

Introduction

Living with the Past, Envisioning the Future

Countless women around the world find ourselves rooted in Catholic traditions while simultaneously yearning for a church that will grow with us and become something better than—and for—us. Despite our love for the richness of the Catholic culture, many of us cannot forgive the church’s continual and persistent failure of so many of its constituents, particularly women. The #MeToo movement has inspired many women to share stories in protest against sexual assault, and it has motivated Roman Catholic women to speak out, too. Anyone who has seen the Netflix series *The Watchers*, which shows women active in researching and revealing the truth about such issues, would be hard pressed to keep their faith in the Catholic Church and its clergy, who undertake, participate in, and cover up the sexual abuse of young girls and boys by Catholic priests.

Pope Francis has made some movement toward progress in the church by advocating for the poor and supporting environmental conservation, and he has even made overtures toward women by commissioning two consecutive studies regarding the possibility of the diaconate for lay women and women religious (for which there is historical precedent in the early but not the modern church, and for which there is long-time precedent in other Christian faiths). Furthermore, as contributor Celia Wexler points out in her recent article in *NBC News’s* “Think,” “Pope Frances named the first woman to a managerial position in the Vatican’s most important

office, the Secretariat of State.”¹ He has also loosened the communion restrictions on divorced and remarried Catholics.

Yet his reforms have been limited at best. For one, he has only just begun to support the victims of clergy sexual abuse. While Francis in 2014 appointed a commission for the protection of minors, it wasn’t until August 2018 that Pope Francis released a letter, acknowledging the failures of the church: “We did not act in a timely manner, realizing the magnitude and the gravity of the damage done to so many lives. We showed no care for the little ones.”² And Francis has been particularly disappointing to women’s groups seeking equality in the church hierarchy. As Wexler further points out, the first woman in the Secretariat did not replace a man but rather was offered a new title for continuing to do work she was already doing. And as of this writing, no progress has been made on women’s ordination to the diaconate, and the ordination of women to the priesthood remains a non-starter. Moreover, calling women theologians “the strawberry on the cake” of the Catholic Church can hardly be viewed as anything other than the Pope patronizing women.³

We thus want to explore the future of women in the Catholic Church—a future that, we hope, will go beyond serving as a pretty dessert topping and, instead, actively include the work and aspirations of real women. In our three previous volumes in our *Unruly Women Writers* series, we attempted to demonstrate the ways in which women engage with the Roman Catholic Church in their writings and in their daily lives. Our first anthology, *The Catholic Church and Unruly Women Writers: Critical Essays* (Palgrave Macmillan 2007), examined both canonical and noncanonical literature, across history and geography, exploring how women writers have been responding to, rebelling against, and reclaiming elements of the Catholic Church from medieval times to the present. Our second collection, *Unruly Catholic Women Writers: Creative Responses to Catholicism* (SUNY Press 2013), offered creative pieces—short stories, poems, personal essays, drama—on this same topic of unruly Catholic women to demonstrate how women express their varying and often-changing relationships with the Catholic Church. Our third volume, *Unruly Catholic Nuns: Sisters’ Stories* (SUNY Press

2017), focused specifically on the stories of women religious, current and former, and the ways in which they have spent their lives in struggle with and for the institutional church.

Moving from past to present to future, our newest anthology examines the possibilities and potentials of the roles, responsibilities, and regulations of women in the church, as third- and fourth-wave feminists write about and examine the issues, reforms, progress, and development of new spiritual activism. Here we explore how women are coming to terms with their feminism and Catholicism in the twenty-first century, and we include as well the voices of those who have left the Roman Catholic Church, examining their reasons and their alternative pursuits. Our volume embodies a spiritually, morally, and ethnically diverse group of writers, some of whom have Latinx and indigenous roots, to reflect the changing populations of Catholic congregants and the ways in which the church continues to spread its roots throughout the diaspora.

In the introduction to her recent book *Catholic Women Confront Their Church*,⁴ Celia Wexler outlines some of these trends: primacy of conscience, importance of social justice, rejection of the church's opposition to women priests, doubt that ordination is enough, appreciation of Pope Francis but skepticism about what he can do, and faith that transcends the institutional church. Our collection addresses similar issues but focuses more on self-identified third- and fourth-wave feminists, with an eye to the future of the Catholic Church. While fourth-wave feminism is still a work in progress, there has been much critical literature on third-wave feminism. In defining our collection, we rely on R. Claire Snyder's definitive essay, "What is Third Wave Feminism?," which delicately works through the third wave's intimate connection with trends already present in second-wave feminism, its problematic yet liberating use of postmodern antifoundationalist discourses, and its utopian strivings for a better future.⁵ Snyder also calls attention to the third wave as "feminism without exclusion," noting that "third-wave feminism necessarily embraces a philosophy of nonjudgment."⁶

Such issues remain active in the fourth wave as well, but fourth-wave feminism also embraces body positivity, celebrating

“empowering representations of bodies of different shapes, sizes, colors, and abilities”; most notably, it is also digitally driven.⁷ Critics point out that the fourth wave continues to evolve, and Prudence Chamberlain presents it as an “‘affective temporality,’ in which a specific period of time engages with and produces affect that in turn engages with and fuels activism.”⁸ She also highlights how technology has enabled individual women to work together to call out sexism, and how the speed and rapidity of communication facilitate that activism.⁹

We recognize the limitations of the wave terminology for feminism; we are aware that feminist activism was alive and well between the first and second waves, and we are cognizant of the overlap among the waves: for example, a middle-aged feminist today might be considered a third waver by generation but feel much more inclined toward second-wave feminists, because those were the women who taught and mentored her. Similarly, third- and fourth-wave feminists should not be limited by age group. However, we find the wave distinctions useful for categorization purposes and so employ them here.

Accordingly, we have organized this volume in relation to three areas that evoke the third- and fourth-wave issues raised by our contributors: domestic and global social justice, sexuality and motherhood, and spiritual activism and utopian vision. Many of the works included here feature, of course, more than one of these topics, but our goal is to demonstrate how the pieces work with each other and contribute to a conversation about women’s roles in the Roman Catholic Church.

Thus, many of our writers address issues of social justice, which, both domestically and internationally, have become even more applicable within feminism and Roman Catholicism. While social justice has a long tradition in the Catholic Church, the church has prohibited, ignored, or denounced some of the issues most vital to feminists. Reproductive rights remain forbidden, racism and sexism do not inspire the opposition they should, and despite the church’s opposition to abortion and alleged commitment to human rights, there are many examples of the church’s lack of care and action for people with disabilities. While specific religious orders

within the church and individual Roman Catholic leaders work for social justice, the international church has not acted on calls from active feminists to speak out on these issues—and to clean its own house. Teresa Cariño, a Filipina pastoral associate inspired by the election of a Latino Pope, remains disappointed: “‘Catholic youth are leaving the church,’ she said, as they have grown disillusioned with the pace of change. ‘Why stay when there are so many reasons to leave?’ is what she hears from her contemporaries.”¹⁰

Our contributors, then, address intercultural and interdenominational issues, diversity, human rights, reproductive rights, work, pedophilia in priests, progress and backlash, women’s rights and whistleblowers, violence, disability rights, Black Lives Matter, Native American rights, and healthcare. Some demonstrate how certain areas of social justice have seen progress, and others show how women have had to work around the church to address their concerns. For example, art and worship related to Our Lady of Guadalupe, who has been reinterpreted and embraced internationally as well as increasingly in the United States, show how feminist women can personally rewrite a story and retain inspirational qualities of their family’s faith tradition.¹¹ However, other women, still deeply attached to tradition, face challenges when specific cases of social justice and religious values and beliefs come into conflict. Such conflicts can lead to exceptionally difficult decisions, and the church’s strict adherence to doctrine often leaves little room for the consideration of the individual. An expanded understanding of ethnic and cultural diversity, as well as awareness of the impact on women of decisions made by an all-male clergy, infuses the pieces in this volume. While there are signs of generational divide and growth over time, concern, anger, and challenges remain.

Our second category, sexuality and motherhood, addresses two issues that are not always related but that remain major topics of conversation and contention generally, as well as ones in which contemporary Roman Catholic women have more choices than previous generations. Long-familiar topics such as menstruation and reproductive rights remain in active contention, as do questions about interfaith and same-sex marriages. As these issues have developed over time, many have come to the forefront of

the conversation, such as the open, public discussion about the anger that stems from clergy abuse and its cover-up. There are movements within the church to confront pedophilia by priests, as in the development of #CatholicToo, inspired by #MeToo and established by liberal feminist religious organizations.¹²

Positive images arise in these conversations as well, such as the individuals and organizations within the U.S. church exploring and tackling issues that the international Roman Catholic Church avoids. One inspiring national story by an ordained deacon demonstrates the learning, development, and acceptance within his community of a child who came out as transgender.¹³ Inspired by feminist theology and feminism more generally, our writers also present Jesus as female or God as mother, redefining gender and gendered language. These stories give us hope during bleak political times and religious crises, and we are grateful to our contributors' various and often positive perspectives.

These active revisions of gender also insist upon spiritual activism and lead many of our writers to envision potential utopias. Memories of the waves of radical rethinking of church practices inspired by the Second Vatican Council—including the adoption of vernacular languages, the emergence of women religious from the habit and movement out into the world, and the welcoming of diversity into the pews—cannot be erased by the recent revision/re-version of the liturgy back to patriarchal language or by the Vatican's attack on American nuns. Such attempts to control women's language and agency have only increased women's understanding of ritual, incited women to organize, and inspired women to write their own prayers and develop their own worship.

Similarly, many Roman Catholics find ways to retain the family religious traditions that they knew from their childhood but to adapt these traditions to their own adult beliefs. Some have cultural and familial ties to the church and separate themselves from specific points that trouble them. Feminist theologians offer information, interpretation, and answers to some of our burning questions.¹⁴ Some women actively depart from the church, finding another faith tradition or living without active faith; others

find ways to peacefully embrace active worship within the church, working with what they have learned; still others create new rites and rituals. Journalist Pythia Peay describes such movements in “Feminism’s Fourth Wave”: “At gatherings big and small, many are realizing that putting themselves in the service of the world is feminism’s next step. Especially at a time when the United States is viewed with increasing distrust by other countries, feminism’s shift cultivating a spiritually informed activism may help to repair our diplomatic ties.”¹⁵ Perhaps it will also save our future.

Our contributors thus address multiple issues directly related to third- and fourth-wave feminism and continue the conversation women have had in and with the Catholic Church for centuries. In keeping with our first three volumes, the pieces included here cover varied geographic and ethnic points of view as well as showcase a variety of genres and perspectives. We hope that this book, too, will make a significant contribution to both literary and women’s studies because it asks women to write about their experiences with Roman Catholicism and their visions for the future, and it offers contemporary women authors the opportunity to express those experiences as they are lived.

We the editors also have our own stories to tell. We have been reading and publishing the stories of other women for years, and we believe it is time to provide our own perspectives as well, even if only briefly. Thus, Jeana writes,

I recently went to the funeral of the father of an old and dear friend from my hometown. I saw another old friend there—someone with whom I had attended Catholic schools for what, at the time, seemed like our whole lives: from kindergarten through high school. As we sat together during the service in the funeral home, saying the prayers together—the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Glory Be—it occurred to me to wonder how many times she and I had sat next to each other reciting our prayers over the years. And while it had been at least thirty years since we had said those—or

any—prayers together, and almost that long since we had had a conversation of more than a few pleasantries, it nonetheless felt incredibly familiar and comfortable. Like coming home.

This is what the Catholic Church does for so many of us. It ground us in a tradition that never leaves us: despite our wanderings, our detours, or even our outright rejections. It gives us a solid foundation in faith and spirituality, often so absent from the lives of our colleagues, our neighbors, our friends, our children. It bathes us in doctrine and dogma, infusing our minds with the wealth of knowledge, cultural heritage, religious symbolism, and allusions that inform our reading, our writing, and our daily living. It enriches our thinking, feeling, and acting in the world.

Leigh shares,

As a cradle Episcopalian, I am grateful that my faith tradition has maintained its three-legged stool—scripture, tradition, and reason—and now embraces the Jesus movement: a loving, liberating, and life-giving God. As our society changes and becomes generally more welcoming and inclusive, most of the Episcopal Church does, too. These points became more active to me when I married. When preparing to marry a Roman Catholic, I worked with both churches. My Episcopal priest, married to a Roman Catholic herself, highlighted the shared beliefs and liturgies of the faiths, and my husband's Roman Catholic priest accepted an interfaith wedding. We were grateful that priests of both traditions led the wedding itself.

However, our first Catholic Mass together after our wedding featured a homily that instructed wives to obey their husbands and make caring for their house and their children their focus in life. Meanwhile, my own religious tradition continued to develop feminist theol-

ogy and came to ordain gay priests and bishops and to celebrate same-sex weddings. It also saw issues of social justice and liberation theology, originally rooted in the Roman Catholic tradition, become more and more active. So I continue to embrace my own faith tradition while remaining fascinated by the Roman Catholic Church, particularly its many inspirational nuns and challenging writers and theologians.

Ana remembers,

My Spanish mother was not granted an annulment from her first husband until 1979, twenty-five years after marrying her second husband, my father. While the most positive way to describe my parents' relationship with the Roman Catholic church might be "semi-practicing," they were emphatic about giving their daughter a thorough Catholic experience in her childhood—at least through First Communion. This included building a strong relationship with my Godmother—my *Madrina*—my father's first cousin and a former nun who left the convent to teach at a Catholic elementary school in the Baltimore area.

The relationship with my *Madrina* over the years, until she passed away in 2004, helped me, in turn, to form a complex relationship with the church. The rest of my family had abandoned *Madrina* when she openly began a relationship with another woman in the 1960s. However, my parents and the church never turned their backs on her, and so I saw her regularly. After her partner left her, and as she grew older and eventually quite frail, the church took her free of cost into a magnificent Senior Care facility north of the city, where I continued to visit her until her passing. Despite *Madrina's* unconventional lifestyle, she held onto her faith, and the church was there with her—unlike most of her family—until the very end. My *Madrina* was as

much an inspiration as the unruly nuns I studied academically. Her life enriched my thinking, doing, and feeling in the world.

Reflecting on the future is an active question at this singular moment in the very long history of the Roman Catholic Church. While change might be slow to come, just the promise of progress may provide hope for women struggling with the conflicts between their church and their sense of their own spirituality. We invite the readers to think of your own stories as you read ours and those of our contributors (and perhaps write and share them, too!). The questions we hope to raise and illuminate by this collection will provide a vital corrective to the contemporary understanding of women's relationships to Catholicism. Rather than simply oppressing or containing women, Catholicism, for many women, drives or inspires us to challenge literary, social, political, or religious hierarchies. In a time when questions of gender and sexuality provoke intense debate within Catholicism and other Christian traditions, and when religion is more and more frequently invoked in political rhetoric, it is imperative to publish works that address women's debates and struggles with the church. Along with other Christian traditions, as well as Judaism and Islam, Catholicism continues to exist as a powerful force in women's lives; by examining how women attempt to reconcile our unruliness with our Catholic backgrounds or conversions and our future hopes and dreams, the editors and contributors to this volume will offer new perspectives on gender and religion today.

Notes

1. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/pope-francis-put-woman-top-vatican-role-it-shows-how-ncna1119661>.

2. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2018-08/pope-francis-letter-people-of-god-sexual-abuse.html>.

3. Silvia Poggioli, "After Five Years As Pope, Francis' Charismatic Image Has Taken Some Hits," *All Things Considered*, NPR.org, March 12, 2018.

4. Rowman and Littlefield, 2016, 9–10.
5. *Signs* vol. 34, no. 1 (Autumn 2008): 175–96; 193.
6. *Ibid.*, 188.
7. Kristen Sollee, *Bustle*. October 30, 2015, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/119524-6-things-to-know-about-4th-wave-feminism>; accessed September 12, 2018.
8. Chamberlain, *Gender and Education*, vol. 2, no. 3: 458.
9. *Ibid.*, 462.
10. Peter Feuerherd, “Francis Still Falls Short with Catholic Women, Feminist Scholars Say,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 19, 2018; <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/francis-still-falls-short-catholic-women-feminist-scholars-say>; accessed September 18, 2018.
11. María Del Socorro Castañeda-Liles, *Our Lady of Everyday Life: La Virgen de Guadalupe and the Catholic Imagination of Mexican Women in America*. Oxford Scholarship Online, March 2018.
12. Kate McElwee, “#CatholicToo Organizations Condemn Recent Wave of Clergy Abuse Allegations, Thank Women Religious and Other Survivors For Coming Forward,” *Women’s Ordination Conference*, August 2, 2018; <https://www.womensordination.org/2018/08/02/catholic-too-organizations-condemn-recent-wave-of-clergy-abuse-allegations-thank-women-religious-and-other-survivors-for-coming-forward/>; accessed September 18, 2018.
13. Deacon Ray Dever, “Transgender and Catholic: A Parent’s Perspective,” *U.S. Catholic*, June 2018, <https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201805/transgender-and-catholic-31392>; accessed September 18, 2018.
14. In addition to extensive feminist theology, Elizabeth A. Johnson’s most recent book includes a conversation between a teacher and student: *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (New York: Orbis Books, 2018).
15. Pythia Peay, “Feminism’s Fourth Wave,” *Utne Reader*, March/April 2005; accessed September 18, 2018.