

FUTURE CHURCH

First Annual Respect Women Lecture

Emily Reimer-Barry, “Respect Women: A Catholic Action Plan for Justice”

January 18, 2023

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Introduction

It is an honor to be with all of you tonight, and I am very grateful to **Russ and Deb** for the invitation to present to Future Church members. The March for Life is planned for later this week in Washington, DC,ⁱ and leaders of the Catholic Church in the United States, especially leaders in ordained ministries, have spent a considerable amount of money and time in promoting their vision of what it means to “Respect Life.”ⁱⁱ I have been concerned for some time that their action plans overlook the full spectrum of reproductive injustices women face in the US today, and even in some cases advance an approach to moral, political, and policy questions that value unborn lives at the expense of women’s lives. While the focus of this presentation is broader than the *Dobbs* decision that overturned *Roe v. Wade*, we are, all of us, living in distressing times. The legitimate discernment of women has been curtailed and obstructed—in emergency rooms, homes, and in parish life. Leaders of the USCCB seem to want to double-down on an approach to civic life that focuses on the culture wars, instead of implementing the call to live out a synodal church.

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I have some ideas about how we can move past this very painful situation towards an ecclesial context that is more inclusive and more just. This presentation:

- (1) highlights some of the obstacles to the full participation of women in the Church;
- (2) and suggests possible action steps that flow from the **very basic claim** that *women have inherent human dignity deserving of equal consideration in all areas of church and society*.

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Standing on the Shoulders of Giantsⁱⁱⁱ

One of my frustrations as I continue to write for the academy and church, is that I feel like I’m constantly saying, “Wake up people! **Rosemary Radford Ruether** said this forty years ago!” Or I think to myself, do I really have to just keep repeating what **Lisa Sowle Cahill** published thirty years ago? It saddens me that many ordained ministers are unfamiliar with the significant contributions of scholars and activists such as **Elizabeth Johnson, Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike, Shawn Copeland, Susan Ross, Margaret Farley, Theresa Kane, Christine Schenk, Maria Pilar Aquino, Simone Campbell, Jamie Phelps, Shawnie Daniels-Sykes, Thea Bowman, Ivone Gebara, Agnes Brazal, Sandra Schneiders**, and so many more. So first I acknowledge the many scholars and activists whose work inspires me to keep going in this challenging attempt to continue to advance justice for and with women in our Church and world.

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Obstacles to the full participation of women in the church

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I. Canon Law

Phyllis Zagano has reminded us recently that one of the legacies of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI is that when he led the CDF 40 years ago, he persuaded the committee revising the Code of Canon Law to “keep governance and ministry within the clerical caste.”^{iv}

When women ask what prevents them from full participation in the life of the church, one obvious answer is: canon law. Canon law gives significant power and authority to the local ordinary, as well as to curial offices. Canon law keeps in place the stained glass ceilings that prevent women from having a seat at every table in which ecclesial decisions are made. And this is the case even though *Lumen Gentium* says that there should be no inequality on the basis of race or sex, that all share a true equality (32).

The church is overdue for significant reforms in canon law. The reforms of 1983 focused on implementing the Second Vatican Council. It is true that Pope Francis has made some modest revisions already, via the process of issuing *apostolic constitutions* and apostolic letters that order changes in particular canons. But I am suggesting something bigger: an overhaul by the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, under a process through which women with expertise are included in the overhaul.

Undertaking internal reforms of church teachings and practices will be a monumental task, but it must begin brick by brick, incrementally. Sex inequality is in fact written into canon law, our theology of marriage, diocesan policies, curial practices, and our theology of ministry. Some reforms should be easy to make – forbidding child marriage, for example—while others may be more difficult— including reform of canons related to the oversight of women’s religious organizations, expansion of lay preaching, including during the time reserved for the homily; a renewed conversation about the appropriate oversight by bishops of Catholic health care systems, and criminal punishment for the failure to report to civilian authorities in cases of sexually abusive priests (which has wide support among survivors of clerical sexual violence).^v

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II. Erasure

One of the things one will notice when reading magisterial documents is the erasure of women’s voices. Even though women have been contributing to the theological academy not only in the area of feminist theology but also in the areas of biblical hermeneutics, historical theology, hagiography, sacred music, liturgy, homiletics, and ethics—and other subdisciplines of theology – those women’s voices are not cited in the authoritative teachings of the church. The reluctance to cite female theologians has a significant impact on those who read magisterial teachings because what it communicates is that women’s voices don’t matter in shaping authoritative teachings.

Now I don't mean to suggest that all women agree on everything or that women's voices, were they to be cited, would be univocal. However, the absence of those voices clearly *already sends a message* that women's voices don't matter in the construction of church teachings. And this is the case even though women have had decades of access to seminary education and doctoral training in theology, and feminist scholars have contributed significantly to every subdiscipline in theology.

One of the clear messages, then, it seems to me, that we need to be forwarding as feminist scholars in the church is this very basic message: **WE ARE HERE**. We are here, we are here, we are here.^{vi}

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III. Seminary Formation

The *Program of Priestly Formation*, now in its 6th edition,^{vii} diminishes the influence of Catholic feminist theologians, and restricts the opportunities for seminarians to learn about the exciting breadth and depth of Catholic scholarship today. The reality of ecclesial patriarchy creates a credibility gap described by moral philosophers as *epistemic injustice* leading to women experiencing "an unjust deficit of credibility," as explained by Miranda Fricker.^{viii} Natalia Imperatori-Lee explains that in the Roman Catholic Church, "women have not been considered reliable witnesses to their own lives, or faith, or the faith of the church that they love."^{ix}

According to the Program of Priestly Formation: Catechesis has a "prominent place" in the seminary curriculum,^x and moral theology focuses on magisterial teachings, "including absolute moral norms."^{xi} Seminary faculty should ensure that "particular attention [is] paid to the synthesis of the Christian moral life in the writings of [the 13th century saint] St. Thomas Aquinas."^{xii}

The assumptions of the document are that seminarians are being trained to inform parishioners about God's will for their lives; priests-in-training are not trained to listen to how the Spirit is already moving within the lives of lay people in the parish. For example: "Priests are called upon to assist the faithful in the formation of a sound moral conscience in accord with Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and magisterial teaching." The document explains that "the pastoral goal [is] gently but consistently fostering the love of God and neighbor; this is especially important in the areas of sexuality and family life."^{xiii} Everything is evaluated "in light of the Magisterium of the Church."^{xiv}

The authoritarian mindset present here and elsewhere within the Program of Priestly Formation has devastating consequences for the treatment of women in ordinary parish settings. It sets us up to be *preached at* instead of *listened to*; *prayed over* instead of *prayed with*; *shamed* instead of *accompanied*.

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Let me give some examples from my current research on reproductive injustice. Half of pregnancies today are pregnancies that women and girls do not deliberately choose.^{xv} A UN study of women in 64 countries reported that “only 57 percent of women are able to make their own decisions over their sexual and reproductive health and rights (United Nations, 2022).”^{xvi} When women discern what to do when facing an unplanned pregnancy, a major factor in their decision-making is the support they can expect in raising the child—support from their sexual partner, support from family and friends, financial support, structural support. Women with unplanned pregnancies often feel that they are “stuck” —caught between nonnegotiable moral obligations that compete—to use the language of ethicist Kate Jackson-Meyer, “many tragic dilemmas are the result of unjust social structures.”^{xvii} The current abortion bans are deepening inequities already apparent in access to sexual health and reproductive health services, especially for communities of color.^{xviii}

Reproductive loss is not uncommon in women’s bodily experience. An estimated 23 million miscarriages occur each year worldwide; estimations are difficult because some miscarriages occur before a pregnant person knows that she is pregnant.^{xix} Stillbirth affects 1 in 175 pregnancies.^{xx} Approximately thirty percent of pregnancies end in induced abortion.^{xxi} Nearly one in four women will have an abortion before the age of 45, including women who sit by you in church on Sunday.

However, even among women, there is often a reluctance to discuss experiences of reproductive loss because of the nature of stigma and shame that women report. Silence in sacred spaces can lead to loneliness and confusion when Catholic women experiencing reproductive loss feel abandoned by their faith communities.^{xxii} Such experiences do not contribute to healing in body, mind, and soul after reproductive loss.

Women’s experiences of reproductive loss vary considerably, and yet the bodily nature of this loss presents very real challenges for a male-led hierarchical church in the sense that pregnancy loss is experienced by “the other” so men report on this experience not from their own personal awareness but from their interpretation of (or projection of) women’s narratives. If women’s testimonies are undervalued and not considered authoritative, how then can leaders of the church teach honestly about something they have not and cannot experience? The experiential gap creates epistemological hurdles for the church. Epistemological honesty, humility, and listening are prerequisites for a Catholic approach to reproductive justice.

The curriculum of seminary formation is rooted in distrust of women’s contributions to the life of the church; when it is rewritten, women should be at the table.

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IV. Gender Scripts in Society and in Church

Gender roles vary by culture and time, but too often gender roles perpetuate male power over women.

Women in some rural communities shoulder an unequal burden of gathering water and wood for their families; the UN reports that collectively women spend 40 billion hours a year collecting water.^{xxiii} There are five million fewer girls than boys in primary school.^{xxiv} Girls with higher levels of education are less likely to get married at an early age. Child marriage practices persist around the world; globally, 12 million girls each year are married before the age of 18.^{xxv} Child marriage is not forbidden in the Code of Canon Law, which must be reformed in this matter.^{xxvi}

Women may hold up half the sky, but we don't even have half of the speaking parts in film. Fewer than a third of the speaking or named characters in film are female roles.^{xxvii} In Catholic Churches, women have fewer speaking parts as well; women cannot preach the homily at Mass.^{xxviii} Cristiane Murray, director of the Vatican Press Office, acknowledges that "the goal of equality is still some way off" for gender equality in the Catholic Church.^{xxix}

The gender scripts in the Catholic Church tell the faithful how to act—they provide a roadmap for what is considered appropriate in the Christian moral life.

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Following John Paul II and Benedict XVI, Pope Francis asserted in *Amoris Laetitia* that "biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated" (56).^{xxx} Men should be masculine; women should be feminine. But what does this even mean?

In some places, Francis seems to approve of changing gender roles in family and society; he seems to acknowledge that gender roles change over time and are culturally bound.

"Nowadays, we acknowledge as legitimate and indeed desirable that women wish to study, work, develop their skills and have personal goals" (173).

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He goes on: "There can be a certain flexibility of roles and responsibilities, depending on the concrete circumstances of each particular family." (175). And further: "it is also true that masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories. It is possible, for example, that a husband's way of being masculine can be flexibly adapted to the wife's work schedule. Taking on domestic chores or some aspects of raising children does not make him any less masculine or imply failure, irresponsibility or cause for shame." (286). Francis goes on to say that it is important to reject rigid gender norms, including norms that would say that "it is not really masculine to cultivate art or dance, or not very feminine to exercise leadership." (286). In these places within *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis seems to be stretching what we would consider to be "traditional" gender norms within magisterial teachings. This is an important step forward.

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But in other places, gender roles are presented in stereotypical ways, and as if they are fixed and normative for all; for example, in *Amoris Laetitia* men are said to offer “protection and support” in family life—this is how they “live their masculinity” (55). Fathers teach children to recognize the limits of life, teach what hard work means (175). Fathers have inherent “authority,” (176). Francis repeats John Paul II’s claim that women have a “feminine genius” and that “their specifically feminine abilities—*motherhood in particular*—also grant duties, because womanhood also entails a specific mission in this world” (173). Francis says that mothers testify to the beauty of life, prevent the spread of individualism, and witness to tenderness (174).

Why these gender-specific roles? Francis falls into patterns by which men are described on the basis of their strength, authority, and power; while women are described on the basis of their nurturing behavior, tenderness, and other-directed love. Such gender scripts perpetuate gender-based inequalities in marriage and family life, even as the pope claims to want to promote gender equality in society and in the family.^{xxxii} It is these scripts that lead to devastating statistics of domestic violence, as men assume divinely sanctioned “power and authority” over women in their homes, and women are expected to submit, obey, and sacrifice without counting the cost.

These scripts can also be damaging for lesbian, gay, bisexual, non-binary, transgendered, intersex, and queer youth and adults who are trying to make their way in the world. We see high rates of depression, anxiety, and even suicide among LGBTQ youth today—youth who are seeking a place to be themselves, to be the people God created them to be. Research shows us that gender scripts are variable, but we have not yet seen that research fully inform Catholic teachings.^{xxxiii}

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A Way Forward: Our work as doulas for the birthing of a transformed church

The Spirit is inviting feminist-minded believers in the Catholic Church to be spiritual doulas for the church’s upcoming transitions.

A doula is someone who provides support and guidance to those who are going through major life transitions. Doulas are most commonly known for their work accompanying pregnant people through the late phases of gestation, childbirth, and postpartum recovery; but in fact doulas work in other settings too, including accompaniment of women during miscarriage, induced abortion, and stillbirth, and even in hospice care, accompanying people through the process of diminishment and dying. Doulas have various roles depending on the situation: they can be **educators**, telling the person what to expect during the transition, teaching the person how to navigate difficulties during the transition; they can be **cheerleaders**, offering

encouragement during times of pain, struggle, and fear; they can be **witnesses**, observing and documenting the sacred transition for loved ones. A doula communicates: *You are not alone. You can do this. Even when it is hard, I will be here to support you.*

I'm told that in Spanish, one of the ways of translating "doula" is **acompañante**, or "one who accompanies."^{xxxiii} This word, of course, is related to a word that Pope Francis has invoked repeatedly in his pontificate: acompañamiento, or accompaniment. Pope Francis uses this word as a reminder that Jesus issued a call to accompany others, to walk with others, on the journey of life.

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Action Plan: full inclusion of women, prioritizing structural change

Pope Francis has already admitted that "we need a healthy dose of self-criticism" (AL36). If the church is a sacrament in the world, the persistence of misogyny in the church's own structures is a scandal and undermines the church's witness to the gospel.

As we work as doulas for the church in her transition to the full inclusion of women and just structures of ecclesial life, women should be at every table where decisions are made. Leaders of congregations of women religious should be esteemed consultants for Pope Francis as regularly as his top pool of advisors drawn from the College of Cardinals.^{xxxiv} Bishops should do more than "listen" to women.

I am advocating for incremental but substantive reforms. The synodal process that is currently underway, is a positive development that enables greater opportunities for encounter. But even the synod process lacks equal representation of women in its final stages. By revising canon law, citing women theologians in ecclesial documents, revising and updating the program of priestly formation, and rejecting problematic gender norms, we can foster greater gender justice in ecclesial spaces. Let me share a local perspective.

In the Diocese of San Diego, I was privileged to serve as a theologian for the Synod on the Family in 2017, and a recorder for my parish listening session in preparation for our current global synod, as well as on a team of scholars and ministers who worked together in a collaborative project called The Future of Faith, at the University of San Diego. My experiences in our local synod have taught me the value of asking ordinary Catholics in the pews about how our current ecclesial structures foster their faith, and how our current ecclesial structures impose barriers to their full flourishing in the church. All diocesan reports are available on the diocesan website.^{xxxv} Our Future of Faith team also organized listening sessions, focusing on women and youth in our local church, and we offered our recommendations to Cardinal McElroy at the conclusion of our process.^{xxxvi} Those recommendations included:

The creation of a women's speakers bureau for the diocese, which would list Catholic women prominently on the diocesan website, so that they can be identified as individuals willing to

share their time and expertise with faith communities (we envisioned women with demonstrated expertise in pastoral care and counseling, spiritual direction, theology, Catholic education, family therapy, grief counselors, doulas and midwives, new mom support teams, and others). A subset of women trained in homiletics would be listed as available to provide gospel reflections in Catholic liturgies at the invitation of the local pastor.

A women's advisory council for the diocese: this group of women appointed by the Bishop would meet with him quarterly to serve in an advisory capacity. The women's council would complement the existing presbyteral council, which is not open to women, and the existing Sister's Council and Diocesan Pastoral council, which are open to women.

A synod on women at the diocesan level. A third proposal that emerged encouraged Cardinal McElroy to hold a diocesan Synod on Women, with participants from all parishes. Having already implemented a successful Synod on Family and Synod on Youth, our thinking was that we could build on the knowledge gained from the structures of those meetings, but focus the next Synod on the needs, aspirations, and goals of Catholic women in San Diego. When women are restored to the ordained diaconate, we want to be ready.

These recommendations have not been implemented, but some of these ideas have surfaced again in our diocesan dialogues about the ongoing synod on synodality.

I conclude by saying: I am ready to serve as a doula for my local church as we work to fully include women and to prioritize structural change. My message?

You are not alone. You can do this. Even when it is hard, I will be here to support you.

ⁱ <https://marchforlife.org/national-march-for-life/>

ⁱⁱ For example: <https://cacatholic.org/prop1>

ⁱⁱⁱ In a letter to Robert Hooke in 1675, Isaac Newton made his most famous statement: “If I have seen further it is by standing *on the shoulders of Giants*”. Chaomei Chen, “On the Shoulders of Giants,” *Mapping Scientific Frontiers*, 135-166.

^{iv} <https://religionnews.com/2023/01/13/traditionalists-reform-and-women/>

^v <https://verdict.justia.com/2021/06/24/reforming-the-vaticans-code-of-canon-law-metoo-insights-and-zero-tolerance>

^{vi} [Dr. Seuss image Horton Hears a Who <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xiD29CfPe0o>]

^{vii} <https://usccb.cld.bz/Program-of-Priestly-Formation-6th-edition/6/>

^{viii} Miranda Fricker explains epistemic injustice as the reality of powerlessness among marginalized groups to have their lived experiences received by others. See Miranda Fricker, “Evolving Concepts of Epistemic Injustice,” *Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, eds. Ian James Kidd, Jose Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr (2017). Epistemic injustice leads to “an unjust deficit of credibility.” Miranda Fricker and Katharine Jenkins, “Epistemic Injustice, Ignorance, and Trans Experience,” *Routledge Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Garry, Khader, and Stone (2017).

^{ix} Natalia Imperatori-Lee, “Father Knows Best: Theological ‘Mansplaining’ and the Ecclesial War on Women,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol. 31, No. 2 (2015): 89-107, at 90. See also Margaret Farley, “The Role of Experience in Moral Discernment,” in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James F. Childress (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 134-145; Laurie Johnston, “Christian Ethics and Experience,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Ethics*, ed. Tobias Winright (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 27-35.

^x No. 329

^{xi} No. 331.

^{xii} No. 331.

^{xiii} No. 332.

^{xiv} No. 348.

^{xv} Bearak et al, 2020, as cited in UNFPA Seeing the Unseen, 9. 121 million pregnancies each year are unintended (331,000 per day on average), according to UNFPA, 10.

^{xvi} Of “partnered women of reproductive age in 64 countries,” “23 percent are unable to say no to sex, 24 percent are unable to make decisions about their own health care and 8 percent are unable to make decisions specifically about contraception. UNFPA, 20.

^{xvii} Kate Jackson-Meyer, *Tragic Dilemmas in Christian Ethics*, 163.

^{xviii} Guttmacher website 1-17-2023

^{xix} <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33915094/>. <https://www.marchofdimes.org/find-support/topics/miscarriage-loss-grief/miscarriage>.

^{xx} <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/stillbirth/facts.html#:~:text=How%20Many%20Babies%20Are%20Stillborn,stillborn%20in%20the%20United%20States.&text=That%20is%20about%20the%20same,the%20first%20year%20of%20life>.

^{xxi} https://www.who.int/health-topics/abortion#tab=tab_1.

^{xxii} Scholars have noted how stigma impacts women’s sense of safety and prevents them from honestly sharing their stories of reproductive loss. See Anuradha Kumar, “Conceptualizing Abortion Stigma” *Culture, Health, & Sexuality* vol 11, no. 6 (2009): 625-639; Alison Norris, “Abortion Stigma: A Reconceptualization of Constituents, Causes, and Consequences” *Women’s Health Issues*, vol 21, no. 3 (2011): S49-S54; Edna Astbury-Ward, “Stigma, Abortion, and Disclosure—Findings from a Qualitative Study” *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, vol 9 no. 12 (2012): 3137-3147.

^{xxiii} <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/ruralwomen/facts-figures.html>

^{xxiv} https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/default/files/Girls_fact_sheet.pdf

^{xxv} Data from UNICEF, “Girls Not Brides,” <https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/about-child-marriage/where-child-marriage-happens/>.

^{xxvi} Can. 1083 §1. A man before he has completed his sixteenth year of age and a woman before she has completed her fourteenth year of age cannot enter into a valid marriage. Canon 1096 par. 1 reads “For matrimonial consent to exist, the contracting parties must be at least not ignorant that marriage is a permanent partnership between a man and a woman ordered to the procreation of offspring by means of some sexual cooperation.” Par. 2 reads: “This ignorance is not presumed after puberty.” Canon 1071/6 reads: “Except in a case of necessity, a person is not to assist without the permission of the local ordinary at a marriage of a minor child when the parents are unaware or reasonably opposed.” These canons are long overdue for significant reform based on a developmental understanding of persons and the human dignity of children and women.

^{xxvii} Stacy Smith, Marc Choueiti, and Katherine Pieper, *Gender Bias without Borders: An Investigation of Female Characters in Popular Films Across 11 Countries* (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media with University of Southern California Meda, Diversity, & Social Change Initiative, 2016), <https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/gender-bias-without-borders-full-report.pdf>.

^{xxviii} Code 767 par. 1. https://www.vatican.va/archive/cod-iuris-canonici/eng/documents/cic_lib3-cann756-780_en.html#CHAPTER_I.

^{xxix} Dulle, America, 25.

^{xxx} Here, AL 56 cites *Relatio Finalis* 58. That document claims “Christianity proclaims that God created humanity as male and female, and blessed them to form one flesh and transmit life (cf. *Gen* 1: 27-28; 2, 24). Their difference, in equal personal dignity, is God’s seal of goodness on creation. According to the Christian principle, soul and body, as well as biological sex (*sex*) and socio-cultural role of sex (*gender*), can be distinguished but not separated.”

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20151026_relazione-finale-xiv-assemblea_en.html

^{xxxi} “If care work for the vulnerable and for creation is an ecological virtue, it must be shared by all. For this to truly happen, care work must first be problematized from the perspective of gender: Who does the care work (race, gender, ethnicity)? Why? For whose interests? What structures reinforce this? Without a critique of patriarchy that thrives on a complementary view of gender roles as fixed, with men as the primary breadwinners and women as the primary caretakers, our discourse will simply maintain the current division of care labor in the family and in society.” According to Agnes M. Brazal, “Ethics of Care in *Laudato Si*: A Postcolonial Ecofeminist Critique” *Feminist Theology* 29:3 (2021): 220-233, at 226-227.

^{xxxii} See Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio, eds., *Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives* (Liturgical, 2020), especially the following chapters: Cristina Traina, “How Gendered Is Marriage”; Craig Ford Jr “Born that Way?”

^{xxxiii} Abortion with Love podcast conversation between Camila and Isabel:

<https://www.abortionwithlove.com/episodes/en-conversacin-con-una-acompaante>

^{xxxiv} A suggestion forwarded in Dulle, *America*.

^{xxxv} [Sdcatholic.org/synod](https://www.sdcatholic.org/synod)

^{xxxvi} This program was funded by a Strategic Initiatives Grant to the Center for Catholic Thought and Culture, University of San Diego. Committee members included Bridget Gramme, Jeffrey Burns, Christine Watson, Erin Bishop, Maureen Day, Laura Martin-Spencer, Stacy Wells, and Emily Reimer-Barry. Avary Kent from [conveners.org](https://www.conveners.org) facilitated the meetings. Our website is

<https://www.sandiego.edu/cctc/women-in-the-church/>