

**Beyond Left and Right:  
Women Priests, New Feminists, and the Search for Common Ground among  
Catholic Women in North America**

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## ABSTRACT

Beyond Left and Right:  
Women Priests, New Feminists, and the Search for Common Ground among  
Catholic Women in North America

Catherine Humes

This thesis examines debates among Catholic feminists, from both the political left and right, about women's ordination. It argues that these debates emerged in North American Catholic circles in response to the explicit prohibition by the Vatican against women's ordination in 1976, which led to a growing divide among Catholic women. This thesis asks: can this "stalemate" be breached, and what resources might there be within the Catholic tradition to do so? Further, what potential might such attempts to seek a common ground offer for revitalizing the Catholic Church in North America?

The bulk of the thesis examines the writings of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sara Butler as representatives of "liberal" and "conservative" voices within the Church. Their theological reflections are framed as starting points to move beyond the divisions that have informed arguments about women's ordination and contributed to tensions among North American Catholics. The final chapter turns to theologian Tina Beattie, who occupies a theological middle ground between Ruether and Butler. It argues that Beattie's emphasis on Catholic tradition and sacramentality offers the greatest potential for initiating dialogue and renewal in liturgical and communal life for Catholic women. Ultimately this thesis suggests an initial starting place from which to draw together women across the political spectrum, beyond right and left, by tapping into the rich theological and liturgical resources of their shared Catholic tradition.

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## Introduction

By the end of the twentieth century the majority of Christian churches reversed their prior teaching and began to ordain women. As Deborah Halter notes in *The Papal "No,"* however, "two groups of denominations were particularly resistant to women's ordination: denominations practicing sacramental ritual (e.g., Roman Catholicism) and denominations endorsing biblical inerrancy (e.g., the Southern Baptist Convention)."<sup>1</sup> This thesis considers how this debate has lingered in North American Catholic circles in the post-Vatican II Church, both in terms of the resistance that Halter describes, and in terms of the continued support for women's ordination within the Church, in spite of (and perhaps because of) this very resistance.

The issue of women's ordination became a critical dividing point for many Catholics (and particularly women) after the publication of *Inter Insigniores* by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) in October of 1976. In this document the Vatican effectively shuts down far-reaching institutional deliberation about women's ordination as integral to the mission of the Church. The document states: "The Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to the priesthood."<sup>2</sup> Subsequent pronouncements made by Pope John Paul II and the CDF in 1994 and 1995 not only reinforced this position, but went so far as to declare the possibility of women's ordination as beyond the scope of the Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Deborah Halter, *The Papal "No": A Comprehensive Guide to the Vatican's Rejection of Women's Ordination* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), *The Papal "No,"* 46.

<sup>2</sup> *Inter Insigniores*, Article 9, in Halter, 186.

Church, and then declared their position infallible. The Vatican thus claimed to have uttered the last word on women's ordination.<sup>3</sup>

This decision had deep political implications for Catholics in North America. Earlier supporters of women's ordination understood themselves to be rooted in the "spirit of Vatican II" and the women's movement.<sup>4</sup> As such they were understood to have remained loyal to the Church. But now, after *Inter Insigniores*, they were understood by the Vatican to be pitting themselves against the magisterium. Yet despite the Vatican's censure, the movement in support of women's ordination within the Catholic Church has continued to grow in North America. In this same period Pope John Paul II further defined the role of women within the Catholic Church—in keeping with the prohibition against women's ordination—in terms of a "new feminism," which he outlined in the encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (1995). In this encyclical, Pope John Paul II emphasized motherhood as women's special calling and encouraged all women to "reject the temptation of imitating models of 'male domination', in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society."<sup>5</sup> In response to his teaching, self-described "new Catholic feminist" women have emerged (in academic as well as lay, popular contexts), writing in support of Pope John Paul II's "new feminism" and of the Vatican prohibition against women's ordination.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the issue of whether the teaching is infallible (and therefore binding) for Catholics has been subject to great debate. This has been the case because the infallible claim here was made by the CDF, and therefore not by the pope, as Catholic teaching requires. For an extended discussion on the issue see Halter, *The Papal "No,"* 117-127.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Steinfels, *A People Adrift: The Crisis of the Roman Catholic Church in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 35.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life), 25 March 1995, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jpii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jpii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html) (accessed September 17, 2008).

Thus, in the current political and theological climate of North American Catholicism, women who support women's ordination and women who support the Vatican prohibition are at cross purposes. They have each been speaking different languages based on divergent conceptions not only of feminist ideology, but also of theological constructions of the sacraments, anthropology, and salvation history. In spite of these different theological emphases and political priorities, however, both groups continue to root themselves in the Catholic tradition. In this thesis, I suggest that this shared commitment to tradition might yet provide the groundwork for these women to engage in constructive conversation with one another. I propose that such conversation should take place at the local level, within parish communities, where at present Catholic women tend to be disproportionately responsible for the maintenance and welfare of these communities. More importantly, I argue that the pursuit of constructive conversation is critical to the welfare of the Catholic Church in North America because it would provide a forum for Catholic women on both sides of the ordination debate to be active contributors in discourses about Catholic tradition. With this in mind, this thesis intends to articulate commitments and constructive agendas from these traditionally opposed camps by focusing on key writings from several figures representing each side of this debate. My goal in this project is to draw out shared ground for conversation within these camps—in terms of commitments to human dignity and a rich faith life—that might serve as a basis for dislodging the present “stalemate” in discussions about women's ordination. In turn, I hope that these insights might serve as points of action and discussion at the local level at a critical period in the Church's history.



At present, the Catholic Church in North America is negotiating a variety of unprecedented circumstances, not least of which is the very urgent crisis in leadership. This crisis concerns not only the current priest shortage, but also the recent sex abuse scandals, both of which foreground important and fraught questions about gender roles in the Church. The fact that most recently in the United States “[m]ore than 80 percent of the lay parish ministers are women” places women in particular in a unique context within the Church at this time.<sup>6</sup> In light of these circumstances, it is my contention that in their attention to the issue of women’s ordination both liberal and conservative groups are attempting to negotiate acceptable roles for women as a means of remedying the crisis facing the Church. Thus, this project is timely. More importantly, however, I intend to consider how constructive dialogue among women in Catholic communities—whether they see themselves as conservative or liberal—might provide the groundwork needed to reinvigorate Catholicism in North America, and specifically, to address the religious needs and commitments of Catholic women in those contexts. I argue that moving beyond the liberal-conservative divide is critical for the health of the Church in North America and for the spiritual fulfilment of Catholic women.

This thesis argues that a commitment to Catholic tradition, and particularly to sacramentality, might serve as the shared ground based upon which dialogue among Catholic women and renewal in local communities might take place. I attempt to discover this shared ground by examining theological arguments for and against women’s ordination as articulated by key figures in this debate. The theological reflections of these thinkers are framed as jumping off points to move beyond the divisions that have informed arguments about women’s ordination and contributed to tensions within North

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<sup>6</sup> Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 332.

American Catholic communities. This move beyond divisions is facilitated by turning to contemporary Catholic theologian Tina Beattie, who occupies a liminal theological space between liberal and conservative Catholics in the West. In particular, Beattie's focus on sacramentality points to the need for a new attention to resources within the Catholic tradition that might appeal to both camps. In light of Beattie's work, this thesis suggests that Catholic women on both sides of the spectrum are searching for meaning in ways that indicate a common purpose, even if their means for achieving that purpose differ considerably. Ultimately, I suggest that Catholic women have a great deal more to offer to the Church (and to themselves) if efforts at engaging conversation continue to be made. This thesis then aims to map two opposing perspectives, seeking in the gaps some common ground from which Catholic women might come together to share in their faith tradition, moving beyond left and right, to find theological and liturgical resources around which they might reinvigorate their religious lives.

### **Argument and Outline**

This thesis is rooted, therefore, in a broad set of questions and problematics facing the Catholic Church in North America.<sup>7</sup> What I offer here is a starting point, or an initial study, that could be elaborated and explored in the context of lived communities, through engagement with Catholic women in their parishes. My goal here is to map the terrain of theological commitments and moral concerns that Catholic feminists, both on the left and the right, have assiduously articulated in various genres and for various audiences

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<sup>7</sup> This thesis is focused on a North American Catholic context, meaning in this case Canada and the United States. Seeing as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sara Butler (as shall be seen) are both Americans who operate theologically (as well as politically) in the United States, the thesis is predominantly rooted in the context of the United States. It is worth noting, however, that Tina Beattie (whose work is encountered in the third chapter) contributes an altogether different context to this discussion, as she was raised in Zambia and is currently based in England.

(academic, lay, clerical, and the like). To this end, I have selected Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sara Butler as two figures, both prominent and prolific, who have been deeply involved in discussions about the role of women in the Catholic Church, along liberal and conservative lines, respectively.

This discussion begins chronologically, turning first to Ruether as a leading figure in the debate about women's ordination. Her early and consistent response to the Vatican's statements on the issue has made her both a controversial figure and a leading voice for the women's ordination movement.<sup>8</sup> My aim in the first chapter is therefore to articulate Ruether's vision for women in the Catholic faith and to consider and unearth the theological vision that makes women's ordination a key issue in her conception of women's role in the Church. In so doing, I aim to find space where some of the concerns that she raises might intersect with women who identify as conservative or "new feminist." I will suggest that such space emerges in particular in her commitment to Catholic sacramentality, which points to her interest in rooting her work in a Catholic theological context and to her own identification as a Catholic woman. This commitment is also particularly worthy of consideration where efforts at facilitating dialogue are concerned because it initiates discussion about sacramentality specifically as related to women's experience within the Church.

Chapter two turns to the writings of Sara Butler, an exemplary proponent of Pope John Paul II's new feminism and a supporter of the prohibition against women's

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<sup>8</sup> See Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Ordination: What is the Problem?," in *Women and Catholic Priesthood: An Expanded Vision; Proceedings of the Detroit Ordination Conference*, ed. Anne Marie Gardiner, S.S.N.D. (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), pages 30-34, for an early articulation of Ruether's theological position in favour of women's ordination. See also Donna Steichen, *Ungodly Rage: The Hidden Face of Catholic Feminism* (1991; repr., San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), especially chapters three and seven, for a polemical discussion of Ruether's work from a conservative perspective.

ordination. I uncover how Butler articulates her understanding of the Vatican prohibition against women's ordination and how she insists that this prohibition is a critical teaching for maintaining the authenticity of the Catholic faith. While she insists women's ordination would undermine the equal worth of men and women by intruding on the dignity of each, interestingly she shares a commitment to expand women's presence in other aspects of worship life. Indeed, Butler's claim that women's leadership is integral to the health and success of Catholic communities, broadly defined, offers a possible point for constructive change in those contexts.

My analyses of Ruether and Butler serve as starting points for the final chapter in which I not only diagnose some of the gaps that divide liberal and conservative women in the Church, but also seek to map possible space for shared dialogue. Here the work of Catholic feminist Tina Beattie proves integral. Beattie draws us to the rich theological and liturgical resources of the Catholic tradition, particularly the profound and deep potential for capitalizing on and reinvisioning Catholic sacramentality as a means to further enrich and expand Catholic women's piety. Appealing to Beattie, I do not minimize the tensions that exist between Ruether and Butler—and the women (as well as men) who might share their views—but instead seek a way forward that brings Catholic women (and men) together around the question of deepening and supporting women's faith, their concerns, and their needs as a powerful impetus for reinvigorating and energizing a Church in crisis.

Ultimately, this thesis on the issue of women's ordination in the Catholic Church will conclude on a perhaps unexpected note: I do not solve or remedy the issue at all. In fact, I will argue that finding common ground between liberal and conservative Catholics

at this critical period will require bracketing, at least temporarily, the question of women's ordination. I do not suggest that women's full inclusion in the hierarchical structures of the Church be relinquished as a critical goal—but that such a goal will not be a productive starting point for conversation in diverse Catholic communities. What is needed are less divisive opportunities for Catholic women (and eventually men) to engage with each other as people of faith taking seriously the ways in which the Church and local parishes can honour, respect, and meet women's needs (spiritual and perhaps otherwise). Indeed, if the Church in North America is to maintain itself, and to grow, these questions are timely and relevant. My epilogue will offer some brief thoughts about what that engagement might entail. Certainly the task will be difficult, fraught with setbacks and tensions, but rife too with potential, when Catholic women of faith come together in the spirit of mutual respect in order to honour each other and their shared tradition.

## Chapter 1

### A Call for Radical Transformation

*Why is there such a difference between what the pope says and women's experience in the church?*

-Elizabeth Johnson<sup>1</sup>

In her essay "Catholic Women Theologians of the Left" (1999) Susan A. Ross states her intention "to provide a 'map' of Catholic women's theology 'of the left'."<sup>2</sup> She begins this mapping process by emphasizing the diversity that exists within feminist and left-wing camps. With this diversity in mind, Ross defines the category of Catholic feminist theologians "of the left" based on a "shared commitment to radical transformation and the conviction that this transformation is the only way to be authentically faithful to the message of Jesus and to the tradition."<sup>3</sup> Ross's emphasis on radical transformation and authenticity as characteristic elements in the discourse of left-wing Catholic feminist theologians rings true, especially when the question of women's ordination is considered. Support for the ordination of women as a necessary (and radical) transformation, in spite of the Vatican's persistent refusal to ordain women, can be understood to be a hallmark of contemporary left-wing Catholic feminist theology. And while these theologians may disagree about exactly when, how, and why women should be ordained as priests, their commitment to women's ordination remains ubiquitous in spite of the Vatican proscription against it.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Johnson, *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), x.

<sup>2</sup> Susan A. Ross, "Women Theologians of the Left," in *What's Left? Liberal American Catholics*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, "Women Theologians," 22.

In the following chapter I will endeavour to render my own “mapping” of the theological argumentation in support of women’s ordination as articulated by one of the foremost Catholic feminist theologians of the left, namely, Rosemary Radford Ruether. I have chosen Ruether as an exemplary voice within the pro-ordination camp in light of her status as a pioneer in the field of feminist theology and in consideration of her continued prominence in contemporary discussions about women’s ordination. I will examine her thoughts on this issue in order to understand how she has constructed her position and in an effort to uncover the theological commitments underlying that position. In order to so, in this chapter I draw primarily from Ruether’s seminal theological text *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (1983). In addition, I look to a selection of essays by Ruether that address the question of ordination directly. Some, like the paper she presented at the first Women’s Ordination Conference in 1975 (“Ordination: What is the Problem?”), were published before the Vatican prohibition against women’s ordination in 1976. Others, such as the keynote speech she delivered at the 2005 Women’s Ordination Worldwide conference in Ottawa (“The Church as Liberation Community from Patriarchy: The Praxis of Ministry as Discipleship of Equals”), represent her most recent thoughts on the subject.

A close reading of Ruether’s theological output from 1975 through to the present has led me to conclude that her argumentation in support of women’s ordination has remained largely consistent. It is for this reason that I have chosen to organize the contents of this chapter in a thematic fashion, paying special attention to the key elements based on which Ruether forms her arguments in support of women’s ordination. My discussion will therefore proceed as follows: I first consider Ruether’s understanding of

Jesus as the Catholic model for the priestly role; followed by her analysis of Church authority and structure; and, finally, by her appraisal of Church tradition insofar as it does (and does not) act as a resource for Catholic feminists.

The way in which Ruether negotiates the issue of women's ordination in relation to the official position of the Vatican is especially relevant within the larger scope of this project, in which I aim to unearth commitments shared by Catholic women theologians, both of the right and the left, that might facilitate efforts at conversation amongst contemporary North American Catholics on a larger scale. In this chapter I argue that Ruether's interest in dialogue and active engagement with Church structures, as well as her use of sacramental language, have the potential to act as resources in such conversations.

### **Jesus: A Male Model?**

Like many other North American Catholics, in the aftermath of Vatican II Ruether looked forward to seeing certain theological concepts that had been raised at the council implemented in concrete ways, both in the everyday lives of Catholics and in the structural workings of the Church. For example, she interpreted the council's teaching on human equality in such a way that she came to view women's ordination as the logical progression in the implementation of that teaching.<sup>4</sup> While there were Catholics who had favoured women's ordination prior to the council, support for the cause took shape on a larger and more organized scale in light of this teaching on equality and only seemed to

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<sup>4</sup> See *Gaudium et Spes*, Article 29: "All women and men are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all and it must be accorded ever greater recognition." In Austin Flannery, O.P., ed., *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II; Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations. A Completely Revised Translation in Inclusive Language* (1996; 6th repr., Northport, New York: Costello, 2007), 194.



gain further momentum after the council closed in 1965.<sup>5</sup> Along with the promulgation of equality, these supporters, including Ruether, drew inspiration from the way that the council had redefined the priestly role. In particular, by positing Jesus' behaviour in serving "the poor and the weaker ones" as the model for the behaviour of priests, the document *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests) proved inspirational for many.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis on service to the poor and the weak led many Catholics to defend the need for priests to be especially (or primarily) attentive to alleviating oppression. Based on this reading of the document, many felt that in denying women the opportunity to be priests, the Church had failed to take seriously its own teaching in favour of human equality as well as its commitment to battling oppression. In order to rectify this situation, it was (and continues to be) felt that the Vatican should bring practice in line with teaching by reversing the prohibition against women's ordination.

In spite of the positive reception that *Presbyterorum Ordinis* received, at the same time as it promoted this new understanding of the priestly role, it also confirmed the current Church practice of exclusively ordaining men. The document suggests that "the Lord appointed certain men as ministers... [and they] exercised the priestly office publicly on behalf of men and women in the name of Christ."<sup>7</sup> It goes on to describe the men appointed directly by Jesus as the progenitors in a line of priestly succession, which extends through to the present day.<sup>8</sup> It is, however, worth noting that while it reinforces

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<sup>5</sup> According to Mark Chaves, "A petition concerning women priests was submitted to the preparatory commission of the Vatican Council in 1962." See Mark Chaves, *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), 125.

<sup>6</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Article 12, in Flannery, 327-328.

<sup>7</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Article 2, in Flannery, 318.

<sup>8</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Article 2, in Flannery, 318-319.

the Church's current practice of ordaining only men to the priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* never condemns the ordination of women explicitly, and for this reason it was understood by many to have left room for discussions on this issue in the council's aftermath.

The document's ambivalence has led Ruether (and many others) to understand the council in such a way that, on the one hand, it can act as a resource for feminist and other liberation theologians with its emphasis on equality, as well as on service and attention to oppression, in relation to priesthood. On the other hand, the council has also served to reinforce the tradition of a male-only priestly hierarchy with a renewed emphasis on Jesus and certain chosen men as the first priests in a sacred succession of male-only priests.<sup>9</sup> In pointing to both positive resources and to what she understands to be oppressive aspects of Church tradition, Ruether highlights the ambiguity of the Catholic Church's teachings for feminist theologians. She negotiates this ambiguity by rejecting oppressive tendencies within the tradition and by emphasizing what she terms the "prophetic-liberating tradition," which she understands as being more consistent with the behaviour of Jesus and the (intended) spirit of the Church.<sup>10</sup>

Ruether grounds this prophetic-liberating tradition in her reading of the biblical text, identifying four key elements in this tradition:

- (1) God's defense and vindication of the oppressed;
- (2) the critique of the dominant systems of power and their powerholders;
- (3) the vision of a new age to come in which the present system of injustice is overcome and God's intended

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<sup>9</sup> This emphasis echoes the Council of Trent's *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Ordination* (1563), Chapter 1, which states: "The sacred Scriptures show, and the tradition of the Catholic Church has always taught, that this priesthood was instituted by the same Lord our Saviour, and that to the apostles, and their successors in the priesthood, was the power delivered of consecrating, offering, and administering his Body and Blood, as also of forgiving and of retaining sins." See "The Council of Trent," *Women Priests Internet Library*, <http://www.womenpriests.org/church/trent2.asp> (accessed December 2, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), 24.

reign of peace and justice is installed in history; (4) finally, the critique of religious ideologies and systems that function to justify and sanctify the dominant, unjust social order.<sup>11</sup>

While Ruether finds many of the elements of the liberating tradition in the prophetic texts, she primarily emphasizes their presence in the gospels, thereby tracing her own commitment to liberation directly back to Jesus. In so doing, Ruether grants her commitment to liberation the prerogative to act as a trump card in the face of any oppressive tendencies that she detects in the Church. This means that “authentic” Christianity, for Ruether, is to be found in those instances when Christians imitate Jesus by challenging oppression and promoting liberation.<sup>12</sup> This understanding of the pursuit of liberation as imitation of Jesus, which includes being critical of oppressive systems of power, leads Ruether to suggest that challenging the Vatican’s prohibition against women’s ordination is an authentic Christian act in the pursuit of liberation. Of course, this implies that the Vatican acts the part of oppressor to her liberator, meaning that Ruether is explicit about prioritizing her commitment to liberation before obedience to the Vatican. (Not surprisingly, this makes for tense relations between Ruether and Church officials.)

On the basis of her commitment to liberation, Ruether articulates what has become one of the classic arguments of the pro-ordination camp when she criticizes the Vatican assertion that priests must be male because both Jesus and his appointed group of twelve followers were male. She states: “Jewishness was as much a requirement as maleness for the New Testament concept of Jesus and the Twelve.”<sup>13</sup> Ruether is here

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 56.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Male Clericalism and the Dread of Women,” in *Women and Orders*, ed. Robert J. Heyer (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), 1.

suggesting that the group of followers known as “the twelve” were likely selected by Jesus based on several factors that were culturally conditioned—what Ruether calls “sociological accidents”—and that they should therefore have no impact in determining who is eligible to enter the priesthood in the present day, especially since in a contemporary setting, where cultural norms have shifted, the exclusion of women can be understood to be an act of oppression.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, if the primary message to be extracted from the biblical text is the necessity of the pursuit of liberation, as outlined above, then the oppression to which women are subjected in being denied the possibility of ordination demands a reversal. In other words, where oppression is detected, all other concerns or commitments are of secondary importance, if not irrelevant.

Ruether further challenges the notion that maleness is essential to the Church’s understanding of the priesthood along theological lines. She questions the implications of stressing Christ’s maleness in regard to the Catholic understanding of the incarnation—and by extension, of salvation.<sup>15</sup> She suggests that the prioritization of divine maleness in terms of the Catholic saviour and, as a result, the priesthood (figured as his earthly representatives), deprives women of their full humanity. In the male-only priesthood Ruether detects a belief that, unlike men, women were not created as *imago dei*.<sup>16</sup> For Ruether, a respect for human equality necessitates the recognition of women as equally saved, equally represented in the incarnation, and equally representative of the *imago dei*. To suggest otherwise is to undermine the intention of Jesus and the liberating impulse that grounds the Christian tradition. In other words, in Ruether’s understanding, maleness is not the essential trait of Jesus and to claim that it is results in the perpetration of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ruether, “Male Clericalism,” 2.

<sup>16</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 19.

oppression. Instead, Ruether suggests that what is most significant about Jesus is his active commitment to liberation, as described in the gospels' renderings of his ministry. It is in emulating this commitment, according to Ruether, that Catholics realize the Church's intended mission, and it is by acting out this mission in the world that salvation is attained. In her words, salvation "is a vision of an alternative future, a new 'deal' of peace and justice that will arise when the present systems of injustice have been overthrown."<sup>17</sup> For Ruether, it is only if the Catholic Church, as the intended bearer of this alternative vision, is willing to commit itself entirely to the pursuit of liberation that salvation can have any hope of being attained through its official channels.

Again, Ruether references Jesus as the model for challenging assumptions and categories of acceptable behaviour in such a way as to promote this liberating impulse. She specifically points to his associations with women—what she calls his "unconventionality toward women"—to suggest that the priesthood can just as easily be understood to have been mandated by Jesus to include both men and women, if only his attention to women and his commitment to liberation are emphasized.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that the official Vatican rhetoric on the subject, while also stressing Jesus' unconventional behaviour in regards to women, comes to precisely the opposite conclusion. According to the Vatican, since Jesus interacted with women in ways that "deliberately and courageously broke...with the customs of the time," it can be concluded that he would have appointed women as members of the twelve if he had wished to do so.<sup>19</sup> The difference between Ruether's understanding and that of the Vatican in terms of

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<sup>17</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Ruether, "Male Clericalism," 3.

<sup>19</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, Article 15, in Halter, 187. Halter also describes the way in which the Vatican adjusted its position on this issue by citing a Vatican

the way in which Jesus (and his followers) can be said to have laid the foundation for the priestly tradition stems from a difference in emphasis. While Ruether reads the biblical text in such a way that Jesus is understood to have espoused a critical and liberating attitude vis-à-vis oppressive systems of power, leading him to embrace and associate with social undesirables (including women), the Vatican reads the text in such a way as to justify current Church structure and practice.

It is worth noting that in referencing the behaviour of Jesus towards women as “unconventional” both Ruether and the Vatican exhibit a common Christian bias. As Ross Kraemer points out in her essay “Jewish Women and Christian Origins: Some Caveats,” the presumption by both parties that the way in which Jesus interacted with women departed from the norm among Jews of his day serves “to support claims that, at its inception, pristine Christianity and Jesus himself were free of any misogyny or gender bias.”<sup>20</sup> Kraemer seeks to trouble this notion by pointing out that “Jesus’ behaviour...is generally quite in line with rabbinic representation” at the time.<sup>21</sup> Whether the popular reading of Jesus’ treatment of women invoked by Ruether and the Vatican alike harbours some incipient anti-Semitism or not, Tina Beattie’s alternate reading displaces it rather convincingly. She suggests that in emphasizing justice and equality in the Christian tradition, in this case in the person of Jesus, Christians do not claim anything unique

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newspaper article from 1970: “Since God had found it necessary ‘to choose a time and a place’ to ‘make himself a man’, it followed that the incarnation of Jesus as savior ‘would not have been true and real’ if God had not submitted to the conditioning of human nature, requiring that Christians not neglect ‘the conditions of the community’.” This logic was abandoned, according to Halter, when Christians began to argue that they should be able to adapt Church teaching to their own times if Jesus was forced to do so in his time. See Halter, *The Papal “No,”* 16.

<sup>20</sup> Ross Shepard Kraemer, “Jewish Women and Christian Origins,” in *Women & Christian Origins*, ed. Ross Shepard Kraemer and Mary Rose D’Angelo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36.

<sup>21</sup> Kraemer, “Jewish Women,” 39.

about themselves because such concerns are not exclusively Christian. Instead, Beattie suggests that Christians, and in this case Catholics, would do better to remember that

Christianity's uniqueness, its particularity and its identity, derive from the drama it performs in the world—the drama of God incarnate who is carried in the womb of a virgin, who becomes the helpless infant at her breast, who eats, drinks, loves and laughs with ordinary people, who is tortured and put to death because the world does not understand him, and who gathers together all these incarnate human realities into a story of resurrection, reconciliation and the hope of eternal life.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, not only does treating Jesus as a liberator of women obscure the historical reality about Judaism in his day, but it also limits the depth and texture of the Catholic tradition, making it reducible to only one of its many parts.

Contrary to Beattie's suggestion, the liberating tradition that Ruether identifies in the gospel texts, which she understands to be rooted in the behaviour of Jesus, is the hermeneutical key that guides her interpretation of the Christian tradition as a whole, including the office of the priesthood. Her concern for liberation connects freedom from oppression to a this-worldly experience of redemption, and an understanding that the Church should have a temporal focus.<sup>23</sup> She makes use of this concern as a critical tool for assessing the official teaching of the Vatican on the priesthood, which, in turn, leads her to suggest that the spirit of a renewed priesthood that she detects in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* should be implemented so as to emphasize service and liberation in the priestly mission, and to include women.

It is clear that Ruether understands the Church to be capable of change, especially when its commitment to equality and liberation requires it. Based on this logic, whether women were ordained at some point in the past or formed part of the twelve, as far as she

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<sup>22</sup> Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006), 7.

<sup>23</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 18; 258.

is concerned the Church's commitment to liberation requires that it be willing to ordain women in the present. This is not because the Church must be faithful to the example of Jesus' activity in a literalist way. Rather, Ruether suggests that it must be faithful to the liberating principle that she identifies as having been established by Jesus, the specifics of which are left to be negotiated and are open to change as time passes, just as the Church must also change. This means that Ruether shares with the Church hierarchy a commitment to the Jesus-event as foundational for understanding the Catholic priesthood but while the Vatican prioritizes a particular reading of Jesus' actions in the gospel text in order to defend an exclusively male priesthood, Ruether prioritizes an evolving, liberating inclusiveness, which she posits as an alternate—and more authentic—source of Catholic tradition in order to make a case for women's ordination.

### **The Call for a New Teaching Authority**

Not only does Ruether challenge the Vatican's defence of the male-only priesthood on the basis of her reading of Jesus' commitment to liberation and equality, but she does so also on the basis of a critique of the Vatican's claim to authority. The Vatican interpretation of biblical events places Jesus as the very first and most perfect model of a priest in the Christian tradition and looks to his appointment of the twelve as the definitive, historical model for the future priesthood of the Catholic Church. For Ruether, however, this interpretation rests not on the biblical text, but rather on a strategic invocation of authority by Vatican officials. This leads her to be critical of the Vatican's interpretation of ordination and to call on the Church to implement a new teaching authority—one that reflects her understanding of the primacy of the Church's commitment to equality and liberation.



*Inter Insigniores* (Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood) was the first official document published by the Vatican with the explicit aim of opposing women's ordination. It suggests that the Vatican is simply abiding by the authoritative actions of Jesus in preserving an all-male priesthood, which implies that Church officials are entrusted with a (lesser) form of authority through which they implement what was first made definitive by Jesus.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Vatican presents itself as having authority only insofar as it has been entrusted with maintaining structures originated or intended by Jesus. Based on this line of thinking, Church authorities claim that they are unable to introduce any innovation in Church teaching on their own. Along these lines, the declaration states: "By calling only men to the priestly order and ministry in its true sense, the Church intends to remain faithful to the type of ordained ministry willed by the Lord Jesus Christ and carefully maintained by the apostles."<sup>25</sup> It then goes on to explain that "the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination," thereby emphasizing both the authority that the Church grants to the behaviour of Jesus—as it has chosen to define such behaviour—and the lack of authority that it considers itself to have in determining these matters, although not in enforcing them.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> According to Chaves, "It is significant that the very first Vatican statement specifically opposing women's ordination, and offering justification for that opposition, came only in 1976." See Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 125. It is interesting to note that support for women's ordination in the U.S. (based on a Gallup poll survey) prior to *Inter Insigniores* and just after shows a 10% increase, jumping from 31% to 41%. See Leonard Swidler, "Introduction: Roma Locuta, Causa Finita?," in *Women Priests: A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, ed. Leonard and Arlene Swidler (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, Article 11, in Halter, 186-187.

<sup>26</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, Article 9, in Halter, 186.

In her contribution to Leonard and Arlene Swidler's 1977 collection of essays in response to *Inter Insigniores*, "Women Priests and Church Tradition," Ruether challenges the declaration's claims regarding Jesus' actions. She states:

It is assumed that the concept of priesthood of traditional Roman Catholicism was, in fact, founded by Christ, conferred by him on an exclusive group of twelve male apostles...and that women were, from the beginning, excluded from this line of apostolic ordination. But it is evident to anyone with even an introductory knowledge of Church history that the concept of priesthood of traditional Roman Catholicism is a historical construct that emerged gradually in the history of the Church. There is not a trace of such a concept of priestly ordination in the practice of Jesus himself.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of the fact that Ruether may be correct in pointing out that "the concept of priesthood...is a historical construct that emerged gradually," the Vatican continues to understand itself as the guardian of Church tradition. As such they consider themselves authorized to define the priestly office and to determine just what it is that Jesus "willed," even if he did not act upon this will at any point in the gospel text.<sup>28</sup> This allows Church officials to strategically defer any real claim to authority onto Jesus, suggesting that they themselves act merely as interpreters and enforcers, even as they simultaneously determine the unspoken will of Jesus based on his action (or non-action), and construct doctrine around their interpretation of this action.

Ruether challenges the claims of Church authorities by pointing out that, in spite of what they themselves suggest, they *are* actively enforcing their own particular reading of the biblical text and lending authority to that reading by claiming to be guiding believers towards the interpretation that was intended by Jesus. Ruether herself interprets

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<sup>27</sup> Ruether, "Women Priests and Church Tradition," in Swidler and Swidler, 235.

<sup>28</sup> As Deborah Halter suggests, "*Inter Insigniores* merely articulated a traditional assumption of male priesthood, and it now faced the prickly task of claiming the authority to teach and do what Christ did *not* teach or do, and to define *his nonaction as will*" meaning that "*Inter Insigniores* turned to the authority of tradition." See Halter, *The Papal "No,"* 47.

the biblical text in light of her theological commitment to liberation but, unlike the Vatican, she explicitly identifies this commitment. She also points out the fact that her commitment to liberation will be articulated and practically negotiated in different ways over time, just as the Church's commitments and self-understanding will be, as both are inescapably mediated by the experience of human individuals over the course of time.<sup>29</sup> For Ruether, recognizing the malleable nature of theology and practice is not indicative of weakness; instead, this recognition allows tradition to remain vital and to avoid oppressive tendencies.

Ruether censures the Vatican for being, in her words, "the cultural guardian of...symbols of domination and subjugation."<sup>30</sup> She suggests that in attempting to enforce its interpretation of Jesus and his ministry as definitive, the Vatican's actions "must be recognized as an apostasy to the Church's true mission as representative of the liberated Humanity."<sup>31</sup> She advocates a remedy to this situation in the form of a re-evaluation of Church authority that would "allow for the fact of fallibility and incompleteness in what the Church taught in the past."<sup>32</sup> And although Ruether does not seem hopeful about the possibility that the Catholic teaching authority would be willing to make these acknowledgements—she suggests that "this impasse over unchanging authority is likely to be the primary impediment to considering the ordination of women"<sup>33</sup>—she nonetheless describes the possibility of a new kind of Church authority that is rooted in the needs of the community and open to change as required in order to maintain its commitment to liberation and equality.

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<sup>29</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 12-13.

<sup>30</sup> Ruether, "Male Clericalism," 10-11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Ruether, "Ordination," 33.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

The content of Ruether's commitment to liberation (as outlined on pages thirteen and fourteen) grounds her focus on the issue of women's ordination as an acting out (on her part) of this commitment. This means that she identifies women as "the oppressed" and the authorities within the Catholic hierarchy as "the dominant system of power."<sup>34</sup> In order for the Catholic Church to become a community of liberation, Ruether sees women's ordination as a necessary change in the process of fostering a new form of authority. What remains unclear in Ruether's discussions related to women's ordination, however, is the extent to which this change is explicitly Catholic. At times, Ruether's theology seems to blur the lines between Catholicism and Christianity as a whole which has the result, in discussions about ordination, that the distinctions between Catholic and Protestant ordination, what with their distinctive histories and theological justifications, become muddled. In other words, Ruether's argument in favour of women's ordination within the Catholic Church would benefit from a more explicit discussion of its Catholic context.

One area in which Ruether does make an explicit attempt at grounding her discussion of women's ordination in the Catholic tradition is in her effort to preserve the sacraments. In my reading, this attention to the sacraments, even if they are altered in form, functions as the single most important instance in Ruether's writing where she makes an explicit connection between her theological project and its Catholic context. Not surprisingly, however, Ruether's understanding of the sacraments demands that they be dramatically reworked. This reworking is to be enacted in light of the reconfiguration of Church authority that she envisions, wherein oppressive power cannot be considered

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<sup>34</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 24.

authoritative. On this basis, Ruether finds the Vatican's definition of maleness as a sacramental requirement for priests to be unacceptable.

The Vatican position, as articulated in *Inter Insigniores*, declares that the priest "acts not only through the effective power conferred on him by Christ, but *in persona Christi*, taking on the role of Christ, to the point of being his very image."<sup>35</sup> Mark Chaves, in *Ordaining Women*, suggests that this sacramental emphasis on the priest as "imaging" Jesus explains why it is that the Catholic Church has been particularly resistant to the ordination of women. According to Chaves it is "not because of any lack of appropriate skill or ability, but because their femaleness makes it impossible for them to resemble Christ in the Eucharistic sacrament."<sup>36</sup> Although Chaves goes on to suggest that resemblance can be understood to be based on more than simply gender parity, he emphasizes the fact that the Catholic Church maintains this particular understanding of sacramental resemblance, thereby placing the greatest importance in sacramental ritual on maleness as a requirement.<sup>37</sup>

For Ruether, requiring resemblance is an inadequate reading of sacramentality and an act of oppression. She suggests that "we must assume this imitation of Christ has now been reduced to one essential element, namely, male sex," meaning that the Vatican has chosen to restrict the ways in which believers can imitate Christ according to biology and not behaviour.<sup>38</sup> In contrast, Ruether invokes Galatians 3:28 ("there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus") in order to highlight the way in which the

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<sup>35</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, Article 42, in Halter, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 88 and 11.

<sup>37</sup> Chaves, *Ordaining Women*, 118.

<sup>38</sup> Ruether, *To Change the World*, 47.

Vatican's emphasis on essential maleness obscures the tradition of equality in Jesus.<sup>39</sup>

This emphasis on the equality of all believers in Christ, and thus also in terms of acting in imitation of Christ, is also invoked by Ruether in her description of the sacraments in *Sexism and God-Talk*. She describes how a reworked sacramental life is intimately connected with the process of dismantling oppressive authority structures, stating, "The liberation of the Church from clericalism also means reclaiming the sacraments as expressions of the redemptive life of the Church that the people are empowered to administer collectively."<sup>40</sup> In this configuration authority rests in the hands of the community. Ruether is careful to point out, however, that this reclaiming of the sacraments does not entail doing away with the priesthood. Instead, the reclaiming of the sacraments through the recognition that sacramental power is vested in the community as a whole means that priests act as representatives from within the community and not as authority figures over and against the community. Along these lines she suggests, "Leadership is called forth from within the community rather than imposed on it in a way that deprives the community of its own self-articulation."<sup>41</sup>

The specifics of how it is that the sacraments are redefined and reclaimed by the community of believers remains fairly vague in Ruether's writing, and thus, once again, the Catholic rooted-ness of her project remains a problem-point for some. In *Women-Church: Theology and Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (1985) she describes how "new forms of ritual...will sacramentalize women's rites of passage that have been

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 208.

<sup>41</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 210.

ignored or relegated to the profane.”<sup>42</sup> Yet it remains unclear exactly how it is that women would be ordained in the liberated Church that Ruether envisions, and equally how it is that the Eucharist would be interpreted and administered. Although *Women-Church* describes a variety of rites and prayers that aim at destabilizing the current Church order, they do so in ways that often seem tenuously connected to traditional Catholic liturgy. It is of course also possible to read Ruether’s openness in discussions related to the sacraments in light of the fact that flexibility and self-determination are essential to her understanding of the liberated community, if it is to remain free from oppression.

If the Catholic Church is indeed intended to be a liberated community then Pope John Paul II’s claim that while “the Church has the power and on occasion also the duty to adapt” sacramental symbolism, certain aspects of the sacraments are to be understood as “immutable” and “divinely instituted” does not hold up.<sup>43</sup> As far as Ruether is concerned, the liberating impulse that Jesus manifests in the gospels should be the guiding principle for leading an authentic Christian life, meaning that community-building—which implies freedom from oppression—and sacramental experience must go hand in hand in the Catholic Church. For Ruether, decision-making power and authority should be in the hands of the community and although she supports the maintenance of specific roles for those who have a special talent for leading she is clear about the fact that any authoritative pronouncements made by the Church should be representative of

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<sup>42</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women-Church: Theology and Liturgical Practice of Feminist Liturgical Communities* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Article 1205, trans. United States Catholic Conference, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington: United States Catholic Conference—Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 310.

the Church as a whole.<sup>44</sup> Thus, in claiming authority for all believers, Ruether can be said to be at odds with the Church hierarchy on this point.

### **The Reappropriation of Church Structure**

The new form of authority that Ruether advocates goes hand in hand with her understanding that the Church is also in need of reforming its structural foundations, in order to accommodate women as priests and, more generally, in order to live in accordance with its mandate to promote liberation from oppression for the poor and the weak. Ruether suggests that this reform must be a radical transformation (in keeping with Ross's suggestion—see page nine) so as to avoid simply inserting women into a framework that is (and would continue to be) patriarchal. She points to the Vatican's teaching on birth control as described in Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* (1968) as an example of the Church's tendency (or in this case, the pope's) to enforce teachings authoritatively by passing them through official channels without consulting or including believers in the process.<sup>45</sup> In this particular case, Pope Paul VI wrote the encyclical in spite of both his papal advisory committee's opposition to the teaching and its lack of popular support among Catholics at the time.<sup>46</sup> The widespread opposition to this encyclical, most pronounced in North America, leads Ruether to suggest that the Church needs to adapt to the needs of its members in order to remain relevant and

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<sup>44</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, "The Church as Liberation Community from Patriarchy: The Praxis of Ministry and the Discipleship of Equals," Keynote speech, meeting of Women's Ordination Worldwide, Ottawa, Canada, July 23, 2005, *Women Priests Internet Library*, <http://www.womenpriests.org/wow/ruether.asp> (accessed October 4, 2008).

<sup>45</sup> Ruether, "Ordination," 33.

<sup>46</sup> According to Peter Steinfels, *Humanae Vitae* is "the Vietnam War of the Catholic Church" in that it has led believers to question the authority, effectiveness, and relevance of the Church's hierarchical structure. He goes on to suggest: "There is one difference, of course between the American entanglement in Vietnam and the church's entanglement with birth control: the United States finally got out, while the papacy, under John Paul II, has intensified its commitment right up to the present day." See Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 257-258.



meaningful for them.<sup>47</sup> Along these lines, Ruether suggests that both a new concept of authority and new “representative structures” must be put in place allowing dissent as in this case—which finds a parallel in the debate surrounding women’s ordination—to be mediated in such a way as to allow lay and religious Catholics who lack representation in the structural workings of the Church to have a voice.<sup>48</sup>

According to Ruether, it is in forgetting or dismissing its intended role as “a community of liberation from slavery and oppression” that the Church has failed to represent its members.<sup>49</sup> In 1976 Ruether identified as problematic the fact that “there are not representative structures by which the desire of changes by the majority of Roman Catholics can be enforced upon the hierarchy.”<sup>50</sup> She continues to voice this same criticism, as it continues to hold true today; in fact, the pontificate of John Paul II (1978-2005) saw an increased emphasis on centralized, hierarchical structures and papal authority.<sup>51</sup> The structural workings of the Church, as a result, are now further removed from the majority of Catholics than was the case at the time of the Second Vatican Council. This growing divide between Church authorities and the majority of Catholics has led to the hardening of the divide between left- and right-wing Catholics and to the solidification of their opposing positions.<sup>52</sup>

Ruether sees the Church as unwilling to engage in dialogue with critical Catholics like herself in response to the failure of the Church to make any changes in building representative structures. Thus she has come to describe the need for “alternative

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<sup>47</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ruether, “Ordination,” 31.

<sup>49</sup> Ruether, “The Church as Liberation Community.”

<sup>50</sup> Ruether, “Ordination,” 31.

<sup>51</sup> Halter, *The Papal “No,”* 97.

<sup>52</sup> Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 35-36.

structures.”<sup>53</sup> These alternative structures are intended to be places where Catholics are able to organize and articulate dissent in order to engage critically with the Catholic Church from a strengthened position. This structural shift forms part of what she terms “reappropriation theology,” whereby Catholics who are not represented in official Church structures can find a forum in which their voices and talents will be heard and used.<sup>54</sup> Ruether emphasizes the need for dissenting Catholics to join together so that they can organize themselves more effectively, but also so that they can interpret and act on their faith in ways that they might otherwise be unable to.

Inspired by Latin American liberation theologians and the popular “house church” movement, Ruether describes her own type of alternative structure, which she calls “base communities.”<sup>55</sup> She suggests that Catholics—and Catholic women especially—should actively develop and participate in such communities, as they offer the opportunity for believers to engage in the form of collegiality advocated during the Second Vatican Council, which failed to take effect, according to Ruether, in any lasting way within the official channels of the Church hierarchy. Ruether contrasts her understanding of collegiality with what she refers to as the “clericalism” maintained within the Church, wherein a hierarchical elite occupy roles that do not (necessarily) represent the will of the people. At the root of this problem, for Ruether, is the Church’s continued reliance on patriarchal ideology, which informs the structural workings of the Church and continues to prevent women from being included in its organization.

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<sup>53</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 184.

<sup>54</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 208.

<sup>55</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 205.

Base communities provide a forum for challenging patriarchy, allowing women to take on roles from which they are barred within the official Church. According to Ruether,

This dismantling of clerical concepts of ministry and church organization does not mean an anarchism that rejects any leadership roles and skills, but rather that the community itself decides what expressions of liturgy, learning and service it wishes to engage in in order to express its redemptive life...In other words, there is a ministry of function rather than clerical caste, rooted in a discipleship of equals.<sup>56</sup>

Although for Ruether these communities offer Catholics the opportunity to participate in and develop Church life and ritual, enriching the lives of believers who are critical and dissatisfied with current Church structures, she also sees that they offer the potential to engage in what she calls “creative dialectic” with Church officials.<sup>57</sup> Ruether sees the role of these communities both as a place from which dialogue might originate, but perhaps more importantly they serve as a means through which Catholics can experience their tradition in ways that are meaningful to them, even without official recognition.<sup>58</sup>

It is also within these base communities—also referred to as “Women-Church,” especially in the U.S.<sup>59</sup>—that Ruether sees the possibility for women to begin to exercise leadership roles that are unavailable to them within the structures of the official Church. Ruether speaks about the possibility of developing new structures, new rituals, and even new creeds, within base communities.<sup>60</sup> For her, a base community is the place where she

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<sup>56</sup> Ruether, “The Church as Liberation Community.”

<sup>57</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 206.

<sup>58</sup> According to Mary Jo Weaver, “Whereas the present pope [John Paul II at the time of publication] holds a brief against dialogue, liberal American Catholics welcome it. Significantly, many of those condemned by the Vatican or fired from their academic posts in the last twenty years have not denied faith, or God, or revelation, but have asked for dialogue about how these great mysteries relate to human experience in a variety of cultural locations.” See Weaver, introduction to *What’s Left?*, 1999, 14.

<sup>59</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement,” in Weaver, 1999, 47.

<sup>60</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 211.

sees the possibility of “reclaiming sacramental life as the expression of our entry into mutual empowerment in redemptive life.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, these communities are both subversive and act as a lifeline for believers who lack representation. Ruether suggests that base communities and the official Church can exist as parallel communities, and women especially may seek sustenance from both, as does she.<sup>62</sup> Ideally, however, she sees base communities as a way to bring change into the Church, allowing believers to first experience for themselves what it might be like if the “entire symbolic edifice of reality that reflects the social hierarchy of male dominance and female submission” could be transformed.<sup>63</sup>

In continuing to hope for change within the official Church, Ruether reveals herself to be committed to the Church, but she also continues to see the structure of the Church as is as a reflection of the patriarchal history of Christianity, which is in need of being relinquished if the Church can offer believers liberation and redemption. The change that is required for the Church to be faithful to its liberating impulse necessitates the inclusion of women in Church structures, but this change must be accompanied by structural shifts based on an understanding of authority that is not simply vertical, but horizontal.<sup>64</sup> Until such changes are made, the need for base communities and other alternative structures that allow for a more participatory Church experience will not cease

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<sup>61</sup> Ruether, “The Church as Liberation Community.”

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ruether, “Ordination,” 31.

<sup>64</sup> Steinfels offers an interesting suggestion in this regard: as opposed to Ruether’s support for parallel, alternative structures, Steinfels says: “If the church’s official case against ordaining women to the priesthood is valid, it should withstand the test of Catholics’ becoming familiar with women ordained to the diaconate and women holding positions of real decision-making power. Those are conditions that could possibly demonstrate the church’s tradition of an all-male priesthood to be compatible with women’s equality and full participation in the church. And if the demonstration still falls short, the church would have at least tested its tradition and prepared itself, theologically and psychologically, to the logical step and ordain women.” This is a less radical transformation but perhaps a more broad-based alternative to Ruether’s call for change. See Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 305.

for self-described Catholics such as Ruether. In fact, the Church's refusal to ordain women, or even to engage in dialogue on the issue, has, according to Ruether, led "most Women-Church groups [to] assume...the right and power to do their own liturgical celebrations 'without the benefit of clergy'."<sup>65</sup> And while she hopes that this situation will not be permanent, the Church's more recent renewal in its emphasis on hierarchical structure and authority means that Ruether's call for representative structures is not likely to be heard any time in the near future.

Ruether offers a brief history of base communities/Women-Church in her essay "Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement" (1999). She describes the origins of Women-Church groups in the context of the women's movement of the 1960s and the Second Vatican Council.<sup>66</sup> In her understanding, such groups are closely aligned with the movement in support of women's ordination and are largely to be found in an American context. Ruether describes the variety of such groups, ranging from the prominent Women's Ordination Conference, established in 1975, which attempted—unsuccessfully—to dialogue with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on the issue of women's ordination, to smaller-scale local groups. She describes such groups as offering creative feminist liturgies and retreats, organizing public protests and educational events, promoting publications of different sorts, and engaging in grassroots activism, among other things.<sup>67</sup> Many such activities have led these groups to be viewed unfavourably by the Vatican, often resulting in censure.<sup>68</sup> Some Women-Church groups have, as a result, relinquished their ties to the Catholic Church in favour of ecumenically-

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<sup>65</sup> Ruether, "Women-Church," 54.

<sup>66</sup> Ruether, "Women-Church," 46.

<sup>67</sup> Ruether, "Women-Church," 55-57.

<sup>68</sup> Ruether, "Women-Church," 49; see Halter, *The Papal "No,"* especially 141-149.

based Christian communities. Other groups have remained adamantly Catholic while also refusing to abide by the Vatican teaching relating to women's ordination. This has led groups such as the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) to support, and perhaps even organize, for the ordination of women as priests with the help of sympathetic bishops. Such ordinations have resulted in a number of excommunications, including the members of the "Danube Seven," all of whom were excommunicated by the Vatican after the ordination ceremony that took place in 2002.<sup>69</sup> In *The Papal "No"* Deborah Halter describes how Women-Church groups have become increasingly polarized as they weigh in on whether the ordination of women without the consent of the Church should be condemned or regarded as a necessary (and hopefully temporary) compromise.<sup>70</sup>

In her 1985 book, also by the name *Women-Church*, Ruether sets out an alternative liturgical program for Women-Church communities.<sup>71</sup> And in the keynote speech she delivered at the 2005 meeting of the Women's Ordination Worldwide (WOW) conference, Ruether describes her own participation in several such groups, ranging from WOW to the smaller, ecumenical meetings she attends within her own retirement community.<sup>72</sup> Clearly, the Women-Church movement is of particular importance to Ruether, both in terms of her theology and personal religious practice. While such groups provide an important forum within which dissenting Catholics can gather together for a variety of reasons, I cannot help but feel that in presuming the universality of an experience of women-as-oppressed within the Catholic Church, it is possible that these communities end up excluding any women who may not identify with that designation.

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<sup>69</sup> Halter, *The Papal "No,"* 146-147.

<sup>70</sup> Halter, *The Papal "No,"* 147.

<sup>71</sup> For further details see Ruether, *Women-Church*, especially chapters seven through ten.

<sup>72</sup> Ruether, "The Church as Liberation Community."

## (Re-)Building Church Tradition

As part of the radical transformation that is required in order for the inclusion of women as priests in the Catholic Church, Ruether suggests that tradition must be recognized by the Church as a vehicle through which oppressive tendencies have been propagated and justified. An understanding of tradition as universal, unbroken, and God-given has allowed abuse and oppression to go unchecked. Appeals to unbroken tradition have also supported the maintenance of the exclusively male priesthood. Ruether refigures tradition as a constructed narrative and suggests that there are at least two identifiable streams of tradition within the Catholic Church; the first being the “official” story of the Church, the second being the “contrary body” of tradition which she identifies as a resource in support for women’s ordination.<sup>73</sup> Ruether critiques the former by suggesting that even those who “clothe themselves in past codified tradition that provides secure access to divinely revealed truth” are actually “engaged in a constant process of revision.”<sup>74</sup> She thereby calls on the Church hierarchy to acknowledge the human process of tradition-building and to recognize the ways in which the tradition they espouse has perpetuated sexism, among other oppressive tendencies. This acknowledgment should be followed by the “massive repentance of all humanity,” or what she terms “the great *metanoia*.”<sup>75</sup> By this statement she intends for the Church, and for all humans, to acknowledge their historicity and the way in which their traditions are grounded in individual, temporal experience.<sup>76</sup> The goal of repentance is to recognize the oppressive tendencies within Church tradition not as God-given, but instead as the fallible

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<sup>73</sup> Ruether, “Women Priests,” 236-237.

<sup>74</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 12; 17.

<sup>75</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 183.

<sup>76</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 12.

(and even sinful) product of humans. And repentance should be followed by changes in the ideological and structural foundations of the Church, making way for women as priests.

Ruether cites alternative traditions (and interpretations of tradition) that describe women as leaders—both in the early communities of Jesus’ followers and throughout Christian history, up to the present day—as a means of demonstrating the diversity of traditions within Christianity. As a result of scholarly developments in such fields as biblical criticism and archaeology, the concrete existence of alternative traditions has been assured. This fact has led Ruether and other scholars to label the Catholic Church’s suggestion that they are the bearers of an unbroken, unquestioned tradition in prohibiting women from exercising a priestly role as a fallacy. Instead, critics of the Vatican’s teaching on the priesthood have made use of historical evidence to suggest both that women were active in a variety of leadership and ministerial roles in the New Testament, and that the priestly role as described by the Church hierarchy developed only gradually.<sup>77</sup> According to Ruether, then, biblical criticism and other recent scholarly developments only further substantiate her call for the Vatican to acknowledge its active participation in tradition-building.

Ruether does not focus her attention on “proving” the presence of exemplary women who served as leaders in early Christian communities in order to bolster her argument, but she does acknowledge the ways in which these alternative roles have been diminished or ignored in an effort to present the Church’s version of its tradition as

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<sup>77</sup> Ruether, “Women Priests,” 235-236. Along these lines, in *The Papal “No”* Deborah Halter states: “Over the centuries...medieval decisions were retroactively laid over the history of the early church, resulting in the widespread assumption among many generations of Catholics that the tradition of ordained priesthood was coexistent with the founding of the church.” See Halter, 15.



infallible.<sup>78</sup> Instead of arguing for women's ordination based on the tradition of women as leaders—which she nonetheless emphasizes as important to acknowledge in order to problematize the concept of tradition as the Church defines it—Ruether, again in “Women Priests and Church Tradition,” chooses to focus on the way in which a redefined understanding of tradition as a theological concept leads one to question arguments made based on tradition. In the case of women's ordination, Ruether challenges the idea that “the mere longevity of a practice counts absolutely as norm, especially when its dominical foundations are in doubt.”<sup>79</sup> She goes on to suggest: “A parallel can be given for the justification of slavery. Historically the justification of slavery and of the subordination of women were closely linked.”<sup>80</sup> In making the connection between misogyny and racism, Ruether identifies the way in which the Church has revised its own concept of tradition, and the way in which it selectively reads certain aspects of its history as essential or authoritative (such as the exclusion of women from the priesthood), while it deems other aspects to be non-essential or accidental (such as the practice of slave-holding). For Ruether this process of selectivity is not problematic in and of itself; she sees it as unavoidable that humans will define themselves and their history in a selective manner. Rather, it is when one suggests that they are somehow able to avoid being selective that understandings of tradition have the potential to become oppressive.<sup>81</sup>

Ruether sees positive models from which to draw inspiration in this process of deconstructing, broadening, and re-appropriating Church tradition in relation to women in

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<sup>78</sup> For further discussions of women's leadership in Christian history see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); and Karen Jo Torjesen's *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church & the Scandal of their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993).

<sup>79</sup> Ruether, “Women Priests,” 237.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 23.

the Second Vatican Council, and particularly in Pope John XXIII. Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), according to Ruether, seems to offer "what sounds like a surprising endorsement of feminism."<sup>82</sup> It suggests: "women are gaining an increasing awareness of their natural dignity. Far from being content with a purely passive role or allowing themselves to be regarded as a kind of instrument, they are demanding both in domestic and in public life the rights and duties which belong to them as human persons."<sup>83</sup> It is of course worth mentioning that in spite of what may seem like an "endorsement of feminism," as Richard Leonard points out, "no papal teaching or Vatican document concedes at any stage that the church has been instrumental in maintaining a history of discrimination against women"—including this one.<sup>84</sup> In other words, in spite of what may be read into certain Vatican texts, the Church has yet to acknowledge its role in sponsoring a tradition that has often impacted women negatively. In spite of this, from Ruether's perspective the encyclical continues to be worthwhile because it *does* indicate a progression in the pursuit of equality and justice, implying that an understanding of women as fully human was both less recognized in the past and, potentially, will be further recognized in the future. Of course, even if the document sounds like an "endorsement of feminism," I cannot help but notice that it does not provide such an endorsement, meaning that, like many Catholics of the left, Ruether's

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth, Justice, Charity, and Liberty), April 11, 1963, Article 41, *Official Vatican Website*, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_11041963\\_pacem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html) (accessed December 10, 2008).

<sup>84</sup> Richard Leonard, SJ, *Beloved Daughters: 100 Years of Papal Teaching on Women* (Ottawa: Novalis, 1995), 108.

thoughts in this regard may be caught up in the mythology surrounding Pope John XXIII.<sup>85</sup>

Ruether sees the Church as having regressed in its approach to women during the pontificate of Paul VI, and more so under John Paul II, who reinstated what Ruether refers to as “the nineteenth century view of gender complementarity.”<sup>86</sup> This notion of complementarity has only further distanced women from the possibility of Church leadership, based on an understanding that women are intended to serve different roles than men within the Church.<sup>87</sup> For Ruether the complementarity approach to gender is problematic because she views it as perpetuating the misogynistic heritage of Greek dualism and Aristotelian biology, wherein men are associated with the mind, and women with the body, the latter being the inferior in this conception.<sup>88</sup> Although these identifications have been refuted scientifically, they nonetheless seem to retain a certain degree of authority up to the present in terms of popular understandings of male and female roles and traits.<sup>89</sup> Ruether suggests that these inherited systems of thought that have led Church leaders to perpetuate the “myth of the feminine” on the basis of which

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<sup>85</sup> In this regard, Steinfels suggests: “No one should pretend that the Council fathers would have approved of homosexual relationships, authorized the ordination of women, or identified the church with a revolutionary vanguard, let alone deconstruct the whole idea of hierarchical authority, a priesthood ordained and set apart for life, and of traditional sacramental theology.” See Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 35-36.

<sup>86</sup> Ruether, “Women, Reproductive Rights and the Catholic Church,” *Feminist Theology* 16, no. 2 (2008): 186. See also Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* (On the Dignity and Vocation of Women), 15 August 1988, *Official Vatican Website*, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jpii\\_apl\\_15081988\\_mulieris-dignitatem\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jpii_apl_15081988_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html) (accessed September 15, 2008). This position was stressed anew by Pope Benedict XVI in February of 2008; see Pope Benedict XVI, “Recall the Design of God that Created the Human Being Male and Female,” Papal Address to Participants in Congress on Women, Vatican City, February 10, 2008, *Zenit*, trans. Joseph G. Trabbic, <http://zenit.org/article-21737?l=english> (accessed September 17, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> Halter differentiates these roles as such: “The magisterium—the teaching authority of the church—holds that women have a threefold mission determined by their sex: virgin, wife, and mother. Available to men is a mission facilitated by their sex: priesthood.” See Halter, *The Papal “No,”* 5.

<sup>88</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 78.

<sup>89</sup> Ruether, “Male Clericalism,” 3-4.

these authoritative male figures “oppose rights for women on the grounds that the true ‘femininity’ of women and their authentic role as ‘moral nurturers of the race’ depend on their staying out of ‘the dirty rough and tumble’ of the real world and remaining ‘in the home’.”<sup>90</sup> By giving theological weight to their selective reading of Church tradition and scripture, Catholic Church officials are able to position themselves in such a way as to simultaneously defend the equal rights of women in the secular sphere—albeit with an emphasis on traditional female roles—while also arguing for a strict divide between the roles of men and women within the Church community.

Ruether suggests that the discrepancy between the Vatican’s rhetoric in support of women in the secular sphere and within the Catholic institution has proven to be a challenge for women when trying to negotiate their place in the Church and in society at large. She observes: “This heritage still divides the woman’s movement today. Women can’t decide whether they want to ‘get into the man’s world’, defined as an evil world, but also the ‘real world’, or hold out for a better but non-existent (utopian) world represented by still unempowered ‘feminine’ principles.”<sup>91</sup> For Ruether this discrepancy between “acceptable roles” for women within Church and state is simply a reflection of the Church hierarchy’s failure to acknowledge the way in which its understanding of tradition serves to propagate sexism. She describes the way in which thoughtful reflection on Church tradition leads many believers—especially women—to feel alienated from their community and it is for this reason that she supports the need for alternative structures where people are welcome to challenge and to develop tradition, and to share

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<sup>90</sup> Ruether, “Male Clericalism,” 9.

<sup>91</sup> Ruether, *To Change the World*, 53.

their experiences within the Catholic Church, including experiences of oppression.<sup>92</sup> It is unclear just how many believers feel alienated in the way that Ruether describes—and the next chapter will articulate a contrary reading of the Catholic status quo—but clearly Ruether speaks from her own experience of oppression, and clearly that experience finds resonance with at least a certain number of Catholics. Until Church officials are willing to make tradition more inclusive and to recognize their own participation in perpetuating the oppression that Ruether and other women experience as Catholics, however, any change in the definition of priesthood is unlikely to take place.

### Final Thoughts

There is no doubt that Ruether's support for women's ordination demands radical transformation if it is to take place within the Church. The very fact that she describes the need for this transformation means that she genuinely wishes to see it take place *within* the confines of the Church. In arguing for women's ordination she is also describing her struggle, and the struggle of many other women, in their attempts to be critical of the Church, while also remaining faithful to their "Catholic roots."<sup>93</sup> In describing the changes that Ruether requires of the Church in order for it to correspond to the "liberation community" that she envisions, including the ordination of women as priests, her emphasis on Jesus and his message as the key to her understanding of the Catholic priesthood would likely find her a sympathetic ear among Church officials. As would her emphasis on liberation as the impetus guiding the Church, and on redemption as the goal of this liberating exercise, wherein freedom from oppression is fully realized, as is the pursuit of personal and social harmony. Of course, her critical re-reading of Church

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<sup>92</sup> Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 194.

<sup>93</sup> Ruether, "Women-Church," 52.

authority, structure, and tradition would be less likely, it seems, to win her friends at the Vatican. Even her discussion of the sacraments, while indicating a commitment to Catholic tradition, is at the same time perhaps not sufficiently rooted in Catholic teaching for Church authorities to consider it common ground. Yet whether the Vatican is interested in Ruether's reconfigured sacramental theology, let alone the ordination of women, in closing the door on any critical discussion of these issues I think that the Church has only further alienated and radicalized many women who might otherwise relish the opportunity to find common ground. And while Ruether's emphasis on liberation and equality might be understood to obscure aspects of the Catholic tradition according to conservatives, it is only through dialogue that such concerns will ever be addressed. Although she is interpreted by some as too radical and by others as overly accommodating, I read Ruether's desire to preserve a connection to sacramentality, Church structure, and Catholic tradition in her support for women's ordination as useful talking points in a discussion among Catholics that has yet to be taken up on an institutional level.

## Chapter 2

### A Case for Tradition

*Reformers made the mistake common among champions of the modern: they assumed that the story they were telling was the only one.*

-Robert A. Orsi<sup>1</sup>

The arguments put forward by Rosemary Radford Ruether and other liberal feminists in support of women's ordination were formed in light of the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and in the midst of the civil rights and women's movements in North America. Within this context Catholic women like Ruether were emboldened to make demands on the Church which they understood to be consistent with the changing social landscape and the spirit of the Council, as well as being in keeping with their understanding of the fundamental nature of the Church. As noted in the previous chapter, in spite of the Vatican's negative response to the call for women's ordination, many liberal Catholic feminists in North America have continued to vocally campaign in support of this cause, often drawing from the same body of arguments originally developed and put forward by Ruether and other liberal feminists during the 1960s and 70s.

With the publication of *Inter Insigniores*—the official papal teaching opposing women's ordination—in 1976, many supporters of women's ordination responded by becoming increasingly vocal and radical in their efforts to bring about this change. At the same time, however, other Catholics interpreted the Vatican document as a vindication of their prior convictions about the issue, while still some others who had formerly

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<sup>1</sup> Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 58.

supported women's ordination were prompted to reconsider their position, choosing to adopt the Vatican stance on the issue. In other words, the papal teaching on women's ordination elicited a wide range of reactions among Catholics in North America. Among those who have embraced the teaching is an increasingly vocal and unified contingent of Catholic women who seek to challenge what they perceive to be the liberal feminist monopolization of women's voices within the Catholic Church. These women—who are making themselves increasingly visible through the work of organizations such as the St. Louis-based Women for Faith and Family (WFF)—offer an alternate take on the issue of women's ordination and, more broadly, on what it means to be a Catholic woman in North America today.

This chapter aims to render the Catholic landscape more complex (and therefore, it is my hope, also more complete) by acknowledging the fact that Catholic women who oppose women's ordination are also participants in the discourse about women's ordination, and that their position merits attention and consideration. In framing this project I take inspiration from R. Scott Appleby's "Epilogue" to *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America* (1995). He suggests that while the labels "left" and "right" may be useful, and certainly they are difficult to avoid, the current Catholic landscape in North America may also be conceived of—and is perhaps better conceived of—as "a map with overlapping circles and changing configurations depending on the question being posed."<sup>2</sup> In this vein, in addressing the particular question of women's ordination within the Catholic Church, I have chosen to label support for women's ordination as a position "of the left," just as I label a position in support of the papal

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<sup>2</sup> R. Scott Appleby, "Epilogue: What Difference Do They Make?" in *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 326.



teaching which forbids the ordination of women “of the right.” At the same time that I employ these labels, however, it is my aim in this project to emphasize not only the differences between these positions, but also to uncover the ways in which they overlap and thus yield some shared assumptions that are beyond left and right. Based on this framework, just as Ruether acts as a voice on the “left” in the previous chapter, in this chapter Catholic theologian Sara Butler will be considered as a voice on this issue from the Catholic “right.”

In surveying Catholic discourses on the right regarding women’s ordination, Sara Butler emerges as an especially interesting subject. She views the Second Vatican Council, as well as the popular civil rights and women’s movements in North America, as providing a much needed impetus for the examination and rejuvenation of both the Church and the secular sphere.<sup>3</sup> This means that she shares and appreciates the same cultural context as Ruether. Also, like Ruether she does not view the Church and the modern world as being at odds but rather as being in partnership.<sup>4</sup> Butler is an academic trained in theology whose expertise in this domain is explicitly acknowledged by the Vatican; she was the first woman (along with Barbara Hallensleben) to be appointed to the Vatican’s International Theological Commission in 2004. This means that she serves as a theological expert and advisor to the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the

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<sup>3</sup> Sara Butler, “Women’s Ordination and the Development of Doctrine,” *The Thomist* 61 (1997): 502-505; Sara Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Catholic Church* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2006), 21-24.

<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps useful for the purposes of this discussion to make a distinction between those Catholics on the right, like Butler, who welcome the Council and other modernizing changes brought about in the post-conciliar Church, often labelled “conservatives,” versus those who reject the Council and its aftermath, often labelled “traditionalists.” Again, for a useful discussion of the differing voices of Catholics on the right, see Weaver and Appleby’s *Being Right*, especially 17-31, 138-162, and 241-269.

Faith.<sup>5</sup> The recognition and support that she has garnered from the Vatican, along with her active engagement in discussions about women's ordination, situate her as a prominent new feminist theologian and a worthy counterpoint to Ruether.

Butler's recent book on the topic of women's ordination, *The Catholic Priesthood and Women: A Guide to the Teaching of the Church* (2006), will serve as the primary text under consideration in this chapter. In this text Butler attempts to clarify and defend the official papal teaching regarding women's ordination, with the result that this text is the most complete, up-to-date discussion of the issue from the Vatican's perspective. The book itself was granted the official designations "Nihil Obstat" and "Imprimatur" by the Archdiocese of Chicago, which together indicate that the "book is free of doctrinal and moral error."<sup>6</sup> Altogether this designates Butler as one of if not the most vocal and authoritative spokespersons for the papal teaching on the issue.

In this chapter I seek to elucidate Butler's understanding of the papal teaching on women's ordination and to unpack the commitments that underlie this teaching. In order to do so, I consider her explanation of equality and complementarity, her understanding of christology, and her discussion of Church tradition and sacramentality. I suggest that these notions are, for Butler, at the very heart of the ordination debate and it is my hope that in examining them it will become clear how it is that Butler positions herself as a corrective to the liberal feminist position in support of women's ordination, while simultaneously arguing for women's equality within the Catholic Church.

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<sup>5</sup> The International Theological Commission is an advisory body to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith created by Pope Paul VI in 1969. See John L. Allen Jr., "Appointments to the International Theological Commission," *National Catholic Reporter*, March 12, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, iv.

## Equality: A Long-Awaited Development

Butler begins *The Catholic Priesthood and Women* by acknowledging the contentiousness of the matter at hand. She states: “Those who dissent are frustrated by the official prohibition of further debate. Other Catholics are scandalized by the ongoing opposition to papal teaching. The question continues to divide Catholics, then, even though the magisterium asserts that it has been officially, even infallibly, settled.”<sup>7</sup> After offering this frank assessment of the present stalemate in discussions related to women’s ordination, Butler suggests that she will address the concerns of those who “dissent” from the papal teaching, while also defending and clarifying the teaching.<sup>8</sup> Already at this stage her approach distinguishes her from Catholic Church authorities in that she is willing to acknowledge the fact that the papal teaching regarding ordination has been a stumbling block for many Catholics. As a result, she aims to tackle what she understands to be the primary objections to the teaching—albeit in an effort to promote the teaching.

Butler’s attention to those who dissent and to their objections suggests that she feels that valid concerns have been raised about the papal teaching and that these concerns merit further discussion. Her own acknowledgment of having supported women’s ordination until sometime after the publication of *Inter Insigniores* in 1976 marks her as someone who holds an intimate understanding of—and perhaps maintains a certain amount of sympathy for—the pro-ordination camp.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the shift in her thinking regarding the papal teaching on women’s ordination, which she presents as a

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<sup>7</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, iix.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, ix.

<sup>9</sup> See Sara Butler, “The Findings of the Research Team of the Catholic Theological Society of America,” 1978, for her position in support of women’s ordination. See also Sara Butler, “Forum: Second Thoughts on Ordaining Women” *Worship* 63, no. 2 (Mr 1989), 157-165, for an account of her “second thoughts” and subsequent move towards supporting the Vatican position.

progression, has led her to feel confident in presenting the non-ordination of women as the authentic and authoritative doctrine for the Catholic faithful. In other words, much as she may sympathize with liberal feminist supporters of women's ordination, in the end Butler judges their position to be untenable within an orthodox Catholic framework.

The tension that Butler exhibits between sympathy towards those who protest against the papal teaching and opposition to them is evident in the way that she situates the question of women's ordination within a Catholic framework. She begins the first chapter in *The Catholic Priesthood*, entitled "The Church's Teaching and the Present Discussion," by echoing the papal position on the issue, stating: "this teaching regarding the priesthood is not a new doctrine."<sup>10</sup> By suggesting that the teaching is long-standing Butler is invoking the idea that antiquity is authoritative. She also acknowledges, however, that the teaching was only explicitly outlined for the first time during the twentieth century—a fact that has led many critics to question its authority.<sup>11</sup> Butler reconciles the notion of the longevity of the doctrine with the newness of its justification and elucidation by again echoing the papal rhetoric which suggests that the Church did not feel compelled "to intervene in order to formulate a principle which was not attacked."<sup>12</sup> In her understanding, the practice of ordaining only men to the priesthood went unchallenged, and therefore unsupported by any official formulation, until recent attacks against the Church brought it into question.

According to Butler, "attacks" levelled against the Church in the mid-twentieth century were rooted in the broader context of dramatic social change and reactions to the Second Vatican Council. Within this context, many Catholics, like Ruether, began to

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<sup>10</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, Article 13, in Halter, 187.

campaign for further changes within the Church, including the ordination of women. In her mind, in certain cases the criticisms they voiced were merited and where this was the case she feels that the Church reacted by developing its teaching. In other cases, according to Butler, where these criticisms were not merited the Church provided adequate and convincing justification for abandoning any and all further attacks against its teaching and practice. In other words, in Butler's estimation, the Church responded to attacks levelled against it in an altogether satisfactory way.

One instance in which Butler has supported the development of Church teaching is in the area of women's equality. She reveals her commitment to equality—and hints at her nuanced understanding of the correlation between equality and ordination—when she condemns the fact that “until quite recently Catholic theologians generally did explain the Church's practice [of ordaining only men to the priesthood], at least in part, by appealing to difference and the ‘hierarchical’ ordering of the sexes.”<sup>13</sup> This tradition of the “hierarchical ordering of the sexes,” according to Butler, can be traced to the familiar “Pauline ban” (1 Corinthians 14:35-36 and 1 Timothy 2:12-14) and the Pauline doctrine of headship (1 Corinthians 11:3, 8-12 and Ephesians 5:22-24) found in the New Testament.<sup>14</sup> She is critical of the fact that these passages have been interpreted by theologians, especially by the supremely influential Church fathers, in such a way as to normalize female subjugation and, not surprisingly, to provide a variety of justifications for the exclusion of women from the priesthood, among other restrictions.<sup>15</sup> Without engaging in any form of critical exegesis herself, she acknowledges the contribution made by the liberal feminists (such as Ruether) who confronted and challenged these

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<sup>13</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Butler, “Women's Ordination,” 504.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 18-19; 46.

texts, thereby bringing the Church's misogyny to the forefront of contemporary Christian scholarship.<sup>16</sup>

In her view, the Church has acknowledged and addressed its problematic historical record vis-à-vis women by abandoning its teaching in support of the hierarchical ordering of the sexes. Butler sees this shift in Church teaching formally articulated in *Gaudium et Spes* (On the Church in the Modern World), a document drafted during the Second Vatican Council. The document states: "All women and men are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all and it must be accorded ever greater recognition."<sup>17</sup> As far as Butler is concerned, this official statement affirms the equality of men and women—most significantly in terms of being created in God's image—and thereby overrules other statements that invoke a hierarchical ordering of the sexes.<sup>18</sup> Up to this point, in voicing her support for the Council, and in specifically pinpointing this statement as a positive development in redressing the Church's historical role in perpetuating misogyny, Butler appears to be on par with Ruether. In fact, the very same passage that Butler extracts from *Gaudium et Spes* is a favourite among liberal feminist supporters of women's ordination.

It is in assessing her interpretation of the way in which this teaching has been implemented "on the ground" that the divergence between Butler's thought and that of Ruether comes to the fore. Butler acknowledges the fact that, in light of discussions about

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<sup>16</sup> Butler, "Women's Ordination," 505.

<sup>17</sup> See *Gaudium et Spes*, Article 29, in Flannery, 194.

<sup>18</sup> See Sara Butler, "Embodiment: Women and Men, Equal and Complementary," in *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue*, ed. Elizabeth Johnston (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 36.

women's historical oppression and their recently recognized equality, many North American Catholics "thought it reasonable to ask whether the Church might not modify her discipline and admit women to priestly ordination."<sup>19</sup> In her mind, however, a faulty justification for Church teaching does not necessarily invalidate the teaching itself. In other words, the fact that the Catholic Church traditionally denied women access to the priesthood based on a now untenable teaching regarding female inferiority does not mean that all obstacles barring women from the position have been removed. As far as Butler is concerned, the teaching in support of a male-only priesthood still stands. And as for the newfound teaching on equality, Butler deems it to have been adequately implemented as a result of the "increased participation" of women in Church affairs and in the revisions made to the Code of Canon Law in 1983, which she suggests grants women "essentially the same juridical status as men in the Catholic Church."<sup>20</sup> She cites the equal access of men and women to non-ordained ministries and the equal treatment of spouses within marriage—Pope John Paul II's notion of "mutual subjection"—as indicative of this "increased participation" and revised status.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, she acknowledges that women's "equal access" to lay ministries is not absolute, as they are prevented from being installed as lectors and acolytes.<sup>22</sup>

Butler explains these exceptions by appealing to the work Nancy Reynolds, a scholar of canon law who published *A Comparison of the Specific Juridic Status of Women in the 1917 and 1983 Code of Canon Law* in 1984. Reynolds suggests that the limitation of the roles of lector and acolyte to men is "a direct carryover from earlier

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<sup>19</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 31.

<sup>21</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 35; 26.

<sup>22</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 32.

tradition.”<sup>23</sup> For Butler, this “carryover” justifies the preservation of these offices as male-only based on the reasoning that they have traditionally been understood to be “steps on the way toward priestly ordination.”<sup>24</sup> In spite of the fact that Butler herself describes the 1917 Code of Canon Law as being in need of “development” precisely because of its discriminatory tendencies, the fact that these “steps” are not required for priestly ordination does not prompt her to challenge this practice as a vestige of the discrimination found in the 1917 Code.<sup>25</sup> Instead, she maintains that men and women have “equal access” to lay ministries and suggests that “the real distinction that remains in canon law is that between the ordained and the non-ordained.”<sup>26</sup>

In stressing the distinction between ordained and non-ordained, Butler intends to demonstrate the fact that while the rhetoric of “equal access” may be suited to discussions related to lay participation in the Church, in spite of the above-mentioned exceptions, it does not apply to discussions related to priestly ordination. This is not to suggest that Butler abandons her commitment to equality within the Church when approaching the priesthood. Rather, it points to the fact that she privileges her understanding of sacramentality and tradition above her commitment to “equal access” where the priestly role is concerned. In perhaps one of her strongest critiques of liberal feminist supporters of women’s ordination, Butler suggests that a commitment to equal access at any cost fails to take seriously the distinctiveness of the priestly role within the Catholic Church and the importance of Church doctrine and tradition in defining that role. In her mind, to

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy Reynolds, *A Comparison of the Specific Juridic Status of Women in the 1917 and 1983 Codes of Canon Law*, Canon Law Studies (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1984), 53-54.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 32.



argue as liberal feminists do that recent Church teaching regarding women's equality should result in women's ordination is to misplace the emphasis with which one should approach the Catholic sacrament of priestly ordination. As Butler puts it:

The starting point for the explanation of the Catholic tradition given in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* is the Church's settled doctrine regarding the origin and nature of the ministerial priesthood. The starting point for advocates of women's ordination on the other hand, is the Church's contemporary teaching that women have equal rights and equal dignity with men. The first starting point confirms the tradition, whereas the second is commonly thought to call it into question.<sup>27</sup>

This emphasis on "starting points" reveals a difference in priority when approaching the question of women's ordination. It is with this in mind that Butler repeatedly accuses liberal feminist theologians of failing to take seriously the Catholic priesthood as Catholic.<sup>28</sup> In other words, in adopting the wrong "starting point," Butler finds that liberal feminist supporters of women's ordination inadvertently invalidate their position. (Or, put another way, they argue very successfully for the ordination of women within a Protestant theological framework.)

In spite of her repeated insistence that equality is the wrong starting point for discussions about women's ordination, Butler takes the time to spell out her own commitment to equality in order to demonstrate to liberal feminist detractors of the papal teaching that it is possible both to maintain this commitment *and* to uphold the papal teaching. Butler supports this position by appealing to a very particular understanding of equality—one which, in her mind, seeks to destabilize the notion that equality and complementarity are mutually exclusive. In other words, Butler wants to demonstrate that

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<sup>27</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 39.

<sup>28</sup> In a recent exchange in *Commonweal* with Robert J. Egan, SJ, an ardent supporter of women's ordination, Butler denounced the former's line of thinking by suggesting that his "views correspond closely, in fact, to a consensus found among many Anglican and most Protestant Christians for whom there is no theological objection to admitting women to the ordained ministry." See Robert J. Egan and Sara Butler, "Continuing the Conversation: Women & the Priesthood," *Commonweal* CXXXV.13 (18 July 2008), [http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/article.php?id\\_article=2281](http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/article.php?id_article=2281) (accessed September 5, 2008).

men and women can be equal *and* complementary, meaning that they are equal in terms of their worth and access to salvation within the Church, but complementary in that they embody this worth and participate in Church life in distinct ways.<sup>29</sup>

Butler explicitly addresses her understanding of equality in a paper entitled “Embodiment: Women and Men, Equal and Complementary,” which she delivered during a series of meetings organized by Elizabeth Johnson and conducted with the aim of bringing Catholic women together in dialogue. In this paper Butler states:

I do not intend to defend a theory of sex complementarity that entails hierarchical relations of power and value or a ‘polar opposition’ between the sexes. I too reject this view. I do not agree, however, that this is the only way to construe the complementarity of the sexes; it surely is not the theory the magisterium has been proposing for the past twenty-five years.<sup>30</sup>

This reinforces Butler’s assertion that she does not support arguments for a male-only priesthood that appeal to a hierarchy of the sexes. As far as she is concerned, to suggest that being ordained as a priest places an individual in a privileged or somehow superior position “can give exaggerated importance to the ministry of the ordained.”<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Butler credits this “exaggerated importance” with promoting the idea that women need to be ordained in order to be granted “full participation” within the Catholic Church.<sup>32</sup> According to Butler, in prioritizing priestly ordination above lay participation it is the liberal feminists who preserve both a male-female hierarchy, and an ordained-non-ordained hierarchy, neither of which are present in Church teaching in her estimation. For Butler, in their fervent pursuit of women’s ordination the liberal feminists promote a sort of “new clericalism” which fails to recognize that women have already been granted full

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<sup>29</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, “Embodiment,” 36.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, “Women’s Ordination,” 517.

<sup>32</sup> Butler, “Women’s Ordination,” 514.

participation and “risks downplaying the contributions of women whose participation is shaped by marriage, by some form of consecrated life, or by a professional commitment to ecclesial service.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, Butler judges the liberal feminist critique of the Church as guilty of disregarding the contributions made by Catholic women based on the assumption, in her reading, that women are only valued when they act like men.

In her commitment to complementary equality Butler offers a critique of the liberal feminist brand of equality—which she terms “equality-as-identity”—for being inconsiderate of women’s contributions *as women*.<sup>34</sup> By suggesting that liberal feminism has diminished the importance (and the beauty) of women’s contributions to the Church, Butler also seeks to restore an appreciation for biological difference among men and women with the aim of allowing women to feel that they are equally valued without requiring that they forego traditional female roles, such as that of mother and/or wife. Although this implies that women cannot fulfill a priestly role, it means instead that they have a unique and complementary way of contributing to the Catholic community. And although her understanding of men and women as equal and complementary “allows for a functional ‘inequality’ if you will in the service of the community,” as she says, this does not imply hierarchy for Butler.<sup>35</sup> Rather, it intends to do justice to the embodied differences that exist between men and women. Echoing the words of Pope John Paul II, Butler suggests that it is

possible to identify and celebrate the specific gifts and contributions women and men make to the human community not only as individuals but also precisely as members of their respective sex. These distinctive gifts are not associated with one sex or the other in mutually exclusive ways [...] but are seen as characteristic

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<sup>33</sup> Butler, “Women’s Ordination,” 517.

<sup>34</sup> Butler, “Women’s Ordination,” 515.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

feminine and masculine aptitudes or 'styles' which enrich human coexistence in the family and in society.<sup>36</sup>

This notion that men and women have "distinctive gifts" and "styles" that are complementary yet granted equal value is appealing to many women.<sup>37</sup>

There is a tendency among liberal feminists to speak as though they do so for all women—as though all Catholic women experience oppression in being excluded from the priesthood. In supporting the papal teaching and promoting her understanding of complementary equality, Butler decentres the liberal feminist discourse on women.

According to Helen Hull Hitchcock, founder of the Catholic organization Women for Faith and Family (WFF), liberal feminist Catholics have claimed to speak for all Catholic women, with the result that "women who did not subscribe to this view of the church were commonly stereotyped as ignorant collaborators in their own victimization, against equality for women, and 'antifeminists'."<sup>38</sup> Hitchcock's displeasure with the liberal feminist monopoly on discussions about Catholic women led her to round up like-minded women in St. Louis in 1984, with the result that WFF has now grown to be a large-scale international movement that acts as a mouthpiece for Catholic women who support the papal teaching regarding the priesthood and the "distinctive gifts" of women—in other words, exemplars of Pope John Paul's new feminism. As Hitchcock says, "One modest achievement with which Women for Faith and Family might be credited is that it is now

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<sup>36</sup> Butler, "Embodiment," 41.

<sup>37</sup> As "Donna," a Catholic woman interviewed by scholar Christel Manning for her book *God Gave Us the Right*, put it: "There's certain things, like physical things, that men can't do, that women can do, like having a baby, nursing a baby, that's one example. And it doesn't hurt my pride that there can be, on a spiritual plane, something that would be only open to men." See Christel Manning, *God Gave Us the Right: Conservative Catholic, Evangelical Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish Women Grapple with Feminism* (Rutgers University: New Brunswick, 1999), 117.

<sup>38</sup> Helen Hull Hitchcock, "Women for Faith and Family: Catholic Women Affirming Catholic Identity," in Weaver and Appleby, 176.

impossible for dissenting feminists to claim convincingly to speak for all Catholic women. Too many voices contradict this.”<sup>39</sup>

In contributing alternative voices to the discourse by and about Catholic women, Butler and Hitchcock (among others) provide a much needed corrective to the so-called liberal feminist monopoly. At the same time, however, Butler’s attempt to disprove and even replace the liberal feminist discourse, and not simply to broaden the Catholic discourse on women, means that she can be accused of the very same monopolizing tendencies that Hitchcock experienced as problematic and unrepresentative. There is no denying that Butler’s suggestion that “women suffer no injustice” in being excluded from the priesthood would only further compound the very feelings of injustice that many Catholic women *do* experience as a result of having been denied access to the priesthood.<sup>40</sup> She continues her train of thought on the issue of injustice by stating the following: “Being excluded from priestly ordination would constitute an injustice only if women...were prevented thereby from attaining some personal advantage that would enhance their ability to achieve the goal of Christian life.”<sup>41</sup> Just as Hitchcock voices a valid concern in suggesting that she does not appreciate Catholic feminist elites telling her (and other women) that they are oppressed, neither do those Catholic women who experience oppression and subjugation in being denied access to the priesthood appreciate Butler’s dismissive suggestion as an elite academic and official spokesperson for the Vatican to the contrary. As far as these women are concerned, the oppression and exclusion they experience may do precisely what Butler suggests it does not, namely, prevent them “from attaining some personal advantage that would enhance their ability to

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<sup>39</sup> Hitchcock, “Women for Faith and Family,” 176.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, “Women’s Ordination,” 518.

<sup>41</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 41.

achieve the goal of a Christian life.” In both cases, it strikes me as problematic for a voice of authority to *tell* other individuals—especially those who may not be in similar positions of power and authority—how they do or do not feel.

In spite of the monopolizing tendencies on both sides of the issue as presented above, it is clear that Butler’s notion of complementary equality touches upon a weakness in the liberal feminist line of thinking. Many Catholics seem to find the idea that male-female relationships are either equal (i.e., identical) or complementary (i.e., hierarchical) to be unsatisfactory. Of course, the very criticism that she endeavours to counteract can also be levelled against Butler; namely, that her notion of complementarity preserves a hierarchical dichotomy by continuing to promote traditional male-female dualities which are inherently misogynistic and outdated. A liberal feminist reader might suggest that in preserving a male-female dichotomy—even if, as she suggests above, “distinctive gifts are not associated with one sex or the other in mutually exclusive ways”—she attributes an excessive degree of importance to biology, to an extent that the myriad other factors that make up the complex and diverse world of human identities are disregarded. In other words, where her criticism against liberal feminists for failing to adequately recognize the impact of embodiment may be merited, it can also be suggested that in attempting to prove this point she herself becomes guilty of prioritizing embodiment to such an extent that human existence is overwhelmingly determined by biology. Her discussion of sex and embodiment is also problematic in that it is uncritically heteronormative; this is most evident in consideration of the fact that she fails to engage in any meaningful way with notions of gender versus sex.

### **The Fundamental Reasons (Or, Why Women *really* can't be Priests)**

Butler's discussion of equality overturns the liberal feminist monopoly of that discourse and points to certain shortcomings within their line of thinking. Her discussion is also intended to indicate that the Church has seriously considered the criticisms raised by liberal feminists, prompting a re-evaluation of its teaching on women. Butler summarizes the outcome of this re-evaluation by suggesting the following: "The evidence shows that the contemporary magisterium is firmly committed to the equal rights and dignity of women with men in the social order and in the Church."<sup>42</sup> By emphasizing the Church's commitment to equal rights and dignity, Butler seeks to demonstrate that the issue of women's ordination is not, as liberal feminists claim, a "justice issue."<sup>43</sup> She raises the issue of equality, in other words, for the benefit of those who continue to object to Church teaching by appealing to notions of equality. As far as Butler is concerned, the Church dealt with the so-called "justice issue" by developing its teaching, which means that the continued prohibition against women's ordination is not adequately understood if approached entirely based on a concern for equality. In other words, if one takes seriously the Church's insistence that women are not prevented from being priests based on some form of misogynist reasoning, then the question remains, on what basis are women excluded from the priesthood?

This is precisely the question that Butler seeks to answer in *The Catholic Priesthood and Women*, and she does so based on a framework that distinguishes between "fundamental reasons" and "theological arguments." In re-orienting the discussion about women's ordination based on the notion that a Catholic approach to the

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<sup>42</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 17.

<sup>43</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 41.

question should be rooted in a consideration for the Church's "fundamental reasons" in support of the teaching, Butler makes a pointed criticism of liberal feminists. Not only are they incorrect in criticizing the Church's commitment to equality, in her estimation, but in focusing their attention on this criticism they also fail to approach the question of women's ordination from an authentically Catholic perspective. If equality was the standard upon which access to the priesthood was predicated, as is the case in most Protestant churches, Butler concedes that women would be priests. Instead, as far as she is concerned, the Catholic sacrament of priestly ordination cannot be understood without consideration of the so-called "fundamental reasons"; namely, the behaviour of Jesus, Catholic tradition, and sacramental theology.<sup>44</sup>

First and foremost—and quite apart from any consideration of equality—Butler declares the Catholic priesthood to be rooted in the person and the behaviour of Jesus. As Pope Paul VI suggested in 1977, in reference to the recent papal teaching on the priesthood, "The real reason is that...Christ established things this way."<sup>45</sup> Having learned that Jesus and his behaviour "established things" in this way (i.e. in such a way as to ensure a permanent, male-only sacramental priesthood), the question then arises as to how exactly he did so. According to Butler, two key factors drawn from the life of Jesus, as encountered in the New Testament, ground the papal teaching on the male priesthood. The first is Jesus' male-embodied incarnation; the second is his decision to appoint only men to "the twelve."

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<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that although I have chosen to label the fundamental reasons as indicated above, Butler herself articulates the reasons in several different ways. I have attempted to do justice to her argumentation regarding the fundamental reasons by grouping the reasons into the above categories so as to cover the scope of her own slightly divergent categories. See Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 9.

<sup>45</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Angelus* address, 30 January 1977, quoted in Sara Butler, "Ordination: Reviewing the 'Fundamental Reasons'," in *Women for Faith & Family: Voices Online Edition XIX*, no. 3 (Michaelmas 2004), under "'Fundamental Reasons' for Reserving Priestly Ordination to Men," <http://www.wf-f.org/04-3-Ordination.html> (accessed November 21, 2008).



For Butler it is significant that Jesus was born as a human man. She is, however, careful to emphasize the fact that the “primary focus of the Incarnation...is clearly that the Word became a human being, rather than that he became male.”<sup>46</sup> This emphasis on the humanity of the incarnation, which is also stressed by liberal feminists, ensures equal access to salvation for male and female believers alike. Of course, in keeping with the importance that she accords to the embodied sex of human individuals, Butler is also careful to point out that the maleness of Jesus “has significance not only for his human identity, but also for the economy of salvation.”<sup>47</sup> Based on her understanding of the complementary duality of humanity—the notion that “man and woman are created for each other” and that “they complement each other in ways that are mutual and reciprocal”<sup>48</sup>—Butler suggests that in order to act *in persona Christi*, and therefore to participate as the representative of Christ in acting out the “economy of salvation” for (and with) the community, the priest must adequately represent Jesus.<sup>49</sup> In other words, in order to act in the place of Jesus vis-à-vis the community, the priest must be male.

Butler is quick to note that liberal feminists take issue with the Church’s emphasis on Jesus’ incarnation-as-male. She condemns this as a failure on their part to take seriously the profound effect that embodiment has on human individuals.<sup>50</sup> Butler also confronts the liberal feminist critique of the way in which the phrase *in persona Christi* is employed by the Church. In her mind, it is the liberal feminist detractors who misinterpret the phrase. According to her they “change its meaning and equate acting in

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<sup>46</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 82.

<sup>47</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 83.

<sup>48</sup> Butler, “Embodiment,” 39.

<sup>49</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 82.

<sup>50</sup> Butler, “Women’s Ordination,” 510.

the person of Christ with acting virtuously, in imitation of Christ.”<sup>51</sup> As far as Butler is concerned, to take seriously the connection between the priestly role and the doctrine of the incarnation is to acknowledge the maleness of Jesus, as well as the intimate connection that exists between the priest who acts *as* Jesus, and not simply *in imitation of* Jesus. It is, I think, worth noting that although Butler is dismissive of the liberal feminist tendency to emphasize the humanity of Jesus as opposed to his maleness, Church tradition has at different times emphasized different aspects of the person of Jesus, allowing not only for identification with him not only as a human being, but even as female.<sup>52</sup> Although Butler does not address this theological tradition, the feminine Jesus has reared his (or her) head time and again—and not only in the medieval mystical imagination. As Stephen Prothero describes in *American Jesus*, the “sweet Savior” maintained a hold on the imagination of the American people, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as evidenced by the proliferation of depictions of and stories about Jesus that emphasized (and glorified) his femininity.<sup>53</sup> Of course, this is not the tradition within which Butler situates herself, and just as she prioritizes Jesus’ maleness over and against the liberal feminist emphasis on Jesus’ humanity, so too does Prothero describe a backlash against the popularity of a feminized Jesus beginning in the 1890s and taking hold especially after the second World War. Butler is firmly entrenched in this era—described by Prothero as being marked by “a crisis in masculinity”—which has resulted in a turn towards emphasizing a more “manly redeemer.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 98.

<sup>52</sup> See Carolyn Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), especially 157-171.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), especially 56-61.

<sup>54</sup> Prothero, *American Jesus*, 91.

In addition to the need to model the manly Jesus, Butler further substantiates the case for male priests by appealing to Jesus' actions. In particular, his choice of twelve men to form his select group of followers (i.e. "the twelve") is understood by the Church to be the "perennial norm" for the male priesthood.<sup>55</sup> The appointment of the twelve is interpreted in such a way that it is understood to signify Jesus' own acknowledgment of the importance of appointing successors for himself—those who will act *in persona Christi*—and, specifically, of the fact that these successors are required to be men. Butler acknowledges that in extracting the papal teaching regarding a male-only priesthood from Jesus' "way of acting," and not from an explicit saying in the biblical text—of which there are none—the Church relies on its own interpretive techniques.<sup>56</sup> It is her contention, however, that the Church is both able and has the authority to deduce Jesus' will on the basis of his actions. To suggest otherwise, in her mind, is to compromise the authority of the Catholic hierarchy and to call into question the doctrine of the Catholic priesthood in its entirety. Although the will of Jesus on this matter is never explicitly articulated, meaning that it is unknown, the teaching that the priestly office was instituted by Jesus on the basis of his calling of the twelve is what Butler refers to as "a matter of faith" for Catholics.<sup>57</sup> If the Catholic understanding of the priesthood is rooted in the appointment of the twelve, and the twelve were men, then the assumption is that this pattern is to function as a "permanent norm" in determining access to the Catholic priesthood.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Butler, "Ordination," 4.

<sup>58</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 77.

In a recent contribution to *Commonweal* magazine, Butler responds to those who take issue with the connection made between the appointment of the twelve and the Catholic priesthood by stating, quite simply, “I regard it as required by Catholic faith that Jesus’ intention for his apostolic ministry is known by way of the mission he gave the twelve, and that this office is passed on in apostolic succession by means of the sacrament of Holy Orders.”<sup>59</sup> In other words, to deny the importance of the twelve in relation to the Catholic priesthood, as far as Butler is concerned, is to remove oneself from Catholic tradition, entering instead the realm of Protestant theology. The rigidity of her stance on this particular point shows Butler to be committed to a reading strategy that prioritizes a commitment to Catholic tradition, which she then positions as being in opposition to—or at the very least superior to—the liberal feminist commitment to biblical exegesis, which is understood to be recent and innovative, and therefore less authoritative. In her essay “Sacrifice and Social Structure in Christianity,” Nancy Jay describes a similar tendency among traditionalist Catholics, where they “ignore scripture whenever it does not accommodate tradition.”<sup>60</sup> Although Butler cannot accurately be situated in the traditionalist camp, her desire to preserve the Catholic teaching on the priesthood means that, for her, tradition trumps historical scholarship.

In keeping with Butler’s insistence on the importance of the twelve for the foundation of the Catholic priesthood, the objection is raised as to whether Jesus was unable to choose women as members of the twelve based on his social circumstances. In response to this concern Butler points to “the sovereign freedom with which the Lord

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<sup>59</sup> Butler, “Continuing the Conversation.”

<sup>60</sup> Nancy Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion, and Paternity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 119.

broke with the customs, traditions, and laws of his time in relating to women.”<sup>61</sup> According to her logic, “Freedom in the one case argues for freedom in the other,” meaning that Jesus must have freely chosen to appoint only men to the twelve.<sup>62</sup> A consideration for the prominence of women within early Christian communities, which has also prompted critics like Ruether to call for women’s ordination, is criticized by Butler based on the tendency of such arguments to “privilege the findings of historical scholarship over the witness of the tradition.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, Butler reveals her commitment to the guidance of tradition as a necessary tool for reading the biblical text appropriately, over against “the findings of historical scholarship,” within a Catholic context.

As far as Butler is concerned, the tendency among liberal feminist critics of the papal teaching to read the biblical text in such a way as to problematize the link made between Jesus and his appointment of the twelve and the present-day priestly office is “to go back four centuries and find oneself once more amid the controversies of the Reformation.”<sup>64</sup> In her estimation, to discredit the interpretive tradition of the Catholic magisterium is to akin to advocating “sola scriptura.” The repeated accusation made by Butler to the effect that liberal feminist critics are closet Protestants draws attention to the differences between Catholic and Protestant conceptions of priesthood, and the difference in authority that they accord to tradition, but it also smacks of condescension. By dismissing the criticisms they level against the Church, Butler fails to consider the fact that liberal feminists may well—and often do, in my reading—have a respect for and an

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<sup>61</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 13.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 93.

<sup>64</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 95.

interest in Catholic tradition, and that they may take issue with her decision to dismiss them as inauthentic Catholics. Just as Butler's declaration that women "suffer no injustice" in being excluded from the priesthood fails to take seriously women's experiences of injustice, so too does her tendency to label criticisms of the papal teaching on the priesthood as Protestant indicate that she fails to take seriously the possibility that self-described Catholics might understand tradition differently, and that they might also disagree with the teaching.

Butler acknowledges that the doctrine of the priesthood cannot be extracted in full form from the biblical text, stating "the Gospel tradition does not make it 'immediately obvious' that the Lord intended to entrust the 'apostolic charge' only to men."<sup>65</sup> She points instead to a long-standing "tradition of practice" as justification for the papal teaching.<sup>66</sup> In her reading, when viewed in light of tradition, the text can easily be read in such a way as to confirm current papal teaching. In other words, tradition is authoritative for Butler to an extent that it seems to require justification only in retrospect. This is exemplified in her appeal to a theological precedent for the papal teaching in the work of the fifth century Christian theologian Epiphanius who, she suggests, points to the twelve as the origin of the priesthood and substantiates his claim by referencing the traditional practice of exclusively ordaining men to the priesthood.<sup>67</sup> Butler is not opposed to looking backwards in this way because in her understanding this is what differentiates a fundamental reason from a theological argument; in this case, tradition precedes doctrine and theology follows from it.

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<sup>65</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 69.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 63.

In privileging tradition as a marker of the authenticity of the doctrine of a male-only priesthood, Butler invites several objections. Firstly, critics have demonstrated that antiquity is not necessarily a marker of worth, especially if the Church's history of misogyny is kept in mind. Butler responds to this objection by suggesting that although the theological reasons supporting a doctrine can change, the doctrine itself, if rooted in tradition, and especially a tradition associated with Jesus, is incapable of being altered.<sup>68</sup> In the case of priestly ordination, Butler suggests that the Church responded to calls for equality by investigating whether the prohibition against women's ordination was simply a veiled propagation of misogyny, but they judged it not to be the case. And even though the doctrinal connection made between the priesthood and the twelve is what Butler refers to as a "new line of reasoning," not only does she find a precedent for this reasoning in the work of Epiphanius, but she also judges the reasoning to be secondary to the tradition.<sup>69</sup>

With the weight that Butler grants to tradition, and the combined authority that she puts upon tradition in conjunction with the biblical text, it is worth noting that the category of "tradition" that she invokes is never firmly defined. By constantly referencing the "unbroken, universal" tradition of a male-only priesthood, Butler seems to be suggesting that Catholic tradition is a timeless monolith.<sup>70</sup> She is perhaps correct then, at least to a certain extent, when she suggests that feminist theologians "give scant attention to the witness of tradition," because, as demonstrated by Ruether, it has been their aim to pick apart the façade of an unbroken tradition by emphasizing the variety of traditions from which the Catholic Church has developed. If, however, liberal feminists are guilty

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<sup>68</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 58.

<sup>69</sup> Butler, "Women's Ordination," 505.

<sup>70</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 9.

of ignoring tradition, Butler and her compatriots are equally guilty of turning a blind eye to the variety of traditions within the history of the Catholic Church, and of failing to question why it is that the practice of ordaining men to the Catholic priesthood is deemed to be above interrogation or development.<sup>71</sup>

Butler further substantiates her claim that the papal doctrine of the priesthood is authoritative when she describes the sacramental justification for the prohibition of women's ordination. Just as she considers the traditional practice of ordaining men to be universal and unbroken—meaning that alternative traditions that may have supported women as leaders, or even as priests, are relegated to the category of heresy—so too does Butler suggest that the seven sacraments upheld in the Catholic Church, including the sacrament of ordination, are definitive and permanent. Butler places the sacrament of holy orders in the category of “settled doctrine,” meaning that the Church cannot alter the fact that the priest must represent Jesus himself—along with his decision to appoint a male line of successors originating in the twelve—by virtue of being a man.<sup>72</sup>

To ignore the importance of signification in reference to the sacraments, according to Butler, is to remove their substance, making their performance a matter of function instead of a matter of symbolism and transformation. For Butler, to interpret the priesthood solely as a “leadership role” that requires certain functions would present no obstacle for the entry of women.<sup>73</sup> In an article from 1989 in which she first began to articulate her support for the papal teaching she states: “It is evident that women are

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<sup>71</sup> In his article “The Triumph of Americanism,” R. Scott Appleby references Ruether in making the criticism “that conservatives and neoconservatives exempt the hierarchy from historical development and fail to challenge the assumption that the church ‘has always possessed a centralized monarchical and hierarchical form of government’ which is ‘divinely mandated and unchangeable’.” See Appleby, “The Triumph of Americanism,” in Weaver and Appleby, 51.

<sup>72</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 39.

<sup>73</sup> Butler, “Women’s Ordination,” 25.



capable of doing what priests *do*.”<sup>74</sup> This simple fact, however—that women can do what priests do—is not sufficient to grant women access to the Catholic priesthood. This is because the Catholic priesthood, without denying the importance of function, prioritizes symbolism above function. Based on this line of thinking, then, the reality is that “a woman is not an apt symbol.”<sup>75</sup>

Sacramental symbolism is determined based on the person of Jesus, as the priest is understood to act as the representative of Jesus to the Church, first and foremost, and, only to a secondary degree, as the representative of the Church community to God. Butler is critical of the liberal feminist tendency to reverse this order, suggesting instead that the priest acts in the first place as the representative of the community to God (*in persona Ecclesiae*), and only secondarily as the representative of God (or Christ) back to the community (*in persona Christi*).<sup>76</sup> Butler disputes this line of thinking by arguing that the priest is never acting as a representative of God, but always of Christ, which again is a result of Jesus’ embodiment as a human man.<sup>77</sup> She also goes on to condemn the prioritization of *in persona Ecclesiae* by emphasizing the necessity of a visible representative of Jesus in order for the priest to adequately fulfill his role within the community.<sup>78</sup> To make the priest a representative of the Church, in Butler’s view, would be to remove Jesus, and thus the cornerstone, from the sacramental practice of the Catholic community. The divergence between these two understandings of the sacramental role of the priest points to the confusion that resulted from the teachings developed during the Second Vatican Council related to the priesthood. According to Jay,

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<sup>74</sup> Butler, “Forum,” 160.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 98.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 82.

as a result of Vatican II, “The whole traditional sacrificial structure, built on the exclusive sacrificing power of the priesthood, was shaken by this call for active lay participation in nature of the priesthood liturgy.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, perhaps it can be stated that the legacy of Vatican II permits both Butler’s reading of the priesthood, which is essentially an appeal for the preservation of the doctrine of the priesthood as articulated at the Council of Trent, and the liberal feminist understanding of priesthood espoused by Ruether, which is primarily rooted in a particular reading of the New Testament. Both find their impetus in the ambiguity of the Second Vatican Council, choosing to emphasize different elements drawn from the Council.

If, as liberal feminist supporters of women’s ordination contend, the Second Vatican Council opened a space from which the priestly role can be reconfigured in such a way as to allow for a new liturgy and a new experience of communal Church life, which includes the ordination of women, then there is no doubt that they take issue with the notion that a male representative is required in order to symbolize Christ and thus to successfully perform the sacramental duties of the priest. The liberal feminist line of thinking suggests that this not only places too great an emphasis on Jesus’ maleness, as opposed to his humanity, but also that it fails to consider, as Jay points out, the possibility that the role of the priest be non-hierarchical and less (if at all) rooted in a sacrificial performance, and perhaps more in a communal meal. Butler, however, counters this critique by referring to her understanding of complementary equality, for one thing, as well as to the very obvious fact that, in her understanding, a female representative of Jesus would not function as a “self-evident” manifestation of Jesus.<sup>80</sup> Again, this is no

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<sup>79</sup> Jay, *Throughout Your Generations Forever*, 119.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 82.

disservice to women in her interpretation. In fact, she mentions the Virgin Mary in order to strengthen her case, stating: “the Blessed Virgin’s dignity was not compromised because she was not called to apostolic office and the ministerial priesthood.”<sup>81</sup> In other words, for failing to appreciate the dignity accorded to women’s distinct roles within the Church, and for dismissing the importance of sacramental signification, Butler accuses liberal feminists of favouring a commitment to theory above “a *fact* of sacred history.”<sup>82</sup> While it is certainly true that liberal feminist critics of the papal teaching appeal to a commitment to liberation and equality before committing themselves to the authority of tradition—in fact, this theoretical framework is what spurs them to interrogate Catholic tradition—in lodging this accusation Butler fails to take into account that her own interpretation of the fundamental reasons also rests on a theoretical commitment, namely, to the primacy of the Catholic magisterium.

### **Final Thoughts**

In the end, for Butler, to dispute the restriction of access to the Catholic priesthood to men is to deny the importance of the incarnation, of Catholic tradition and practice, of sacramentality, and of the Church’s genuine commitment to equality. If she is willing to address objections to the papal teaching, therefore, she will do so from a position that is grounded in her commitment to these constitutive elements of Catholicism. In this regard, her attempt at responding to liberal feminist criticisms is both admirable and important. Although her argumentation positions her squarely as a defender of the Catholic magisterium, placing her in direct opposition to Ruether in many respects, this only shows the need to plot a middle ground between the two camps to be

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<sup>81</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 15.

<sup>82</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 48.

all the more urgent. In particular, Butler's prioritization of tradition points to the need for Catholic women's discourses, on both sides of the spectrum, to think seriously about Catholic tradition, and to explore the possibilities it offers for enriching women's experiences within the Church.

It is clear from a close reading of their work that both Ruether and Butler articulate genuine concerns, and that they are responding not only to their own lived experience within the Church but also to a desire to act as mouthpieces for Catholic women. What they share, then, is a commitment to speaking the voices of Catholic women; Ruether in her attempt to give women a voice over and against the exclusive male hierarchy and Butler in her attempt to restore a different voice to the discourse initiated by the bold and dominant voice of the liberal feminists. In other words, the one follows the other in a corrective attempt to speak for women. With very different outcomes both Butler and Ruether are calling the Church to respect its commitment to women as believers and participants in Church life and in the economy of salvation. Both ground themselves in the Second Vatican Council and in a concern for theoretical and applied changes in women's presence in the Catholic Church. What remains to be seen, however, is whether their shared context and commitment to women might allow for a progression in this discussion by and about Catholic women in such a way that difference is not invalidated, but seriously understood and respected.

## Chapter 3

### Thinking Catholicism Anew<sup>1</sup>

*We need to rediscover how to play as well as how to pray.*

-Tina Beattie<sup>2</sup>

In chapters one and two I outlined the commitments underlying the theology of Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sara Butler, respectively, paying special attention to the question of women's ordination. By putting these thinkers in conversation with one another, and by designating them as spokespersons for the so-called "left" and "right," I have to a certain extent perpetuated the notion that there is indeed a fixed ideological left and right, and that members of either camp are forever (and irredeemably) in opposition to one another. On certain points this may be true, and certainly I chose to focus on Ruether and Butler because they articulate different understandings of the role of women in the Catholic Church. On the other hand, I chose both thinkers deliberately to represent two opposing conceptions of women's ordination not only to explore the logic that sustains those arguments, but also because I see in their larger thought the potential for compromise, negotiation, and the possibility of creating some bridges between Catholics. This potential "common ground" can only be sought by looking for points of overlap and by teasing those out as possible building blocks for a fresh discourse that examines the welfare as well as the status of women in Catholic religious life. That is the goal of this chapter, and in pursuing this goal I hope to trouble the very same opposition—that is,

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this chapter is a reworking of Susan Parsons's phrase "thinking redemption anew." See Susan Parsons, "Accounting for Hope: Feminist Theology as Fundamental Theology," in *Challenging Women's Orthodoxies in the Context of Faith*, ed. Susan Parsons (Aldershot, Burlington USA, Singapore, Sydney: Ashgate, 2000), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 9.

between left and right—that has repeatedly kept such a discourse at bay by locking women into rigid and opposing camps.

I turn to contemporary Catholic thinker Tina Beattie in my effort to tease out this “common ground” from within the current range of options available to Catholic women (as espoused by Ruether and Butler). In the end, using Beattie as my guide, I suggest that instead of forcing Ruether and Butler into an artificial shared theological space, the work of Beattie acts in such a way as to draw out resources from both thinkers, while also pointing to their weaknesses and omissions, in order to plot a new path for Catholic women. Beattie facilitates this breakthrough in the theological stalemate resulting from the liberal feminist-new feminist opposition because she eludes classification as either “left” or “right” and at the same time is adamantly Catholic. As such she provides an interesting and refreshing theological voice in discussions about women’s ordination. Although Ruether and Butler continue to be active participants and thinkers in Catholic contexts, Beattie also comes to this context more recently and, thus, her work functions as a response both to liberal and new feminist theologies.

My discussion in this chapter draws primarily from Beattie’s recent book *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (2006) in which she articulates a critical reading of both the liberal feminist Catholic theological tradition and more recent (and increasingly popular) new feminist Catholic theology. I will outline the way in which Beattie grapples with these two theological positions in the hope of elucidating how it is that her critique applies specifically to the thought of Ruether and Butler. After considering Beattie’s critique, I consider how she articulates her own explicitly Catholic feminist theology, which in turn, I will argue, provides the theoretical resources for

engaging with difference productively and for drawing out commonality in such a way that it facilitates dialogue and even social change. It is in fact my own experience in Catholic communities that leads me to see Beattie as creating a theological discourse within which a plurality of Catholic women's voices could be respected. And this discourse has implications, I will suggest, for addressing anew the place of women in the Catholic Church, as well as broader issues such as Church structure and liturgy.

### **Setting the Stage for a New Catholic Feminism**

Beattie frames her discussion of Catholic theology around the assumption that for the Catholic Church in the present day all is not well. She finds the present range of theological options to be lacking. She identifies the liberal feminist critique of Church tradition—including its treatment of the issue of women's ordination—as “impoverished.”<sup>3</sup> The new feminist brand of theology does not fare any better for Beattie, as she suggests that it is “shot through with contradictions, inconsistencies and distortions.”<sup>4</sup> In her mind, the crux of the problem and the key to repairing Catholic theology and the lived experience of Catholic believers is found in the concept of sacramentality. In reading both Ruether and Butler it came to my attention that they share a desire to preserve sacramentality, albeit in different forms. This struck me as a potential resource for engaging in conversation about women in the Catholic tradition. In other words, just as Beattie points to sacramentality as the key to the much-needed reinvigoration of present-day Catholicism, at the heart of which is the divisive issue of women's ordination, I see sacramentality as presenting a viable starting point for shared discussion amongst liberal feminist, new feminist, and a plurality of other Catholic

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<sup>3</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 230.

<sup>4</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 15.

women. Not only is sacramentality inseparably linked to the issue of women's ordination but it also grounds discussions about women in an explicitly Catholic framework.

The discussion of women's ordination by way of sacramentality occurs organically for Beattie in her attempt to probe and deconstruct the theological status quo of the contemporary Catholic Church. Armed with a particular curiosity about and commitment to women, Beattie surveys a wide spectrum of ideological commitments and theological discourses. Her search for a Catholic feminism that respects and nourishes women and the Church as a whole leads her to critique liberal feminist theology for failing to get at the root of the Church's malaise. This in turn leads her to examine the work of the popular theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who is often touted by new feminist Catholic theologians as "the Catholic Church's answer to feminism."<sup>5</sup> She employs the theoretical tools of psycholinguistic theory in order to interrogate Balthasar's theology. In the process, however, she not only remains unconvinced by his theological position as a viable alternative to liberal feminism but becomes deeply concerned about the implications she sees in his theology (and in that of his new feminist compatriots), which include the perpetuation of violence against women. The result of her dense and difficult analysis of Balthasar and the new feminists is Beattie's own articulation of a "new Catholic feminism."

Beattie's theological position is reactionary in that it responds to liberal feminism and, more significantly, to the implications of Balthasar's theology, which she understands to be particularly insidious. Her work is aimed at a scholarly audience and therefore operates on a highly theoretical level. The deep probing that she performs in *New Catholic Feminism* is crucial in allowing for the articulation of a Catholic feminism

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<sup>5</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, ix, 9.



that engages honestly and intelligently with the Catholic tradition. For my own purposes, however, it is the implications and applications of Beattie's theological work that are of particular interest. In other words, while Beattie's work functions primarily on a theoretical level, it is in its potential as a starting point for engagement with Catholic women on the ground—at the grassroots level—that I find her to be most compelling. With this in mind, I use her critique of liberal feminist theology and of Balthasar's neo-orthodox theology as a way of engaging critically with Ruether and Butler, in order to extract from both what I view to be the most worthwhile aspects of their theological positions as they pertain to Catholic women. This is followed by my own reading of Beattie, wherein I come to view her as a guide in delving into the symbolic depths of the Catholic tradition, eventually allowing me to resurface so as to draw out and put to work a program for the renewed faith-life of Catholic women in North America.

### **Beyond Politics**

The centrality of sacramentality for Beattie's theological vision leads her to be critical of liberal feminist Catholics, such as Ruether, for their insufficient attention to sacramentality. Her appreciation for the pioneering work of liberal feminist theologians, and her positive assessment of certain aspects of liberal feminist theology—including Ruether's notion of the "kenosis of patriarchy"<sup>6</sup>—do not prevent Beattie from levelling a thorough and compelling critique, which, in my reading, reaches to the very core of liberal feminist thought. In fact, Beattie finds many of the same faults with liberal feminism as does Butler, but, unlike Butler, I understand Beattie to be critical without being dismissive, both by acknowledging her debt to the liberal feminist pioneers and by

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<sup>6</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 244; see also Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 137, for her discussion of the *kenosis of patriarchy*.

retrieving and reviving certain components of their theological vision. Specifically, her critique points to the liberal feminist commitment to North American-style liberal politics above its Catholic theological commitments; to its reliance—whether acknowledged or not—on secular ideology; and to its tendency to reinforce a heterosexual gendered binary, ironically, by way of its attempts to include women in the Church.

For Beattie the liberal feminist theological stance is a product of its time; it is formed (primarily) in light of certain political trends in a mid-twentieth century North American context and as a response to the Second Vatican Council.<sup>7</sup> Although she speaks of liberal feminist theologians in general, Beattie frequently pinpoints Ruether both in order to acknowledge her prominence in the field of feminist theology and for the purpose of explicitly highlighting and critiquing her thought. Beattie sees the prominence of the rhetoric of justice in Ruether's work specifically as being closely tied to the zeitgeist of the 1960s, meaning that it not only reads as somewhat out of date in the twenty-first century but also that it tends to reduce the Christian message to a political agenda in making direct links between the behaviour of Jesus and certain revolutionary sentiments that are historically linked to mid-twentieth century North America (i.e., the women's movement, the civil rights movement).

Beattie cites Catholic theologian Nancy Dallavalle in order to describe the tendency among liberal feminists like Ruether to seek “a reformulation of Christian tradition in the light of the emancipation of women, a position that continues to rest on an ethical, not a theological, basis.”<sup>8</sup> For Beattie this approach makes the liberal feminist theological vision “impoverished” because it “substitutes a political ideology for the

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<sup>7</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Nancy Dallavalle, “Toward a Theology that is Catholic and Feminist: Some Basic Issues,” *Modern Theology* 14: 4 (October 1998): 540.

profound psychological and spiritual resonances of the Catholic tradition, with its mystical, transcendent beauty, its incarnate sacramentality, and its visceral bodiliness.”<sup>9</sup>

Political concerns, however, and particularly a concern for justice, remain important to Beattie’s theological vision. In fact, she sees within the Catholic tradition many of the same evils (such as misogyny) that are condemned by liberal feminists like Ruether. Yet she emphasizes the potential for a range of theological resources from *within* the Catholic tradition that could address these issues while also providing a range of answers to respond to them. By suggesting that liberal feminism has built a theology on the basis of an external political ideology, Beattie’s critique resembles that of Butler. Yet what distinguishes Beattie is that she shares many of the same commitments as does Ruether—to social justice and especially to women’s liberation, for example. And they arrive at many of the same conclusions regarding the need for certain changes in the Church, again especially as related to the need for the expansion of women’s leadership. What differentiates the two, then, is the *means* by which these commitments are articulated and thereby these conclusions reached.

It is no surprise to Beattie—nor is it a surprise to me—that theology has political implications. (Beattie herself articulates the hope that her own theology “might ultimately be a more political act than the overtly political rhetoric of feminists such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza.”<sup>10</sup>) In other words the problem is not, for example, that Ruether calls for women’s ordination, but that she does so without careful discussion of how women priests would (or wouldn’t) alter Catholic

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<sup>9</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 230.

<sup>10</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 3.

sacramentality.<sup>11</sup> This leads Beattie to emphasize the need for a new methodological approach to the role of women in Catholicism. For her this necessitates taking seriously the formative power that Catholic language and symbolism has on individual identities, and thus on the question of women's ordination. Without addressing the depth of the connection between "the innermost workings of the human psyche and the structures and systems which order our world" she suggests that feminist theology has nary a hope of initiating transformative change.<sup>12</sup>

Beattie accepts the liberal feminist premise that the Church is a patriarchal institution in need of reform, but she suggests that Ruether fails to fully uncover what is at the heart of the Church's history of misogyny because she does not probe the language and symbolism of the tradition. As a corrective, Beattie suggests the following: "If feminists are to understand and challenge the misogyny that forms a dark undercurrent to the Catholic theological tradition, we must go beyond politics in order to ask why the Catholic hierarchy is so resistant to acknowledging the sacramentality of the female body in its capacity to reveal Christ."<sup>13</sup> This means that the commitment to the expansion of women's roles within the Church must be reframed according to a "feminist sacramental vision" that is able to "refocus its lens beyond liberal feminism's primary concerns of justice and equality, in order to recognize that faith, hope and love provide a more textured language for the mystery of our humanity than justice alone."<sup>14</sup> In other words, Beattie advocates a certain turning backward (or inward) as a means by which to seriously interrogate official Church teaching, without surrendering her access to the

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<sup>11</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 7.

language or the mystery of the lived Catholic experience. For her, Catholic feminists must move away from the language of rights in order to ground their project, if they desire that it remain a Catholic project, in the substance of Catholic tradition—as challenging as that substance may turn out to be.

Beattie also finds problematic the commitment within liberal feminist theology, whether explicit or not, to secular ideology. In the case of Ruether, she pinpoints the former's "de-personalized, de-mystified philosophical concept" of God as indicative of her failure to engage with the "intimacy and otherness of the God of Christian revelation."<sup>15</sup> In Beattie's assessment this de-personalized God is alienating and lacks the potential to inspire believers because it engages with them solely on an intellectual level. Beattie reads Ruether's theology as a sort of stripped-down Catholicism, one that prioritizes academic integrity above the potential potency of, say, mystical experience.<sup>16</sup> It is perhaps helpful to view Ruether's de-personalized God again in the context of mid-twentieth century Catholicism in America. As Robert A. Orsi describes in *Between Heaven and Earth*, many American Catholics after Vatican II came to feel that the "devotional past has to be rendered utterly over and done with."<sup>17</sup> He goes on to suggest that there was a feeling after the Council "that Catholics needed to mature and to come of age."<sup>18</sup> Just as many Catholics in the latter part of the twentieth century wanted to diminish their otherness, so too did theologians like Ruether react against the (self-) perception of Catholics as too intimate or overly emotional in their encounters with God by developing a secularized theology.

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<sup>15</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 154.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

By pointing to its “subservience to secular ideology” Beattie suggests that liberal feminist scholarship—much as it may speak in the political language of rights—is guilty of diminishing its Catholic-ness and, simultaneously, of ignoring the voices of Catholic women on the ground, many of whom refused to reject the same devotional practices that are embarrassing to so many Catholic scholars.<sup>19</sup> Beattie cites Rebecca Chopp in order to suggest that feminist theologians “rarely mention the language or the imagery of Christian symbols, let alone belief and practice.”<sup>20</sup> And for Beattie this lacuna is problematic. By minimizing the importance of Catholic religion as a living thing and the diversity of women’s lived experiences as Catholics, liberal feminist theologians have tended to play by the rules set out by secular feminist theory. In other words, Beattie is suggesting that liberal feminist theologians have tended to speak for Catholic women while in reality they speak for themselves. She turns this scenario on its head by suggesting that feminist theology should instead aim “to represent the interests of women worldwide and not simply to provide a megaphone by which the values of western secular individualism can be broadcast to the world.”<sup>21</sup> In order for this vision to be possible, she is adamant about the fact that “there needs to be a much greater recognition by feminist theorists of the extent to which religion continues to shape the lives and identities of the majority of the world’s women.”<sup>22</sup> In short, theology about women should not be done without a consideration for the religious lives of women. What this means is that the feminist theologian has an extremely difficult task to fulfill: she must

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<sup>19</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Rebecca S. Chopp, “Theorizing Feminist Theory,” in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 230.

<sup>21</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

“hold together the demands of academic rigour and objectivity” while also respecting her “responsibilities and commitments to communities of women, children and men who represent diverse and often contradictory ideas and values, and whose lives may be untouched by the rhetorical games of the (post)modern academy.”<sup>23</sup>

This is, of course, a tall order. And as compelling as her critique of Ruether’s theology, in my reading, the same can be said of Beattie. What does differentiate the two, however, is the fact that this weakness on Beattie’s part is articulated as a conscious choice in that it allows her the theoretical space to effectively challenge the theological status quo, based on which she can then consider the lived experience of Catholic women. It is my intention to demonstrate that this theoretical project is critical for the survival and continued relevance of feminist theology, but I continue to view the separation between theory and practice to be troubling. It is my hope that the dense and challenging methodology employed by Beattie in *New Catholic Feminism* can be distilled in such a way that it might function as a theological tool for Catholic communities on the ground. It is worth acknowledging, however, that Ruether’s language is itself potentially more palatable for those “on the ground,” even if it is less deeply-rooted in tradition. It is also worth noting that, in my estimation, Beattie tends to be overly hasty in her critique of Ruether, at least when it comes to engaging with Catholic communities. As described in chapter one, Ruether is deeply committed to engaging with women on the ground via her participation in Women-Church groups. On the other hand, I agree with Beattie when she points to the fact that these sorts of activities have been perceived as being too loosely committed to Catholic doctrine for them to be taken seriously by the Church hierarchy, which means that they fail to challenge the Church in its own language.

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<sup>23</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 28.

Theory and practice come together for Beattie in her agreement with Ruether about the fact that the ordination of women is a crucial step in remedying the situation of Catholic women on the ground. Once again, however, she finds fault with Ruether's articulation of this call for change. Instead of challenging the hierarchical male-female binary that the Church employs in its defence of the male-priesthood, Beattie finds that Ruether "simply shifts the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion" by adding "woman" to the mix.<sup>24</sup> In other words, Ruether neglects to provide a sacramental justification for women's ordination, over and above the call for equal rights. In Ruether's configuration, the role of priest remains a role intended for a man, into which a woman steps providing that she can act the part of the man. For Beattie this means that Ruether has not done her theoretical homework as she continues to "appeal to the concept of 'woman' as a stable foundation for knowledge."<sup>25</sup> Beattie appeals to the insights of poststructuralism in order to challenge the notion that stable categorizations of "man" and "woman" exist in practice in the same way that they are designated in language and to suggest that without destabilizing the power of hierarchically gendered language, woman remains the "other" to the male standard.<sup>26</sup>

For failing to address the implications of the language she invokes, and for failing to see the potential within the Catholic tradition itself for destabilizing this language, Beattie finds that Ruether and the liberal feminists have inadequately challenged the Church's continued reliance on a gendered hierarchy. Once again, then, the insights gleaned through theoretical exploration become crucial for Beattie if change hopes to be anchored within the tradition with any degree of authority. This leads her to view

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<sup>24</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 125.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



Ruether's theology as somewhat naïve, as it "sidelines the roots of sexual and social conflict deep within our own psyches, and our need for something beyond the imperative of politics."<sup>27</sup> It is precisely these "deep roots" that Beattie hopes to excavate, meaning that although she supports Ruether's commitment to women and to justice and is indebted to her theological efforts, she cannot accept her methodology. She wants to move beyond Ruether's "vision of a Church in which we would all be terribly nice to one another and work together for a better world" into a world where a commitment to justice is actively maintained in the midst of great success *and* in spite of great difficulty.<sup>28</sup> For Beattie it is from a place of loyal commitment to Catholic doctrine and tradition, which has the capacity to "express darkness as well as light, struggle as well as creativity, conflict as well as harmony," that feminist theology can best speak to the lived experience of Catholic women.<sup>29</sup>

### **Breaking Through the Doctrinal Cul-de-Sac**

Beattie looks to so-called Catholic "new feminism" as a recent theological movement within the Catholic Church that has sought to counter the influence of liberal feminist theologians. She takes note of the fact that the new feminist theological contribution overturns the liberal feminist monopoly on discussions about Catholic women by espousing a more "typical" Catholic perspective that is at the same time being developed and promoted by highly educated women within academia. As well, and more significantly, Beattie sees the new feminists as posing a serious challenge to a variety of liberal feminist assumptions.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, Beattie sees much that is problematic in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 233.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 25-26.

the new feminist line of thinking. She finds that the practical application of their theological reasoning results in contradiction and distortion, and that this distortion has the harmful effect of explicitly denying the sacramental potential of the female body. Once again, in other words, sacramentality rears its head as both the problem-point and the means by which to remedy what Beattie refers to, in her 2003 essay “The Baptism of Eros,” as the new feminist “doctrinal cul-de-sac.”<sup>31</sup>

As a move away from liberal feminist political rhetoric, Beattie in particular finds the attention paid by new feminists to the body to be a positive source for relationship with God and for theological reflection. She welcomes this renewed appreciation of embodied faith and sees in it the potential for a less rigid understanding of what it is to live as a participant in the sacramental community of Catholic believers. Unfortunately, Beattie is led to feel that it is precisely in the theological working out of this “return to the body” that new feminist theology comes to reaffirm biological essentialisms.<sup>32</sup> Beattie turns to Balthasar in order to get to the heart of the matter in this case, both because she understands him to be the dominant voice espousing the Catholic neo-orthodox trend in theology, which includes the new feminist movement, and because his work exhibits this tension between a gendered fluidity in terms of sacramental performance and a deterministic reading of embodied existence.

In Balthasar’s work Beattie sees a retrieval of “pre-modern Catholic theology” where “concepts of masculinity and femininity are used to position the human and divine in relation to one another, and only secondarily do they acquire anthropological

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<sup>31</sup> Tina Beattie, “The Baptism of Eros,” *Theology & Sexuality* 9.2 (March 2003): 173. N.B. The same phrase has also been borrowed for the title of this section.

<sup>32</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 112.

significance with regard to human sexual relationships.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, Beattie sees a degree of fluidity between gendered categories in the language that Balthasar uses, which has the potential, in her understanding, to rectify the heterosexual binary that is enforced by the Vatican’s teaching on the priesthood, and reinforced by liberal feminism. However, Beattie judges Balthasar and his new feminist disciples to have curbed the inherent potential (especially for women) in this turn to a pre-modern Catholic form of gendered play as he “imports into this pre-modern theological scenario a thoroughly modern understanding of a fundamental physical and psychological difference between the sexes” on the basis of which he “freezes the dramatic interplay of gendered relationships.”<sup>34</sup>

For Beattie, the most bizarre result stemming from this “freezing” of gendered relationships is to be found in the new feminist rhetoric regarding the priesthood. Beattie cites Balthasar’s appeal to the bride-bridegroom metaphor—which the Vatican itself espouses in *Inter Insigniores* as a justification for the male-only priesthood—as an example of this “freezing.”<sup>35</sup> In this line of thinking, during the mass the priest acts as a symbol of Christ (bridegroom) and as the representative of the Church to Christ (bride). In other words, in the sacramental performance men play the part of both male *and* female. The harmful and disturbing consequence of the doctrinal weight given to this metaphorical language is that women are erased entirely from this theological scheme. As Beattie describes, woman is “reduce[d]... to the level of mute animality, while the male body appropriates ‘her’ language to determine ‘his’ identity as woman and Bride in

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Inter Insigniores*, Article 47-53, in Halter, 192.

relation to a masculine God, incarnate in a male Christ.”<sup>36</sup> By using this gendered, metaphorical language, and then deriving sex-specific doctrinal formulations that have sacramental implications from this language, Beattie sees that Balthasar and other supporters of the male priesthood end up relegating women to the status of the “unredeemed sexual other of the Catholic faith.”<sup>37</sup>

Without any role for women to play in the performance of the mass (other than being parodied by the male-figured-as-female priest), Beattie sees the new feminists as having “implicitly constructed the Mass as a symbolic act of sexual intercourse among men.”<sup>38</sup> Of course, as rigid defenders of the heterosexual binary, new feminists would likely chafe at Beattie’s reading of this scenario, perhaps countering with the fact that the priest never actually *becomes* female. Beattie anticipates such a defensive reaction and sums up the inherent tension in the new feminist position as follows:

the Christian dread of homoeroticism means that if the male love affair with Christ is to find erotic expression, it must use the language of heterosexual love even if, for example with the poetry of St John of the Cross, homosexual desire might lie very close to the surface. The celibate man therefore needs the female body to provide metaphors for his love of Christ. She is the raw material for his spiritual fantasies, the tabula rasa on which he inscribes his projected desires. But he must also resist the real female body as that which can lure him away from Christ through the arousal of sexual rather than spiritual desire. So we have in the Christian faith a separation between the female flesh identified with carnal lust, and the romantic ideal of feminine desire identified with the man’s spiritual relationship with Christ.<sup>39</sup>

The complex role played by “woman” in the Christian tradition as described above—to say nothing of the complex role which this also requires of man—lends an urgency to Beattie’s question regarding the significance of performative metaphors and the degree to

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<sup>36</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 149.

<sup>37</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 158.

<sup>38</sup> Beattie, “The Baptism of Eros,” 173.

<sup>39</sup> Beattie, “The Baptism of Eros,” 170.

which they should (or shouldn't) correspond to the biology of the participants in question. If a priest must be male in order to act as the female bride of Christ, but also must be male in order to act as the representative of Christ, what Beattie seeks to discover is why it is that only in the latter case (when the male performs as male) that the gendered performance requires male biology, whereas the female performance is actually understood to require male biology. In other words, if men get the opportunity to play women, why shouldn't women have the opportunity to play men? And if women cannot play men, what do they contribute to the sacramental performance of the mass?

The confusion that arises in trying to sift through the metaphorical and performative language that Balthasar—as does Butler—uses, especially when considered in light of the embodied experience of human individuals, leads Beattie to suggest that underlying this new feminist theology is a deep fear of female sexuality. As indicated in chapter two, Butler's dismissal of the harmful effects of this language stems from her understanding that the bride-bridegroom metaphor acts as a theological explanation for a previously existing practice.<sup>40</sup> For Beattie, however, this dismissive attitude toward the power of language and theology fails to take on the deep roots of the fear of women in the Catholic tradition, as well as the way in which this underlying fear impacts Catholic practice and human identities. Again in her essay entitled "The Baptism of Eros," Beattie suggests that from its earliest days in contact (and competition) with pagan goddess religions, the Church faced a female rival which, she suggests, it "rejected rather than baptized."<sup>41</sup> The long-standing implications of the Church's fear and rejection of female sexuality (initially in the form of pagan goddess religion) has been the denial of

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<sup>40</sup> Butler, *The Catholic Priesthood*, 50; 83-84.

<sup>41</sup> Beattie, "The Baptism of Eros," 167.

sacramental significance to the female body. Beattie sees the new feminists as having reaffirmed this denial in the rejection of women's ordination, and in the theological explanation given for this rejection. Beattie references a particularly disturbing version of the Catholic theological narrative from Balthasar in order to prove her point:

In becoming flesh, the Word became feminine, sought to give shape and form to the feminine, but 'she' would not accept him. When her flesh devoured the Word, the Father intervened...enabl[ing] the Son, through the act of the most radical filial obedience to the Word, to achieve ultimate victory by resuscitating him and releasing him from the desire of the flesh and the *vagina dentata* of hell.<sup>42</sup>

This passage—although it is Beattie's paraphrasing of Balthasar's version of the cosmic theological struggle between the male God and the female other—is certainly indicative of the way in which, even if only metaphorically, masculinity is associated with divinity and femininity is associated with bodiliness. (And it is evident in this version of events which of the two reigns supreme.)

It is at this point that Balthasar's influence on the theology of Butler is particularly evident. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Butler anchors the requirement for the male priesthood in the person of Christ. She suggests that both men and women are the inferior human partner vis-à-vis the superior divine partner, meaning that they are both representatives of "feminized humanity in relation to Christ's presumably superior masculinized divinity."<sup>43</sup> Within this "feminized humanity," however, Butler identifies the human male as more closely resembling the "masculinized divinity" of Christ, and therefore as being better able to represent Christ in the priestly role. This means, in the language of Balthasar, that it is precisely the embodied maleness of men that makes them the better representatives of feminized humanity.

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<sup>42</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 191.

<sup>43</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 138.

The issue becomes even more muddled when one considers the fact that Balthasar “repeatedly refers to God’s activity in creating and sustaining life in maternal terms.”<sup>44</sup> For Beattie this “poses a fundamental question to the whole logic of his argument regarding the essential masculinity of Christ and the priesthood.”<sup>45</sup> In choosing to employ metaphorical language and at certain times insist that it have biological implications, while at other times insisting that it should not, Beattie thinks that Balthasar and the new feminists who adopt his thinking shirk the coherent end result of their theological reasoning, which is that gendered play should remain just that. This means that if God can be spoken of as male and female, and if priests can be figured as male and female, then Catholic believers, who themselves embody a variety of expressions of what it means to be gendered as male and/or female, should bring harmony to the lived sacramental experience of the Catholic community by sharing in the performance of a variety of roles.

For Beattie, this shift would be best expressed in the recognition of the mass as a “performance of the Church’s unchanging hope, on a world stage of multiple narratives, plots, themes and possible endings, in which the drama fluctuates scene by scene between comedy and tragedy.”<sup>46</sup> Instead, the Church’s failure to include women in the sacramental performance of the mass limits the range of acceptable meanings, experiences, and reactions to the mass in such a way that it disavows embodied femaleness. Yet Beattie sees potential in the new feminist theological vision in the notion of gendered play that is both embodied and malleable. Although this notion operates at a highly theoretical level, and Balthasar and the new feminists argue that it is to remain

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<sup>44</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 249.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 292.

subservient to the current doctrine of a male-only priesthood, Beattie sees their linguistic gymnastics as a critical wedge from which to break open the discourse about gender in the Catholic tradition. Beattie judges Balathasar and the new feminists to have curbed the implications that their metaphorical language could have on Catholic practice and believers, so that the theoretical discourse about gendered play could be implemented at the grassroots level. In other words, once the theological foundations have been worked out, Beattie argues that this turn to the body, if it remains open-ended, is the ground from which to build a solid, doctrinally-rooted argument for female participation in the Church's sacramental life. Ironically, then, although in the end they invoke gendered categories that are fixed, it is the new feminists and not the liberal feminists who lead Beattie to see the potential in Catholicism for a shattering of the heteronormative hierarchically gendered binary.

### **Recovering Sacramentality**

It is clear that for Beattie the Catholic Church is in need of moving beyond the present range of available theological discourses as encountered in liberal feminist and new feminist lines of thought. For Beattie this requires taking stock of the resources available within the Catholic tradition and the insights (both positive and negative) gleaned from her theological predecessors in order to address the ways in which the tradition is wounded and has wounded. Primarily, this entails engaging actively and openly with difference, both in a theoretical and a worldly context; embracing Catholic language, in all of its mystical potential, in order to step outside of the limitations imposed on Catholic expression by the theological status quo; and recovering and



expanding the lived experience of sacramentality, which for Beattie is the key to remedying the Church's various ailments, especially its conflicted approach to women.

In the "Introduction" to *New Catholic Feminism* Beattie voices her own doubts about the potential for initiating positive change in the Church by means of plunging into the depths of the Catholic theological tradition, especially where women are concerned.

She admits:

Sometimes during the last year I have wondered what I was doing, huddled over my desk exploring the dense, dark regions of Hans Urs von Balthasar's theology and psycholinguistic theory... Surely it would have been better and more profitable to rush off and write a book about feminism, theology and politics than to plough on with this intellectual struggle to produce a book that might at first glance seem far removed from and perhaps even irrelevant to the most urgent questions that Catholic women face in the contemporary world?<sup>47</sup>

In the end, however, Beattie concludes that it is only through the sort of close reading and deconstruction that she attempts that "the misogyny that forms a dark undercurrent to the Catholic theological tradition" can be understood and challenged.<sup>48</sup> Without forcing new feminist theology to confront the challenges of psycholinguistic theory, Beattie thinks that liberal feminist theologians have let the former off the hook. She seeks to attack the theological language of thinkers like Butler and Balathasar directly because it is in the assumptions and implications of their language, often far below the surface, that Beattie finds the locus of both the power and the danger of these theological positions, especially as pertaining to women.

Beattie's work is intended as a springboard for a revitalized Catholic feminism that is neither of the liberal feminist, nor the new feminist, variety. She positions herself instead in the middle, which she says allows her "to take up a position in the space of

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<sup>47</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 2-3.

<sup>48</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 3.

conflict and mutual resistance between feminist theory and Catholic theology.”<sup>49</sup> By occupying this middle space Beattie consciously interacts with a plurality of voices. From the very outset this distinguishes her from both Ruether and Butler, as they tend to limit their discourses to the confines of their respective ideological frameworks. In my reading both Ruether and Butler favour a dismissive reading of their detractors (including each other) over serious engagement with them. Beattie instead wants to shatter the boundaries of acceptable discourse about gender and Catholicism, referring to her middle ground as the “broken middle,” as opposed to the “holy middle.” Unlike Ruether and Butler, in her assessment, Beattie aims for “broken” over “holy” because she understands the latter as “a hypothetical space of unbounded peace which is in fact a space of totalizing power, because it refuses to accommodate the imperfection inherent in the necessary institutions and laws of society.”<sup>50</sup> By positioning herself in this broken, imperfect middle—heretofore a Catholic no man’s land, it would seem—Beattie is intentionally trying to make room for the lived experience of Catholics “on the ground,” which inevitably entails change, imperfection, and compromise, but also beauty, revelation, and love.

The noble undertaking that Beattie initiates in *New Catholic Feminism* is almost overwhelming in scope including as it does the voices of liberal feminists and new feminists as well as psycholinguists, philosophers, postmodern theorists, and others. What is noticeably lacking, however, is the presence of the Catholic population that stands entirely outside of the theological-academic sphere. In other words, just as Beattie critiques Ruether and the liberal feminists for engaging in academic theology that is largely inaccessible to the majority of Catholic women, Beattie’s own multi-vocal world

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<sup>49</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

continues to silence those most in need of being heard, meaning, in my view, that under- (or un-) represented communities remain just that. Perhaps, as Beattie says, this book which at first glance seems far removed from the lives of Catholic women might in fact provide a toolkit with which these women might effectively articulate their distinct Catholic identities. Something seems at least slightly amiss about this project, just the same, when Beattie herself acknowledges that “there needs to be a much greater recognition by feminist theorists of the extent to which religion continues to shape the lives of the majority of the world’s women.”<sup>51</sup> Of course, having already pointed to the scope of Beattie’s project, which is a possible deterrent for readers even slightly unfamiliar with the postmodern academic world, it seems a lot to ask of Beattie (and of the reader) that she expand her efforts even further in order to include “the majority of the world’s women.”

This leads me to conclude that Beattie’s inspiring theoretical work requires as a “next step” the empowerment of Catholic women who to date remain largely voiceless. If this process of opening space for these women’s voices hopes to facilitate dialogue between women from different spheres and different ideological backgrounds, it also requires that such spaces be more representative and inclusive than the few efforts in this direction that I have encountered, such as Elizabeth Johnson’s *The Church Women Want* project (see page fifty-three), which was comprised of almost entirely white academic women. Likewise with the group Women for Faith and Family which—as important as the organization may be for providing a voice and a space for women who subscribe to a certain ideology (see page fifty-five)—has set itself up in opposition to (and not in conversation with) women of different theological and/or political stripes. As a model for

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<sup>51</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 29.

this sort of engagement, Beattie suggests that “it is in acknowledging our differences that feminists might enter into dialogue and debate” and she emphasizes that “this entails speaking from a particular position which does not seek to colonize or speak for those who occupy other contexts and positions, whether these are secular or religious.”<sup>52</sup> In the process of researching the place of Catholic women in the contemporary Church, however, such a representative and inclusive model for dialogue has yet to come to my attention.

For Beattie the “broken middle” within Catholicism requires not simply a plurality of voices but also an expansion of the language that those voices are free to use in their own expressions of Catholic life and faith. Neither the often sterile, politically-oriented language of the liberal feminists nor the hierarchically-embedded language of the new feminists will do for Beattie. Instead, she appeals to what she suggests is a neglected resource within the Catholic tradition, namely, the language of mysticism. Of course, in the development of a Christian feminist consciousness the female medieval mystics have proven to be a popular example of the presence of a “women’s spirituality” that was both prominent and (supposedly) alternative. The problem with the framework in which female mysticism is unearthed as a resource within feminist circles is that it relegates the mystical experience, and the language it entails, to the past. Instead of serving as toolkit from which to borrow in order to speak about God and faith, for example, female mysticism has often served the purposes of academic forms of feminism. In this context measuring the presence of women on a historical timeline is prioritized above immersing oneself in the beauty and the power of the experience that such mystics evoke. The latter alternative is one that Beattie suggests has not only the

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<sup>52</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 11.

potential to enrich the faith of Catholics today (and not merely women), but also the potential to break open the tradition as a whole to a range of expressions and experiences that lie dormant within its walls.

It is apparent from the very first pages of *New Catholic Feminism* that Beattie herself is committed to the use of Catholic language. She embraces the language of the mystics as well as that of Catholic doctrine, but she does so in such a novel way that she broadens the scope of Catholic language from within. In so doing she addresses what she perceives to be the liberal feminist weakness (i.e. being “light” on doctrine) while also reclaiming doctrine from the new feminist theological vision wherein doctrinal language is much less fluid than Beattie envisions it. By consciously muddying the waters of acceptable Catholic discourse, Beattie acts out her own program for change in the Church.

Beattie roots herself in the Catholic tradition, but does so in such a way as to emphasize the breadth and depth of the tradition, which she wants to reclaim and rejuvenate. She employs much of the same language that the new feminists use in opposition to liberal feminist Catholics (whom the former criticize for having stripped the tradition of its linguistic trappings, among other things). For example, in the same breath as describing “the exuberant excesses of mourning and celebration that surrounded the dying of John Paul II,” Beattie ponders the “carnival of love and desire, of yearning and faith, erupting in the gaps of Catholicism.”<sup>53</sup> She then goes on to ask: “How many legitimate and forbidden sexual encounters sought to express a hope beyond death, enigmatically glimpsed in the stubborn charisma of a man whose faith at the end

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<sup>53</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 5-6.

disrupted all the boundaries he so vigorously sought to defend?”<sup>54</sup> For Beattie it is clear that faith, sex, and death are intimately intertwined in what it is to be human, and thus in the lived experience of Catholics. The compartmentalization of eroticism and doctrine leads our expressions and experiences of faith, by extension, to be impoverished. To overcome this impoverishment, Beattie advocates “the rediscovery of the language of grace.”<sup>55</sup> For her this requires “acknowledging the revelatory potential of the body in relation to God”—in other words, the body as the site of sacramental performance and significance, and as an instrument of God-given grace.<sup>56</sup>

Beattie suggests that the legacy of the Western philosophical tradition in its construction of the subject as male has led liberal feminists to be wary of thinking of God in gendered terms. And Beattie agrees with their desire to challenge the identification of God with man. However, she suggests that they fail to see that thinking of God in gendered terms might yield some desirable possibilities. For Beattie this potential is to be arrived at first “by acknowledging the divine mystery concealed behind the patriarchal masks of the theological tradition,” followed by the creation of “a clearing in the language in which the being of woman might at last speak from the site of a body which until now has been silenced and excluded from manifesting its meaning as an unveiling of Being in the world.”<sup>57</sup> In other words, and again hearkening back to the language of the mystics, Beattie is proposing a language in which God is both intimately familiar and incomprehensibly other. Instead of Ruether’s notion of God as the “deep ontological structures that underlie human and all living beings,” where God is abstracted to the level

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<sup>54</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 6.

<sup>55</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 58.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

of an intellectual construct, Beattie wants to embrace the passionate encounter of an enraptured believer in the embrace of God, or, at the very least, something a little more personal than a “deep ontological structure.”<sup>58</sup> This means that Ruether has the right impulse in wanting to root out patriarchy, but that she does so at the expense of meaning. Beattie therefore attempts to adopt the same critical impulse but infuses it with a deep commitment to Catholic doctrine.

For Beattie the malleability of Catholic tradition and language, especially when one begins to consider the incarnation, yields remarkable potential for experiencing and describing human encounters with God in personal terms, and even for speaking of God in gendered terms, so that God is both (and neither) the “mad lover” encountered by Catherine of Siena and an “utterly unknowable” other only glimpsed at in the created world as for Thomas Aquinas.<sup>59</sup> By emphasizing the maleness of Jesus (and therefore of the priest) Beattie judges the new feminists, in a different way than the liberal feminists, to have limited the range of expressions for encountering and describing God. In a critical move that challenges the new feminists, she declares that “the potential of the Catholic understanding of gender lies not in its sexual dualities but in its capacity to open up a dazzling proliferation of relational performances in the gap between male and female.”<sup>60</sup> This potential is most apparent, for Beattie, in the performative context of the mass, wherein, according to the new feminist framework, men play at being women. For Beattie this framework invites the reciprocal exchange in which women also play at being men, which has the result that the hierarchical duality of the sexes is shattered in order to

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<sup>58</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 223.

<sup>59</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 47.

make way for a gendered play that welcomes both men and women, without requiring that men act only as men (or as women, for that matter) and vice versa.

Of course, the form of gendered play that Beattie describes in the context of the mass presupposes a variety of concrete changes in the liturgical life of the Church, most significantly in the form of the ordination of women. The necessity of women's ordination becomes increasingly apparent for Beattie as she delves deeper into new feminist theology, only to find that she comes up empty-handed in her search to find a place for women in the sacramental life of the Catholic community, other than insofar as they are parodied by men acting as women. This troublesome discovery leads Beattie to suggest that the concretization of the sacramental role of the priest in terms of biology implies the fallacy that men really can image God or Jesus. It also pretends at being a timeless truth when in fact it is a thoroughly modern argument. In countering this rhetoric Beattie corroborates the emphasis of the liberal feminist theologians on the fact that both men and women are "equally made in the image of God."<sup>61</sup> But whereas Ruether, for example, takes equality in the image of God to mean equal access to priestly ordination, Beattie seeks to paint a more nuanced picture of the potential for human interaction with God.

In this vein, alongside the equal capacity of humans—male *and* female—to image God, Beattie suggests that the Church is in need of recognizing that, at the same time, "neither is capable of imaging God."<sup>62</sup> By holding in tension the sameness and the difference of humanity in relation to God, Beattie characterizes the liturgy as an opportunity to "recognize the significance of both male and female bodies for the

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<sup>61</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 123.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



presencing of God in creation and worship, in the service of a dynamic sacramental analogy that would move restlessly, creatively, between the affirmation that God is both male and female and that God is neither male nor female.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, the liturgy serves as an opportunity to “play at what we are not” but, as embodied creatures, this play is also firmly anchored in what we are.<sup>64</sup> For this reason Beattie suggests that, inevitably, “in the drama of the liturgy, our sexuality becomes part of the performance.”<sup>65</sup> For her this is not something to be reasoned away or ignored, but something to be embraced in the “refiguration of Catholic sacramentality and symbolism” that she proposes.<sup>66</sup> Beattie’s notion of sacramentality implies an appreciation of the mass as a performance of the Christian narrative in which human bodies interact with each other and with God in ways that are transformative. Yet her vision also extends to daily life in such a way that the whole of creation is shown to exist in this sort of tension, between identity with God and difference from God, so that the lived experience of a human individual is simultaneously experienced as both mundane and mysterious.

Although the new feminists emphasize the embodied nature of liturgical performance—not so much the notion of a performance that embraces human sexuality, however—Beattie challenges their assertion that a priest must be male in order to adequately represent Christ. She suggests that that this requirement prioritizes Jesus’ sacrifice as the primary event and source of meaning in the mass. Not only does this view restrict the experience of believers, but it also presents a selective version of the Christian narrative of salvation. Instead, she affirms: “The Mass is a dramatic performance that is

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<sup>63</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 127.

<sup>64</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 310.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 14.

at one and the same time an incarnation, a crucifixion, a resurrection, a birth, a wedding and a feast. We come to Christ with different needs at different times, and each time we experience a different facet of the marriage between the human and the divine in him and therefore in ourselves.”<sup>67</sup> To continue to support an all-male priesthood is to deny this variety of experience, all of which forms a part of Catholic tradition, and which includes the reality of variation in terms of gender and sexuality. In Beattie’s estimation, any attempt to curb the variety of human expression is to deny the fact that the lived experience of men and women “is not constituted by stable polarities of masculinity and femininity but by the dynamics of difference and desire which suggest to us something of the nature of our relationship to God.”<sup>68</sup>

Not only is the ordination of women a logical result of the recognition of the gendered “dynamics of difference” and the part that this difference plays in the expanded Christian narrative that Beattie describes but, as far as she is concerned, it is also the logical result of the new feminist understanding of the play in which the priest is engaged during the mass, where he both represents Christ to the community (as a male) and the community to Christ (as a female). Beattie suggests that this male-only play would be completed by the presence of a female priest who is equally at play. In denying the possibility that women might also play in this way, Beattie says that the Church promotes an “assymetrical essentialism” that is reliant “upon a philosophical claim that is insupportable in terms of the Christian understanding of God and the human made in the image of God: the identification of women with humanity and man with God.”<sup>69</sup> For Beattie this identification is problematic for many reasons, not least of all because it

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<sup>67</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 300-301.

<sup>68</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 127.

<sup>69</sup> Beattie, “The Baptism of Eros,” 174; *New Catholic Feminism*, 309.

appeals to the incarnation of Jesus as a man in order to suggest that men better image God. By looking to the incarnation in order to justify the male priesthood, she suggests that the new feminists overlook the role of Mary in the incarnational process; a role that positions her, according to Beattie, as one who is “essential to the world’s redemption and to the fulfillment of its purpose.”<sup>70</sup> Continuing to work the new feminist logic against itself, Beattie points to the fact that in being born a human male Jesus necessarily took on his mother’s flesh, meaning that “the maternal flesh...becomes inseparable from God in Christ.”<sup>71</sup>

Furthering this line of thinking, Beattie develops upon the idea that the role of Mary in a Catholic context provides a powerful justification for women’s ordination. She states:

If Mary had conceived of Christ sexually, then ultimately it would have been a man’s consent, not a woman’s, that was needed for the incarnation. But the fact that no male mediation or intervention was needed has profound implications, not least for a theology of priesthood that says a man always has to mediate between humankind and God. If Mary’s ‘yes’ was enough to incarnate Christ in her body, a woman’s prayers of consecration ought to be enough to incarnate him in bread and wine.<sup>72</sup>

Beattie is suggesting, in fact, that not only the new feminist theology of symbolic representation but also the Catholic doctrine of the incarnation stakes a claim on a female priesthood. If the Christian narrative as connected to the mass is expanded in such a way that the sacrificial element is joined together with the incarnation and the resurrection—as it should be, according to Beattie—then a “maternal priesthood” functions in such a

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<sup>70</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 281.

<sup>71</sup> Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 282.

<sup>72</sup> Tina Beattie, Interview by Rupert Shortt, “Feminist Theology,” in *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 202.

way as to complete the Christian narrative while at the same time allowing for Catholic women to actively participate in the sacramental life of the Church.

### **Final Thoughts**

Beattie offers a startlingly new perspective for Catholic women to consider in her theological discourse. In her efforts to root her theology in Catholic tradition and in what she identifies as the pressing need for the Church to identify a sacramental role for women Beattie answers both liberal feminists and new feminists alike. In order to do so her theological discourse operates primarily at a theoretical level, meaning that its implications for Catholics on the ground have yet to be worked out or implemented extensively. I believe that she presents the most compelling reasoning to date in support of women's ordination within the Catholic Church and if she is taken seriously by the scholars and theologians with whom she engages I see the potential for just the sort of serious and respectful grappling with the teachings and tradition of the Catholic Church that could launch the Church down a new and exciting path. The transition from intellectualized theological argumentation to a change in practice and doctrine, particularly in regards to women's ordination, will certainly not come easily. Beattie's revisiting of Catholic tradition from a place of love and respect and her attention to the variety and ambiguity present in the tradition offers Catholic believers a model for a renewed appreciation of their tradition. And it is in this spirit of love and respect that I envision change taking hold at the grassroots level. By holding in tension the liberal feminist commitment to calling the Church to account for its history of misogyny and women's oppression while also prioritizing a commitment to Catholic tradition and sacramentality, in terms of theology and embodied experience, Beattie succeeds in

drawing from the likes of both Ruether and Butler in order to come to her own broken middle ground.

## Epilogue

We have discovered that Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sara Butler represent two alternate visions of women's roles in the Catholic Church. The goal of this project has been to examine not only their oppositional views, but to use them as representatives of two different perspectives that very often exist in tension within the Church. It has been my goal to consider whether there might yet be a means to establish some common ground among these different perspectives. Looking in the cracks and spaces of their theological reflections, in other words, what do these two "sides" hold in common, and how can their shared commitments serve to bridge the political divide?

The answer at base seems to be a deep and abiding sense of their place within the Catholic tradition, as women, and the unfailing notion that they are created and loved by God. Can we frame those commonalities, that sense of belonging to the Catholic faith, in such a way that the needs of Catholic laity, especially though not exclusively women, are taken seriously, actively addressed, and integrated into the liturgical life of Catholic communities? In my reading, framing the issue in these terms means bracketing, though not abandoning, the debate over women's ordination, a debate that we have seen merely entrenches two fixed political positions. Instead, I have suggested, in response to Tina Beattie's analysis, that richer and more dynamic movement could take place through deeper engagement with Catholic sacramentality. How then to undertake such a project?

At this point I offer an initial proposal, emerging from my analysis, for a curriculum designed (initially) for local, small-scale women's discussion groups. Why women? If the numbers cited by Peter Steinfels in *A People Adrift* are correct, as of 2003,

in North America, “[m]ore than 80 percent of lay parish ministers are women.”<sup>1</sup> Steinfels also describes the reality that the majority of Catholic educators in America are women. In fact, he points out that many of these female educators, when asked, “identified the church’s teaching accurately but disagreed with it.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Angela Bonavoglia in *Good Catholic Girls* (2005) cites a variety of statistics that point to women’s interest in leadership in Catholic circles in the United States, including, for example, the fact that women “make up the majority of students—55 percent—in master’s programs in nonordained ministerial leadership.”<sup>3</sup> All this goes to show that many Catholic women in North America would likely be well-equipped and interested in organizing, facilitating, or simply participating, in such discussions. I imagine that these discussions would be more productive if initiated at the local level so that they might remain closely attached to Catholic communities and at the same time removed from the reach of institutionalized organization.

The presence of so many educated Catholic women who, as Steinfels suggests, may not agree with the Church’s official stance on issues such as women’s ordination, but who would likely be conversant with Church tradition, appears to me to be the most compelling source from which to draw candidates for leading such groups. These numbers also confirm just how much of the Catholic tradition—at least in North America—rests in women’s hands. If the Church is to be revitalized in this context, women will surely play an integral part. It only makes sense then that women could initiate and support groups designed to enrich their relationships with other Catholic

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<sup>1</sup> Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 35.

<sup>2</sup> Steinfels, *A People Adrift*, 217.

<sup>3</sup> Angela Bonavoglia, *Good Catholic Girls: How Women are Leading the Fight to Change the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 179.

women in order to enliven their religious faith and experiences. It is my impression that such discussions would be more successful in establishing common ground if they were to—at least temporarily—sideline the issue of women’s ordination. That said I see the commitment to women’s ordination as a critical implication of such discussions. Thus I envision those who facilitate such groups as supporters of women’s ordination—or at least as committed to more expansive and institutionally recognized leadership roles for women. Ideally, such discussion groups would equip participants with a richer sense of their tradition, beyond a history of Catholic dogma, opening onto other “unexpected” aspects of their tradition, including mystical thought, reflections on sacramentality and Marian devotion, and also the opportunities to address their spiritual needs and concerns.

Such discussion groups would certainly move in directions that I cannot forecast (indeed, they may not facilitate women’s ordination)—proliferating into larger mixed groups perhaps, groups for laity and clergy, into discussions about sexuality and marriage, or about prayer and pilgrimage—but that is precisely the power of creating a religious space, open and non-threatening, for people of different political backgrounds and life experiences. For such discussions to be dynamic they must comprise a space where people feel safe and empowered to extend themselves beyond their comfort zone in the hopes of reaping deeper spiritual and personal rewards. Such efforts will be difficult, surely, but it is my conviction that they could also be deeply rewarding.

It is time that the Church recognizes the gifts that Catholic women have to offer if this divide is to be eroded. The Catholic faith is big enough to encompass left and right; it is big enough to incorporate, even if in tension, divergent viewpoints and political



opinions; it is big enough to allow women (and men) from various backgrounds to stand together as people of faith who want a more profound and richer religious experience.

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