

Catholic Anthropology beyond Compulsory Sexuality

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Abstract: Drawing from asexual experience and theory, this essay demonstrates how many Catholic magisterial and progressive theological accounts of the human person mask the realities of asexuality by reflecting and perpetuating compulsory sexuality. To correct this oversight and move Catholic theological anthropologies beyond compulsory sexuality, the author explores underappreciated dimensions of human life that often feature more prominently among asexual persons because of their asexuality. This reflection shows asexuality to be a fecund resource for expanding theological reflection on human relationship to the more-than-human world, other humans, and God.

THEOLOGIANs HAVE FREQUENTLY NAMED HOW CONTEMPORARY Catholic teachings on sexuality elide the experiences of many.¹ These omissions are significant for theological anthropology for several reasons. Omitting whole swaths of

¹ Catholic feminist theologians have persistently raised this critique, for example. See Barbara Hilbert Andolsen, “Whose Sexuality? Whose Tradition? Women, Experience, and Roman Catholic Sexual Ethics,” in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick, SJ (New York: Paulist, 2009), 207–239; María Pilar Aquino, *Our Cry for Life: Feminist Theology from Latin America*, trans. Dinah Livingstone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 97–101; Sharon A. Bong, “The Gender Question in *Amoris Laetitia*: An Asian Feminist-Queer Appraisal,” *Marriage, Families & Spirituality* 28 (2022): 119–132; Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Women and Sexuality* (New York: Paulist, 1992); M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), 73–84; Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 109–173; Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1994), 1–28; Karen Peterson-Iyer, *Reenvisioning Sexual Ethics: A Feminist Christian Account* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2022), 7–20; Emily Reimer-Barry, “On Women’s Health and Women’s Power: A Feminist Appraisal of *Humanae Vitae*,” *Theological Studies* 79, no. 4 (2018): 818–840, doi.org/10.1177/0040563918801194; Susan Ross, “Extravagant Affections: Women’s Sexuality and Theological Anthropology,” in *In the Embrace of God*:

experience from accounts of sexuality impedes the responsibility of ecclesial leaders and theologians to give an account of church teachings in relation to their communities; one cannot do this if one ignores what is real.² Inattention to human experiences also represents a neglect of the Spirit, who guides the baptized through the sense of the faithful (*sensus fidelium*) and expresses Godself in their lived realities as much as through magisterial decrees.³ What is more, those whose experiences are absent from Catholic portraits of human sexuality are often the same people who experience stigma, marginalization, and identity-based violence in and beyond the church.⁴ In such cases, the church's inattention perpetuates this harm.

These omissions also risk compromising the intellectual integrity of Catholicism's theological systems. Since so much Catholic teaching on sexuality arises from the natural law tradition, which legitimizes itself with appeals to an observable natural order, theologians should be able to situate any number of human realities within their systems. When they fail to do so—either out of neglect or because these realities just do not fit into prevailing models of the natural order—the very foundation of their arguments is weakened. Not all theologians privilege the natural law tradition in their theologies of human sexuality, but one is hard pressed to identify a contemporary Catholic theologian who does not in some way appeal to experience to validate their claims about sexual personhood. For the lot of us, then, inattention to human experience is a problem.

This essay spotlights a subset of human experience Catholic theology has overlooked: Our theological anthropologies have not accounted for asexuality, a descriptor adopted by individuals who experience less sexual attraction than is mandated by the norms of contemporary Western society. More than mere inattention, however, many Catholic magisterial and progressive theological accounts of the human person mask the realities of asexuality by reflecting and perpetuating compulsory sexuality, a presumption and mandate that all normal human persons are sexual persons. Taking up asexuality as

Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology, ed. Ann O'Hara Graff (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 105–121.

² Instructive on this point is James Keenan, SJ's discussion of the church's credibility on issues of sexuality, especially in light of data on the lived experiences and views of Catholics and other contemporary people. See "Can We Talk? Theological Ethics and Sexuality," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 113–131, doi.org/10.1177/004056390706800106.

³ See Orlando Espín, "Tradition and Popular Religion: An Understanding of *Sensus Fidelium*," in *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 63–82.

⁴ See Daniel P. Horan, OFM, *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 143–170.

a locus for anthropological reflection will help Catholic theology correct its inattention to asexual experience and uncover neglected realities and possibilities of human living that will extend Catholic theological reflection beyond compulsory sexuality. Namely, it will show asexuality to be a fecund resource for expanding theological reflection on human relationship to the more-than-human world, other humans, and God.

ASEXUALITY AND COMPULSORY SEXUALITY

Though asexual individuals—or “aces”—have probably always existed, community and conceptual consensus about asexuality among those who share experiences associated with this identifier emerged online through the *Asexual Visibility and Education Network* (AVEN) in the early 2000s.⁵ Since then, asexuality has continued to develop as an umbrella term or spectrum that includes a range of individuals beyond those who experience no sexual attraction whatsoever.⁶ Today, explains journalist Angela Chen, “there are many types of aces” from those who are “sex-repulsed, sex-indifferent, or sex-favorable depending on how averse we are to sexual material and sexual activity” to those “who identify as gray-asexual, or gray-A, a more catchall phrase that encompasses experiences like only occasionally experiencing sexual attraction or not experiencing it very strongly.”⁷ Aces who experience some degree of sexual attraction additionally identify with a range of other orientation labels—such as gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, or pansexual—depending upon their gender and the gender of those to whom they are attracted. Uniting aces and distinguishing them from other nonsexual identities and lifestyles, such as sexual persons who practice celibacy, is their unchosen experience of little to no sexual attraction: whereas many celibates experience a socially mandated degree of sexual attraction but choose not to engage in sexual activity, asexual persons do not experience a normative range of sexual attraction in the first place.

⁵ Though David Jay’s creation of AVEN in 2001 is widely recognized as a threshold moment in the articulation and recognition of asexuality, several activists and academics previously sketched asexuality and the experiences it names. For a comprehensive history of key moments in the development of what we today know as asexuality, see Sherronda J. Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality: A Black Asexual Lens on Our Sex-Obsessed Culture* (Huichin, unceded Ohlone land aka Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 2022), 151–166.

⁶ Ela Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics: Intimate Readings of Compulsory Sexuality* (Columbus: The Ohio State, 2019), 6.

⁷ Angela Chen, *Ace: What Asexuality Reveals about Desire, Society, and the Meaning of Sex* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 2020), 25.

That is, celibacy is about sexual behavior, whereas asexuality concerns experiences of sexual attraction (or lack thereof).

Because the formation of the ace community and its language for conveying experiences along the asexual spectrum emerged only recently, asexuality remains unfamiliar to many people. Yet activists and scholars of asexuality point to an additional, compounding social reality that facilitates this ignorance. This reality is called “compulsory sexuality.” Scholars of compulsory sexuality adapt the term from Adrienne Rich’s classic essay, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Existence,” and build on Rich’s argument to posit that sexual oppression and erasure result not only from social imperatives to inhabit particular sexual orientations and behaviors (namely, heterosexuality) but also from the more radical moral requirement that all humans be sexual in the first place.⁸ Compulsory sexuality, they argue, is a form of contemporary social regulation that marginalizes and erases individuals who do not desire or engage in sexual activity in accordance with normative standards.

One sees evidence of compulsory sexuality in the significant number of people who report having sex because of the perceived social expectation that they *should*. These individuals consent to unwanted sex for reasons that include a sense of duty to their partners or because of the idea that they should enjoy sex.⁹ The history of pathologizing various forms of nonsexuality in the modern medical and sexual sciences likewise reflects the assumption that all normal and healthy people experience uniform levels of sexual attraction.¹⁰ Media and pop culture, which often “portray sex and sexiness as goals that should be pursued” and “implicitly or explicitly pathologize a lack of sexual activity or sexiness” also contribute to compulsory sexuality.¹¹ According to Kristina Gupta, these and other indicators demonstrate that “those considered ‘normal’ face strong pressures to be sexual, and those who seek access to the normal must establish themselves as sexual subjects.”¹²

⁸ Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 631–660.

⁹ Kristina Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality: Evaluating an Emerging Concept,” *Signs* 41, no. 1 (2015): 135–136, doi.org/10.1086/681774. This perception is not exclusive to a particular gender, but sexual expectations and imperatives are gendered and racialized. Cis-heterosexual men’s socialized entitlement to sex places undue pressure on women to consent to sex even if they do not want it. Furthermore, Black and Brown women who do not wish to relate sexually to men are punished disproportionately. See Kate Manne, *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (New York: Crown, 2020).

¹⁰ Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality,” 137–138; Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 11–14.

¹¹ Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality,” 140.

¹² Gupta, “Compulsory Sexuality,” 142.

Note the anthropological assumption anchoring compulsory sexuality: to be human is to be sexual—that is, someone who experiences sexual attraction and desires to engage in sexual activity. As a result, aces often face dehumanization and discrimination in everyday life because of their inability or refusal to conform to this standard. For example, a 2012 study found that aces are characterized as less emotional and more “machine-like” than others.¹³ Ironically, aces were simultaneously seen as more “animal-like” due to the perception that they are unrestrained, impulsive, and less sophisticated.¹⁴ The latter view is likely informed by the use of sexual activity as a metric for adulthood in all kinds of mainstream social scientific research that cites decreases in sexual activity among younger Americans to argue that they are more immature than older generations who were more sexually active at the same age.¹⁵

Furthermore, compulsory sexuality disproportionately harms some aces and allosexuals—or “allos,” a label for those whose experiences align with normative Western standards of sexual attraction. For, though compulsory sexuality promises normality to those who inhabit uniform levels of sexual attraction, libido, and behavior, it distributes social validation unevenly according to race, ability, and size, among other social factors. For instance, because one strategy of white supremacy is to cast people of color—especially women of color—as hypersexual, their sexuality often goes unrewarded by society (it is just taken for granted); they are simultaneously punished disproportionately for asexual nonconformity.¹⁶ This example alongside others from asexuality studies brings into focus the racialization of compulsory sexuality and its oppressive effects on

¹³ An illustrative anecdote: Recently, a student’s first encounter with theological speculation about Jesus’s sexuality inspired a torrent of new questions about other aspects of Jesus’s appetitive life: “Did Jesus have a favorite food? Did he ever get intense cravings for a dessert, or a strong desire to do something silly?” That the presumed absence of sexual attraction from Jesus’s life had gone hand in hand with the presumed absence of all these other desires reflects sexual attraction’s social positioning as the paradigmatic human desire. In a society pervaded by compulsory sexuality, a Jesus without sexual desire is easily imagined as a wholly wantless person.

¹⁴ Cara C. MacInnis and Gordon Hodson, “Intergroup Bias toward ‘Group X’: Evidence of Prejudice, Dehumanization, Avoidance, and Discrimination against Asexuals,” *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 25, no. 6 (April 24, 2012), doi.org/10.1177/1368430212442419.

¹⁵ See Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, 43–54; Luke Brunning and Natasha McKeever, “Asexuality,” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 38, no. 3 (July 2021): 511–512, doi.org/10.1111/japp.12472.

¹⁶ See Ianna Hawkins Owen, “On the Racialization of Asexuality,” in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. Karlie June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 119–135; Chen, *Ace*, 68–84; and Brown, *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, passim.

many in and beyond the ace community, especially those already marginalized by race or ethnicity.

COMPULSORY SEXUALITY IN MAGISTERIAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

In view of asexuality's nascent history, Catholic anthropology's scant attention to it is unsurprising. Yet Catholic configurations of human sexuality evince more than mere neglect: Catholic anthropology inadvertently erases ace individuals through its perpetuation of compulsory sexuality, a bias theologians must contend with in order to recognize asexuality as a reality of human personhood.

This is clear in the *Catechism's* summary of church teachings on human sexuality, which identifies sexuality as a good God gifts to *all* persons and an expression of "man's [*sic*] belonging to the bodily and biological world," as if those without sexuality do not belong (nos. 2331–2335 and 2337). It avers, "Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity" (no. 2333). Not only does the church present sexuality as a divinely bestowed universal, but it moreover asserts that this "sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul" (no. 2332). This encompassing universal does entail some divinely ordained difference, albeit not any that makes room for those who lack sexual attraction. The *Catechism* asserts that all men and women have distinct sexualities that complement each other and together reflect the divine image (*imago Dei*) (nos. 2333–2335). With this, compulsory sexuality buttresses magisterial anthropologies of gender.

The *Catechism* reflects other magisterial teachings, and closer analyses of these detail how compulsory sexuality is gendered. Underwriting the church's portrait of nuptial sexuality, argues Elizabeth Antus, are the presumptions that all men are driven by sexual pleasure while all women participate in sex not because of sexual yearning but because they are responsive to their husbands and open to conceiving children.¹⁷ This caricature of men reflects compulsory sexuality and erases asexual men. And this portrait of the good wife is no less concerning. By advocating for women's participation in sex as a nuptial obligation—something they *should* do regardless of whether they desire or enjoy sex—these Catholic teachings erase the wide range of difference women experience in

¹⁷ Elizabeth Antus, "A Woman's Pain Is Not a Gift: Toward Sexual Flourishing for All," in *Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Jason King and Julie Hanlon Rubio (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Academic, 2020), 40.

these regards. In the process, they bolster compulsory sexuality and erase ace women.¹⁸

All of this is underscored by the *Catechism*'s discussion of chastity, which it defines as a form of "self-mastery" that facilitates "the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being" (nos. 2339 and 2337). The church makes clear that *all* are called to this sexual self-mastery, stating, "At the moment of his Baptism, the Christian is pledged to lead his affective life in chastity" (no. 2348). This ties compulsory sexuality to the church's definitive marker of ecclesial belonging. As with sexuality, the *Catechism* is careful to extend the duty of chastity across sexual difference, clarifying that all are called to chastity "in keeping with their particular states of life"—whether single, married, ordained, or vowed religious—and whether one is hetero- or homosexual too (nos. 2348 and 2357–2359). This expansive articulation of chastity puts into relief those whose experiences cannot be easily mapped onto it—namely, those who do not need to exercise sexual self-mastery because they experience little to no sexual attraction in the first place.

This expansive articulation of chastity also masks additional harms that emerge when the magisterium's universal constructions of sexuality and chastity are applied to communities shaped by various forms of social difference. Already Natalia Imperatori-Lee's decolonial analysis of *Amoris Laetitia* indicts the church's prevailing portrait of nuptial sex for the disproportionate harm it inflicts on "populations of color in which hypersexuality is assumed as a cultural feature."¹⁹ The hypersexualization of men of color amplifies the trope of unwieldy sexual desire Catholic teaching assigns to all men and which erases the aces among them. This stereotype suggests that men of color, more than others, will struggle with the sexual self-mastery of chastity, positioning them as needful targets of moral surveillance

¹⁸ Antus, "A Woman's Pain Is Not a Gift," 44. Karen Cuthbert's qualitative study of ace individuals shows that similar gendered stereotypes contribute to the "unintelligibility" of asexuality in the United Kingdom. While aces of various genders recount experiences of dismissal and epistemic injustice upon disclosing their asexuality to others, those who present as men receive messages that presume their sexual agency and authority while those who present as women are presumed to be "non-credible, unknowing, passive and over-determined by their bodies" (848). These differences parallel many of the gender stereotypes that, according to Antus, shape magisterial teaching on nuptial sex and anthropologies of gender. See Karen Cuthbert, "Asexuality and Epistemic Injustice: A Gendered Perspective," *Journal of Gender Studies* 31, no. 7 (2022): 840–851, doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1966399.

¹⁹ Natalia Imperatori-Lee, "How Is *Amoris Laetitia* Being Received? Colonialism, Conscience, and Accompaniment," in *Amoris Laetitia: A New Momentum for Moral Formation and Pastoral Practice*, ed. Grant Gallicho and James F. Keenan, SJ (New York: Paulist, 2018), 6.

and the kind of magisterial condescension Imperatori-Lee associates with colonialism. Hypersexualized women of color are cast as especially needful of this magisterial management, too, for the mere fact of women's experiences of sexual desire already defies Catholic constructions of womanhood. Their hypersexualization thus positions women of color for moral attack on multiple fronts: Those who are sexual will face religious gender policing and more suspicions of failed chastity; those who are asexual will face erasure by way of social stereotype and the ecclesial denial of sexual diversity among women. In all cases, compulsory sexuality is an unjust burden.

COMPULSORY SEXUALITY IN PROGRESSIVE ANTHROPOLOGIES

Magisterial treatments of sexuality are not the only Catholic anthropologies marked by compulsory sexuality. Craig Ford's analysis of responses to church teachings on homosexuality helps demonstrate how progressive theologies frequently reflect and perpetuate compulsory sexuality too. Ford notes that many progressives who challenge the immorality of same-gender sex acts leave uncontested the magisterium's view of sexual orientation.²⁰ According to these theologians, observes Ford, "This very *unchosenness* of sexual orientation reflects, in a theological key, a certain *givenness* of sexual orientation by God to the person, which then grounds an argument for maintaining that homosexuality as sexual orientation is an aspect of God's creation and is, therefore, good and morally unproblematic."²¹ Ford illustrates this with a passage from Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler, who assert, "Our sexual anthropology recognizes sexual orientation as an intrinsic dimension of human 'nature.' As such, what is 'natural' in sexual activity, which is an expression of the sexual person, will vary depending on whether or not the person's sexual orientation is homosexual or heterosexual."²² Though Salzman and Lawler are careful to note that there is no unified definition of "sexual orientation" in Catholic thought, the examples they provide and the definition they adopt all presume and center sexual attraction or desire.²³

²⁰ Craig Ford, "Born That Way? The Challenge of Trans/Gender Identity for Catholic Theology," in *Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives*, 95. Margaret Farley is one notable exception to this trend. See Margaret Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 294–296.

²¹ Ford, "Born That Way?," 96.

²² Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 227. Cited in Ford, "Born That Way?," 96.

²³ Citing Robert Nugent, Salzman and Lawler write, "We offer this definition of sexual orientation: a 'psychosexual attraction (erotic, emotional, and affective) toward

While these progressives envision the particularities of chastity differently than the *Catechism's* overseers, Ford is right that they leave uncontested the assumption that every human person has some God-given sexual orientation in need of moral management. For them, too, every person is a “sexual person.” While Ford acknowledges the theological and political affordances of the naturalization of sexual orientation, especially among lesbian, gay, and “perhaps more tenuously” among bisexual persons, he cautions that “it is nevertheless *not unambiguously clear* how these sorts of arguments depathologize the existences” of other queer people.²⁴ For his part, Ford notes the concerning implications of this line of anthropological reasoning for “transgender, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming persons more broadly.”²⁵ The naturalization of sexual attraction also bears negative implications for asexual persons.²⁶

Because asexuality was originally articulated as a sexual orientation and many in the ace community continue to frame it as such, one might assume that the naturalization of sexual orientation in these progressive theologies is a relatively small obstacle to ace inclusion. Conceivably, theologians could apply Salzman and Lawler's logic to sexual orientations beyond hetero- and homosexuality to affirm the naturalness of an asexual orientation. After all, aces already emphasize that asexuality is an unchosen experience—it is just how some people find themselves in the world—which seems in keeping with naturalization.

There are several limitations to this approach, however. First, because etiological theories attributing nonsexuality to sexual violence and trauma have so often been deployed to pathologize asexuality, many in the ace community reject this line of moral reasoning and

particular individual persons' of either the same-sex or the opposite sex, depending on whether the orientation is homosexual or heterosexual.” See *The Sexual Person*, 65. In Catholic writings on sexuality, terms like “attraction” and “desire” are often used interchangeably, and so I have done in discussions of this literature. Asexuality studies, however, sometimes distinguish between terms like these in important ways. Chen, for instance, states that “sexual attraction is the desire to have sex with a specific person,” whereas “sex drive (or libido) is the desire for sexual release, a set of feelings in the body, often combined with intrusive thoughts. . . . A person can be ace and have no desire for sexual release at all. Or a person can be ace and have a so-called undirected sex drive, that tingling in the nethers . . . which can afflict anyone because horniness does not need to include sexual attraction.” See *Ace*, 20–21.

²⁴ Ford, “Born That Way?,” 96 and 97; italics mine.

²⁵ Ford, “Born That Way?,” 97.

²⁶ Since there is a higher representation of ace-identified persons among those who are trans, genderqueer, or gender-nonconforming, there is overlap between populations whose experiences inform our respective concerns. See Julie Sondra Decker, *The Invisible Orientation: An Introduction to Asexuality* (New York: Skyhorse, 2014).

insist on untethering asexuality's moral status from its causes.²⁷ Those who champion the validity of asexuality regardless of its known or unknown origins in a person's life would likely resist even the positive framing of asexuality as an inborn orientation simply for the sake of justifying it as "natural" and therefore good.²⁸

Second, reluctance towards naturalization is still more likely because of the diversity of ace experience. While some aces have always experienced themselves as asexual, the experiences of many others do not fit the born-this-way framework. So committed is the ace community to theoretical framings that reflect its diversity that many have started to resist not only asexuality's conceptualization as an inborn condition but also its original framing as a sexual orientation because this category is so often associated with intrinsic and immutable sexuality.²⁹

Third, framing asexuality as another natural sexual orientation sidesteps more radical critiques of compulsory sexuality by retaining sexual attraction as a definitive anthropological category. Queer theory admonishes theologians in this regard, having shown that incorporating more orientations and identities into existing sexual frameworks often reinforces those frameworks rather than subverting them. Already Ela Przybylo observes instances when asexuality functions this way in social discourse. While on the surface asexuality seems a radical challenge to Western preoccupations with sexuality that, according to Michel Foucault, have come to define almost every aspect of modern self-understanding, asexuality is easily and often deployed "to anchor sexuality, not alter its logic. It is, in part, through its incitement to speak of sexuality that asexuality operates as a stabilizing agent. In such ways asexuality can be understood as a particular growth of sexuality . . . not as something altogether alien

²⁷ Chen, *Ace*, 86–106.

²⁸ For firsthand examples of how asexuals are negotiating this in their lives as well as some theoretical discussion of these debates in the ace community, see Kristina Gupta, "'And Now I'm Just Different, but There's Nothing Actually Wrong With Me': Asexual Marginalization and Resistance," *Journal of Homosexuality* 64, no. 8 (2017): 1005–1009. See also Erica Chu, "Radical Identity Politics: Asexuality and Contemporary Articulations of Identity," in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives*, ed. Karlie June Cerankowski and Megan Milks (New York: Routledge, 2014), 79–99.

²⁹ See Gupta, "'And Now I'm Just Different,'" 1005–1009. See also Brunning and McKeever, "Asexuality," which showcases the view of theorists of asexuality who suggest that, when taken to be a sexual orientation, asexuality has the potential to complicate and clarify sexual orientation beyond an innate biological reality concerning the object of one's sexual attraction to focus instead on "patterns of attraction towards traits, behaviors, situations, or even individuals" (501).

and divorced from Western fixations.”³⁰ Were Catholic theology to recognize asexuality as a naturalized sexual orientation—a framework that, in Western society and throughout Catholic thought, centers sexual attraction—it could further stabilize sexual attraction as a norm of its theological anthropologies.

CATHOLIC ANTHROPOLOGY BEYOND COMPULSORY SEXUALITY

Experiences of asexuality and the concomitant insights of asexuality studies beckon Catholic theologians to move away from compulsory sexuality and revise Catholic theological anthropologies. This is a worthy undertaking not only because the compulsory sexuality of existing theologies does harm but also because experiences of asexuality have the potential to enrich conceptions of human personhood. Philosophers A. W. Eaton and Bailey Szustak emphasize this by drawing on the theoretical framework of “Deaf Gain” to consider the genuine goods asexuality brings to ace individuals, the ace community, and broader society.³¹ Deaf Gain, they explain, “[moves] away from the ‘normalcy’ model where deafness is framed simply as hearing *loss*, to a diversity model that construes deafness as a *gain*.”³² Analogously, Eaton and Szustak advocate moving away from defining asexuality in terms of lack of sexual attraction to consider the gains asexuality occasions. Even preliminary reflection on some of these “ace gains” shows asexuality to be a fecund resource for expanding Catholic reflection on human relationality to the more-than-human world, other humans, and God.

Relation to the More-Than-Human World

Asexuality can illuminate humanity’s connections to the more-than-human world through its emphasis on nonsexual experiences of the erotic. For this, asexuality scholars such as Ela Przybylo build on feminist and queer definitions of “eroticism” as forms of emotional depth and intimate relations “simply not reducible to sex and sexuality and that, further, challenge the Freudian doxa that the sexual is at the base of all things.”³³ Though all humans experience this expansive eroticism, asexual phenomenologies are often shaped more

³⁰ Ela Przybylo, “Crisis and Safety: The Asexual in Sexusociety,” *Sexualities* 14, no. 4 (2011): 452, doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406461.

³¹ A. W. Eaton and Bailey Szustak, “Asexuality,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Sex and Sexuality*, ed. Brain D. Earp, Clare Chambers, and Lori Watson (New York: Routledge, 2022), 140.

³² Eaton and Szustak, “Asexuality,” 141; emphasis original.

³³ Przybylo, *Asexual Erotics*, 20.

predominantly by nonsexual eroticisms because sexual attraction is not in the foreground of their experiences. In turn, sexual relationship does not necessarily serve as the real or aspirational organizing principle of their lives in the way the sexual partnership of marriage and the wider nuclear family do for so many.

Chen illustrates this with the story of James who, upon realizing he was ace, wondered, “People feel sex is so central to them, and it made me think, ‘What can I feel similarly about the way allo people feel about sex? . . . How can I find that feeling actively?’”³⁴ James found it in cooking, a passion he felt free to pursue with abandon precisely because of the peripherality of sexuality in his life. The ace poet and scholar Cameron Awkward-Rich also captures this in his “list of things I like more than having sex,” which includes “Reading. Lying flat on my back staring at the ceiling. Peeling back the skin of a grapefruit. . . . Strong coffee. Cheap whiskey. Riding my bike away from parties.”³⁵ More examples surface on the message boards of the *AVEN* website, where aces discuss their passions for companion animals, bird watching, nature walks, cultivating garden produce, and raising farm animals.³⁶

These examples reveal that asexuality can be “an opportunity to focus more on other passions, to be less distracted by sexuality,” as Chen puts it.³⁷ And while there are plenty of allosexual people who share in these and other nonsexual loves, aces talk of organizing their lives around these passions in ways many others talk about prioritizing sexual partnerships like marriage. Amid sexually saturated society and church that often pressure people to build their lives around sexual experience and partnership, aces can “reveal, or at least give permission to embrace, other forms of eroticism and other ways of living that may be just as fulfilling,” suggests Chen.³⁸

For theology, focus on human lives anchored by intense, nonsexual passions for the world, including the more-than-human world, can put into focus the goodness and wonder of other creatures—from affectionate pets to the wondrous allure of the forest—and of the things God’s creatures make—art, games, music, even theology. These passions can also direct attention to the necessity of reverent, ethical relation to all of God’s world. The expansive erotics of asexuality resonates with what Sallie McFague calls the “loving eye,”

³⁴ Chen, *Ace*, 181.

³⁵ Cameron Awkward-Rich, “A Prude’s Manifesto,” video recorded at Button Poetry’s inaugural Inside Voices show at the Fox Egg Gallery in Minneapolis, January 15, 2014, www.youtube.com/watch?v=nInAqWF0tt4.

³⁶ “Forums,” *Asexual Visibility & Education Network*, May 22, 2023, www.asexuality.org/en/.

³⁷ Chen, *Ace*, 181.

³⁸ Chen, *Ace*, 180.

a way of relating to the natural world in response to being “touched” or moved by the world beyond oneself. What results, she argues, is not only an affective investment in the nonhuman world but also an embodied, responsive, and interdependent sense of self.³⁹

The kinship with the more-than-human world that arises from this expansive eroticism and radically defines this emergent anthropology are easily overshadowed by interhuman relationships. The glorification of sexual erotics within a context of compulsory sexuality bolsters this anthropocentrism: in a setting where sexual erotics are presumed to constitute humanity’s most intense and intimate relations, human relationships will always carry highest esteem. Yet, with its challenge to sexual supremacy, and without denigrating the goodness of sexual passions for other people, asexuality pushes theology to decenter interhuman sexual relations to cherish a more expansive range of experienced passions for the world. Embracing asexuality’s more expansive eroticism may therefore aid theologians in imagining the human person beyond both human-centrism and compulsory sexuality. In doing so, Catholic theology may gain important insight into the value of our relation to all creatures and things.

Relation to Other Humans

The expansive eroticism of ace experience reveals important insights about interhuman relationality as well. Many assume that because aces do not experience a normative threshold of sexual attraction, they do not have desire for or experiences of nonsexual human intimacy. This reflects the common, if often implicit, assumption that our most passionate bonds are necessarily sexual. This surfaces in homophobic tropes like one in the popular 2004 movie, *Mean Girls*, where a teenage girl, Janis, is bullied and accused of being lesbian because of her “obsession” with two different close female friends, first the popular Regina and then the underdog Cady.⁴⁰ It is not hard to convince the high-school masses that one girl’s infatuation with another *must be* sexual at its root.

A great deal of ace experience suggests otherwise. Many aces (though not all) experience intense connection, infatuation, and personal intimacy in relation to people for whom they have little to no sexual attraction, something aces speak of in terms of romantic attraction.⁴¹ The distinction between sexual and romantic attraction is

³⁹ Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians: How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), esp. 91–117.

⁴⁰ Mark Waters, dir., *Mean Girls* (Paramount Pictures, 2004), 1:37.

⁴¹ Those who do not experience romantic attraction to others often identify as “aromantic” or “aro.” See Decker, *The Invisible Orientation*, 17–27.

not itself controversial, as experiences of sexual attraction without romantic love are widely recognized (e.g., hookup culture). What is harder for many people to accept, explains Chen, is the fact that some individuals experience intense romantic love without sexual attraction. “How is [nonsexual romance] different from loving a platonic best friend?” skeptics ask. “Without sex involved, what is the difference people feel inside when they draw a line between [romantic and platonic] love?”⁴²

Though aces lack consensus on these questions, asexual phenomenologies distill the complexities of human relationship that inform these inquiries—complexities often otherwise masked by the presumption and priority of sexuality in Western society and Catholic teaching. Knowing the long history of Christian reflection on different kinds of interpersonal love—*philia*, *eros*, and *agape*, for instance—which, according to Paul Wadell, have often put the nonsexual, preferential bonds of “friendship [*philia*] on the fringe,” discussions within the ace community about the distinctions among sexual, romantic, and platonic love could challenge, sharpen, or even expand these and other Christian thinking about love.⁴³

These conversations will surely complicate more formal Catholic configurations of human relationships too. Catholic marriage can benefit from asexuality studies even as it is, by canonical definition, a sexual relationship.⁴⁴ To Pope Francis’s recent characterization of marriage as “friendship marked by [sexual] passion,” for instance, asexuality offers a multifaced vocabulary for clarifying this general category of “friendship” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 125). This vocabulary could also elaborate existing theologies of marriage that utilize the category of friendship.⁴⁵ Especially in view of periodic celibacy within marriage—due to fertility regulation, geographical distance, health issues, marital strife, or what have you—resources from asexuality can elucidate how and why a temporarily celibate marriage is and is not like other nonsexual relationships.

Furthermore, the significance of nonsexual relationships in the lives of asexual persons challenges Catholic definitions of the family, which overwhelmingly center the heterosexual married couple and

⁴² Chen, *Ace*, 108.

⁴³ Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 70.

⁴⁴ Code of Canon Law, canon 1061, no. 1.

⁴⁵ See Lisa Fullam, “Toward a Virtue Ethics of Marriage: Augustine and Aquinas on Friendship in Marriage,” *Theological Studies* 73 (2012): 663–692, doi.org/10.1177/004056391207300309; and Richard Gaillardetz, “A School for Love: Marriage as Christian Friendship,” in *Sex, Love, and Families: Catholic Perspectives*, 129–138.

their children.⁴⁶ Rather than reducing familial kinship to a network of relations bound together by a sexual partnership, asexuals invite recognition of the vital role nonsexual relationships play in people's lives—including married people's lives. Following scholars who have challenged the legal institution of marriage in the United States for its complicity in compulsory sexuality, Catholics might revise their definitions of family to move beyond compulsory sexuality to include the nonsexual relations many already experience as familial kin.⁴⁷

Catholic thinking about those who take formal vows of celibacy may also benefit from engagement with ace reflections on interhuman relationship. At present, the celibacy of clergy and other vowed religious is frequently glorified as an extraordinary sacrifice of the sexual attraction all are presumed to experience uniformly. Asexuality is a simple but radical challenge to this singular narrative of profound self-sacrifice: while some clergy experience celibacy as a difficult discipline because of the high levels of sexual attraction they experience, the ace spectrum suggests that some clergy may not find celibacy to be much of a sacrifice at all because they probably do not experience a great degree of sexual attraction in the first place. Recognition that clergy probably experience diverse levels of sexual attraction that results in diverse experiences of celibacy has the potential to interrupt the clericalist narrative that all clergy are superheroes of sexual self-mastery. Recognizing the diverse realities of sexual attraction could also enrich theologies of celibacy to the benefit of clergy themselves, as it would expand the available language for clergy to draw upon as they name and integrate sexual—and asexual—experiences with their vocations as celibate priests; this, too, can mitigate clericalism and its abuses.⁴⁸

Relation to God

From the Bible's Song of Songs to the spiritual rapture experienced by some of the tradition's great mystics, Christians have long drawn upon sexuality as an analogy for human relations to God. Asexuality invites a reappraisal of Christian theology's reliance on sexual

⁴⁶ That magisterial documents use the label "irregular" to denote couples and families who do not fit this normative configuration of family is evidence of its limited definition. See, for example, Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, nos. 296–300.

⁴⁷ See Elizabeth F. Emens, "Compulsory Sexuality," *Stanford Law Review* 66, no. 303 (February 2014): 303–386, www.stanfordlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2014/02/66_Stan_L_Rev_303_Emens.pdf.

⁴⁸ See Paul Schutz and Julie Hanlon Rubio, "Beyond 'Bad Apples': Understanding Clergy Perpetrated Sexual Abuse as a Structural Phenomenon and Cultivating Strategies for Change," *Santa Clara University* (2022), www.scu.edu/media/ignatian-center/bannan/Beyond-Bad-Apples-8-2-FINAL.pdf.

metaphors for humanity's most profound intimacies with the divine. On one hand, asexuals—even those personally sex-repulsed—are not morally opposed to sex and even tend to identify as sex-positive. (By analogy, one can be physically repulsed by mayonnaise but not morally opposed to the condiment.)⁴⁹ Asexuality does not therefore oblige rejection of all sexual imagery for the divine-human relationship. Instead, asexuality's emphasis on nonsexual relationships provokes new questions about the abundance of sexual imagery Christians use to convey intense human encounters with God: Does the prevalence of this imagery reflect and play into the assumption that humanity's truest experiences of interpersonal intimacy are necessarily sexual? Meanwhile, has compulsory sexuality led Christians to overlook or undervalue some nonsexual images of divine union from the tradition?

Asexual experience spurs the church to retrieve, invest in, and invent more of this nonsexual imagery—perhaps especially those images that affirm dimensions of asexual living undervalued in contexts dominated by compulsory sexuality. One might look, for example, to images of God as friend, developed by the likes of Thomas Aquinas and Teresa of Ávila, among others.⁵⁰ Already, Julia Feder promotes Teresa's treatment of divine friendship as a helpful image for those who live in the aftermath of sexual violence and consequently possess complicated associations with sexuality;⁵¹ Teresa's portrayal of God as friend may be a resonant image among the ace community for its own complicated, though sometimes overlapping, associations with sexuality.⁵² The ace community's incisive observations about

⁴⁹ This analogy is from Jessica Coblentz, "Hail, Mary! Mother and Ace: Envisioning an Asexual Mary of Nazareth for Today," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 38, no. 2 (Fall 2022): 28.

⁵⁰ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 1948), I-II, q. 65, a. 5; see also Wadell, *Friendship as the Moral Life*, 120–141.

⁵¹ Julia Feder, *Incarnating Grace: A Theology of Healing from Sexual Trauma* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2023). Feder's analysis of Teresa's image of divine friendship shows that, even when the mystic occasionally speaks of this relationship in nuptial terms—as a "marriage of friendship"—Teresa uncommonly emphasizes nonsexual dimensions of marriage, such as the permanence of relationship and the equal merging of assets, suggesting additional possibilities for asexual reflections on Teresa's spirituality.

⁵² Though nonsexual images of divine intimacy may appeal to asexuals for different reasons than the victim-survivors at the center of Feder's project, there is also significant overlap between these communities. Sherronda Brown explains: "In the 2015 Asexual Community Census, 43.5 percent of aces surveyed reported past sexual violence—including rape, assault, and coercion—and 50.6 percent of those respondents had experienced sexual violence with their romantic partners. The 2018 Asexual Census saw that number increase to 79.5 percent of aces surveyed having experienced sexual violence. In each report, racially marginalized asexuals were more likely to have experienced sexual violence." It is important to interpret these findings

human relationality may likewise enrich Christian affirmations of God as a nonsexual friend.

Some, however, may question whether an asexual bidding to decenter sexual imagery for God is premature, especially because Christian history has often denigrated human sexuality while simultaneously appropriating it to convey intimacy with God. To the point, Miguel Díaz reminds us that while many contemporary Catholic theologies “focus on vanquished subjects and their experiences as *loci theologici* to encounter the triune life of God,” still “often missing from these theological reflections is consideration of sexuality and the sexual subject.”⁵³ His queer reading of Juan de la Cruz “from the bedroom” is an important contribution to remedying this absence, and more theologies that take seriously a wide range of sexual experiences are in order. Asexuality does not contest the fact and revelatory potential of these sexual experiences but rather their universalization, a concern Díaz would likely share in concert with other liberationist (and so-called “contextual”) theologians who write explicitly from and with the particularities of their communities. To this end, the imagery for God that arises from asexual experience can appropriately relativize contemporary retrievals of sexual imagery from Díaz and others. Just as retrievals of sexual imagery corrects Christianity’s historical denigration of sex, concurrent retrievals of nonsexual imagery will correct a sex-centered Western context where compulsory sexuality so often misrepresents and overestimates sexuality.

In keeping with Juan’s mystical theology, which “refuses to allow God to be restricted to any image, experience, category, or name,” drawing from a wide range of sexual and nonsexual experiences for God-talk can result in a closer approximation of the human as well as the divine.⁵⁴ Asexuality helps us affirm that God is both sexual and asexual (and neither sexual nor asexual).⁵⁵ This asexual negation of

in view of the history of medically pathologizing asexuality by arguing that it is an abnormal response to sexual violence and trauma that should be treated and cured. Without denying that some asexuality may result from sexual violence, the ace community holds that it is not a pathological condition. Meanwhile, advocates and scholars of asexuality such as Brown argue that the high rates of sexual violence against aces point us to other conclusions: “Asexuals are susceptible to harm from allosexuals of all sexualities in a unique way precisely because the intent of that harm is often to eradicate our asexuality—it’s meant to kill the very thing that sets us apart from all allosexual identities in the first place, that marks our departure from societal sexual norms, and that threatens to expose society’s devotion to compulsory sexuality.” See *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality*, 23.

⁵³ Miguel H. Díaz, *Queer God de Amor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 16.

⁵⁴ Díaz, *Queer God de Amor*, 48.

⁵⁵ Thanks to Andrew Prevot, who offered this insight in an early conversation about this research.

God's sexuality does not reflect the sex negativity that Christianity has long espoused and that Díaz's project stands against. Rather, the ethical sex positivity of the ace community would underscore that the dual affirmation of sexual and asexual metaphors for God are not oppositional even as they may at times exist in paradoxical tension with one another.

CONCLUSION

In *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics*, theologian Linn Marie Tonstad observes how today's Christian thinkers often take for granted the faith's long-standing preoccupation with gender and sexuality. So many hold that "gender and sexuality *matter* theologically, *matter* Christianly, so to speak."⁵⁶ Among LGBTQ+ Christians and their supporters, this assumption frequently animates an apologetic stance dedicated to defending Christianity from those who characterize it as wholly anti-sex, or at least wholly anti-certain-kinds-of-sex. Yet, Tonstad's titular provocation to move "beyond apologetics" invites more radical reimaginings of Christian theology. In response, we too might wonder: What if sexuality did not *matter* theologically—or at least mattered differently than it does today? What if Christian ideas about the human person—and a whole host of other theological loci—were not caught up in prevailing ideas about sexuality? And, more still: What if Christianity simply had nothing to do with sex at all?

Though, in the sexually saturated Western context and church, it can seem almost impossible to imagine the Christianity summoned by Tonstad's provocation, the ace community proves that there are already many who embody a human life and Christian faith far less concerned with and motivated by sex than others; the extent to which their secular and religious lives are constituted by sexuality is due to the context they live in, not their own asexual experiences and preferences. The lives of those on the asexual spectrum can therefore offer a glimpse of human life and Catholic thought beyond compulsory sexuality—one that might expand our understandings of human relations to the more-than-human world, one another, and God.⁵⁷ **M**

⁵⁶ Linn Marie Tonstad, *Queer Theology: Beyond Apologetics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 5–6.

⁵⁷ Thanks to Maria Dach, Maggie McNabb, Daniel Horan, and Paul Schutz for their feedback on drafts of this essay.

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