

Feminism and Faith: How Women Find Empowerment in the Roman Catholic Church

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Feminism and Faith: How Women Find Empowerment in the Roman Catholic Church

As a cradle Catholic, religion was not something I gave much thought to growing up. Church was what the family did on Sunday mornings and Religious Education was something I suffered through on Tuesday nights. Feminism was also not something I ever questioned. I was always surrounded by strong women and told that my existence mattered. These two aspects of my identity never conflicted.

When I got to Augustana I had to start choosing my identity. There was no family to bring me to Church on Sundays, but I was still surrounded by strong women. Freshman year was the first time people close to me began telling me that Catholicism was not compatible with feminism. That feminists could not be religious because religion was a tool of the patriarchy.

As I began to explore what I considered integral parts of my identity, I found myself being drawn deeper into my faith and more firmly committed to my feminist ideologies. This project began mainly because I now find it hard to explain that I am both a practicing Roman Catholic and an ardent feminist. Even to myself it can be hard to articulate why I remain committed to a religion that at its worst can seem anti-woman and at its best appears unintentionally misogynistic.

As is the case for most college students, I've spent the last four years more deeply exploring my beliefs and the reasonings behind those beliefs. As I have done so, I have found myself more firmly committing to both feminism and Catholicism. This caused some personal discomfort as there are ideas within the Catholic Church that seem to contradict feminism and there are ideas within feminism that go against Church teaching. However, I know that I am not the only Catholic who is a feminist and therefore there must be something about the Catholic

Church that keeps feminists in the faith. This project is an attempt to discover what some of those reasons are.

Feminism and the Catholic Church

Traditional Catholic teaching includes the idea of complementarianism.

Complementarianism is the belief that the two sexes, male and female, are fundamentally different in function and purpose.¹ While different, man and woman were both created in the image and likeness of God and therefore equal in inherent dignity.² Complementarianism uses the biological differences between men and women to propose that men were created to be active authority figures and that women were created to be passive nurturers, as implied by their biological role of motherhood. Though it can be argued that the complementarian view has created a gender dichotomy that at its worst ascribes the positive characteristics of leadership, intellect, and spirituality to men and views women as physical and submissive,³ this is not what the Church publicly claims. The Church's intention is not to create a hierarchy of gender, but to allow individuals to live most fully into their unique vocations.

Today's concept of complementarianism was popularized in the Catholic Church during the papacy of Pope John Paul II, who spoke of the "feminine genius". The idea of feminine genius is that women have been created by God with the unique ability to be spiritual mothers and have been granted several distinct gifts to carry out this vocation.⁴ This view of women as exceptionally spiritual and moral gives them a significant amount of influence in the Church and

¹ Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

² Catholic Church

³ Radford Ruether, "Motherearth and the Megamachine: A Theology of Liberation in a Feminine, Somatic and Ecological Perspective," 44.

⁴ Anderson, "Feminine Genius."

as children of God, though it is separate and distinct from the roles of institutional power and authority granted to men. Pope John Paul II described feminine genius as made up of four aspects: receptivity, sensitivity, generosity, and maternity.⁵ The four aspects of Pope John Paul II's feminine genius are the fundamentals of what Catholicism believes women are. These characteristics were specifically granted to women by God in order to fulfill their roles in the Church, in the home, and in society.

There are two main documents that contain Pope John Paul II's views on femininity and the feminine genius: his *Letter to Women* and *Mulieris Dignitatem*. Pope John Paul II wrote *Letter to Women* prior to the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 in order to acknowledge the special role that women hold within the Church. In it, he wrote “[t]hrough the insight which is so much a part of your womanhood you enrich the world’s understanding and help to make human relations more honest and authentic,” drawing on the complementarian idea that women are especially capable in the arena of interpersonal relationships and qualified in a way that men are not.⁶ This view was earlier supported in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, written in 1988 to coincide with the Marian Year and focused on the dignity of women. In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Pope John Paul II discusses the importance of femininity and the role of femininity in the Church. He writes that “‘woman’ is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race: she *represents the humanity* which belongs to all human beings, both men and women.”⁷ This quote clearly shows the characterization of women as physical and worldly, but in a positive and purposeful way. Pope John Paul II makes sure to point out that the “personal resources of

⁵ Anderson

⁶ Catholic Church and John Paul, “Letter to Women.”

⁷ Catholic Church and John Paul, “Dignity and Vocation of Women: Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II on the Occasion of the Marian Year.”

femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different.”⁸ An important example of this type of holy femininity in the Catholic faith is Mary, the mother of God. Mary is the perfect example of femininity because she dedicated her life to God and to serving God in the most powerful way possible, by bringing God’s son into the world. Mary is obedient, she is a mother, she is a virgin, and she says “yes” to God. She serves selflessly and without complaint. For Pope John Paul II’s feminine genius and for Catholicism, Mary is the shining example of what women can be when they embrace the femininity God has created for them.

Pope John Paul II, complementarianism, and the feminine genius were contemporary with, and perhaps a reaction to, the Catholic Feminist movement of the late 20th century. The Catholic Feminist movement was an organized, semi-unified movement within the Church during the late 1960s through the 1980s. Though some of John Paul II’s writings post-date the birth of the 20th century Catholic Feminist movement, the ideas espoused in them were very much present in the Church long before they were published in *Mulieris Dignatatem* and *Letter to Women*. Before there was the feminine genius, there was the Eternal Woman. This Eternal Woman was in part what was being reacted to when the Catholic Feminist movement was born.

An organized Catholic Feminism did not appear until the 1970s, but articles with a feminist orientation began appearing as early as the 1950s and the movement began building momentum in the 1960s.⁹ Large movements are difficult to generalize, but Catholic Feminism appears to have begun from within the Church, rather than as inspired by secular feminism. Regardless of if secular or Catholic, the feminist movement is about creating equality for men

⁸ Catholic Church and John Paul.

⁹ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*.

and women through advocating for women's rights. Feminism is about recognizing that men and women are equal, but that society does not treat the genders equally. Feminism seeks to empower women in a variety of ways, including through social and legal change. Some of the earliest Catholic Feminists describe their feminism as being born from their faith. These individuals, including leaders such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Sister Margaret Ellen Traxler, argued that their feminism was a direct result of the message of the Gospel and the logical next step in living out a Catholic life.¹⁰

The earliest aim of Catholic Feminism was to tackle gender stereotypes and inequality. This soon moved to a conversation about the ordination of women, first as deacons and later as priests. Ordination became a major focus of the Catholic Feminist movement with many believing that allowing women to enter the hierarchy was the best way to reach true equality in the Church. There were others who feared that women joining the existing structure would not bring about the desired movement toward equality and community rather than a strict focus on authority, but ordination still became a rallying point for the movement.¹¹

Like any movement, there was not perfect unity within Catholic Feminism. Women religious and lay women were both involved in the movement, sometimes as hesitant allies. As early as the beginning of the 1970s there was a split between radical Catholic Feminists like Mary Daly, who had come to the conclusion that the Church could not be mended and was

¹⁰ National Coalition of American Nuns, Chicago, IL and Henold, "Document 11: National Coalition of American Nuns, 'Declaration of Independence for Women,' May 1972, Published in National Coalition of American Nuns, *If Anyone Can NCAN: Twenty Years of Speaking Out* (Chicago: National Coalition of American Nuns, 1989), Pp. 13-14"; Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*.

¹¹ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*.

inherently unfeminist, and reformist Catholic Feminists like Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who wanted to stay with the Church in spite of its downfalls.¹²

The Catholic Feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s did have some impact on the Church. Gains were made in female participation in the liturgy as lectors and as Eucharistic Ministers, girls began to be able to participate as altar servers. Though women were not able to participate in the Second Vatican Council, for the third session they were invited to observe. A small, but many would say significant, step. However, after the discussion of female ordination was closed, the Catholic Feminist movement lost momentum and unity.¹³

Today, though there is no singular Catholic Feminist movement that can be easily studied, there has been a resurgence of contemporary Catholic women who have once again come to identify as feminists. Some call themselves Catholic Feminists and others have adopted the title “New Feminist”. Evidence of this new group of Catholic feminists can be seen in podcasts such as “The Catholic Feminist” and websites such as *FemCatholic*. For this new group, ordination is no longer a focus, though there are some who still support it. The Vatican’s refusal to even discuss the topic has caused many women to move on to different areas. Now, a common theme of modern orthodox Catholic Feminism is creating a pro-life, pro-women feminism that accepts the Church’s teachings on contraception and sexuality and includes activism on issues of social justice. For those in this group, this new feminism involves following *Humane Vitae*, advocating for a greater respect for motherhood in our society, and emphasizing the unique and vital role women play in the Church and in society. This orthodox

¹² Henold; Daly, “Why Speak About God?”; Schussler Fiorenza, “Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision.”

¹³ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*.

group is the most easily recognizable, as they are the promoted branch of current Catholic feminism since they do not challenge Church teachings. There are of course more progressive groups of Catholic feminists who are more liberal and therefore not advertised by the Church community.

This Project

When it came to the idea of exploring the relationship between Catholicism and feminism, there were many possible avenues to pursue. While there are many opportunities to academically discuss Catholicism and feminism, I was more interested in the lived experiences of Catholic women. So, rather than exploring specific feminist issues in relation to Catholicism, I thought it would be interesting to distill feminism to one of its most simple goals: the empowerment of women. Feminism and all its agendas have always aimed to make it possible for women to grow, in whatever that meant for the society of the time. So, if women view the Catholic Church as a feminist-friendly institution, it would follow that women would find it empowering. In order to collect responses that provided a deeper understanding of women's relationship to the Church I decided to create a survey with free response questions.

I collected demographic information from female students, staff, and faculty at Augustana College and then asked three questions: *Have you ever considered leaving the Church? Why or why not?*, *Why are you Catholic?*, and *In what ways do you feel empowered by the Catholic Church?*. The questions were chosen to give women room to share their experiences within the Church and motivations for remaining a part of it.

Data was collected over a two-week period and 94 responses were received. After an initial cleaning to remove the data of any individuals who failed to complete the survey, I was

left with 70 responses. The average age of respondents was 29 years. Participants ranged from 18 years to 65 years, with the most frequent age being 21 years. The vast majority of respondents (83%) self-identified as White and smaller numbers identified as Hispanic (9%), Multiethnic (4%), Black (3%), and Asian (1%). As data was collected through campus email at a majority White, undergraduate institution, these demographics are consistent with the campus population.

During the first round of coding, I looked through the responses for each question and wrote down themes that struck me, responses that stood out, and responses that I had to the data. In a notebook, I wrote down themes as they occurred in the data and made tally marks to help me find patterns. During the second round of coding my goal was to put responses into general categories and find responses that exemplified these categories, as well as note responses that stood out as unique. I printed out each response and created piles for each identified category.

Analysis

Have you ever considered leaving the Church? Why or why not?

I asked this first question to try and gauge respondents' attitudes toward and commitment to the Roman Catholic Church. In my experience, I know many individuals who do not feel a particular connection to institutional religion, but rather describe themselves as "spiritual," emphasizing their personal relationship with God over any specific faith community. As the Church community is an important aspect of the Catholic faith, I wanted to get a sense of women's personal relationship with the Church as an organization.

During my initial round of coding I noticed a divide between individuals who had not considered leaving the Church and those who had. For those who had not considered leaving, reasons listed included Catholicism being a core part of their identity, as well as feelings that

there were not any better options, so they might as well stay with what they knew. For individuals who had considered leaving, the main reasons listed were the Church's stance on homosexuality, reproductive rights, its treatment of women, and the fact that many felt some of the Church's teachings did not align with their core values. Corruption and scandal were mentioned as reasons individuals had considered leaving and many brought up feelings of conflict over which aspects of the faith were man-made and which were from God.

During my initial round of coding, individuals were more questioning of the Church's hierarchy and disappointed by continued conservatism than in disagreement with the premises of the faith itself. Eight of the reasons listed for considering leaving focused on organizational aspects of the Church or on interactions with members of individual's parishes, indicating respondents found fault with the institutional Catholic Church rather than their faith experience. The most common responses, 26, indicated individuals had difficulties with the Church's attitudes toward homosexuality and women. Three individuals said that they had left the faith because they no longer believed in God.

After my second round of coding, I found five overarching categories in responses: individuals who had not at any time questioned their commitment to the Catholic Church, those who said they hadn't considered leaving but who expressed various levels of questioning, those who had considered leaving for personal reasons, those who had considered leaving for structural reasons, and those who had already left or who described themselves as not practicing.

Not at all. There were 21 respondents who indicated they had not considered leaving the Catholic Church. Of these respondents, the majority (17) identified as White. The sample was approximately equal numbers of young adults (12) and middle-aged or older individuals (10). Of those who had not considered leaving, some described themselves as feeling "comfortable" or

“content” within the Church (#51, #92). Many women explicitly said they had not considered leaving the Church and that they felt it was the True faith (ex. #16, #58). Some acknowledged that they had had questions over the years, but found they were satisfied by the Church’s answers (ex. #34, #93). One respondent felt the Church was “a safe place to be while undecided” (#84). A small group of respondents gave answers that indicated they had not considered leaving the Church because Catholicism was an important part of their personal identity, saying things like “it’s fairly important to my family” (#25), “it’s all I know” (#30), and emphasizing the fact that it’s how they grew up (ex. #44, #88, #8).

These women’s responses illustrate a variety of attitudes toward the Catholic Church. For some, the Church is the True faith and they have never questioned it. For others, the faith may be more about their cultural identity than their religious identity. An important topic that these women brought up was the idea of being able to question your faith without wanting to leave the faith. Some women felt that this process of questioning had a negative connotation, as if questioning your faith meant you were not truly committed to it. Others were able to accept that questioning their faith was an important part of their journey that brought them closer to Catholicism rather than farther away.

No, but questions. There were eight respondents who said they had not considered leaving the Church, but whose responses indicated various levels of questioning the faith. All but one of these respondents were young adults and all but one identified as White. Three respondents indicated discomfort because of the scandals (#11, #33, #77), three indicated they disagreed with some Church teachings (#29, #40, #46), and one indicated that during high school she struggled to reconcile science and religion (#63). Though these respondents indicated questions or discomfort around the faith, they all said they had not considered leaving the

Church. They gave reasons such as “I’ve have found myself [...] in the [C]hurch” (#77), “I feel at home [in the Church]” (#11), and “[Catholicism is] part of my identity” (#46).

The responses of these women indicate that it is possible for some to find issue with the Church without questioning their overall commitment to it. Unlike the women in the previous category, these women acknowledged that they had questions about Catholicism. Some of them indicated that they were working through those questions, while others indicated that though the questions were a source of personal discomfort they were not actively working to answer them. To me, these women represent that an individual can find space for themselves within the Catholic Church without having all the answers. Catholicism does not have to be an all or nothing identity.

Yes, personal reasons. There were eight respondents who cited personal reasons for considering leaving the Church. All identified as White and slightly more than half (5) were young adults, the remaining (3) were middle-aged. Two of the participants listed disagreements or dissatisfaction with their parishes as why they had considered leaving or had temporarily left the Church (#27, #59). Two women temporarily left the Church when they married non-Catholics (#23, #37). Three women cited negative experiences with their priests as reason for why they had considered leaving (#10, #21, #73). One woman is no longer able to participate in the Church, though she still believes in the precepts of the faith, because of this negative interaction (#21). The final two women listed personal events as causing them to consider leaving the Church. One became “extremely doubtful in high school, and [she] was not satisfied by the answers proved by Catholics around [her]” (#42). Another questioned the existence of God after the death of her father (#52).

The experiences of these women indicate the importance of the Catholic Church as a community and not just as a system of belief. These women were heavily impacted by their interactions with the pastors of their parishes and by their fellow parish members. Though the majority of these women did not mention disagreeing with the principles of Catholicism, their interactions with other Catholics dissuaded them from practicing their faith.

Yes, structural reasons. There were 24 respondents who listed structural reasons as having caused them to consider leaving the Church. The majority of these respondents were young adults (19) and the majority self-identified as White (20). More than half of this group made mention of disagreements with specific Church teachings. The most commonly mentioned were homosexuality, reproductive rights, and gender roles. This group expressed views such as that the Church's teachings "go against my own liberal values" (#75) and "no longer align with my moral standards" (#35). The idea that "my core beliefs do not line up with the laws of the [C]hurch" (#14) expresses the theme of these responses well. Some, however, made sure to clarify that though they disagreed with specific teachings they do still "believe in God and the teachings of Jesus" (#38).

Other individuals were more focused on corruption and scandals than on specific teachings. Four respondents specifically mentioned corruption (#65, #72, #55, #32). Only two participants specifically mentioned the sex abuse scandal (#90, #13). Words participants used to describe the Church's hierarchy included "archaic" (#75) and "man-made" (#22). One participant questioned the principles of Catholicism, arguing "some of the specific practices that the [C]hurch requires of its members are not listed anywhere in the gospel as necessary" (#86).

Compared to respondents who listed personal reasons for considering leaving the Church, these women were not concerned with individual interactions they had had within the Church,

but with the overall structure and concept of the Catholic Church. Many felt that the Church's stance on homosexuality and reproductive rights is outdated and unwelcoming. However, the fact that these women listed reasons they had considered leaving the Church but indicated that they had not yet done so shows that women are finding ways to create space for themselves within the Church regardless of these disagreements.

Left or not practicing. There were nine respondents who fell into this category. The majority (7) self-identified as White and the majority (6) were young adults. Two respondents indicated they left the Church because they were no longer religious, writing "I am [an] atheist" (#67) and that there "isn't any evidence that religion is real. Religion was, and is, a way to control people who don't think critically" (#41). Another respondent wrote that they "Already left" (#12) but did not give context as to whether they left for a different faith or had become areligious. One respondent left the Church as a teenager for a Lutheran church. They felt the Catholic Church was "all about exclusion and getting money" and that the Lutheran church "was much more [open] and inviting and based in love" (#80).

The five remaining respondents indicated that they were in the process of leaving the Church, had considered leaving the Church, or were not currently practicing. Two respondents did not feel that they were considering leaving the Church but had not been to Church in one year or in eight years, respectively (#50, #81). One respondent had considered leaving the Church because they "never go" (#78). Two respondents cited personal experiences in the Church that had made them consider leaving. One respondent felt unwelcome in the Church as a divorced mother (#4) and another wrote about discrimination faced by her mother as a turning point in her relationship with the Church that continued to deteriorate:

[My] withdrawal was gradual— I can't pin it down to a particular event or time [...] My mother had received her Master's degree in liturgical studies [...she] was resented and treated so poorly by some of the priests in our parish. I could not stand by the Church's position on women's reproductive health. The intolerance of homosexuals is hurtful and un-Christian. [...] The sex abuse scandal has only confirmed my decision to no longer practice Catholicism (#47).

The women in this group show a range of experiences with the Church. Some have completely left the faith, which is to be expected in our increasingly secular society. But I was particularly intrigued by the individuals who wrote that they do not attend Mass regularly yet did not feel that they were considering leaving the Church. To me, this attitude reflects the idea of Catholicism as a culture. As a religious faith, it is necessary to practice Catholicism in order to claim the identity. But for these women, they were not practicing but continued to feel a part of the culture. This could, however, be a bias on my part. The most easily identifiable practice of Catholicism is attending Mass on Sunday, which is obligatory under canon law. However, it is entirely possible that these women have a fulfilling and satisfying personal faith that is not contingent upon them meeting the communal standards of the Roman Catholic Church. For these individuals, their personal expression of their faith life could be very different from the Church's requirements, but they could still identify with Catholicism.

The largest divide in the data for question one was between those who had limited opportunity to think about their faith and those who had taken the time to critically evaluate it. Critical evaluation does not mean rejecting the faith but taking the time to analyze what you believe and why you believe it. For some, analysis confirmed that Catholicism was the right religion for them. For others, analysis led to questions that sometimes pointed toward the Catholic Church and sometimes away. Regardless, questioning the faith is an important part of the faith journey that some Catholics may feel guilty about. This reluctance to ask questions may

hinder some Catholics from developing a deep and meaningful relationship with the Church or their individual spirituality.

Another important theme that emerged is the idea of Catholicism as both a faith and a culture. It is difficult to separate these two aspects of Catholicism as they are so tightly intertwined in an individual's life and experiences. An important acknowledgement that needs to be made is that Catholicism does not have to be all or nothing. Sometimes within the Catholic community there is the idea that you either agree with everything the Church has to say or you are not Catholic. This is not the lived experience of Roman Catholic women. The women in my sample were able to recognize themselves as members of the Church while also admitting that there were places of discomfort and disagreement.

The community aspect of Catholicism was an important factor for participants. Their experiences with other members of the Church had large impacts on their desire and ability to be a part of the overall organization. As a Church, it is easy to say that the actions of individuals do not matter. It is easy to turn the focus away from individual members to the greater Church body. But again, this is not the lived experience of Roman Catholic women. Women view the Church both as the hierarchy and also as the people sitting next to them in the pews on Sunday. The community aspect of Catholicism and its effect on an individual's connection to the faith cannot be ignored or diminished.

Why are you Catholic?

The aim of my second question was to understand the reasons women told themselves for identifying as Catholic. This question was similar to the first question, but from a different angle.

The most common responses during my initial round of coding were because the woman had been raised Catholic, because of family, and because of their ethnicity. All of these reasons are related to a sense of identity and heritage and were therefore combined during the second round of coding. Another very common response was for participants to acknowledge that they were brought up in the faith, but to then clarify that they chose it for themselves as adults.

After my second round of coding, I found two overarching categories in responses: individuals who identified Catholicism as central to their identity and/or heritage and individuals who fell into a miscellaneous category.

Identity or Heritage. The vast majority of respondents, 65, cited reasons of identity or heritage for why they are Catholic. The most common responses involved the fact that these women were born into Catholic families, influenced by family members such as moms and grandmothers (ex. #33, #52), attended Catholic schools (ex. #82, #81), or that it was important to their heritage (ex. #42). The phrase “born and raised” was used many times to describe why women considered themselves Catholic (ex. #22, #50).

A significant subsection of this group was individuals who clarified that though they were born and raised in the Catholic Church, it was something that they had chosen for themselves as they grew older. Of the 15 women who clarified that though they had been raised Catholic they had subsequently chosen it for themselves, comments were made such as: “I [...] didn’t appreciate the faith until I made a retreat in high school” (#90), “many experiences throughout my life have reinforced that faith and confirmed that it is central to my life and identity” (#8), “[I] finally understood and appreciated my faith as an adult” (#15), and “I’m Catholic because I truly believe the teachings of the Church” (#44).

Several respondents, in addition to acknowledging Catholicism as a core part of their identity, also spoke of the comfort they receive from the faith. One respondent says she “is comfortable in [her] church” (#93) and another says Catholicism is “just something that makes [her] who [she] is [...], it’s all [she’s] ever known and [her] faith has been there for [her] during the hard times” (#53). One respondent focused on the fact that Catholicism has “always been a part of [her], and it actually helps [her] find [her] way when there seems to be chaos in [her] life” (#64).

Two respondents specifically mentioned that they considered themselves “culturally Catholic” as opposed to practicing Catholics (#13, #47).

The responses in this section exemplify some interesting patterns for why women consider themselves Catholic. The vast majority were brought up in the faith and chose to stay, which is not surprising. However, I was intrigued by the continued use of the phrase “born and raised”. This emphasis on the fact that they were born Catholics is interesting because it turns Catholicism into a cultural identity rather than a faith one. Technically, no one is born Catholic. Baptism is required to become a member of the Church. So, that these women consider themselves to be born Catholic alludes to an understanding of Catholicism as something that is inherited, an intrinsic aspect of one’s identity, rather than a faith that is received with the sacraments. This nuances the relationship between women and the Church and may explain why women continue to stick with the Church even when they have disagreements with its teachings or question the institution— it is not just their faith, it is who they are.

Miscellaneous. Five respondents fell into the miscellaneous category. One respondent was a recent convert who had grown up Methodist and “searched for the truth and finally found it in the Catholic Church” (#19). One respondent said she “found comfort and strength through

the Catholic [C]hurch”. She described “a sense of community and a strong connection to God” (#77). A third respondent said that the Catholic Church is “what [she’s] used to. [She doesn’t] agree with a lot of it, but that’s okay”. She expressed enjoyment of the fact that no matter where in the world she goes, a Catholic Mass is a Catholic Mass and she can still understand it (#76).

These first three respondents are unique in that they did not explicitly mention Catholicism as an important part of their identity, but instead focused on their experience of being Catholic. They add nuance to the analysis by showing that Catholicism is not only a cultural identity, but it is a faith that individuals are drawn to participate in.

For almost all respondents, Catholicism is an integral aspect of their identity. They see Catholicism not only as the religion they practice, but who they are. As shown in responses to question one, they may have a variety of attitudes toward and relationships with the institutional Catholic Church, but the faith remains an important part of their self-concept.

In what ways do you feel empowered by the Catholic Church?

The aim of my final question was to get at the heart of this research project: how women combine their feminism with their faith and whether or not the Catholic Church is a feminist-friendly institution. By distilling feminism to the basic component of empowerment I aimed to leave plenty of room for women to define their own experiences within the Catholic Church.

During my initial round of coding I realized that about a third of respondents did not feel empowered by the Catholic Church. The remaining respondents overwhelmingly cited the Church as a source of community for why they felt empowered, as well as the Church as a source of morality, their personal relationship with God, and the tradition of strong female role models within the Church.

After my second round of coding, I found four overarching categories in the responses: those who felt they were empowered by the Church community (30%), those who felt empowered by the morality or lessons of Catholicism (11%), those who felt empowered through their spirituality (16%), and those who did not feel empowered (37%).

Community. Community was cited as the primary mode of empowerment by 15 women. All but one of these respondents self-identified as White and all but one of the respondents were young adults. Respondents felt that because of their Catholic faith they “have a group of people that can support [them]” (#94) and people to “encourage [them] in difficult times” (#58). They mentioned having a “support system” (#69) and “feel[ing] cared for” (#29). One respondent wrote that “[w]omen are able to unite in faith and go through similar struggles in life together” (#88). As well as having their parish communities, one respondent pointed out the global community, writing that Catholicism “is like a universal language that [she] is lucky enough to speak” (#42).

That a sizable portion of women found empowerment through the community offered by the Catholic Church was not surprising to me. In my experience, Catholicism places an emphasis on community and fellowship among parishioners. In an environment that may sometimes feel anti-woman, it makes sense that women would group together to provide comfort and support to one another.

A smaller subsection of the community category was a group of six respondents who cited the presence of strong female role models within the Church as a source of empowerment. These respondents identified as White (3), Hispanic (2), and Black (1) and were mostly young adults (4). Five of these six women explicitly mentioned the Virgin Mary, saying things like “[Mary] is an amazing example of what it means to be a woman [...], she is a great example of a

woman who chooses her own path” (#34) and Mary is “our most important intercessor” (#15). One mentioned the presence of other strong women in the Old Testament (#15) and another mentioned both female saints and women religious (#34). A final respondent did not cite specific women role models but expressed the opinion that “the [C]hurch allows women to have a voice” (#82).

The responses of these women highlight what I perceive to be a unique contradiction within the Catholic Church— to the outside world (and sometimes even to those within) the Church can appear misogynistic, and yet there is a rich history of strong female figures within the Church most clearly shown in the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary. These respondents acknowledge this history of strong women and draw empowerment from the examples set both by biblical characters and by the lives of real women in the stories of saints and women religious.

Morality and lessons. There were eight women who felt empowered by the morality or teachings of the Catholic Church. All respondents in this category self-identified as White and respondents were approximately even between young adults and middle-aged individuals. These women said things like “the morals boost me” (#30), “I feel there are many important life lessons to be learned [through Jesus and the Saints]” (#38), “I feel [Catholicism’s] core values represent the proper way to live life and treat others” (#22), and “Going to church makes me feel [...] that I’m being my best self” (#53).

The responses of these women reflect the empowerment of Catholicism as a faith. For them, the focus was not on their relationships with other Catholics but on how the faith shaped them as people. The responses of these women indicate that the Catholic Church can be a feminist institution in that it does give women the ability to grow in a positive way.

Spirituality. There were 11 women who listed their relationship with God among their top forms of empowerment within the Catholic Church. The majority of these respondents identified as White (9) and the majority were young adults (7). One woman put it simply: “[t]hrough Him, I feel empowered” (#63). Several emphasized the love of God, saying things like “God loves all” (#35) and that they were “empowered by [their] relationship with an all-loving God” (#49). Several women mentioned the sacraments of reconciliation (#13, #37) and the Eucharist (#24, #26, #37, #68) as ways that they were able to feel close to the Lord and find empowerment. A final respondent wrote that she found empowerment through her relationship with God by “knowing that no matter what happens, the Lord’s got [her] back” (#64).

Like the previous group, these women’s responses reflect the empowerment of Catholicism as a faith. This group of women specifically felt empowered through their relationship with God, rather than through their fellow Catholics or through the teachings of the faith.

Not empowered. There were 26 respondents who responded that they did not feel empowered by the Catholic Church. Of these respondents, the majority identified as White (20) and most were young adults (17), with the second largest group being middle-aged individuals (5). Of these 26 respondents, responses fell into three subcategories: those who said they did not feel empowered and did not expand, those who said they were unempowered by indicated a positive attitude, and those who said they were unempowered and indicated a negative attitude.

Of the 13 women who responded that they did not feel empowered by the Catholic Church without expanding, the majority identified as White (10) and most of them were young adults (9). Most respondents simply wrote “I don’t” (ex. #9, #10) or “None” (ex. #12). One respondent did say “Unfortunately, I do not feel at all empowered by the Catholic Church” (#4),

which indicates that this individual desires to feel empowered by their faith but at this time does not.

It is also possible that these women do feel empowered by their faith but not by the institution of the Roman Catholic Church. The wording of my question could have impacted the responses I received.

There were eight respondents who said they did not feel empowered by the Catholic Church, but still displayed a positive attitude toward the Church. Of these respondents, the majority identified as White (6) and over half were young adults (5). One respondent wrote that she did not “feel empowered by any organized form of religion” but that she did “feel respected” by the Catholic Church, even though she did not “see women in any form of power in the Catholic Church” (#11). Another cited Pope Francis as a reason she felt hopeful for the future of the Church, though she did not personally find empowerment through it (#72). One respondent said that she no longer felt empowered by the Catholic Church but had found empowerment in the past through relationships she had had with priests (#90). Another said that though she did not find empowerment through the Church, she did enjoy the “sense of spirituality” it gave her (#50). One woman’s response particularly stood out to me. She writes,

Honestly, I don’t feel empowered by the Catholic Church. I feel empowered by my Catholic faith. It’s not quite the same thing. The institutional Church has its flaws, and I don’t always agree with everything. But that is separate from my personal faith, which strengthens and sustains me. (#8)

This response, along with the other women in this subcategory, embodies the complicated relationship between women and the Catholic Church. On the one hand, many draw strength and comfort from the precepts of the faith, while also struggling with a hierarchy that is not always sure how to best serve the women in its care. The challenge in finding empowerment through the

Catholic Church is women finding space for themselves in an institution that is completely controlled by men. I believe this is one reason women may be hesitant to express feelings of empowerment through the Church. They may find empowerment in their parish communities or in their relationship with the Lord, but it can be harder for women to feel like they have a voice in the greater organization of the Church.

In the final subsection, there were three women who indicated they were not empowered by the Catholic Church and displayed negative attitudes toward the Catholic Church. All three respondents identified as White and two were young adults while one was a middle-aged individual. One woman expressed the opinion that only “white, heterosexual, married people” feel empowered by the Church because “they are told they’re better than everyone else” (#80). Another said that the Church “does not see women as equal to men. If they did, they would let women make their own choices about their bodies and let them assume positions of power in the [C]hurch. It’s pretty simple” (#47). And the third respondent wrote that the Church “makes [her] feel powerless in more ways than making [her] feel empowered” (#32).

Of these three women, two described themselves as in the process of leaving the Church or as having already left the Church. The third indicated that she had considered leaving the Church. This subset of respondents represents a very real problem within the Catholic Church. Feelings of disenfranchisement and a view of the Church as out of touch have been cited as the reasons for a large exodus of younger Catholics from the Church.

There were a variety of responses to whether women felt empowered by the Roman Catholic Church. Some women found empowerment through their faith community, others through the faith itself, and a significant portion of women did not find empowerment at all. This large group of women who did not feel empowered could be because of the wording of my question. Perhaps

these women chose to focus on not feeling empowered by the institutional Catholic Church, but do find empowerment through their personal faith life and spirituality. However, that one third of respondents chose to discuss their lack of empowerment rather than find an area in which they did feel empowered is troubling.

Limitations

There were several limitations that must be acknowledged in the present study. Due to using Augustana College's campus community for recruitment, the sample skewed both toward White individuals and toward respondents in their 20s. By heavily featuring White individuals, analysis could have missed out on unique variances between White individuals and individuals of other ethnic and cultural identities. As acknowledged in the analysis, Catholicism is for many a cultural identity as much as a faith identity, so an individual's ethnic identity may influence both their experience as a Catholic and their experience with the Catholic Church. The age of respondents could have also influenced results. It is possible that older individuals have had more opportunities to explore and critically evaluate their faith. There are also generational differences that could influence women's experience with and relationship to the Catholic Church.

Another limitation is the wording of my questions. I chose to explore the relationship between Catholicism and feminism through the lens of the Catholic Church, but some respondents expressed a distinction between their Catholic faith and their relationship with the Catholic Church. This difference between personal and institutional faith could have influenced the responses respondents gave.

In connection to this limitation, I received a much greater depth of response when asking *Have you ever considered leaving the Catholic Church?* as compared to *Why are you Catholic?*. It is possible that being asked about leaving the Church caused respondents to more clearly analyze their relationship with the Church. It is also possible that the memories triggered by remembering times they considered leaving the Church stood out more to respondents because these memories were more rare or more emotionally charged than their day-to-day experience of Catholicism as a part of their identity. Continued exploration of their experiences within the Church, both positive and negative, is important if the Church wants to capitalize on their presence and participation.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church professes that their view of complementarianism allows individuals to find their true vocation, yet in many of the responses women expressed feeling limited in their options within the Church. Proponents of complementarianism may say this is because secular feminism has warped women's ideas about possible vocations. However, opponents would argue that strict complementarianism reserves power and authority for men, a sentiment many respondents expressed. Also, no respondents mentioned motherhood as a form of empowerment within the Church, something I would have expected women who believed in complementarianism to discuss. Though motherhood was not mentioned as a form of empowerment, a small number of respondents did mention that their faith encouraged them in social justice and social work, which fits with Pope John Paul II's discussion of spiritual motherhood and the feminine genius.

The Catholic Feminists of the organized 20th century movement categorized their feminism as born from their faith. Many respondents, however, felt that their liberal values put

them at odds with the Catholic Church, particularly those liberal values that align with today's idea of feminism such as women's autonomy and freedom of sexuality. On the surface, support of these issues certainly does put women against the Church, however, the spirit of love and acceptance that underlies and drives these values does. This complicated relationship between policy and attitude, the two of which do not always agree, may be one of the reasons women feel hesitant in connecting their feminism to their faith in the explicit way the Catholic Feminists of the 70s and 80s did.

Common threads in the analysis include Catholicism as an identity and the idea of Catholicism as all-or-nothing. In their responses, respondents indicated that Catholicism was not just a faith but an identity. Even respondents who pointed out that they no longer participated in a faith community or who acknowledged disagreements with the teachings of the Church still chose to hold onto their Catholic identity. This is in direct opposition to the pervasive idea of Catholicism as being an all-or-nothing faith. It was apparent in responses that respondents held this idea of all-or-nothing in mind when they discussed tensions between their Catholic identity and the parts of the faith that they did not endorse. This all-or-nothing idea also influenced what women considered empowering, as some expressed the sentiment that since they were not empowered by the Church as a whole they could not be empowered by pieces of it. The distinction drawn by Respondent 8, in her acknowledgement of the Catholic Church being separate from her Catholic faith, embodies the lived experience of many, if not most, Catholic women. Catholicism cannot be an all-or-nothing faith, because no single person can incorporate over two thousand years of tradition into their experience. For each Catholic decisions must be made about what pieces of Catholicism to embrace and which pieces to consider fundamental.

All Catholics navigate the complex relationship between the Church, personal faith, ideals, and experience.

The fact that one third of respondents did not feel empowered by the Catholic Church, but that 30% of those respondents had not considered leaving the Church displays a delicate balance between identity and dissatisfaction. Many respondents indicated dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church. But more respondents indicated a commitment to remain in the Church despite its shortcomings. There are many possible explanations for this— an unwillingness to leave the comfort of the familiar, dedication to the precepts of the faith, not having the motivation or opportunity to explore alternative options— but regardless of the explanation, it exemplifies the fact that women are a part of the Church and they are not going anywhere.

My desire for this project was to learn about the experience of other Catholic women with their feminism and their faith. One of the most striking findings to me was the idea that some women did not feel it necessary to question or explore their faith. In my own faith journey, I was not encouraged to ask questions while I was growing up. It was not until college that I began truly exploring Catholicism and it was through this process of searching for answers that I became more deeply connected to my faith. I think it is important that we recognize that there is no inherent danger in asking questions, but that as responsible individuals we should be probing our faith and striving to understand why we believe what we believe.

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