

Nicole M. Bauer / J. Andrew Doole (eds.)

(De)Constructing Gender Politics in Contemporary Christian Discourse





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Introduction

Religion and politics are by no means two separate spheres. Many religious groups in the USA and Europe have come to see their governments as instituting laws against their beliefs and thus have themselves become active participants in local and national politics. Issues such as gender identity, gender equality, gender roles, sexuality, sexual ethics, abortion, and equal marriage are the subject of much debate, and religious groups tend to adopt a position on these issues, with many contemporary Christian groups tending to position themselves along the political rather than the theological divide. Roman Catholic and evangelical groups – in traditional and theological understandings almost diametrically opposed – nonetheless share certain perspectives on social values and moral beliefs. Cooperation between Roman Catholic and evangelical representatives on political issues is well-attested in various countries and social contexts around the world, as both groups often find themselves “fighting the same fight” (to use the terminology of warfare quite common in religious discourse) against, for example, feminism, abortion, homosexuality, and “gender”. The so-called culture wars are very much political in nature, yet the role of religion can also be identified in contemporary, ‘post-secular’ societies. Societies are challenged to renegotiate values and norms, an undertaking which entails great potential for conflict. In modern pluralistic societies, ideological and religious debates no longer necessarily run along confessional or denominational lines, rather are reflected in processes of negotiation of values. The intersection of Roman Catholic and evangelical self-understandings is the object for our research into contemporary Christian identity in Austria.

Gender and the Bible: An Empirical Study of Roman Catholic and Evangelical Religious Identity in Austria

The interdisciplinary project “Gender and the Bible: An Empirical Study of Roman Catholic and Evangelical Religious Identity in Austria” funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF 10.55776/P36406) is investigating the role of the

Bible in discourses of gender and sexuality among evangelical and Roman Catholic groups in Austria. The project started in 2023 and is designed as an interdisciplinary endeavour at the intersection of Religious Studies, Sociology, and Biblical Studies. At the core of this project is an analysis of current Roman Catholic and evangelical discourses in Austria regarding issues of gender identity and roles, sexuality, contraception, abortion, and women's ordination. The aim of this project is to investigate how Roman Catholic and evangelical groups in Austria perceive themselves and their relationship to others and how they use the Bible to legitimize their positions on certain social issues.

We developed a multimethod research design based on an empirical approach involving systematic observation and data collection in order to gain evidence-based insights. The methodology includes an analysis of primary literature on the subject (statements, publications, websites, and social media) and both a survey of and qualitative interviews with representatives of specific groups. This approach aims to explore how these groups perceive themselves and their relationship with others, the extent to which the Bible is used in their arguments on gender-related issues, and the commonalities and differences that can be identified between them. We are interested in how members and those in leadership positions use the Bible to justify the positions they take with regard to the issues of gender identity and sexuality listed above. We have already found considerable evidence for cooperation between evangelical and Roman Catholic representatives, and it will be interesting to see where there are overlaps and differences in how they think about these questions as our research progresses.

The concept of 'identity' represents a central aspect in social interaction and thus also in the context of religious communities. How do people identify within a religious group and how do they differentiate themselves from other, similar groups? We seek to provide a 'thick description' of Roman Catholic and evangelical groups in Austria and thus to contribute to an understanding of the borderlines between religion and politics in contemporary Europe and to show how the border between Roman Catholic and evangelical identity is permeable when it comes to certain socio-political issues. Analysis of empirical research data allows examination of gender aspects beyond stereotypical preconceptions and will provide insights into the social and cultural dynamics that shape gender roles and identities within the religious landscape of Austria.

Austria provides an interesting case study for two particular reasons. Austria has long been and essentially remains a strongly culturally Roman Catholic country, though the number of registered members of the Roman Catholic Church has dropped consistently from 1951 (almost 90%) to 2021 (ca. 55%). There is now a growing evangelical scene (though it remains under 1% of the population) due in part to immigration but also attracting people who, to various degrees, turn their back on Roman Catholic worship and doctrine. Yet Roman Catholic and evangel-

ical views on issues of gender and sexuality tend to remain similar. How do evangelicals who had a Roman Catholic upbringing in Austria negotiate this aspect of their identity? Secondly, Austria is home to the charismatic Roman Catholic movement *Loretto* which enjoys a particular following among young people. Their presence in society and online continues to grow. Worship resembles that of the pentecostal movement but concludes with a rather traditional Catholic Eucharist. Furthermore, an overlap with the evangelical movement can be seen in the role ascribed to the Bible and the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus. *Loretto* includes literature and speakers from the evangelical scene in its ministry but remains firmly within the Roman Catholic church. While by no means the only Roman Catholic group active in Austria, *Loretto* enjoys considerable success and is a “home-grown” movement that continues to attract interest and publicity.

This volume does not present the results of the research project but rather seeks to provide a basis for our research by establishing it within international academic discourses on gender and religion. The scholars who have contributed to this volume with studies on sexuality and gender reflect various disciplinary and methodological perspectives, including Religious Studies, Sociology, Biblical Studies, Historical Studies, and Theology. The dialogue began with a conference held at the University of Graz on 4th–5th July 2024, where scholars first presented their work, and now these studies can be presented to the broader public. We would like to thank the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) for funding the research and both the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Graz and the Department of Biblical Studies and Historical Theology at the University of Innsbruck for hosting and supporting the project. A special thank you to our doctoral researchers Laura Athenstaedt, Magdalena Collinet, and Elena Scherer and to our student research assistants Lorenz Grießenauer, Johannes Härting, Samuel Hefty, Chiara Schallhammer, and Markus Wiener for all their hard work for the project.

(De)Constructing Gender Politics in Contemporary Christian Discourse: An Overview

This collection of individual studies on issues of gender and sexuality in Christian groups comprises two sections of six chapters. The first section focuses particularly on the Roman Catholic gender discourse, while the second section considers non- and inter-denominational groups, movements, publications, and personalities.

Michele Dillon looks at official doctrine and lay opinion on issues such as contraception, same-sex relationships, marriage and sexuality, and women’s ordination. She demonstrates that church doctrine is iterative and responds in turn to

contextual developments in society, though to varying degrees for each issue. *Deborah Sawyer* focuses on the debate concerning the definition and understanding of “gender” in Roman Catholicism and considers recent publications by Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, and Gunda Werner. She notes that the topic is not about to go away and laments the lack of open and respectful dialogue on the issue of “gender” on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. *Gunda Werner* is also in dialogue with Judith Butler’s most recent book *Who’s Afraid of Gender?*. She looks particularly at the financial side of the anti-gender movement in Europe and the Roman Catholic Church’s inherent fear of academic discourse. A queer theology of radical diversity could allow the opening of new perspectives and remind the Church that there is no “neutral” theology, only contextual theology. *Irmtraud Fischer* reflects on a career in Roman Catholic Biblical Studies with a research focus on gender issues in the Hebrew Bible. She provides perhaps unexpected historical readings of key texts in the Bible often cited in debates concerning gender identity, homosexuality, and marriage, arguing that biblical interpretation is itself a continuing process and requires “updating” for each new generation. *Anne Koch* draws on the sociological anti-racism theory of Charles W. Mills and Linda Alcoff’s philosophy of knowledge in her examination of the ways in which the Roman Catholic clergy apply the historical-critical method they learn during their studies selectively to the texts they encounter, for example in debates on women’s ordination. She provides two case studies to demonstrate this form of selective rationality in contemporary Roman Catholic discourse in Germany. Finally, *Nicole Bauer and Elena Scherer* analyse the 2019 Vatican document “*Male and Female He Created Them*” and compare this with empirical findings from interviews conducted with representatives of Roman Catholic groups in Austria. They discover that the exclusion of women, queer, and transgender individuals from recognition and positions within the Roman Catholic Church is based on an ambivalent relationship to scientific research and that, while the ordination of women is not an issue for the groups in question, they present themselves as otherwise entirely egalitarian when it comes to administrative and organizational leadership.

Christian Feichtinger analyses the entanglement of physical and spiritual health in the writings of Ellen G. White (1827–1915), a founding figure of Seventh-day Adventism. White saw the body and soul as interconnected and provided guidelines on diet and sexuality for a healthy lifestyle that can be compared with current secular publications, though with a higher, spiritual goal. *Ulrike Bechmann* looks at the establishment of the World Day of Prayer within the women’s missionary movements of the nineteenth century and how this ecumenical movement developed and became structured and institutionalized. The World Day of Prayer provides women from various countries with a voice in composing a prayer service with their own hermeneutical perspective on biblical texts, and its use around the

world reminds us all that the interpretation of the Bible is always contextual, even our own. *Benedikt Bauer* uses “desire” as a theoretical category derived from the works of Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler in order to examine evangelical worship and lifestyle. He analyses “desire” in Song of Songs, the Hillsong song “Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)”, and in devotional fitness literature and shows that this emic concept provides insights into the construction of gender and agency in evangelical movements. *Frank Hinkelmann* looks at the role of women in “free churches” in Austria, namely in the Salvation Army and in pentecostal and evangelical federations. The Salvation Army is an international movement that took an egalitarian approach to ministry from its very foundation, used the Bible to justify this, and enjoyed great publicity in its early years in Austria. The pentecostal and evangelical churches in Austria remain legally independent communities, in which the issue of women’s ordination is discussed at meetings at the national level, and, while the path to “spiritual office” is officially open to women in the pentecostal federation and officially closed to women in the evangelical federation, individual communities retain a degree of independence that allows women to serve in some churches. *J. Andrew Doole* compares ideas of biblical intimacy and interpretations of Song of Songs in the works of two charismatic figures with considerable social media presences, Bernadette Lang in Austria and Mark Driscoll in the USA. For Lang as a consecrated virgin and bride of Christ, Jesus is a fairy-tale prince, an almost asexual lover; for Driscoll as a reformed complementarian, the Jesus of contemporary Christianity isn’t manly enough and needs to grow a pair. Each paints a very different portrait of a nonetheless heterosexual, masculine Jesus. Finally, *Beth Allison Barr* examines white evangelicalism in the contemporary United States of America and shows how complementarian theology reinforces problematic gender roles, resulting in a toleration of sexual violence towards women in both the religious and political spheres.

Nicole Bauer and *J. Andrew Doole* provide some concluding remarks on the results of these studies, the insights gained from interdisciplinary discussion of the issues, and the relevance of the topics and results for further research. Thank you to all the contributors, to Sabine Schönekeäs and Samuel Hefty for assistance with the copy-editing, to the series editors, and to Julia Schwanke and the team at V&R unipress. A big thank you also to the Vice Rectorate for Research, the Research Area “Cultural Encounters – Cultural Conflicts”, the Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology, and the Department of Biblical Studies and Historical Theology of the University of Innsbruck, and to the Faculty of Roman Catholic Theology and the Department of Religious Studies of the University of Graz for financial support for the publication of this volume.

Michele Dillon

The Dance of Doctrine and Context: Catholic Discourse on Sexual Behavior and Women's Ordination

The convening, deliberations, and outcomes of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II; 1962–1965) showcased Catholicism's theological grounding in the pluralism of faith and reason (rather than the Bible alone) and amplified the church's institutional self-understanding of its reflexive openness to societal change. From Pope John XXIII to Paul VI, the Council reaffirmed the importance of learning from history and being attuned to the signs of the times so that the church would carve out a dynamic relevance and sustain the vibrancy of a living faith tradition no matter the spiritual ruins and societal contradictions of the era.

The church's engagement with societal change had long been evident in its social justice teachings, with papal encyclicals since the late 1800s articulating the moral obligation of the state and voluntary groups to ensure a just society amid the inequality propelled by industrialization. Vatican II amplified that obligation. It also turned a spotlight on the church's own institutional practices and doctrinal principles and, on a myriad of issues – from liturgy to religious freedom to ecumenism – made transformative changes in recognition of the rapidly changing social and cultural order, its impact on Catholics' everyday circumstances, and the changing roles of civic, social, and religious institutions. It affirmed the major advances in the social and physical sciences and, significantly too, of lay professional expertise and lived experience in informing the continuous development of doctrine. Vatican II's unprecedented recognition of these sources of everyday authority added to the church's complement of authoritative teaching sources – which include the Bible, Natural Law, papal encyclicals and exhortations, synodal and other Vatican reports, and a deep repository of philosophical and theological principles. It also empowered the laity as Catholics and as citizens and repositioned the church as a relevant public actor sensitive both to its intra-institutional context and to the everyday contexts of Catholic life.¹

1 Dillon 1999, 45–53.

Although church teaching in the general domain of sex and gender may often appear monolithic and stubbornly resistant to contextual openness, this essay argues that church doctrine is responsive to social change and the realities of Catholics' lives. The nature and outcome of this engagement is complex and uneven. As I will show, there are varied, nuanced shifts apparent in the sphere of sexual morality – specifically on contraception, gay relationships, and non-church approved marriages. By contrast, the church maintains a definitiveness on women's exclusion from ordination. Its reasoning on the issue conveys the Vatican's deft use of its interpretive authority and illuminates how – and why – it bolsters hierarchical power while proactively holding the line against doctrinal change.

Nuanced Doctrinal Change

Contraception

As in western Europe, and increasingly South America, the secularization of American society and the secularization of American Catholics have proceeded hand in hand. Catholic secularization – partly abetted by Vatican II's affirmation of lay competence – is well conveyed by the interpretive autonomy American Catholics exercise regarding church teachings on contraception, sexuality, and marriage.² By the late 1960s, contraception had already gained widespread use among Americans, including Catholics. Given that reality and abetted by Vatican II's recognition of the relevance of personal conscience and human experience, many Catholic theologians and others assumed that the commission appointed by Pope Paul VI to examine the moral permissibility of contraception would recommend approval of married couples' use of contraception. Although the commission did indeed vote in favor of change, *Humanae Vitae* (HV), issued by Paul VI in 1968, upheld the church's prohibition on the grounds that “each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life”. For couples to do otherwise – or for the church to affirm otherwise – he stated, would be to contravene the divinely created, natural moral law and scripture's affirmation of the sacrament of marriage and the essential significance of procreation within it.³ Disagreement with Paul VI's decision drove some Catholics away from the church. But for others it became a tipping point in shifting their self-understanding and definition of what it means to be Catholic such that by the mid-1980s, two-thirds of American Catholics believed that one can be a good Catholic and

2 Dillon 2018, 5–6, 14–32.

3 Paul VI 1968, *Humanae Vitae*, #11, 12, 4 respectively.

not obey church teaching on birth control.⁴ That proportion has steadily increased over the years, with 8 in 10 (83%) expressing this opinion today.⁵

Because church doctrine is not tethered to the Bible, either solely or literally, and is dynamically open to contextual developments, there is thematic freedom in what is emphasized and how it is articulated. Consequently, strands of doctrine get changed in their everyday application even if such changes are not formally or explicitly sanctioned by a church decree. Contraception is a case in point. In church teaching, contraception is still a sin; it is “intrinsically evil”, though it is not as morally grave as abortion.⁶ Today, however, it is mostly an unspoken sin; it is rare for bishops and priests to remind Catholics of its prohibited use or to encourage contraception-users to go to confession before Communion. Silence is part of discourse, and it can be argued that the silence around contraception reflects the church hierarchy’s concession to – or, more dynamically, its conversation with – the well-documented post-*Humanae Vitae* empirical reality whereby the vast majority of Catholics discern that they can be good Catholics *and* use contraception.⁷ Therefore, while official church teaching has not changed, the reality is that Catholics act as if it has changed or that it doesn’t matter to their identity as Catholics. They have collectively changed the teaching through their behavior and everyday discourse conveying that contraception is a normal part of Catholic reality and, further, through socializing new cohorts of Catholics into this shared, common-sense understanding of this settled (new) reality, tacitly approved by the hierarchy.

Same-Sex Relationships

A similar contextual dynamic is evident regarding church doctrine on homosexuality and same-sex relationships. In the late-1970s and ’80s, responding to the surge in gay rights activism, successive Vatican declarations unequivocally reaffirmed the sinfulness of same-sex activity and defined homosexual orientation as objectively disordered in and of itself, independent of sexual behavior.⁸ The church’s teaching is grounded both in scripture and in Natural Law, and Vatican documents frequently reference both sources. The Vatican ties its disapproval of same-sex sexual behavior to the Bible, stating, for example, “Sacred Scripture condemns homosexual acts as a serious depravity.”⁹ Yet, also drawing on the

4 Hout and Greeley 1987.

5 Dillon 2019.

6 John Paul II 1995, #13, 57, 58.

7 Dillon 2018, 20–22.

8 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1976 and 1986.

9 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003.

independent interpretive authority of the Magisterium, the Vatican notes that, “This judgment of Scripture does not of course permit us to conclude that all those who suffer from this anomaly are personally responsible for it, but it does attest to the fact that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.”¹⁰ The church’s construal of disorder, and its differentiation between sexual orientation and sexual acts, are informed by Natural Law and the *a priori* assumption of sexual complementarity as the natural union capable of transmitting life. These official statements have not been rescinded. Nevertheless, over the past few decades, more and more Catholics (and others) have come out as gay and Catholics have been in the vanguard of support for gay marriage, being consistently more likely than Americans in general to favor its legalization.¹¹

The early advocacy of organizations such as DignityUSA (founded in 1969) has been critical for the intersectional identity work of gay Catholics. Its local chapters across the U.S. provide structured opportunities for LGBTIQ+ Catholics to come together communally to share their subjective experiences both as gays and as Catholics. As I’ve elaborated elsewhere based on findings from my ethnographic research, their pooled experiential knowledge empowered not only a new understanding but also the enactment of what it means to be gay *and* Catholic.¹² In turn, LGBTIQ+ Catholics’ increased visibility in the church advanced Catholic and broader cultural acceptance and normalization of being gay and Catholic. Relatedly, the increased normalization of gay relationships in society at large, crystallized by the legalization of same-sex marriage in several countries in the past decade, continues to reinforce the new objective reality affirmative of the normalcy of same-sex relationships.

The transformation in gay equality has had a significant impact on official church discourse and is ever-fermenting. Most notably, the Synod on the Family (2014–2015) demonstrated an unprecedented engagement with the lived realities of Catholic gay (and other “irregular”) relationships, and the synod’s interim report spoke very positively about gay Catholics and their importance in the church.¹³ The synod’s final report (2015), however, was less affirming, and subsequent statements by Francis, Vatican offices, and the 2023 report from the Synod on Synodality (2022–2024) comprise an uneven discourse on gay inclusion. Yet there is acknowledgment that LGBTIQ+ Catholics have a legitimate, welcoming home in Catholicism. *Amoris Laetitia*’s (AL) affirmation of the positive value of same-sex unions, Francis’s January 2023 statement that homosexuality is not a crime (though a sin like many other contextualized sins), and the Vatican declara-

10 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003.

11 Archer and McCarthy 2020.

12 Dillon 1999, 115–163.

13 Dillon 2018, 136–140.

tion in December 2023 approving the informal, non-liturgical blessing of same-sex couples (and others in “irregular” situations)¹⁴ are all significant moments in the cumulative understanding and institutionalization of gay inclusion in the church. Again, the silences are also significant. While the Vatican has not retracted its language of “objective disorder”, church officials tend no longer to use this vocabulary and for the most part refrain from explicit condemnation of “the depravity” of gay sexual relationships.

Marriage and Sexual Morality

Beyond same-sex relationships, the larger domain of marriage and sexual morality is similarly interpreted in ways that are increasingly autonomous of official church teaching. Historically, American Catholics were slower than their fellow-Americans to divorce, and currently their divorce rate (approx. 20%) is lower than for other Americans (approx. 26%). But with divorce and cohabitation an increasingly normalized part of their everyday reality, it is not surprising that, as with contraception and gay rights, Catholics have been steadily moving away from full adherence to church teachings on marriage. In 1987, 51% said that one can be a good Catholic and not have their marriage approved by the church; by 2017, 77% thought so.¹⁵

The church is unequivocal in its disapproval of divorce, and papal exhortations and other Vatican documents consistently reference scripture in grounding both the sacramental sanctity of marriage and condemnation of divorce. In church teaching, divorce is a rejection of the Lord’s commandment, and divorced Catholics who remarry are excluded from the Eucharist because their situation is in contradiction to the indissolubility of marriage.¹⁶ Yet contextual openness to the diverse realities of Catholic marriages and cohabiting relationships has nudged a nuanced shift in church discourse toward these couples’ fuller inclusion in the church’s sacramental life. Again, the Synod on the Family was instrumental in advancing this long-fermenting discourse. As reflected in public statements and in the synod’s dialogues and interim and final reports, there was substantial division among the bishops as to the path forward for couples who are divorced and remarried without an annulment. The disagreement was essentially between “spiritual communion” – conveyed through participation in Mass but not the

14 Francis 2016, *Amoris Laetitia*, #52. On blessings, see Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith 2023; on homosexuality not being a crime, see <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-01/pope-francis-letter-james-martin-homosexuality-sin-lgbtq.html>.

15 Dillon 2018, 25–27, 172–176; Dillon 2019.

16 John Paul II 1985, *Familiaris Consortio (FC)*, #84; Francis 2016, *Amoris Laetitia*, #61–63.

Eucharist – and “sacramental communion” – the freedom to receive the Eucharist – and related disagreements about which participatory and confessional options are pastorally appropriate and in accord with canon law. Despite divisions, the synod’s final report applied the language of “careful discernment” to the task of integrating divorced Catholics into the Catholic community. Of further symbolic significance, it noted that “such persons need to feel not as excommunicated members of the Church, but instead as living members, able to live and grow in the Church”.¹⁷

Moreover, as an illuminative example of how church discourse also advances by reflexively engaging with church doctrine, the words of John Paul II on marriage in his exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (FC #84) were engaged to push forward this imperative of integration. In particular, the synod invoked his important acknowledgment that each “irregular” situation presents its own circumstances and context, and, by extension, the probability of varying degrees of moral responsibility. Given the elevated authority of John Paul II among theologically conservative Catholics, it is noteworthy that his language and reasoning became pivotal to forging a remarkable (though contested) doctrinal shift. The synod drew on John Paul II’s theology of marriage, including his acknowledgment of the church’s pastoral obligation to accompany “families in difficult or irregular situations” (FC #65), to legitimate the possibility that a conscientious judgment process might allow for communion for divorced and remarried Catholics on a case-by-case basis.

It is precisely this principle that Francis affirms in *Amoris Laetitia* (AL #300). He elaborates on the relevance in Catholic theology of mitigating factors that reduce moral fault and clarifies that “it can no longer simply be said that all those in any ‘irregular’ situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace” (AL #301, fn. 351). He also notes that even in situations of objective sin – in which individuals may or may not be subjectively culpable – the person can benefit from the church’s help, including “in certain cases ... the help of the sacraments” (AL #305). *AL* does not specify which sacraments might be appropriate, but, given the context of synodal debate – and of Catholics’ experiences and aspirations toward sacramental inclusion – it is reasonable to infer that conscientious discernment might lead some such Catholics to Communion. Indeed, in the wake of the family synod, Catholic support for doctrinal change continued, with 78% of American Catholics agreeing that “divorced Catholics who remarry without an annulment should, in consultation with a priest about their situation, be able to receive Holy Communion”, an opinion shared by 57% in 1987.¹⁸

17 My discussion here draws on Dillon 2018, 157–160.

18 Dillon 2019.

The agenda for the Synod on Synodality excluded discussion of sexuality and “irregular” marital situations at its final October 2024 meeting; instead, it focused more generally on lay inclusion in the church. Regardless, the cumulative discourse on sexual relationships over the past several years, especially intensified by the Synod on the Family (2014–2015), has substantively changed the doctrinal framing of sexual behavior. Most notably, recent statements by San Diego Cardinal McElroy calling for a new theology of sex and sin mark a transformative moment. He candidly argued:

The effect of the tradition that all sexual acts outside of marriage constitute objectively grave sin has been to focus the Christian moral life disproportionately upon sexual activity.... The church has a hierarchy of truths that flow from [its] fundamental kerygma [rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ]. Sexual activity, while profound, does not lie at the heart of this hierarchy. Yet in pastoral practice we have placed it at the very center of our structures of exclusion from the Eucharist. This should change.¹⁹

McElroy elaborated that a Eucharistic theology should not be one that multiplies barriers to reception of the Eucharist based on the church’s moral teaching that any and all sexual sins (e.g., contraception, non-church approved marital and same-sex sexual behavior) are objectively grave. This is quite a remarkable call for a senior church leader to articulate and further energizes and foments the multilayered Catholic discourse on sex. Developing a new theology of sin will certainly encounter intellectual and doctrinal-political challenges. Yet the prospects for change are emboldened not only by Catholics’ everyday realities and shifts in scientific understanding of, for instance, sexual desire, identity formation, and personal growth but also by the Vatican’s expressed recognition – articulated by Pope Benedict XVI and in the preparatory document for the family synod – that amid developments in evolutionary biology and culture, Natural Law, a central motif of Catholic teaching, needs a more meaningful translation in contemporary times.²⁰

Women’s Ordination: A Case of Impediments to Doctrinal Change

The discernable impact of a changing societal context in tacitly changing church doctrine on contraception and sexual behavior is absent in the case of women’s ordination. Rather, on this issue, the church’s own institutional context has primacy, a context in which apostolic succession and an exclusively male priesthood is foundational to the church and its tradition. From Pope Paul VI to John Paul II

19 McElroy 2023.

20 Dillon 2018, 132–133.

to Francis, the Vatican insists on the impossibility of women's ordination as priests.²¹ This lack of openness to change persists despite the major advances in women's equality in society, decades-long lay support for women priests, sustained activism by the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC, founded in 1975) and allied groups (e.g., Future Church), and – perhaps most significantly from a Catholic theological and institutional perspective – the critical sacramental need presented by a shortage of priests in Western countries.

The Vatican argues that ordaining women would contravene the actions of Jesus who called only men to be apostles and who, at the Last Supper, commanded them to “Do this in memory of me.” The Last Supper – and Jesus's memorializing words – are the scriptural foundation for the sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Catechism calls “the source and summit of the Christian life” and which is core to Catholic theology, faith, and communal life. The priest enacts Jesus's command during the consecration of the Eucharist at every daily Mass and at Masses at which other key sacraments are typically celebrated such as confirmation, marriage, and ordination itself. In explaining women's exclusion from ordination, the Vatican further states that because it is impossible for women to mimic the physical maleness of Jesus himself, it is impossible for women to be priests reenacting his actions.

The interpretive lens the Vatican uses to anchor its teaching on ordination warrants reflection. Notably, there is a selective focus on the physical maleness of Jesus rather than, for instance, his ethnicity or the marital status of the apostles, even though celibacy only became a formally sanctioned church law in the eleventh century and for the past few decades has been a contested and widely discussed topic. It is also striking that on women's ordination – unlike on divorce or gay sex – church officials do not (and, in fact, cannot!) point to any prohibitory words of Jesus. There is no record of Jesus saying that women are prohibited from memorializing his actions, and there is no instance of Jesus saying that women cannot be priests or that they cannot consecrate the Eucharist, and there is no commandment, “Though shalt not ordain women.”

In the absence of any literal prohibition in scripture against women priests, advocates of ordination look to Jesus's inclusive behavioral disposition toward women – an inclusivity that is noteworthy given the historical-cultural context and women's restricted roles in early society. The Bible is replete with evidence of women's visibility and their significance in Jesus's life and ministry; scriptural accounts show Jesus routinely sought women's company and that women were present at the most theologically significant events in his life – his birth, suffering, death, and resurrection – and in instigating or witnessing renowned miracles (such as at the wedding in Cana in John 2:1–11). However, whereas the biblical

21 Dillon 1999, 60–64; Dillon 2018, 84–96.

evidence of women's significance is interpreted by many scholars and advocates as compelling grounds for the ordination of women, the Vatican makes a contrary inference. It argues that, given Jesus's anti-discriminatory attitude toward women in other domains of his ministry and life, it is all the more remarkable that he did not call women as apostles.²² It thus gives more interpretive weight to what Jesus did *not* do rather than to his inclusive actions that might be seen as open to the possibility of women's ministry. Similarly, while it singles out what Jesus *did not do*, it refrains from probing the possible interpretive implications of what he *did not say*.

The focus on what Jesus did not do is further extended by the Vatican to bolster the impossibility of any doctrinal change on ordination. The Vatican's position is that the exclusion of women from the priesthood is a settled matter of faith because even if a pope wanted to ordain women, he cannot. To do so, the Vatican argues, would contradict Jesus's will and intention, who, by not calling women as apostles, established the institutional blueprint for the church founded on an exclusively male priesthood. Consequently, grounded in what Jesus did not do, an exclusively male priesthood is part of the church's constant practice and essential to its hierarchical, apostolic tradition. Accordingly, it is core to the deposit of faith and not "open to debate". As stated by John Paul II:

"[I]n order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of grave importance, a matter which pertains to the church's divine constitution itself [...] I declare that the church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the church's faithful."²³

Similarly, Francis, departing from his general openness to dialogue and contravening his emphasis on the need for a continuous conversation between ideas and realities, has reaffirmed the settled definitiveness of the church's exclusion of women priests: "The reservation of the priesthood to males, as a sign of Christ the Spouse who gives himself in the Eucharist, is not a question open to discussion."²⁴

The continued defense of an exclusively male priesthood can be understood when considered in the context of the church's emphasis on the alleged immutability of doctrine. Given that an exclusively male priesthood is indeed the constant historical practice in the church, its overturning to admit women priests would mark a major transformation in the everyday visible practice of Catholicism. Apart from any socio-cultural divisions such change would inevitably sow across the global church, it would also present a challenge to the church's institutional

22 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1977, 520.

23 John Paul II 1994, 51.

24 Francis 2013, #104.

self-identity and legitimacy, one largely grounded by the church's emphasis on the constancy and immutability of doctrine. Paul VI's concern that a formal change in the church's teaching on contraception would diminish the church's credibility among the faithful and dilute their respect for the "constancy of doctrine" was what made him hesitant to embrace the change recommended by his own papal commission. Of course, as soon became evident, his reaffirmation of the teaching (*Humanae Vitae*) was a turning point in Catholics' own assumption of moral autonomy in the domain of sexual behavior as well as in subsequently nudging tacit doctrinal change (e.g., the Vatican's relative silence on contraception as sinful).

On ordination, however, the doctrine and practice cannot be changed merely by turning a blind eye to challenges to church teaching or by passively avoiding discussion of the issue. Contraception, same-sex relations, and divorce and remarriage – though each has its own complexity – are matters where nuanced doctrinal changes can take effect relatively tacitly and/or with varying degrees of circumscribed privacy (e.g., in sexual relationships and in the internal forum provided by the sacrament of confession). Relatively privatized contraceptive and sexual behavior that accords with a Catholic's individual discernment or with nuanced shifts in a specific teaching has a relatively lower risk of causing scandal to the church than any tacit acceptance of women's ordination would have.

The church's preoccupation with the avoidance of scandal seeks to protect the "purity" of the church from Catholic behavior that publicly contradicts or directly or indirectly conveys an (objectively erroneous) understanding of doctrine. This context is especially salient with ordination. The thoroughly public nature of the Mass and of ordained priests' sacramental roles and the iconic embeddedness of the priest as male in the church's tradition and in the Catholic imagination are core elements of Catholicism that cannot be un-lodged partially, gradually, or passively. Rather, change in the church's exclusion of women from ordination would have to be formally instituted and proactively explained by the Vatican – and defended amidst considerable doctrinal opposition from select church officials and sectors of the laity. Moreover, it would have to be credibly executed in ways that allow the Vatican to maintain that the profound change visibly in effect (e.g., at Mass) is in *de facto* continuity with the church's tradition and understanding of priesthood. Thus, change in ordination may not be impossible, but the bar to its implementation is of a different order than for doctrinal change in the realm of sexual behavior.

Not surprisingly, therefore, even Cardinal McElroy, in calling for a more inclusive theology, is notably circumspect on women's ordination. He notes that women should be invited to engage in all elements of church life that are "not

doctrinally precluded".²⁵ He refrains, however, from discussing what distinguishes doctrinal from contextual or pastoral imperatives and who constructed and validated this distinction, a distinction that, like all categorizations, rests on what are essentially arbitrary criteria demarcated by those in power.²⁶ Yet there seems to be little recognition among church officials of the possibility that precisely because priests and bishops comprise a consecrated elite, this may – consciously or unconsciously – infuse a male bias in the Vatican's reasoning on its exclusion of women from ordination.

Nevertheless, the prohibition of discussion even on a matter of faith such as ordination is at odds with the church's tradition of reflexive engagement with doctrine and how its formulation evolves. As Vatican II's "Pastoral Constitution on the Modern World" stated: "Theological inquiry should seek a profound understanding of revealed truth without neglecting close contact with its own times."²⁷ Sociologically, the church's stance may illuminate what Pierre Bourdieu would call the double-truth in church practices: the hierarchy's simultaneous assertion and denial of its authority.²⁸ The Vatican asserts its privileged authority to interpret Jesus's will and intentions, declare the matter definitively settled, and demand Catholics' adherence to it, while at the same time saying that even if it wanted to change the teaching it does not have the authority to do so (i.e., to contravene Jesus's will and intentions).

The effect of such reasoning both masks and reproduces inequalities within the church. As Bourdieu argues, the "word games" that accompany church practices function to inoculate church officials from acknowledging the inequalities they sanctify.²⁹ They instead euphemize inequality, transfiguring women's exclusion from hierarchical/clerical power into something else. Thus, the priesthood:

"...does not form part of the rights of the individual, but stems from the economy of the mystery of Christ and the church [... It] cannot become the goal of social advancement [... It] is of another order."³⁰

"...[It] is a service and not a position of privilege or human power over others. [... Its] true meaning [...] can only be found in the sacrifice of one's own being in union with Christ, in service of the brethren."³¹

"Women are of great service as women – not as ministers [...] within the Holy Orders."³²

25 McElroy 2023.

26 Foucault 1974, xv.

27 #62 in Abbott 1966, 270.

28 Bourdieu 1998, 95; Dillon 2001, 413.

29 Bourdieu 1998, 116. See also Bourdieu 1991 and Dillon 2001, 413–418.

30 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1977, 523.

31 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1995, 404.

32 Francis in a television interview with CBS News interviewer, Norah O'Donnell, May 20, 2024. https://www.cbs.com/shows/video/fO_jHfBMTrgFgRgNGDaH5AQLIDY3E79S/.

Therefore, while the Vatican affirms the complementary nature and equality of women and men and condemns sexism as a sin, women's exclusion from ordination is not (in its reasoning) a manifestation of inequality or of sexism. This is because ordination is of a "different" symbolic order than society; it is part of the revered mystery of the church. And women, in the interpretive reasoning it professes, cannot be consecrated into this hierarchically ordained order.

Conclusion

The Bible matters in Catholic discourse, but its authority is circumscribed and complemented by Magisterial authority. The overarching role of the Vatican in the interpretation and prioritization of doctrinal beliefs and principles ensures that doctrine is a living thing. It is open to the changing contexts of everyday life and to new sources of knowledge and experience. Church synods and attendant synodal reports, papal encyclicals and declarations, and a historically accreting body of philosophy and theology, including Natural Law, comprise a deep repository of arguments, ideas, and themes that at any given point in time not only inform but reflexively advance or reshape contemporary discussion of the question at hand. As such, church doctrine is always in iterative conversation with itself as well as with contemporary contextual realities.

Doctrine is undoubtedly shaped by Catholics' everyday practices amid the changing, increasingly secular contexts of their lives. The contextual reshaping of doctrine is vividly seen with contraception and church officials' tacit concession to how Catholics, by their behavior and everyday discourse, have silenced official church teaching on its prohibition. It is also evident regarding LGBTIQ+ sexuality, same-sex couples, and the sacramental inclusion of couples in non-church approved marital situations. Church teachings on sex and sexuality are grounded in what the church sees as Natural Law and, understandably, there are theological and sociological challenges in reframing the church's reasoning in ways that recognize new knowledge and cultural developments in this domain. Nevertheless, the ever-fermenting Catholic discourse on sexual behavior embraces new vocabularies (e.g., civil unions can be positive; homosexuality is not a crime) and practices (e.g., informal blessing of same-sex couples; communion pathways for divorced/remarried Catholics) and includes a call from within the hierarchy for a new theology of sin that would decenter the church's prioritization of sexual sins.

Church discourse on women's ordination, by contrast, conveys what might appear as indifference to societal context, specifically to the changes in women's equality, and – from a Bourdieusian perspective – a masking of the church's perpetuation of both hierarchical power and gender inequality. This issue, however, raises complications for the church not only in terms of its hierarchical constitu-

tion but also regarding its related commitment to protect the church from public scandal and threats to its institutional credibility. Thus, the Vatican's understanding of the sacred order – and an exclusively male hierarchy's place within it – takes precedence over other considerations. Given the public ceremonial nature of priesthood, change regarding ordination presents a more challenging hurdle than change regarding sexual behavior and cannot be accomplished passively or subtly. Nonetheless, notwithstanding the Vatican's position, the discourse contesting women's exclusion from ordination continues, as it does on other issues. Yes, the Vatican argues that women's ordination is radically different from other issues because the prohibition is seen as enshrined in the intentionality of Christ. However, as I have argued, this claim is contested, and there is ambiguity in the evidentiary base for the Vatican's assessment, thus opening the possibility that the received teaching is, at least potentially, open to interpretation. In light of the church's openness to contextual realities and its record of doctrinal reflexivity, especially pronounced at Vatican II and revived by recent synods, the Vatican's foreclosure on ordination seems puzzling. Moreover, it may be a missed opportunity, if not for institutional renewal then at a minimum for a forthright discussion of doctrine and the role of standpoint in shaping consciousness. As synodal dialogues convey, sincere and honest discussion of an issue does not in itself predetermine the outcome and can in fact open up new considerations or, perhaps, a synthesis of options not previously thought of as being compatible with the Catholic tradition.

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