equity in the Roman Catholic Church.



On Our List

Books

Road to Repeal: 50 Years of Struggle in Ireland for Contraception and Abortion

Edited by Therese Caherty, Pauline Conroy, and Derek Speirs

Published by The Lilliput Press

2022, 164 pages, \$28

Need inspiration from advocates who managed to overturn an abortion ban in a majority Catholic country? This coffee table book offers powerful photographs that chronicle the journey of Ireland's Eighth Amendment.

A Woman's Life Is a Human Life: My Mother, Our Neighbor, and the Journey from Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Justice

By Felicia Kornbluh

Published by Grove Atlantic

2023, 432 pages, \$28

This unique nonfiction book focuses on two neighbors — a Puerto Rican activist and the author's mother — whose paths, thanks to white supremacy in the reproductive rights movement, did not intersect as much as they should have.

Catholic Women Preach: Raising Voices, Renewing the Church

Edited by Elizabeth A. Donnelly and Russ Petrus

Published by Orbis Books

2022, 320 pages, \$20

Presented in three volumes to follow the cycles of the lectionary, this collection taken from the Catholic Women Preach project features homilies written by Catholic women.

Red Lip Theology: For Church Girls Who've Considered Tithing to the Beauty Supply Store When Sunday Morning Isn't Enough

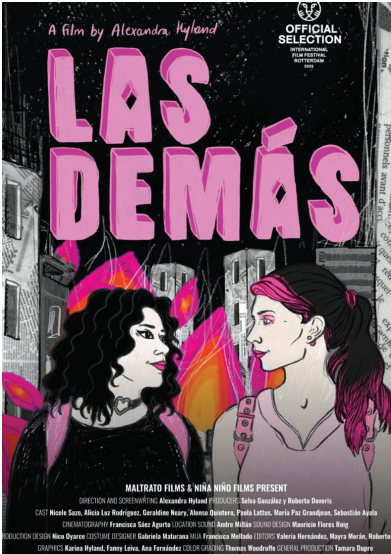
By Candice Marie Benbow

Published by Penguin Random House

2022, 224 pages, \$26

This collection of feminist essays seeks to empower Christians who are called to fight for gender equity even when it means defying church culture.

Photo Credit: Niña Niño Films.



Films

Las Demás (Outsider Girls)

Maltrato Films and Niña Niño Films, 2022

In this sharp social critique, two friends struggle to save up the resources for an illegal abortion in Chile.

Plan C

Dinky Pictures, 2022

The documentary, which premiered at Sundance in early 2023, takes one of the first cinematic looks into post-Roe America.

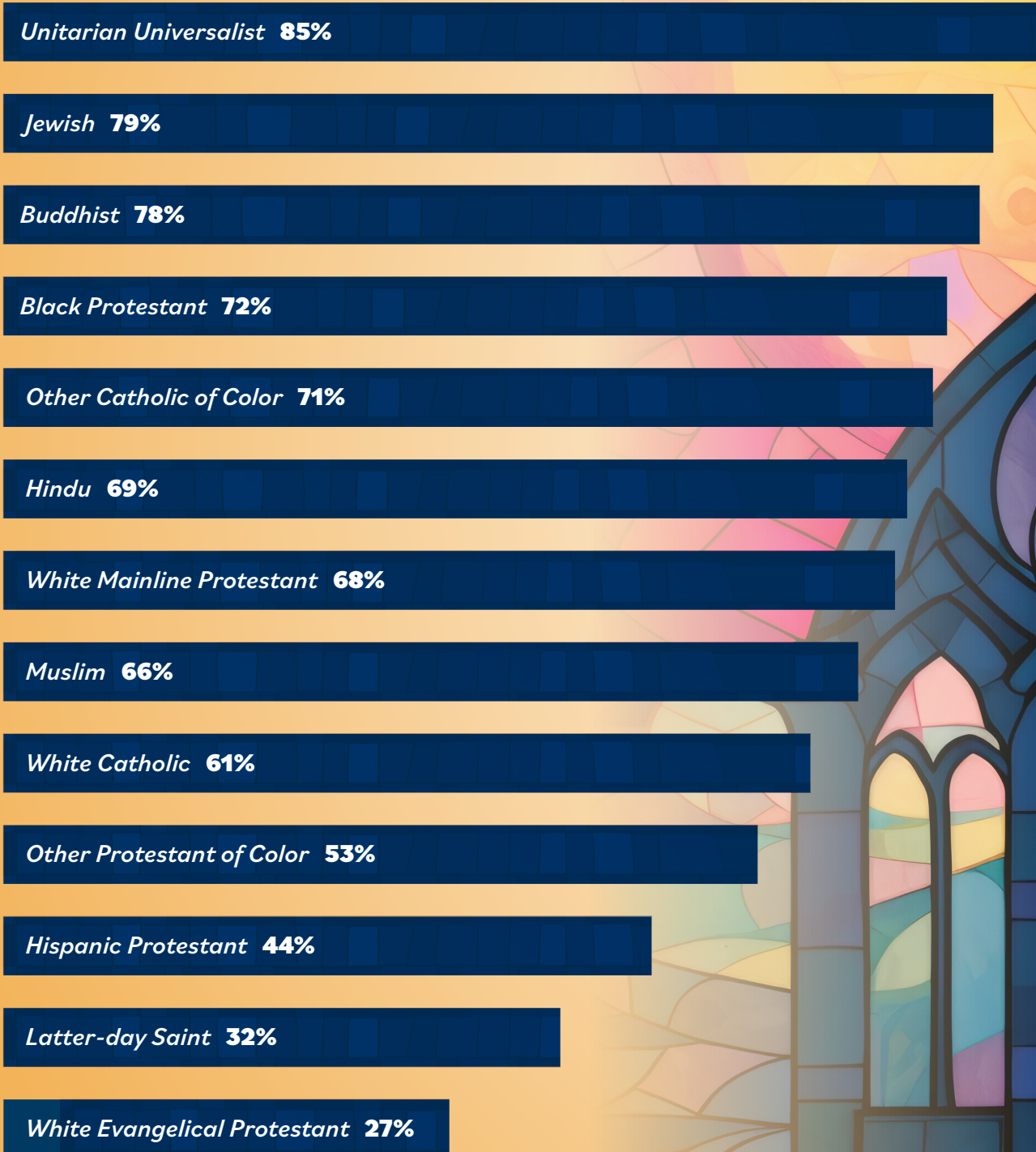


Photo Credit: Mollye Miller Photography and Plan C.

Percent who believe...

Abortion should be legal in all or most cases

Source: PRRI 2022 American Values Atlas



Religious overreach by the Catholic hierarchy hurts us all.

The Catholic church's **crusade against gender equality and reproductive rights** has infiltrated lawmaking at every level of government — and that affects each and every person.

But there is **power in numbers: 63% of Catholics support abortion in all or most cases.** In fact, nearly every religious group supports legal abortion.

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CFC activists wheatpasted posters along the route of the so-called "March for Life."
Photo Credit: André Chung/CFC.