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The Complexities of Being a Pro-Choice Catholic: How Religion and Politics Collide

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The Complexities of Being a Pro-Choice Catholic: How Religion and Politics Collide

The separation of church and state has been indicated in the United States Constitution since the ratification of the Bill of Rights in 1791. Ideally, this was intended to ensure that no one religion would receive privilege over another in the political arena, and that citizens have the freedom to practice their own faith without fear of persecution. In contemporary United States, religion has become a powerful influence in modern day politics and the line distinguishing church from state has become hazy. This is especially prevalent in the realm of reproductive rights. The fight for access to reproductive healthcare, such as contraception and safe, legal abortions, become more combative, as proven by the “pro-life” vs. “pro-choice” dichotomy. The implication that being pro-choice means you do not believe in the sanctity of life, while being pro-life means that you do not believe women should have control of their own bodies, increasingly alienates more and more people who are able to see the complexities surrounding abortion. Unfortunately, it is not just United States citizens that are affected by changes in policies surrounding family planning; it is also women in developing countries who have even less access to these services than we do. This paper addresses the complexities that come with the Catholic Church participating in politics, in addition to examining the way Catholicism and conflicting ideologies surrounding female reproductive health affect the United States and other cultures worldwide.

Personal Experience

I was raised Roman Catholic, attended Sunday school every week for a decade, and was confirmed in April, 2011. I still consider myself a practicing Catholic and try to attend mass every week. I struggled with my faith for a long time in high school and early years of college. The conflict began in my seventh or eighth year of Sunday school when the church I originally attended had to shut down, prompting many families in our congregation including mine, to start attending a different Catholic church in our town. For the first time, I began to butt heads with some of my Sunday school teachers and feel increasingly frustrated with the way the faith was being presented to me. My first recollection of “rebellious” against my faith was arguing with one of my Sunday school teachers about whether people who commit suicide go to Hell. She very adamantly asserted that while tragic, it was a selfish act and taking a life is the ultimate sin. I expressed that I felt like she did not seem to really understand the complexities of what she was stating or how isolating depression can be, even for the most devout of Catholics. The class ended without either of us budging on our positions, and it left me feeling incredibly confused and lost. The God I felt I knew and loved could never

punish someone experiencing that level of pain. My teacher made it clear that this is what Catholicism preaches; therefore, this is what I was expected to believe. I began to wonder where I fit into a faith that did not seem to be open to understanding varying degrees of mental health on an individual level.

While my increasing frustration with church school leaders is what started my struggle with Catholicism, it was not what caused my ultimate conflict. It is no secret that the Catholic Church takes one of the most aggressive stances against access to artificial birth control and abortion. As I began to identify as pro-choice, I felt I needed to step away from my faith. The Catholic doctrine makes it clear that contraception and abortion are unacceptable, despite the fact that the Bible does not directly prohibit either (Blackburn, 2011). In the New Testament, Jesus introduces the Law of Love and says, “There is no commandment greater than these” (Mark 12: 31). It states, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12: 30-31). The basis of the Catholic faith is rooted in these words, and beyond it, the Bible is written to allow for growth within a changing society, something that has allowed it to

be as influential today as when it was written. Unfortunately, many current religious leaders do not interpret the flexibility of the Bible in this way. This was not always the case. Saint Antoninus, archbishop of Florence in the fifteenth century, openly defended the use of early abortion in circumstances where the mother's life was in danger (Maguire, 2001). Pope Adrian VI canonized him in 1523. This shows that there is no one Catholic view on abortion; there have always been degrees of variation (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2009). One can practice faith and still recognize the complexities of reproductive justice. It is in trying to stay true to both sides of one's identity where we find blurred lines.

The women in my life guided and influenced my faith greatly. I know several strong, intelligent, Catholic women for whom I have immeasurable amounts of love and respect. I understand why some feel issues such as abortion are undeniably wrong, because I once felt this way too. That said, these women allowed me to create my own opinion, and while we may not see eye-to-eye, we still feel connected in faith. This made it clear to me that it is not the conservative views of reproductive health that I struggle with, but the way it was thrust upon me by

certain authority figures in the church, and the way it is forced upon people who have no ties to the Catholic Church. Daniel C. Maguire (2001), a former Catholic priest and current ethics professor at Marquette University, has been a longtime activist for women's reproductive rights. In his book about abortion and religion, he touches on the complexities that come with Catholicism in politics:

For one thing, the Catholic Church is the only world religion with a seat in the United Nations. From that seat, the Vatican has been active in promoting the most restrictive Catholic view on family planning, although more liberating Catholic views exist (p. 31).

By participating in the United Nations, the Church is not only saying that there is only one correct Catholic way to view reproductive rights, but also pushing to restrict others' access to family planning. I would argue that many people with no ties to the congregation feel the influence and pressure of Catholic views on reproductive health and sexuality.

In the past few years, I have been able to come back to my faith, finding ways to balance my liberal beliefs with the scripture. I now realize the core of Catholicism and teachings of the Bible do not have to be at odds with the political and social beliefs I hold. That

being said, it does not come without internal conflict, as I know that my Church is still immensely conservative. While I love the basic values and beliefs of the Church, I grow increasingly more impatient with its political influences. As Catholics, our morals and beliefs are shaped with substantial influence from our own faith, something that could be said of someone from any religion or perhaps, a lack thereof. How can we spread God's message of love, kindness, and acceptance if we are simultaneously condemning thousands of people for believing something different?

About Catholicism

Catholicism is a branch of Christianity deeply rooted in tradition with a tendency to fight against changing society instead of embracing it. Not all Christian denominations struggle quite as much with change. The United Presbyterian Church and the American Baptist Convention came out in support of birth control in the late 1950s (Goldberg, 2010). According to Goldberg (2010), several other prominent denominations also came together to acknowledge their shortcomings when it came to contraception: "Christian thought has, especially in the area of the family and its relationships, often clung to tradition

without taking into account new knowledge" (p. 49). Needless to say, the Catholic Church was not one of them. As early as the 1960s, the Pope announced that artificial contraception for any reason was "intrinsically evil" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, para. 2366-2372). Because of the emphasis on authority and tradition in Catholic faith, no prominent religious leader since then has reversed their stance on contraception, despite an open and avid desire from many Catholics to do so (Ruether, 2006). In fact, only about 15% of Catholics in the United States have stated that they believe the use of contraception is morally wrong (Ruether, 2006). Despite this, conservative Catholics have led the crusade against contraception and those who support it for decades.

Perhaps the most controversial argument surrounding reproductive freedoms is abortion rights. Some denominations of Christianity, such as the Episcopal and Presbyterian churches, allow it in circumstances of incest, rape, or if the mothers' life is in danger (Liu, 2013). The Catholic Church is known to offer none of these exceptions and openly denounces abortion for any reason (Liu, 2013). According to the Church, women should not only abstain from using artificial birth control, but they should

also under no circumstances terminate an unwanted pregnancy (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1993, para. 2373-2379).⁵

Lacking from this conversation is the idea that most women seeking abortions actually take into account their morals and beliefs and still feel that abortion is their only option. Ann Furedi (2016) lays this out very simply in her book, *The Moral Case for Abortion*, stating, “That abortion can be a woman’s moral preference and the outcome of a personal and private choice, which she should be free to make for herself, is rarely considered and even more rarely stated” (p.6). If we truly want to eradicate abortion, the first step is looking at the ways society approaches sex and motherhood. Catholics are taught not to judge, but rather, to help and show kindness to others, something it seems is often forgotten when religion is brought into the political arena. Rickie Solinger’s (2013), *Reproductive Politics: What Everyone Needs to Know*, devotes an entire chapter to discussing the intersections of religion and reproduction with a chapter section that focuses solely on the Catechism.

⁵ See also *This is the Faith: A Complete Explanation of the Catholic Faith* (2002) by Canon Francis Ripley.

There are a few groups who identify as Catholic and support women’s reproductive freedoms, such as Catholics for Choice (CFC). In their mission statement they say, “We are part of the great majority who believes that Catholic teachings on conscience mean that every individual must follow his or her own conscience – and respect others’ right to do the same” (Catholics for Choice, n.d., para.1). CFC does not pretend to speak for the Vatican, but instead, shows there can be diversity in the way Catholics view issues such as reproductive freedoms, abortion, sexuality, etc. The Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) has openly denounced this group and what they stand for (Quindlen, 1993). They made it clear they do not believe CFC can be considered “an authentic Catholic organization” and continue on in their statement to say, “In fact, the group’s activity is directed to rejection and distortion of Catholic teaching about the respect and protection due to defenseless unborn human life” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000). Simply put, the NCCB believes that because the CFC identifies as pro-choice, they cannot possibly call themselves Catholic. Apart from being an intolerant response, it shows that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is

unwilling to allow outspoken differences of opinion when it comes to abortion. It is also prudent to note that women are not allowed to become bishops or priests, therefore, the group condemning this behavior is made up exclusively of men.

A Global Perspective

Religion plays an influential role all around the world. The Catholic faith in particular is practiced in all corners of the globe. Because of cultural differences, the ways that religion and politics interact can be different from how the two intersect here in the United States. In many ways, even with the disparities of abortion access and regulation on a state to state-wide⁶ level in the U.S., an argument can be made that many American women still have opportunities to decide for themselves what they believe is best for their own bodies. Unfortunately, this is just not the case around the world. Goldberg (2010) emphasizes:

For people living in the world's richest developed countries, it can be hard to grasp just how terribly women are treated in much of the world. Sexism and

⁶ For more information on women's access to reproductive health services across the United States and globally, see The Guttmacher Institute, <https://www.guttmacher.org>

violence exist everywhere, but political correctness or condescending romanticism about exotic others should not obscure the fact that women in the third world often have it much, much worse (p. 9).

As a privileged woman living in the United States, I have the freedom to express a difference of opinion from my faith, without worry of serious retribution. However, in 2006, the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines decided they would withhold sacraments (baptisms, communions, confirmations, weddings and last rights) from anyone who used or supported contraception (Ruether, 2006). This is not an isolated incident; most Catholic hospitals globally are not allowed to carry emergency contraception. In developing countries, this is an alarming issue because the Catholic hospital could likely be the only hospital in the area (Ruether, 2006). As Goldberg (2010) said, "Overwhelming abuse and devaluation of women, especially in poor countries, is the biggest human rights crisis in the world today" (p.11). Instead of religion liberating and supporting women, it is inadvertently oppressing them and their agency.

When it comes to rape victims, the Church is no less forceful in their stance against abortion. In Nicaragua, a

nine-year-old girl, Rosita, was raped and impregnated by her stepfather (Goldberg, 2010). The Catholic Church was very much involved in trying to ensure she did not receive an abortion, taking up the argument that this baby was a blessing from heaven (Goldberg, 2010). This is an opinion often vocalized by the Catholic Church to counter the argument that abortion is allowed in cases of rape. Rosita's case was no different. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, "Human life is sacred" (para. 2258), but by putting an emphasis on the life of the fetus over the life of Rosita, what are we saying about Rosita's life? Is the life of a nine-year-old girl less sacred than that of her fetus? Does it truly matter that she can physically carry a healthy child to term if it comes as a steep cost to her emotional wellbeing? In addition to all of this, the conversation was almost entirely focused around her potential abortion, rather than outrage at the abuse she had experienced. As a Catholic, I do not believe we can boast about valuing life while simultaneously showing a disregard for the lives of women who may choose to have an abortion.

Maguire (2009) discusses another example similar to the story of Rosita, telling the story of a Catholic doctor who had to perform an emergency

abortion in order to save a pregnant woman's life. The story was brought to Father Bernard Haring, a Redemptorist Moral Theologian, after a priest told the doctor that he made the wrong choice. Father Haring disagreed with the doctor on the stance that both the fetus and the mother would have died had the surgery not been performed. Maguire (2009) wrote, "Fr. Haring asked: by what thinking could the fetus have such a right to life that it could kill both itself and the woman by exercising it? Such rights, he said, do not exist" (para.12). By insinuating that the life of the fetus is more important than that of the woman, we are diminishing her worth. Women are not just incubators for creating children; they are living, breathing humans. Susan Bordo's (2003) work looks at how defining women by their reproductive capacity can negate their contributions to society beyond reproduction. Yes, with pregnancy comes responsibility, but it should not be at the expense of a woman's life.

Religion in U.S. Politics

Despite efforts from conservative Catholics, not all Catholic politician's platforms adhere to the Church's teachings. Democratic politicians such as Nancy Pelosi and Joe Biden are both open about their Catholic faith and the

fact that they support access to contraception and access to safe and legal abortions. Biden has stated that he does believe life starts at conception; however, he doesn't believe he has the right to impose that view on someone else. This is a noteworthy example of how faith can shape your morals and values for your own life without hindering the recognition of alternative faiths and belief systems unique to different social and religious groups (Berenson, 2015). Pelosi received abundant backlash from several bishops after stating in an interview that in traditional Catholic teaching, life begins at three or four months of pregnancy rather than the time of conception. Maguire (2009) supported Pelosi, explaining that even God allowed some "evils" in cases where greater evils would arise as a result. He articulates this well saying:

Today a Catholic legislator who thinks all abortions are evil could still vote to sustain its legality since banning legal abortion leads to illegal abortions with a high loss of life, especially for poor women. History proves that criminalizing abortion does not decrease the number of abortion but does increase morbidity and mortality. (Maguire, 2009, para.4)

Reducing abortion to a question on when life begins is reducing the conversation entirely.

Catholics who support the right to choice are simply saying yes, abortion is tragic, but it is also more complicated than the "pro-life" vs. "pro-choice" dichotomy. Jeannie Ludlow's (2008) article "Sometimes It's a Child and a Choice: Toward an Embodied Abortion Praxis," focuses on how neither side of the abortion argument acknowledges the concerns of the other. Ludlow (2008) points out that while, "...much feminist discourse around abortion emphasized its benefits to the exclusion of its complexities," adversely, there should be "...consideration of both fetus and woman, not fetus at the expense of woman" (p. 30). The labels "pro-life" and "pro-choice" limit the conversation surrounding abortion, creating a "them vs. us" atmosphere. This only leads to furthering the battle lines between the two and leaving many people unsure where they stand. In overlooking the complexities of abortion, not only are we preventing important conversations, but we are failing women.

This conversation is not limited to democratic political leaders. Republican and Catholic George Pataki, who served as Governor of New York, was pro-capital punishment and pro-choice, two issues the Catholic Church strongly opposes. In 2013 there were six Catholic judges on the Supreme Court:

John Roberts, Samuel Alito, Anthony Kennedy, Antonin Scalia, Sonia Sotomayor and Clarence Thomas (Berenson, 2015). Two years later in 2015, the court ruled 5-4 that same-sex marriage is legal in every state, something the Catholic Church has advocated against. Justices Kennedy and Sotomayor both fell in the majority, showing that religion does not always dictate political decision (Berman, 2015). Social and political views are personal to everyone; it is possible to maintain your faith while also supporting issues such as same-sex marriage or a woman's right to her reproductive health.

Conclusion

I do not want to pretend to have all answers; reproductive issues such as abortion are incredibly complex. There is no black and white solution to this. In a way, it is easy for me to assert that the Church should not be participating politically, but what about all the good that they do alongside this? They advocate for the poor and homeless and for peace instead of war. This care and compassion for the struggling is part of the core of Catholic faith. So why is it that when it comes to reproductive health, the Church's political agenda can feel like an attack to many women? As I struggled with this question,

someone close to me recently laid it out very simply. She said, "The Church's position in the case of refugees or the poor is about dignity, but in the case of abortion is about preserving 'life' even at the expense of a women's dignity. It strips women – never men – of their ability to exercise moral judgment" (S. Smith⁷, personal communication, April 24, 2017). It is as if we do not trust women to know what is best for themselves or their fetus. This need to control women's fertility feels like a desire to control women themselves, without regard for their dignity or needs.

There is not one "Catholic view" on contraception and abortion; it varies from person to person. Many Catholics support individual choice and many do not. Neither point of view makes the other a bad Catholic. This is obvious in my life when it comes to all the women who have supported me in my faith. Our opinions on issues of reproductive nature vary from liberal to conservative, but the love and respect for each other remains. We are all Catholic and connected by essence of our faith; to love and show kindness to others. When the Church tries to enforce conservative views as the only Catholic way to practice, it is not doing justice to

⁷ Pseudonym

the diversity of life and its own congregation.

There is no denying that the physical and emotional consequences of religious influence in politics are felt all around the world in varying degrees. There are countless arguments as to why the Catholic Church as an institution should not be participating

in politics but perhaps the most important one of all is that it should be focused on spreading God's message of love and acceptance. It is important to remember how to respect others and show compassion for all kinds of people, not just the ones who fit a very specific and increasingly unrealistic prototype.

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