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People Like Us: intimacy, distance, and androgyny of saints

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People Like Us

Intimacy, Distance, and the Gender of Saints

by Maya Mayblin

In Catholicism, the work of attributing gender to God, saints, and even humans who carry out sacred forms of labor is complex and unstable. The more intensely divine a sacred being is, the harder it is to gender them in any fixed, dyadic sense. Gendering the divine is part of a deeply held Catholic proclivity to familiarize the Godhead. Attributing gender to God or saints is inherently possible and indeed necessary, but it is also always open to contestation. In this paper I explore how gender ambiguity both indexes and resolves a double imperative in Catholic practice: to identify with and promote a sense of contiguity between human and divine forms and to maintain a sense of distance and unknowability between worldly and otherworldly forms.

One of the things I find intriguing about Christianity is the idea that God, in the form of *anthropos*, touched base in the world at a specific point and place in time. The curiosity that is the Incarnation, and the subsequent anthropocentricity of Christianity, has remained largely unremarked on within the new anthropology of Christianity (Robbins 2003). The Old Testament assertion that the first humans were made in God's image and the New Testament assertion that God chose to incarnate Himself as a man named Jesus are widely accepted, indeed central tenets across a wide variety of Christian denominations. Even while other religious traditions display varying degrees of anthropocentricity, it could be said that Christianity is somewhat peculiar in the extent to which it champions human form, human-divine likeness, and thus—to stretch the analogy—how likeable (agreeable) divine figures are to humans.[1] While the emphasis on the Incarnation and its ultimate significance for Christians doubtless varies according to tradition, it is nevertheless true that for a large number of people who would call themselves Christians, human corporeality in a generic arms, legs, and torso sense is not incommensurable with a concept of God. Or at the very least it is not beyond the bounds of conception that if one could visualize It, Him, or Her, God would look like you or me.[2]

What has been more problematic is defining God's humanity in terms of gender. The gender of the Godhead has been theologically and anthropologically far more uncertain and at times controversial. Herein lies a peculiar inconsistency: while the generic anthropocentricity of the Christian

divine is so accepted among Christians and even anthropologists that it barely seems to merit comment, the gender of the divine provokes frequent debate.

It is interesting to note that the "anthropology of Christianity" itself has unwittingly reflected something of the matter in its own range of responses to the question of gender. In recent studies that have been emerging on this issue, two distinct approaches to gender can be noted that for the sake of argument I here gloss as "sociological" and "symbolic." In studies of Protestant contexts, gender has received attention primarily as a sociological phenomenon; that is, gender has been shown to structure styles of worship and the relationships that exist among and within congregants and leaders of churches, but it has been less relevant for understanding the nature of the divine realm itself (Brusco 2010; Eriksen 2008, 2012; Mariz and Machado 2004; Maxwell 1998; Van Kinken 2012).

Although the sociology of gender in Catholic communities has also been described (Christian 1972; Drogus 1997; Flinn 2010; Martin 2009; Mayblin 2010), scholars of Catholicism have been more ready to examine the gendered nature of divinity itself (Børreson 2010, 2001; Bynum 1982; Daly 1973; Hammington 1995; Hebblethwaite 1993; Ruether 1993). I suggest this has something to do with the fact that for Catholics, gender constitutes a more self-consciously elaborated modality for thinking about sanctity. Within Catholicism, sanctity is not the exclusive property of an intangible God or

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1. The question of a "likeable" God receives interesting treatment in Luhrmann's (2012) monograph on North American Vineyard Protestants. In Catholicism, God's character changed a good deal with postconciliar theology. Whereas previously God was more likely to be imagined as a distant and punishing figure, today he is likely to be defined as infinite agape—a forgiving, loving father/mother type (Mayblin 2012).

2. "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27).

formless Holy Spirit; it is a constituent part of an entire material panoply that includes relics, priestly vestments, ritual paraphernalia, the architecture of an ecclesiastical system, and by no means least, the gendered bodies of clergy and saints. Unlike Protestant traditions that have tended to approach such issues in terms of mutually exclusive categories, Catholic theology has tended to focus on continua and continuities. As David Tracy (1998) argues, whereas "the Protestant Imagination" is "dialectic," the "Catholic Imagination," in viewing God's body as coextensive with the natural world, can be seen as "analogical." This difference perhaps goes some way to explaining why gender difference has less symbolic potential within the Protestant tradition, where its meanings remain relatively fixed.

What follows is an exploration of how gender intersects with understandings of divinity and sacredness in Catholic thought and practice on multiple levels encompassing both "popular" and "orthodox" traditions. By drawing intentionally from a kaleidoscope of sources (some ethnographic, some theological, others historical), I aim to show how across the particularities of what we might call different "registers" of Catholicism, a particular problematic recurs: overidentification with the divine through intimate identification with the bodies of saints. Understanding this enigma of intimacy—why intimacy with sacred figures is productive, but not in excess—sheds useful light on why gender is sometimes intrinsic to divine categories and at other times not or, as I argue here, why gender is so gymnastic in Catholic constellations of practice and thought. I use the term "gymnastic" deliberately to invoke the image of a gymnast swinging suddenly into movement from stillness, involuting themselves on the parallel bars. The image seems to capture well the process by which sacred bodies can suddenly invert their meanings by vacillating dramatically along a continuum from gendered in the male/female dyadic sense at one end and vaguely androgynous somewhere in between to genderless at the other extreme. I see the potential for gymnastics here as a type of affordance that responds to a wider problematic within Catholicism: human overidentification with the divine.

The article will proceed in three main parts. The first of these will describe processes that foster intimacy with saints, using the example of kinship. The second will address the perceived dangers of excessive intimacy as expressed, in particular, through themes of common corporeality. In the final section I show how gender, when refracted through Catholic values of sexual and reproductive abstinence, constitutes a particular modality for manipulating this wider problematic. What I summarily call "gender gymnastics" is relevant not only for a finer understanding of the dynamics that permeate Catholic forms of worship but also for comprehending currents of controversy over mandatory priestly celibacy and women's ordination.

A Catholic Imperative for Likeness

The appeal of the ordinary but saintly person is deeply embedded in the rural Catholic culture of the Brazilian Northeast (Mayblin 2012, 2013*a*, 2013*b*).[3] In priestly sermons and during conversations about saints, the emphasis is invariably on the quotidian aspects of saintly lives. For example, it is commonly emphasized that St. Joseph worked as a carpenter, or that Mary and Joseph were "simple people" (*povo simples*) akin to any rural fieldworker. When asked about particular saints, devotees tend to draw attention to the ways in which they suffered (Mayblin 2010). A saint's skin will have burnt under the same hot sun; their feet will have blistered walking the same rough ground; the saint will have bled when speared, felt hunger, endured pain. While it is implicitly understood that the saint is deserving of respect precisely because they are *not* like us—that is, they lived and died to an impossibly higher standard—overtly, what prevails is a powerful humanistic logic grounded in a principle of shared corporeality open to suffering. Good people suffer, saints suffer, therefore saints are "people like us."[4] Speaking to Lourdinha about Saint Rita of Cassia, for example, known locally as "the married saint," she said,

> She was a woman, just an ordinary woman like any other before she became a saint. I like to keep her here next to Our Lady of Sorrows. She was married and had two sons, so she was a mother and a wife, but her husband was a drunkard and a gambler. And so were her sons. I think this is why she understands the suffering of women so well. On her feast day there are always lots and lots of women! (M. Mayblin, field notes, October 2001)

Among the Catholics I knew, Santa Rita seemed more than most to embody the saint-as-ordinary-person complex for the fact that she had been married before becoming a nun and eventually a saint.[5] As Lourdinha confirmed, popular

3. Fieldwork was carried out in the rural hinterlands of Pernambuco, Northeast Brazil.

4. The ethnographic record is filled with the idiosyncratic stories that connect communities and individuals to specific patron saints. In some accounts the saint is so human that it is celebrated not only for miracles and protections but also for worldly misdemeanors. In Stephen Gudeman's account of saints' day feasts in rural Panama, Saint John is said to be a "drinking saint," which justifies, to some extent, the intensity of the celebrations held on June 24. June 25 is also sacred, but it is primarily kept for sobering up: "it is suggested that Saint John woke up on the 25th, after his drinking bout, unable to remember what happened" (Gudeman 1976:717). Another interesting example is found in the Sicilian legend *La Sciarra de San Giuseppe cu lu Patreternu* (The quarrel of St. Joseph with God), in which Saint Joseph becomes angry with God because he refuses to allow one of his devotees into paradise. In the story, Joseph demands that God pay the Virgin Mary's "dowry" and threatens to leave paradise with her and his son, Jesus (Amitrano-Savarese 1995).

5. According to hagiographic accounts, the Italian St. Rita of Cassia (1381–1457, canonized 1900), was married aged 12. After her husband was killed in a barroom brawl, she applied to join the Augustinians at the convent of St. Maria Magdalena in Cascia but was refused twice for

identification with Santa Rita has tended to lean heavily on the gendered aspects of her person (as a wife and a mother). Curious about the extent to which such gendered identifications could occur, on my last field trip in 2012 I asked several women whether or not they thought the Virgin Mary had menstruated. At first bemused, respondents had to stop and think about this one. Remarkably, it was generally supposed that, yes, she probably would have, because even though she was a saint, she was also a woman like any other. As one middle-aged mother replied: "for me she would have, certainly! And she would have felt pain in childbirth also because in the Bible it says that she called for a midwife. Well, how would she have known the baby was about to come without labor pains?"

It is worth noting that among the laity, detailed historical knowledge about a saint's life and particular spiritual achievements is not necessary for "connecting with" him/her and requesting intercession. Even knowing next to nothing about a saint, one can safely assume that he or she once shared your corporeal experience of the world. To be sure, common corporeality may not be the only reason for Catholics to connect with saints, but for many, the possibilities for identification are exponentially enriched working outward from the intuition that such divine figures menstruated, bled, wept, drank, ate, and felt pain. In short, if saints' corporeal experiences in the world receive so much emphasis in Catholic religious discourse, it may well be because corporeality is all they have in common with the rest of humanity—in every other sense saints belong to the supramundane, so they are exceptional to the rest of humanity.

The anthropocentricity of Christianity is, of course, hardly news. The Catholic universe has always been peopled with anthropomorphically recognizable figures, with creatures shaped very much "like us." The flesh-and-blood body has long been a central motif in hagiographic depictions of torture and martyrdom and in religious art centered on the Passion. A full exploration of this poetics of identity via what David Morgan (1998) calls "the visual formation and practice of religious belief" (1) is beyond the scope of this paper; suffice it here to highlight the fact that throughout Catholicism's history, human-divine corporeal likeness has been largely reinforced through graphic representations of the bodies of Jesus and the saints. Disputes over the accuracy of physical details in such representations points back to the need for sacred identity. Take, for example, debates about race and skin color provoked by the proliferation of statues of "black Madonnas" in the Americas (Burdick 1998; Moss and Cappannari 1982). Were such images black from age and decay or black because the saint in question actually had black skin?

Indeed, why should it matter so much? It matters, I argue here, because corporeal identification with the divine matters.

While images of saints being physically tortured need to be understood as culturally and historically particular kinds of objects, one might note that they are also inherently affective kinds of objects. Affect in the viewer is produced by an intrinsically human capacity to empathize with another person's pain. Imagining is heightened all the more by the cognitive deduction that similar-looking bodies will experience pain in similar ways. Empathy is fundamental for Catholic forms of visual piety that work through principles of mimesis and analogy. Such principles reached new heights particularly during the Counter-Reformation, when religious artists took pious hyperrealism to new extremes, producing spectacular polychrome wooden sculptures featuring real human hair, glassy eyes, and ivory teeth (Bray 2009). The logic behind this extraordinary craftsmanship was to provoke powerful constellations of emotions in onlookers, emotions of sorrow and awe but also of empathy based on a sense of shared humanity with divine figures. Such emotions would become the engine of a renewed faith.

It is notable that in many contemporary Catholic traditions, theological and devotional praxis remains largely (though not exclusively) cataphatic in nature: faith is personalized, and devotions are driven by passionate identification with or fascination for divine figures.[6] Devotees engage intimately with the divine because they are able to assimilate attributes of sacred bodies. This process of passionate assimilation makes intimacy with the divine possible. Intimacy is experienced when devotees begin to enjoy regular "conversations" with particular saints and to strike prayerful pacts (*promessas*) with them in return for supernatural intercession. Here I focus on certain kinship practices that facilitate such intimate relationships.

In Brazil, godparents (*padrinhos*) play an important role in kinship relations. Given that there are various different types of godparent a person can have, people may collect quite a number over the course of a lifetime. Some godparents are acquired through formal rites of baptism, confirmation, and marriage, while others are produced more informally—either during St. John celebrations in June or via exchanges of friendship or relations of patronage. In less formal contexts, godparent status can be improvised simply by repeatedly addressing someone as "my godfather" (*meu padrinho*). A similar thing occurs in the case of devotion to saints, where exceptional feelings of closeness to particular saints are "Christened" by choices in terms of address or language. For example, it is generally known throughout Northeast Brazil that the folk saint, Padre Cicero, is every devoted pilgrim's

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not being a virgin. She was eventually admitted in 1413 and became known for her austere devotions and for a suppurating wound on her forehead. Her body is reported to have remained uncorrupted to the present day (Delaney 1980).

6. E.g., see Fenella Cannell's (1999) discussion of the cult of the dead Christ in the Christian Philippines, which she argues is constructed as and emotionally identified with a Bicolano wake and funeral. Also, see John Ingham's (1986) discussion of kinship and folk identification with Catholic saints in central Mexico.

"godfather." Significantly, Padre Cicero is neither "the godfather" nor "a godfather"; he is always "my godfather" (*meu padrinho*) to each and every person who venerates him. Whereas ordinary Catholic priests are always addressed as *padre*, and fathers (in the social/biological context) are addressed by the more common term *pai*, Padre Cicero is distinguished from both these categories in this significant, intimate way. By always using the personal and possessive pronoun "my," devotees claim intimacy with a saint who is venerated by millions and is ostensibly a *padre* to everyone.

In some cases parents may choose dead canonized saints to act in a more formal capacity as godparents for their children. Santa Rita was godmother to Lourdinha's youngest brother, born in the early 1960s. Lourdinha's mother, the late Maria de Alves, had been an extremely religious woman, a composer of hymns and poetry, and a great devotee of Santa Rita. According to Lourdinha, the day of her brother's baptism, the woman meant to become his godmother failed, for some reason, to turn up at the church. Lourdinha's mother, determined that the baptism go ahead all the same, named Santa Rita de Cassia as the infant's godmother, and this was the name that was put on the baptismal certificate. Another case involved an elderly woman called Conceicão. Like many Catholic women, Conceicão had a certain devotion to the saint she was named after (Our Lady of Conception), but her affinity with this saint also derived from the fact that she was a certified baptismal godmother. It was recounted that in the middle of a difficult labor, Conceicão's mother had made a promise to the Virgin that in exchange for a safe delivery, she would make her the baby's godmother. At the official ceremony of baptism Conceicão acquired three godparents: one male and two female, including Our Lady of Conception.[7]

Taking a saint for a godparent and, by implication, turning a saint into your *compadre* (co-godparent) creates intimacy and indexicality between this world and the next world, between human beings and godlike beings. In the cases I have presented here, gender facilitates intimacy. When saints become kin, they become either god*fathers* or god*mothers*. In short, it is gender that allows a saint to be slotted into networks of kinship that in turn link him or her to living individuals in powerful ways.

Saints of the House Do Not Work Miracles

Among the Catholics I knew, God was the most important figure, but He was also somewhat difficult to access. Saints

made perfect mediators and intercessors because, as Seu José, a local mill owner, once put it to me in the course of explaining why he rarely attended mass but maintained an active devotion to various saints, "The saint is closer to us, he understands us!" (O Santo está mais perto da gente, ele nos entende! M. Mayblin, field notes, September 2002).[8] Issues arise, however, when people become overly familiar with sacred mediators. Such is the paradox of divine intimacy. It is this paradox writ large that explains why gender must sometimes disappear from view. Before discussing some of the mechanics by which this "disappearing" might occur, however, I explore the paradox of divine intimacy itself using a combination of ethnographic examples from my own research and theological debates on the Virgin Birth.

In the small interior city of Juazeiro do Norte in the state of Ceará, there is a gigantic statue of the popular folk saint Padre Cicero. Pilgrims flock to it all year round, but during the commemorative week in November, the city throngs with devotees from all over the country, and people line up for hours to ascend the steps that lead to the statue. Having ascended these steps, one can walk around the base of the statue and, most importantly, touch it or write a personal request to the saint onto it in pen. Elderly and infirm people can find it difficult to endure the heat and jostling crowds as they wait to ascend the stairs. In such cases it is possible to avoid the wait by writing your petition onto the large concrete plinth that the statue stands on. But people say that doing this is not as effective as writing it farther up. One's request is more likely to be answered by the saint the higher on the statue it gets inscribed. Ideally, then, one would ascend to the very top to write out the request on Padre Cicero's gigantic stone head. But as the teenage boy behind me in the queue pointed out, this is impossible, and even were it possible it would be disrespectful. Padre Cicero would hardly be likely to grant any request made in this fashion, mused the boy. A hierarchy of efficacy is therefore restrained to the lower, more accessible parts of the statue. This manoeuvring oneself upward or downward into an optimal position for communing with the divine provides a graphic instantiation of a generalized problem: how does one ascertain the optimum balance between intimate proximity and productive distance?

In Brazil one often hears the phrase *Santo de casa não faz milagre* (saints of the house don't work miracles). "Saints of the house" are simply saints with a particular relationship to a household or family. Sometimes the family keeps a shrine at home to that saint, or a statuette of it stands proudly on the shelf in a prominent place, such as in the living room or at the front entrance. The proverb itself, however, is somewhat ambiguous. Depending on the context in which it is used, it can imply either that a certain level of social distance or formality is required for something to become effective, or alternatively that the qualities of someone or something are

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7. In Northeast Brazil godparenthood is a sacred institution that serves many purposes (Lanna 2004). Officially, a godparent is someone who can actively and materially guide a child in the ways of the faith as well as someone capable of taking over the care of a child in the event it becomes orphaned. It therefore makes sense that those chosen for the task are, initially, alive. Nevertheless, it is significant that when exceptional circumstances prevail, dead saints can theoretically be accommodated in such a role. Moreover, there is nothing in the code of canon law that would explicitly rule it out.

8. For interesting discussions of Catholic saints as mediators, see Calavia-Saez (2009) and Turner and Turner (1978).

underappreciated by those closest to them. Thus a person might complain that it is impossible to offer advice to a spouse because, after so many years of intimacy, couples simply do not listen to one another in the same attentive way. Explaining this fact, the person might add, "you know how it is, saints of the house don't perform miracles." The nearest equivalents in English would be "familiarity breeds contempt" or the biblical phrase "a prophet hath no honor in his own country."[9] It is interesting that in Catholic Brazil it is the house saint that most embodies this enigma. Why, we might ask, have house saints at all if everyone knows that they cannot perform miracles? The question could be rephrased in another way: why cultivate intimacy with particular saints if by doing so you stop them from working for you?

This problem of overfamiliarity is manifest in relation to a popular "folk saint" called Frei Damião. Frei Damião (1898–1997) was born in Bozzano, Italy, but lived most of his life in Northeast Brazil as a Capuchin missionary, where he is widely believed to have performed healings and divinations. During his lifetime he traversed the hinterlands and won large numbers of devotees in the region where I worked. Many among the older generation had touched him, seen him, or at one time been blessed or confessed by him. Frei Damião was frequently fed and sheltered by the laity such that talk of the miracles he had performed were often mixed with recollections about the ordinary aspects of his character, like the fact that he snored loudly or was fond of stewed pumpkin. Not everyone classified him as a saint, however. Some of the more progressive religious remembered him as sexist and disagreeable—one ex-nun referred to him simply as "that annoying old man" (*aquele chato*)—but among the laity Frei Damião was popularly venerated as a holy man.

On one occasion I discussed Frei Damião with Dada and Tatu, an elderly couple of fieldworkers. Dada, like others I had spoken to about Frei Damião, remembered him as especially "ugly" (*feio*). Short, contorted, and hunchbacked, Frei Damião is often described by devotees as *feio*, but not in an offensive way. Uttered in a spirit of admiration his ugliness comes to stand as a divine mark, an index of his holiness that places him apart. Dada recalled a meal Frei Damião had taken at her patron's house. She remembered him sitting hunched at the table, laughing and cracking jokes. The young Dada had served him a plate of rice and beans. Clearing up afterward she remembered her patroness (*patroa*) eating up Frei Damião's leftovers, hoping to ingest some of his grace. Tatu had been quietly listening, and when Dada left the veranda for a few moments, he said to me,

> One thing I must tell you is that not all you hear about him eating this and that is true. Not everyone knows it, but one of the strange things about that man was that he did not eat. I have heard it said that mostly he only pretended to eat the food that was given him. In truth he wouldn't

eat it because he did not need to. He lived off the host. And he would hide that food he was offered, and if he was found out, he would swear people not to reveal this secret of his. (M. Mayblin, field notes, October, 2002)

Whatever the actual facts of Frei Damião's eating habits might have been, it was clear that Tatu's words had some purpose. What he sought to describe was the very opposite of an ethic of kinship through commensality. In the rural Brazilian context, refusing to consume the food provided for you is antisocial in the extreme, but in this instance the motif served to distance the saint from the ordinary rules of sociality. Frei Damião, I was being reminded, although he snored, laughed, and was present at the table, was not "like us" after all, for he had no need of the actual calories or the many reciprocal relations that stemmed from commensality and the sharing of food. It was as though Tatu sought to counter Dada's overly familiar talk by reintroducing some distance and mystery into the narrative. His comments defamiliarized Frei Damião's body and drew attention to the ultimate unknowability of the divine.

The Hymen and the Sepulchre

I want to stress that the problem of overfamiliarity is not simply an issue for "folk Catholicism"; it permeates the religion at the highest institutional levels. An interesting example concerns the theology of the Virgin Mary's hymen. By the fourth century, the concept of the female body having a natural seal or hymen had become central to Christian beliefs about the birth of Jesus and the status of Mary. Physical virginity was intrinsic to the Marian cult from its official beginnings in Byzantium, but its precise details —in particular, whether physical intactness could have been maintained even *in partu*—produced confusion and debate.

The confusion over virginity in motherhood arises from the fact that Mary, although sacred and a virgin, is nevertheless anatomically "normal" and supposedly gave birth in the normal, vaginal way. This suggests her birth canal would have stretched in labor to allow the baby Jesus passage, and that in this moment her intact hymen would have ripped in order to let the baby out. Perhaps God seals it immediately afterward, but even so, it still means that for one essential moment in time Mary is not virgin. In a story from the Apocryphal Gospels, for example, the midwife Salome, who does not believe in Mary's virginity, examines her manually to ascertain whether the hymen is intact. For this incredulity, God punishes Salome with a withered hand. The spectre of this possible sequence of events must have bothered the early church fathers, because debates about *virginitas in partu* recur in the period in which the division between heresy and orthodoxy was first defined (Plumpe 1948).

Tertullian, in opposing the arguments of the Docetists (who believed in a fantastic divine phantom Christ), stated of Mary, *Virgo quantum a viro; non virgo quantum a partu* (virgin in

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9. Luke 4:24: "I tell you the truth" he continued, "no prophet is accepted in his home town."

respect to the man, nonvirgin in respect to delivery).[10] By this forceful statement Tertullian meant to quell, once and for all, the Docetists' heretical claims that Jesus was not a man.[11] In doing so, notes Plumpe (1948), "an exaggerated realism [is] put forth on behalf of the real Christ" (569), and Mary's virginity is sacrificed. The problem here, as St. Augustine (1947) clearly saw it, was that if virginity was destroyed in the process of birth, then Jesus could not have been born of a virgin: "And if only in His birth her virginity had been destroyed, from that moment He would not have been born of a virgin, and the whole Church would proclaim falsely, which God forbid, that He was born of the Virgin Mary" (42).

In fact the issue of the hymen continues to attract debate, even among contemporary Mariologists, and it does so despite the Catholic aesthetic and moral imperative that "One should be reverently silent on the subject of the Virgin Birth . . . and never venture into physiological territory. . . . Attempts to explain it end by explaining it away" (Angelo Geiger, cited in Calkins 2004:10).

The debate was most recently revisited in print following a controversial article by Catherine Tkacz (2002) titled "Reproductive Science and the Incarnation," in which she discusses a number of correlations between the discoveries of reproductive science and the Church's belief in the mystery of the Incarnation. The controversy stems from Tkacz's insinuation that rupture to the hymen must have happened, even though "rupture or absence [of the hymen] is not evidence of loss of virginity" (n. 78). It also stems from her choice of words in the following paragraph: "He [Christ] chose to traverse the birth canal. . . . He passed through her cervix. Its strength had kept him securely in the uterus throughout gestation and now it widened to deliver him to wider life. He passed through her vagina, the organ with which every wife knows her husband. Jesus emerged through the labia, the vulva" (Tkacz 2002:21).

Tkacz never actually denies the doctrine of *virginitas in partu*, but the imagistic language she deploys is too real, too intimate, and perhaps too gendering. It transgresses the limits of "ultimate unknowability" where divinity is concerned. Tkacz's article causes other (male) Mariologists to intervene, all the while professing reluctance, embarrassment, and a sense of religious duty: "While a certain sense of delicacy, inspired by the 1960 Monitum of the Holy Office of 1960, makes me hesitate a moment before taking issue with this statement [on the intactness of the hymen], it needs to be dealt with" (Calkins 2004:9).

Calkins (2004) goes on to marshal various ancient texts in defending the mystery of the *virginitas in partu*. He concludes, paraphrasing from the Catechism of the Council of Trent, that Jesus must have passed through the hymen as though by magic: "as the rays of the sun penetrate the substance of glass without breaking or injuring in the least: so, but in a more comprehensible manner, did Jesus Christ come forth from his mother's womb without injury to her maternal virginity" (10).

Such seemingly small and indecorous details, as Calkins implies, have to be dealt with because their epistemological implications are profound. In the case of the virgin hymen, the possibility of even a momentary rupture in childbirth is enough to upset the delicate balance between warmly identifying with Mary because she is "like us" and venerating her from a respectful position of ultimate unknowability because, despite her deceptively human form, she is not ontologically the same sort of (gendered) being "like us" after all.

A comparable controversy is reported to have arisen over depictions of Jesus's genitalia in Renaissance art. According to Leo Steinberg (1996), Christ's sexuality was an essential component of orthodox incarnational theology. Imagery of his genitalia grew out of the dominant impulse of the period to render the "utter carnality" and humanation of God. But censors of the Counter-Reformation, wishing to reduce the humanist conception of the Incarnation, decried such depictions on the basis that they might stoke latent types of homoeroticism in devotional practices (Mills 2002).

Thus, as Peter Brown (1982) has argued, the ambiguity of the Christian message could never be entirely eliminated. The point is well taken among historians of Christianity. In a study of Christian apologetics in Late Antiquity, Jaś Elsner argues that Christian sainthood functioned as a means not only of airing the uncertainties of hegemonic culture issues but also of negotiating with existing literary and communicative structures how best to play out and deny those uncertainties. For Elsner (2009), Christian apologetics is a field that reveals the "underbelly of its uncertainties about the absolute exclusivity of its Truth and its lingering fascination with that Other against which it was once constructed" (682). One might trace Catholicism's uncertain underbelly back to the Council of Chalcedon in 451, wherein the dual nature of Christ was decided and declared irrefutable. With this event, the "both God and man" option took root and allowed for an ambiguous imperative for familiarity and unknowability to come into play.

In Catholicism, then, we see that saints constitute (almost everywhere and in every period) mediators but also weak nodes in networks of divine presence. Their weakness (in other ways their strength) stems in large part from their anatomical similarity to us. The differences, likenesses, and oddities of sacred bodies allow for the endless return of "the other possible visions of Christianity that have always existed in relationship to the dominant paradigm" (Cannell 2006:42). As with Mary's hymen or Jesus's penis, so with Frei Damião's appetite: common anatomy can be almost too intimate.

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10. De carne Christi, 23 (II, 461 Oehler), cited in Plumpe (1948).
11. The Docetists taught that Christ was a divine phantom and had no human body.

Sexual Abstinence and Gender Ambiguity

The controversy surrounding Mary's hymen (and Jesus's penis) suggest that gender and its attendant erotic/sexual associations constitute a powerful instrument for knowing the divine. Gender in the fixed dyadic sense is both what grounds the saint to the world one knows and that which allows one to know them. But the divisive, sticky associations of gender do not always sit easily with Catholic constructions of the divine as pure, undifferentiated wholeness. In what follows I want to explore how distance in the sense of unknowability and thus unfamiliarity is maintained not through an event or ritual but through the dissolution of gender in combination with sexual procreation.[12]

Although in common Brazilian parlance, God is linguistically referred to in the masculine form, often as "Father" (*Pai*), certain clerics and lay people are wont to describe God as a loving mother (*Mãe*; Mayblin 2012). It is not at all clear, however, that when the terms "Father" and "Mother" are used in this context that the primary purpose is to assign to God qualities of an intrinsically gendered nature. Whenever I asked Santa Lucians directly, In your opinion is God a man or a woman? (*Deus é homen ou mulher?*), the response tended to be a look of perplexed consternation. Rephrasing the question in various ways did not help very much. "God is neither of those" or "God is both of/more than that" would often be the eventual reply. It is interesting to note, therefore, that although people were happy to speak about the gender of various saints, when asked directly about God, no Catholic I spoke to was willing to assign a particular gender to God.

If, as Judith Butler (1990) has argued, sexuality is one of the primary means through which gender is performed, we can read the emphasis on asexuality, as one climbs the sacred hierarchy, as a dilution of gendered identities. The Roman Catholic Church mandates that clergy sacrifice their reproductive capacities through vows of celibacy. The Catholic rule of celibacy serves various practical as well as theological ends. It serves to remove the religious from the economic drag caused by the unity and divisiveness of procreative kinship relations, but in other ways it works to maintain a certain separation between bodies that are sacred and bodies that are profane. While celibacy is not in itself a denial of gendered

identity, it works to differentiate it from gender as lived and performed by the laity. For example, although a nun is female, she will never be classed as feminine in the same way as a heterosexual laywoman. Similarly although a priest is male, he is not considered to be the same intensity of male as a married, heterosexual layman.[13] In rural Northeast Brazil, as elsewhere, a layman who never marries can perhaps never perform his masculinity to quite the same degree as one who does.

And yet in Catholicism, a whiff of asexuality often accompanies any movement toward sanctity. Ethnographically it has been shown that in many traditionally Catholic cultures, celibacy of a sort (or a social distancing from the possibility of physical procreation) applies to an important stratum of lay devotional and theological virtuosi or mediators: devout older churchgoing women (sometimes men), faith healers, and spirit mediums. In rural Northeast Brazil, powerful faith healers and the most spiritually elevated members of the community who undertake most of the day-to-day spiritual labor are almost always childless or older married individuals whose childbearing years are well behind them. The devotional work of attending mass regularly, holding novenas, leading the prayers at wakes, performing the cult of the dead souls in purgatory, praying the rosary, tending to shrines and graves, and so forth, rests for each household in the hands of an individual virtuoso who in local terms is recognized with the title *sofredor* (great sufferer; Mayblin 2010). The virtuoso is frequently—although by no means always—a postmenopausal female. The role may pass on to older men when their wives die, and when it does it often happens that the man has started to distance himself from the more definitively masculinized world of barrooms and business deals (so in a sense he is postmenopausal too). In a practical sense increased Church activity tends to coincide with a phase in the life course where people simply have more time to devote to religious activities, but this does not mean that a certain symbolic value does not attach itself to the distance from the business of procreation that comes with greater age. Again, it is not so much that older people in these contexts lack gender; rather, they stress their erotic neutrality through symbolic action, body language, and speech (Pardo 1996:100).

The ethnographic record on Catholicism in the Mediterranean suggests that similar patterns are to be found elsewhere. In Julian Pitt-Rivers's *People of the Sierra* (1954), the two most spiritually prominent lay people, or *sabias* (wise ones), of the pueblo are Juana de la Pileta and Redencion, both married and with children but past the age of menopause. The only actual challenge to their authority arrives in the community one day in the form of "a young man of markedly effeminate manner and dress named Rafael" who, according to Pitt-Rivers, turns out to be more of a "confidence

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12. Questions of mediation, distance, and proximity have been present in anthropological debates about religion and central to theories of sacrifice for a long time. For Hubert and Mauss (1964 [1898]), sacrifice, via the death of a substitute or intermediary, is quintessentially a method for approximating the divine while maintaining a safe distance from it. Evans-Pritchard (1954) and Beattie (1980) further developed the idea by distinguishing between sacrifices that establish closeness with the divine ("conjunctive") and those that aim at separation from it ("disjunctive"). More recently, Rane Willerslev (2013) and Joel Robbins ("Keeping God's Distance: Sacrifice, Possession and the Problem of Religious Mediation," unpublished manuscript) have explored the manner in which sacrifice and mediation allow for "penetration and separation" or "connection without fusion" between gods and humans and among humans themselves.

13. From an ecclesiastical point of view, a different interpretation might hold. A community of celibate male clerics may be considered to embody an accentuated type of maleness.

trickster" and does not stay in the pueblo for very long (Pitt-Rivers 1954:192).[14] In William Christian's classic study of Spanish Catholicism (Christian 1972), the life course plays a structured and guiding role in the way religious labor is carved up. Once again, the older female "devotional virtuosi" are discernible predominantly by age and by their distance from childbearing: "When her children grow older, and especially when her husband dies . . . it is then that she may become one of the elderly ladies in black that are seen haunting the church in every European village" (Christian 1972:160).

For Christian, the wearing of black, although initially for mourning, is significant in other ways. "I see it also as a statement of utter humility before God," he writes, "a kind of uniform of abasement not unlike the cassock of the priest" (Christian 1972:161). Such women, notes Christian, are ridiculed, especially by men. The asexuality of Catholic lay leaders makes them a target for jokes much as the asexuality of priests feeds anticlericalism in many Catholic parts of the world.

Asexuality and gender ambiguity tends to become accentuated the higher up the Catholic sacred hierarchy one progresses. An interesting body of work on hagiographic literature and medieval religious history attests to the fact that in Christianity, the pursuit of holiness often destabilized binary conceptions of gender. As holiness cut across gender divisions, ascetics were freer than the rest of society to break from the norms of gendered behavior (Bynum 1982; Campbell 2008; Riches and Salih 2002). Examples proliferate of transvestite saints, gender-bending ascetics, eunuchs, and virgins as well as men who challenged conventional gender hierarchies by submitting to the spiritual powers of holy women. Following Deleuze (2006 [1993]) on "the fold," it might even be noted—at least from the modern perspective—that traditional iconography that renders saints in biblical robes replete with curves and folds seems almost to intensify the ambiguous nature of sacred bodies. The aesthetic produced—"neither high nor low, neither right nor left, neither regression nor progression"—corresponds to what Leibniz called an "ambiguous sign" (Deleuze 2006 [1993]:15).

It would be possible to argue that the notion of gender ambiguity is misleading; rather, what we see, historically, is that in order to gain spiritual authority, women have always had to become more masculine (Eriksen 2014). However, for Catholicism in particular, the inverse argument is equally possible if one focuses on the aesthetic femininity of Christ as nurturer (Bynum 1982) or Christ as sufferer (Gudeman

1976). Craun (2005), for example, tells us of early Syrian male ascetics who were rendered as the receptive and passionate bridal lovers of God, while Riches (2002) describes the manner in which St. George was gendered female through hagiographic and pictorial representations of him as a virgin.

We might observe, then, that while anatomically ordinary "men" and "women" structure the sacred hierarchy in certain ways, the anatomical differences of sex that connect divine bodies to the mundane world (that enable sacred identity) are potentially undone in the movement toward sacred difference. Rather than God being strictly male or strictly female or human holiness being an intrinsically masculine or feminine trait, Catholic conceptions of the divine emerge out of a tension between three points: maleness, femaleness, and ungendered humanity/divinity. The ungendered here works as the negative founding gesture of the male/female opposition. In Levi-Straussian terms it represents the quintessential "zero institution"—the exception that grounds the rule.[15]

The other side of sacred identity (of passion, likeness, and intimacy) is therefore ambiguity. Like the lens of a camera moving out of focus, definitions of masculinity, femininity, and their attendant erotic associations become blurred the holier a body becomes. Nevertheless, from the ordinary human perspective, this temporary loss of focus is never irrevocable. That is, a fixed sense of gender may come back into focus again if that is what the moment calls for. It is worth noting some of the political consequences that accompany this sliding focus. For example, emphatic foregrounding of the fact that Jesus was male supports Catholic arguments against female ordination to the priesthood. For those who support women's ordination, on the other hand, the fact that Jesus was male is deemed to be no more significant than the possibility that he sported a beard or was circumcised (Butler 2007). What counts was the fact that Jesus was, in the most encompassing sense, a human being—masculinity and femininity as differentiating states are herein de-emphasized. For those who support an exclusively male ministry, however, Jesus's sex as a differentiating feature is strongly in focus.

The depth and tenacity of the ordination debate in the contemporary Catholic world and its resistance to any definitive resolution to date indexes the inherently unstable value of gender at the core of Catholic discourse.[16] It is the capacity for Catholicism to cradle within itself this restless move-

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14. Further examples of this pattern are present in the rich ethnographic account of life in a Catholic quarter of Naples by Italo Pardo (1996). Among the religious virtuosi of this quarter are various cases of childlessness, prostitution, and homosexuality. In one instance, Maria, a "middle-aged" assiduous performer of the cult of souls in purgatory and a "mystical person" has "an undeveloped uterus." Her physical inability to procreate is seen as evidence of God's wish to preserve her purity from the pollution of giving birth. Thus she is treated "almost like a saint" (Pardo 1996:70).

15. Following Levi-Strauss's (1963) notion of the "zero-institution" as the hidden constant to think through the splitting into two of relative perceptions (in the case of the Winnebago, "from above" and "from below"). Levi-Strauss's basic point is that because the two subgroups nonetheless form one and the same tribe (in the analogous case of gender, that tribe would be "humanity"), a third signifier must exist—one whose function is the purely negative one of signaling the presence and actuality of the social institution (the above/below binary). Žižek applies the same logic to the postmodern view of sexual difference as "a multitude of sexes and sexual identities," suggesting that it effectively alludes to the exact opposite: an underlying all-pervasive sameness (Žižek 2002:72).

16. For information on this debate, see http://romancatholicwomenpriests.org/resources_links.htm.

ment—to gender or degender its models of humanity and divinity—that accounts for its resilience in the face of pressure for reform. According to Phyllis Zagano (2011), "there is no document that insinuates or states an ontological distinction among humans except among documents that address the question of ordination" (130). One of the most sophistic examples of this restless gymnastics is to be found in the pages of Vatican documents and theological treatises dealing with the ordination of women to the deaconate. Here arguments interweave along two convergent lines: the "iconic argument" (Jesus must be represented by a male because he was a male) on the one hand and the "argument from authority" (Jesus chose only male apostles) on the other (Zagano 2011:130). Although it is only the former argument (i.e., because divinity is significantly gendered) that serves definitively to exclude females from ministry, the argument from authority has lately received the greater emphasis. Ambiguity arises because the argument from authority does not contradict the argument that Jesus's own gender was superfluous to his divine power and therefore that the generic humanity of Christ may overcome the limitations of gender divisions in the world. The Vatican's collective attempts to justify the exclusion of women from ministry therefore appear restless and unstable—or from a polemical viewpoint, logically flawed.

Conclusion

The usefulness of gender symbolism for "thinking with" in different cultures is a point that has been well made within anthropology. Marilyn Strathern (1988) famously pioneered the realization that maleness and femaleness are not necessarily intrinsic to bodies but may in some cultures represent modes of relationality that can be symbolically detachable from bodies. A man can thus become a woman depending on the mediating roles he assumes and what he produces, and vice versa, a woman can take up male modalities in the production of sociality. Strathern's work produced something of a breakthrough in anthropological discussions of gender and opened up productive lines of thought for subsequent scholarship on gender in Christianity (see Eriksen 2008).

In Catholicism, detachability of gender is also possible—femininity and masculinity may apply to groups of differently sexed people but may just as well describe different modalities of connecting with the divine, modalities that are symbolically gendered but not necessarily fixed to men or women per se. The point to be made here, however, is not so much that gender is "good to think" but that it is sometimes "too good to think." Fixed, stereotypical gender identities tie a saint too intimately to the world, such that to escape the world is to escape the gender binary. Rather than neatly "swapping" dyadically opposed roles of male and female, saints may confuse, intensify, or degrade the significance of the dyad altogether. Such ambiguity indexes a realm that is sacred, strange, and yet itself unstable. Lived Catholicism is "gymnastic"—gender

ambiguity may suddenly be eclipsed by the foregrounding of a fixed male or female gender. For political reasons—such as the Church's need to foment the faith of the laity or men's desire to subjugate or placate women—Catholicism must allow for the gendering of pious people (suffering mothers), offices (the priesthood), or saints (the Virgin Mary) to occur.

Here my aim has been to show how Catholicism's predilection for divine-human contiguity is complicated by the enigma of sacred identity. The enigma is illustrated by the complex relationship Catholic saints have with gender. Saints are "people like us" but also "not like us." Like us they die, but unlike us their bodies do not decompose. Like us saints can be anatomically male or female, but unlike the average person, they remain sexually neutral and incapable of procreation. They do not marry, do not give birth, lactate, menstruate, or ejaculate—or if they do, doubly so! Neither strictly masculine nor strictly feminine, neither too close nor too distant from us—this is why saints endure.

Acknowledgments

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