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# From Center to Margin: A Feminist Journey in the Roman Catholic Church

## A Socio-religious Approach to Autobiography

*SUSAN A. FARRELL*

### INTRODUCTION

Writing now from a perspective informed by a sociological framework, I see my life through what C. Wright Mills termed the “lens of the sociological imagination.” Our individual lives are interconnected and shaped by the social and economic forces of the times in which we live. And so my brief autobiographical story written for this book takes shape within a family and a society shaped by post-World War II America. For me, it is important to note the people in my life who helped shape what I call my feminist spirituality. My spirituality remains rooted in the Roman Catholic faith—a faith that is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). My Roman Catholic faith has been enriched by my feminist spirituality. Feminist theologians such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Beverly Wildung Harrison, Carter Heyward, Mary Hunt, Mary I. Buckley, and many others too numerous to mention here, have touched my life both through their writing and contact with them at conferences and in the Women-Church Convergence, a feminist Roman Catholic group of which I’ll speak of later. Blessedly, some of these women I can also speak of as friends.

As an unapologetic academic, I believe that ideas expressed in literature and research can nourish life as well as religious and theological writing.

The intellectual life for me is an integral part of my spirituality. But I also see teaching as activism, and this too is informed by my faith. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45), a German pastor in the Confessing Church who gave his life resisting Hitler, said that faith is not passive; it is activism. I agree and find my faith, my spirituality, my research, and my activist teaching intersecting in mutually supportive ways. Many would find a Roman Catholic faith and feminism to be contradictory, but neither I nor those Catholic feminists with whom I study and work agree with that view. For us, the values espoused by Jesus and the early Christian church are very much about justice, equality, and love. What does contradict these values is the patriarchy and structures of inequality in the institutional church.

As a sociologist, I research and analyze the organizational church; as a feminist Roman Catholic, I, with the women and men of Women-Church and other progressive Roman Catholic organizations, work for the transformation of a religious organization from a patriarchal structure to an egalitarian one. We are convinced by our faith that, although unseen as yet in its fullness, the church can become an inclusive institution. So we embody the activist faith of Bonhoeffer and stand on the prophetic margins of the church calling for and working for “new women, new church, new priestly ministry” (motto of the Women’s Ordination Conference).

### SPIRITUAL ROOTS AND RELIGIOUS TRAINING

My mother used to joke that she had bail-money-saved for me in-case I should ever be arrested in a civil rights demonstration. I was never arrested, and the bail money was not needed. But the activist Roman Catholic religious order I entered in 1967, the Daughters of Wisdom, seemed a natural continuation of my parents’ own commitment to social justice. Members of the NAACP, my parents believed strongly in equality and raised their children with an awareness of the terrible racial injustices in America. Their belief in equality grew out of their belief in American democracy and their Roman Catholicism. My father, though, was a convert from Presbyterianism. Perhaps this was why I was drawn to Bonhoeffer’s life and theology as filtered through my father’s very different take on Catholicism in contrast to my mother, who was an Irish-German American cradle Catholic. My father was always questioning Roman Catholicism, and so he readily accepted and engaged in the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. Dad had the kind of critical analytic mind that we sociologists try so hard to instill in our students. He handed this sociological perspective on to me before I even knew what sociology was. My spiritual journey combines both the traditionalism of my mother and the somewhat unorthodox views of my father with their deep sense of social justice. This commitment to social justice was deepened by my experience with the Daughters of Wisdom.

Although I was only in the Daughters of Wisdom for a scant two years, the experience profoundly shaped the rest of my life. Founded in France in 1704 by Saint Louis Marie De Monfort and Blessed Marie Louise Trichet, the Daughters of Wisdom believed they had a mission to educate young people and care for the sick. Their work was primarily to the poor, although later it was extended to the growing middle classes of Canada, the United States, and to the French colonies in Haiti and Africa. I went to high school at Our Lady of Wisdom Academy in Ozone Park, Queens, New York, where the sisters taught. After my four years of high school with them, I decided to enter the order. Ever since I could remember, I had wanted to be a nun. I wanted to be one of those women dedicated to Christ and the church, and I wanted to teach. Those were my two ambitions in life.

It was a life in some ways similar to that of a young woman depicted in a semi-autobiographical story by Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), an existentialist philosopher, feminist, and friend and lover of Jean-Paul Sartre. De Beauvoir is best known for the feminist classic *The Second Sex* (1949). In *When Things of the Spirit Come First* (1979) she describes a pious childhood filled with longing for mystical experiences. Mine was similar, although much later, in the 1950s. I wanted to and aimed to be a good Catholic girl with a life filled with all the small pieties taught to us by the nuns. I went to Catholic grammar and high school. I went frequently to weekday mass as well as Sunday mass, often accompanying my grandmother in the wee hours of the morning, especially during Lent. We also went to the Stations of the Cross on Fridays in that penitential season and to Benediction throughout the rest of the year. I had prayer books and statues of my favorite saints in my bedroom and even was the proud possessor of a holy-card collection. Much of this was shared with my cousin, who would later go on to become a priest. He has remained in the priesthood, a conservative and truly pastoral man. My journey has gone in a different direction although still profoundly shaped by these early socialization patterns.

From such beginnings, with a good dose of social justice concerns added, I emerged from the convent in 1970 unsure of what I wanted to do. I had pinned all my desires on living a life of service to God, of teaching in that service. But both the novice mistress and I decided that this was not the life for me. I had no problem with either poverty or chastity, but obedience was not a strong character trait. I questioned too much and even in those more liberal times for religious orders, obedience was still important in the formation of young nuns.

Now what? Vatican II was just over, and I decided to take up the liberal causes of the church and society. I became immersed in the local parish life in which my parents were also active. Active involvement in the life of the church was now possible for lay people. Beyond decorating altars and belonging to the Holy Name Society, lay people could become lectors, eucharistic ministers, and parish leaders. My father was president of the parish council and took the new opportunities opened to him by Vatican II very

seriously. From his perspective, this was simply Catholics coming around to the way Protestants did things. I happily joined the committee on liturgy, hoping to bring all the knowledge gained from my convent education to my parish, which was still hesitant about church reforms.

But the parish went slowly, too slowly for someone who was already receiving communion in the hand and under two species (bread and wine) in the convent. As I headed back to college, I was slowly becoming disillusioned with parish life. Universities in 1969 and 1970 were still the epicenters of the antiwar movement, and I joined in with eagerness and determination. I attended Queens College of the City University of New York. Social justice issues were at the top of the required reading lists in almost all courses. May 1970 brought the tragedies of Kent State and Jackson State universities. As with many others in my generation, Vietnam, the peace movement, and the student movement intersected with the civil rights movement to raise consciousness and conscience about injustices in the United States and the world. It would require one more crucial event in my life to move me into yet another social justice movement: meeting the man who would become my life's partner. My spiritual life was and is more complete because of our relationship. We talked about having children and what our life would be like after we had them. He remarked that of course I'd finish school and go out to work. My mother had never worked outside the home once she had children. But Edward's mother had, and that's the example with which he grew up. I spent some time thinking about this as I raised two small children.

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### TOWARD A FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY

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We and a few close friends attended weekly mass at St. John's, my husband's alma mater. It was a welcoming place for children and adults seeking a more intimate liturgical and worship community than could be had in many parishes even after Vatican II. At Edward's suggestion I enrolled for a summer institute at St. John's University in Queens. I was still interested in religious and theological issues. This institute would turn out to be the first feminist theological conference in the United States.

That conference created in me a still developing feminist consciousness and conscience which, for me, encompass and support all other social justice causes. Hearing feminist theologians and ethicists such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Mary Buckley, Carter Heyward, and Beverly Harrison excited and engaged me in another social movement for change. I began reading everything these women and others were writing. Rosemary Radford Ruether's *New Woman/New Earth* (1975), along with *Womanspirit Rising*, edited by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979), now feminist theological classics, then served to open up questions and critiques of patriarchal religion.

Feminism is now the heart and soul of my spiritual life, but of itself, feminism did not move me from the Catholic Church. I decided to return to college for a master's degree in theology, still determined to work in the

church, still dreaming of service to the church. One of my professors, Dr. Mary Buckley, who had organized that first feminist theology conference, expressed some concern about my choice of careers. She wanted to know what my husband did for a living. Did he too work for the church in some capacity? "No," I answered. "Good," she replied. "Someone has to have a real job." Church-related careers, now, as ever, do not pay well, either for women or men although men are better paid, as in all economic sectors.

I soon had a job teaching religious studies to high school students in a Catholic high school in Queens, New York. My favorite course was "Women in the World," which I taught to the senior girls. My second-favorite course was a course on moral issues for the juniors. Because of my involvement with this course, I was invited to be a member of the Northeast Feminist Ethics Consultation by Dr. Beverly Harrison, then a professor of Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary. She had been a friend since the second summer institute at St. John's University in 1980, where she gave a lecture on family and feminism. Involvement with the Feminist Ethicists Consultation laid the groundwork for my continued work in the area of sexual ethics and feminism. This interest in feminism, religion, and sexual ethics would become the basis for my doctoral dissertation as well.

### MOVING TOWARD THE MARGINS

My commitment to social justice was tested in 1983 when my union went on strike. The Lay Faculty Union was a small unit that had organized the teachers at several Catholic high schools in Brooklyn and Queens. My high school, St. John's Preparatory High School, was formerly a diocesan high school in Brooklyn, meaning that it was run by the diocese for students from the geographical area in which it was located, in this case, Astoria, Queens. But at this time dioceses all over the United States were divesting their Catholic schools and setting them up as independent regional high schools with Catholic lay boards comprised of parents and local business people. St. John's Prep, formerly Mater Christi, went a slightly different route. Close to St. John's University in Queens, the schools decided to work together, with the prep becoming a feeder school for the university. This would benefit both the university and the high school. The high school would gain the prestige of being connected with the university and the university could more easily recruit students from the local area.

There was, however, one problem. Several years earlier, St. John's University had broken its union through a long and difficult strike. If our small union succeeded in negotiating a good contract, long-time high-school faculty with tenure would be making more than the college professors. The board, composed of some members of the university and some local business people, did not want to give those raises, nor did it want a union at the high school. In addition, the board demanded that pregnant women resign their faculty positions. Although labor law states that pregnant women cannot be

fired or laid off, this in essence was what the board wanted to do. Strange and contradictory actions from a school affiliated with a religion that believes a woman's ultimate vocation is to marry and bear children, as Pope John Paul II so clearly stated in his encyclical letter "On the Dignity and Vocation of Women" (*Dignitatis mulieris*, 1988).

Although this union-busting activity flew in the face of Catholic social justice teaching (see encyclicals by Leo XIII and John Paul II), the board decided to break the union. Those of us on strike were replaced with scabs. I was devastated. One of the board members was chaplain at St. John's University. We attended this worship community every Sunday. My children received first communion there. My husband had received his BA from the university. I had my MA in theology from St. John's. We taught Sunday school there, and I was a eucharistic minister for the community. I gave out communion side by side with this board member, a Vincentian priest, along with other Vincentians who also taught my theology classes as well as ministered in that community. When I asked him to intervene in this dispute, his reply was simply this: "Susan, I know that you are a good Catholic woman, but there is nothing I can do." This priest, as well as others in that community, would often participate in grape and lettuce boycotts for the farm workers, but when it came to injustice in his own backyard, he couldn't or wouldn't see it.

My faith was strongly connected to a sense of justice and equality. Starting with those early commitments to civil rights and then feminism, I really could not believe in a church that treated people unjustly. This union contract dispute was connected with feminism, because of the demand that pregnant women must resign their teaching positions or be laid off. How could an organization identified with Roman Catholicism punish women for being pregnant? I came to understand that this church to which I belonged was testing my faith. For my faith to survive, I had to remove myself from the organizational structure. My family and I left the St. John's University Sunday Community. We could not worship with people whose sense of social justice disappeared with the bottom line. I also no longer had a job. So, at my husband's suggestion, I went back to school. Disillusioned with Catholic theological teaching and seeing its real limitations for women, I returned to school for women's studies. Not being able to travel beyond the New York area, I applied to the City University of New York's graduate school, where I would major in sociology and take a certificate in women's studies.

#### RESEARCH: FEMINISM, WOMEN-CHURCH, AND THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

Traditionally, graduate students are advised to do their dissertations on subjects with which they are familiar. I was no different. My advisors knew of my background in Roman Catholicism and interest in religion. They encouraged me to do research on women in the Roman Catholic Church. My

work did provoke some discussion among the members of my dissertation committee. The three women who constituted this committee were all Jewish, each one representing a place along the continuum of believing and belonging. In fact, one felt the dissertation might be irrelevant in the near future, because any feminist woman would finally come to her senses and leave such a patriarchal institution. I disagreed, and the four of us explored why feminists would remain believing in and belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. Since I was already active in the Women's Ordination Conference (WOC) and some other feminist Catholic groups, I decided to study Women-Church. Women-Church is not one organization but a coalition of autonomous feminist groups and organizations rooted in the Roman Catholic Church and tradition. The group's formal name is the Women-Church Convergence. Its primary goal is the ordination of women as full Roman Catholic priests with the rights to move up the church hierarchy and to participate in church governance, including at the Vatican.

The first meeting was held in Chicago in 1983 with fifteen hundred people in attendance. Originally a movement with great support among religious communities, laywomen are now the majority. The organization is also ecumenical and has grown in numbers and scope. The organization consists of approximately thirty-five groups. Some of these groups are quite large, for example, the WOC and several religious orders with hundreds of members. Groups such as the Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (commonly called WATER) are medium-sized organizations operating on a local level but with international ties to similar groups in Latin America and Europe.

Other participating organizations include Catholics for a Free Choice, with international partners in Latin America and Europe. This organization was founded to promote procreative choice for Catholic women and men. Other members are small parish groups of women or grassroots Women-Church groups from particular geographical locations. Selected members of each of these groups serve on the steering committee of the Women-Church Convergence. If an individual is a member of any of these organizations, that person is also a member of Women-Church. These are women who do not want to leave the church but are determined to change the church.

Women-Church has made connections with Catholic social justice groups such as Call to Action (a Catholic lay group whose aim is to democratize the church), and the Center for Concern and the Quixote Center (which focus on Catholic concerns over U.S. involvement in Central and South America linking religious liberation movements with political liberation). Links have also been forged with CORPUS (an organization that supports married priests). Members of DIGNITY (an organization of gay and lesbian Catholics) also participate in Women-Church. Most important, many religious orders remain active both through participation and by making resources available for Women-Church. Association with Las Hermanas (a Catholic Hispanic women's group) extends the coalition beyond U.S. borders. Women-Church Convergence members support and participate in Women's Ordination



Worldwide (WOW), a global network of organizations that support the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church.

Women-Church, then, is a social movement seeking to change church ideology. It presents an alternative model for being church as it challenges the present institutional arrangements that exclude women as well as laymen from positions of authority. The Women-Church Convergence sees itself as "raising a feminist voice and committed to an *ekklesia* [church] of women which is participative, egalitarian and self-governing." It is working "to eradicate patriarchy, especially sexism and racism, in order to transform church and society" (Women-Church Convergence website).

I've been studying Women-Church now for twenty years as an "insider-outsider" in Robert K. Merton's sense of the researcher who studies what he or she is a part of, otherwise known as a "participant-observer" (Merton 1972). I'm a member of some of the organizations that make up the Women-Church Convergence, and the convergence steering committee has allowed me to sit in on its board meetings for my research. In my articles and papers I have analyzed Women-Church as it has grown and changed strategies for transforming the Roman Catholic Church. I have interviewed leaders and members of Women-Church to find out how feminist Roman Catholic women live with the tension between their beliefs and the teachings of the official church. I also have analyzed the publications of Women-Church and the organization's members as a way of comparing and contrasting their beliefs and practices with official church teaching. The contrast is most pronounced on two issues: the ordination of women and sexual issues, notably abortion, contraception, premarital sex, and homosexuality.

Women-Church stands in the liberal tradition of reform movements in the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout the church's history there has been a tension between liberal and conservative groups. In the aftermath of Vatican II two distinct groups emerged in a struggle for power and authority in the church. Conservatives wanted a return to the pre-Vatican II church with power consolidated in the clergy and the Curia. Liberals wanted to continue Vatican II reforms and shift power to the laity and the local churches. This struggle mirrors the conflicts experienced in almost all contemporary religious traditions.

The last few decades have seen a rise in religious fundamentalism and a corresponding resistance and challenge by liberals and modernists. Women-Church is a case study in how a liberal group both challenges traditional religious authority and counters conservative movements within its own tradition and the world at large. Aligned with the secular women's movement, Women-Church asserts the rights of women to participate fully in all social institutions. It opposes any group that is attempting to diminish those rights already won, such as procreative choice, and continues to work for the transformation of the church and other institutions that do not yet grant full rights to women. In light of the conflict between Women-Church beliefs and official church teachings, I've concluded that Women-Church is creating an

oppositional discourse with the aim of constructing a new understanding of gender and sexual ethics in the church.

Interviews with members of Women-Church support this conclusion. Over and over, these women insist that they do not and will not leave the church—meaning the people of God. They often remind me that the church is not the institution but a community of believers. They quote Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*:

Where they have not yet won it, women claim for themselves an equity with men before the law and in fact. . . . With respect to the fundamental rights of the person, every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language, or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God's intent. (GS, nos. 9, 29)

Women and men I've interviewed tell me that the church should practice what it has declared in this document; it should treat women equally, which, for them, means ordaining women.

One interviewee and scholar who has written on women's ordination, Mary Buckley, often stated that if women cannot be ordained, then this means that they are not fully redeemed either. She bases this on the belief that baptism, for Roman Catholics, is the sacrament that initiates and allows the reception of the other six sacraments: Eucharist, reconciliation, confirmation, matrimony, the sacrament for the sick and dying, and holy orders. But women who are baptized still cannot be ordained. Buckley concludes that women's baptism must somehow be incomplete or suspect. In fact, she reminded me that the Council of Trent (1545–63) was not totally sure that women had souls, so their redemption was indeed questionable. Regardless of what doubts male leadership of the church may have about women, the women of Women-Church continue to say that "it's our church, too," and they have no intentions of leaving.

### THE FUTURE OF WOMEN-CHURCH

I've expanded my interviews to include young Catholic adults as well as veterans of the feminist movement in the church. To the question, Why remain in the church, especially when so many young people are either nonreligious or uncommitted to any organized religion or tend to be more conservative? all agreed with one young woman's statement: "If I'm not there, who will be the liberal voice in the church?" This is a very similar response to other feminists in the church of whom I've asked the same question. Further, all these young people also believe in the Vatican II message that they are church. They heard this message loud and clear through their socialization into this post-Vatican II church despite reactionary voices from the hierarchy.

Their generational identity came through when another young woman voiced concern over “the slowness of the older generation,” as she put it, “to confront the bishops.” “Enough talking,” she said, “let’s just get on with it.” Another young woman also lamented the constant rehashing of old conflicts either with the hierarchy or within the feminist groups themselves. She said that she heard enough about what happened in WOC or the Women-Church Convergence twenty years ago. Let it go and move forward. “New leadership is needed and it’s time for older members to let go and for younger people to move up,” she said.

There seems to be both an impatience to get on with the feminist movement and yet a search for strategies that have yet to be developed. Some of the younger members felt that older leaders and members couldn’t quite let go because they did not trust the younger members with the movement and the organization. This seemed to be echoed in both the Women-Church organizations and DIGNITY. One thing that came across to me most clearly in these interviews and focus groups is that if these feminist and progressive organizations don’t start making room for and inviting young women and men into leadership positions, these young adults will find the organizations increasingly irrelevant to them and to the world in which they live.

### CONCLUSION: LIFE ON THE MARGINS

These feminist organizations and their members live, as I do, on the margins of the Roman Catholicism. But many feel that it is their faith that gives them the strength to use the margin as a prophetic stance. If they leave completely, as the radical post-Christian feminist Mary Daly and countless others have, then the institution does not have to take them seriously. If they stay, albeit on the margins, they remain engaged in the discourse of challenge and transformation. Life on the margins is not easy, and it is filled with tension. One of the leaders of a Women-Church organization said that she felt that “it’s not a question of ‘if’ I leave but ‘when.’ But I’ll stay at least until you’ve finished your book.”

And for the moment, that is where I stand, too. My research and my faith life intersect here as I work with Women-Church to create what is yet unseen but hoped for: a church in which “there is no longer Jew and Greek, there is no longer slave and free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).