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Women in a Divided Church: Liberal and Conservative Catholic Women Negotiate Changing Gender Roles

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The Catholic Church in America is deeply divided, and gender issues (especially reproductive choice and women's ordination) have become a symptom of this division. This paper examines the language used by liberal and conservative Catholic women to talk about gender. It is argued that although similar divisions over gender exist within Protestantism and Judaism, Catholic women are in a unique position to confront them. Unlike conservative Protestants and Jews who have separated themselves from their more liberal counterparts by forming independent Evangelical and Orthodox denominations, conservative Catholics co-exist with liberals in the same church. The paper shows that being forced to confront those divisions has resulted in a tendency towards polarization on the one hand, and towards moderation on the other, both of which have important implications for the future of the Catholic Church.

Roman Catholicism in America is becoming a divided church. In the past, this division has usually been conceptualized as laity and women on the liberal side versus male leadership on the conservative side. There is thus a substantial body of literature on the growing division between the increasingly liberal American Catholic laity and the conservative Vatican bureaucracy (e.g., Bianchi and Ruether 1992; D'Antonio 1994; Greeley 1990; Hoge 1981; Seidler and Meyer 1989). Greeley noted as early as 1976 that the Catholic laity disagreed with their church on birth control. D'Antonio's (1994) review of more recent survey research suggests that a majority of Catholics disagree with their leadership on many other issues (e.g., mass attendance, abortion) that in the past were never questioned as requirements for being a good Catholic. D'Antonio shows that the number of Catholics disagreeing with their leaders is increasing, and that this finding holds even for committed Catholics (those who attend mass at least once a week). "The laity," as he puts it, "are developing an image of a good Catholic very much at variance with the traditional model set forth by the magisterium in Rome" (p. 384).

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There is also a large body of literature on the division between Catholic women and the men who lead their church. Many studies have explored dissatisfaction among Catholic women over their status in the Church (e.g., Browne and Lukes 1988; Greeley and Durkin 1984; Winter, Lummis, and Stokes 1994) and the growing feminist movement that has emerged in response (Farrell 1991; Weaver 1986). These studies suggest that gender issues have become key symptoms of division within the Catholic Church. Indeed, women's ordination and reproductive choice have become a kind of litmus test that distinguishes the more liberal laity, women in particular, from the more conservative male leadership.¹

More recently, however, sociologists have become interested in a growing conservative lay movement that includes many women. The most comprehensive study of Catholic conservatives is Weaver and Appleby's edited volume *Being right* (1995) in which they show that there is a significant movement of lay people who feel that the liberalization of their church, initiated by the Second Vatican Council, has gone too far. While some Catholic conservatives feel betrayed by their leadership and reject the council's reforms altogether, most conservatives believe that Vatican II was well-intentioned but has been misconstrued by liberal extremists to allow for a total disregard of church doctrine in favor of individual choice. Both types of conservatives have rallied around gender issues as symbols of loyalty to tradition (see also Cuneo 1989). In contrast to feminists who feel that establishing women's equality is a logical extension of Vatican II, conservatives see such a change as a challenge to the authority of the Church itself and hence as heresy. There is evidence then that the Church is divided not only vertically — between laity and leadership — but horizontally — between conservative and liberal members.

What impact does this latter division have on women in the Church? This question is an important one because gender issues have become such potent symbols of division, and it is women who are most directly affected by the way in which these questions are resolved. Yet we know very little about conservative Catholic women and their relationship to their more liberal counterparts. Studies of women in the pro-life movement (Klatch 1987; Luker 1984) tell us more about conservative Catholics' relationship with the larger culture than with other members of their church. Those studies that do focus on conservatives within the Church have other limitations. Cuneo (1989) does not look specifically at women. Weaver and Appleby's (1995) chapter on conservative Catholic women is an insider's perspective written by Helen Hull Hitchcock, founder of Women for Faith and Family, which outlines the goals and accomplishments of her organization. Neitz's (1987) study focuses on a charismatic community, which while traditional on gender issues, is viewed as controversial by many conservative Catholics. The purpose of this essay is to examine conservative Catholic women in the context in which they are most likely to be found — a parish in which conservatives constitute a minority of the

¹ There are some liberal clergy who — more or less openly — question the Vatican on women's issues, especially birth control (Greeley 1990) but most of the literature has focused on the conflict between feminists and conservative clergy.

membership — and to provide a sociological analysis of their relationship with other, more liberal Catholics.

METHODS

The database for this paper is part of a larger comparative ethnography of 75 conservative Christian and Jewish women, 27 of whom were Catholic.² Catholics were members of St. Joseph's, a parish of almost two thousand located in a Los Angeles suburb.³ The women ranged in age from 24 to 50, with an average age of 39. Eighty percent were white, the remainder were black or Mexican American. Most were college educated, but only a few had graduate degrees. About half of the respondents reported a family income between \$40,000 and \$70,000, a quarter between \$20,000 and \$40,000, and another quarter was split between those making less than \$20,000 and those making more than \$70,000 a year. Most (seventeen) were married; six were single, three were divorced, and one was widowed. Only eight of the women were homemakers, while nineteen worked, most of them full-time.⁴

The study draws on diverse sources: I analyzed church documents, engaged in two years of participant observation, and conducted in-depth personal interviews with all of the Catholic women. Analysis focused on the language women used to express their beliefs and feelings about themselves, their church, and the society around them as well as on observation of their involvement in the parish and their interaction with others. Because of the symbolic role that reproductive choice and women's ordination play in dividing liberal and conservative Catholics, particular attention was paid to women's feelings about these two issues and their involvement in related activities. I categorized the women as liberal or conservative based on their own self-identification and on where they located moral authority: a conservative Catholic is one who accepts the authority of the magisterium and feels that a good Catholic should be obedient to all church teachings; a liberal is one who questions the Church, locates authority in herself, and only selectively adheres to Catholic doctrine. Although there has been some debate about how the terms "conservative" and

² Because I was interested not only in Catholic women's opinions but in how they talk about gender, an ethnographic (qualitative) approach was more appropriate than a survey. Though ethnographies typically rely on a smaller sample, they have the advantage that we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the individuals studied: the subject is allowed to speak for herself and the researcher is able to observe the subject in the context of her daily life. As is evident in this study, this method reveals information that is often overlooked by survey research.

³ To protect privacy, the names of the church and its members have been changed.

⁴ According to a recent Gallup poll, 25% of U.S. Catholics are college graduates and another 26% have attended at least some college; 28% of U.S. Catholics reported an annual household income of more than \$50,000, 27% an income between \$30,000 and 49,000, 25% an income between \$15,000 and \$29,000, and 20% an income under \$15,000 (PRRC 1991). It thus appears that levels of income and education of the women at St. Joseph's were higher than for Catholics elsewhere in the U.S.; however, if we factor in that salaries and cost of living are higher in California, they are fairly representative of non-Hispanic Catholics in California.

"liberal" Catholic should be defined, the categories employed here are consistent with commonly used research indicators (see Cuneo 1988; Greeley 1991; Hunter 1991; Weaver and Appleby 1995).⁵ I do not claim that my sample is representative of all Catholic churches. However, I do think it mirrors divisions in the larger Church and thus raises important questions about contemporary American Catholicism.

FINDINGS

Although similar divisions over gender exist within Protestantism and Judaism, Catholic women are in a unique position to confront these divisions. In the conservative Protestant and orthodox Jewish communities I studied, most members designated themselves as conservatives. By contrast, the women I interviewed at St. Joseph's were almost evenly divided between liberals and conservatives — and liberals were in the majority. This was not for lack of trying to locate a conservative Catholic parish. St. Joseph's had been recommended to me by the archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Right to Life League as a church with many conservative Catholics, and according to survey data (Greeley 1991), the proportion of conservatives I found there was substantially higher than the proportion of conservatives in the U.S. Catholic population. The membership of St. Joseph's simply reflected the fact that, unlike conservative Protestants and Jews who have separated themselves from their more liberal counterparts by forming independent Evangelical and Orthodox denominations, conservative Catholics must co-exist with liberals in the same church.

There is a common perception that conservative Catholics are older and more active in their church than liberals. Thus I was surprised to find that women in the same age group, with equally intense religious commitments, could range from ultra-loyalty to Catholic doctrine to questioning and criticizing almost everything the Church says. Both liberals and conservatives felt alienated from each other (liberals told me that St. Joseph's "is too conservative," while conservatives complained that "too many people at St. Joseph's ignore church teachings"), yet neither side felt alienated enough to leave St. Joseph's and find a parish more closely aligned with their position. The need to co-exist resulted in two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, it created a high level of polarization among church members which I did not find in the Evangelical and Orthodox Jewish communities I studied. On the other hand, being forced to tolerate each other has had a moderating influence on both liberal and conservative Catholics. I will discuss both tendencies in turn.

⁵ The debate over the meaning of "conservative" and "liberal" has resulted in suggestions for new labels such as "traditionalist" (Marty and Appleby 1995), "orthodox" (Hunter 1991), or "revivalist" (Cuneo 1988) versus "progressivist" or "selective" Catholics. As Harper (1996) points out, all of these labels are problematic, not only because of the lack of consensus about what they mean, but also because they usually fail to distinguish between social and theological conservatism or liberalism which do not always coincide.

Polarizing Tendencies

All women in this study were asked questions about reproductive choice and women's ordination. While Evangelicals and Orthodox Jews often answered my questions by saying, "at our church/synagogue, we believe X," Catholic women rarely did. Instead both liberals and conservatives would preface their answers by statements such as "other people in our church think X but I feel Y." That is, women saw their own position as contrary to that of others.

Liberals would contrast their own position with church tradition or with the views of older women who followed that tradition. The following excerpts from interviews with liberal women illustrate this point. Of interest here is not the fact that liberals support women's ordination and reproductive choice (that is hardly surprising), but the way in which these women frame their position on these issues.

The issue of reproductive choice was framed as one of conflict, though it was not a conflict that aroused much emotion. Liberal women contrasted their acceptance of contraception not just with the hierarchy (as I had expected) but also with other laity. Linda, a married career woman, is a good example. When she told me that she uses birth control, she admitted (smiling) that other, more conservative Catholics

would probably be slapping me and my husband all over town because we don't have kids yet . . . but that is an area I've never agreed with. . . . I keep thinking, well, what if I brought a child into this world? I couldn't take care of it. I'd be so stressed out doing this and this and this, and commuting so far that maybe I'd become very ill. Well, what good am I for that child?

Linda stated her disagreement matter-of-factly; she and other liberals seemed fairly unconcerned about their conflict with church leadership and with more conservative members of their church.

By contrast, on the issue of women's ordination, conflict with others led to anger and resentment. Marie, a schoolteacher with three teenage children, is typical. Talking about her daughter's dream to become a priest, she said:

Catholicism is very, very man-based. Like my daughter couldn't serve as an altar-boy or altar-girl or whatever because they said it's just not done. I feel she's every bit as good as my son, and he's served as an altar-boy, you know, and the priest at our church did too. And they kept telling her, when she said, 'I want to do that too', 'I'm sorry, Sherrie, but it's just not done.' Wahoo! Because men run the church, the Pope is a man, the cardinals, the bishops, the priest is a man, everybody is a man! I think that we're all here to work together as equals, not men up there judging women down here.

I imagine that the reason women's ordination incites stronger emotions than contraception is that the latter can be quietly ignored while the former cannot. Whatever the reason, almost all of the liberal women at St. Joseph's expressed a sense of conflict over gender roles. They were keenly aware that their own view was at variance with their leadership or with more conservative women in their church, yet they were also convinced that the liberal view was right. Taking a

liberal view was seen as an authentic Catholic position, and the leadership was viewed as simply out of touch.

Conservative women were similarly conscious of conflict. Equating their own position with Catholic tradition, conflict for them was primarily with other women in their church, but also with liberal clergy. Conservative responses to my questions on the issues illustrate this point. Many conservative Catholic women self-consciously rejected the use of artificial birth-control, arguing that a Catholic must follow all the Church's rules. Yet they were very much aware that most Catholics do use birth control and that some priests condone that use. Beatrice, who has seven children, is representative of the conservative position.

I do believe in the somewhat old-fashioned idea of obedience to the Church's rule and what is considered orthodox teaching, what we call the magisterium of the Church, the teaching from the apostles. For example, when I got married and the question of all these kids coming along — for me it was a terrible struggle, 'cause I was from a more lenient sort of background. But when *Humanae Vitae* came out, I decided, well, it's not what I like, it's not what I want, but this is the will of the Church. . . . I could have ducked out of it, and many do. But it always came back to me that this is what we are being taught, this is the tradition, if I'm making an error in following this teaching, it's on the side of the good. If I set my will against it, actually that will be to my detriment, to the detriment of my marriage, my children. That was when it made me realize that I was trying to be a good Catholic, because this was a terrible struggle for me. If all your friends were intelligent women, and they decided, even if they were Catholic, that they wouldn't be so stupid as to have a bunch of kids, and they could justify it in many ways, and even Catholic priests were justifying it. There was a whole faction of people after Vatican II who were justifying contraception. But I could never bring myself to agree with them, because I realized that if the Church is to be the Church, we have a head, we have a Pope, and that's the crux of the difference between the Catholic belief (and that of other churches), and I wanted to remain true to the tradition of Catholicism.

I quote Beatrice in full because her comments reflect the kind of struggle experienced by many women in trying to define who they are, both as women and as Catholics. Beatrice and other conservative Catholic women are clearly aware of divisions within their church over contraception, yet, like their liberal counterparts, they are convinced that their position is the right one. Recognizing that their stand on birth control constituted the minority position even within their own church, conservative Catholic women nonetheless rejected the notion that the American laity is rebelling against an establishment that is out of touch with the realities of contemporary life. Rather, they saw themselves as the "real Catholics" who are protesting the attempt by liberal extremists to adapt their church to an increasingly secular and selfish society.

The question of women's ordination was also framed as one of conflict. Conservatives were very much aware that many Catholics support the ordination of women as priests and they attributed such support to the activism of a feminist minority. Barbara, a conservative Catholic homemaker, is representative of this view.

I think the women's movement has pushed too hard to get women ordained. . . . I don't see that as one of the major issues facing women. . . . I think women need to see that they already have a stronger role in the Church than most people believe. I'm lucky. Most people I know

at church are very, very involved, so they don't have any delusions that their voice doesn't count because they're female. They know that's ridiculous. They know that good priests listen to the women of their parish.

Barbara does not oppose women priests on theological grounds but because she feels it is not an important concern. Other conservatives did cite theological reasons for their opposition (e.g., that the priest must be male because he represents Christ and/or because of apostolic succession) and insisted that Catholic women would not have a problem with the tradition if it weren't for feminist agitation. While liberals like Marie saw themselves as rebels against a patriarchal hierarchy that does not represent most Catholic women, conservatives were protesting against a feminist laity that they perceived as similarly unrepresentative.

Both liberal and conservative Catholic women saw their own position, although currently embattled, as the one that represents the true church. This was particularly evident in comments about the bishops' letter on the status of women for which several focus groups had been held at St. Joseph's. Conservative women complained that a few disgruntled feminists were giving the bishops a false view of what most Catholic women want. At the same time, they were concerned that too many of their fellow Catholics were actually following this feminist advice and ignoring church doctrine on reproductive choice and other issues. In their view, disregard for Rome was undermining the very core that distinguished Catholics from Protestants and thus destroying Catholic identity. They were concerned that such watered-down Catholicism would come to be seen as the norm, while "real Catholics" such as themselves would be ignored. Liberals for their part were concerned that bishops would see conservative women as the norm. In their view, feminists have had relatively little impact on the Church hierarchy, and a vocal minority of conservatives is threatening to reverse what little progress has been made by pretending to speak for everyone. Anita, a middle-aged liberal, described a focus group she attended.

There were women from all over this area here, and I couldn't believe my ears when some of these women were talking about how women should be submissive and subservient. They believed that everything the Church said was gospel and they wouldn't question it. And they absolutely believed in no birth control, you know, nothing could be done for women but they shall have to suffer through it. I was disgusted! In fact, I didn't go back for the second session because I just couldn't believe it. They were putting all of this down as Catholic statistics, you know. 'This is what the Catholic women say, what they believe.' And I just don't agree. . . . I think feminists still have a long way to go in the Catholic Church.

Anita's comment illustrates just how deep the divisions between liberal and conservative Catholics are. The same values that are seen as symbols of one's true commitment to the Catholic Church by conservative women are rejected by liberals as not only mindless but unrepresentative of what being Catholic is really about. Both sides accuse the other of being un-Catholic: conservatives because liberals question the magisterium and want to make decisions for themselves, liberals because conservatives share the views of fundamentalists on many social issues. Comments such as "they might as well become Protestants"

were made more than once by both liberals and conservatives. Feeling alienated from what they perceived to be the norm, both liberals and conservatives gained support from participating in small faith communities or committees (Right to Life, feminist Bible study, etc.) which tended only to confirm their differences. Yet despite their misgivings, these Catholic women did not leave but chose to stay in their church.

We gain some insight into why liberal women remain in the Church from a recent study by Winter, Lummis, and Stokes (1994). Drawing on a nationwide survey of Catholics, Protestants, and other Christian denominations, they suggest that many feminists are deeply dissatisfied with their churches, but choose to remain *on their own terms*, often gaining support from women's spirituality groups that may or may not be formally associated with the denomination. As the authors put it, feminist church members are "defecting in place." Yet, as Schuessler-Fiorenza points out in her commentary at the end of the study, not all women's spiritual support groups are feminist. Indeed, my research at St. Joseph's suggests that a significant number are actually anti-feminist (e.g., women's Bible study groups specifically designed to combat the feminist interpretation promoted by some church members). I would like to suggest that in the case of the Catholic Church the metaphor of "defecting in place" applies not just to feminists alienated from a patriarchal institution, but to conservative women who feel that the majority of Catholics, including some clergy, have become too liberal. Defecting in place might be more broadly defined as retaining one's view of what it means to be Catholic even though that view is not normative in one's church. For liberal Catholic women this usually means defection from the norms established by church leadership, norms which in the case of St. Joseph's were accepted by a significant number of the laity as well. For conservative Catholic women, defection in place usually means standing up to large numbers of the laity who diverge from church authority. Both liberal and conservative defectors stay in the Church because they have a sense of ownership: conservatives to prevent the dissolution and disintegration of their church, liberals to promote the transformation of theirs.

Moderating Tendencies

There are deep divisions between Catholic women, yet at the same time interaction between liberals and conservatives has created forces of moderation that are often absent from Evangelical and Orthodox Jewish communities. Not being able to avoid each other, liberal and conservative Catholic women must come to terms with the existence of both feminist and anti-feminist strains in their church and in the process influence each other in ways that neither side has acknowledged. A good illustration of this mutual influence is the way in which liberals and conservatives respond to questions about the feminist promotion of women's ordination and reproductive rights.

Not surprisingly, many conservatives denounced feminism as anti-Catholic. Yet many conservative responses to my questions clearly reflected the influence of feminism. For example, many conservatives prefaced statements opposing

women's ordination by insisting that they are not against women's equality. Bridget, a mother active on the pro-life committee, is typical.

I'm not anti-woman, okay? I think equal pay for equal jobs, all of that stuff, that's okay . . . but I think there are things that we are suited for, that God gives us very definite gifts that can vary from person to person, but he also made men and women differently . . . Women have a more nurturing role . . . by and large, if a woman can, she should be a mother.

Similarly, it was often argued that women can't be priests not because they are less qualified but because they are more spiritual than men, or because God has given women a different way to express their spirituality: "men can't have babies, so they get to be priests."

Some conservative women went beyond supporting equality to argue that their traditional view was more in line with "real feminism" than the feminist movement itself. Such cooptation of feminism was especially evident in the language these women used to discuss abortion, a question which many women at St. Joseph's reformulated as an issue of women's empowerment. As Barbara put it:

I think women are going to do more to end abortion than men. People seem to think that this is a violation of women. That new Supreme Court nominee said, 'to keep women equal we must keep abortion legal.' I have no idea where they connect being equal to men. Men are not allowed to kill people, why should women be allowed to kill people? I don't understand that at all. I think women are going to end this. I don't think men are. When women begin to realize, 'this is not my body being flushed down the toilet, this is somebody else's,' and when women who already believe that realize, 'my voice is important,' then change will come.

Having children, in Barbara's view, was a special gift that women contributed to society. Yet like many other female contributions, that gift was not as valued by society as the achievements of men. To create a society that truly valued women, women must take the lead in ending practices, such as abortion, that clearly devalue the gift of childbirth. Fighting to restrict or prohibit abortion, then, is not a matter of punishing women for sexual irresponsibility but of empowering them to value themselves and what they have to give to others.

Barbara's argument against abortion contains at least two feminist themes: that women's contribution to society is not valued and that women need to empower themselves. Another common feminist theme was a call for respect of women's bodies. As Beatrice put it:

Women have to get in touch with their biological selves again. They are trying to deny that, which is a very strong part of us, and I think that's going to be key To kill your own child, with whatever rationale, a woman should feel that that's wrong. It's really a contradiction of something so basic, that that's going to hurt her terribly. . . . So it's really up to women to keep that alive, the sacredness of life. It is up to women, because men aren't going to do it. They don't have that sense, it's not within their body.

Conservatives acknowledged that disrespect for women's bodies had contributed to women's inequality, but they insisted that women's desire to be equal to men

had led them to buy into patriarchal norms that ultimately devalued women. The moral deterioration of American society, they felt, derives in part from male domination and an overemphasis of masculine characteristics and contributions such as competition and economic achievement. While more and more men have become obsessed with material production, women's biology keeps them in touch with the creation of life itself. It is up to women therefore to reverse the tide of moral decline in American culture.

How do we account for this curious mixture of feminist and traditionalist language? The cultural prestige of feminism is probably a factor, since the use of feminist rhetoric by religious conservatives has been observed in Orthodox Jewish and Evangelical communities as well (see Kaufman 1991; Stacey and Gerard 1990). An additional factor that may be unique to Catholics is conservative women's desire to reach out to their ideological opponents, to find common ground in their increasingly divided church. There seemed to be a similar desire among liberals, albeit to a lesser degree.⁶ Thus liberal responses to my questions about feminism reflected the impact of interaction with more conservative women, particularly on the issue of abortion. Though many liberals supported feminism and identified themselves as pro-choice, they also took pains to show that they agreed with basic Catholic teachings on abortion and had reservations about the feminist movement's support for it. Though liberal women did not wish to return to the days when abortion was illegal, they nonetheless claimed that abortion is morally wrong and should be discouraged. This more moderate position, they believed, is representative of the feelings of most Catholic women in America. Abortion on demand, by contrast, reflects the values of a small minority of *secular* (as opposed to Catholic) feminist leaders. Just as conservatives feared being stereo-typed as anti-equality, some liberals feared being labeled as anti-religious. By distancing themselves from secular feminists, liberals demonstrated their affinity with more conservative women in their church.

A good illustration of this kind of feminist-traditionalist double-speak is provided by Eileen's comments on abortion. Eileen, a single mother of two, voted pro-choice but claimed she did so to give women the opportunity to make a moral choice against abortion. In her view, making abortion illegal would take away that choice. Yet while choice is important, she also felt that "the women's movement has become too focused on the abortion issue." Just as Barbara softened her conservative stand on gender issues by providing evidence that she is not an "anti-woman" reactionary, Eileen modified her feminist position by insisting that she is not a secular feminist.

I'm very depressed about the women's movement because I don't think it's been successful. We still don't make what men make, and instead they're always pushing for abortion rights. It's almost like we've sold ourselves short. I look at women, you know, like my mom's seventy, I have relatives that are in their eighties and nineties, everybody is living, we're not dying at

⁶ The reasons for this asymmetry are unclear. Higher education (often associated with an embrace of feminism and rejection of tradition) was not a factor: there were no significant educational differences between liberal and conservative women. Involvement in the Church (often associated with traditionalism) was not a factor either: liberals attended church as frequently as conservatives.

35 anymore, and so to refuse to give up nine or ten months of your life to work out a situation that you've created — I really think women are better than that.

Eileen believed that when given the choice most women, especially Catholics, would choose to have their child. She and other self-described liberal Catholics were angry that "I have no place in the women's movement because I am pro-life." Taking for granted their legal choice to have an abortion, liberals, like the conservatives described above, argued that moral support for the pro-life position was more consistent with the feminist goal of promoting women's rights than the pro-choice position. They argued that feminist insistence on abortion rights may enhance women's upward mobility in the job market but does not challenge the underlying patriarchal structure of that market. Rather than pushing for abortion rights, Eileen and other liberal Catholics believed the feminist movement should encourage employers to provide livable solutions to women who want to work part-time and take care of their children — a proposal consistent with those made by the National Council of Catholic Bishops.

If we compare how liberals and conservatives at St. Joseph's felt about feminism, the difference in their outlook is one of degree. Both embraced some feminist ideas, yet both exhibited considerable ambivalence towards feminism. While conservatives rejected reproductive choice, they made feminist arguments to do so. While liberals accepted choice, they emphasized their concern for Catholic values: choice would force women to make a moral decision. The need to remain connected with others in their church caused both liberals and conservatives to see some truth in or at least adopt some of the language of the other side and thus move closer to the middle. An excellent example of the kind of moderating influence this liberal-conservative interaction has is a comment made by Rita, a conservative who chaired St. Joseph's Right to Life committee.

I'd like to make a comment about being a feminist. . . . The modern feminist movement, the feminist movement as we know it, emulates masculine qualities, masculine virtues and masculine values. It is *not* feminist, in that it does not emulate what's feminine. And I've always been frustrated and confused as to how someone can call themselves a feminist and then go out about trying to make themselves as masculine as possible, by trying to compete in the same job market as men, the same way, which was never something I admired, by defining reproductive freedom as meaning limiting or abolishing the whole notion of having children, by saying that reproductive freedom has to include annihilating one's child in order to compete. And that's what the feminist movement tells us, that if we're going to compete in the job market, that a woman has to be able to deny her reproductive nature by, if birth control doesn't work, by abortion. This is *not* to me what feminism is about.

Feminist means really emulating what's feminine, what is womanly, what is distinctly female, and taking those qualities and elevating them in society — so that they're acknowledged as equally important to what's masculine, so that motherhood isn't seen as a second-rate thing, motherhood is seen as what it really is: one of the most important jobs anyone could ever embark upon. . . . That's why I admire Mary. Mary was a woman who had a child against the odds. She wasn't a single mother, but she was technically an unwed mother who could have lost her life and said 'yes' anyway. That's really something I admire. Mary was a feminine woman, and yet she really packed the wallet. She had tremendous influence over her child, her husband, and she is respected and emulated in the Catholic Church. The Catholic

Church has one of the most positive feminine role models in existence on this planet, and I consider *that* to be feminist!

It is difficult to categorize Rita. Although she describes herself as conservative and fits the definition of a conservative I gave earlier, her traditionalism is moderated by her desire to reach out to liberals in her church and enlist them for the pro-life cause. On the one hand she embraces the traditional gender norms of her community, insisting that women are essentially different from men and elevating motherhood to one of women's highest callings. On the other hand, she departs quite radically from the patriarchal model in suggesting that Mary should be admired because she rejected the sexist values of her society and chose to be a single mother. Rita does not accept male-dominated society, but believes the world would be a better place if it were transformed according to feminine values. Clearly, Rita's outlook reflects both conservative and liberal influences.

IMPLICATIONS

I have argued that the divisions in American Catholicism have both a polarizing and a moderating impact on women in the Church. While the mix of liberals and conservatives will vary in each parish, the divisions I observed at St. Joseph's are present in other churches as well. What are the implications of this for the future of American Catholicism?

On the one hand, the polarization of Catholic lay women increases the ongoing fragmentation of the Church. Both liberals and conservatives insist that their position represents true Catholicism, yet both see their position as contrary to the direction their Church is taking. They express a sense of being embattled, an apprehension that the very definition of what it means to be Catholic is contested. Defining a distinctive Catholic identity is particularly difficult for liberal women. Conservatives argue that calling oneself a Catholic implies an obligation to consistently obey the moral authority of the Church. Liberals reject that definition but have yet to agree on what they would replace it with. This is, of course, a classic liberal dilemma. Embracing pluralism makes it difficult for liberals to affirm a single definition of being Catholic. But until they do, they will be confirming the conservative argument that the crisis in church authority threatens Catholic identity and must therefore be stopped.

There is no sign that polarization in the Catholic Church is likely to end anytime soon. Historically, the Vatican has resolved conflict in one of three ways: by silencing dissenters, by coopting them, or, if disagreement reaches a critical mass, by making a change. Yet none of these methods appears to work in the present case. Some liberals like to think that eventually, conservative leaders of the Church will have to accommodate the fact that the vast majority of Catholics disagree with them. Pointing to Vatican II as evidence, liberals argue that their Church has in the past responded positively to changes in the beliefs of its members, the "sensus fidelium" as the Church calls it. According to this teaching, "the body of the faithful as a whole . . . cannot err in matters of belief." The people of God manifest "this unerring quality when . . . it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals" (Dogmatic Constitution on the

Church, quoted in McBrien 1981). But, unfortunately for liberals, such universal agreement does not exist with respect to women's issues. Feminists have not yet reached the critical mass that could force a change.

If the leaders will not give in to pressures to change, neither can they make these pressures go away. The Pope's recent attempt to silence feminists by declaring the question of women's ordination closed to further debate has only increased their outrage and strengthened their determination to fight for change. The growth of small faith communities (see D'Antonio 1995) could be seen as a way for the Church to coopt dissent as it did with various monastic movements in the past. Yet the highly ideological focus of many of these groups and the fact that an increasing number are only loosely associated with the Church makes me wonder if such cooptation is still possible today. In an increasingly diverse and divided community people need the support of a subculture which thinks like themselves, yet these subcultures also further existing divisions. In short, liberal and conservative Catholic women are likely to feel even more alienated from each other in the future than they are today.

On the other hand, the moderating tendency may help prevent total alienation as both sides seek to find a common language to communicate with each other. Though this language is often patronizing, it does reflect a desire to reach out. While conservatives in this study sharply criticized the feminist movement, they were somewhat sympathetic to feminist women in their church, arguing that these women had been misled about what feminism really means. While liberals were wary of conservative women, this was more because they feared the priests and bishops would see such women as representative of all Catholics. Their most vehement attacks on conservatives were reserved for the Church hierarchy. Despite these rhetorical efforts to reach out, however, liberal and conservative women rarely came together to resolve their differences. What is missing at St. Joseph's (and at many other Catholic churches) is an opportunity for formal dialogue between lay people on both sides.

Wood and Bloch (1995) have argued that such intra-church dialogue can be a model for resolving controversial issues in the society at large. Their study of the Methodist General Conference revealed that churches have three characteristics that make civility in discourse and hence resolution of controversy more likely: (1) the Church provides "an arena in which the discussants represent a diversity of social backgrounds and interests;" (2) "there is a set of legitimate, orderly procedures governing the debate;" and (3) "participants, though deeply divided on some issues, have some common ground on which to stand during their debates" (Wood and Bloch 1995: 123-124). The presence of two of these three characteristics — diversity of background and common ground — may explain the moderating tendency observed in this study: interacting with real people seems to prevent liberal and conservative women from demonizing the other side and brings both sides closer to the middle. At the same time, the absence of procedures governing the debate reflects the lack of an organized forum where liberal and conservative church members can discuss and potentially resolve their differences. While the structure of the Catholic Church would not allow these differences to be officially resolved by lay people,

promoting dialogue might strengthen existing tendencies towards moderation and hence reduce polarization in the Church.

The moderating influence that liberal and conservative church members exert on each other has important implications for the study of how Catholics fit into the growth of fundamentalism in the modern world, a topic that has attracted considerable interest among sociologists in recent years. Though there is clearly a conservative movement within Catholicism that can be compared to Protestant fundamentalism, it is not clear that this movement is fundamentalist. Weaver and Appleby (1995) reject the term "fundamentalist" for two reasons: because conservative Catholics reject it and because conservative Catholics do not exhibit characteristics considered essential to Protestant fundamentalism e.g., biblical literalism and millennialism. Even if the conservative Catholic movement is defined as fundamentalist, it has been remarkably unsuccessful compared to other fundamentalisms: unlike conservative Protestants who have experienced phenomenal growth and whose numbers now rival those of main-line Protestants, conservative Catholics continue to be a small minority within their church.

Two explanations are commonly offered for why fundamentalism hasn't grown well on Catholic soil. The first centers on doctrine: Catholics don't take a literal view of scripture and aren't millennial, two important characteristics of most fundamentalist movements (Marty and Appleby 1995; Weaver and Appleby 1995). A second explanation focuses on social class: as American Catholics move into the middle class, rising education and income are accompanied by liberalization of attitudes (Greeley 1990). Doctrine and social class, however, cannot by themselves prevent the growth of fundamentalism. In many Muslim nations, for example, fundamentalism has taken a strong hold, even though Sunni Islam is not millennial and many Muslim fundamentalists are part of the educated middle class. This research suggests a third explanation which focuses on discourse. The concluding volume of Marty and Appleby's *Fundamentalism project* defines fundamentalism as an enclave community, a community that separates itself from the secular world and reacts against it in various ways. If we accept this definition, then the greatest challenge facing fundamentalists is maintaining the boundaries of that enclave (see especially the introductory essay by Sivan and concluding essays by Almond, Sivan and Appleby in Marty and Appleby 1995). I propose that the reason why fundamentalism has failed to take hold in the American Catholic Church is that lay conservatives have trouble establishing the boundaries that would create such an enclave. The reason they have trouble is that their interaction with liberals in their church has a moderating influence on conservative discourse. As Wood and Bloch (1995) have pointed out, sharing common ground with people from diverse backgrounds tends to increase civility and hence decrease extremism.

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