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# Catholic Girls All Grown Up: A Practical Theological Exploration of Sexuality Formation in Young Adult Women

## Abstract

The Roman Catholic Church promotes exacting norms about the sexual behavior expected of Catholics, but prior qualitative and quantitative studies have shown a mixed effect on the decisions made by young adult Catholics, especially women. This qualitative study interviewed young adult women who were raised Catholic and sought to determine both what they were taught about sex and sexuality while growing up Catholic and how they think those teachings affected their lives and decision-making as young adults. Analysis of their responses indicated an anxious climate in their childhood educational experiences where adults were hesitant to answer questions or engage in discussion about the topic, and where formal sexuality education was focused on the risks of having sex in the form of pregnancy, STIs, and incurring religious guilt. This sense of discomfort from adult educators ultimately translated into a fear-, shame-, and guilt-based lived theology in young adulthood. Participants largely made sexual decisions in a defensive manner, focused on the possibility of negative experiences rather than the desired outcomes of sexual behavior and relying on intuition and a "gut feeling" to make decisions in the moment. By creating a composite narrative, this study identifies key educational encounters across the lifespan and indicates how each moment could have been experienced as life-giving and integrated into the participants' moral religious upbringing so that as young adults, they would have felt better equipped to make sexual decisions in their own lives. Parents, religious educators, and stakeholders in the Catholic world are encouraged to consider how to incorporate sexuality education more holistically into religious education using well-established modes of Catholic religious pedagogy.

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Formation in Young Adult Women

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Presented to

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Program

University of Denver

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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by

Emily S. Kahm

June 2017

Advisor: Katherine Turpin

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Author: Emily S. Kahm  
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### **Abstract**

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Prelude and Introduction**

Amy<sup>1</sup> texted me out of the blue on a winter evening to ask why the Catholic Church said you couldn't have premarital sex. It had been years since we had last seen one another in person, and longer still since we had been close in college, so I was understandably taken aback by the direct question, though more than ready to start a conversation.

Over the next few days, entirely through text message, I found out that Amy was in a new relationship and deeply in love. Her boyfriend was comfortable with the physical boundaries they had established early on, but every so often asked her why she planned to wait for sex until marriage. Amy had realized that she didn't have an answer—at least not one that made sense when she said it out loud.

I did my best to affirm her discernment process and to encourage more frequent conversations with her boyfriend while providing theological information when she asked. Their relationship fell off my radar for a short while, but she got back in touch a few months later. She had made up her mind: they had had sex. It had been good and loving and she believed it had been the right step for their relationship, but it had made

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym.

other relationships more complicated. Most of her closest friends had waited for marriage, and she felt like she couldn't talk to them about this important decision that she, ultimately, had made proudly and with conviction. She also started skipping Mass more frequently. She told me that she felt her relationship with God was as solid as it had always been, but her relationship with the Church had been shaken—she felt that the Church had misled her. She had spent most of her life believing that sex could only be good and life-giving in a sacramental marriage, but now she was living proof that this wasn't true. Her religious education about sex and sexuality had run up against her lived experience as a young adult navigating a romantic relationship and in the end, the religious teaching had lost.

This dissertation seeks to answer two main research questions: What were young adult women who were raised Catholic taught about sex and sexuality during their upbringing? How does what they were (or were not) taught affect their lives as young adults? I sought answers primarily through the qualitative method of in-depth interviews with individuals who had that experience. Once some answers to these questions have been related, this dissertation continues following the path in the practical theological field to explore how these young women's' upbringing as Catholic has influenced their lived theologies, that is, the way they integrate (or segregate) religious beliefs and values with their actions and behaviors. This exploration, ultimately, sheds light on how education in sex and sexuality in the Catholic Church context becomes life-giving or life-limiting to these women as they become young adults, and offers reflections on how the life-giving

aspects can be enhanced. To better understand how this discussion will proceed, we must first clarify how our terms function in this context.

### **Definitions**

Sexuality is difficult to accurately define. Precise definitions run the risk of focusing too tightly on the physical and biological aspects of sexuality; broad definitions that attend to emotional and social aspects of sexuality often end up including acts and situations that one would not typically refer to as sexual.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this dissertation, defining broadly will serve the project better than defining too restrictively given that the above research questions invite conversation about beliefs, values, and feelings alongside biological realities. For this reason, I follow the 5-circle definition used by the *Our Whole Lives* Sexuality Education curricula, a set of six comprehensive and medically accurate programs jointly created by the United Church of Christ and the Unitarian Universalist Association for a range of ages. These curricula use five aspects of a “whole” concept of sexuality that are interlinked, but which can be spoken about separately. The 5 circles consist of Sensuality (bodiliness and touch), Intimacy (relationality), Sexual Identity (orientations and roles), Sexual Health/Reproduction (physiology, procreation, etc., content that is most typically covered in “sex ed” curricula), and Sexualization (power dynamics).<sup>3</sup> **Sexuality** is the constellation of

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<sup>2</sup> One example of this might be physical contact with children, such as cuddling and breastfeeding, which do clearly play a role in sexual development but would generally not be referred to as “sexual” because of the risk of connoting abusive activity.

<sup>3</sup> Michael J. Tino, Sarah Gibb Millspaugh, and Laura Anne Stuart, *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education for Young Adults, Ages 18-35* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, 2008), 8.

sensuality, intimacy, identity, health/reproduction, and sexualization that permeates all human relationships.

**Sexuality education**, then, is the formal and informal training a person receives, especially in childhood and adolescent years, that provides information about the various aspects of sexuality *and* which forms commitments, values, and notions for the proper use of these aspects. Information about sexuality comes with a set of values, whether implicit or explicit—for example, sexuality education that offers only precise biological realities suggests the value that biological aspects of sexuality are most important to know, or that emotional and spiritual aspects of sexuality are less relevant to consider. Sexuality education might be more properly termed "sexuality formation" in order to attend to the emotional and moral aspects of the education, though I chose not to use this term because of its relative unfamiliarity. Formation includes not only doctrinal or propositional thinking on sexuality, but also habits, bodily practices, patterns of relating, and cultural norms that may not be fully articulated.

Sexuality education usually brings to mind a specific type of educational paradigm—a classroom setting, biology lessons, cross-section diagrams of reproductive organs, boys and girls segregated from one another, and so on. While these experiences often factor into sexuality education, the lessons learned about modesty or proper dress, negotiating friendships and "crushes," and physical contact from one's family are also central aspects of this education. Beyond this, the influence of media, pornography, and cultural expectations around men and women and how romantic or sexual relationships are established become especially relevant in young adulthood. Religious commitments

intersect all these modes of education as well, often providing messages and frameworks about appropriateness and acceptability of sexual display and behavior.

### **Religiosity and Sexuality**

Religion scholar Donna Freitas made waves in 2008 with the release of her book *Sex and the Soul*, a popularly written text based on qualitative interviews with young adults in college. Freitas is one of a handful of writers, both popular and academic, who have tried to tackle the "hook-up culture," a real, if at times mythically endowed, influence on college campuses that encourages young adults to seek one-off sexual encounters with relative strangers under the guise of "hooking up," a deliberately vague term that can mean anything from kissing to sexual intercourse and beyond. Her findings indicated that while plenty of students at both public and Catholic colleges hooked up, many did so with a sense of conflict and felt isolated in their discomfort with the sexualized expectations at play.<sup>4</sup> However, sociologists Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker claim that Freitas' work over-emphasizes the prevalence of the hook-up culture, which is fairly concentrated in elite, private schools and schools with fraternity cultures.<sup>5</sup> Their research provides context for a deeper exploration into how young adults negotiate their values and religious beliefs when making sexual decisions. To explore this more robustly, we must move deeper into research that investigates the relationship between religious formation and sexual behavior.

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<sup>4</sup> Redden, Elizabeth. "Sex and the Soul." *Inside Higher Ed*, April 15, 2008. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/04/15/sexsoul>.

<sup>5</sup> Regnerus, Mark, and Jeremy Uecker. *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 104.

The complex relationship between religiosity and sexuality has risen to the fore of much research literature as qualitative and quantitative methods are applied to questions about how religion actually shapes belief and behavior. While the majority of Christian theologies (Catholic, mainline Protestant, and Evangelical) in the United States discourage or forbid premarital sex with varying degrees of intensity,<sup>6</sup> it is less clear how these teachings are communicated, or whether they affect the way youth live out their sexuality, especially when they reach young adulthood and a new level of autonomy.

Qualitative and quantitative research affirms that young people are rarely satisfied with the education around and portrayal of sexuality in their Christian church environments. In a large-scale study of church-going teenagers by Clapp, Helbert, and Zizak in 2010, only 44% of teenagers agreed that their church communities portrayed sex as healthy and positive, in contrast to 74% of their clergy.<sup>7</sup> In information about sex, teenagers overwhelmingly scored their communities as doing a poor job of educating, while their clergy and teachers scored the same communities as “fair” or “good.”<sup>8</sup> As this study was released in 2010, the teenagers in those church communities are now young adults who have greater freedom to navigate sexual values in practice. It is now possible

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<sup>6</sup> Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd Revised & Enlarged Edition. Vatican City: Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000, 634. “The sexual act must take place exclusively within marriage. Outside of marriage it always constitutes a grave sin and excludes one from sacramental communion.”

<sup>7</sup> Steve Clapp, Kristen Leverton Helbert, and Angela Zizak, *Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion, and Sexuality*, New Edition (Fort Wayne, Ind.: LifeQuest, 2010), 177.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.



to ask members of this same generation how their “poor” education, if they thought it so, has contributed to their understandings of sexuality several years later.

Young adults (18-25 years) are an especially interesting population for researchers who are interested in the intersection of religious values and sexual behavior because they are in a uniquely deliberate part of their lives where they are given enough space to critically evaluate what they were taught in their youth and compare it to new education and experiences in their social lives. David Gortner, a social scientist researching the theologies of young adults, describes this time as an intersection of cognitive complexity, awareness of a broadening world, and starkly increasing autonomy in one's life.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly true of the college-educated, who are able to "leave home" (often literally) and observe different aspects of culture and community in a new environment, and thus have impetus to reflect upon how their parents' or caregivers' values play out in a new setting. This is also the period of life in the U.S. culture where opportunity and cultural support for sexual activity ramps up, giving researchers an occasion to see how stated values can compare with behavior and examine how young adults negotiate tensions between the two as they arise.<sup>10</sup>

Large-scale quantitative research has repeatedly revealed a strong correlation between religiosity and abstinence, or lower rates of sexual behaviors. Religiosity is

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<sup>9</sup> Gortner, David. *Varieties of Personal Theology: Charting the Beliefs and Values of American Young Adults*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Parks, Sharon Daloz. *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith*. 2nd Edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, 30. Parks notes that all action is conditioned by a person's sense of ultimate value, but does not argue that therefore all actions are consistent with it.

typically measured by three self-reported factors: frequency of attendance at church services, frequency of personal prayer, and self-rated importance of religion, with the understanding that such factors often indicate other contextual effects on a person's religiousness.<sup>11</sup> Typically, higher religiosity is associated with less premarital sexual activity, fewer lifetime sexual partners, and less frequent intercourse overall, as Murray-Swank et. al.'s most recent study attests.<sup>12</sup> Though the vast majority of young adults in the United States engage in sex before marriage, high religiosity indicates a group that is more likely to abstain from sex until marriage, especially if individuals in that group have taken an abstinence pledge.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, once researchers included measures of spirituality alongside measures of religiosity (spirituality defined broadly as having a transcendent perspective which emphasizes connection and unity<sup>14</sup>), a different association emerged. The mixed-methods study by Murray-Swank, et. al., found that in a sample of 151 participants, the more that the participants perceived sexual intercourse as being sacred or having sacred characteristics, the more likely they were to have engaged in it. Even more intriguing, "...higher ratings of sacred qualities of sexual intercourse were related to a greater range

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<sup>11</sup> Murray-Swank, Nichole A, Kenneth I Pargament, and Annette Mahoney. "At the Crossroads of Sexuality and Spirituality: The Sanctification of Sex by College Students." *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 15, no. 3 (2005): 199–219, 205.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>13</sup> Uecker, Jeremy E. "Religion, Pledging, and the Premarital Sexual Behavior of Married Young Adults." *Journal of Marriage & Family* 70, no. 3 (August 2008): 728–44. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00517.x, 741. It should be noted that even among pledging youth, premarital sex is normative.

<sup>14</sup> Burris, Jessica L., Gregory T. Smith, and Charles R. Carlson. "Relations Among Religiousness, Spirituality, and Sexual Practices." *Journal of Sex Research* 46, no. 4 (August 7, 2009): 282–89. doi:10.1080/00224490802684582, 283.

and frequency of prior sexual activity, greater current frequency of sexual activity, and greater number of lifetime partners."<sup>15</sup> Four years later, Burris et. al. conducted a similar study with a sample of 353 young adults and noted similar results;

...for women, greater spirituality is associated with increased numbers of sexual partners...frequency of sex...and not using a condom. For men, however, spirituality does not appear to be a predictor of lifetime numbers of sexual partners...or condom use...despite a significant association with decreased frequency of sex.<sup>16</sup>

In sum, religiosity and spirituality both appear to have significant effects on young adults' sexual behaviors, but unique effects—high religiosity is associated with less sexual behavior, high spirituality with more sexual behavior. While neither study could easily conclude why this is so, the Murray-Swank study noted that their sample included two distinct groups within the more religious segment—those who sacralized sex, and those who did not—and postulated that the two groups may have cancelled each other out when looking for a strong association between religiosity, spirituality, and sexual behavior.<sup>17</sup> Burris et al. noted that understanding sex as sacred was particularly tied to the "connectedness" quality of sex and proposed that women in particular might pursue sex in order to feel intimacy and connection.<sup>18</sup> Qualitative approaches may be able to explore the reasoning behind these curious results.

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<sup>15</sup> Murray-Swank, et. al., "Crossroads," 212.

<sup>16</sup> Burris et. al., "Relations Among Religiousness," 286.

<sup>17</sup> Murray-Swank et al., "Crossroads," 213.

<sup>18</sup> Burris et. al., "Relations Among Religiousness," 287.

Of the two available qualitative studies that aimed to explain the relationship between religiosity and sexual activity in young adults, both are unpublished theses and offer limited conclusions. Julie Ellis-Gowdy's thesis for her Doctor of Psychology degree noted that Christian college-age women who believed premarital sex was morally wrong often mentioned guilt, internal conflict, and cognitive dissonance in explaining their dating histories,<sup>19</sup> which could point a more conservative religiosity relying on negative or risk-based education about sexuality to discourage sexual acts. A later thesis written by Bradi Nichols for a Master of Science in Child Development and Family Relations found that young adults who claimed religion did not influence their sexual decision-making perceived that the way sexuality was portrayed by their family, friends, church groups, and other influencing bodies tended to conflict with one another more than those who claimed religion did influence their sexual behaviors—that is, they experienced more mixed messages about what they should be doing in the sexual sphere.<sup>20</sup> What neither study was able to address was how the young adults interpreted messages about sexuality as positive or negative, affirming or degrading, empowering or limiting, which would point to the ways in which religious communities taught them to think about sex and sexual decision-making. This project explores some of the gaps in recent research by studying the religious formation aspect more thoroughly and theologically.

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<sup>19</sup> Ellis-Gowdy, Julie. "The Experience of Christian College-Age Women Ages 18-22 When Faced with Choices Regarding Their Sexual Behavior and Relationships: A Qualitative Study." Psy.D., Alliant International University, San Diego, 2006. <http://0-search.proquest.com.bianca.penlib.du.edu/docview/304912497/abstract?accountid=14608>.

<sup>20</sup> Nichols, Bradi Petersen, and Sharon Ballard. "The Impact of Religiosity on the Sexual Socialization of Emerging Adults." East Carolina University, 2011. <http://hdl.handle.net/10342/3733>.

## American Catholic Women

American Catholicism is the single largest Christian denomination in the country, enormously diverse in culture and politics. As a denomination, the Catholic Church has taken its educational and formational role far beyond Sunday school and created a vast network of Catholic schools and universities dedicated to education within a specifically Catholic mission and value set. Even for Catholics who cannot attend Catholic schools, evening classes (usually called Religious Education, though some use the older term "CCD" for "Confraternity of Christian Doctrine") are typically required for children to enter into full sacramental participation with their community. Given the number of Catholics and the expansive opportunities for religious formation for youth, one might expect a well-standardized process of teaching young people about sex and sexuality.

Women make up more than half of practicing Catholics in the United States, but due to Catholic theology of Holy Orders, are not able to join the priesthood and thus are seen in relatively few authoritative positions in churches and dioceses. For decades, Catholic feminist theologians like Mary Daly have pointed to how the female voice has been ignored in the formation and application of doctrine and pastoral care and have argued that this failure results in theology that reinforces sexism and patriarchy.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is imperative to highlight the voice of women to better understand how the U.S. Catholic church functions "on the ground" and in the lives of faithful. Catholic women frequently

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<sup>21</sup> Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Revised edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, 4.

represent a distinct group in large-scale studies, further emphasizing that women are best studied as a separate group.

Looking at broad quantitative studies, Catholic young adults initially appear to be a mixed, moderate group, especially when compared to denominations like Evangelical Protestantism or Mormonism. Catholicism effectively falls in the middle of every scale. This might be a result of a "two-group" sample like that noted in Murray-Swank's study, where Catholics tend to be either very conservative or mostly disengaged, with the resulting average washing out the nuance of both subgroups. One study noted this effect in a sub-sample of 76 college-age Catholics. Among this sample, "...the actively engaged [Catholics] differed from the less committed in their views on sexual behavior and abortion."<sup>22</sup> I highlight this example in particular because it echoes a common perception of American Catholicism: active church-going Catholics take very seriously the Church's teachings on sexual morality and abortion, but do not seem as influenced by Church teaching on social justice and the consistent ethic of life, whereas the less frequent church-goers favor Catholic social teaching but tend to ignore teachings on sexual morality. Sometimes termed the "pro-life" Catholics and the "social justice" Catholics, these two groups differ in what they believe should be the primary moral focus of Church teaching in the present United States.<sup>23</sup> Combined with "cultural" Catholics, who identify with the religious tradition but do not regularly practice, it is possible that these camps

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<sup>22</sup> Dillon, Michele. "The Persistence of Religious Identity among College Catholics." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35, no. 2 (June 1, 1996): 165–70. doi:10.2307/1387083, 168-169.

<sup>23</sup> Alessi, Scott. "'Social Justice' Catholics Versus 'Pro-Life' Catholics--Can't We Have It Both Ways?." *USCatholic.org*. Accessed August 10, 2015. <http://www.uscatholic.org/blog/2012/10/social-justice-catholics-versus-pro-life-catholics-cant-we-have-it-both-ways>.

mix together to form a subdued whole that cannot match the clear outcomes of smaller or more culturally homogeneous denominations, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons).

Yet Catholics, and Catholic women in particular, do emerge as distinct in certain studies. One such study, which asked young adults enrolled in a Human Sexuality college course to write a reflective journal about how what they learned in the class intersected with their religious beliefs, found that females who were raised Catholic "...described their understanding of the church's message that they remain sexually pure, noting that it was implicit, rather than overtly discussed."<sup>24</sup> That is, Catholic women were notable in that they both identified the pressures to follow Catholic sexual morality, *and* that they did not recall with any distinction how they had been taught these norms.

Despite this unspoken rule about female purity, a large-scale telephone survey study conducted in 2001 and published in 2009 revealed another unexpected trend among college-going Catholic women. Namely, "once individual-level variations in religious involvement are controlled, Catholic women are actually more likely than their unaffiliated counterparts to have "hooked up."<sup>25</sup> The researchers parsed out the data in greater detail and found that there were again two distinct groups of Catholic women in the category; only 24% those who attended Mass on a weekly basis had "hooked up,"

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<sup>24</sup> Allen, Katherine R., and Jada E. Brooks. "At the Intersection of Sexuality, Spirituality, and Gender: Young Adults' Perceptions of Religious Beliefs in the Context of Sexuality Education." *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 7, no. 4 (September 2012): 285–308. doi:10.1080/15546128.2012.740859, 293.

<sup>25</sup> Burdette, Amy M., Christopher G. Ellison, Terrence D. Hill, and Norval D. Glenn. "'Hooking Up' at College: Does Religion Make a Difference?." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 535–51. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01464.x, 545.

compared with 50% of Catholic women who attended Mass infrequently.<sup>26</sup> While this may lead one to believe that denominational affiliation is again unhelpful in examining sexual behavior, the researchers noted another curious pattern—the odds of a young adult having "hooked up" were actually higher at religious institutions than secular colleges, and "this pattern is determined entirely by a large Catholic college effect."<sup>27</sup> That is to say that college students at Catholic institutions were more likely to engage in "hook up" behavior than those at secular institutions regardless of their own religious affiliation, a trend that the researchers theorized could be related to anything from the high social compatibility of Catholic college students to the traditionally looser restrictions on alcohol.<sup>28</sup> Once more, the research raises questions that cannot be answered by statistics; why are there so many women who identify as Catholic, infrequently attend Mass, and engage in premarital sexual relationships? What about a Catholic college is more conducive to hook-ups than a secular institution?

College is portrayed in media outlets as a time of serious sexual exploration and experimentation, a place where "hooking up" is the standard of the day and serious dating is on a rapid decline.<sup>29</sup> While young adults at college are in a new environment with differing social expectations than high school, research data expose a far more complex reality than sound bites can express. Studies on the intersection of young adults,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 546.

<sup>29</sup> Lieberman, Charlotte. "Why Is College Dating So Screwed Up?" *Cosmopolitan*, February 10, 2014. <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/a5585/college-dating-screwed-up/>.



religiosity, and sexuality are still being regularly conducted in the social sciences, but such studies rarely go beyond the fields of public health. This dissertation takes the evidence-based practices of social science and puts them in conversation with a field that can deal with religious belief and practice in a complex way: theology.

### **Practical Theology as Method**

Practical theology is a subset of academic theology which is based on the idea that human experience matters to how we study God and our relationship with God.

Christianity is a faith that is both “already” and “not yet”—salvation may be the telos to which Christians aspire, but being a Christian should also change the way one lives, thinks, and experiences the world. For the sake of this project, human experience shall be defined and used broadly as anything that engages a person that they can critically reflect upon. As practical theologian David Tracy explains, “the task of theology involves an attempt to show the adequacy of the major Christian theological categories for human experience...the Christian tradition is impelled to test precisely that universalist claim.”<sup>30</sup>

Practical theology highlights the experiential aspect of being Christian and, most critically, seeks to be intentional about using this experience as a source of wisdom and authority.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 44.

<sup>31</sup> Practical theology is also much more than applied theology. To “apply” theology to a situation implies that there is something relatively stable, monolithic, and comprehensible that can be put into conversation with something else that is relatively stable and comprehensible so that the latter may be improved. Thinking of practical theology as applied theology drastically oversimplifies the dialogical process and critical analysis that make up practical theological methodology.

Despite the fact that Catholicism does not list “experience” among its authoritative sources for religious knowing, Scripture and Tradition, the role of experiential knowing is present throughout Christian theology. All human learning, even the most theoretical or academic kind, happens in context of what a person has already experienced. As theologian Gerben Heitink states, “All learning is based on prior, nonscientific experience, and usually has a practical purpose... In the same sense theology is based on experiential knowledge and is aimed at faith and action.”<sup>32</sup> Experience, then, is something that theologians can ill-afford to ignore, even if and when they do not think of themselves as practical theologians.

Practical theologians take experience seriously, both their own and others’. The deliberateness of using human experience as a source for theologizing partially defines the field in contrast to other types of theological reflection. Systematic theology, for example, seeks a certain type of logical continuity that creates elegant and internally consistent doctrine, but is not evaluated by how well it is understood, received, or practiced by the church faithful on the ground level. Practical theology puts systematic theology into conversation with the living Christian community.<sup>33</sup> This is to say that practical theology *deliberately* starts at the level of human experience, individual or communal, moves into theologizing and other sources of knowledge at that point, and

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<sup>32</sup> Gerben Heitink, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains: Manual for Practical Theology*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma, Studies in Practical Theology (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 105.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, Ray S. *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis*. 1/16/01 edition. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2001, 23.

must then return to the experience that began the process in a continuous cycle. These steps are variously labeled in the field; theologian Richard Osmer explains them as four key “tasks,”<sup>34</sup> whereas religious education author Thomas Groome divides them into five “movements.”<sup>35</sup>

Practical theology must carefully balance the relationships between the experience it prioritizes and the tradition it consults. There are some significant differences in how authors see human experience and Christian tradition conversing with one another; Groome, for example, aims for a mutually critical approach where the two are roughly equal partners, with experience able to legitimately critique the Christian story and vision and the story and vision able to challenge present practices.<sup>36</sup>

Alternatively, theologians like John Swinton and Harriet Mowat see the Christian story, related in Scripture and, to a lesser extent, Tradition, as playing the primary role in defining how things ought to be. Experience is taken seriously, but is seen as needing to conform to Christian revelation in contextually appropriate ways.<sup>37</sup> In both approaches,

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<sup>34</sup> Osmer, Richard Robert. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2008. They are, in Osmer’s language, the descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic tasks.

<sup>35</sup> Groome, Thomas H. *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 1998. Somewhat wordier, Groome’s movements are 1. naming/expressing present action, 2. critical reflection on present action, 3. making accessible Christian story and vision, 4. dialectical hermeneutics, and 5. decision/response for lived Christian faith. Groome effectively divides Osmer’s normative task into two steps.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfteich, Claire E, “Hermeneutics in Roman Catholic Practical Theology,” in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology: An Introduction*, Cahalan, Kathleen A., and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds.. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014, 142.

<sup>37</sup> Swinton, John, and Harriet Mowat. *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd Revised ed. edition. London: Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 2015.

however, the goal is to have a “...conversation [that] is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions, and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both.”<sup>38</sup> Understanding that it is particularly appealing to allow one’s own experience to take precedence all the time, the field highlights communal understandings of experience, seeking common themes in people’s thoughts and reactions that create a shared narrative of truth-telling. Indeed, this narrative is very much what qualitative research provides. Ultimately, it is expected that practical theology provides something that is both true and useful.<sup>39</sup>

Methodologically, practical theology has much in common with the standard practices for qualitative methodology. It begins with thick description of the situation at hand, whether that is the state of a particular congregation or, in this case, a particular experience of young adult women who were raised Catholic. It privileges the experiential voices of the faithful and seeks a common or evocative narrative in their varied stories while also holding space for the mysterious and indefinable.<sup>40</sup> Once this description has been established, the experience is put into conversation with the tradition associated with the community; we will begin this process in Chapter 2, which provides an overview of Catholic Church teachings on sexuality and current theological trends which will

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<sup>38</sup> Patricia O’Connell Killen and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), viii.

<sup>39</sup> Joyce Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2005), 11-12.

<sup>40</sup> Holding narratives as “mysterious and indefinable” comes from the language of constructive narrative theology, which prioritizes storytelling and meaning-making as a method of theological reflection and creation. Graham, Elaine, Heather Walton, and Frankie Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods*, London: SCM Press, 2005, 47.

appear as influences throughout the narratives of these women. This second part of the practical theological process may also involve pulling in parts of the religious tradition that might not seem directly related to the experience in question. Theologies of sexuality from the Catholic sphere, therefore, may not be as salient as theologies of conscience formation, religious education, or pastoral theologies. Finally, practical theology seeks a way forward. This typically comes in the form of concrete recommendations on multiple levels that can help the community in question reflect and restructure to create a more life-giving environment that is consistent with their tradition.

With this in mind, this study aims to find information that can be translated into actual, feasible recommendations for working with young adult women who have been raised Catholic around areas of sex and sexuality, as well as for those adults and authority figures who shaped their childhood education. Recommendations will be directed at helping these women live into values around sex and sexuality that they find most life-giving and meaningful, but may also include more holistic reflections on the state of sexually-related religious education in Catholic contexts.

### **Who Do I Say that I Am?**

As we have seen above, both qualitative and practical theological methods place heavy emphasis on contextual understanding. This also extends to self-knowledge for the person doing the work. For practical theology, this includes being able to name one's cultural contexts and influences so one can explore the situated-ness of theologizing; for qualitative research, self-awareness is emphasized in the process of ensuring that one's own predilections do not affect one's research process. Both frameworks insist that the

researcher or theologian identify themselves in the spirit of accountability and transparency, and that this identity be carefully set aside so that thick description and real listening can take place without the researcher unconsciously influencing their own conclusions. Both movements are necessary in qualitative practical theology.

In the interest of centralizing myself for a brief moment so that both readers and I can have a clearer sense of where my predilections could influence this project, I take a moment here to introduce myself and my own interest in the topics at play. In the spirit of qualitative inquiry, much information can be conveyed in one narrative:

When I turned 13, instead of having a birthday party, my parents took me out to a fancy Italian dinner downtown. As we finished eating, my mother took a small box and handed it to me. Inside was a silver cross necklace, studded with crystals. My mother, awkwardly but fervently, said that they wanted to give me this necklace as a reminder to be chaste. She took it out of the box and fastened it around my neck.

From what I recall, I tried to be gracious and thankful (though I'm sure my performance at 13 was somewhat less convincing than I intended), but I recall being viscerally angry about this gift. I could not believe that my parents somehow thought I was a "chastity risk"—I was chubby, acne-ridden, socially awkward, and had all manner of trouble making friends, to say nothing of boyfriends. I was somehow offended that they thought I needed "reminding" to stay a virgin, and simultaneously confused about why they'd consider this a 13-year-old's problem—sex, if it was ever going to happen, was far down the road. As with nearly every occasion where my parents had brought up sex, the conversation felt overwrought and affected by a fear and pressure I did not

understand. When we returned home that night, I took the necklace off and never wore it again.

Now, I read many more interpretations into my 13-year-old angst. Sexual purity was simply another facet of the high-pressure cultures I experienced daily as a "gifted" Catholic school student in a middle-class family. My parents had high expectations for my grades and my behavior, and as a sensitive child, I stressed easily. I remember my mother reacting emotionally and forcefully to nearly all sex-related questions—when I heard the term "oral sex" in a Monty Python movie, she raced through a vague physical description of what it was and concentrated instead on the big finish: "But that's not how God intended sex to be!" Years later, in my 20s, she tried to convince me that I shouldn't ask my Catholic doctor about getting vaccinated for HPV because the doctor might think I was promiscuous.

I knew that "sex talk" made my family uncomfortable, and I had few close friends with which to process the tidbits of knowledge I gleaned from peer conversations and dramatized media portrayals. I remember that the "Family Life" religion textbooks given to us in 4<sup>th</sup> grade at my Catholic school had been deemed too controversial to address in class, and the books were sent home with each student instead, ostensibly to be studied with our parents, though that conversation never materialized. I remember attending a sex talk in the sanctuary of our church in middle school with my mom, a projector screen of genital cross-sections placed just below our giant, lifelike crucifix. I remember being desperate for knowledge that nobody, apparently, was willing or able to share with me.

This is the person who has created this research. I am a cradle Catholic, and still practice in the Roman Catholic faith. I am a product of 19 years of Catholic schooling and higher education, followed by 6 years in a United Methodist-related academic context. I have been a Church professional while writing this dissertation, spending two years in a Midwestern parish directing adult formation and education. I am recently married to a Catholic man who works at a Catholic college in campus ministry, and I reap the social benefits of our heteronormative performance. I am someone who wanted my Catholic sexuality education, both at home and at school, to be better, to explain more, to contain more, and to let me think more. I am also someone who recognizes that not all experiences are like my own, and who wishes to hear those stories in their variety. My intersecting identities and experiences created my interest in this dissertation and energized decisions about using qualitative methods that allowed me to listen deeply and respectfully to the identities and experiences of my participants.

### **Outline of the Following Chapters**

Chapter 2 delves deeply but strategically into the Roman Catholic context of sexuality theologies. It describes a lengthy history of suspicion with regards to sex that has only changed to official positivity in recent decades, and lays out where active moral theologians, usually working from feminist and justice-oriented frameworks, take issue with Church teaching. Beyond professional theologians, this chapter will visit the role of "people in the pews" and why their narratives both inform and critique official theologies. We also visit the concept of "lived theology" and how this personal, intersectional concept will help us recognize the multiple influences on each participant's beliefs,



values, and practices, some of which arise from official Church teaching and many of which stem from cultural sources.

Chapter 3 will reiterate why qualitative methods are a good choice for practical theological explorations, and detail how this study was performed from design, testing, and recruiting through coding, theming, and establishing rigor. We will also meet our participants in this chapter, and report demographic diversity and limitations.

Chapter 4 highlights the major and minor themes that arose through the interview and coding processes, relying on the voices of participants to expose, explain, and explore the common aspects of their sexuality education experiences and how they feel those experiences affect their lives and decision-making as young adults.

Chapter 5 expands upon the discussion of themes by weaving together a common narrative and exploring how findings point to systemic issues in learning about sex and sexuality while growing up as a young woman in the Catholic context.

Chapter 6 explores the possibilities and barriers to adapting Church contexts and the roles of authority figures in response to the data and what these women identified as desirable, life-giving educational experiences with regards to sex and sexuality. In the spirit of practical theology, this chapter contains select but specific suggestions about what steps to take at the social or parish level, and identifies further areas for research and exploration.

## **Chapter Two: Sexuality and Roman Catholicism**

### **Introduction**

There is no singular, clear “history” of the relationship between Roman Catholicism and sexuality that can be drawn as a line across two millennia; as the Christian religion spread and grew, official doctrine has shifted and adapted. Even St. Paul, in his many Biblical letters, discouraged marriage (and, most assume, sexual expression), whether simply out of priority for Christ’s return or a deeper distaste for bodily pleasure, scholars still cannot agree. For the purposes of this dissertation, a few major touchstones in Catholic theological history will serve to illustrate the complicated, often fraught relationship between the Church and its own understanding of sexuality. As we will see on this brief tour of Church Fathers and official Church documents, this history is dominated by male theologians and thinkers characterizing sexuality as a risky moral endeavor and this conception has not fully faded as official theology has grown and adapted over time.

### **Sexuality in the Roman Catholic Church**

While many Christian groups consider the Bible to be a primary determinant of appropriate sexual ethics, Catholicism also includes a lengthy history of church fathers, councils, and papal statements that make up Tradition in its doctrine. Because of this confluence, it has been difficult for Catholic teaching to leave behind earlier beliefs about

sex and sexuality. I will trace Catholic teachings on sexuality through two major Church fathers—St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas—and then more recently through the release of the papal encyclical *Casti Conuubii* in 1930, the years of Vatican II, and the eventual release of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. I will also include a brief reflection on the clergy sex abuse scandal, which did not change church doctrine but, many have argued, did radically alter the faithful’s view on the authority of church doctrine. This expansive view will both introduce the necessary history to understand modern issues in theologizing about sexuality and offer a glimpse into the culture that helped form the participants in this dissertation study.

#### St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas

St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas are mainstays of any discussion of sexuality doctrine in Catholicism due to their status as both saints and Church Fathers, despite their limited biological knowledge and their celibate lifestyles. Augustine, who lived in Northern Africa from 354-430 C.E., converted to Christianity from Manicheism and pursued an ascetic lifestyle, suggesting that he remained influenced by Gnostic beliefs that characterized the body as evil.<sup>1</sup> In writing the *Confessions*, Augustine speaks about his personal struggles with sexual desire, describing it as “an addiction beyond the power of the will.”<sup>2</sup> He concluded in his theological writings that this lack of discipline was a punishment of the Fall, before which he believed that sexual desire did not exist

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<sup>1</sup> John E. Thiel, “Augustine on Eros, Desire, and Sexuality,” in Margaret D. Kamitsuka, ed., *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 69.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

and procreation would have happened by force of will.<sup>3</sup> Reasoning in a male-centered way, Augustine noted that the sin of the Fall was primarily disobedience; therefore, assuming the punishment had to fit the crime, God must have imbued the male sex organ with the same spirit of disobedience, so that no power of will or reasonable thought could control its reactions. One can well imagine that a man who was preoccupied with bodily obedience, modeled in his chosen asceticism, would find unpredictable sexual urges frustrating.

Later readings of Augustine have convinced theologians like James Whitehead that he was, in modern terms, sexually compulsive, and that his vilification of sexuality makes better sense if one understands his struggle with sexual compulsivity.<sup>4</sup> This is a modern concept and perhaps not appropriately applied to an historical figure, but one should note that Augustine was willing to make enormous sacrifices to pursue his celibate lifestyle, including leaving behind the woman he had been committed to for over a decade, and their young son. To be sure, Augustine believed marriage and the begetting of children to be good and important, though not as ideal as consecrated virginity. In his writings, Augustine posited that all acts of sex that were not explicitly aimed at begetting children were sinful<sup>5</sup> because “The intercourse that goes beyond this

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *A Sense of Sexuality: Christian Love and Intimacy*, 1st ed (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Gaillardetz, Richard R., and Catherine Clifford. *Keys to the Council: Unlocking the Teaching of Vatican II*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012, 104. The terminology of “mortal” and “venial” sins has largely stopped being used after Vatican II, before which it was central to Catholic moral theology. Simply, venial sins were less serious sins that could be forgiven through taking the Eucharist in a state of repentance; mortal sins were full breaches in a person’s relationship with God that could only be healed through the sacrament of Reconciliation. Dying in a state of mortal sin was said to ensure one could never

necessity no longer obeys reason but passion.”<sup>6</sup> Here again it is worth noting the ascetic orientation against pleasure, and the masculinization of the reasoning—Augustine defines sex by male ejaculation, and therefore the experience of bodily pleasure by the woman involved is not addressed.<sup>7</sup> He encourages married couples to begin practicing abstinence from intercourse as early in their marriage as could be agreed upon, saying “it would be a matter of praise that they had refused beforehand what they were able to do,”<sup>8</sup> because this would allow the spouses to focus more fully on God than on one another. Augustine was undeniably brilliant, and his contribution to Church doctrine substantial, but this anxious relationship with sexuality has continually influenced the way Christians understand sexual desire as morally suspect. Augustine’s unease with sexuality eventually carried over into St. Thomas Aquinas, a later Church Father.

St. Thomas Aquinas, who lived in various parts of Western Europe from 1225-1274 C.E., followed Augustine’s lead in matters of sexuality, though he tempered it with his concepts of natural law. Aquinas was a Dominican monk and wrote most of his works for other celibate religious men, a very particular audience in Western Europe. He was

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enter heaven. Moral theology in the pre-Vatican II era was interested in specifying exactly what sins counted in which category. Any sin related to sexuality, from fantasizing to masturbating to non-marital sex, fell into the “mortal sin” category.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine, Saint Bishop of Hippo, “The Good of Marriage,” *Saint Augustine : Treatises on Marriage and Other Subjects*. Translated by Charles T. Wilcox, 1st edition. Washington: Catholic Univ of Amer Pr, 1955, 24.

<sup>7</sup> This follows from Augustine's theology of gender, which assumes women are incapable of being moral agents in the same way as men, and thus can only be saved through their relationship to a man: either by marrying a Christian man, or by living a celibate life devoted to Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Augustine, “The Good of Marriage,” 12.

one of the first prominent theologians to posit that “*concupiscentia* (concupiscence, sexual appetite) was a natural aspect of human nature rather than a corruption of that nature.”<sup>9</sup>

Aquinas moved away from Augustine’s more dualistic views of body and soul, viewing both as necessary to one another, though the soul retained its superior status over the body.<sup>10</sup> As he explains in the *Summa Theologica*, “Now the human soul is the highest and noblest of forms. Wherefore it excels corporeal matter in its power by the fact that it has an operation and a power in which corporeal matter has no share whatever. This power is called the intellect.”<sup>11</sup> Because Aquinas believed that the soul could only communicate itself through the body and that the union of body and soul was humanity’s natural state, he opened the door for a more positive appraisal of bodily desire, including sexual desire. Aquinas demonstrably believed that sex was for procreation, and sex for pleasure would be aimed at a lesser good and thus disordered (which is to say, sinful).<sup>12</sup> This dualistic idealism is often active in Church teachings around sexuality today; one is to aim for the highest possible good in any situation, and aiming at lower goods may be characterized as failure to have been sufficiently moral in the first place. Moral theology

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<sup>9</sup> Corey Barnes, “Thomas Aquinas on the Body and Bodily Passions,” in Margaret D. Kamitsuka, ed., *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 83.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>11</sup> Aquinas, St Thomas. *Summa Theologica, Volume 1*. Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2013, 372.

<sup>12</sup> Barnes, Thomas Aquinas,” 94.

gains greater nuance with recent concepts such as the principle of double-effect<sup>13</sup> and the *minus malum*,<sup>14</sup> though these moral concepts are not widely known by Church faithful.

Aquinas' hierarchy in ordering the soul above the body is also implicated in the way women have been traditionally viewed as subordinate in the Church, associated with the body and "baser" instincts. Aquinas was invested in reasoning and ordering through hierarchy which did not lend easily to the concept of equality. Aquinas modified Augustine's evaluation of sex by asserting it was not minimally sinful at all times, but agreed that sex was sinful if pregnancy was not the goal. Both Augustine and Aquinas worked from male-centered and procreational worldviews, and this tendency is still influential in Church doctrine. These Church Fathers steered Catholicism down the path of viewing sex as good insofar as procreation intended, but maintained that sexual pleasure was morally risky.

### Early 1900's

Another major development in Catholic doctrine on sexuality occurred in 1930, when Pope Pius XI promulgated an encyclical called *Casti Connubii*, typically translated

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<sup>13</sup> Cavanaugh, T. A. *Double-Effect Reasoning: Doing Good and Avoiding Evil*. 1st edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 36. The principle of double-effect explains that it can be morally licit for a person to perform an action that has two effects—one good, one evil—if the good effect is the only one intended, if the goodness accomplished outweighs the evil, and if the situation is sufficiently grave to warrant it. The best example in modern Catholic ethical circles is that of removing the fallopian tube of a woman with an ectopic pregnancy, thus ending the pregnancy but saving the life of the woman. (Ending the pregnancy directly is not permitted).

<sup>14</sup> Fuller, Jon D., and James F. Keenan. "Tolerant Signals: The Vatican's New Insights on Condoms for H.I.V. Prevention." *America Magazine*, September 23, 2000. <http://www.americamagazine.org/issue/381/article/tolerant-signals>. *Minus malum* is explained succinctly as "an important principle used to describe morally permissible though regrettable action." More helpfully, it permits actions which are not considered "good" provided that they are less evil than the alternative. In this article, Fuller and Keenan identify the use of prophylactics between married couples to prevent the transmission of H.I.V. as a lesser evil than allowing the virus to spread.

"On Christian Marriage" or "Of Chaste Wedlock." While the text spoke broadly about marriage and family, it seemed a clear response to the recent Anglican Lambeth Conference which resulted in an allowance of the use of oral contraceptives for their faithful, though it does not mention the Anglicans specifically when it says,

Since, therefore... some recently have judged it possible solemnly to declare another doctrine regarding this question, the Catholic Church, to whom God has entrusted the defense of the integrity and purity of morals... raises her voice in token of her divine ambassadorship.<sup>15</sup>

*Casti Connubii* was a definitive reassertion of the Catholic Church's teachings on gender hierarchy,<sup>16</sup> the ends of marriage, and the illicitness of birth control, but for the first time suggested that the "natural" spacing of births was permissible in marriage.

The primary end of marriage, according to the document, which cites both Augustine and Canon Law, is the begetting and educating of children.<sup>17</sup> The secondary end is the mutual fidelity of the spouses,<sup>18</sup> which has been interpreted to mean both the avoidance of sexual sin by giving people a legitimate outlet, or as loving unity (with the latter becoming a stronger emphasis in societies where companionate marriage is the norm). The document follows the tradition established by Augustine and Aquinas when it calls the avoidance of conception a "criminal act" and asserts that couples who try to

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<sup>15</sup> Catholic Church and Paul XI, *On Christian Marriage: Casti Connubii*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1930), Para 56.

<sup>16</sup> This document affirms that women owe "obedience" to their husbands and strongly discourages women from taking on jobs or roles in the public world, insisting that this would endanger the sanctity of the family.

<sup>17</sup> Paul XI, *Casti Connubii*, Para 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Para 19.



avoid pregnancy “wish to gratify their desires without their consequent burden,”<sup>19</sup> suggesting that pursuing desire alone is to shirk responsibility. As such, it makes good sense that the pope would not affirm contraception because non-procreative sex would likely be sought for its pleasure, which both Augustine and Aquinas clearly stated was problematic.

On the subject of non-procreative sex, the encyclical reads: “Nor are those considered as acting against nature who in the married state use their right in the proper manner although on account of natural reasons either of time or of certain defects, new life cannot be brought forth.”<sup>20</sup> In plainer summary, this statement affirms that it is not sinful for married couples to have sex even when they are sure they could not become pregnant, as long as they are not actively preventing pregnancy from taking place. The terminology “natural reasons either of time or certain defects” suggests that the Pope was referring to menopause and infertility, where couples could be certain they would not conceive due to their biological realities. This reframing represents a turning point in Catholic theology—sex is still assumed to be for the propagation of children and the fidelity of spouses, but Catholic couples who had passed childbearing years were now explicitly permitted to pursue the “bonding” aspect alone, since the higher good was no longer attainable.

*Casti Connubii* might have faded into history as another enigmatic Church document asserting Catholic family values, but the quoted section above regarding the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Para 53.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Para 59.

spacing of births was eventually adopted and used for another purpose that is active in Catholic culture today. The idea that it was permissible to avoid pregnancy through the proper application of timing begins a new spiritual practice among some Church faithful: using knowledge of the menstrual cycle to space out births, which later become known as the rhythm method, or Natural Family Planning (NFP). After the release of this document and well into the present, rhythm or NFP rises in notoriety and status as the uniquely Catholic method for participating with God's will and cooperating with nature while creating a family.

In and of itself, *Casti Connubii* is not a surprising document. It is, however, a significant player in the understanding of Church teaching authority that impacted Vatican II and the later *Humanae Vitae*. This 1930's document represents a small step away from the theologies of sexuality set out by Augustine and Aquinas. It asserts that having sex simply for pleasure, that is, for the unity of the spouses, is now explicitly approved, provided that the spouses have not done anything deliberate to avoid conception. Acknowledging the possible goodness of sex for pleasure is a recent addition to Catholic doctrine.

### The Second Vatican Council

The ecumenical council Vatican II, which convened from 1962-1965, marked major transition in many areas of Catholic doctrine and life. The council produced distinct changes in faith practice, such as altering Mass from Latin to the local vernacular, and was aimed at "opening the windows" to the modern world. In terms of teachings about sexuality, a few shifts happened here. This ecumenical council, like all before it,

involved only ordained men as voting members, though women religious and some religious leaders from other denominations were permitted to attend the council as non-voting, non-speaking guests. The question of hormonal birth control had not been easily set aside after the promulgation of *Casti Connubii* and was still in contention. It was considered too specialized and perhaps too controversial to be addressed by the council proper and so was shunted aside to a special commission, which will be addressed below. However, a few changes in language came through in *Gaudium et Spes*, also known as “The Church in the Modern World,” one of four major pastoral constitutions to emerge from the council.

Paragraph 48 of *Gaudium et Spes* addresses Christian marriage and, while still referring to children as the “ultimate crown” of marriage, does not use the language of primary and secondary ends, stating, “As a mutual gift of two persons, this intimate union and the good of the children impose total fidelity on the spouses and argue for an unbreakable oneness between them.”<sup>21</sup> Martial bonding and the begetting of children are described as equally worthy pursuits in a marriage, another small step away from Aquinas’ insistence that having sex for pleasure alone must be disordered, and a minor adjustment of *Casti Connubii*’s hierarchical ordering of these two ends. This represents one way that doctrinal change happens in the Church—authority figures stop using certain language or replace it with new terminology that allows for different nuances to

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<sup>21</sup> Catholic Church, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et Spes*, (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1965), Para 48.

emerge.<sup>22</sup> There is no repudiation of *Casti Connubii*, no admission of the wrongness of earlier teaching, but this alteration of phrasing becomes regarded as the official doctrinal position of the Church—not “new,” but more fully developed.

*Lumen Gentium*, another of the principle documents that emerged from the council, added another significant concept to the dialogue. The sense of the faithful, *sensus fidelium*, is identified as a proper and authoritative source of theological understanding.

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole people’s supernatural discernment in matters of faith when “from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful” they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, the Church faithful in and of themselves were recognized to have some level of authority when it came to recognizing and shaping doctrine as it is lived out. *Sensus fidelium* can be viewed as a return to other teachings by Church Fathers regarding the individual conscience,<sup>24</sup> which Aquinas especially highlighted as the Spirit within each person, a voice that had to be followed in order to achieve moral rightness. A more recent Church document produced by the International Theological Commission

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<sup>22</sup> Porter, Jean, “Contraceptive Use and the Authority of the Church: A Case Study on Natural Law and Moral Discernment,” Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, eds., *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 369-405, 376.

<sup>23</sup> Catholic Church, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), Para 12.

<sup>24</sup> Gaillardetz and Clifford, *Keys to the Council*, 143. The notion of conscience is bound up in a high theological anthropology which emphasizes that human beings were created for good and thus naturally desire to make the best choices we are able.

describes it as “a sort of spiritual instinct that enables the believer to judge spontaneously whether a particular teaching or practice is or is not in conformity with the Gospel and with apostolic faith.”<sup>25</sup> The same document also acknowledges that a lack of assent to Church teaching “may indicate that certain decisions have been taken by those in authority without due consideration of the experience and the *sensus fidei* of the faithful,”<sup>26</sup> a statement which reaffirms the dynamic relationship between faithful and Magisterium in moral matters. *Sensus fidelium* operates on a larger scale than individual conscience and thus carries more weight as a source of wisdom and authority. This concept has been one of the theological warrants for critiques of Church teaching on sexuality since Vatican II.

### *Humanae Vitae*

With the many changes coming out of Vatican II, it was also known in the Catholic world that the late Pope John XXIII had assembled a special commission to address the question of birth control, and that his successor, Pope Paul VI had maintained and added many members to that commission, including a few married Catholic couples. Couples were largely chosen for their faithfulness to and promotion of Natural Family Planning,<sup>27</sup> a point that will be significant when we explore the conclusions of this

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<sup>25</sup> International Theological Commission. “Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church (2014).” *Vatican.va*. Accessed September 26, 2016. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20140610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html#Introduction](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html#Introduction). Para 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Blair Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex and Religion: A Case History in the Development of Doctrine, 1962-1984*, (Kansas City: Leaven Press, 1985), 93.

commission. For those who followed the business of the council, many were convinced that a change to the birth control teaching was imminent. This may have been especially true given the way *Lumen Gentium* recognized a special place in theologizing for the lay faithful, especially when they had different experience and expertise than celibate clergy.

Two people on the birth control commission, the married couple Pat and Patty Crowley, took it upon themselves to investigate how the rhythm method of family planning (known as Natural Family Planning when used in Church contexts) was working among their circles. They surveyed faithful married Catholic couples like themselves and were startled by a largely negative evaluation, even from those who had dedicated their lives to making this method work.<sup>28</sup> Many couples reported serious friction in their marriages, especially when children were conceived when they had been trying to avoid another birth. This information was presented to the commission, and after many years of intense work after the closing of Vatican II, the commission presented a majority report with the consensus that the Church's teaching on birth control needed to be changed to allow for other forms of family planning, including the birth control pill. Their conclusion became well-known after the *National Catholic Reporter* scooped the information and published all the commission documents in full in April of 1967.<sup>29</sup> However, the priest leader of the small minority on the same commission wrote a personal missive to Pope Paul VI arguing that "it is not possible to contradict *Casti Connubii*, for that would undermine the doctrinal authority of the magisterium and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 184.

seriously endanger the confidence of the faithful.”<sup>30</sup> That is, to change anything regarding Church teaching on sexuality will make the Church look foolish, and the faithful will stop taking Church authority seriously. This argument from authority seemed to be enough for Pope Paul VI to promulgate *Humanae Vitae* a few short years later, which was written by the commission minority without the knowledge of the majority.

*Humanae Vitae* is known primarily as the birth control encyclical, though it deals with sexuality questions more broadly as well. Strictly speaking, it does not represent any change in Church doctrine, but an unexpected upholding of doctrine after an impetus from an advising body to revise. About the use of artificial birth control, it states:

The Church is the first to praise and commend the application of human intelligence to an activity in which a rational creature such as man[sic] is so closely associated with his[sic] Creator. But she [the Church] affirms that this must be done within the limits of the order of reality established by God.<sup>31</sup>

The difficult language may have been intended to forestall further discussion, a theory that Catholic ethicist Mark Jordan argues applies to nearly all Church documents regarding sexuality.<sup>32</sup> The document tries to settle the issue of authority quickly, stating,

No member of the faithful could possibly deny that the Church is competent in her magisterium to interpret the natural moral law. It is in fact indisputable...For the natural law, too, declares the will of God, and its faithful observance is necessary for men's[sic] eternal salvation.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>31</sup> Catholic Church, *Encyclical Letter Humanae Vitae*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1968), Para 16.

<sup>32</sup> Mark D. Jordan, *Telling Truths in Church: Scandal, Flesh and Christian Speech*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>33</sup> Catholic Church, *Humanae Vitae*, Para 4.

One's salvation, according to this document, was bound up in proper obedience to the teachings established by the Church regarding family planning. This is consistent with Church teaching on infallibility beyond the role of the pope—to say the Church is infallible does not mean that it is always right, but that following the path laid down by Church teaching cannot lead one astray in their relationship with God.

A few aspects of the language are noticeable shifts from previous documents. The encyclical states “Also noteworthy is a new understanding of the dignity of woman and her place in society, of the value of conjugal love in marriage and the relationship of conjugal acts to this love.”<sup>34</sup> This is the first official acknowledgement by the Church of the changing norms of companionate marriage and the significant role that sex plays when marriages are based on affection. We do not see here any language that insists sex is a gift, or that the pleasure of the act itself is good, but this small cue that sex might be good in and of itself—instead of simply *producing* good via children or mutual bonding of spouses—will be repeated by another pope.

Even after years of new scientific understandings of human reproduction, *Humanae Vitae* suggests trepidation about de-centering the procreative purpose of intercourse. This upheld teaching on birth control was not well-received by the faithful, especially in the United States. Sociologically, the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae* has been described as the American Catholic "Declaration of Independence," after which the faithful decided "...that they as individuals were authorized to make their own choices on

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., Para 2.



such doctrinal and moral matters."<sup>35</sup> Two years after the release of the encyclical, a Princeton study found that two-thirds of Catholic women in the U.S. were using birth control methods that were not in line with Church teaching,<sup>36</sup> and more recent surveys have indicated that that percentage has risen.<sup>37</sup>

Much doctrine on sexuality has not substantively changed in two millennia of Church history. Language about female submission to male headship has developed into “complementarity” language, strongly favored by Pope John Paul II, which asserts that passivity is central to the nature of all women.<sup>38</sup> Procreation has maintained a central role in justifying sexual expression, though it has been tempered by a discourse on unity. What has changed, and what is more significant than doctrinal change to this project, is the attitudes of the faithful towards Church teaching. Birth control is one convenient example of people in the pews doing what they feel is best, despite the conflict with Church teaching. The work of Religion scholar Donna Freitas indicates that young adults

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<sup>35</sup> Smith, Christian, Kyle Longest, Jonathan Hill, and Kari Christoffersen. *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out Of, and Gone from the Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Kaiser, *The Politics of Sex*, 218.

<sup>37</sup> Kessler, Glenn. “The Claim That 98 Percent of Catholic Women Use Contraception: A Media Foul.” *The Washington Post*, February 16, 2012. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/the-claim-that-98-percent-of-catholic-women-use-contraception-a-media-foul/2012/02/16/gIQAkPqIR\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/fact-checker/post/the-claim-that-98-percent-of-catholic-women-use-contraception-a-media-foul/2012/02/16/gIQAkPqIR_blog.html).

While the above article demonstrates that the commonly cited 98% statistic of U.S. Catholic women who use birth control other than natural family planning is an overstated number (considering sampling size and a notable minority who use no family planning method at all) the study provides strong evidence that a solid majority of Catholic women in the U.S. have used methods besides NFP.

<sup>38</sup> More specifically, “woman is the one who receives love in order to love in return...[This] means something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all interpersonal relationships.” Catholic Church and John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women: Mulieris Dignitatem* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988), Para 29.

have vague concepts of what the Church teaches about sex and tend not to take those teachings seriously.<sup>39</sup> Catholic historian Tom Wright cites the sex abuse scandal as worsening this trend by inciting distrust between laity and clergy<sup>40</sup> given the scandal is an egregious example of the Church being more interested in maintaining appearances than in developing healthy practices and ideas around sexuality.<sup>41</sup> However, longitudinal studies of religiosity among Roman Catholic young adults in the United States indicate that the fundamental shift of regarding the Church as having ultimate moral authority actually occurred around 1970—that is, shortly after *Humanae Vitae* was released.<sup>42</sup>

### Pope John Paul II and Theology of the Body

Pope John Paul II,<sup>43</sup> an uncommonly popular pope and great ecumenist, took it upon himself to create what he termed a “theology of the body” through a series of lectures between 1978 and 1984. The title is somewhat misleading, as *Theology of the Body* deals almost entirely with issues of gender and sexuality and not the entirety of incarnational existence. His lectures spoke about sex as a beautiful gift<sup>44</sup> from God that

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<sup>39</sup> Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 186.

<sup>40</sup> Appleby, Scott. “Responding to Clericalism and Sex Abuse.” *USCatholic.org*, October 2012. <http://www.uscatholic.org/church/2012/09/responding-clericalism-and-sex-abuse>.

<sup>41</sup> Brian F. Linnane, S.J., “The Sexual Abuse Scandal in the Catholic Church: Implications for Sexual Ethics,” in Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, eds., *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 276.

<sup>42</sup> Smith, et. al, *Young Catholic America*, 19.

<sup>43</sup> Pope John Paul II is also known by the title “St. John Paul the Great.” Since his papacy is still within the living memory of most Catholics, I rely upon his more well-known moniker.

<sup>44</sup> John Paul II. *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology Of The Body*. Translated by Michael Waldstein. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006, 196. Throughout the text, John Paul II uses terminology such as “gift of self” that at times obscures whether he specifically means sexual intercourse,

was given to all husbands and wives, changing the discourse again and de-emphasizing the suspicious language that had long dominated sexuality discussions.<sup>45</sup>

In *Theology of the Body*, Pope John Paul II reframed one of the fundamental starting points of theologies of sexuality; unlike Augustine and Aquinas, and unlike *Casti Connubii*, he begins by asserting that human sexuality is good and that the act of sex is good in and of itself, as is sexual pleasure.<sup>46</sup> This is a departure from regarding sex firstly as a method for begetting new children and also for the betterment of the spousal relationship—this assertion talks about the act of sex in and of itself, instead of what it produces.

However, Pope John Paul II did not change any existing Church teachings about sex in his *Theology of the Body*. This is curious given that the baseline teaching shifted from sex as aimed at other goods to sex as a good in and of itself. One would assume that changing such a fundamental premise would have reshaped other aspects of teaching, but it did not. Pope John Paul II refreshed pious discourse for explaining the Church's concepts of gender and the need for all sexual expression to be between spouses in heterosexual marriage that was actively open to the conception of children.

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marital love, or both. As we saw above in *Humanae Vitae*, this choice of vague language is likely intentional to emphasize that sex and marriage can only rightly be spoken about together.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 167. Indeed, sex is not simply heralded as "good" but as having cosmic power to allow spouses to "...rediscover...the mystery of creation" and "[relive] in some way man's[sic] original virginal value."

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

Commentators note that Theology of the Body is fundamentally focused on the teachings of *Humanae Vitae* and bolstering their persuasive power.<sup>47</sup>

At present, official Catholic doctrines on sexuality can be summarized as follows, directly from the Catechism:

*Sexuality* affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his[sic] body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others.<sup>48</sup>

Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands *indissolubility* and *faithfulness* in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to *fertility*.<sup>49</sup>

One will notice that sexuality is helpfully defined as encompassing multiple spheres of relationality and spirituality, not unlike the definition of sexuality set out at the start of this dissertation.<sup>50</sup> Friendships, for example, involve forming bonds with others, and thus are part of a person's sexuality.

However, one will also note that sexual expression is referred to as "conjugal love"<sup>51</sup> and is treated as fundamentally marital; thus, it is difficult for Church teaching to grapple in a complex way with non-marital sexual expression. The Catechism exclusively

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<sup>47</sup> Waldstein, Michael, "Introduction." *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology Of The Body*. John Paul II, Translated by Michael Waldstein. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006.

<sup>48</sup> Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd Revised & Enlarged Edition. Vatican City: Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000, 560.

<sup>49</sup> Catechism 410; One should note the term "conjugal love," which does not clearly distinguish between the act of sex itself and the act of sex as expressed within a marriage.

<sup>50</sup> To reiterate, sexuality in this project is defined as encompassing Intimacy, Sensuality, Sexual Identity, Biology/Reproduction, and Sexualization (power dynamics).

<sup>51</sup> The word "conjugal" by definition refers to marriage.

uses phrases like "conjugal love" and "carnal union" to describe sexual intercourse, and both phrasings make it unclear if it is only penile-vaginal intercourse being addressed or if other forms of sexual expression are included. In either case, "conjugal love" assumes that all sexual actions take place within a sacramental marital context. This assumption creates confusion about how is one to know what sexual expressions are reserved for marital relationships and which can be part of a romantic non-marital relationship which, according to the above definition, is part of both partner's sexuality. Despite the nuanced understanding of sexuality articulated above, there is a limited framework in which sexual expression makes sense. Outside that framework of marriage, as most interpret the doctrinal teaching, is a large valley of uncertain moral behaviors.

This would mean that all sexual expression outside the context of a marital relationship (which the Church defines as only between a male and a female and which must be sacramentally conducted), is understood as morally suspect. Furthermore, all marital expressions of sexuality must be open to the possible creation of life. The implications run far: masturbation at any time and for any purpose, including medical testing, is sinful<sup>52</sup>; oral sex, or any activity where a man willfully ejaculates outside of a vagina is sinful;<sup>53</sup> sexual fantasizing, or willful assent to feelings of sexual arousal outside of marriage is at least occasion for sin;<sup>54</sup> sex using any form of contraceptive is

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<sup>52</sup> Catechism 564-565; Masturbation is the only one of the listed "offenses against chastity" in the catechism that has equivocating language about moral responsibility being affected by maturity, psychological or social factors, etc. However, it is still widely understood that masturbation for medical purposes is considered illicit.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Catechism 564. Fantasy would fall under the offense "lust," which is defined as sexual pleasure sought for itself and disconnected from unitive and procreative purposes.

illicit;<sup>55</sup> homosexual acts are considered objectively disordered.<sup>56</sup> Much of the "gray area" is left undiscussed—various forms of touching, kissing, hugging, and other bodily expressions of affection are given no official treatment, perhaps because of substantial cultural differences in how such touching is perceived.

There are occasional discussions about the morality of intent, which emphasizes the context of moral decision-making, but these are largely out of the public eye. Pope John Paul II wrote a document that discussed contraceptive intent, which is equated with abortive intent and thus sinful in and of itself. This is to say that going into a sexual act while intending that it not be procreative is truly the sin—the means by which this intention is lived out is largely moot. This teaching has not been widely promulgated, likely because of the divisive rulings it would create.<sup>57</sup> Couples who use Natural Family Planning to “avoid” pregnancy, if they truly intended their sexual act to have no openness to conception, would be in the wrong just as much as couples who rely on condoms; and couples who use condoms to prevent the spread of a sexually transmitted disease, who otherwise did not intend to contracept their act, could be acting licitly.<sup>58</sup> Focusing on

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<sup>55</sup> Catechism 570; spouses are permitted to use "periodic continence" to space births, so long as they are not being motivated by "selfishness."

<sup>56</sup> Catechism 566; The Catechism uses the phrases "grave depravity" and "intrinsically disordered" to refer to all homosexual acts and states "Under no circumstances can they be approved."

<sup>57</sup> Pope John Paul II. "Evangelium Vitae." Libreria Editrice Vaticana, March 25, 1995. [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html), Para. 13.

<sup>58</sup> Theologically, *Humanae Vitae* and official church teaching permit the use of contraceptive drugs for medical needs. However, the USCCB website discourages this practice, claiming that "artificial hormones typically treat only the medical symptoms. They do not correct the underlying disease or condition," and thus medical treatment with contraceptive drugs is not considered ideal or completely proper treatment. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. "Love and Sexuality: Frequently Asked

intentions has not been the usual thrust of doctrinal sexual morality. Church teachings on sexuality have focused on sacramental context, particular actions, and the ends of those actions more so than intention or discernment.

The topics of sex and sexuality in the Roman Catholic Church have undergone large shifts in the last century and the full implications of moving away from a procreation-centered ethic to one that also acknowledges the goods of bonding and pleasure have not been fully explored. The Church is in theological transition, which has raised a number of practical questions that cannot be easily resolved. If in the past non-marital sexual acts were forbidden because of their sinfulness, present language forbids the same acts because they are too sacred and important to be experienced in anything but the most ideal setting.<sup>59</sup> Because of this transitional context, the theologies of sexuality in the Catholic Church have not come together in a systematized way, and as such, faithful and clergy alike may experience confusion with regards to official teaching.

### **The Modern Disconnect**

Pope Francis has renewed the role of the pontificate by nearly anyone's standards since his election in 2013; while he represents no breaks with official Catholic teachings, and to date has altered no doctrine, his difference of priorities and tone has been oft noted. He is on record saying that Catholics should embrace a broader picture of what joyful, whole, Catholic living might entail and speak less frequently about select

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Questions on Sexuality and Family Planning." USCCB Beliefs and Teachings, 2015. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/love-and-sexuality/>.

<sup>59</sup> Waldstein, Michael. "Introduction." In *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, by John Paul II. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006, 121.

sexuality issues.<sup>60</sup> When asked about homosexual men in the priesthood, his response was a humble “Who am I to judge?”<sup>61</sup>

Pope Francis represents a pastoral theological approach, one which holds to certain convictions while also refusing to let those convictions interfere with listening to a person's story.<sup>62</sup> His effort to decentralize sexuality issues has created hope in certain circles that greater diversity of beliefs and opinions will be better tolerated in the future. Pope Francis has instigated a change in tone and emphasized compassion over self-righteousness, alterations that could translate into better and deeper listening to experiences of the other. Where this will leave the Church with regards to theologies of sexuality remains to be seen.

While priests and bishops have authority to decide Church teachings at the Magisterial level, lay and religious scholars have made a point to contribute to the discussion. Catholic feminist theologians have, in the past few decades, advocated the

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<sup>60</sup> Spadaro, Antonio. “A Big Heart Open to God.” *America Magazine*, September 30, 2013. <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>. “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context. The teaching of the church, for that matter, is clear and I am a son of the church, but it is not necessary to talk about these issues all the time.”

<sup>61</sup> Donadio, Rachel. “On Gay Priests, Pope Francis Asks, ‘Who Am I to Judge?’” *The New York Times*, July 29, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/30/world/europe/pope-francis-gay-priests.html>.

<sup>62</sup> This might be most clearly seen in the example of transsexual persons, whom Pope Francis states fails to recognize the order of creation. Francis nevertheless invited a transgender man to a private meeting and has dined with prisoners who were transgender. “Pope Francis Compares Transgender People To Nuclear Weapons In New Book.” Accessed July 6, 2015. <http://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2015/02/20/pope-francis-compares-transgender-people-to-nuclear-weapons-in-new-book/>. “Transgender Man: I Met with Pope Francis - CNN.com.” *CNN*. Accessed July 6, 2015. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/30/living/pope-transgender-man/index.html>.



integration of lived experience into the formulation of theology.<sup>63</sup> This inclusion of women's unique experience proves especially necessary when theology deals with embodiment, which sexuality clearly does. Moving away from Augustine's aversion to the physical, feminist theologians re-center the body as a distinctly human way of knowing, taking their cue from the theology of God becoming a fully embodied human in the Incarnation as evidence that this way of knowing is sanctified.

Christian ethicist Christine Gudorf is known for arguing that pleasure, especially mutual pleasure, should become a major factor in how we evaluate the ethical implications of sexual expression. Gudorf argues against the dominant strand of Catholic theology by contending that pleasure is a premoral good,<sup>64</sup> and while premoral goods must sometimes be negated by higher-order moral goods, bodily pleasure is a worthy end to pursue. Her orientation towards pleasure extends to a major concern for bodiliness, reclaiming the goodness of embodied creation in Christian Incarnational theology. She repudiates the historical suspicion of sexual pleasure, denying that desire for such pleasure is as irresistible and only leads people towards selfishness, as Augustine believed.<sup>65</sup> In fact, she centralizes bodily pleasure as "important in creating the ability to trust and love others, including God,"<sup>66</sup> establishing pleasure as a spiritual aid instead of an impediment.

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<sup>63</sup> Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

Another Catholic theologian, Lisa Sowle Cahill, echoes the significance of embodiment, and thus seeks to re-insert the significance of procreation and gender into sexuality discourse. With this approach, Cahill is actually more attentive to certain bodily experiences than Gudorf, such as pregnancy. Cahill is concerned that sexuality has become too privatized and detached from its social reality, and thus is prone to slipping into relativism in cross-cultural contexts.<sup>67</sup> Cahill ultimately proposes an interrelated triangle of aspects of sexual flourishing with the three points being Pleasure, Intimacy/Commitment, and Procreation/Parenthood.<sup>68</sup> She describes these three areas as rightly separable, but also ideals towards which sexual expression should strive. We can see in this triangle the procreation and mutual bonding aspects from doctrinal statements, but Cahill's addition of pleasure changes the dynamic by centralizing bodily experiencing as a major aspect of sexual ethics.

Beyond a reframing of bodily experience, Catholic moral theologians such as Evelyn and James Whitehead, William Spohn, and William Mattison III emphasize growth in virtue and argue that act-centered sexual morality does not provide the faithful with opportunities to grow in virtue or to develop discernment skills.<sup>69</sup> Whitehead and Whitehead, among others, advocate for non-idealized theologies around sexuality that

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<sup>67</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>69</sup> Marvin Mahan Ellison, *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 30.

encourage contextual decision-making;<sup>70</sup> however, these growth-oriented theologies often come under fire from the Magisterium because they do not (and often cannot) summarily exclude practices that the Church presently teaches are sinful, such as premarital sex or sexual expression between two people of the same sex.

Justice-based theologies of sexuality have also become popular with Cahill,<sup>71</sup> Catholic ethicist and woman religious Margaret Farley,<sup>72</sup> and Protestant ethicist Marvin Ellison<sup>73</sup> as these theologians take the guidance of social justice doctrine in hopes of creating a more holistic moral system where sexuality is not treated differently from other moral issues. Farley in particular sought to lay out the basic values that should undergird sexual decision-making for Christians, moving away from act-centered morality, but was critiqued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops for failing to uphold Church teaching on masturbation and homosexuality.<sup>74</sup>

These justice-oriented works often point to the fact that when faced with the doctrine of social justice in the Church, faithful Catholics are given the broad terms of the

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<sup>70</sup> Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *A Sense of Sexuality: Christian Love and Intimacy*, 1st ed (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 141.

<sup>71</sup> Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*.

<sup>72</sup> Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum International Pub. Group, 2006).

<sup>73</sup> Ellison, *Making Love Just*.

<sup>74</sup> Goodstein, Laurie, and Rachel Donadio. "Sister Margaret Farley Denounced by Vatican." *The New York Times*, June 4, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/05/us/sister-margaret-farley-denounced-by-vatican.html>.

teachings and left to decide how to apply them in their own lives,<sup>75</sup> unlike sexual issues which, according to Church teaching, typically deal with “gravely illicit” actions, such as sexual intercourse outside of a marriage context, or the use of artificial contraception. Because the misuse of sexuality regularly falls into the “grave” category, the Catechism states that no good intentions or serious circumstances could justify them.<sup>76</sup> For that reason, such teachings are given an immutable status. The moral theologians cited above disagree with the fundamental starting point that premarital sex or the use of artificial contraception are intrinsically evil and construct their arguments from that assumption.

Margaret Farley speculates that these justice-oriented theologies will be more appealing to young adults seeking guidance on sexual decision making,<sup>77</sup> since young adult Catholics are popularly portrayed as being attracted to the social justice concepts of Catholicism.<sup>78</sup> However, there is little indication of whether these more comprehensive, justice-oriented theologies are circulating amongst Church faithful, especially young adults. Donna Freitas’ study of college culture indicates that Catholic young adults do not know much about Church doctrine or other theological interpretations of sexuality and thus tend to adopt concepts and practices from the secular realm.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Gaillardetz and Clifford, *Keys to the Council*, 100. This is also referred to as “legitimate disagreement” around the concrete implementation of Church teaching.

<sup>76</sup> Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 486.

<sup>77</sup> Farley, *Just Love*, 235.

<sup>78</sup> Droel, Bill. “Young Adults and Social Change.” *Catholic Labor Network*, April 23, 2015. <https://catholiclabor.com/working-catholic/2015-articles/young-adults-and-social-change/>.

<sup>79</sup> Freitas, *Sex and the Soul*, 186, 213.

What does all this tell us about why the formation of Catholic doctrine around sexuality is difficult? First and foremost, the process of forming Catholic doctrine is slow, especially when measured against the process of changing cultural norms about sexuality. That doctrine relies on Tradition for authority, leaving it beholden to Church Fathers who did not have a positive or biologically astute appraisal of sex. Positive assessment about the role of bonding in sexual expression is still quite new and only gained popularity in Vatican II and later with Pope John Paul II's theology of the body lectures. Disagreement on the topic of sexuality tends to be heated and contentious, and moral theologians take professional risks when openly critiquing the Magisterium.<sup>80</sup> Teachings on sexuality are not necessarily comprehensive or systematic, leading many people to wonder why, for example, the principle of double effect works in bioethics and not in birth control, or why the faithful have great latitude to interpret teachings on social justice and not on sexuality.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, when shifts do occur, they are rarely momentous occasions—rather, they are gradual changes in language in official documents.<sup>82</sup> Church documents do not state that earlier documents were in error even when correcting them, meaning that the path of doctrinal development is not always easy to trace.

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<sup>80</sup> Charles Curran is the classic example of disagreeing with the Catholic Church on matters of sexuality and subsequently being removed from his tenured professorship at the Catholic University of America. Theologians like Lisa Sowle Cahill and James Keenan, S.J., backed away from sexuality issues in their later scholarly work; Farley and Gudorf ended up teaching at non-Catholic schools.

<sup>81</sup> Charles Curran, "John Paul II's Understanding of the Church as Teacher of Truth about Humankind," in Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, eds., *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 430.

<sup>82</sup> Porter, "Contraceptive Use," 396. Porter believes it is most likely that doctrinal "change" around birth control will happen when church officials just stop talking about it.

Following the lead of other theologians who write about sexuality, a Catholic sexual theology need not be exclusively "Catholic" in terms of uncritical doctrinal adherence to present teachings or attention to all significant resources in the tradition. Rather, a Catholic sexual theology may be extrapolated from particularly helpful resources within the tradition, and needs to be held in tension with other Catholic sexual theologies in order to be appropriately complex. Because Catholic doctrinal theology does indeed call for the voice of the laity to be heard, major cultural shifts in understandings of sexuality, pleasure, and methods of family planning often challenge official teachings.

### ***A Return to Sensus Fidelium***

*Sensus fidelium* makes its first real waves with the writings of John Henry Newman, a convert from Anglicanism who eventually became a Roman Catholic cardinal. In the process of writing articles for an intellectual Catholic periodical in the late 1850's in England, he asserted that the perspective of the faithful needed to be taken into account when the Church decided doctrinal matters. By consulting the faithful, he did not mean polling or asking for opinions, but to take testimony, consult their feelings, and gauge their emotional reactions to the introduction of doctrine before finalizing it.<sup>83</sup> While the article generated no shortage of controversy and some accusations of heresy, perhaps Newman's most significant contribution to the discussion was his assumption that the role of the laity was more than a matter of administration policy; it was a

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<sup>83</sup> Newman, John Henry. *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*. Edited by John Coulson. New York: Sheed & Ward, 1961, 70.

theological issue.<sup>84</sup> Whether one believed laity had a role in formulating and receiving teachings or not, to address Newman's work meant engaging the idea that the laity's role was God-ordained and divinely assigned.

Let us return to the document that codified this role into doctrine, *Lumen Gentium*, which reads:

The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth.<sup>85</sup>

Theologian Fr. Donald Cozzens asserts that this document and the trends of Vatican II suggest recognition that laity had "come of age" and were to be engaged by clergy as full adults in the faith, expectant of compelling reasoning for Church teachings and capable of complex reasoning about how to live good Catholic lives.<sup>86</sup> Arguments from authority or under threat of sin were no longer compelling. Furthermore, *Gaudium et Spes* identified the special charism of the laity to "take the initiative in making Christian values concrete,"<sup>87</sup> recognizing that the people in the pews took primary responsibility for discerning how the love of Christ could and should be translated into lived situations.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>85</sup> Catholic Church, *Lumen Gentium*, Para 12.

<sup>86</sup> Cozzens, Donald B. *Faith That Dares to Speak*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004, 81. One should note that this is a significant theological departure from the dominant model of pastor-lay relations which typically used the shepherd and sheep metaphor to describe the pastor's role in guiding ignorant charges towards salvation.

<sup>87</sup> Gaillardetz and Clifford, *Keys to the Council*, 98.

Like many of the reforms of Vatican II, this particular calling has not been fully articulated or realized, and Church hierarchy continues to use official teaching authority more specifically and often than ever before in history,<sup>88</sup> but the theological ideal remains part of Church doctrine.

The concept of *sensus fidelium* continues to be used in numerous and complex ways, but the central hallmarks are as follows: the voice of the laity shines through in this source of revelation; *sensus fidelium* is a dynamic source that encompasses the lay response to teachings and the hierarchical response to the laity's reaction; it is inherently communal, and individual experiences and stories should have some kind of wider resonance. The Church is the communal space where Christ's revelation can be found, and yet revelations are experienced personally—"And when we give testimony to our personal encounters with God's revelation, received and interpreted within the unique stories of our lives, the community is enriched by our testimony."<sup>89</sup> Despite the more definitive wording of *Lumen Gentium*, modern theologians disagree that the *sensus fidelium* can only be manifest in perfect unanimity, or by a specific kind of Catholic.<sup>90</sup> Catholic teaching must pay attention to the stories and experiences of diverse Catholics in order to develop. While there may be no clear consensus on how those common

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<sup>88</sup> Gaillardetz, Richard R. *By What Authority?: Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2003, 122.

<sup>89</sup> Gaillardetz and Clifford, *Keys to the Council*, 44.

<sup>90</sup> Schlumpf, Heidi. "Catholic Theologians Ponder 'Sensus Fidelium' at Annual Convention." *National Catholic Reporter*, July 3, 2015. <http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/catholic-theologians-ponder-sensus-fidelium-annual-convention>. As Jerome Baggett states for this article, it behooves theologians to be "absence minded" and to consider the sense of those who no longer affiliate with or attend Catholic churches after years of involvement.



experiences should alter teaching (or vice versa), listening both provides a needed source for those who articulate Church teaching and offers insight into how Catholics and former Catholics theologize for themselves.

With this in mind, this project seeks to account for common experiences that inform lived theologies. This is particularly important when it comes to representing women's experiences, because women have historically been excluded from creating, framing, and evaluating doctrines that affect their lives. *Sensus fidelium* makes the point that doctrine or official teaching that has ignored the voices of half of humanity guarantees that such a teaching will not represent the fullest possible manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

### **Lived Theologies**

What has been addressed so far in this chapter is primarily formal theologies, those created by scholars and intellectuals to talk about human relationships to the Divine in sexuality. Official doctrines and formal theologies may have very little to do with what people actually believe and how they actually behave. To say they profess one thing and do another is far too simplistic; people live out their beliefs and values in a complicated manner that usually (though not always) makes sense to them, but which may appear convoluted to an outsider. Pastoral theologian Carrie Doehring's concept of "lived theology," as opposed to "espoused theology," is the theory best able to address the myriad ways in which childhood values, new beliefs, and one's specific context form a multifaceted and personal way of theologizing. Lived theologies may be articulated or tacitly held without reflection.

Lived theology references an emotionally saturated constellation of values, beliefs, and habitual practices that “make sense” emotionally and spiritually,<sup>91</sup> and which are most visible when a person is coping with a difficult situation or trying to sort out a complex issue. While Doehring often writes about lived theologies becoming visible in high-stress times,<sup>92</sup> the theory is readily applicable to daily decision-making as well. The theory deliberately includes the intellectual, emotional, and physical aspects of theological reasoning. This concept is similar to Gortner's definition of "personal theologies," which he describes as:

...experientially fundamental questions, perceptions and beliefs about the world, humanity and existence, combined with ultimate values about ideal ways to live, that provide an interpretive framework for experience in relation to these ultimate questions, and shape motivations, goals and behaviors.<sup>93</sup>

Doehring's theory, however, functions more effectively at the micro level when talking about something as specific as the lived theologies of sexuality.

Three aspects of lived theology make it the best framework for this project. First, lived theology assumes that all people theologize because all people seek connection with the goodness or meaning of life (what a Christian would call God). This is consistent with the concept of *sensus fidelium* and provides impetus to listen attentively to individual stories, as is done in qualitative research. Second, lived theology is bodily; it notices that

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<sup>91</sup> Doehring, Carrie. “Emotions and Change in Spiritual Care.” *Pastoral Psychology* 63, no. 5–6 (May 23, 2014): 583–96. doi:10.1007/s11089-014-0607-3, 585.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 594-595.

<sup>93</sup> Gortner, David. *Varieties of Personal Theology: Charting the Beliefs and Values of American Young Adults*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013, 9.

the physiological effects of emotions impact one's theological reasoning.<sup>94</sup> I expand this to say that experiencing physiological pleasure, anxiety, or nervousness could be especially shaping in the way a person forms their theology of sexuality. Third, lived theology is meant to be used intersectionally, meaning it goes outside the individual to observe their context and accounts for the impact of systems such as patriarchy, heteronormativity, racism, classism, and sexism, recognizing how they play into the formation of theologies of sexuality.

Lived theologies are made up both of embedded theologies and deliberated theologies. Embedded theologies are the beliefs, values, and practices learned in one's youth which usually maintain a feeling of comfort and normalcy, even if they have been explicitly rejected later in life.<sup>95</sup> Deliberated theologies are the understandings that a person comes to when they grapple with what they were taught was true versus how they are seeing and understanding life as an adult.<sup>96</sup> Because of this interplay, it is expected that a person will experience contradiction in their lived theology, and this clashing is considered normative, not hypocritical.

Lived theologies often bear little resemblance to scholarly theology or official doctrines, but it is necessary to keep those influences in mind; while the average Catholic rarely has the chance as a child to learn a fully reasoned justice-based theology of sex, for

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<sup>94</sup> Doehring, Carrie. "Resilience as the Relational Ability to Spiritually Integrate Moral Stress." *Pastoral Psychology*, April 16, 2015, 1–15. doi:10.1007/s11089-015-0643-7, 8.

<sup>95</sup> Stone, Howard W., and James O. Duke. *How to Think Theologically*. 3rd edition. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013, 15.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

example, they frequently pick up bits and pieces, and these fragments find their way into both embedded theologies and deliberated theologies. Official doctrine, feminist theologies, and Augustine's thought are necessary context for exploring the theologies and values of Catholics.

This dissertation is not intended to be a strictly intellectual exploration of theologies of sexuality. This project is also more than a report on what sexuality theologies young adults know about. As previously discussed, practical theology requires thick description of the situation at hand, in this case, the stories of these young adult women. Practical theology also has a constructive aspect, but construction must be responsive to and reflective of the shared human experience that has been studied.

I follow the Catholic feminist theological tradition of prioritizing women's voices and trusting their experiences to be helpful guides in developing a fuller sense of the faithful. I am interested in knowing what young adult women have found convincing, empowering, harmful, intriguing, and repulsive in their education on sexuality in a Catholic context; I seek to extrapolate from that information some guidance about how sexuality education can be life-giving and joyous when it comes from a religious background. *Sensus fidelium*, as previously discussed, operates in a communal, not individual, sense—therefore, the common elements amongst this small group of women will be highlighted as most useful for constructing an idea of their common wisdom, while individual idiosyncrasies will be noted when evocative.

With this theological background in mind, I will present the process of practical, theological, qualitative methodology in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Three: Qualitative Method**

### **Practical Theology and Qualitative Research**

While the connection between the practical theological method and qualitative research was briefly addressed in Chapter 1, this topic bears revisiting when talking specifically about methodology. Following the example of practical theologian Joyce Ann Mercer, my research is deliberate in “starting small,” that is, working from precise, culturally-situated, subjective experiences, before addressing the theological “big questions” about beliefs, values, and actions.<sup>1</sup> Both practical theology and qualitative methodology implicitly affirm that individual stories are significant and worth the effort of reflection, and that specific issues or problems often have wider resonance, so that examining one situation with precision can lead to information that is useful in other situations.

Both practical theology and qualitative methodology employ a kind of responsive flexibility in research and in analysis. Mercer describes this interplay of interdisciplinary resources and multifaceted perspectives as one that resists rigid hierarchies of knowledge, the assumption that some types of knowing are obviously, inherently, and immutably more important than others (often, that high-minded intellectualism is superior to

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<sup>1</sup> Mercer, Joyce. *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*. St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2005, 6.

practical knowing).<sup>2</sup> This study integrates traditional theological knowledge with information provided by social scientific inquiry, and not insignificantly, is done by me—a white, female American citizen, a cradle Catholic who still practices the faith, a product of Catholic parochial schools and Jesuit universities, a person who laments her own sexuality education experiences in the Catholic context of her youth. Qualitative research supports the necessity of self-awareness in research, and the need to explore other types of studies and disciplines to frame one’s immediate research question.

Finally, both practical theology and qualitative methods are intended to be helpful and to determine next steps forward. Mercer describes a dual commitment to a theology that is both contextually true and useful,<sup>3</sup> and all qualitative manuals orient towards the ultimate “discussion” endpoint, the special place in which researchers share what they have found most significant about their work and how they believe it should affect practice, even when “practice” is typically future research. Neither mode of inquiry can be performed entirely for the sake of theoretical inquiry. The heart and soul of qualitative practical theology comes in its telos of improvement, bettering, and greater knowledge.

The central research question guiding this dissertation, once again, is as follows: How do young adult women who were raised Catholic see their experiences learning about sex and sexuality in their youth affecting them today? As a question that requires individualized, narrative-driven answers, qualitative design is the best fit for this research. This chapter will provide the details of the procedure that was followed for the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 11.

study, present the interview outline, introduce the study participants and their relevant demographics, and briefly visit the limitations of the study.

Qualitative research is, at the heart, exploratory and experience-centered research. It does not begin with a hypothesis, nor contain outcomes to a set of predetermined topics. It also does not result in statistical or numbers-oriented results that can be quickly related. Qualitative research, especially the phenomenological style used in this study, centers around questions and seeks new concepts, ideas, connections, and meanings in the narratives of participants. This is to say that qualitative research of this type is not concerned with *proving* something; it is concerned with *learning* something. As we saw repeatedly in the research literature review in chapter 1, many quantitative studies have found unexpected results with regard to the relationship between religiosity, Catholicism, and sexual behaviors and attitudes, but can only speculate on why, for example, Catholic women are statistically more likely to engage in "hook-ups" than their non-religious counterparts. Qualitative research can look at the statistical data, especially incongruous data, and turn the question of "why?" directly to those who would know best.

### **Phenomenology as a Qualitative Method**

This qualitative study follows a methodological style known in the social sciences as "phenomenology." While sharing the same title as a school of thought in philosophy and while referencing some of the major philosophical figures that created the term, this qualitative method in social scientific research is best understood separately.

Phenomenology does not always appear in the literature to be a distinct method of qualitative research and analysis, and qualitative expert Sharan Merriam explains that this

is for one simple reason: “Phenomenology is a school of philosophical thought that undergirds all of qualitative research.”<sup>4</sup> Almost any qualitative study is about a particular phenomenon and will seek to describe that phenomenon as accurately as possible—in that way, effectively all qualitative work is phenomenological. Phenomenology has a long history in philosophy, starting with German philosopher Edmund Husserl, as a way that humans can understand specific phenomena as they are experienced, subjectively.<sup>5</sup>

As a method of qualitative inquiry, phenomenology has several common features that guide the research. The first is the orientation towards discovery instead of confirmation; phenomenological studies should not begin with a hypothesis or theory to test, but rather focus on revealing meaning to “[enrich] our understanding of everyday life.”<sup>6</sup> Philosopher Martin Heidegger adds the insight that discovery of meaning can help a researcher understand how a person lives out their life according to how they comprehend reality.<sup>7</sup> The complexity of lived theology is best pursued in this open-ended fashion.

Another major feature of phenomenology is the commitment to a descriptive approach without presupposition—while interpretive leaps may come later, the first step of any phenomenological study is to describe the phenomenon as nonjudgmentally as

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<sup>4</sup> Merriam, Sharan B. *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education: Revised and Expanded from “Case Study Research in Education.”* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998, 15.

<sup>5</sup> Phyllis Knaack, “Phenomenological Research,” *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 6, no. 1 (February 1, 1984): 107–114, doi:10.1177/019394598400600108, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Anne Flood, “Understanding Phenomenology: Anne Flood Looks at the Theory and Methods Involved in Phenomenological Research,” *Nurse Researcher* 17, no. 2 (January 2010), 7.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.



possible.<sup>8</sup> Such listening is particularly important to this study because of the contentious nature of Catholic conversations on sexual morality. Participants must be especially assured of the listener's tolerance for controversial beliefs if they are to feel safe enough to share their views.

A third feature is the radical respect for participants in the research, traditionally interviewees: the participant is regarded more as a co-researcher, and the researcher seeks to co-create meaning with that participant, who has more of a say in how the researcher ultimately presents their findings than in some other qualitative styles.<sup>9</sup> The participant is assumed to be the ultimate authority on their own understandings of the world, and is assumed to be competent to describe those meanings themselves. This respect for participants connects to the role of laity in forming the *sensus fidelium*, where laypeople are recognized as having authority in moral matters.

Undergirding all of these features is the ever-present idea of "bracketing," also called "epoche," wherein the researcher deliberately calls to mind all of their assumptions, biases, and expectations, and deliberately sets them aside in order to more fully listen to the participant.<sup>10</sup> In Chapter One, I noted that practical theology and qualitative methodology aim for similar but distinct purposes with bracketing; while

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<sup>8</sup> Knaack, "Phenomenological Research," 109.

<sup>9</sup> Flood, "Understanding Phenomenology," 9.

<sup>10</sup> Knaack, "Phenomenological Research," 110.; Also, Clark E Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), 26.; Thomas Ryba, *The Essence of Phenomenology and Its Meaning for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Toronto Studies in Religion vol. 7 (New York: P. Lang, 1991), 210.; Merriam, "Qualitative Research," 158.; Schwandt, *Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, 192.; Padgett, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods*, 35.

qualitative research seeks to bracket out the perspective of the researcher so that their biases do not influence the results, practical theologians prefer to be direct and honest about the lenses, assumptions, and social locations that underlie their inquiry, striving for transparency toward their audience. I balanced these approaches by limiting descriptions of my transparency to select sections where I believe they are most relevant.

For the purposes of this design, I rely on Creswell’s short and effective definition of phenomenological studies:

A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon...The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of a “universal essence” can come across as troublingly oversimplified in any method that deals with human complexity; therefore, I would replace Creswell’s term with one I feel is more accurate, “common factors.” I find that pluralizing the end description more adequately describes the grouping that tends to occur in qualitative findings.

Phenomenology relies heavily, if not exclusively, on interview-generated data from participants who experienced the phenomenon of interest directly. Factual information is not given precedence—contradictions, complexity, and multiplicity are embraced as reflecting the intricacies of human experience, in much the same way as

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<sup>11</sup> John W Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013), 76.

lived theology.<sup>12</sup> The end aim of a phenomenological study is to be able to produce a fundamental conjoint structure among the experiences shared that operates at a deeper level than “what these people have in common.” This essence, if constructed well, should elicit feelings of resonance<sup>13</sup> with others who have experienced the phenomenon, and a sense of having “walked a mile in their shoes” for those who do not have that direct experience.<sup>14</sup>

Research questions appropriate to phenomenological studies are focused on the experience of the participants, not a factual description of events. “What was the experience of...” questions undergird the study, and are followed by “meaning” questions: “How do you think this affected...” or “How do you feel about...” etc. This approach recognizes that truth in human communities is found somewhere in the dynamic relationship between factual realities and experiences as they are felt and interpreted by individuals.

### Sampling

This study sought participants who, at the time of interview, were young adults (defined as 18-25 years of age), who self-identified as women, and who were raised in the Roman Catholic tradition, regardless of how they currently identify religiously.

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<sup>12</sup> Knaack, “Phenomenological Research,” 112.; Also, Kristy Nabhan-Warren, “Embodied Research and Writing: A Case for Phenomenologically Oriented Religious Studies Ethnographies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 386.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Padgett, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods*, 36.

While there is much debate in sociological studies about how one should define who is or is not “Catholic,” asking someone to identify if they were “raised Catholic” brings up far fewer concerns. The assumption, when asking a person if they were raised Catholic, is that they will only say yes if Catholicism had some kind of significant, notable role in their childhood or teenage years.<sup>15</sup> Since this study is meant to sample those who had experienced some kind of identifiably Catholic training, education, or formation, this self-selection by potential participants is advantageous. This also helpfully avoids the issue of young adults choosing not to label themselves with a religious identification even when they engage in many religious behaviors or continue to hold certain religious beliefs.<sup>16</sup> While young adults may be self-conscious about cleaving too strongly to a religious label at this point in their lives, presumably they will be less sensitive about stating how they were raised, since this decision was not primarily theirs.

College students were sought in particular because of the developmental understanding that young adulthood starts in earnest when a young person leaves “the home,” as it is variously defined. College students were expected to be more likely to have a self-reflective perspective on their upbringing. Colleges are also conveniently accessible locations where one can find young adults. Recruiting took place through Catholic, Protestant, and non-affiliated colleges, though the information about their college of choice was not requested or explicitly recorded when identifying each

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<sup>15</sup> Christian Smith et al., *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out Of, and Gone from the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 140.

<sup>16</sup> Lipka, Michael. “A Closer Look at America’s Rapidly Growing Religious ‘Nones’.” *Pew Research Center*, May 13, 2015. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>.

participant. Purposive sampling was necessary to ensure that all participants met those requirements upfront. The intention was for maximum variation sampling<sup>17</sup> or relevant range sampling<sup>18</sup> to be used to diversify the group within the age brackets, by race, by sexual orientation, and by economic background. Since the goal of the research was to get to a common structure of experience, the findings have greater validity if this is achieved in a diverse sample. Racial and ethnic diversity was difficult to ensure while other factors (such as age, urban/suburban/rural childhood environment, economic backdrop, and relationship status) were more easily diversified.

Initially, recruiting for the study was located on multiple college campuses and through local Roman Catholic churches to aid in the maximum variation. Advertising consisted both of publicly posted flyers and emails or posts generated through gatekeepers to people they believe could qualify for my study (young adult ministry lists, Facebook forums, sororities, etc.). Phenomenological studies are deliberately smaller-scale,<sup>19</sup> so 8-15 participants were sought in hopes of getting at least 10 who had substantive narratives to share.

The most successful recruitment method for this study consisted of distributing the flyer via email through multiple gatekeepers on college campuses, especially professors and campus ministers, who largely procured participants through personal referrals. The first interview took place in a large city in the West; subsequent interviews

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<sup>17</sup> Padgett, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 92.

<sup>19</sup> Padgett, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods*, 35.

occurred in several small cities in the Midwest. As most recruitment happened in cities that were heavily Caucasian, specific recruiting for Latina and/or Black participants began after interview 8 by reaching out to ethnically-identified student groups, though these efforts ultimately did not result in participants. Efforts were made throughout to find participants who no longer identified as Catholic by asking gatekeepers for these women in particular, though this was especially difficult given the fact that former Catholics rarely congregate in the same place, like churches or campus ministry departments. Two participants were specifically referred to my study by a gatekeeper because they were known to have left the Catholic Church, though 5-6<sup>20</sup> participants ultimately did not identify as Catholic. It is also notable that one study found the most significant drop-off of Catholic-affiliated young adults happened in the male population, with the female Catholic population remaining more stable;<sup>21</sup> therefore, it is possible that despite public perception of a Catholic exodus, leaving the Church is not as common a trajectory for women.

A deliberate break in recruitment took place after interview 9 due to a natural summer break where candidates for participation were more difficult to find on college campuses. This break was also used to revise recruitment techniques to target less

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<sup>20</sup> This range is due to the fact that one participant identified herself as Catholic on her demographics form, but indicated in the interview that she did not practice, did not intend to return to practicing at any point in the future, and did not intend to raise any future children in the Catholic faith. I seek to both respect her choice of self-identification while noting that she had more in common with former-Catholic participants than practicing-Catholic participants.

<sup>21</sup> Allen, Katherine R., and Jada E. Brooks. "At the Intersection of Sexuality, Spirituality, and Gender: Young Adults' Perceptions of Religious Beliefs in the Context of Sexuality Education." *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 7, no. 4 (September 2012): 285–308. doi:10.1080/15546128.2012.740859, 295.

represented populations, though to limited effect. The sample is also limited insofar as volunteers for this study could have been more comfortable talking about sexuality than is typical among their peers—for example, one gatekeeper mentioned knowing several potential participants, but later related that they had not been interested in participating after they found out the interview had to be completed face-to-face.

### Data Collection

Data collection primarily took place in the form of lengthy, recorded, in-depth interviews with participants. Interviews occurred in locations chosen by the participant, with suggestions by me made available if desired. Locations were as diverse as library study rooms, coffee shops, and empty dorm rooms, but the majority of interviews took place in college libraries, which generally contained private study rooms.

All participants were asked to fill out a short demographics form that included age, education level, current religious affiliation (if any), ethnic background, where they were raised (urban/suburban/rural), what religious groups they participate in, and if any denomination besides Catholicism had heavily influenced their upbringing. The demographics form also included an optional section which asked about relationship and sexual experience, relationship status, and sexual orientation, which most participants elected to fill out fully. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of the interview on multiple occasions, especially when receiving the consent form—the researcher emphasized that this would be the only documentation with their real name and that all other communications would be deleted and details altered to ensure that their identity was protected. This became especially necessary given the small-city location of some

interviews, where church affiliations could often be discerned with relatively little information. The fact that interviews would be audio recorded was always mentioned in emails with potential participants, and affirmed again in person before signing the consent form. After interviews, all consent forms were immediately secured in a private location under lock and key.

Some significant flexibility in the interview schedule proved necessary in order to respond appropriately to what the participant related.<sup>22</sup> Priming all participants about the content of the study beforehand (in accordance with IRB standards, which recommended emphasizing that the study concerned sexuality education and not sexual experiences at multiple times throughout participant-researcher interaction) was intended to encourage participants to reflect upon their experiences before the interview and come in with stories they were interested in sharing. Several verbally noted that they had spent time recalling memories of sexuality education beforehand, including one participant who said she had gone home and read her journals from high school in preparation for the interview. Much attention was paid to body language, expression, and intonation and was noted in post-interview memos whenever possible so that this information could be included in the transcripts.<sup>23</sup> I ultimately took very few, if any, notes during each

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<sup>22</sup> A related pilot study conducted in the winter of 2014 verified the effectiveness and flow of this particular interview schedule. Several participants moved directly from their educational experiences into their opinions of that experience and how they see the long-term effects.

<sup>23</sup> Kristy Nabhan-Warren, "Embodied Research and Writing: A Case for Phenomenologically Oriented Religious Studies Ethnographies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79, no. 2 (June 1, 2011): 378–407., 378.



interview so that I could prioritize engaged body language and eye contact and maintain the conversational flow.

Establishing rapport was essential in these interviews because of the desire to establish participants as co-researchers in the project and because of the sensitivity of the topic. Pre- and post-interview time was scheduled in so that the participant has an opportunity to ask questions about the study or to visit with me more informally. Following the guidance of qualitative experts Bruce Berg and Howard Lune, I sometimes shared a few factual details about myself in order to demonstrate the common ground between myself and the participant;<sup>24</sup> for example, telling them that I was not a native to the city where we were interviewing.

Interviews were conducted in an open-ended manner with seven questions on the official interview schedule and heavy reliance on probes to keep the conversation moving. Participants were informed before the start of the interview that I was interested in their story of sexuality education and being Catholic in whatever way they wished to tell it. I also usually made some remark to the effect of “The more you talk, the happier I am,” as part of the short briefing, when explaining that I might not talk much in response, but I wanted them to feel free to tell stories and speak at length when relevant. The interview schedule, and a discussion of the alterations and modifications that ultimately affected interviews, follows:

1. Tell me a little about the church environment you grew up in.

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<sup>24</sup> Berg, Bruce L., and Howard Lune. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. Boston: Pearson College Div, 2011, 138.

2. How do you remember your church community talking about sex or educating you about sexuality?
  - a. Probe: In a formal way? Sermons, speakers, Bible study groups, etc.?
  - b. Probe: In an informal way? Personal conversations, offhand comments, etc.?
3. When you think back about what you learned about sex and sexuality from the church, what stands out as the most significant?
  - a. Probe: premarital sex, homosexuality, contraception, dating, modesty
  - b. Probe: What do you remember was the general “attitude” around discussing sex and sexuality in your community?
4. How did you react if/when those messages were conflicting or confusing?
5. Looking back, what do you think your church community did well in addressing sexuality?
6. What do you wish had been addressed differently in your church community?
7. How do you see your religious upbringing affecting how you make decisions about sexuality and intimacy in romantic relationships?
  - a. Probe: Have you always thought this way? If not, what has changed?
  - b. Probe: How is this similar to or different from the way you see your friends handling these questions?

The first questions on the interview schedule were designed to establish rapport and get the participant accustomed to talking at length about their family, hometown, home church, and what they did and did not like about growing up Catholic. After the

first three interviews, I began to use more probes at the second question when participants seemed shy about offering information or were only sharing brief answers. These probes often consisted of breaking down the second question into multiple, single-topic questions: What did you learn about homosexuality? What did you learn about masturbation? Pre-marital sex? Oral sex? Dating? Modesty? Abortion? Contraception? and so on. Participants seemed much more able to answer these questions in story-driven detail, and this allowed me to signal that many aspects of sexuality were available for discussion, even if the participants had experienced them as “taboo” subjects earlier in their lives, and ensure that less obviously sexual concepts like dating and modesty were included in the conversation. By the fourth interview, I expanded the first question to ask participants to describe how their faith or relationship to the church had changed since they became a young adult to encourage greater discussion of the participants’ religious development since leaving home, and to provide a better timeline by which to track the changes in their understandings of sexuality throughout their young adulthood. For participants who no longer identified as Catholic, this part of the interview tended to be lengthy and content-rich.

Question 6, regarding what participants wished had been different about their education in sex and sexuality, was also expanded with a second probe: "If you had a daughter, how would you want her to learn about sex and sexuality as she grows up?" While some participants had difficulty answering question 6 initially, most were able to provide clearer, more confident answers when reframing the question into a theoretical situation where they held significant power in the education process and had a vested

interest in the outcome. Finally, question 7b about the participants' friends was expanded in later interviews to also ask "Do you find yourself giving advice on dating and relationships to your friends?" and instigate a less personal part of the interview so that the conversation could draw to a natural close. The final question asked in any interview was, "Is there anything more you wanted to say about sexuality and Catholicism, or any memories that have come up that you wanted to share?" This was intended to signal the end of the interview and allowed for final thoughts without becoming re-engaged in intense discussion, and in practice it also provided the opportunity for participants to share some of their thoughts on sexuality education or religion that had not yet fit into a previous question.

It should be noted that question 7 was, in effect, the central research question of this entire study. Placing it later in the interview after establishing context with other questions had several advantages, especially when priming participants to think about education on sex and sexuality expansively before asking a bigger, more theoretical question. In certain interviews, I rephrased the question in less religious terms and asked it again as "When you're with a particular person and are deciding whether you want to do something intimate with them—anything from hand-holding to sex—how do you decide if it's right or wrong to do?" While this reframing of the question was evocative, neither version tended to inspire lengthy replies. Throughout multiple interviews, I found that participants tended to answer question 7 quickly and without much detail—either they saw a connection between upbringing and sexual decision-making they did not. While qualitative research prioritizes the narratives of participants, it does not assume

that everything participants claim is the whole truth of their situation; the researcher is still permitted to draw their own conclusions about how, in this case, education and later behavior seem to connect. I feel that asking the question directly communicated respect for the participants' meaning-making process, included them in the analysis, and ensured that they knew precisely what information I was seeking. I also make a point throughout my analysis to take their interpretation seriously, even if I ultimately disagree with some of their conclusions.

Participants agreed to potentially being contacted for further questions in their consent form, though this was only deemed necessary in three cases for interviews where I had neglected to rephrase the question 5 & 6 combination with the “theoretical daughter” perspective. Two of the three participants responded to the additional question via email, and one never replied. With respect to the sensitivity that sexual topics had for some participants, I made plans before each interview so that participants could be quickly referred to a counseling center if they seem distressed. This never proved necessary in practice.

I typed full transcripts of every interview, and all notes taken during the interview were typed up with the transcript. Extensive memoing took place immediately after each interview and throughout the data collection process with the understanding that the analysis phase began as soon as I started collecting information. Memos assisted with the bracketing process and provided space for me to record errant thoughts about interviews or the subject matter when they occurred, which proved helpful as I began recognizing commonalities between different interviews.

## Trustworthiness, Dependability, and Credibility

Prolonged engagement allowed me to establish a comfort level with participants.

<sup>25</sup> Most participants exchanged several friendly and open emails with me prior to the interview, and several offered their cell phone numbers for ease of contact. I made an effort to never appear rushed and ensured that participants had as much time as they needed to complete the interview and chat afterwards.

Peer debriefing with other doctoral students was central to establishing dependability in the study. Though the peers consulted cannot be fully familiar with the data, having a trusted colleague with which to debrief interviews and verbally process ideas proved helpful in clarifying what I was seeing and how I interpreted it. In this way, my colleagues served as a kind of informal, consensual validation for the findings of the study.<sup>26</sup> Much peer debriefing took place between myself and the advisory professor on the project, as well as between myself and other doctoral students who were familiar with qualitative methods and the project at large.

Keeping a careful chain of evidence was essential to establishing dependability and trustworthiness in the study, in the form of an “audit trail” (memoing and note recording)<sup>27</sup> that helps verify my use of other methods. For example, my memos taken immediately after interviews contain information shared by the participant that was not audiorecorded—this evidence supports my claim that I used prolonged engagement to

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<sup>25</sup> Padgett, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods*, 208.

<sup>26</sup> Schwandt, *Dictionary*, 188.

<sup>27</sup> Padgett, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods*, 213.

establish rapport. The skill of relating this chain of evidence in a convincing way was practiced in peer debriefings and in academic settings while presenting tentative findings—while the listener may not entirely agree with the findings, that person should be able to see how the researcher came to those conclusions.<sup>28</sup>

For a phenomenological study, a possible source of rigor comes from deliberate and sincere member checking,<sup>29</sup> that is, going back to participants to ask for their input in later analysis stages. In practice, this strategy was too unwieldy to use because it raised concerns about data collection falling outside approved interview protocols. I chose to contain my post-interview contact to the aforementioned three cases of asking a follow-up question via email and to informing participants who had checked the box on their consent form requesting that the results of the study be made available to them when it was completed.

### Analysis and Synthesis

Phenomenologist researchers outline several strategies for how to begin the analysis phase. They begin with self-conscious bracketing, and several authors suggest doing this in a literal, written way.<sup>30</sup> For this study, this meant that I deliberately kept in mind what I thought I would find in each interview, and then consciously set it aside before conducting the interview and, later, transcribing and coding them. This proved

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<sup>28</sup> Knaack, “Phenomenological Research,” 113.

<sup>29</sup> Padgett, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods*, 212.

<sup>30</sup> Knaack, “Phenomenological Research,” 110.

both necessary for certain interviews, like my first, that bore little resemblance to my earlier pilot study or to the information I found in related research.

After a bracketing process, several authors recommend that the researcher read through all transcripts with fresh eyes to gain a sense of the whole, a strategy I used on multiple occasions throughout transcription and coding.<sup>31</sup> Transcription began shortly after the ninth interview was completed, and continued throughout the remainder of the data-gathering process. I transcribed word-for-word without editing, and changed identifying names of cities, friends, or churches immediately after transcription. The slow work of transcription ensured lengthy immersion in my data.

When the coding phase began, after all transcription was complete, I made a point of doing my two rounds of coding in random order, moving back and forth between distinct viewpoints—for example, between participants who were and were not still Catholic. This helped me avoid closing my code book too early or dismissing certain data as ancillary and not warranting a code if I had not seen it arise in previous interviews.

I coded all 15 interviews in two rounds using descriptive coding<sup>32</sup> because it was well suited for bracketed analysis. This type of coding allows the researcher to highlight structures and plainly describe events without pushing too quickly into interpretive leaps. Descriptive coding is also the simplest form of coding to do at the start, since phenomenological studies try to limit the literature review done before the study begins

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 111.; Also, Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 115.; Flood, “Understanding Phenomenology,” 10.

<sup>32</sup> Saldana, Johnny. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2009, 70-71.



in order to keep analysis from falling too quickly into preconceived categories.<sup>33</sup>

Focusing on describing the content in condensed form allowed me to code more quickly than if I had been focused on exploring thematic concepts at that early stage. Some in-vivo codes<sup>34</sup> emerged at this stage when the participant's choice of wording was particularly memorable or summative.

At the conclusion of the second round of coding, I created an Excel spreadsheet with all my codes and tallied up the number of times each code was used in each interview and in total.<sup>35</sup> The tally sheet served as a semi-quantitative indicator of code prevalence and, subsequently, theme prevalence.

Experts in qualitative methods diverge on how to proceed once coding is complete, but several suggest textural descriptions, processes wherein the researcher attempts to describe the phenomenon as it was experienced by each individual in an open, voluminous way where all details are examined.<sup>36</sup> This is similar to another analytical strategy which occurred after immersion and coding, consisting of finding significant phrases and pulling them out to help discern what is most important about the phenomenon in each person's narrative.<sup>37</sup> Qualitative phenomenologist Clark Moustakas refers to this process as "horizontalization," which reflects the desire to put these

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<sup>33</sup> Juliet M Corbin, Strauss, and Anselm L Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008), 36.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>35</sup> Padgett, *Qualitative and Mixed Methods*, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Moustakas, Clark E. *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994, 96.

<sup>37</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 115. Also, Flood, "Understanding Phenomenology," 10.

statements on an even playing field to see how they interact.<sup>38</sup> Saldana refers to a similar process that he terms the “top ten” focusing strategy.<sup>39</sup> The rich portions of each transcript that are pulled out in this process become the most influential building blocks in establishing essence. I used this strategy when writing out summary paragraphs of each interview after the second round of coding.

Analytic processes in phenomenological research are described rather philosophically instead of practically, which adds to the perception that some mental “magic” has to occur in the researcher for the analysis to work. My research has been no exception. For the sake of time and organization, my efforts setting consistent deadlines throughout the analysis phase, especially through transcription and coding, kept me moving from transcript to transcript instead lingering on one.<sup>40</sup>

#### Limitations in Design and Sampling

Qualitative research, like all research, has natural limitations that one must identify and acknowledge in order to appropriately frame what can be learned from the study in question. Among the easiest limitations to point out is that of sample size—my fifteen participants, while diverse in certain ways, are not representative of all young adult women raised Catholic in the United States. A majority were born and raised in the Midwest, from economically stable families, and most had attended Catholic parochial

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<sup>38</sup> Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Saldana, *The Coding Manual*, 186.

<sup>40</sup> Anna Roland-Price and Del Loewenthal, “A Case of Heuristic Research: Is Counseling/Psychotherapy Helpful to Midwives in Relation to Breaking Bad News to Pregnant Women?” in *Case Studies in Relational Research: Qualitative Research Methods in Counseling and Psychotherapy*, ed. Del Loewenthal (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 85.

school at some point in time. Twelve of my 15 participants were Caucasian. Here I remind readers that the goal of qualitative research is not to obtain statistically representative data about a group of people, but to learn something helpful about that group of people. My methods of recruitment, for example, likely led to my sample being skewed towards women with particularly interesting or dramatic narratives. Especially around such emotionally loaded topics as sexuality and religion, those at the margins may provide the most useful or impactful information, despite their experiences being "atypical."<sup>41</sup>

Another limitation has to do with the sensitivity of topics like sexuality and religion in the wider culture of the United States. It is possible that participants sought to fit a particular mold of ideology within their interviews and thus withheld certain relevant information, or played up aspects of their personality and experiences to better fit that example.<sup>42</sup> Relatedly, while I sought as a researcher to be nonjudgmental and affirming of all the information participants shared, often using phrases like "of course!" or "wow, really?" to shape a responsive and positive space, it is possible that participants picked up on subtle cues about my viewpoint and tried to share information that they believed I wanted or would agree with.<sup>43</sup> This risk is notable because, when I conducted 14 of my 15 interviews, I was employed full-time in a Catholic parish and had no way of knowing if my participants were aware of that fact. I sometimes strategically shared that

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<sup>41</sup> This especial focus on the marginal stories also echoes a significant part of Catholic doctrine, the "preferential option for the poor." This theology calls attention to those who need solidarity and justice the most. Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Translated by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Revised edition. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1988, xxv.

<sup>42</sup> Berg and Lune, *Qualitative Research Methods*, 140.

information with participants who seemed to have more traditional commitments, with the intention of dispelling some of the academic mystique that associates high-level academic research with anti-religiosity. I took these calculated risks in hopes of signaling that I was “on their team” and could understand their commitment to religious values, though this meant that I may have inadvertently been viewed as an authority who expected specific doctrinal answers.

Keeping in mind the intersectionality that all of my participants experienced, the content or specificity of these interviews may well have been influenced by systemic constraints such as sexism, racism, and the difficulty talking about sexuality in Catholic culture. Lived theology calls attention to the need to take these related influences into account while continuing to rely on the individual for the fullest and most trustworthy account of their experience. I regularly suspected, especially with my more conservative participants, that they wished to share more than they actually did—some appeared to struggle with accurate vocabulary, unfamiliar with the terms of sex and sexuality. These factors certainly limited what my participants were willing and able to share in our time together, though I cannot know how much.

Lastly, the limitation of time is worth repeating. My time with each participant ranged from 90-180 minutes, including debriefing and friendly chat before and after the formal interview, and the rapport and trust established may not have been deep enough for participants to offer their most honest or complete viewpoints. While Question 7 got to the heart of the information I sought through each interview, it was a complex and philosophical question that participants seemed to have difficulty answering, and the

brevity and single contact of the interview may not have been enough time for participants to formulate their most honest and thoughtful response.

### **Meet the Sages**

Now that the methods of qualitative inquiry have been explained at length, we arrive at our first encounter with the fifteen narratives that shape this study. What follows below is a brief summary of each participant meant to complement the demographics table and prime the readers for their voices.

The sample included a total of 15 participants with a diverse range of upbringings and experiences within the sampling requirements. The sample included three women of color (two Asian, one Tejano) and 12 Caucasian/white women; a participant who identified her sexual orientation as queer and bisexual, another who identified as queer,<sup>44</sup> and three more who did not specify an orientation while the remainder identified as heterosexual or straight. The sample included a mix of women raised in rural, suburban, and urban environments. The numbers correspond to their order of interview; while I make a point of referring to participants primarily by their pseudonym, the numeric system allows the reader to trace the flow of interviews as well. Additional demographic details follow in a table at the end of the chapter.

1. Georgia was the oldest participant, recruited at the age of 25, and self-identified as queer and bisexual. She was engaged to a woman at the time of the interview.

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<sup>44</sup> “Queer” is still a contested and amorphous term in the field; it can refer to a state of being that deliberately critiques heteronormativity, gender dualism, and dyadic relationships, but can also be used more directly as an identity marker to mean “not heterosexual.” It is also still considered pejorative in certain circles. For this project, I seek to honor the way participants identified themselves while acknowledging that the term two of them used is challenging.

While she bore no major animosity towards the Catholic Church, she had become Episcopalian in the months preceding our conversation.

2. Isabella was a practicing Catholic at a Catholic college, 21 years old and set to graduate in the spring. She was recently single, and heavily influenced by a tight peer group of friends, all of whom were practicing Catholics.
3. Melanie was a single senior Religious Studies major at a Catholic college thinking about a career in a Catholic parish setting. She was well-versed in doctrinal controversies around sexuality, and comfortable both assenting to Church teaching and insisting that such teachings be coherent and well-explained.
4. Nora, a loquacious college senior, had been raised in a large and highly traditional Catholic family where she homeschooled from elementary through high school. She had “taken a break” from religion in her high school years and identified as agnostic at the time of the interview. She spoke with some fondness for the Catholic tradition and made a priority of participating in interreligious dialogue, but had no desire to return to a religious tradition of any sort.
5. Allison was a soft-spoken junior at Catholic college who earnestly practiced her faith and interspersed much religious and spiritual language throughout our conversation. She identified as being in a serious, committed relationship which she explained during the interview was only in its third week.
6. Rose was an uncommonly articulate 19-year-old freshman at a Protestant university, one of the youngest in the sample. Raised Catholic in a city where Catholic churches and schools kept shutting down, Rose ultimately found a more

stable community in Evangelical/nondenominational Christian groups and identified as Undenominational, though she mentioned that she had recently left her nondenominational church because of her discomfort with how the pastor treated her homosexual friends.

7. Tess was an easygoing 22-year-old senior at a Catholic university, a practicing Catholic who talked frequently about the supportive friend group she had maintained from her rural high school. Tess was unique in her relaxed personality, never displaying strong emotion or intensity throughout the interview and discussing sexuality with ease.
8. Jessica, a senior at a Catholic university and active participant in campus ministry, came from an urban Catholic environment where she had been in Catholic school from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and was the only participant who had encountered Theology of the Body prior to college.
9. Bridget was an athletic junior at a Catholic university, her casual demeanor belying her high levels of involvement in campus life and ambitious educational goals. She was in a serious, committed romantic relationship at the time of the interview, and actively wrestling with how her traditional Catholic values related to her intense college romance.
10. Lily was the youngest participant, an 18-year-old sophomore at a Catholic university, a practicing Catholic who also identified with a Spiritualist belief system. Amiable, funny, and intellectual, Lily was also the first woman of color to participate, of an Asian ethnic heritage.

11. Valerie, a junior at a Catholic university, identified herself as Catholic on her demographics form but explained in the interview that she did not practice and had no relationship to the church, and expected to continue distancing herself from religiosity in the future. She came from an urban Catholic community in a large city that she described as insular, and expressed some resentment towards that community for her own self-perceived ignorance about sex and relationships when she entered college.
12. Corey was a petite, 20-year-old sophomore at a Catholic university who identified with no religion (None or No Affiliation). Witty with a biting sense of humor, she saw little of value in Catholicism, or at least her mother's strict interpretation of it, which she eventually revealed had been a major factor how she felt unsafe and unwelcome in her home. She was involved in an open relationship at the time of the interview.
13. Willow was 22, a recent college graduate from a Protestant college, and Tejano (sometimes referring to herself as Mexican). Calling herself queer when asked for an orientation and speaking about herself as gender fluid, she nonetheless assented to being grouped with "women" for the purposes of this study. Willow's interview took two hours, the longest of any participant, as she described a long childhood struggle to understand her sexuality and subsequent college explorations into feminist and queer cultures. She called herself agnostic and spiritual, expressing a desire for religious community while feeling cynical that she would ever be welcome in one.



14. Samantha was a 21-year-old junior at a Catholic university, a mostly non-practicing Catholic who had recently started attending Mass again with a friend who had just lost her mother to cancer. She was enjoying casually dating as a single person.

15. Esther was a 19-year-old junior, Asian, and adopted. An external processor, she talked around complex topics and beliefs, sometimes contradicting herself before settling on a conclusion to questions. She was single and talked about hooking up on occasion in her college environment.

This chapter has laid out the multitude of steps and considerations necessary for conducting rigorous qualitative research in the field of practical theology. The complexity and emotional reality of the narratives that follow help make sense of the iterative and responsive process that qualitative research demands. Now that I have briefly introduced our young adult sages, it is time to move into the intricate world of their stories.

Figure 1. Selected Demographics:

	Pseudonym	Age	Current religious identification	Participate in religious community	Catholic school	Racial/Ethnic	Raised in:	Sexual Orientation	Romantic Relationship?	Sexual Relationship?	Current Relationship Status
1	Georgia	25	Episcopal	Yes	n/a	White	Urban	Bisexual/Queer	Yes	Yes	Engaged
2	Isabella	21	Catholic	Yes	K-8	White	Suburban	Straight	Yes	No	Single, not dating
3	Melanie	21	Catholic	Yes	K-12	White	Suburban	Heterosexual	Yes	No	Single, casually dating
4	Nora	21	Agnostic	No	n/a	White	Rural	Heterosexual	Yes	Yes	Serious, committed relationship
5	Allison	20	Catholic	Yes	K-8	White	Suburban		Yes	No	Committed relationship
6	Rose	19	Undenominational	Yes	K-12	White	Urban	Straight	Yes	Yes	Committed relationship
7	Tess	22	Catholic	Yes	3rd-12	White	Rural	Straight	Yes	No	Committed relationship
8	Jessica	22	Catholic	Yes	K-12	White	Urban	Heterosexual	Yes	Yes	Serious, committed relationship
9	Bridget	20	Catholic	Yes	K-12	White	Rural	Heterosexual	Yes	No	Serious, committed relationship
10	Lily	18	Catholic, Spiritualist	Yes	K-12	Asian	Rural	Straight	Yes	?	Serious, committed relationship
11	Valerie	20	Catholic	No	K-12	White	Urban	Straight	Yes	Yes	Friends with benefits relationship
12	Corey	20	None	Yes	K-12	White	Suburban		Yes	Yes	Open relationship
13	Willow	22	Agnostic/spiritual	No	6th-12	Tejano	Rural	Queer	Yes	Yes	Open relationship
14	Samantha	21	Catholic	Yes	K-12	White	Suburban	Straight	Yes	Yes	Single, casually dating
15	Esther	19	Catholic	Yes	n/a	Asian	Suburban		No	No	Single, hook up on occasion/friends with benefits relationship

## **Chapter Four: Results**

### **Introduction**

The results of qualitative research are shared through stories and similarities instead of numbers or statistical trends. Throughout this chapter, I privilege the voices of the participants by sharing how they responded to the primary research questions—what they were taught about sex and sexuality in their Catholic context and how it affects them—in their own words. After a brief look at the larger commonalities among the fifteen participants, I proceed into thematic trends; first, what they were taught (content), then how they were taught (method), and finally how they have adapted what they learned about sex and sexuality to be useful for them as young adults (application).

Before exploring the detailed experiences of participants, it is helpful to look at their commonalities and trends in a larger perspective. First, all fifteen participants recalled and discussed their sexuality education process as one of curiosity: each interview received the code “wanting to understand” at least once, a label that noted occasions where the participant described seeking out more information about sex and sexuality, asking questions, or lamenting that some part of the topic had not been well explained. “Wanting to understand” was the most popular code by a wide margin. Even participants who claimed they were not overly interested in sexuality topics in their youth

could cite at least one example where they wished for more information or better explanation.

Second, all participants received codes indicating a lack of discussion around sex and sexuality. The code “sex not discussed” was used any time a participant noted “we never talked about that,” usually referring to their parents, but also sometimes to their friends or school settings. The code “truncated conversation” was also common, which denoted any time a participant described a discussion ending before they felt like they were finished or before they had gotten the information they wanted, typically with phrases like “...and that was it,” or “...we never talked about it again.” Parents were consistently characterized as being uncomfortable discussing sex or sexuality issues with their daughters, even if some were able to overcome that discomfort to start conversations. Several parents reportedly never broached the topic of sexuality with their children at all.

More positively, all participants used examples of “conversational learning” in their interviews, either describing how they used it (typically among friends) or lamenting its absence and explaining why they felt it would have worked for sexuality education. Talking about norms in romantic relationships was also frequent, with participants spending much of their interview time discussing what they had learned about dating, what is appropriate when, the role of love in sexual decision making, and telling stories of the relationships they had been in or witnessed others in to evaluate their quality and their rules. Peer influence was a significant influence for all fifteen, with every participant describing an instance where their peers acted as their educators for sex

and sexuality—whether in the form of older youth telling them to look up euphemisms for sexual acts, or the form of open, safe conversations about difficult topics. This combination of commonalities presents a clear trend: relationships are in the fore of the minds of young adult women, and they want to talk about relationships (and sex) with their friends.

To parse out the sample further, five of the fifteen participants were no longer Catholic, with Valerie being a partial sixth member in this group as she identified as Catholic in terms of heritage but did not practice and had no intention of practicing any faith tradition or passing one onto her children. Of these six, five described the most negative sexuality education experiences out of the full sample of fifteen.<sup>1</sup> This categorization was drawn from the total number of negative codes they received, including “silencing,” “fracture,” “anxiety/pressure,” “sex portrayed as negative” and “unsafe space.” While some of the still-Catholic participants also had high totals of negative codes, it must be noted that, broadly, those who shared the most negatively coded experiences of sexuality education were also those who left the Catholic Church.

Curiosity and secrecy characterized a large portion of the educational experiences that participants discussed. All fifteen participants could readily cite times where they deliberately sought, or lacked, information about sexuality. Sometimes these instances conveyed a dearth of the most basic information, as Nora related: “This is so sad and so bizarre, but I vividly remember looking up sex in the dictionary. Because no one was

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<sup>1</sup> Georgia was the one ex-Catholic exception, having had very little sexuality education in her youth at all and having chosen to leave the Catholic Church with her fiancée not because of negative experiences, but out of a more preventative desire to avoid negative experiences.

going to tell me, it wasn't something I was going to ask." While she knew about menstruation, and that sex was an activity that was not supposed to happen before marriage, this was not enough information to sate her curiosity. Valerie noted that the internet had its uses for sexuality information with the convenience of not having to start a difficult conversation with a parent, though it came with risks as well:

I don't know about books, the internet was kind of coming around when I was like going through puberty and stuff like that, so I mean, definitely a little bit from there, because like if I had questions, like, I could just type it in and there it was! But it was on my home computer so I had to be careful, like, ooh, is Mom going to see what I'm typing in here?<sup>2</sup>

Both of these participants wanted more information, but pursued it secretly, convinced that their parents were not the best resources for this type of learning.

Most of the occasions where participants described a desire for better understanding were not instances of wanting biological information, but information about relationships, morals, and especially sexual boundaries. Jessica summed this up tidily:

And junior year I remember that was always the question that would always get asked, like, 'How far is too far?' And then the answer would be, 'Well if you have to ask, then it's probably too far!' That was always the question response... it was basically saying if a kiss goes beyond anything, like, all those things that we say

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<sup>2</sup> Here and throughout, participant responses have been cleaned for readability by eliminating some filler words ("um," "like," and "I mean,") and immediate word repetition ("I was like, was like,") except in cases where they add nuance to the quotation.

no to, you're asking because you want to do all those things that we're saying no to. And so don't do it. And I remember, like, the innocent 15-year-old... girl being like, 'What kind of a kiss can I give? What's appropriate kissing? What if we, like, kiss for this long? What if we're laying down on the couch? Like, is that okay?'

Here we see that Jessica's curiosity was anchored in a very specific, very personal set of concerns about how to act well in a relationship, but was treated with a broad guideline that did little to alleviate her worries and assumed that the students must have immoral intentions in mind in order to ask such questions.

Several participants were specific in wanting to understand the teachings of the Catholic Church on sex and sexuality. Isabella expressed frustration in not being given the tools to understand Church teaching in any meaningful way while she was in middle and high school:

I wish they would have been able to tell me why the church taught the things it did and provided more of a platform for asking questions about that. And yeah, how those teachings were grounded, like I said, in scripture and tradition and...kind of just practical advice for how you should live them out in today's world where most people don't live them out. ...the culture says one thing, the Church says a different thing, if I'm going to try to live by the Church's teaching, can they help me out here so at least I can explain why I'm doing that to someone else?

This desire to be able to explain faith convictions to others arose in other interviews, especially for the more traditional Allison who had been on staff at a Catholic summer camp and spoke about needing to know the right responses for campers who came with questions about homosexuality and gay marriage. Allison noted that she and the other staff got “coached” on the correct Catholic response each summer, but that the curious middle school campers did not seem satisfied with their answers. Allison was, in contrast with other participants, more concerned with arriving at a correct answer and a tried-and-true way of conveying it than in engaging in discussion around it.

Not all women characterized their youth as a quest for sexuality information, of course. Tess, in her typically laid-back manner, mentioned only one moment of seeking out such information, and that was a half-hour Google search with a friend concerning the appearance of uncircumcised penises. Bridget related disinterest, or perhaps embarrassment, to the point of outright dismissal of learning opportunities in her youth: "I think it's really awkward if you just walk into their room and are like—this is what my mom tried to do. And she's like 'About sex, Bridget, and drinking...' and I was like [pointing to the door] 'Go.'" Bridget, as we will see, laments her lack of understanding of church teaching when it comes to how she makes sexual decisions in her long-term, committed relationship, but seemingly believed any parent-child conversation too awkward to be an effective learning space. Corey, in a similar vein, found that asking her mother was unproductive, as when she tried to start conversations about homosexuality: "I just kept trying to challenge it, and she'd always be like 'Well, this is what they say so



this is what goes." For a majority of participants, interest in sex and sexuality was mixed with a sense of awkwardness and secrecy about their curiosity.

### **Content**

While it impossible to document all the information that was made available to these fifteen women in their youth, the lessons they recalled tended to fall into three major categories; the idea that sex is for reproduction, expectations of modesty in dress and its association with sexual temptation, and the overarching feeling that sex was a negative topic.

### **Procreation**

When discussing sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular, more than half of participants cited the Catholic teaching that sex is supposed to be intrinsically related to the creation of new humans. Nora, unsurprisingly, made this association strongly:

But again, babies were gifts from God, the process through which they were made is very vague, like, you had sex when you were married with your husband to have a baby. Like, that was pretty much it. And I think that I was under the impression that every time you had sex, you had a baby. Which, can you blame me? I had eight siblings!

Isabella had picked up the more nuanced view that babies were only one of two ends of sexuality, explaining in a way that also illustrates the "truncated conversation" theme: "Growing up, I think it was just 'Don't have sex until you're married. And this is because sex is for bonding and babies.' And that's it." Throughout her interview, Isabella used the

phrase "bonding and babies" several times, suggesting that she was repeating a specific wording that had been expressed to her.

Corey was offered little of this nuance. She recounted what she remembered from an 8<sup>th</sup> grade religion teacher: "He was just like, 'Guys and girls will have sex after marriage,' and he always stressed that, and, 'To have kids and to reproduce.' And then, 'To also put them into the religion that you guys were married into.'" After some prompting about whether bonding or pleasure had come up, she summarized by saying, "He kind of talked about bonding, but it was just like, "Bonding...to make a kid." Corey was aware that her teachers varied in their emphasis on procreation, mentioning a high school teacher who was also a priest: "The teacher that I had junior year for religion, he kind of was similar to my 8th grade teacher where you only have kids to make more Catholics and that is the only time you ever need to have sex in your life." She also discussed the contrast between a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, who said that premarital sex was wrong but that babies were the greatest gift a person could receive, and the content of a staged abortion debate in high school where babies were referred to as "punishment" for premarital sex.

Several more participants brought up the role of reproduction when talking about the Church's position on homosexuality, citing the inability to beget children as one aspect of the Church's opposition to homosexual relationships and marriages. Samantha reiterated what she had learned in Catholic school throughout her interview:

We had a really cool religion teacher who kind of let us, we had debates about a lot of stuff and gay marriage being one of them. And some people being like,

"Well that's wrong because...the Catholic Church says that marriage is supposed to be between men and women," but some people would be like "No, the church isn't against gay marriage, they're just saying they just don't support it or whatever because the whole thing of marriage is you're supposed to be able to have children and, if you're gay, you can't have children, and that's the whole sanctity of marriage."

While not a fully robust view of church teaching, it nonetheless stuck with Samantha long enough to note that the church did not forbid infertile couples from marrying. She wondered aloud why that situation was any different, if marriage truly was about making babies.

Tess recounted something similar in her school environment:

I mean, obviously we looked at the Church's view of it, just saying that homosexuality isn't so much wrong as, um, sexual intercourse between homosexuals, simply because having sex is supposed to be an act of reproduction. But that can't happen with two homosexuals.

Bridget, unique among participants, connected sex and reproduction closely, in part because she did not believe that contraception was ever truly effective. "Well [my mom] just said how you shouldn't do, have sex, unless you're ready to have, to raise a child, basically, because you don't, you have no control. I mean we like to say we have control with conception but really we don't because things go wrong all the time."

From a more holistic concept of bonding through children to the specifics of reproduction in homosexuality, participants had a clear sense that the church thought of sex and babies as both intertwined and inseparable.

### Modesty

One of the primary areas where these women were explicitly taught about their bodies and sexualized boundaries was in the realm of modest dress. Twelve of the fifteen participants had attended parochial Catholic school at some point between kindergarten and 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and eight had exclusively attended Catholic school. Details about uniforms and dress code were easily recalled and explained, with skirt length requirements coming up frequently. Corey described one of the strictest codes: "We had skirts, and they preferred it if you left a hem out. So it would like, go down to mid-shin. But they said it was okay if you got like, your pinky, the width of your pinky, above your knee." Other participants referenced getting in trouble because of the dress code, like Samantha:

I mean, there was times like, when I just, literally you had to stand straight and if they [your shorts] weren't at your fingertips, and I had ones that literally probably went to like, middle of my finger. Like, only clean pair of shorts I had, and I had to be sent to the principal and I'm like... I had long, long legs!

Samantha's insistence that uniform codes did not adequately account for diverse body types (like her long legs) was echoed by Willow, who recalled that in her Catholic school setting, heavysset girls were cited for uniform violations far more often than slim students.

In sum, the majority of participants who experienced them felt that uniform codes were restrictive and unevenly applied.

While strict uniforms and dress codes were ubiquitous, some participants did not make a direct connection between the style of dress and sexuality, like Lily, who did not mind the code:

I don't think they have ever said 'We want you to wear this stuff because it's going to be distracting to the other gender or whatever.' They never said anything like that from what I remember. I just know that all I ever heard was 'We want you to dress like this because this is a college preparatory academy and we want to portray a good image.'

By contrast, Rose experienced this code as being tied to sexuality in a profoundly negative way. "Temptation was a huge thing throughout youth group and schooling. Obviously we had dress code. So all my life I was taught that if my shorts went above my fingertips, I was a temptation. My 7-year-old body was a temptation." Rose found a way to critique the system, though to limited effect:

I remember having a fit about it once. Because I had a teacher about to give me a conduct point, and I was like 'If you seriously want to do this right now, go ahead. But I'm pretty sure that much more of my thigh isn't a distraction to most of the guys around me because it's under the table.'

Jessica, notably, experienced a type of modesty culture that involved "guarding the hearts" of men who would be tempted to look at them lustfully if they revealed too much of their bodies, and continued wrestling with that standard well into college:

A lot of women would be like, 'Jessica, are you guarding their hearts?' Which is, now I'm like...sometimes I see it as kind of slut-shaming. I mean, with everything that I don't like about it, I don't like this idea of guarding their hearts, like, men can guard their own hearts. But part of me is like "Yeah, but maybe I could dress more modestly.'

Even for women like Jessica who had the education, vocabulary, and critical skills to critique the association between modesty and sexuality, the socialization continued to run deep.

Though the individual experiences were diverse, these fifteen associated modesty with covering skin and wearing loose clothing, or with not wearing leggings. These standards were couched in terms of dressing "nicely" (for church or formal occasions), dressing professionally, and dressing to avoid the wrong kinds of attention. Nine participants offered examples of modesty being a gendered expectation, or of having their clothing choices policed by males. In one such example, Esther, who was never reprimanded by her parents for clothing choices, had to defend her workout clothing to her brother:

I remember one time, though, I came downstairs and I was wearing, literally like running leggings and a v-neck t-shirt and my brother was like "You need to go

change.” I was like, “No.” He's like “Why are your pants so tight?” I'm like “They're called leggings.”

Esther didn't give her brother's opinion much credence, but he clearly felt he had the right to express it. In sum, modesty was closely connected to restrictive dress that participants recalled for its unfairness and unequal application, and for how their clothing choices could tempt their male peers.

### Negativity

The idea that sexuality was a "bad" topic arose in several specific ways across interviews. The most common way that instructors and authority figures conveyed this message was through an educational focus on the risks of being sexually active—pregnancy and STIs. Rose offered one of the clearest examples of this trend when talking about her sex education experience in middle school, which consisted of watching dated educational videos:

It was just weird, because...it wasn't even about safe sex. Because God forbid that, there's no safe sex, safe sex is abstinence. I think it was honestly about the consequences. Like all negative. And just, like, it was very looked down upon. Like don't do that, it's negative, it's negative... Now that I'm thinking about it, the only sex talk we ever had was about diseases.

Rose experienced an environment where talking about sexuality with explicit positivity was deemed taboo, even though the negative curriculum was suspicious to students.

Not all participants learned about the threat of disease and pregnancy in such explicit terms, though the fears were still operative. Lily, who effectively never spoke

with her parents about sex and sexuality, recalled an instance in high school where her mother saw that she had a hickey:

She never asked what we did or how far we had gone or anything, but she was just like "You need to be careful, because when you're in those situations, there's not much that can stop you, you don't want to make any mistakes." She was like "You're going to be a doctor, he's going to be an engineer. You need to be careful!" It was a lot of yelling!

While the threat of pregnancy was not named as such, Lily's mother loudly made the point that sexual behavior was a slippery slope that could destroy not-yet-established careers if it got out of hand.

Samantha remembered learning about the consequences of being sexual in a more direct way, via a child development class where students were given a "robot" baby to care for over a short period of time: "So I had to take care of the baby and stuff like that and that's where you talked about taking care of kids and what you're getting yourself into." While Samantha does not highlight it, the statement "what you're getting yourself into" speaks to the risk-averse intent of the assignment. The point was not simply to give high schoolers a sample of what it is like to care for a baby—it was meant to ensure that their care experience was negative enough to discourage them from taking the risk of getting pregnant.

### **Implications from Method**

As stated in previous chapters, the "how" of sexuality education often communicates as much in terms of values and beliefs as the information itself. Here we



explore the ways in which method convinced participants that sex was not easily understood as theologically good, the strategies that adults used to close down awkward conversations about sex and sexuality, and the resulting harm that emerged in two cases when closed conversations kept participants from accessing vital information or support.

### Sex as Ambiguous

Official Church teaching asserts that sex and sexuality are beautiful gifts from God, and it is interesting to note how this message came across in the midst of risk-averse education. Isabella, Nora, and Jessica claimed that sexuality was spoken about in positive terms, but felt this positivity either masked or blended with negative portrayals of sexual behavior. The more conservative Isabella gives a concise summary of how the tension felt: “[Sex is] portrayed in a negative way, mostly. Like yes, you know, you listen to talks and you hear, the church teaches that sex is a good thing! But I don't really think that it's always portrayed as a positive.” Jessica talked about this same conflict in her middle school Theology of the Body book, which she describes as well-framed for the adolescent level, but ultimately lacking in helpful advice:

So obviously the questions that would arise are like, "Is masturbation wrong? Is looking at pornography wrong?" And I remember... it was always a two-part answer. It was like, "The world is tempting!" and like, "You as a young person have these feelings!" And then it would be like, "But don't look at pornography." And like, "Do not masturbate." So it was always this element of like compassion, like understanding and trying to meet you where you're at and recognizing that this is natural, *but* 'No.'

She then explained the two-part tension in more detail:

I remember it being a lot of ideas and talking and then the concrete things, it was very much just like 'Yes.' 'No.' They would give you a page of ideas about like how we're created in the image and likeness of God and blah blah blah blah and then the practical side of it was two sentences at the end. "So don't have sex outside of marriage."

This left Jessica with little practical guidance about how to respond to the sexual feelings that the book had tried to normalize, aside from trying to dismiss them or put them on hold until marriage was a possibility. Thus, while Jessica treasured and absorbed the message that sexuality was a good and beautiful thing, the takeaway message at the time was "...as a 14-year-old, you're thinking, 'Well, everything is bad, then.'"

Nora found herself in a similar situation, as she experienced the values and teachings on sexuality as highly empowering while she was part of her traditional Catholic faith, but looking back feels they were more negative than she had realized.

Summarizing, she said:

I think the holistic message was that sex was really good and important if you did it right, and if you didn't do it right it was really bad. And I felt like that about a lot of things when I was in the Catholic Church. If you did this right, it was great. But if you didn't do it right, it was all downhill from there. Everything about my life seemed like that.

Keeping in mind that Nora ultimately “took a break” from Catholicism in high school because of the intense pressure to behave appropriately, her understanding of sex and sexuality fit into what she described as a black-and-white worldview. While she did not specifically cite sexuality issues as a breaking point that led her to cease her relationship to the Church, she had a clear sense about how the worldview could only be empowering if one was an insider: “At least when I first started getting it [messages about proper sexual behavior], everything in my life didn't conflict with it. And then it did. And then the whole thing blew up.” These precise sexual norms, in her view, could not function once she moved past believing in God, though she claimed that she still held to many of the underlying values about sex being a significant way to relate to another person.

#### Closed Conversations

As mentioned above, "truncated conversation" was one of few codes that was used in every interview. Some of these were simple incidents where the discussion did not include substantive information, as Isabella describes an abstinence book that her Catholic school gave her in 8th grade:

I've thought about this later, I didn't think about it then, but it never really explained why. It was just focused on, ‘This is what the church teaches. Sex is for procreation and unity,’ and that's the extent of it. It wasn't anything beyond that. So it didn't really...it wasn't very helpful.

Rose related something similar about her combination of health and religion classes in middle school: "I think probably in biology we talked about the function. But we never talked about, like, anything else. I mean, basically when we touched it in religion it was

'That's between a man and a wife and that's it.'" Across interviews, teachers, parents, and other adults reportedly avoided lengthy or in-depth conversations about sex and sexuality, especially through the middle school years. In these interviews, truncated conversations represent one of the passive methods for authority figures to avoid difficult discussions.

For several women, conversations did not go unfinished so much as they never began. Samantha reiterated in several instances that she never experienced any kind of sex talk with either parent: "...my parents were never ones to cover that information with me, I guess they kind of just thought, 'Eh, school will take care of it.'" Nora knew that sex was something she should not ask about at home or in Sunday school, confirming, "We never talked about sex, though, ever. Ever, ever, ever." Tess explained that all her information about sex and sexuality came from school. The one occasion where a parent decided to talk with her about sex was later in life and somewhat lacking in useful information:

Before I came to college, I remember I was riding with my dad in the semi one day, and he just all the sudden stopped and he turned to me, and he's like "Tess, just so you know, now that you're going to college, guys are only looking for one thing. So make sure that you find a good one." I was like, "Okay dad, that's...good talk."

Bridget, Melanie, Corey, and Esther all recalled their mothers handing them a book about sexuality around the age of puberty. Their reactions ran the gamut—Melanie claimed, "I think I read the book and was very embarrassed and hid it somewhere in my room, never to look at it again." Bridget became irrationally angry, citing her tomboyish

discomfort with the feminine changes she was experiencing: "I was so mad, I just remember throwing the book and I was like "Take it back to the library!" She laments later in the interview that she had not experienced more opportunities to learn about sex, describing a school environment that would not have been friendly to questions: "I think I remember [my one sexuality education class] so vividly because it was something that I was interested in that no one ever lets you learn about. But you feel bad asking, because it's one of those, like, faux pas, like don't ask about it."

Clearly the offer her mother made with a sexuality book was not the chance she wanted, but she felt the information was still desirable.

Several participants described a pervasive culture that disallowed questions about sex and sexuality and fostered distrust between their adolescent selves and their teachers. Melanie described this culture from her perspective as an adolescent who fully intended to follow church teaching, but did not receive enough instruction in it:

In 8th grade, our religion class went a little bit more in depth and there was some kind of pamphlet that we got, and it had a couple holding hands on the beach on the front of it. It was a very cheesy thing, and it answered all those questions that you had. But they didn't talk to us about it. They just gave it to us. So I think I always was frustrated by that, and I wanted to know more about the teachings, but never really got the opportunity to ask.

Valerie related an experience of what Melanie likely would have wanted—an opportunity to ask questions via an anonymous question box—but found it lacking:

They wanted us to ask questions, but wouldn't necessarily answer them. They would have this kind of open forum like, if you didn't want to ask it out loud you could write it down on a piece of paper kind of thing and hand it in so it was anonymous, but some of the questions they wouldn't answer.

When pressed for more details, Valerie admitted that what she remembers is a teacher pulling a piece of paper from the anonymous question box, opening it, stating that she would not answer the question, and putting it aside. She remarked during the interview, seemingly surprised by her own insight, that she did not know if it contained an actual question, a rude remark, or some personal inquiry that the teacher declined to comment upon—the possibility had not occurred to her before. The significant detail about this encounter is that Valerie *perceived* that her teachers were hiding information from her and her peers, failing to be as open and honest as they had claimed they would be. This suggests a serious lack of trust between herself and the authority figures that she looked to for guidance.

Nora echoed this lack of trust, relating that even when there were opportunities, asking questions was risky for her relationship with her mother: "I would never ask my mom about that because, I mean, if I start asking questions about that? Probably meant I was having sex with the whole neighborhood!" Rose recalled a culture of silence that was purposefully created at her Catholic school: "It was kind of a tabooed subject. When people figured it out, they figured it out, and like, we had a girl get pregnant my freshman year. It was kept a secret." It is not clear from her description if the secret was kept for

the sake of privacy or the reputation of the school, but Rose understood it as an unsurprising part of a system where sex was rarely addressed.

Willow, who knew at a young age that her sexuality made her feel different from others, experienced a different kind of risk in asking questions when taught in Catholic school about the complementary roles of men and women:

W: So I quickly was like "This isn't quite right." I did not have as fully informed opinion as I have now, but I was certainly like "This is weird." And that outed me pretty hard.

R. Just by asking?

W. Just by asking, just by being kind of resistant to that.

As someone in a school environment where, in Willow's recollection, gay students were regularly bullied, responding to Church teachings on gender and sexuality with anything other than benign acceptance increased her sense of feeling unsafe in Catholic contexts.

At times, burgeoning conversations about sexuality were very deliberately quashed by authority figures. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this came from Jessica, who related an interaction with a high school teacher in her Catholic school that continued to bother her many years later. She described her high school self as inquisitive and as someone who would repeat or revisit questions in class if the answers she had been offered did not make sense to her. While she often took these questions to a different teacher in her high school who she thought was better at explaining moral issues, she continued asking one teacher, a young and newly ordained priest, about sexuality issues that concerned her.

I would push back to the point where my [high school teacher], the priest, wrote me a letter. And in the letter, said that I had the potential to be a saint, but currently I was "maliciously suspicious" towards the church... It has stuck with me! But as a junior, I don't think I was malicious! Or suspicious. I was just very much unsettled with what I was being taught, or really trying to figure out why. Like, why does every sexual act have to be unitive and procreative? What is the reasoning behind that?

During Jessica's interview, she was clearly distressed that her high school teacher had so dramatically misunderstood her intentions and did not seem to have realized that he might have called her malicious because he did not know how to answer her questions, or thought she should not be asking them. Instead of responding to her directly, he chose a passive medium that disallowed the chance for conversation, clarification, or further questions, and described her in a way that made her feel ashamed of her curiosity. This is a strong example of a culture around sexuality that tries to silence dissent by alleging that the asker is morally deficient. Jessica had endured this blow to her self-esteem without realizing that the teacher could have simply been trying to shut her up.

Similarly, Isabella represented one of the ways that a silenced culture around sexuality can continue to affect the lives of young adult women. She repeated throughout the interview that she felt awkward questioning Church teaching on sexuality, and worried that her more conservative friends would see her questions as spiteful. She emphasized that she was not trying to disagree with Church teaching and was simply curious if there were better explanations for official doctrines on sex and sexuality, but



because her traditional friends reacted defensively to those probes, she concluded, “I’m just asking questions. And I feel like I shouldn’t even be doing that.” Her friends’ negative reactions to this desire to interrogate church teaching created a sense of guilt that, at least in Isabella’s case, had the potential to encourage silence instead of engaging critically with a system that she sees as imperfect.

### Harm

Self-doubt was not the only type of harm that arose from truncated or absent opportunities to learn about sex and sexuality. Two participants, Willow and Corey, had dealt with weightier ramifications, as Willow describes:

When I was seventeen I was diagnosed with herpes. And it was because I was having unprotected sex! I had unprotected sex with a guy and I didn't think it was that big of a deal. Of course, it is. It's a big deal. And people we talked to, condoms were optional, and I think I was like 17 at the time, obviously. So I wasn't really thinking on a far range anyways, and I've always been impulsive. So it just happened.

Interestingly, Willow had preceded this story by claiming she was grateful she had learned something about STIs and condoms in her 6<sup>th</sup> grade public school, even though that education was insufficient to convince her of the need to use protection during sexual contact. Because her main sources of information—“people we talked to”—were not good resources, and because she did not know of better resources in the form of parents or teachers from which to get adequate information, she had learned that protection was unimportant. However, the compassionate reaction of parents who she described more

frequently as exhibiting discomfort with her orientation and gender identity was fascinating. She explained:

My parents actually about that were amazing. They were really affirmative, and like "This doesn't change you." And they knew it was going to be hard and they were giving me resources about things to think about. And my dad especially was very supportive... I don't know if this is everybody's parents, but my parents, they're the most insane people who do the most sane things. At the end of the day, they'll do the right thing for me, you know?

Despite the friction at home, Willow's relationship with her parents had not ruptured in the same way that Nora's had when she left the Church. While her parents had balked at providing Willow with sexuality information a few years earlier and had refused to let her get on birth control until they realized she was already sexually active, they were able to come to a place of compassion and open communication when a difficult situation presented itself.

Corey, by contrast, found herself in a situation where she was convinced of the fallout at home, adding fear upon fear as she dealt with a crisis by herself:

I'm going to be very open about sex with my kids. I just feel like, as a teenager in high school, I kind of wish my parents were more like that. Just in case something were to happen. Like, they wouldn't...want to kill me. They'd be kind of like, "It's okay," like, "You're not going to die. We will help you." Because my first pregnancy scare was [when I was] a senior in high school. And I was just like, oh my gosh, if I get pregnant, they're going to kick me out. I know they are. And then

I'm like, "Then what am I going to do? I'm just going to like live with a friend, I guess. Like, I'm not going to really have anything else."

Corey recalled her mother's uncompromising views on sexuality when she asked questions, and this prior experience transformed an already difficult situation into one where she was concerned for her bodily safety and the permanent loss of her primary relationships. Corey deliberately labeled this as her "first" pregnancy scare, noting elsewhere in the interview that she was still on her parents' insurance and thus unable to get a prescription for birth control without their knowledge, instead relying on a basic rhythm method and emergency contraception. While she did not specify how this first incident was resolved, it is clear that her family situation did not bring her the same affirmation that Willow found after her diagnosis. Corey realized in these terrified moments that she did not trust her parents to support her if it became obvious that she made sexual decisions they disagreed with.

A majority of these fifteen participants experienced conversations about sexuality that were deliberately truncated, by authority figures or by friends, and sometimes these closed methods contributed to long-term negative consequences. Still, as they entered young adulthood and the college environment, both what they learned and what they lacked formed a baseline for future decisions.

### **Application**

For the variety of influences that these 15 participants experienced, as young adults they all had to undergo some process of integrating what they knew with the process by which they made decisions. It is worth reiterating here that out of the group,

only four—Isabella, Melanie, Samantha, and Esther—identified as "single," and only Isabella said she was both single and not dating. For all the participants besides Isabella, the question of how to act out their sexual values was not theoretical. Whether or not they felt fully prepared to do so, they had to make their own decisions.

### Re-Education

A majority of participants mentioned relearning or seek out new information about sex and sexuality once they were in a college environment. Allison and Isabella went about this process in a religiously centered manner. Isabella spoke about discovering the chastity movement and why she found the values so engaging:

That gave me a new understanding of why it's beneficial to wait for marriage. I didn't understand why nobody ever talked about it from that perspective before. Because he was talking about it in ways where it was like, "Well yeah, it's for bonding and babies of course, but it's also just about respect and love and..." Nobody mentioned selfless sacrificial love. Like maybe that's a reason to wait.

Isabella found that these talks engaged her intellectually and spoke to her concerns about how to form relationships when she decided to re-enter the dating pool.

Allison explained the amount of internal motivation that was necessary to even find the resources she wanted: "I wish in grade school or in high school, I had more of a like Catholic Theology of the Body teaching. Because I kind of discovered it all on my own, I feel. I feel like I did a lot of researching and figuring out." She repeated the emphasis on learning "on her own" several times throughout the interview. On her demographics form, Allison described herself as being in a serious, committed

relationship, and explained during our conversation that the relationship had begun three weeks prior, suggesting that she was taking this nascent romance very seriously.

Other participants found their relearning process to be less straightforward. Valerie, for example, felt she grew considerably in her college years, but resented feeling so uninformed when she came into this more diverse environment:

I think coming into college, especially in that first semester, I learned so much about what other people were doing, it's like a culture shock and it like hits you and you're like "Oh my gosh, like, I've been missing out on stuff! I really have!" ...Even my roommate—again, I went to high school with her—me and her kind of came to college here and we started to figure it out together, and I feel like we're on kind of the same page as everybody now. I feel like we've caught up and are moving forward into adulthood.

Valerie's relearning centered on learning cultural norms beyond the Catholic suburban context where she spent her childhood, associating this learning with becoming an adult.

A number of participants mentioned college classes as part of their relearning process. Nora reflected on a history class that focused on U.S. culture and sexuality, which gave her a critical way of examining the ways that culture creates sexual norms. Both Isabella and Melanie (who attended the same school) talked about a religion class on Christian sexual ethics that helped them delve into the theologies that undergird doctrine, and Jessica mentioned a similar course in passing. Rose also talked about a Christian ethics course where she had gotten to see the diversity of knowledge about sexuality. Willow listed off a series of courses from anthropology to political science and

ethnography that helped her better understand the mix of cultures in her upbringing and that introduced her to feminist theory and LGBT+ communities. Finally, Esther referenced a college ethics course that had given her the chance to explore theological and social implications of gay marriage. Both academically and socially, sexuality was an important enough topic for these women to engage when opportunities arose.

### Conversations and Experience

When asked what they wished had been different about their sexuality education, the majority of participants responded with variations of “I wish we had talked about sexuality more frequently and more openly.” It is not unexpected, then, that these women tended to seek out conversations once they entered college. Rose, always articulate, explained how her classroom education on sex and sexuality measured up against other resources:

Honestly, I think the best education I got wasn't in class. I think it was talking to friends, talking to family. Having my brother get a girl pregnant, that's a pretty good education you're not going to get in the classroom. You could read a story about it, but it's not going to impact you... I guess my impacts were never really taught in the classroom.

Rose’s explanation represents the way a majority of participants described the role of open conversations and personal experiences in their sexuality education, especially after the college threshold was crossed.

Learning through experience and conversation is often a blended process, as Esther related:

I've got one friend who won't have sex before marriage. I've got another friend who just went crazy freshman year of college, so. Two different ends of the spectrum, but I mean, both of the friends and I have talked about it. Just like why they are that way or what their opinions are. And I think that's a lot more like, once you are kind of on your own, can make those decisions.

As a young junior at a Catholic school, Esther asserted in the interview how much she valued having a variety of information available and then using that pool of knowledge to inform her decisions. Having a diverse friend group opened up possibilities for her to explore different ways of living sexually without having to experience all of them herself. Esther spoke about these conversations neutrally, suggesting that she felt it was natural to talk to her friends about their sexual decision-making. This was not the case with all participants, such as Isabella, who noted above how negatively her friends reacted when she brought up questions about sexual behavior.

Valerie's experience sounded much like Esther's, though she directly contrasted her high school and college environments. While Valerie asserted throughout her interview that she had several high school religion teachers who were good resources, the transition to the college environment was still marked:

Go to college, you know, meet a ton of new people! You just learn, like freshman year was the most I think I've ever learned about anything, really. You learn so much about other people and you get their experiences and I feel like now we're just so open about everything, and my group of friends like, I could tell them the weirdest thing they've ever heard and they're just like, "I'll give you an answer."

We're able to just discuss whatever. Which is much different from high school where you kind of had those constraints of religion and like, I don't know. We kind of had all these pressures on us to not do things.

While Valerie had not described her high school experience as constrained in and of itself, it clearly paled in comparison to the openness she discovered in college.

Tess was unique in that she had developed and maintained a tight group of friends earlier in life that she carried through her college years, despite being geographically separated. The openness that other participants experienced as exclusive to college was, for her, a longstanding presence. When asked what she was most happy with of her sexuality education experiences, Tess responded without hesitation, saying, “I think definitely the open lines of communication with my friends. I have no idea what I would do without them there. Talk to about everything. And it's just anything, absolutely anything, they're always there.” Her experience suggests that the factors needed for conversational learning were not exclusive to the college sphere—the grounds for trust and safety can be laid in earlier relationships.

The desire for open discussion carried beyond friend relationships and into romantic partnerships. Lily, for example, referenced a conversation that her boyfriend had had with their high school chaplain, wherein the chaplain explained that premarital sex was not ideal but could be worthwhile if it was an expression of love between partners. That conversation acted as a starting point for her and her boyfriend to talk about what they wanted in their sexual relationship, which she described as the best experience in her sexuality education: “I actually would say from the chaplain when he



had that talk with my boyfriend. My boyfriend and I are pretty open about it, we talk about all this. And it's a discussion, and we know that it is going to happen in the future and all that, so we talk pretty openly.” Being able to communicate openly and honestly within a relationship was a desirable skill, and one of the first things that participants cited as lacking when they described friends in unhealthy relationships

Georgia held this value of open communication highly in her own relationship, but expressed frustration that while her religious values upheld the concepts of dignity and mutual respect, these ideals were not well related to the significance of communication:

I think that one issue that doesn't come up as much for me through faith but I think is important to relationships is your kind of communication. I think that that also just falls into the respect and dignity piece, but isn't as clearly articulated. That it's really important to be on the same page, to communicate about issues, no matter what it is, really... And that's something I don't see as, having as much of a basis in faith or in tradition that I've really experienced.

Georgia, like many other participants, felt that her relationship experiences had taught her values that should have been articulated far earlier, and with some religious significance.

Bridget, more than any other participant, exemplified how the experience of being in a romantic relationship can challenge one's beliefs and values around sex and sexuality. Bridget grew up in a rural Catholic environment and clung tightly to her religious identity when confronted with a more diverse peer group at her Catholic college. She was in a serious, committed relationship with her boyfriend at the time of the

interview, and while she marked that she had never been in a sexual relationship on her demographics form, it became clear through her interview that she understood sexual relationships to involve intercourse, and had participated in other sexual acts. While Bridget began the interview by proclaiming her commitment to remain a virgin until marriage, her views became more complex when she described her own relationship:

I feel like I've got like a wall, and I'm like "Sex, no." But I'm like, "Everything else...okay." Because I think, if I would have been with the other person [former boyfriend] I was with that month, where I was like "I don't think so," I probably wouldn't be as adamant. But I really think I'm going to marry this person [current boyfriend]. So it's just kind of hard for me to be like, I mean, why not? Because I don't plan on getting with anyone else, ever. So that's the hard part for me, the hardest part.

This internal conflict dominated her description of how she and her boyfriend navigated being physical without having intercourse:

I just honestly don't think I'm strong enough to not do it [non-intercourse sexual acts]. It's one of those things where I have my battles that I choose to put all my strength into and I just don't think it's one of them. And if we went back, I don't think I'd be able to change it, because I just don't think it's something that I have the energy to give, where like, not having sex before marriage, that takes a lot of energy! That's a lot of work to not do it!

The “battle” metaphor is particularly evocative in expressing the urgency of this conflict. Bridget was in a liminal state at the time of our interview, and it was difficult to predict if she would ultimately give up the fight and have sex (a decision complicated by her boyfriend's greater sexual experience and her own stringent disapproval of artificial contraception), or maintain her hard line until marriage was imminent, which she explained would four or five years later at the earliest. We can conclude from her internal discord that despite her commitment to Catholic teachings on sexuality, that commitment was not enough to make her relationship choices easy.

#### Decision-making

Participants were asked some variation of the question “How do you decide if it’s right or wrong to do a particular sexual act with a particular person?” Perhaps unsurprisingly, most participants had never attempted to articulate their own response to this question. What is more surprising is how similar the answers were among diverse participants.

From Allison, a traditional Catholic who spoke at length about how her faith informed her sexual boundaries:

Well, I feel like I would decide just by my comfort level. I like move on instinct a lot, so if I get a gut feeling where like, okay, that's not okay, that experience I had, in the past like I had a really bad gut feeling... So I think that whole comfort level thing...if I feel okay in my heart about it, then sure.

From Samantha, a more casual Catholic: “Definitely a gut feeling where I'm okay with, I'm ready for, like, it's something that I know I'm ready for.” From Rose, an ex-Catholic

with loose Evangelical affiliations: “If this is what I want to do, it's what I want to do. And so I engaged as I wanted to. And I think now, when I'm thinking of things, I try to keep things within the context of a relationship where I feel comfortable, everything's good.”

These statements are representative in the participant pool—the above participants all expressed particular boundaries that they had decided beforehand (aside from Allison, the hard line was typically sexual intercourse), but when it came to making choices in the moment, “gut feelings” and “comfort level” dominated their reasoning. Several participants explained how sophisticated thinking around sexual behavior is complicated by a college culture in which drinking and hooking up often intertwine. Esther, a practicing Catholic who actively enjoyed hook-ups and friends-with-benefits arrangements on her Catholic university campus, admitted that she had not been sober for her last few sexual encounters and summarized one of the difficulties of relying on gut feelings:

I guess, I feel like in any type of intimacy situation, you're not thinking so much as you are just doing. Until it comes to actually having sex, I think a lot of times you're not really thinking "Oh, is this something I want to do?" until it becomes something you don't want to do.

Her statement conveys a defensive posture when it comes to sexual behavior—acts may not be reflectively considered until a boundary is crossed. Again, it is curious to note that participants who had strong religious convictions and those who had minimal convictions

appeared to be equipped with the same tools when it came to on-the-ground decision-making.

Two participants who were no longer religious took a different approach to making such decisions. Corey did not rely on gut feelings so much as practicalities:

R. How do you decide if it's good to do or not good to do?

C. Based on if I'm close to my period or not.

R. Okay!

C. And if, like, there's like condoms or something around. But I mean, yeah, that's really it!

Willow conveyed that she tended to err on the side of being sexual, responding to the same question by saying, “Anymore, I assume it’s right.” Her response makes sense in context with the rest of her interview, where she talked about un-learning certain gender dynamics that she felt had contributed to her lack of confidence when trying to defend herself from sexual assaults. Willow and Corey had separated their decision-making process from their moral upbringing around sexuality as they grew into young adulthood.

#### Future Parenting

Each participant was asked to reflect on their ideal sexuality education experience not only for themselves, but in a situation where they became the primary educator. “If you had a daughter, how would you want her to go learn about sex and sexuality as she grows up?” Two major themes came up in nearly every interview; the first was the idea of being the first teacher their daughter would have. Lily expressed this desire, saying, “I would want them to find out from me and my husband or their father or whatever. I want

them to hear it from us first, rather than anywhere else. Instead of like seeing stupid boys do stupid things, just like, ‘What are you doing?’ Like, ‘That’s how that works?!’”

Lily was referencing the fact that she learned about oral sex from middle school gossip, not from a trusted resource. Melanie echoed a similar sentiment, though her concern was less about “grapevine” sexuality education and more about her daughter feeling prepared for “the talk” at school:

I think I would talk to her about it when she got more of the middle school age, or whenever I knew that they were going to address it soon at school. I would probably try to talk to her before that so she doesn’t go to school and come home and be like “What is this that you didn’t tell me?”

In these cases, the idea of being the first teacher of their daughters was significantly tied to being the most trustworthy resource for their child to come with questions. Rose spoke at length about how important this trust has been in her relationship with her mother, and why she believed it created the best scaffold for a young person to make smart sexual decisions:

Ideally, I’d like to be the one to talk about it with her, because I want to start that relationship early...I don’t ever want to be that kind of parent that’s like “Hell no, that’s not right.” I want to talk about things. And I’ve always kind of said it to my friends that this is my view in it: If you’re mature enough to come and talk to me and look me in the eye and have that conversation, I’m going to trust you to make the right decision... I’ll feel comfortable to talk about my own experiences.

Because I think that's important. I think that's the foundation of starting that relationship and being like, "Hey, I've been there too. I grew up once."

In Jessica's response to the same question, we see how highly participants valued the idea of learning conversationally, to the point that they believed it would be the best way to teach an adolescent.

I would try to open up that dialogue, and say, "You know, if you have questions, talk to me. If ever you feel pressure, you can come talk to me." And I think I would put less of an emphasis on kind of that black-and-white like, "Don't do this, don't do this, don't do this."

When comparing the above responses to the way participants were taught about sex and sexuality, it is clear that they intend to make a significant break with the methods they had experienced. As Melanie asserted, "I wouldn't just hand my daughter a book, I think I would sit down and have a conversation and try and be as non-awkward as possible so she felt she could actually talk to me." Melanie knew that the conversation is likely to be difficult, but also recognized that it is the role of the parent or educator to mitigate that discomfort and to start the discussion regardless. Even when participants such as Jessica, Bridget, and Lily claimed that they would not have wanted any more involvement from their own parents in their sexuality education, their replies indicated that they did not believe their parents' hands-off methods were ideal—they simply could not imagine having a conversation about sexuality with their parents that would have been comfortable and informative. By and large, these women felt ready to change the course of sexuality education in the next generation.

## **Isolation and Silence**

One overarching theme that emerged from a majority of interviews, though participants rarely identified it themselves, was a sense of isolation when it came to learning about sex and sexuality. Georgia described never fully fitting into her Christian friend group in college because of her more progressive views on sexuality; Isabella and Melanie both believed they asked more questions than their friends when it came to Church teaching on sex and were worried that this meant they were less faithful; Nora found herself detached from her traditional family when she left the faith, partly because of the pressures of a sexual purity culture; Allison spoke at length about having to find *Theology of the Body* by herself; Rose voluntarily left an Evangelical church group that she loved when she realized how poorly they treated her gay friends, finding herself navigating college without a religious community she trusted; Jessica was singled out for rebuke by a priest who did not like her questions about church teaching on sexuality; Bridget, highly conflicted about the next steps in her relationship, noted how strange it was to be the only virgin on her athletic team; Valerie felt shamefully ignorant about sex when she came to college and worried to let her ignorance be known; Corey lost her sense of safety in her family when she came to understand the implications of her mother's strict expectations about sexuality; Willow found her gender and sexuality made her a target for the threat of harassment or violence in her Catholic high school. In several cases, I was the first person they had told about their internal conflict. For all that they were learning the ropes of being sexual persons through conversation and experience, most of these fifteen women had feared that their curiosity or beliefs about sex and



sexuality were peculiar and uncommon, and at times had sought to hide their own strangeness from others.

These diverse examples of feeling isolated indicate a self-perpetuating culture of silence, a framework where these women felt they could not reach out to others because they feared that their curiosity was odd and their concerns silly. It is from this difficult and anxiety-prone arena that we move into a deeper analysis of what these stories communicate about the state of Catholic sexuality education and its aftereffects on young adult women.

## Chapter Five: Analysis

### Introduction

In order to best understand the themes from Chapter 4 holistically and engage with the theories and perspectives of the field of religious education, I present my analysis in terms of a composite narrative—that is, an interpretive single story that reflects the experiences of multiple participants which aims to illuminate and personalize the topic for readers.<sup>1</sup> This method of presentation allows us to examine the common factors<sup>2</sup> in participant narratives along an easily understandable timeline, and permits me to engage resources from relevant theological fields in discrete moments and parse out this information for implications about these participants’ relationship to the Catholic Church. The analysis phase of qualitative research corresponds with the “putting experiences in context with tradition” phase of the practical theological method.

In this chapter, I follow the “chain of failed formation.” Failure, while a strong word, is here used to indicate the perspective of the participants as they related instances

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<sup>1</sup> Wertz, Marcia Stanley, Marcianna Nosek, Susan McNiesh, and Elizabeth Marlow. “The Composite First Person Narrative: Texture, Structure, and Meaning in Writing Phenomenological Descriptions.” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being* 6, no. 2 (April 12, 2011). doi:10.3402/qhw.v6i2.5882.; also, Moustakas, Clark E. *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994, 137-138.

<sup>2</sup> To reiterate from Chapter 3, I use the phrase “common factors” instead of “universal essence” when describing findings from phenomenological research in order to avoid oversimplifying the numerous takeaways that may emerge from qualitative inquiry.

where they were denied something that they sought from their religious community with regards to sexuality education, whether that was information, conversation, or affirmation. This composite narrative will trace moments where these women felt underserved or failed by their religious education in sexuality.

The chain metaphor operates by indicating how well participants believed that their religious communities had prepared them to make life-giving decisions about sex and sexuality. Each moment we will examine is represented by the link of a chain. Links might be quite strong when a participant was given what they needed intellectually and emotionally; links are weakened when these women were given only part or none of what they sought. While many weaker links might still form a functional chain, even one link that has broken—one experience that fractured the participant's trust in or relationship to the Church or religious authority—has the potential to destroy the integrity of the chain, leaving that woman without a holistic sense of how their religious background connects to and informs their sexual decision-making. While she can still use individual parts of what she learned and integrate those links into what she believes and how she behaves, there is no longer a stable, trusting connection between her decisions and her religious sexuality education. Additionally, links are not simply formed at one point in time and forever static—they can be revisited, reinforced, weakened, or altered by experiences throughout a lifetime and, as such, will be represented below by moments from childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. While I present the chain in a timeline format, this is not to suggest a single, causal path, but to provide some logical order to the recursive nature of learning.

Each of these “chain-link” moments will also present an opportunity to review literature in religious education, pastoral theology, and other relevant avenues of Catholic tradition and see where their experiences reflect the best practices recommended in the literature, and where they do not. While we saw echoes of Catholic doctrinal teaching on sexuality in the participants’ stories, most narratives focused on the participant’s felt experience rather than the doctrinal content of their education. As such, pastoral theology and religious education are fields which better frame this analysis and which emphasize the significance of relationships and support, which are salient topics throughout.

The practical theological method names “putting experiences in context with tradition” and “determining new paths of action” as two separate movements,<sup>3</sup> but they will blend together here as I discuss “microinterventions,” or small ways that individual authority figures or peers could have reframed each moment to avoid the negative experiences that so many of these participants had in common.

### **The Chain of Failed Formational Moments**

#### **1. Scanty Information**

We begin our chain by recognizing that for a majority of our participants, information about sex and sexuality was scant from the beginning. We might recall Nora who looked up the word “sex” in the dictionary. Their schools did not directly address physical, biological differences between boys and girls until about 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and this was typically in context of “the talk” that delivers information on menstruation, at least to

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<sup>3</sup> Osmer, Richard Robert. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2008, 4.

the girls, and may not include anything more detailed on sex and reproduction. Rose, for example, related that she learned what sex was in middle school, when a classmate called her a slut and she asked her mother what the word meant. While houses with mixed-gender siblings had some natural education about sex differences, most authority figures seemed in silent agreement that sex and sexuality were topics that should not be broached until absolutely necessary—that is, at puberty or immediately before.

This context of scanty information runs up against the very concept of sexuality as defined in the catechism. That definition describes sexuality as the core part of every human person that calls us into relationship with one another, the inborn drive we have to connect, create community, and intimately know others in many senses.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, one would expect sexuality to be addressed early and often with children as they form friendships, learn to share, and are taught how to treat others with affection, respect, and boundaries. Indeed, these topics are ubiquitous in raising children, except that they are typically not classified as sexuality education. These lessons would ideally become the bedrock for explaining reproductive function, desire, and romantic relationships, especially as children become adolescents and experience their sexuality taking on a new and more noticeable form. When these participants relayed their experiences of sexuality education, few could connect sexuality to friendship, or “the talk” to bodily respect. Because of the lack of information, sex and sexuality were taught as isolated subjects, not in the wider context of human relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd Revised & Enlarged Edition. Vatican City: Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000, 560.

Religious education expert Thomas Groome dedicates much time to exploring the type of environment that is conducive to formative religious education, and explicitly states that “an environment of *intellectual* hospitality is free of ossified positions or knowledge control.”<sup>5</sup> The sheer dearth of natural information about sex and sexuality available to the participants as they grew up suggests that careful knowledge control—that is, an active prevention of availability—was at work. This explains why the drama of “the talk” around puberty was so immediately recalled and well-remembered by participants. Educational theorist Elliott Eisner is also relevant here due to his exploration of the “null curriculum,” that which is taught by explicitly not being taught.<sup>6</sup> From this exclusion, learners absorb the idea that this information is not as important to learn as that which is directly taught in schools. Eisner highlights that what is not taught also limits how the learner will learn in the future: “It has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problems.”<sup>7</sup> When information and values around sexuality are introduced later in adolescence, learners lose out on years of curiosity and the chance to practice critical thinking around the subject.

Microinterventions here could be introduced by nearly any member of the family or church community. They might include having children’s books available that address

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<sup>5</sup> Groome, Thomas H. *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry The Way of Shared Praxis*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 1998, 168.

<sup>6</sup> Eisner, Elliot W. *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*. 3rd Edition. Prentice Hall, 2002, 97.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

topics like friendships, boundaries, and how we show love and respect to others. This baseline-level work on sexuality can then be brought to the fore if, for example, a parent finds it necessary to address a child masturbating and wants to talk about privacy, or if a child tries to show affection by kissing friends who do not appreciate that action. Subjects such as mutuality and consent can be introduced at a young age and set the stage for future relationships.

Given that many of the above conversations happen naturally throughout a child's development, it might be more difficult to introduce direct conversations about sexuality, gender, and attraction. Most secular sexuality educators advocate teaching children the correct anatomical terms for all their body parts, including their genitals, from an early age, and finding age-appropriate but accurate ways to explain pregnancy or the arrival of new siblings.<sup>8</sup> Authority figures who are matter-of-fact about biology, anatomy, and bodily functions lay the groundwork for later comfort in discussing sexual functions in greater detail, and help growing children know that curiosity about the subject matter is natural and good.

## 2. Balking Teachers

When participants decided to supplement their minimal knowledge about sex and sexuality by asking questions of parents or other authority figures, their attempts resulted in them learning more about the awkwardness of the subject matter than the subject matter itself. Recall here Valerie's story about the anonymous question box where she thought teachers were skipping over questions, or Jessica's experience with a high school

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<sup>8</sup> Roffman, Deborah. *Talk to Me First: Everything You Need to Know to Become Your Kids' Go-To Person about Sex*. Boston: Da Capo Lifelong Books, 2012, 121-123.

teacher labeling her “maliciously suspicious” for asking questions about why sex had to be unitive and procreative—participants had enough negative experiences to know that direct questions about sexuality were, minimally, risky to ask.

We have no direct data from parents and religious authority figures about why they reacted to questions about sexuality in ways that troubled these adolescents. One can speculate that they felt awkward themselves because they never had a robust sexuality education and felt lacking to teach young people; perhaps they believed that offering too much information about sexuality would encourage greater curiosity and early experimentation; they might have thought the subject was being introduced too early, or in the wrong way, or perhaps did not find the topic interesting. What we do know is that these reactions did not serve our participants well. We also know that this approach flies in the face of established good practices in religious education. Thomas Groome advocates moving religious education away from the classroom-oriented model to one that “calls the teacher to a new self-image, away from answer person or controller of knowledge and into ‘being with’ participants in a subject-to-subject relationship.”<sup>9</sup> These relationships allow for back-and-forth exchanges in a safe space. Instead of leaning in to a relationship that allowed vulnerability and mutual learning, these authority figures balked and retreated.

Additionally, Groome advocates teachers helping their students become agents of their own faith who can take responsibility for their own learning and, eventually, trust

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<sup>9</sup> Groome, Thomas H. *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Pub, 1998, 143.



themselves enough to rely on their own counsel in making moral decisions.<sup>10</sup> This recommendation mimics developmental theologian James Fowler’s theories about moving from “conventional” faith, where a subject relies on external authorities, to “individuated” faith, where the subject internalizes their own authority.<sup>11</sup> Some of the authority figures referenced above may have been invested in keeping these learners in the conventional stage of faith, thus minimizing the possibility that learners would reach different conclusions about the appropriate sexual behavior and make regrettable choices. In this mindset, appropriate sexual morality becomes an exercise in following the rules set down by the external locus of authority. Questions or doubts could weaken that authority. Ironically, when the religious authority figure refused to engage questions about how to be a sexual person, these women had to turn elsewhere with their curiosity—mostly to peers, but sometimes internally, in a move that could have hastened their preparedness for individuated faith.

The microintervention for this chain link is unsurprising—authority figures should seek to respond to questions about sex and sexuality with the same aplomb that they would use to explain how caterpillars become butterflies and how long division works. If this is not immediately possible, especially for adults who have little experience talking about sexuality openly, they should be encouraged to admit that they are uncomfortable, but that they really do want to have these conversations and will keep

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>11</sup> Fowler, James W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New Edition. San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995, 179.

working on their own discomfort—a vulnerable moment, but one that epitomizes Groome’s subject-to-subject relationship. When learners seek clarification or want to revisit the information, authority figures should understand this repetition as a normal and natural part of learning instead of assuming it signals doubt or rejection of the first teaching.

### 3. Lonely, Wicked Questions

Remember that Nora looked up sex in the dictionary not only for her own curiosity, but because “no one was going to tell me, it wasn’t something I was going to ask.” This example suggests that Nora felt she was in the wrong for being curious about a topic that, as best she knew, was restricted information meant for married couples only. Isabella exemplified her sense of isolation when she explained how defensive and difficult her more traditional college friends became when she asked for clarification on Catholic sexuality teachings. Their defensive reaction gave her reason to believe that she was on the outside by not being already convinced or by not defaulting to obedience when moral justifications were not clearly presented—that the questioning itself was wrong. Recall also how Jessica described the rule, “If you have to ask if a sexual act is too far, then it’s too far.” She had the impression that her curiosity was taken as evidence by adult educators that she wanted to participate in sexual acts that they deemed inappropriate, when internally she was trying to locate boundaries between acceptable and sinful behaviors like the number of seconds two people can kiss one another before it is too much. To be curious was to be looked at differently by authority figures, and was risky to one’s reputation and self-image as a good Catholic girl. These encounters led a

majority of participants to say, in various forms, that they felt like they were the only one who was concerned about “sex stuff” among their peers.

One possible reason that Jessica’s encounter with a priest calling her “maliciously suspicious” was so traumatic is that, well in the teenage years of conventional-stage faith, approval of authority figures feels crucial.<sup>12</sup> In fact, since religious authority is still located outside of one’s own conscience and beliefs at this life stage, approval of authority figures could be easily conflated with approval from God. Adolescents whose questions are dismissed or demeaned, then, do not only feel the weight of disapproval from a trusted figure, but feel it in an ultimate sense that can quickly become crushing.

To combat this sense of moral inferiority around asking questions, authority figures should take care to normalize curiosity and the desire to know more about appropriate boundaries. Beginning answers with phrases like, “I remember wondering something similar when I was your age,” or “I’m sure a lot of your friends are trying to figure out the same thing,” could disassociate curiosity from suspicion and questions from risk. Asking the young person what they think the best answer might be before directly responding to the question affirms the learner’s status as a morally responsible person who ultimately must make decisions for themselves, and may be a good exercise for approaching a different stage of faith, where authority becomes internally located.<sup>13</sup> Such questions can also be expanded beyond an inquiry-response format if the authority figure helps the learner access their own prior knowledge, then offers a new perspective

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<sup>12</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 154.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

(by answering the question), then asks the learner what they make of this new information and how it might affect their beliefs or values.

These steps need not be sequential or prescriptive, but should serve to remind the authority figure that youth learning about sex and sexuality are frequently self-conscious and that vocalizing their curiosity is an act of bravery that should be affirmed. Instead of assuming a young person is asking for permission to become sexually active, the authority figure can frame their response to assume that the learner wants to know more about how to form good relationships, whether platonic or romantic. Interviews confirmed that participants were much more interested in the dynamics of relationships than the particulars of sexual contact, so authority figures can be assured that questions about sexuality are most often in the context of how to be a good friend and partner.

#### 4. The Untrustworthy Church

Given how frequently participants were given awkward or incomplete answers to their questions about sex and sexuality, many of them stopped trusting the resource that responded so poorly. Corey sought to engage her mother in conversation or debate about sexuality, but quickly discovered that her mother seemed to be parroting the catechism answer and asserting that if it was what the Church taught, it had to be true. When she became frustrated at not receiving further justification or explanation, Corey stopped going to her mother or any Church resource with questions. Similarly, we recall Valerie's story about how her Catholic school had an anonymous question box for sex questions and how teachers refused to answer some of the questions. Whether or not her interpretation of the situation was correct (and it seems quite possible that the teachers

were simply screening lewd or inappropriate submissions), Valerie saw this event as evidence that authority figures were hiding information. These authority figures failed to explain their choices or why they answered the way they did. As a result, both Corey and Valerie came to see their religious resources as untrustworthy and unreliable.

Thomas Groome speaks at length about why Christian religious education must be “shared,” that is, experienced in partnership, participation, and dialogue.<sup>14</sup> He asserts that because “Christian religious educators are educating for faith identity/agency that is radically communal...our pedagogy should be likely to promote our purpose.”<sup>15</sup> Looking from this understanding of religious education at the examples above, it becomes clear why Corey and Valerie lost trust so quickly in their religious authority figures and, by extension, in the Church—the Christian faith is communal and interactive, but this open environment disappeared when sex was introduced as a topic. Catholicism generally encourages participation, even from children, in sacraments, liturgy, and prayer, and takes pains to explain to children why it is so important that they be active, involved, and interested. The abrupt switch from what should have been an engaging experience to one of strict authoritarianism seemed hypocritical, as Valerie described; “They wanted us to ask questions, but wouldn't necessarily answer them.” Authority figures here failed to maintain the type of religious education environment that allowed for partnership and explanation.

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<sup>14</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 142-143.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

This chain link moment is experienced internally by the learners, and as such, is more difficult to directly address as an authority figure. In Corey's case, her mother offering to do more research or suggesting they look for the reasoning together might have given Corey confidence that her mother did want to help, or that the Catholic Church had reasoning behind the rules. For Valerie, the teacher explaining, "This is an inappropriate question about my personal life and I am not going to answer it" could have given Valerie a different read on the experience. The connective tissue between these two examples is transparency. When transparency is not present, learners will naturally come up with their own theories about why they are not getting the information they seek, and authority figures would do well to explain the reasons governing their own actions, not simply to avoid speculation, but to help young people develop skills in reasoning from multiple perspectives. Authority figures need to be willing to say that they do not know or that they are uncomfortable sharing instead of avoiding difficult encounters in order to build up trust.

#### 5. Secret Lessons

Secret learning about sexuality became many of these women's only recourse when information was limited and untrustworthy. Valerie's quote about needing to hide her internet searches from her mother speaks volumes—she wanted and needed further insight, but asking a trusted adult was not an option, and could have gotten her shamed or punished for her curiosity. We can also classify, to an extent, Corey and Willow's risky forays into unprotected sex as a form of pursuing further education. Secrecy was

paramount as they believed that their parents would react poorly upon learning they were sexually active.

The failure in this chain link is in how strongly these women believed secrecy was necessary in order to learn anything substantive about this aspect of their personhood. The need to be sneaky, cautious, and enterprising almost certainly perpetuated a sense of isolation and perhaps shame. Because of previous failures in the chain, they were left without a sense of what resources they could access for good information and thus turned to whatever they had on hand, whether that was the internet, books, or other adolescents with similar urges. Let us recall that shame is defined in theological circles as the need to hide oneself, lest others realize how stained or sinful one actually is inside.<sup>16</sup> Secrecy, even when undertaken with a sense of empowerment (“If nobody will tell me, I’ll find out on my own!”) can easily slide into shame, especially if that young woman experienced guilt<sup>17</sup> throughout her self-education by, for example, stumbling across pornography in her internet searches, or going farther sexually with a partner than she had planned on.

Again, because this chain link is defined by privacy and secrecy, it is difficult to see a clear intervention that authority figures might use to interrupt the failing formation. Ideally, none of these women should ever have gotten the idea that secrecy was the only option if they wanted to learn about sex and sexuality. Here we can echo the interventions

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace: Healing the Shame We Don’t Deserve*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 9.

<sup>17</sup> That is, the sense of having done something wrong, which is distinct from believing that one’s very self is sinful.

spelled out above; creating a culture of accessible information, affirming and answering questions with aplomb, creating spaces for learning in community settings, and repeating how all young people experience this curiosity and how good and important it is to want to learn how to be a sexual person. Additionally, if an authority figure discovers a young person searching for more information in secret, they could attempt to interrupt the cycle by responding mildly, affirming that curiosity on the subject is natural, and emphasizing that they are always available as a resource or can find the young person reputable books or websites to help answer those questions if they aren't comfortable talking about them at this moment.

#### 6. Just the Facts

When these women pursued their secret education on sexuality, they typically had no guidance, context, or community to help them make meaning of the information. As such, their clandestine education was informational, not formational. Informational and formational education are not always easy to distinguish from one another, as informational education should always be included in formational education. Formational teaching is distinct in that it intentionally includes both relevant information—facts, figures, experiences, etc.—*and* some level of meaning-making. In Groome's language, "Christian religious education is to promote 'knowledge' of some kind and to actively engage people's minds in achieving it."<sup>18</sup> This mind-engagement, or meaning-making, involves more than one individual in dialogue and communally interprets the

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<sup>18</sup> Groome, *Sharing Faith*, 6. This is related to Groome's concept of "conation" as the ultimate goal of religious education; that is, both being and becoming Christian in a process of religious education that forms, informs, and transforms: 30.



information. Our best example of a good formational moment from a participant comes from Willow and her story of being diagnosed with herpes. She said her parents provided her with information and content about her new condition, but also told her explicitly, “This doesn’t change you.” They sought to help her make meaning out of this new development and help guide her to think about the implications, not just in practical terms, but for her self-image and inherent worth. She came from that encounter feeling informed *and* affirmed that she knew what this diagnosis meant factually and personally and who to trust if she needed further support or insight—a true formational moment.

When it came to sexuality education, informational educational moments were far more common in these narratives. Informational education made up the bulk of STI-oriented sexuality education classes, the ones that Rose claimed were “all about diseases.” The participants who were handed puberty-themed books by their mothers and instructed to ask if they had any questions were offered only informational education. Informational education lacks three key components that formation requires: community context, dialogue about what the information means, and a clear sense of where one can go to get more of the same.<sup>19</sup>

Another example helps clarify this distinction: Tess told a brief story about how, in college, she and a friend realized they did not know how uncircumcised penises looked, and spent some time on a Google Image search to learn. They were able to access

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<sup>19</sup> Morgenthaler, Shirley K, Jeffrey B Keiser, and Mimi L Larson. “Nurturing the Infant Soul: The Importance of Community and Memories in the Spiritual Formation of Young Children.” *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 2 (September 2014): 244–58, 253. These authors do not lay out the factors of formational learning in precisely the list order presented above, but affirm the necessity of all three aspects.

to the specific information they sought, but the other requirements of formation were partial or lacking. Their decision to do this search together provided some affirmation that it was okay to be curious about this topic, but neither of them had much more wisdom or insight than the other. With that dearth of context, there was no setting for them to talk about what this curiosity or information meant; is it normal to be attracted or repelled by penises? What does the look or cut of a penis mean for a relationship with a male? What are the politics or cultural norms behind circumcision? What is Catholic teaching on circumcision, appropriate male clothing choices, or looking up pictures of penises? Finally, there was no clear path forward to continue the conversation—they now had their visual information, but did not know of community resources that could add to their knowledge or interpretation. Indeed, it is quite possible that this situation echoed the negative outcomes of the “secret lessons” moment as this encounter became a two-person secret.

A microintervention for this link is really more of a macrointervention. In order for education to be formational and relevant to the questions and struggles of young adult women, this education needs context and community. Informational instruction on the mechanics of fertility and the prevalence of STIs is not enough. Prior chain links have established in more detail what this type of educational environment looks like, and now we can more clearly see what is missed when a community cannot provide a safe space for learning about sex and sexuality.

## 7. Retalking the Talk

For all that these women lacked the style of sexuality education that they wanted, they were remarkably clear about how they wish it had looked. Again and again participants described conversational learning spaces where they would feel safe, unjudged, and could forthrightly mull over their complex ideas and experiences around sex and sexuality. Tess summed up this idea beautifully when talking about her tight-knit group of friends from high school: “[I] talk to [them] about everything. And it's just anything, absolutely anything, they're always there.” Her use of the phrase “they’re always there” denotes the longstanding and trusting relationship that undergirds this learning space. Several other participants used variations of the phrase “open lines of communication” to explain what they wanted from friends or parents or what they wanted to offer to future daughters. Rose, we recall, repeatedly used the phrase “Let’s talk about things” when describing how she wanted to form a trusting relationship with a daughter. Participants knew, almost instinctively, what they needed in order to learn well.

Yet participants also talked about their attempts to create these conversational learning spaces in the present, and how they often felt constrained or awkward. Think back to Isabella trying to start dialogues with her more traditional Catholic friends and how their defensive reactions made her feel as though her questions and interests in deeper learning were somehow unfaithful. The same difficulty conversing also showed up in the need for—and fear of—forthright conversations with romantic partners about desires and expectations. Allison, who was highly traditional and who had recently begun her first romantic relationship explained during her interview that she and her boyfriend

had not talked at all about sexual desires or boundaries, but assured me that it wouldn't be difficult to do so at all because they were "on the same page." While the relationship was certainly nascent, the low priority (or avoidance) of having this "easy" conversation speaks to a certain level of awkwardness. If she had been exposed to a culture of modesty that made her less comfortable with her body or had framed sexuality in terms of temptation, embarrassment could also play a part here. Allison had the confidence that she could converse well, but had thus far circumvented putting that confidence to the test.

Both feminist and pastoral theology spheres highlight the importance of practicing safe conversational learning, especially for women. Eunjoo Kim, a scholar on preaching, argues that women are often more holistic learners and want to integrate their rational understandings with their present reality, and that such holistic learning, "requires a learning environment in which students feel a sense of trust and security to be vulnerable."<sup>20</sup> Creating such environments requires practice, something that these participants had little of. Looking at previous chain links that may have failed, especially when curiosity about sexuality was met with negativity or led them to secret explorations, participants more often practiced the opposite of what they said they wanted. With this in mind, it makes sense that the conversational relationships and spaces they tried to build in young adulthood would be tentative and shaky compared to their ideals.

When left to their own devices, these women naturally gravitated towards the kind of learning environment that Groome strongly encourages—one where individuals

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<sup>20</sup> Kim, Eunjoo Mary. "Conversational Learning: A Feminist Pedagogy for Teaching Preaching." *Teaching Theology & Religion* 5, no. 3 (July 2002): 169–77, 171.

can openly express what they are doing, how they feel about it, how they think their religion informs their practice, and how they might want to change in the future. The strong inclination of participants to attempt “shared Christian praxis” when they came into safer spaces acts as affirmation of Groome’s approach, signifying how this model is just as applicable to questions about sex and sexuality as any other topic of religious education.

An adult authority figure could intervene early in this chain link simply by bringing up the topic as they would any other, inviting discussion and allowing young women to practice talking openly about their curiosities, interests, questions, and desires in the sexual sphere. Adults can be proactive in beginning these conversations early rather than waiting until the adolescent expresses interest. These talks need not be in formal classroom settings and, in fact, might be more efficacious if they were not. These women needed opportunities to practice speaking and listening, the same as any student of a foreign language. Without the chance to make mistakes, have them gently corrected, and experience the satisfaction of having communicated effectively, such a student will make little progress in their goal to be a proficient conversationalist. So too here, with the topic of sexuality. The chance to safely practice conversation may have profound influence on a woman’s ability to get the information she seeks and to candidly express her wants and needs, especially in romantic relationships.

#### 8. Moral Intuition

Recall how Allison, the most conservative participant and an enthusiastic fan of Theology of the Body and purity culture, talked about making sexual decisions based on

a gut feeling. Recall also how Esther, who was a practicing Catholic but who enjoyed regular hook-ups in her college atmosphere, used the same language to describe her decision-making process. Each had encountered the Catholic moral tradition around sex and sexuality and had chosen to give it a very different weight in their lives, but both relied upon this “gut feeling,” this internal sense of comfort, to let them know what was acceptable or unacceptable. Social psychologist Jonathan Haidt calls this “moral intuition,” a near-automatic moral judgment that occurs without the agent consciously weighing evidence or reasoning their way to a conclusion.<sup>21</sup>

It is not surprising or problematic that these women were learning to keep their own counsel in sexual decision-making, but it is curious that between a woman steeped in Catholic moral teaching and one who largely did not care about it, both were equipped with the same tools for navigating potentially sexual interactions. This is one telling place where the moral formation provided by the Church does not translate into substantive connection with the experiences of young adult women.

Learning from experience is not a bad education; experience is an excellent teacher. The issue here is not that women were learning from their experiences, but that they had no real scaffolding in place to help them decide what experiences they wanted to have and which they wanted to avoid *before* the opportunity arose. One does not need to experience a burn to know that touching a hot stove is a bad idea, and one does not need to regret a sexual encounter under the influence of alcohol to reason that they want their

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<sup>21</sup> Haidt, Jonathan. “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment.” *Psychological Review* 108, no. 4 (October 2001): 814–34. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.108.4.814, 818.

sexual encounters to be sober. This is not to cast criticism on individual women for finding themselves in situations where they needed to make quick choices about sexual encounters, but to critique the educational environment that gave them little opportunity to reflect on what they wanted and did not want so that they could more carefully select their situations and their opportunities.

With this chain link, we can look back and see how earlier failures made it difficult or impossible for these women to connect their sexual decision-making to their deeply held values or religious beliefs. Of these fifteen women, most experienced several “weak links” in their chain and, especially among those who had left the Church, several had negative enough experiences that their chains were clearly severed. Most retained pieces that they recognized as important; respect for others, the significance of remaining a virgin until marriage, and so on, but had emerged with little clarity on why these values came out of their tradition or how precisely to live them out.

This chain is not meant to indicate that all sexuality education conducted in Catholic environments was damaging, but to reveal that formative educational moments lacked coordination and systematic understanding. Without the context of the broad view of sexuality and without the community accountability that is vital in religious formation, the result was a scattershot of encounters that had the potential to rupture a young woman’s trust in her religious tradition and community. Treating sexuality as a subject set apart, as a special topic that a religion class discusses for two weeks, as a theme that can be answered with one-off chastity talks, did not adequately encourage or educate these women.

## The Fear of Sexuality

One may have noticed throughout the chain links, perhaps without explicitly naming it, a pervasive undercurrent of fear and anxiety. Participants were constantly afraid of asking the wrong question, having the wrong information, being out of step with their peers, being suspected of promiscuity, regretting a sexual encounter, getting pregnant or getting an STI, getting called out, or being ostracized for their identities, beliefs, or practices around sex and sexuality. Authority figures, we can speculate, feared these young women making regrettable decisions that come with lifelong consequences, feared them abandoning their faith, feared that they would be overtaken by sexual impulsivity unless carefully taught, monitored, and kept strategically ignorant. The entire learning process appears to be dominated by fear.

To return to Carrie Doehring's concept of lived theology, the physically felt sense of stress or anxiety when learning about sex and sexuality could give rise to a fear-based lived theology of sexuality, which gives rise to decision making and coping that is based in defensiveness.<sup>22</sup> A lived theology of fear helps explain Esther's account of not knowing if something is "too far" until a boundary is crossed—her primary focus is on recognizing her negative reactions (guilt, disgust, etc.) rather than on the desirable outcomes of the encounter. Kenneth Pargament, a psychologist specializing in spirituality, also contributes the concept of spiritual struggle, which are moments of spiritual tension, often incited by stressful events or interpersonal conflict, throughout

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<sup>22</sup> Doehring, Carrie. "Resilience as the Relational Ability to Spiritually Integrate Moral Stress." *Pastoral Psychology*, April 16, 2015, 1–15. doi:10.1007/s11089-015-0643-7, 8.



which a person must redefine their relationship to the divine and to their religious community.<sup>23</sup> Pargament notes that while spiritual struggle may give rise to a new, more robust spirituality, it may also produce disengagement with spirituality altogether,<sup>24</sup> as in the cases of Nora, Corey, or Willow, who left the tradition of their youth and pulled out of religious belief entirely following various unsatisfying encounters with Catholicism. These authors provide language for the kinds of life-limiting outcomes that may accompany a fearful approach to sex and sexuality.

### **Implications for Religious Education and the Church**

It becomes increasingly obvious with each link of the chain that participants' experiences were wildly out of step with some of the most time-tested and highly regarded practices in religious education. I posit that this is because, even when it takes place in religious environments, *sexuality education is not considered religious education*. This is why participants describe practices and learning spaces that are at odds with the most basic tenets of good religious education. Throughout this chapter, I have implicitly argued throughout each microintervention that sexuality education must be considered religious education and treated with the same care, respect, dignity, and import as catechetical instruction, prayer memorization, or pastoral caregiving. This requires that we both equip and permit participants to become real moral agents in the sexual sphere, able to make their own decisions and welcome them into a community that can help them reflect upon their lives, their faith, and the kind of person they want to

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<sup>23</sup> Pargament, Kenneth I. *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*. 1st edition. New York: The Guilford Press, 2011, 112.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

become. The inertia of prescriptive, threatening, and incomplete sexuality education will be difficult to reverse; however, a few community members employing a few of the microinterventions described above could help turn the tide.

Throughout this lengthy process of research and analysis, I have clearly and carefully focused my efforts on the topic of sexuality, but it would be a mistake to assume that religious sexuality education is a subject set apart from the rest of religiosity, faith life, and the state of the Catholic Church in the United States. As stated above, treating sex and sexuality an entirely distinct subject does not serve our young people well, nor does it reflect how they think. By addressing the “lived theology” of these young adult women with regards to sex and sexuality, I was also granted insight into their lived theology in larger terms—into the state of their faith life as a whole. We should again call to mind Willow, who valued religious community while feeling that her queer, gender-fluid body would never again feel safe in a church, or Bridget, who had constructed so much of her identity around Catholic pro-life issues that she could not envision using birth control even if she eventually “gave up” and had sex with her boyfriend. These women’s relationships to the Church and to faith were reflected in microcosm in their experiences of religious sexuality education.

Recall again Jessica’s youthful concern about how much kissing one can do before the kissing becomes sinful. Here we see that asking if kissing while laying down is okay is also asking if it is okay to *want* to kiss someone while laying down—Jessica was not just asking for information, but asking for affirmation of how she thought and felt, of her inherent okay-ness. Examples like these peppered the interviews—these women were

rarely asking for information alone, but implicitly asking if anyone else wondered about the things they did, or if it was okay to have certain desires. This is partially developmental, since adolescents are hard-wired to seek approval from authority figures, but it is also a question of theological anthropology. These young people want to know if they are lovable by God, that is, if they are wholly acceptable or if they have to earn that acceptability. This is why sexuality education is not just a niche subject—it matters for these women’s ultimate relationship with the Church and with God. If their sexuality education communicates that they are unacceptable unless they follow certain but vaguely explained requirements, how long can a person stay in an environment that makes them doubt their own worth? If so burned, they may leave. What happens when Bridget finally gives in and has sex with her boyfriend, despite the risks and the blow to her Catholic virgin identity? What happens if Allison finds herself going “too far” with her new boyfriend and regretting it? This shame—of being exposed, of having something essential to one’s self demonstrated as inadequate<sup>25</sup>—is felt deeply. The fall from grace is also a feeling of being disconnected from their community. They may no longer feel acceptable. And they will distance themselves if they cannot find a way to reconcile what they have done with what they have been told they must do.

All this paints a textured but dismal picture of the state of sexuality education in the Catholic Church, insofar as it affects young adult women. In the next chapter, we take a longer look at how this data and corresponding analysis fit into the larger framework of Catholicism in the United States and how the limited but rich information we have

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<sup>25</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 60.

reviewed could motivate future research and contribute to religious education practices in the Church.

## **Chapter Six: Synthesis**

### **Revisiting the Journey**

The Catholic Church is in the midst of a notable shift in understanding sex and sexuality, and exploring the educational and formational experiences of young adult women offers us insight into how these shifts impact the lives of American Catholics. Early Church fathers like St. Augustine of Hippo and St. Thomas Aquinas viewed sex as morally suspect because of the chance of bodily pleasure, and it was only in the 1900's that Church documents begin speaking about sexuality as a positive force that reproduces the species and permits a unique type of bonding between spousal partners. Though the document *Humanae Vitae* surprised many Catholics by upholding the teaching that the use of birth control was illicit, even in marriage, Pope John Paul II carried the concept of sexuality's sacred bonding power throughout his Theology of the Body lectures, praising the distinct and complementary roles of males and females and speaking with gravitas about the joys of marital relations. Yet the Church faithful in the United States seemed to have largely stopped listening by this time.

Feminist theologians such as Mary Daly note how rarely the female population has been permitted to speak for itself on doctrinal issues regarding sex and sexuality, a disconcerting fact considering that women make up more than half of the Catholic faithful in the United States. Catechistic texts on sexuality frame it as good, but speak in

vague terms about conjugal relations and end with little practical guidance about how to grow in virtuosity as a sexual person if one is not married or imminently becoming so. Moral theologians and ethicists like Margaret Farley contribute distinct ethical approaches that are often at odds with conclusive declarations of sinfulness that undergird Church teaching on, for example, homosexuality. And somewhere in all of this are the Church faithful, the blend of traditional, nominal, cultural, and “Cheaster”<sup>1</sup> Catholics who fill or flee the pews and who, according to Vatican II, have their own special authority in explaining and living out Church doctrine.

Research on the intersections of sexuality, young adulthood, and religiosity has come primarily from social science fields such as public health, and typically use quantitative methods in order to look at trends broadly. In so doing, studies sometimes found unexpected patterns—for example, that Catholic young adult women were more likely to “hook up” in college than women who had no religious tradition—that could not be easily explained with the data on hand. The theory of lived theology frames such moral behaviors complexly, that is, influenced by a constellation of values, beliefs, and pressures that make sense to individuals and which can best be understood through focused conversations with the moral agents themselves.

For this reason, I turned to the methods of qualitative research to both gather stories and make sense of them in context across a single population. This methodology responds to the call of Mary Daly and other feminist theologians who advocate

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<sup>1</sup> That is, a Catholic who only comes to church on Christmas and Easter.

developing theologies based on women openly speaking and truly hearing one another.<sup>2</sup> I recruited fifteen young adult women, ranging from 18-25 years old, all of whom had been raised Catholic and had something to say about their sexuality education experiences in that space. Their stories were diverse, but participants spoke at length about a pervasive sense of anxiety and isolation that ran through their limited educational experiences. They quickly learned that their parents seemed uncomfortable when they asked questions, and internalized the sense that sexuality was not to be spoken about openly. On the rare occasion that they asked sexuality questions to those parents or other teachers and authority figures, the answers they received were typically informational, truncated, and unsatisfactory, leaving them with little guidance about how sexuality and religion fit into their lives as they waded into romantic relationships in their teen years. Their parents, especially if they were raised around the time that the *Humanae Vitae* debate was nascent, may have experienced much of the same anxiety and discomfort around sex topics and had to decide how to start sexuality education for their own children without having a confident base of knowledge of their own. Many parents reportedly balked and left sexuality education to schools, which often taught biological realities and sometimes official Catholic doctrine, but rarely created a safe enough environment for conversational learning to occur. As much as these women wanted to learn about the subject of sexuality from their parents, years of silence or tense conversations often convinced them to keep quiet. A thematic analysis of the conversations with young women in this study highlights the extent to which these women internalized shame-

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<sup>2</sup> Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Revised edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993, 6.

fear-, and guilt-based lived theologies of sexuality. Silence and awkward conversations did not prevent such theologies from being implicitly taught from one generation to the next. The sad message from these interviews is that an suspicious Augustinian theology of the body and sexuality continues to be pervasively real and dominant among the women interviewed.

From the most traditional to the most happily ex-Catholic, these women experienced the topic of sex as fraught in their adolescent years. While many women used the leaving-home process of going to college to develop their own intentional theologies of sexuality, these were formed without the benefit of theologies that unambiguously affirmed the goodness of their bodies and their sexuality. College provided a new opportunity for conversational learning, even for novices who struggled to begin such conversations, but the fear did not cease here; these women were regularly dabbling in relationships, sexual encounters, and romance and had to make weighty decisions without significant moral guidance from their tradition. Most relied upon defensive moral intuitions arising from emotions and which had been shaped by the implicit curriculum of their community and from the teachings of the religious tradition of their youth. Fear- and shame-based moral intuitions might easily arise from simplistic moral associations that were taught in their risk-averse sex education programs, such as the idea that STIs or pregnancy were “punishment” for sexual intimacy outside of marriage. When these decisions intersected with systemic sexism, these women feared both being known as a virgin or as a woman who enjoyed sex; like Bridget, they feared the ramifications of having sex while being scared that their own strong sexual desires



would make it impossible to wait; like Valerie, they feared that it would be obvious that they did not know much about sex; like Willow, they feared that their appearance or identity would be seized upon as opportunity for harassment. Having a solid sense of how their professed values and religious identity should affect their sexual decisions might not have dispelled all these fears, but it could have gone a long way in building the confidence and self-knowledge needed to make choices deliberately. When a shame- and fear-based lived theology of sexuality intersects with systemic and culturally encouraged sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and classism, the fear and shame themselves may seem to have the tacit approval of the Church.

The sporadic and apprehensive religious education on sexuality that participants experienced bears no resemblance to the mutually vulnerable and emotionally attentive religious education advocated by experts like Thomas Groome. Instead of a conversational religious education that helped them grow in moral discernment and prepared them to make difficult and thoughtful decisions in their sexual lives, these women were more often handed unsophisticated moral pronouncements and truisms—“If you have to ask, then it’s too far,”—which did little to alleviate their curiosity about sex and relationships, or to shape their critical thinking. Eventually, such unsatisfying educational moments fostered a distrust between these women and Church teaching as it was manifested through their nervous parents and teachers.

The pervasive fear and anxiety that surrounds the topic of sex and sexuality in Catholic spheres appears to be obstructing opportunities for learning, but such emotions make sense given the recent history of Catholicism on the subject. It has been less than

100 years since the Church first acknowledged that sex had a sanctioned and sacred purpose beyond that of begetting children, and fewer years still since sexuality was officially recognized as a gift to human relationships. *Humanae Vitae* was not well received in the United States, and polls today indicate that a sizeable majority of Catholic women choose birth control methods that are not in line with Church teaching. The moral teachings of the Catholic Church around sex and sexuality, from premarital sex, homosexuality, and birth control to expectations of modest dress, are far afield from the U.S. culture in which these women were raised. With such a pronounced disconnect, religious pronouncements about sexuality can function as a weighted test of orthodoxy. This sense of sexuality as a litmus test for Catholicity has made waves in academic circles, such as when Margaret Farley's monograph on sexual ethics, *Just Love*, was denounced by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops for failing to uphold Church teaching on homosexuality and masturbation, or when Fr. Charles Curran was removed from his tenured position at the Catholic University of America for advocating moral theologies that allowed for goodness in premarital sex, masturbation, and homosexuality. While Catholic parents do not necessarily face the same professional risks for disagreeing with Church teaching on sex and sexuality, these adults may find themselves reluctant to share their honest views and beliefs amongst themselves, much less with their children, for fear of being marked as immoral or insufficiently Catholic.

The sense of sexuality being a test of orthodoxy also runs through the institutional church in its parish forms. Throughout the writing of this project, I was employed for two years as a full-time Director of Faith Formation in a Catholic parish, tasked with adult

education for my church where the bulk of religious education was aimed at children. Sexuality being a difficult subject, it was not addressed in our religious education classes, nor in most throughout the Archdiocese. We had a traveling speaker come in once a year to talk to select grade levels about body safety, but even these important and necessary talks had to be preceded by a permission slip, assurance that all parents could see the curriculum ahead of time, and the promise that all absences from that period would be excused. This is not to malign the tremendous responsibility that parents bear in ensuring that the material their child learns is healthy and conforms to their values, but to point out the significant bureaucratic hurdles any Catholic parish faces in addressing sexuality in a formal setting.

Adding to this difficulty, parish programs were subject to the approval of the Archbishop, at least in a roundabout way. A parish that decided to host, for example, a speaker on sexuality would be required to have that speaker vetted by the Archdiocesan offices. If investigation revealed evidence that the potential speaker might not fully uphold Church teaching on sexuality, whether personally or professionally, the parish would not be permitted to host them. Speakers on other topics, however, like prayer or spirituality, did not receive this kind of vetting. For those speakers who passed the scrutiny, it is unlikely that they would attempt to engage in conversational styles of learning with their listeners because to do so would risk introducing open space, which would by its nature be uncontrolled. If the discussion took a turn that some participants felt was inappropriate, a parish employee or priest risked being reported to the diocese. One can look at the discussion questions in the first chapter of *Theology of the Body* for

Teens, a chastity program that is permitted for use in Catholic religious education settings, for one example of how conversations about sex and sexuality are carefully delimited through slanted discussion questions: “Do you think that many teens look at the broken relationships around them and lose hope for their own futures?” “How has the sexual confusion of our society influenced your view of sex and love?”<sup>3</sup> One can deduce from this information that the institutional Catholic Church, especially in parish form, faces substantial hurdles when aiming to offer the kind of structural support and safe spaces that scaffold the kind of engagement with sexuality that we know from religious education would be most effective in the moral formation of youth and young adults.

When adults and church leaders fear judgment or professional repercussions for discussing sex and sexuality in religious spheres, the result is disaster for the formation of young people. Trite and cursory answers to questions about sexual morality, especially throughout the many years between puberty and the average age of marriage, disallow the active intellectual and spiritual engagement that helps youth connect their decisions to their moral beliefs and the teachings of their church community. This study provides strong evidence that the outcome of such perfunctory (or absent) educational moments around sex and sexuality is not a generation of young adults who accept and obey the moral rules they have been given; the outcome is a generation of young adults who disconnect their religiosity from their sexual values and behavior, and who sate their curiosity on the topic through secret learning, exploration, and experimentation. Even

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, Brian, Jason Evert, Colin MacIver, and Aimee MacIver. *Theology of the Body for Teens: Discovering God's Plan for Love and Life*. West Chester, Pa.: Ascension Press, 2011, 8.

those who try to turn to Church teaching to guide their sexual decision-making end up basing their choices on an in-the-moment felt sense of comfort or apprehension, in the same style as their more secular peers. Their lived theologies appear to be based on fear, guilt, and shame, and they navigate their sexual lives with these negative lenses.

These fear-based lived theologies of sexuality persist because the cycle relies on silence. These women were determined to teach their own daughters about sex and sexuality with greater openness, clarity, and trust than they themselves had been taught; however, it would be far simpler to fall back on the methods they know best and stay quiet even though they deeply understand that this is not in the best interest of their daughters. Their fear- and shame-based lived theologies are likely to take on a sense of urgency and truth when they are anxious and protective as mothers about their daughters' emerging sexual desire in adolescence. The risk that silence will perpetuate a fear of sexuality through another generation of young Catholic women is unmistakably real.

### **Limitations and Avenues for Future Research**

As noted in previous chapters, qualitative research comes with a few natural limitations, especially around sample size and generalizability. The fifteen women I interviewed, who mostly came from the same area of the country and represented six schools of higher education, are not representative of all young adult women who were raised Catholic in the United States. At the same time, qualitative research is not focused on generalizability. The stories of these women did resonate with one another and gave rise to several clear themes, especially that of anxiety and pressure in the sexual sphere. The “average” experience may not be the most important experience to understand if,

following the Catholic doctrine of preferential option for the poor, the outliers are those who experience the brunt of the damage. Willow's tales of feeling unsafe as a queer individual in a Catholic school setting may not represent a majority of experiences, but it tells us a great deal about how sexual minorities might be especially victimized by a particular sexual culture. Catholic theology tells us that God has an especial preference for this queer woman and those who, like her, are pushed to the margins by their community. She may not be typical, but she is important. If we take her story and the stories of all participants seriously as communicating something of worth about the state of sexuality education in the United States, we should be mindful of the following limitations and opportunities for other research projects.

While this study aimed to take an intersectional approach, the implications of racial and ethnic background on sexuality education and the teaching styles of parents were not deeply explored. In U.S. culture, racial stereotypes often include implications about sexual behavior; for example, the notion that Asian women are both exotic and sexually submissive, or that African-American women are more sexually aggressive and promiscuous. Only Lily, Willow, and Esther could have spoken authoritatively from those specific contexts, and of these three, only Lily had two parents who shared the same ethnic identity as one another and their daughter—Willow's father was Caucasian, and Esther had been adopted by Caucasian parents. Considering that the Catholic Church in the United States is becoming significantly more populated by Latino/a and Hispanic Catholics, this study is meaningfully limited in how it can comment on the intersection of an ethnic minority experience with sexuality education. Another qualitative study that

could better reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of the Catholic Church in the U.S. at this time might be more suited to explore the role of stereotyping and ethnic cultural influence that affects the way norms about sexuality are taught and learned. A similar approach could be taken to the characteristic of socioeconomic class, since lower income is stereotypically associated with early sexual debut and young pregnancy and single motherhood in the U.S. Such realities conflict with the middle-class narrative of risk aversion during lengthy preparation for future careers, the kind that Lily's mother loudly expressed when warning her daughter that a hickey was a portent jeopardizing Lily's future as a doctor, and her boyfriend's future as an engineer. A study that does not restrict recruitment to women with some college education might find more salient themes for the influence of socioeconomic class.

Another limitation of phenomenological research that affected this study has to do with relying on first-person explanations of the experiences that shaped participants' views about religiosity and sexuality. For example, these 15 women rarely mentioned the effects of media or a sexually expressive American culture on their beliefs or behaviors. At this stage of life, such reflexive exploration of passive cultural influences was not likely to arise unless specifically prompted, but certainly impacted the way these women understood femininity and sexual attractiveness and affected their assumptive narratives of romantic relationships. These women had likely internalized the media-supported message that college is a time of sexual exploration, whether or not they were engaging in such exploration themselves. Along the same lines, participants hinted at the conflict between what they understood to be practical athletic clothing and the apparent

immodesty of leggings, but never fully articulated how the mixed messages from media and parents and the maritally-oriented guidance of the Church generated their uncertainty of how to dress appropriately. Because this kind of qualitative research privileges the voices of participants, gaps may occur when the participants' stories fail to consider the less obvious shaping influences of culture and compare them to the more evident shaping influences of their Church.

A future study might directly ask participants about how they understand the scripts of dating, romance, and sex and how their ideas about relationships compare to those that they more typically see evidenced in media, thus priming them to speak to the push-pull influences of their U.S. media culture and their American Catholic culture, if they felt the two were meaningfully opposed. Additionally, expanding the sampling criteria to include a slightly older demographic—for example, 18-30 years old instead of 18-25—might increase the odds of recruiting participants who have a more experienced perspective on how their relationships have reflected or contradicted the norms of media and Catholic culture.

Finally, this study was limited in how effectively it can speak to particular Catholic communities. None of the participants had grown up in the same parish community, and all together they represented at least four Catholic dioceses, possibly as many as seven. The ways in which their communities encouraged or discouraged learning about sex and sexuality, and the related variables of bureaucracy and diocesan oversight, are here treated broadly instead of precisely. To reframe this study as a congregational study, or to conduct it again in a single partner diocese, could be more effective in terms



of finding specific, actionable deficits and opportunities to align sexuality education more closely with the best practices of Catholic religious education. A partner institution would also be better poised to alter their practices as needed, and would then have the benefit of solid data on which to base their religious education choices and to explain the impetus for those decisions to concerned parents, community members, or diocesan stakeholders. My brief example above about the relationship between the Archdiocese of Dubuque and my own parish illuminates the potential difficulties in finding a congregation ready to tackle this subject matter, but should a research site be found, the data and conclusions would be primed to effect change in the lives of children and youth in short order.

### **Implications for Church Stakeholders**

For the lay religious educator, the priest, the Catholic parent, and for anyone invested in the work of the Catholic Church in the United States, these findings validate the importance of starting conversations about sex and sexuality with girls and women in religious contexts. The fear- and shame-based lived theologies these women described were maintained by a culture of silence; therefore, the first step to creating a more positive educational environment for sex and sexuality is to stop being silent. Individual authority figures may not be able to singlehandedly overcome their learned anxiety around sexual topics and step into the role of confident sexuality educators, but they do not need to teach perfectly in order to create safe and fruitful opportunities for practicing moral reasoning. Speaking openly about sex and sexuality in a religious context, even awkwardly, begins to break the silence that makes fearful reactions more likely. Conversations need not have an explicit learning outcome in order to be valuable

because, by their nature, they encourage practice and confidence with the intersecting languages of sexuality, values, and religion.

Lay workers in parish and diocesan positions and priests have the most direct power to influence the culture of silence around sex and sexuality in their congregation, but they also take the greatest risks in directly confronting it. In this sphere, parents of involved children might have a greater impact by asking for speakers, discussion nights, or forums regarding sex and sexuality for themselves and for their children. This allows lay leaders and priests to open space for conversations as a pastoral response, possibly lessening risks to their employment situation by adding a degree of separation between themselves and the requested program. For their part, parish workers and priests can encourage and support parents in initiating discussions with their own children and by assuring them that these conversations are desired, even if they are imperfect or uncomfortable, and that their children will benefit from their openness.

For those who work with young adults directly, such as college professors or campus ministers, this study affirms the importance and significance of exploring topics like sex and sexuality in the college space. The participants who had the opportunity to take sexuality-related courses in college, even those far removed from their major area of study, often took them and regarded themselves as richer for it. Campus ministers have a unique chance to engage religiously attentive young adults dialogically in ways that might be drastically different from a “no questions asked” religious formation in sexuality. The findings presented here indicate that young adulthood indeed functions as a testing period for young adults as they integrate or renegotiate their beliefs, values, and

practices in both faith and sexuality; professionals who work with young adults could benefit from a greater awareness of this juncture.

### **Conclusion**

I emerge from the research and writing of this dissertation humbled and honored by the trust and hope that my fifteen participants offered me. I also find myself feeling much less alone. I remember entering the college world thinking that other Catholic women did not struggle with Church teachings on sex and sexuality the way I did—my conservative, academically-driven friends at my Catholic preparatory high school had seemed blissfully accepting of Church condemnations of homosexuality, the immoral status of birth control, the necessity of virgin marriages, and so on. For me, such acceptance was not so easy.

I heard echoes of my own narrative in nearly every interview I conducted, and relished the chance to be a compassionate presence for women who were trying to find words for topics they had rarely discussed. I took my role as researcher with utmost seriousness as I reflected on the similarities between these isolated interviews and the type of pastoral work I found myself doing in my parish position. It was a privilege to craft a safe space and a nonjudgmental presence for these women, knowing from my own life how much I would have benefitted from an opportunity like this one. I hope and believe that they walked out of those libraries, dorm rooms, coffee shops, and meeting rooms feeling affirmed in their journeys and valued for their experiences. I prize qualitative research for this moment of intervention, the chance to sit with another person

and reverence their stories. To me, these moments were sacred. I look forward to the opportunity to craft this sacred space again with future studies.

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