

Feminist Theology and the Clergy Sexual Abuse Crisis

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Abstract

The clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is complex. While first and foremost a terrible violation of victims, it is not only about sex or abuse. It concerns unchecked, divinely sanctioned patriarchal power and its devastating consequences. The author reviews the theological issues at stake, including patriarchy, sexuality and sexual ethics, and sin. She argues that addressing the roots of the crisis calls for taking seriously the contributions of feminist theologians to the thinking of the church, especially about establishing relationships of mutuality and equality between clergy and laity.

Keywords

feminist theology, patriarchy, sexual abuse, sexual ethics, sin

First and foremost, the clergy sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church concerns the terrible violation of victims, but it is not only about sex or abuse. It is also about unchecked, divinely sanctioned patriarchal power and its devastating consequences. This article will review some of the major theological issues raised by feminist theologians that reveal and critique the roots of this power. Feminist theologians have written about sexual abuse for decades, long before the issue of clerical sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church took the headlines. Moreover, much of the response to the crisis has focused on perceived problems in theologies of sexuality,

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structures of ministry, and ecclesial leadership. Yet, the insights that feminist theology offers to this crisis have not received the kind of attention they deserve. In this article, I will show how many (although not all) of the issues in clergy sexual abuse are theologically grounded, how feminist theologians analyze abuse, how feminist insights can contribute to a transformed church in which patriarchy and clericalism no longer dominate, where there is a healthy and holistic theology of sexuality, and where the voices of women and the laity are truly heard.

The issue of mapping and naming the phenomena of theologies by, of, and for women is an ongoing task. This article will largely draw on Euro-American feminist theologians; other articles in this series will have a more global focus. Not all women theologians would describe themselves in feminist terms, nor would they agree on basic principles; the “new Catholic feminists” are an example of women theologians who find magisterial Catholic teaching on women, especially as interpreted by Pope John Paul II, to reflect their views.¹ The theologians I will discuss would agree with the following: that in much of the Christian tradition, women, along with other underrepresented groups, have been understood as different from and inferior and subservient to men; that they have wrongly been seen to lack the fullness of the image of God which, in this view, resides to a much greater degree in men; that women’s purported unsuitability for clerical vocation and leadership is based on a distorted idea of gender; that women’s vocation as essentially maternal and receptive has deprived the church of a necessary voice; and that women have suffered grievous harm throughout the Christian tradition because of these beliefs, which are, feminists argue, a distortion of the Christian message. Christian theology needs to acknowledge and repent for these harms and develop a reconstructed vision that is inclusive of all women, particularly those at the margins of society, and that incorporates women’s experiences and potential for transformation of the church and society. Such a transformation would have wide-ranging effects, not least improved clerical relationships with women and other laity.

The sexual abuse crisis is also a profound and egregious failure on the part of those who supervised the abusers: the bishops who were aware of abuses but nevertheless transferred abusers, failed to report their abuses, and even covered them up, and whose concerns were primarily for the reputation and finances of the church.² Thus, as has often been noted, the crisis is not only the abuse itself and the conditions that allowed the abuse to take place but also the structures that maintained, and continue to maintain, these conditions.³ In addition, feminist theologians, along with many

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1. See Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London / New York: Routledge, 2006).
 2. See Regina Ammicht-Quinn, Hille Haker, and Maureen Junker-Kenny, eds., *The Structural Betrayal of Trust, Concilium* (2004).
 3. See the work of the Leadership Roundtable: <https://leadershiproundtable.org/>. Founded in 2005, its mission is described on its website: “Leadership Roundtable promotes best practices and accountability in the management, finances, communications, and human resources development of the Catholic Church in the U.S., including greater incorporation of the expertise of the laity.”

others, reject the frequent charge that clergy sexual abuse can be reduced to the equation of gay priests with pedophiles.⁴ The problem is systemic and therefore requires systemic analysis and reconstruction.⁵

Theological Issues

In what follows, I will focus on the following dimensions of feminist thought: First, the fundamental theological teachings that are at stake in the dynamics of clergy sexual abuse. By this I mean the ways that central doctrines such as God, Christ, church, sacraments, sin, and grace are implicated, critiqued, and reinterpreted by feminist theologians and how they relate to clergy sexual abuse. While these theological shortcomings are not causes of abuse, they cannot be discounted as major contributors to it. I will characterize these problems as those of patriarchy, a distorted theology of sexuality, and a theology of sin as disobedience.

Second, I will explore how feminist theologians have discussed sexual abuse, particularly the abuse of girls and women, but also the complex dynamics of abuse itself and its connections with Christian theological ideas and practices. The organizational categories here are the dynamics of power, the practice of blaming/shaming, and the role of silencing.

Third, I will discuss how feminist theologians have developed constructive theologies of relationships that recognize power imbalances, value mutuality and equality, and present a vision that fully recognizes the contributions of women and lay people

4. Benedict XVI, "The Church and the Scandal of Sex Abuse," <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-benedict-xvi-the-church-and-the-scandal-of-sexual-abuse-59639>; see also <https://www.npr.org/2018/09/19/647919741/sex-abuse-scandal-deepens-divide-over-gay-priests>. Pedophiles and gay priests are, of course, two entirely separate categories. For an expert opinion on this contention, see Thomas G. Plante, "Separating Facts about Clergy Abuse from Fiction," *Psychology Today*, August 23, 2018, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/do-the-right-thing/201808/separating-facts-about-clergy-abuse-fiction>. Plante writes, "Since about 80 percent of the victims of clergy sexual abuse are male, many wish to blame the clergy abuse problem in the Church on homosexual priests. While research does suggest that the percentage of Catholic priests who are homosexual is much higher than found in the general population, we know that sexual orientation is not a risk factor for pedophilia. Homosexual men may be sexually attracted to other men but not to children. Research has found that most of the sexual abuse perpetrators didn't consider themselves homosexual at all but were 'situational generalists' (i.e., they abused whoever they had access to and control over, boys or girls) . . . *Sexual orientation isn't a risk factor for pedophilia. Pedophilia and sex offending behavior is not predicted by sexual orientation but by other known risk factors such as a history of child abuse, impulse control problems, alcohol problems, head injuries, and an inability to manage and maintain satisfying adult and peer relationships*" (emphasis original).

5. For a thorough study of the multiple dimensions of clergy sexual abuse, see Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2012).

to the church. These theologies respond to the problematic issues I raise in the first two parts: moving beyond patriarchy; establishing a theological anthropology of mutuality and justice; understanding sin as a failure to respond to evil and injustice; including women's and disenfranchised people's voices in church polity; ministry as shared work for community. This short article cannot include all that feminist theologies have to say regarding clergy sexual abuse. It is, rather, one limited effort to see how feminist theological analyses can shed needed light on a global issue.⁶

Patriarchy: God, Christ, and Church

Feminist theologians have been especially concerned with the ways in which God is understood and the consequences that flow from this theology. A few short examples will suffice. In her 1973 book, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, Mary Daly wrote, "If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people, then it is in the 'nature' of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated."⁷ A few pages later, she continued, "if God is male, then the male is God."⁸ While Daly had by this time repudiated her Catholic identity,⁹ her focus on the implications of divine maleness could not have been clearer. Male power and divinity were so inextricably related that encountering a priest or even more, a bishop, was equivalent to encountering God. Other feminist theologians echoed Daly's concerns and identified related problems: how God is described; the ministry of Jesus; models of ministry in the church, both past and present. These understandings are all connected to the subordination of laity both to the divine and to men, but more significantly for our purposes, they see laity as the priest's "children," and provide clergy with a power that is divinely justified.

In her 1983 book *Sexism and God-Talk*, Rosemary Radford Ruether argued that the Hebrew and Christian traditions rejected the divine gender complementarity of ancient civilizations and, through male monotheism, "the social hierarchy of patriarchal rule" was established and reinforced.¹⁰ While she does not specifically treat the topic of

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6. The article will draw largely on Euro-American theologies. Given the complexity of cultural issues surrounding gender and sexuality, articles on global issues connected with the sexual abuse crisis will appear in a later issue of *Theological Studies*.
 7. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973), 13.
 8. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 19. The section is titled "Castrating 'God.'"
 9. Daly's first doctorate was from St. Mary's College School of Theology, established by Sr. Madeleva Wolfe, CSC (1887–1964) who established the program since women were not permitted in Catholic doctoral programs in theology until the 1960s. In the revised version of *The Church and the Second Sex*, Daly writes about her hopefulness after Vatican II. For a contemporary evaluation of Daly's thought, see Jessica Coblentz and Brianne A. B. Jacobs, "Mary Daly's *The Church and the Second Sex* after Fifty Years of US Catholic Feminist Theology," *Theological Studies* 79 (2018): 543–65, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563918784781>.
 10. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 53.

clerical sexual abuse, her focus on the misuse of power and authority by the clergy was clear. In her chapter on ministry and community, she asserts that “[t]he arguments for women’s exclusion from ministry are applications of the general theology of male headship and female subordination.”¹¹

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, also published in 1983, challenged the canonical understanding of the early Christian community as exclusively male-led, and that this was intended by Jesus, and argued that women’s ecclesial leadership was widely practiced before being suppressed.¹² Her later works, notably *A Discipleship of Equals*, develop more fully her vision of church leadership.¹³ One of the terms she develops and uses is *kyriarchy*: ecclesial power as not simply that of males over females, but rather of a lordship over subordinates that is inimical to the ministry envisioned and practiced by Jesus.¹⁴

A third early feminist text is Anne E. Carr’s *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience*, which begins with the issue of women’s ordination and which also, like Ruether and Schüssler Fiorenza, argues for new models of ministry.¹⁵ Carr focuses on women’s experience and critiques the ways that male language for God “derives from and legitimates human patriarchal structures.”¹⁶ Like her colleagues, Carr challenges the “literal interpretation of the father metaphor,” as both elevating men and demeaning women and describes how “[w]omen are thus identified with the finitude, mortality, evil and sin of the human condition in the male attempt to disown negative human qualities.”¹⁷

Finally, Elizabeth Johnson’s highly influential 1992 book, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, explores feminist scholarship on the divine, shows how ancient Christian language for the divine originally made use of feminine language and imagery, and develops a thoroughly reconstructed trinitarian doctrine of God.¹⁸ Johnson makes the point repeatedly that “the symbol of God functions.” She argues that “exclusive speech about God serves in manifold ways to support an imaginative and structural world that excludes or subordinates women.”¹⁹

11. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 195. Ruether’s book *New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1975) identified hierarchical dualisms as the root of original sinfulness.

12. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983).

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

14. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 12–18.

15. Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

16. Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 135.

17. Carr, *Transforming Grace*, 138.

18. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Continuum, 1992).

19. Johnson, *She Who Is*, 5.

These theologies of God remain relevant because they identify hierarchical male leadership as the taproot of sexism, which elevates clerical male power and requires female/lay submission.²⁰ This leadership is based in a male deity (consider how much controversy inclusive language has raised),²¹ the Incarnation as a male human being as establishing a normativity that implies the lack of women's capability to image Christ,²² the purported establishment of patriarchal church structures directly by Christ,²³ and a theology of sin and grace that not only emphasizes obedience and humility, but also disproportionately focuses on sexual sins.²⁴ Despite biblical and historical scholarship that challenges the unchanging nature of these doctrines, church teaching stresses obedience to divine and human male authority figures, the normative male leadership of Christ, and the valorization of self-sacrificial suffering. Feminist theologians take issue with all of these views.

It is surely the case that not every priest or lay person has understood the identification of the priest with the divine in a literal sense. The sacrality attached to the priest, however, has been understood not only as a theological reality, but a personal one as well. Many can recall being taught that a priest's hands were especially sacred,²⁵ and that the sacrament of holy orders had produced an ontological change in the priest, raising him above the laity.²⁶ The priest occupied a place in the church and in the

20. Ruether's 1975 book *New Woman New Earth* was prescient in its analysis of the destructive effects of hierarchical dualisms, which include ecological concerns, racism, and anti-Semitism.
21. Some have taken issue with the use of inclusive language. See, for example, Michael J. Wrenn and Kenneth D. Whitehead, "The Translation of the Catechism," n.d., <https://www.ewtn.com/library/CATECHISM/CCHISM.HTM>, where the authors argue that "Occasionally the almost maniacal concern which is evident to avoid generic language at all costs can lead to actual distortions and misstatements of Christian revelation and essential Catholic doctrine." See also Kenneth D. Whitehead, "Inclusive Language: Is It Necessary?" *Speaking Naturally vs. Speaking Artificially*, March 1997, <https://www.newoxfordreview.org/documents/inclusive-language-is-it-necessary>, where the author refers to "ideological feminist theory" and argues that the use of inclusive language will lead to continued demands for "priestesses."
22. See Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, chap. 5: "Christology: Can a Male Savior Save Women?" 116–138, where she observes that "Access to Christ is now through the official line of apostolic teaching. Only males can occupy the apostolic teaching office and this represents Christ. Women are to keep silent" (124). See also the articles by Sara Butler and Dennis Ferrara in *Theological Studies* on the question of women's ordination: Sara Butler, "Questio Disputata: In persona Christi: A Response to Dennis Ferrara," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995): 61–80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399505600104>.
23. See especially Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals*.
24. Christine E. Gudorf, "To Make a Seamless Garment, Use a Single Piece of Cloth," *Cross Currents* 34, no. 4 (Winter 1984–1985): 473–91.
25. One can find internet references to the practice of holding the index finger and thumb (the "canonical digits") together after consecration. See John Paul Sonnen, "Posture as Liturgical Art: The Canonical Digits," *Liturgical Arts Journal*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.liturgicalartsjournal.com/2018/05/posture-as-liturgical-art-canonical.html>.
26. While the language has since changed, the laicization of priests was formerly described as "reduction to the lay state."

imagination of the people as the earthly representation of the divine, and lay people were socialized in obedience to this representative.²⁷

While the sacred status of the priest was somewhat attenuated after Vatican II with a renewed emphasis on the laity's share in the priesthood of Christ, and while the status of women was recognized as a significant issue, efforts to include women in ministry by changing church teaching on the ordination of women were and continue to be vehemently rejected by the Vatican. The argument of *Inter Insigniores* (1976) is that not only was it the intention of Christ and of the early church to establish a male-only priesthood, but also that ordaining women would violate not only the "natural resemblance" needed to see Christ in the priest, but also the spousal identity of the church.²⁸ According to this theology, the laity have a feminine (receptive) nature in relation to the masculine (initiatory) God.²⁹ Feminist theologians, along with many of their male colleagues, have long challenged arguments against women's ordination, and have argued that the biblical support for male-only ordination, as well as the tradition, is at best ambiguous, and needs to be understood in the context of the time.³⁰ Yet women's ordination cannot even stand as a topic of theological debate;³¹ women who are ordained and those who ordain them incur automatic excommunication. The Roman Catholic theology of holy orders emphasizes the priest as the "icon" of Christ who alone can administer the sacraments. "The theology of priest presented by John Paul II stressed its exceptionally cultic dimension through 'sacramental consecration' so that 'the priest is

27. On this point, see Eamonn Conway, "Operative Theologies of Priesthood: Have They Contributed to Child Sex Abuse?" in Ammicht-Quinn, Haker, and Junker-Kenny, eds., *The Structural Betrayal of Trust*, 72–86. Conway quotes the catechism of the Council of Trent that says of priests that they are "not only angels but also gods, holding as they do amongst us the power of consecrating and offering the body of the Lord" (77).

28. Paul VI, *Inter Insigniores* (October 15, 1976), 5, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html: "The same natural resemblance is required for persons as for things: when Christ's role in the Eucharist is to be expressed sacramentally, there would not be this 'natural resemblance' which must exist between Christ and his minister if the role of Christ were not taken by a man: in such a case it would be difficult to see in the minister the image of Christ. For Christ himself was and remains a man."

29. Moreover, seminary education, which in the United States takes place largely in a male-only context, further supports this understanding, especially when seminary educators are urged against the admission of lay people to seminary classes. See the document (1009/2002) issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education, on December 15, 2008, in response to the Apostolic Visitation of American seminaries and houses of priestly formation, sec. II.2, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/priesthood/priestly-formation/upload/Final-Seminary-Visitation-Report.pdf>.

30. See Leonard Swidler and Arlene Swidler, *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1977).

31. John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (May 22, 1994), 4, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html.

configured to Jesus Christ as head and shepherd of the church, and is endowed with a “spiritual power” which shares in the authority with which Jesus Christ guides the Church through his Spirit.”³² The fact that many bishops, notably Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, sought to protect the priesthood more than the people who were abused, can be seen as following from this kind of understanding of the priest.

None of these ideas on their own supports an atmosphere in which a culture of male privilege, secrecy, and divine sanctification allowed the abuse of women, children, and vulnerable adults, but this culture could not have flourished without such support. The feminization of the church itself is also a key factor: it envisions the non-ordained laity as the “spotless bride” of Christ: receptive, docile, and obedient, and thus reluctant to challenge or question the clergy even when abuse is suspected.³³ As feminine, the laity are to model Mary as the first obedient and receptive disciple.³⁴ In sum, a patriarchal theology of God, priesthood, and church serves to socialize both clergy and laity into a pattern of thinking and acting that supports masculine power and feminine (lay) subordination.

Sexuality

Feminist theologians assert that Catholic moral theology must examine critically its own teaching on both sexuality and power. Sexuality has long been a particular focus of Catholic theological anthropology and moral theology. As a divinely created gift, sexuality is so central to a person’s life that sexual sins always involve “grave matter”; sexual sins are serious because they are violations of the natural law, established by God.³⁵ Sexual morality is thus largely understood in terms of the objective nature of sexual acts, and the larger context of sexual relationships is often ignored. The theological anthropology of magisterial Catholic teaching, while affirming equality between men and women, nevertheless strongly emphasizes sexual difference. Indeed, Vatican teachings are most critical of feminist ideas when they seek to diminish or erase the “essential” differences between the sexes.³⁶ Even recently, Pope Francis has

32. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (March 15, 1992), 21, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html.

33. See Susan A. Ross, “The Church as ‘Spotless Bride,’” in Daniel Minch and Christopher Cimorelli, eds., *One Bread, One Body, One Church: The Ecclesia of Christ Today* (Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia: Peeters, forthcoming).

34. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 42–47, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031987_redemptoris-mater.html.

35. John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (London: Clarendon, 1989); Cristina L. H. Traina, *Feminist Ethics and Natural Law: The End of the Anathemas* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1999).

36. See, for example, Paul VI, *Inter Insigniores* (October 15, 1976), 5, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19761015_inter-insigniores_en.html; and especially John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 7, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

caricatured feminism as “machismo in a skirt.”³⁷ According to this understanding, as noted above, women have an essentially maternal nature, and a “feminine genius” that enriches the church.³⁸ Although women are described as the teachers of men when it comes to family issues, women’s “distinctive” role is basically maternal.³⁹ The religious socialization of women is one of deference to clergy, fathers, and husbands.

Particularly because women have been historically associated with the body and sexuality, as the lower and inferior dimensions of the person, feminist theologians share a concern to retrieve and reevaluate sexual attitudes and relationships. As M. Shawn Copeland notes, the “ambivalence and disquiet” that Catholic teaching on the body manifests falls more heavily on women, especially women of color, and vulnerable children and adults.⁴⁰ John Paul II’s “Theology of the Body” strongly emphasizes the receptive nature of female sexuality, and more than one scholar has warned of the dangerous and even potentially violent implications of such romanticized conceptions of sexuality.⁴¹

Feminist theologians challenge magisterial teaching which prioritizes procreation, too often focuses primarily on the objective nature of sexual acts, and fails to fully attend to the social contexts in which relationships are formed and develop. Clergy run the risk of suffering from a “lack of human connection within society.”⁴² In addition, and perhaps more relevant to the crisis, normative sexual activity, according to Catholic

37. Maya Oppenheim, “Pope Francis Says Feminism is ‘Machismo with a Skirt,’” *Independent*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/pope-francis-feminism-machismo-skirt-child-sex-abuse-catholic-church-vatican-summit-a8795726.html>.

38. See Pope John Paul II, “Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women” (June 29, 1995), https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

39. See *Mulieris Dignitatem* 17–19.

40. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010).

41. See Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, tr. Michael Waldstein (Chicago: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). For a critical look at the theology that inspired much of John Paul II’s theology of sexual complementarity, see Elisabeth Vasko, “The Difference Gender Makes: Nuptiality, Analogy, and the Limits of appropriating Hans Urs von Balthasar’s Theology in the Context of Sexual Violence,” *Journal of Religion* 94 (2014): 504–28, <https://doi.org/10.1086/677290>; Karen Kilby, “Julian of Norwich, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and the Status of Suffering in Christian Theology,” *New Blackfriars* 99 (2018): 298–311, <https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12298>; Tina Beattie, “Sex, Death and Melodrama: A Feminist Critique of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *The Way* 44 (2005): 160–76; Brianne Jacobs, “An Alternative to Gender Complementarity: The Body as Existential Category in the Catholic Tradition,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 328–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563919836243>.

42. Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994), 99. See also Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary E. Hunt, and Radhika Balakrishnan, *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World’s Religions* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2001); Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996).

teaching, assumes a domination–subordination model, with male, active penetration of the receptive female as the basis for any legitimate form of sexual expression, which must always be tied to procreation.⁴³ Christine Gudorf argues that the association of sex and dominance cannot be ignored, and further observes that nondominant men are commonly referred to in contemptuous terms while dominant women are seen as threatening.⁴⁴ Sexuality is thus revealed as a relationship not only of (potentially and ideally) love and procreation but also of power.⁴⁵

Without an understanding of sexual pleasure itself as a good⁴⁶ and a commitment to mutuality in relationships, clergy relationships with laity, especially women and children, lack positive examples. Patricia Beattie Jung notes how the Roman Catholic Church needs to “teach with credibility and consistency that partnered sex to be good must be pleasurable.”⁴⁷ Her point is not only to affirm women’s sexuality but, for our purposes here, to argue that the failure to attend to *mutually* pleasurable sex privileges men’s pleasure and keeps it within both an unequal and an act-centered understanding of sex.⁴⁸

Overwhelmingly, feminist theologians argue for the inherent goodness of human sexuality as a gift of God and are critical of theologies that privilege celibacy over sexual activity.⁴⁹ Sexuality, however, must not only be seen as good, which is affirmed in magisterial theology, but also as *just*. One of the more significant challenges to traditional Catholic teaching on the body and sexuality is made by Margaret Farley who stresses the importance of justice in all sexual relationships.⁵⁰ Rather than focusing on

43. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not prescribe or proscribe any particular sexual position (cf. §§2337–2400), but any sexual act must be in accord with both its unitive and procreative purposes, thus ruling out any male ejaculation outside the vagina or female orgasm not connected with intercourse.

44. Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 125.

45. This is a point underscored by Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Feminist Ethics and the Sexual Abuse of Children: Reading Christian Origins,” in Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, eds., *A Just and True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 234–72. Megan McCabe even argues that all heterosexual relationships are marked by violence. See her “A Feminist Catholic Response to the Social Sin of Rape Culture,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46 (2018): 635–57, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12239>.

46. Both Gudorf and Margaret Farley (*Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* [New York: Continuum, 2006]) carefully note that the prohibition of masturbation does not take into account the scientific evidence of its role in sexual formation. See Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*, 81–138, and Farley, *Just Love*, 235–37.

47. Patricia Beattie Jung, “Sanctifying Women’s Pleasure,” in Jung et al., *Good Sex*, 77–95 at 95.

48. See Patricia Beattie Jung, *Sex on Earth as it is in Heaven: A Christian Eschatology of Desire* (Albany: State University of New York, 2017).

49. Cahill, *Sex, Gender and Christian Ethics*; Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure*; Jung, *Sex on Earth*.

50. Farley, *Just Love*. See also Ryan and Linnane, eds., *A Just and True Love*. Especially relevant to this topic are the essays in Ryan and Linnane by Mary Rose D’Angelo, “Feminist Ethics and the Sexual Abuse of Children: Reading Christian Origins,” and Brian Linnane, “The Sexual Abuse Scandal in the Catholic Church: Implications for Sexual Ethics.”

the sexual act itself, Farley is concerned with the context of sexual relationships, and the need to consider social and cultural realities which affect women and children differently, depending on their location. Farley stresses the mutuality that is so central to a positive sexual experience, perhaps not surprisingly resulting in condemnation by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for the book's lack of emphasis on the immorality of certain acts.⁵¹ The lack of a healthy theology of sexuality extends to Catholic sex education which, as a number of theologians have observed, consists largely of admonitions to youth not to have sex, and the dangers of premarital sex.⁵² As noted above, seminary education in the United States, especially diocesan, remains largely isolated and all-male, so that even any positive theology of sexuality taught in a seminary remains disconnected with the lived experience of the laity. The consequences of an incomplete and distorted theology of sexuality, along with an exaggerated conception of patriarchal authority and power, provide rich ground for the patterns of abuse that we have witnessed.

Sin

Feminist theologians charge that the sins of misogyny and abuses of power have not received the kind of magisterial condemnation they deserve. Drawing on liberationist principles, feminists see sin not just as individual vicious acts but also as deeply embedded in social and cultural systems that perpetuate injustice, particularly injustices that harm women and children. Sin is a "violation of right relation, a sign of our brokenheartedness, a betrayal of trust, the reign of injustice, the consequence of disparities of power, and as tyrannical systems of oppression."⁵³ In relation to clergy sexual abuse, sin resides not only—although it is primarily—in the abuser, but also in the structures that have minimized the harm to victims, protected abusers and diocesan bank accounts, and discouraged victims and their families from pursuing redress.⁵⁴

Constructively, feminist theologians have also argued for a revised understanding of sin and grace that is based less in strict obedience to church teaching and more in

51. In 2012, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) declared that Farley's *Just Love* was in conflict with Catholic teaching. The CDF critique can be found at the website of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in its own news release, "Vatican Critiques Book by Mercy Sister Margaret Farley," June 4, 2012, <http://www.usccb.org/news/2012/12-097.cfm>.

52. Karen Ross, "Deconstructing the 'Good Catholic Girl': A Critique of Sexual Pedagogies for Young Women in Catholic Ethics" (PhD dissertation, Loyola University Chicago, 2018); also see Brian Linnane's essay in *A Just and True Love*.

53. Christine M. Smith, "Sin and Evil in Feminist Thought," *Theology Today* 50 (1993): 210–11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057369305000205>. Although dated, this article is a helpful summary of feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologies at the time. For some more recent treatments, see Margaret D. Kamitsuka, "Toward a Feminist Postmodern and Postcolonial Interpretation of Sin," *Journal of Religion* 84 (2004): 179–211, <https://doi.org/10.1086/381210>; Joy Ann McDougal, "Sin—No More? A Feminist Re-Visioning of a Christian Theology of Sin," *Anglican Theological Review* 88 (2006): 215–35.

54. See Elizabeth Johnson's description of sin as exploitation in *She Who Is*, 27.

the development of a healthy sense of self and a mature and educated conscience.⁵⁵ A feminist approach to obedience and conscience, as developed by Anne Patrick, focuses on obedience as “hearing toward,” and “[l]istening with care for clues to the divine will,” rather than obediently following church teaching without reflection.⁵⁶

A theology of sin primarily focused on individual acts and obedience to patriarchal authority and the law does not encourage the development of a mature and educated lay conscience, one that can challenge abuses of authority.⁵⁷ In addition, feminist theologians argue that the magisterial focus on sexual morality receives disproportionate attention in relation to the seriousness of other moral issues, such as war, poverty, and racism, which are rooted in complex social structures, as is sexual morality.⁵⁸

In sum, many of the theological issues regarding sin and sex that feminist theologians have raised get at the fundamental structures of the church’s beliefs and practices. Rather than seeing clergy sexual abuse as the problem of a small minority of troubled priests, or, worse, assuming that only homosexual and/or pedophile men commit sexual abuse and thus should be barred from the priesthood, feminist theologians see a structure of patriarchy, which, alongside attitudes of fear and avoidance of sex, demands obedience and continues to exert authority over, marginalizes, and silences the feminized laity. Given this structure, it is no surprise that some clergy exercised their power in dehumanizing ways.

Sexual Abuse

Although the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has been precipitated in some parts of the world by the overwhelming cases of the abuse of males, in the broader population, men are the overwhelming majority of those who commit crimes of sexual abuse, and the majority of victims are girls and women.⁵⁹ While the abuse of boys and young men has aroused so much attention in recent years, the abuse of girls and women by clergy is not only equally reprehensible, but probably far more frequent; and because it is “normal,” heterosexual sex, it is far less often reported. Lay women and

55. See Anne E. Patrick, *Liberating Conscience: Feminist Explorations in Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1996). See also her Madeleva Lecture, *Women, Conscience and the Creative Process* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2011); *Conscience and Calling: Ethical Reflections on Catholic Women’s Church Vocations* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

56. See Patrick, *Liberating Conscience*, 106.

57. Rebecca Bratton Weiss’s blog posts have been insightful; see <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/suspendedinherjar/2018/09/the-problem-with-a-culture-of-obedience/>.

58. See Gudorf, “To Make a Seamless Garment.”

59. See National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey: 2010 Summary Report,” November 2011, https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nisvs_report2010-a.pdf. Sexual violence and abuse come in many different forms: rape, sexual assault, sexualized violence. Feminists highlight the gendered dimension of sexual violence.

women religious alike have been the victims of clerical sexual abuse.⁶⁰ Given these realities, feminist theologians have paid close attention to the dynamics of power in sexual relationships and sexual abuse.⁶¹

The Bible and Tradition on Sexual Violence

Women's claims of sexual violence have historically been dismissed, denied, and silenced. Women have been told that abuse is their fault, that they exaggerate the abuse, that no abuse happened, that they should forgive their abusers, and that they in fact asked for it and even enjoyed it.

The roots of the problem run deep. Many accounts of abuse are found in the Bible, and feminist scholarship includes numerous scathing critiques of biblical narratives of the abuse of women and children. Renita Weems' *Battered Love*, along with other texts, shows how the biblical tradition has romanticized the spousal relationship between God and humanity, and in the process, has also justified the use of violence to "punish" the harlot wife.⁶² Power relationships are at stake in these biblical passages, as the patriarchal tradition supports the right of the father or husband to set the boundaries for appropriate behavior on the part of the daughter or spouse.⁶³ While these biblical passages do not explicitly touch on clergy sexual abuse, the assumption is that male authority figures, especially those who stand for the divine, must be obeyed, sometimes at the cost of one's life.⁶⁴ It needs to be said as well that while the biblical texts often include their own internal critiques of these actions, these subtleties are not made evident to those who are most affected by them. New Testament texts that sanctify wifely submission and prohibit women's speech in public have been used for centuries

60. See Marie Collins, "Breaking the Silence: The Victims," in Ammicht-Quinn et al., *The Structural Betrayal of Trust* (n.2).

61. See Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1989); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and M. Shawn Copeland, eds., *Violence against Women, Concilium* (1994); Lisa Isherwood and Rosemary R. Ruether, eds., *Weep Not for Your Children: Essays on Religion and Violence* (London: Equinox, 2008). In the early phase of the "second wave" of feminism (the 1960s and 1970s), concern for bodily autonomy and integrity was prominent. See, e.g., *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, first published as a pamphlet in 1970; it has since undergone numerous revisions. While much of this focus was on women's reproductive autonomy, stressing the need for available contraception and legal abortion, equally significant is a concern for equality and especially safety in relationships.

62. Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995).

63. See also Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984).

64. See, e.g., Sara M. Koenig, "Make Love Not War: The Limits of David's Hegemonic Masculinity in 2 Samuel 10–12," *Biblical Interpretation* 23 (2015): 489–517, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685152-02345p02>.

to insure women's and children's subordination as the will of God. St. Jerome's comments on women's dress could still be made in the present: "When they go out they do their best to attract notice, and with nods and winks encourage troops of young fellows to follow them."⁶⁵ Whether or not women "try to attract notice," they are held responsible for the actions of the men who might abuse them.

The Women's Movement and Feminists Speak Up

The early "consciousness-raising" groups of the 1960s and 1970s, which also served as informal places for conscience formation, provided spaces where women could share their experiences and come to realize that they were not alone, that violence from intimate others was not only widespread but needed to be identified, named, and condemned, and that women's voices needed to be heard.⁶⁶ It was in such groups that women identified marital rape, for example, as rape and not simply what was to be expected in conjugal relations. It was also in such contexts that feminists recognized that the issue was not primarily sex but rather power.

As note earlier, feminists, including but not only theologians, have emphasized the point that sexual abuse is fundamentally an abuse of power.⁶⁷ Far too often, sexual relations between unequals have been portrayed as seduction, or less seriously as a mere "return of affection," often by the woman or child involved.⁶⁸ In situations of sexual violence against girls and women, blame was (and still is) cast on the victim for her clothing, for being out at night, for not being sufficiently loving (or obedient) toward her spouse.⁶⁹ In addition, victims were (and are) reluctant or afraid to report abuse because of their fear of not being believed, and especially of the repercussions of reporting.⁷⁰ It is imperative, then, to acknowledge the imbalance and abuse of power

65. Jerome, "Letter to Eustochium" (Letter XXII), in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, and A. C. Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 27.

66. Ann O'Hara Graff, "The Struggle to Name Women's Experiences," in Ann O'Hara Graff, ed., *In the Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995).

67. Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

68. See, for example, how David has been portrayed as being seduced by Bathsheba (n.65 above), or even that a teenage girl can agree to sex with a priest; see "Cardinal's Comments Anger Critics," UPI, April 26, 2002, https://www.upi.com/Top_News/2002/04/26/Cardinals-comments-anger-critics/47621019845556/.

69. See Lee Moran, "Spanish Archbishop Implies Women Are to Blame for Domestic Violence," *Huffington Post*, December 20, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/archbishop-domestic-violence-pain_n_568bc89ee4b06fa6888374d8.

70. Such fear was evident in the hearings for Brett Kavanaugh's Supreme Court nomination in the fall of 2018. For linkage between clergy sexual abuse and the Kavanaugh hearings, see Marci A. Hamilton, "The Response to the Kavanaugh Allegations Exposes the Lessons We Failed to Learn from the Catholic Clergy's Abuse," *Time*, October 4, 2018, <http://time.com/5415241/brett-kavanaugh-catholic-church-abuse/>.

when mutual consent is absent or impossible.⁷¹ “Sexual abuse is not only or especially a misuse of sexuality. It is, in the first instance, always a form of power abuse.”⁷² Annemie Dillen carefully sorts through the multiple issues involved in power relationships, noting that power is an issue in every relationship, but that pastoral relationships in particular need close scrutiny.⁷³ And with regard to power, it is also worth noting how many critics of women seeking ordination charge them with a desire for power and argue that the priesthood is one of service.⁷⁴ It is notable that the editors of one of the first feminist volumes published on violence against women and children observed that it was only when women began taking on pastoral leadership roles in churches that many of their parishioners were able to share with their pastors the extent of women’s experiences of abuse.⁷⁵

The phenomenon of “victim grooming,” in which an authority figure or someone older and looked up to by someone younger, is a variation on power relationships where the eventual victim is drawn into a relationship which is initially portrayed as loving but is in fact profoundly manipulative. Cristina Traina’s work on unequal relationships sheds needed light on the harm to the development of moral subjectivity in children and young adults, and the devastating results, when the trust of vulnerable children is betrayed. The complexities of caregiving relationships that both require and forbid touching need both self-awareness and attunement to the erotic nature of our relationships.⁷⁶ Hille Haker points out that “sexual violence disrespects the other as moral agent, and potentially threatens the victim’s moral agency and well-being. It perverts the very basis of sexuality, namely, the trust to be recognized in one’s ‘nakedness’.”⁷⁷

71. See M. Reynaert, “Sexual Abuse of Children as a Form of Power Abuse and Abuse of the Body,” *Acta Theologica* 35 (2015): 189–200, <https://doi.org/10.4314/actat.v35i1.11>.

72. Reynaert, “Sexual Abuse of Children,” 190.

73. Annemie Dillen, “The Complexity of Power in Pastoral Relations: Challenges for Theology and Church,” *ET Studies* 4/2 (2013): 221–35. The fact that there are many reports of sexual and other abuse by nuns shows that men are not the only perpetrators. The Irish Magdalen Laundries and revelations of the abuse of children by women religious are evidence that power relationships are not bound by gender. See Myra L. Hidalgo, *Sexual Abuse and the Culture of Catholicism: How Priests and Nuns Become Perpetrators* (New York: Haworth, 2007).

74. Jamie Manson, “Stop Shaming Women for Seeking Equal Power in the Church,” *National Catholic Reporter*, August 16, 2017, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/stop-shaming-women-seeking-equal-power-church>.

75. “Preface” to *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, ed. Carol J. Adams and Marie M. Fortune (New York: Continuum, 1995), 9: “When we first began educating church leaders about sexual and domestic violence in the late 1970s, their most common response was: ‘*But no one ever comes to me with this problem*’” (italics original).

76. Cristina L. H. Traina, *Erotic Attunement: Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2011), especially chap. 6, “Abuse and Attachment.”

77. Hille Haker, “Catholic Sexual Ethic—A Necessary Revision: Theological Responses to the Sexual Abuse Scandal,” in *Human Trafficking, Concilium* (2011): 128–13 at 131.

Feminist Theological Critique of the Sublimation of Suffering

How one responds to abuse or suffering is another central concern of feminist theologians. Feminist theologians have questioned the role of violence and suffering as central to Christian teaching, as dominant theologies of sin taught that humanity was to blame for Christ's death and that suffering was to be borne in solidarity with Christ. In particular, women theologians of color have raised concerns about the valorization of redemptive suffering, surrogacy, and the role of sacrifice in the Christian life. Delores Williams, among others, has challenged the idea that substitutionary atonement is the most adequate interpretation of the suffering of Jesus. Her point is that the role that surrogacy (one who takes the place of another) plays in Christian theology overlooks the threat that Jesus posed to the religious authorities of his time and the role this played in his execution. Moreover, the value placed on being a surrogate, standing in for the other, has had a disproportionate effect on women of color, who are the surrogate wives and mothers of white men and women.⁷⁸ Thus, theologies of atonement have been blamed for perpetuating an attitude that overly valorizes the suffering of victims and thus makes it more difficult for victims to see their abuse as abuse and to come forward.

Lisa Sowle Cahill articulates some of the reasons for objecting to atonement theologies:

... the atonement paradigm sanctifies violence (Denny Weaver, Stephen Finian); worships a divine sadist (Dorothee Soelle); turns God into an omnipotent child abuser (Rita Nakashima Brock); speaks no word of salvation to African American women and others resisting oppression (Delores Williams); and provides murderous fanatics, fascists, and torturers with validating symbols (Jürgen Moltmann, Mark Taylor).⁷⁹

Cahill responds to these challenges to the atonement, arguing that there is a role for a doctrine of atonement through a reinterpretation of Anselm and a consideration of the ways that human suffering has generated positive responses. She concludes, "The atonement paradigm of salvation, when tied to resurrection and complemented by soteriologies of incarnation and ethics of the reign of God and option for the poor, can inspire communities of vicarious sacrifice for others that can make a difference in the world around us."⁸⁰ Yet too often theologies of atonement have not made these connections and have perpetuated a spirituality that encourages an acceptance of suffering without questioning its source or cause.

78. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993); see also Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988).

79. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Quaestio Disputata: The Atonement Paradigm: Does It Still Have Explanatory Value?" *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 419–20, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056390706800209>. Cahill provides references to all of those named in the notes to the article.

80. Cahill, "Quaestio," 432.

Because of the lack of willingness on the part of pastors to acknowledge the prevalence of sexual abuse along with the ambivalence, disquiet, and the shame that accompanies discussion of sexuality, those who are sexually abused are very often reluctant to admit the abuse, even to themselves, or blame themselves for the abuse. Victims and their families who report abuse to authorities have far too often been required to sign non-disclosure agreements when financial settlements are made. Worse, “by silencing, shaming and stigmatising the victims of male sexual violence, the churches largely reflect the attitudes of society, which include blaming the victim.”⁸¹

The silence that surrounds clergy sexual abuse is one of its most disturbing dimensions, and this is especially related to women’s and especially children’s experiences with abuse.⁸² Women’s voices are so often *not* heard: in legislative bodies, in places of power, and especially from the pulpit. M. Catherine Hilkert’s work has focused on the issue of women’s voices, “naming grace” in situations of joy and especially in suffering. Hilkert writes that “naming grace in the Christian tradition can happen only if we are equally committed to naming the ‘dis-grace’ or sin that is part of our heritage.”⁸³

Sadly, naming the “dis-grace of sin” is not difficult. Women religious in Africa have been pressured into sex, especially by priests who seek to avoid contracting HIV. I know a woman religious superior in Kenya who was silenced and removed from her teaching position by her bishop for protesting the sexual abuse of nuns in her community; the bishop’s response was to remove her from her position for “insubordination.” She was eventually exonerated by the Vatican Congregation for Religious, but the process took years to resolve. The women religious who contracted HIV or who became pregnant were dismissed from the community, where the priests who were HIV positive were given retroviral medicines and returned to their ministries. Only recently has Pope Francis recognized and condemned the sexual abuse of nuns.⁸⁴

Catholic theologies of sexuality and marriage have been particularly dangerous for women in many parts of the world. African women, many of them Catholic, are at higher risk for contracting HIV because of patriarchal cultures that privilege male pleasure and procreation.⁸⁵ Emily Reimer-Barry’s work on married Catholic women with HIV reveals the need for a much more women-affirming approach to such practices as marriage

81. Louise du Toit, “Sexual Violence, Religion and Women’s Rights in Global Perspective,” *Religious Studies and Theology* 36 (2017):155–70 at 156, <https://doi.org/10.1558/rsth.35156>.

82. See Jennifer Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace and Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2007).

83. Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 147.

84. See Richard Gonzales, “Pope Francis Acknowledges, for First Time, Sexual Abuse of Nuns by Priests,” NPR, February 5, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/05/691843161/pope-francis-acknowledges-for-first-time-sexual-abuse-of-nuns-by-priests>.

85. See Melissa Browning, *Risky Marriage: HIV and Intimate Relationships in Tanzania* (London / New York: Lexington, 2014).

preparation, family ministry, and wedding ceremonies so that “women hear of God’s loving care for them and of their obligation to care for themselves.”⁸⁶

Even the spiritual practice of silence needs closer examination. As Beth Crisp notes, “In some churches, longstanding expectations have promulgated the message that docility and obedience are the correct response of Christians to their clergy in all matters.”⁸⁷ She goes on to question the valorization of silence in spiritual practice and further points out that “[t]he ability to appreciate silence requires a perception that the silent space is a safe one to explore.”⁸⁸

A final comment is in order on the role of speech and silence in how the hierarchy have responded to the crisis. Consider the words of Bishop Joseph Imesch, when he was asked about how parents must have felt, knowing that he allowed abusive priests in his diocese: “I don’t have children.”⁸⁹ The failure of imagination on the part of the episcopacy to empathize with their married brothers and sisters and to put the financial security of their dioceses ahead of concerns for those who suffered abuse is one of the most striking problems, but it arises out of the clergy’s separation from the laity, the secrecy with which sex is dealt, and clericalism itself. The silence of the clergy and the absence of women’s voices was raised in the February Vatican Summit on sexual abuse, when Sr. Veronica Openibo castigated the assembly for their silence, which served to protect them.⁹⁰

Constructive Suggestions

The sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church is complex. It is not primarily a result of the sexual revolution of the 1960s or of the presence of gay priests. Clergy sexual abuse does not only occur in the Catholic Church; in early 2019, the Southern Baptist Convention was forced to reckon with its own sexual abuse crisis, as did other

86. Emily Reimer-Barry, *Catholic Theology of Marriage in the Era of HIV and AIDS: Marriage for Life* (London / New York: Lexington, 2015), 156.

87. As quoted in Beth Crisp, “Silence and Silenced: Implications for the Spirituality of Survivors of Sexual Abuse,” *Feminist Theology* 18 (2010): 286, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0966735009360386>. The reference is to Thomas P. Doyle, A.W. Richard Sipe, and Patrick J. Wall, *Sex, Priests and Secret Codes: The Catholic Church’s 2000-year Paper Trail of Sexual Abuse* (Los Angeles, CA: Volt, 2006).

88. Crisp, “Silence and Silenced,” 293.

89. Todd Lighty and David Heinzmann, “Joliet Bishop at Center of Crisis,” *Chicago Tribune* (May 16, 2002), <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2002-05-16-0205160369-story.html>.

90. See “Nun, among Few at Vatican Abuse Summit, Blasts Church for ‘Mediocrity, Hypocrisy and Complacency,’” *PBS Newshour*, February 23, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/nun-among-few-at-vatican-abuse-summit-blasts-church-for-mediocrity-hypocrisy-and-complacency>. For the text of Openibo’s remarks, see “Text: at Abuse Summit, Sister Openibo Calls for Complete Transparency,” *CNS News*, February 23, 2019, <https://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2019/text-sister-openibo-calls-for-complete-transparency-at-abuse-summit.cfm>.

organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America.⁹¹ Clerical sexual abuse in Catholicism has multiple roots: in theologies of God as an all-powerful male authority figure; a theology that fails to nurture a healthy sexuality; an overemphasis on following rules and being obedient to male authority; a church structure that elevates clergy to a quasi-divine status; a practice of avoiding or silencing the voices of the vulnerable and powerless; and blaming victims for their own abuse.

Feminist theologies do not have all of the solutions to this crisis, but the crisis will not be sufficiently faced without their contributions. At this point, let me simply outline some of the responses from feminist theologies.

First, in terms of theological issues: theologies of God must challenge the dominant image of the powerful male God and the gendered theology that sees men as divinely ordained leaders and the laity as docile receivers. When all the language for God in liturgical contexts is male, the feminized laity see themselves as less than fully in the image of God and see (clerical) men as authorities to be obeyed.⁹² Such language and theology discourage the development of a mature laity and silence their voices.

Second, clericalism has been widely condemned as one of the main sources of the crisis of clergy sexual abuse. Feminist theologians have long argued for a theology of ministry that sees it as service to the community, that emphasizes the ministry of all the baptized, and that recognizes vocation as something to which all the baptized are called. The ordination of women to the priesthood seems extremely unlikely at any point in the future; the question of women's ordination to the diaconate, while the subject of a recent papal commission, is no closer to being resolved.⁹³ Papal statements that express the need for more women in church leadership cannot be taken seriously unless and until there is significant action on this issue. Although women have taken on significant leadership roles in dioceses, they still lack a formal voice in church deliberations. To be sure, it is by no means clear that the mere presence of women would prevent abuse; there are too many examples of women religious as sexual abusers. But the voices of women victims, parents, and professionals are badly needed in church offices that deal with children and vulnerable adults. In addition, the presence of laity, especially women, in seminary formation programs is not a threat to the identity of the priest; rather, it encourages seminarians to develop healthy and realistic relationships with those with and among whom they will minister. The toxic culture of misogyny in seminaries, where it exists, must be challenged and uprooted, as can be

91. For Southern Baptists, see Elizabeth Dias, "Southern Baptists Announce Plans to Address Sexual Abuse," *New York Times*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/us/southern-baptists-sexual-abuse.html>; for the Boy Scouts, see James Barron, "Nearly 8,000 Boy Scout Leaders Have Been Accused of Sexual Abuse since 1944, Researcher Found," *New York Times*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/23/nyregion/boy-scouts-sex-abuse.html?searchResultPosition=2>.

92. Marjorie Procter-Smith, "Liturgical Anamnesis and Women's Memory: 'Something Missing,'" *Worship* 61 (1987), 405–24.

93. Phyllis Zagano, ed., *Women Deacons: Essays with Answers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2016).

seen in the recent comment of a seminary professor who referred to the presence of women on seminary campuses as a “a challenge to human formation.”⁹⁴

Third, feminist contributions to theologies of sexuality not only insist on recognizing the goodness of sexual desire and pleasure, but even more, challenge magisterial teaching that sees all sexual relationships according to the norm of procreation.⁹⁵ All sexual relationships must be marked by justice, equality, and mutuality, which by definition rules out sexual relationships with children and vulnerable adults. Consequently, there must be a more adequate program of both sexual education and marriage preparation for youth and young adults. In addition, the social context of sexuality needs further attention. The roles of sex and gender within social and cultural traditions are especially significant for women and children.

Fourth, while academic theologies of sin and grace may have moved beyond a largely act-centered focus and traditional doctrines of atonement, and now include the biblical tradition, human development, and social contexts along with their theological foci, it is unclear to what extent such emphases have found their way into parish education programs. It is beyond my own qualifications and the scope of this article to evaluate programs of religious education, but a clear message from parents, clergy, and religious educators of God’s unsurpassing love and mercy, the goodness of the body and sexuality, one’s own bodily integrity, mutuality and justice in sexual relationships, and the need for a well-formed conscience, to the extent that these are not already points of emphasis, would assist young people in their spiritual, sexual, social, and moral development.

Fifth, with regard to sexual abuse itself, feminist theologians and ethicists take issue with the ways that it has been understood by church authorities as primarily a problem of some abusive clergy. This should come as no surprise, since in this situation they are the offenders. Yet the deeper dimensions of this issue go unheard: the voices and experiences of the victims and the effects of abuse on their own sense of self, sexuality, and morality. Hille Haker writes,

... If these experiences are not expressed and communicated, if it is not possible to speak about them, if they are not heard or just ignored and kept shut away in a secret place, they may not find their way into the moral sense. This is another facet of why the abuse scandal, on the theoretical level of ethical reasoning, becomes a scandal about sexual ethics, too.⁹⁶

The systemic nature of sexual abuse requires a systemic response. To be sure, episcopal accountability, more rigorous psychological evaluation of candidates for the priesthood, and training for all ministers who work with children are all necessary.

94. See Mary Pezzulo, “Women Are Not Poison to Seminarians’ Formation,” *Patheos*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/steelmagnificat/2019/05/8828/?fbclid=IwAR0MAE2qPXqoj-UKAVnZg1bKFWyGAumS-w117YfHazZlymYeipsBgD8IXDw>.

95. I am indebted to Hille Haker for her comments on this point on an earlier draft of this article.

96. Hille Haker, “Catholic Sexual Ethics,” 133.

But they are not enough. The deep roots of patriarchy and paternalism, misogyny, fear of sex, and a culture of obedience must be named and challenged so as to establish relationships of mutuality and equality between clergy and laity and appropriate education and safeguards for children and vulnerable adults.

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