

Catholic and Feminist: Can One Be Both?

ELIZABETH FOX-GENOVESE

Can one be both Catholic and feminist? Many of us these days are asking the question, sometimes with considerable anguish. The real question, however, is why is this a question at all. Why do so many of us see the relations between Catholicism and feminists as problematic?

Until we can answer this, we will find it difficult to think constructively about the prior question of whether it is possible simultaneously to be both Catholic and feminist. Many of us, I suspect, think the answer to this question should be "yes," if only because we believe ourselves to be both. But knowing that others perceive irreconcilable conflicts between Catholicism and feminism, even the most optimistic of us is likely to pause. For we do know that even if we hope to reconcile the claims of Catholicism and feminism within our own beliefs and lives, most Catholics and most feminists would insist that such reconciliation is difficult if not impossible.



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The perceived difficulties originate in the allegedly incompatible demands that both Catholicism and feminism impose upon their adherents. Catholic teaching includes a series of prescriptions about human sexuality, fertility, and marriage. As Pope John Paul II and the Magisterium insist, Catholicism does not countenance sex outside of marriage or divorce and does require that sexual relations be open to reproduction, which, in practice, means refraining from the use of artificial contraception. In addition, Catholics are held to revere life in all its forms and hence to refrain from abortion, suicide, and assisted suicide, all of which are viewed as forms of murder. The Holy Father has further enjoined Catholics to oppose capital punishment in virtually all cases. These requirements apply equally to women and men, but there can be no doubt that their consequences, notably with respect to the prohibition against abortion, may appear to fall more heavily upon women.

In addition to forcefully underscoring the practices from which Catholics must refrain, the Holy Father has repeatedly emphasized the dignity of women as persons, acknowledged the abuse and injustice that has too frequently been inflicted upon women, and welcomed modern advances in women's worldly and professional equality with men. Praising "the culture of equality," he has written that "respect for the full equality of man and woman in every walk of life is one of civilization's greatest achievements." And he sadly acknowledges that "unfortunately even today there are situations in which women live, *de facto* if not legally, in a condition of inferiority." Such injustice makes it all the more "urgently necessary to cultivate everywhere a culture of equality, which will be lasting and constructive to the extent that it reflects God's plan."^[1]

The Pope's frequent remarks upon the dignity and vocation of women testify to his genuine concern to further steady improvement in women's traditional position, which has been historically, and throughout much of the world remains, one of subordination to men. To the disgust of feminists, however, he has also insisted upon women's specific genius, which includes responsibilities as well as rights. Women's right to equal treatment and respect, like their right to equal partnership in the mystery of redemption, derives from their equal value as persons in the eyes of God. And many of their responsibilities, like men's, derive from the same source. But women also have specific responsibilities that derive from their nature as women, notably their ability to bear new life and the special intimacy of their relation to it. Thus the Pope does, to be blunt, insist that in some essential ways women and men differ and that, in the measure that they do differ, must be acknowledged to have subtly different vocations.

On the face of it, many recent Catholic statements about the nature, dignity, and rights of women appear to have much in common with feminism. But, in this case, as in many others, everything depends upon the meaning we ascribe to the words Catholicism and feminism, and today the meaning of both is hotly contested. The core of feminism lies in the simple demand that women receive the same respect as men as independent, capable human beings. Yet the very simplicity of that demand raises as many questions as it answers. What does equal respect for women and men mean, and what does it require? If you listen to the more radical feminists, you would have to believe that feminism requires unlimited sexual freedom, complete individual autonomy, and absolute equality between women and men in all areas of life. For the radicals, feminism necessarily includes not merely personal dignity, freedom from sexual harassment and rape, and equal pay for equal work, but abortion on demand; sexual freedom for women, including the freedom to engage in extramarital affairs with men or women; lesbianism and bisexuality as coequal to heterosexuality, which is increasingly referred to as "heterosexism"; single-sex marriage; freedom from any special responsibility to children; single motherhood; no-fault divorce; equal participation in the military; and more. At a minimum, this agenda suggests that contemporary feminism, in its most radical and politically influential manifestations, has established itself as a resolutely, if not aggressively, secular program. In particular, in declaring uncompromising war against men's alleged domination over women and women's alleged enslavement to children, it has discredited, the ideals of service and sacrifice.

Feminists reason that women, as the victims of systematic and universal oppression, are entitled — perhaps obligated — to struggle against all of its protean manifestations, notably the ubiquitous instances of men's violence against women. Today, few Americans disagree, and most willingly support feminist campaigns against rape, the abuse of women and children, and *quid pro quo* sexual harassment. But feminists also find evidence of male violence in more ambiguous areas. Their favorite targets include, but are not limited to: the domestic division of labor, the distribution of political and occupational positions, styles of classroom teaching, standardized tests, male models of moral reasoning, scientific theory and practice, single-sex education for men, and professional sports. According to many feminists, all of these forms of violence and more may be traced to the patriarchal family and patriarchal religion, which together share primary responsibility for imprisoning women within constrictive social relations and demeaning interpretations of female nature.

Feminists seek to free women from the stereotype of womanhood that both the family and revealed religion have perpetrated upon them. And like many who seek liberation from what they experience as a condition of enslavement, they have tended to argue that freedom must mean the total repudiation or reversal of that condition. They have especially resented the tendency of churches and families to base their vision of women's roles upon assumptions about female nature, most notably female sexuality. Thus,

Feminists frequently link their campaign for women's sexual freedom to their campaign against family and religion, arguing, at the extreme, that to survive in the Christian churches, women must reclaim their sexuality from the male domination that Christianity has foisted upon them. In an attempt to impose their views, they have frequently — and with considerable success — turned to the government to implement them. To date, their campaigns against religion have primarily been waged within the churches, but some are now proposing that all churches be denied tax-exempt status unless they comply with an anti-patriarchal agenda in their allocation of institutional positions and use of language. For Catholicism, the implementation of this program would mean women priests and the deletion of all references to God the Father. For people of all faiths, it would signal the end of the constitutional separation of church and state.

The radicalism of some feminist attacks on religion was captured by the fourth and most recent "Re-imagining" conference, which began by inviting the participants to bite into one of the apples piled in bowls on the tables at which they were sitting. The point of the exercise was to reclaim Eve and, with her, a woman's right to the knowledge of good and evil. In a similar spirit, a school of Catholic feminist theologians has enthusiastically turned the tools of postmodern cultural analysis against the Virgin Mary, whom it has little patience — at least in the form in which the Church has presented her. And, at the same time, many ostensibly Christian feminists call for goddess or Sophia worship on the grounds that the Father God and Savior of Christianity do not reflect women's experience. These feminist critiques of patriarchal religion have begun to make a serious impact upon the churches, most of which suspect that they have not always treated their female members with the respect they deserve. But this laudable openness to acknowledge women's dignity may be blinding many to the nature of the challenge they are being asked to accommodate in a proper Christian spirit. For feminist demands upon the churches have inevitably and invariably hewn more closely to the imperatives of politically radical secularism than to those of Christianity.

Feminist rereadings of religion through the lens of secular concerns has a longer history than many may suspect. In 1848, at Seneca Falls, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a group of colleagues assembled to defend women's right to the same civic freedom as men enjoyed on the grounds that "all men and women are created equal."^[2] But even at Seneca Falls, Stanton turned her attention to the ways in which man held woman spiritually and morally hostage. "He has made her, morally, an irresponsible being," by assigning to her a different code of morals than that which obtains for man. In sum, "He has usurped the prerogative of Jehovah himself, claiming it as his right to assign for her a sphere of action, when that belongs to her and to no other."^[3]

Some years later, in *The Woman's Bible*, Stanton launched an open challenge to religious authority in the name of women's emancipation and self-determination. In a spirit that contemporary feminists would find entirely congenial, she insisted that women's freedom required liberation from artificial laws and customs that, by freeing women, would transform society.^[4] In *The Woman's Bible*, Stanton offered a series of harsh commentaries on the Old Testament, reproaching Moses for not having been "more merciful in his judgments of all witches, necromancers and soothsayers," who "possessed the same power and manifested 'many of the same wonders'" as he and who "should not have been so severely punished for their delusions."^[5]

Stanton nonetheless reserved her real fire for the New Testament, which she judged even less friendly to women. Rejecting the Christian claim that the New Testament brought "promises of new dignity and of greater liberties for women," she announced that women's inferior position is actually "more clearly and

phatically set forth by the Apostles than by the Prophets and the Patriarchs." [6] She especially deplored the position of Mary, whom she described as having belonged to the Jewish aristocracy. With this distinguished ancestry, Mary should have been granted a husband of her own rank rather than a humble craftsman. But then Stanton could not understand why Mary had to be human at all. "If a Heavenly Father is necessary, why not a Heavenly Mother? If an earthly Mother was admirable, why not an earthly mother?" Above all, she objected to the idea that Mary's motherhood of Jesus honored women as a sex. In her view, "a wise and virtuous son is more indebted to his mother than she is to him, and is honored only for reflecting her superior characteristics." These and similar complaints amply prepare Stanton's reader for her concluding observation that "Biblical mysteries and inconsistencies are a great strain on the credulity of an ordinary mind." [7]

Informed with a postmodern theory that insists upon the social construction of all religion, contemporary Catholic feminists are carrying Stanton's impatience with the Virgin Mother to new levels. They contend that Catholic moral theology, formulated by a misogynist male hierarchy, has used Mary to guarantee "the perpetuation of compulsory heterosexuality, the valorization of virginity, and the denigration of female sexuality." [8] Incensed by Pope John II's devotion to her, they insist that reverence for Mary as the virgin mother of God imprisons women within the traditional feminine stereotypes of virginity or heterosexual marriage. The scope and intricacy of the attack exceeds my purposes here, although it should give Christians pause to see Jesus described as an "illegitimate child." [9] Indeed, the prevailing feminist attitude toward Christian doctrine is well captured in Uta Ranke-Heinemann's title, *Putting Away Childish Things: the Virgin Birth, the Empty Tomb, and Other Fairy-Tales You Don't Need to Believe to Have a Living Faith*. [10]

Underscoring the fundamental secularists of most feminist goals, I am passing no judgment on the inherent worthiness of the goals themselves. Many of those goals, notably equal pay for equal work, are not merely admirable, but necessary as a matter of simple justice. Others may be open to civilized debate, but nonetheless reflect a serious attempt to permit women to move as freely in the world as men and to ally with men to enjoy the fruits of their talents and labor. But the worthiness of the goals should not blind us to their single-minded focus upon the goods of this world and, beyond them, to the liberation of the individual woman from binding ties or obligations to others. This inherent feminist secularism obviously poses serious problems for Catholic women, all the more since most feminists have tended to be hostile to Christianity and downright hostile to Catholicism. It is in this context that Rosemary Radford Ruether and Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, both Catholic feminist theologians, have joined the attack on the alleged oppression, patriarchalism, and male dominance that have deeply compromised Christianity.

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By many interlocking political and theological debates that pit feminists against Catholics and all orthodox Christians touch upon virtually every aspect of our society, culture, and faith. At their core, however, lies feminists' visceral hostility to Catholicism's male priesthood and opposition to abortion. Feminists see Catholic teaching on these and other matters as the negation of Catholicism's profession to honor the equal worth and dignity of women and men. Yet belief in the equal dignity of women and men lies at the heart of Catholicism. Catholicism has always insisted upon the freedom of each individual to follow or rebel against the Holy Spirit. Catholicism has always acknowledged the special dignity of women, the ideal of which is embodied by the Virgin Mary. Historically, these teachings coexisted with Catholicism's tacit or open acceptance of significant inequality between women and men. Recently, however, Catholic theologians, beginning with the holy Father, have increasingly insisted upon the fundamental equality of women and men. Consider, for example, the words of Pope John Paul II in *On the Dignity and Vocation of*

men: "both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image" [12].
 ther, however, can exist alone, but only "as a 'unity of the two,' and therefore *in relation to another
 nan person.*" For both women and men, "being a person in the image and likeness of God also involves
 sting in a relationship, in relation to the other "I" (25).

great twentieth-century theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, also insisted upon the exemplary quality
 he feminine for all human beings. Insisting that the word for "answer" or "response" is feminine, he
 w the lesson that "woman is essentially an answer [*Ant-wort*] in the most fundamental sense. . ."[12]
 "if man is the word that calls out, woman is the answer that comes to him at last" (254). Thus Balthasar
 stled with the same problem that angers feminists today, namely, how can the idea of equality between
 men and men be reconciled with the idea of man's primacy? Unlike feminists, however, Balthasar
 used to agree that the difference between men and women diminished women's dignity and
 ertance. To the contrary, he insisted that "the word that calls out only attains fulfillment when it is
 lertstood, accepted and given back as a word." In his view, man's dependence upon woman thus
 firms that "man can be primary and woman secondary" because "the primary remains unfulfilled
 out the secondary. The primary needs a partner of *equal rank and dignity* for its own fulfillment" (254).

oughout the most compelling modern Catholic teachings on the nature and dignity of woman runs this
 phasis upon a complementarity of women and men that in no way diminishes women's importance or
 rding. Indeed, if we follow Balthasar, man himself is "responsive" or feminine in relation to God. In this
 pect, it is tempting to argue that, as the answer that fulfills the word, women embody the exemplary
 nan posture — that of receptivity or confirmation. None of this has satisfied feminists who persist in
 eting the role of the word that is answered for themselves, presumably on the erroneous assumption
 t Catholics see a direct analogy between man and God and thus deify man in relation to woman. They
 not, and we might do well to recall that the teachings of the Church consistently question — indeed,
 y defy — the deification of any human being. If pride constitutes the first of the capital (mortal) sins and
 nility the first of the capital virtues, how do we insist upon the equality of women and men in the world
 he premier standard for Christianity?

nists would counter that their real object is to ensure the equality of women and men within the faith
 heir equal "personhood." Yet their equality of personhood has been there from the start. It is the
 ality of roles — of worldly authority, standing, and freedom — that is at issue. Neither Christianity in
 eral, nor Catholicism in particular, has taught that standing in the world testifies to a person's
 rthiness. If anything, they have taught the contrary. The Catholic Church's recent teaching on abortion
 mistakably focuses upon the intrinsic, spiritual value of the most impoverished and most vulnerable
 nan life, which has been created in God's image, not upon women's condemnation to the status of
 ond-class citizens.[13] The point of the prohibition against abortion is to protect human life, not to
 nean women. Women's bodies do bear children, which places women at special risk to live the direct
 isequences of the Church's teaching on life. Some might even hold God responsible for having given
 men such bodies, but the teaching on life bears no necessary relation to the Church's teaching on the
 je of women's personhood. Eve's punishment for her part in the fall was not to bear children, but to
 rg them forth in pain.

most, then, the Church implicitly acknowledges a difference between women, who can, and men, who
 not bear children. If anything, the Church celebrates women's ability to bear children as a reflection of
 ry's having borne Jesus and thereby having redeemed Eve's trespass. And, given the unique position of

ry, Queen of Heaven, in Catholicism, it seems difficult to argue that a reverence for women's ability to bear children demeans and oppresses women in religion or theology. That women's unique ability in this regard may, in some way, make their worldly lives more difficult or complicated is an entirely different question. Yet Christian feminists turn naturally to that worldly standard to imagine what women's dignity as Christians requires.

Feminists, including many Catholic feminists, regularly attack the Vatican's general conservatism, specifically its teaching on women "in which women's role is circumscribed, which underscores women's difference from men, and which romanticizes and exalts women's 'special' purpose and duty." And though they sometimes concede that the Vatican claims to agree with feminists that the position of women must be improved, they deplore its wish to link that improvement to "women's 'unique nature' as distinct from men." [14] Above all, these feminists cannot abide the thought that anyone, especially the Pope, might claim that women differ in any way from men, that women have a "unique nature," and that women have a special responsibility or vocation to ensure the well-being of families.

As more outraged they become at official Catholic pronouncements on these questions, the clearer it becomes that they detest the very idea that the capacity for or experience of motherhood might in any way distinguish women from men. And they angrily condemn the Pope's claims in *Evangelium Vitae* that it depends upon women "to promote a new feminism which rejects the temptation of imitating models of male domination," and that "the experience of motherhood makes you acutely aware of the other person, but at the same time, confers on you a particular task." [15] In writing thus, the Pope was arguing that women occupy a unique place, in thought and action, in the work of transforming culture so that it supports life. Now if these words are cause for objection, we are entitled to ask why. Do pro-choice Catholic feminists deny that women have a special affinity for the support of life? Do they want women to embrace the male model of domination? And why should we regard a reluctance to support life and oppose domination as especially Christian — indeed, as Christian at all?

Increasingly, feminists seem to be insisting that women's equality with men requires that women be liberated from the consequences of their bodies, notably the ability to bear children. It has become a theme in many feminist circles to suggest that women may have different tastes, proclivities, virtues, and vocations than men. Justice and equality require that women be able to do everything that men do, which means that their power and success in the world must not be compromised by the special, much so "unique," ties to children and the family. As more and more women have begun to compete directly with men in the world of work and politics, feminists have become increasingly reluctant to acknowledge any difference between women and men out of fear that the acknowledgment of difference might in some way compromise women's chances for success. Thus, they have declared war on the notion of sexual difference itself. For they know that should they agree that men and women differ they might have to concede that each sex has distinct responsibilities, and they cannot agree that anyone has the right to hold men to any responsibilities they do not freely assume.

Many Catholics, including Catholic women, have understandably reacted to the feminist attack on their faith by repudiating feminism entirely, but I do not believe that that is what the Holy Father is asking us to do. Rather, in reminding us of the abiding importance of women's special responsibility to families, especially children, he is inviting us to formulate a Catholic understanding of feminism's most generous goals. It is difficult to imagine a Catholic feminism that does not take account of children or that liberates women from any responsibility to them. Each day, our media offer new examples of the desperate

dition of children who lack the love and security that a strong, two-parent family provides. And we all know that such families still depend heavily upon women, even if many fathers are doing more than in the past. Women do have a unique relation to the children they bear, and that relation should be understood as both a vocation and a sacred trust for which women should be honored, in the exercise of which they should be supported, and in which they themselves should take pride.

We also know that even the most devoted mothers cannot completely insulate their children against the outside world. We further know that today motherhood and family responsibilities do not normally take up all of the years of a woman's life. Above all, we should know that the world desperately needs the active participation of Catholic women. Motherhood may manifest an essential aspect of women's nature and, in turn, help to define and shape many women's sense of their vocation. But as a specific social role — or set of tasks and responsibilities — motherhood rarely accounts for the entirety of any woman's, even a Catholic woman's, vocation. And well-educated Catholic women face very special responsibilities in this regard. First, the world, beginning with their own families, sorely needs their talents. Second, their daughters and other women especially need them to develop and represent the dignity and vocation of women's combined vocation at home and in the world. Finally, the example they set and the values they advocate might powerfully influence our society's sense of an honorable and responsible feminism.

More than a generation ago, Edith Stein, Jewish convert to Catholicism, Discalced Carmelite, student of Thomas Aquinas, philosopher, and teacher, reflected upon the role and vocation of women in the modern world. Above all, she reminded her readers that the contemporary roles of women — like those of men — reflect the fallen condition of all humans. Firmly defending women's opportunity to enter any profession they chose, Stein nonetheless insisted upon a difference between women and men, including men's leadership and responsibility for women within families. Men, she noted, may be more likely than women to desire that lordship over the world which was denied them by original sin, while women, for their part, may be more likely to nurture not merely their young but the earth. But, she cautions, a man's

one-sided endeavor to achieve perfection easily becomes a decadent aspiration in itself; our desire for knowledge does not respect limits placed on it but rather seeks by force to go beyond these limits; human understanding may even fail to grasp that which is not essentially hidden from it because it refuses to submit itself to the law of things; rather, it seeks to master them in arbitrary fashion or permits the clarity of its spiritual vision to be clouded by desires and lusts.[16]

Stein did not, however, restrict women's roles to their family responsibilities. To the contrary, she insisted upon women's independent right to vocations in the world and, especially, to the intrinsic value of those vocations. But her enthusiasm about women's vocations did not change her belief that woman's nature differs from that of man in important ways. Many contemporary feminists choke on the notion that women are especially called to a life of service, presumably because they assume that service primarily means service to men. Some traditionalists, including some Catholics, have done their part to encourage this view by emphasizing women's responsibilities as dutiful and long-suffering wives and mothers at the expense of their pursuit of vocations beyond the family. Yet there are no grounds to believe that it is more appropriate for women than for men to bury their talents, just as there are no grounds to believe that families do not need the devotion of men as much as they need the devotion of women. The opportunities, pressures, and complexities of the modern world, as Stein insisted, challenge us to rethink the ways in which women and

n meet their respective responsibilities — a rethinking that does not require that we view men and women as identical.

eminism at its angriest depicts the world as dangerous to women's self-respect and ambition, it simultaneously suggests that a properly reconfigured world will promote women's happiness and fulfillment. Both visions have troublesome aspects. It remains unproven that the world is as uniformly hostile and detrimental to women as feminists contend. Indeed, key indicators like women's college attendance and their earnings suggest that we have seen dramatic improvement in a remarkably short span of time.[17] Furthermore, it remains unclear that these gains have dramatically increased women's satisfaction with their lives. My point emphatically is not to minimize the importance of these and other improvements in women's position, but rather to suggest that happiness and fulfillment do not necessarily flow from them. Happiness and fulfillment flow from our relations with other people and with God, and they may as often derive from self-denial as from self-promotion. A Catholic feminism must be flexible and gracious enough to encompass human and divine love and all of the constraints and rewards that both afford.

Notes

1. *Pope John Paul II on the Genius of Women* (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1997), 22, passage from the Angelus Reflections, June 25, 1995.
2. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Declaration of Sentiments," in *The Concise History of Women Suffrage: Selections from the Classic Works of Stanton, Anthony, Gage, and Harper*, ed. Mari Jo and Paul Buhle (Urbana, Ill., 1978), 94-95
3. Ibid. 95
4. Ibid., 311. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Revising Committee, *The Woman's Bible*, Pts. I & II (Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974; orig. ed. 1898).
5. Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, I, 134.
6. Ibid., II, 113.
7. Ibid.
8. Maurice Hamington, *Hail Mary?: The Struggle for Ultimate Womanhood in Catholicism* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), 74.
9. Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).
10. Uta Ranke-Heinemann, *Putting Away Childish Things: the Virgin Birth, the Empty Tomb, and Other Fairy-Tales You Don't Need to Believe to Have a Living Faith* (San Francisco: Harper-San Francisco, 1994).
1. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Disputed Questions: On Being a Christian* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1982); Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-Logos of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993).
2. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* 3, 284-85, cited by Edward T. Oakes, *Patterns of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 254.
3. Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae): The Encyclical Letter on Abortion, Euthanasia, and the Death Penalty in Today's World* (New York: Random House, 1995)

4. "The Campaign for a Conservative Platform," *Conscience* XVI, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 11. *Conscience* is the pro-choice Catholic journal edited by Rosemary Radford Ruether.
5. *Ibid.*, 14, quoting *Evangelium Vitae*.
6. Edith Stein, *Woman*, trans. Freda Mary Oben (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 70.
7. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "*Feminism is Not the Story of My Life*": *How Today's Feminist Elite Has Lost Touch With the Real Concerns of Women* (New York: Doubleday/Nan Talese, 1996) includes a full discussion of these issues.

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