

9. On the Role of the Catholic Church: A Theoretical Roundtable

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Note from the Co-Editors: In this second roundtable discussion, we posed the questions: “What should be the role of the Catholic Church in advancing justice with regard to reproduction? In your context, is the Catholic Church a resource or a roadblock?”

Simeiqi He (China/USA)

In *C'est La Confiance*, Pope Francis called our attention to the insights of St. Therese of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face. Exalting Therese's exclamation that divine justice is clothed in love as one of her loftiest insights and major contributions to the entire People of God (no. 27), Pope Francis breathed life into the meaning of justice. In this way, he opened new possibilities for the discussion of reproduction. Understanding justice—with divine justice as its highest form—as love, our question now becomes “what should be the role of the Catholic Church in advancing love with regard to reproduction?”

To answer this question, we must first consider the nature of such advance. The Church's capacity to advance love lies in its being as a lover, who is first the beloved. It implies a deeper reality where the Church is advanced by the divine Lover, whose life unfolds indefinitely into life infinitesimal. Such understanding of the Lover's advance expands the meaning of reproduction beyond the narrow definition of giving birth to children for the purpose of preserving the human race toward a much broader horizon to denote the reproductivity of divine love as the living

force of the world. Thus, human reproductivity manifests itself in love's doubling and multiplication. It is an expression of the pure act that is divine love. In *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt to Ascend to the Meaning of Being*, St. Edith Stein points out that the birthing of children from their parents is not different from the creation of Eve from Adam, both are the result of Christ's self-giving.¹ That is, divine life is immanent in human reproduction as a process of creative transformation of the world. No longer an isolated phenomenon, human reproduction manifests the fecundity of divine creativity and the reproductivity of social life, cultural heritage, the natural world, and the entire undivided universe. It expresses the infinite mysteries of the divine mind and implies absolute freedom fulfilled only in love.

In this sense, the path has been laid out before the Catholic Church if it is to advance justice regarding reproduction. It can only be achieved if the Church is continuously advanced and transformed by the love of God in the process of unceasing conversion in union with its Lover. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote in 1921 that "the Church is still a child. Christ, by whom she lives, is immeasurably greater than she imagines."² I believe that, over a century later, these words still ring true today. The Chinese Catholic Church is acutely aware of its need to grow and develop. Despite its impoverished state, many throughout history, especially women, have found consolation, strength, and mercy in its divine Lover. Nonetheless, the maturity and future of the Chinese Church and its capacity to address the question of reproduction depends upon its ability to draw from the depth of its ancient wisdom and to serve as an outpouring source of life for all living beings. The Chinese Catholic jurist John C.H. Wu, who was deeply influenced by Therese, pointed out that the simplest way of understanding the little way of spiritual childhood is to realize that it is reminiscent of the Confucian teaching of filial piety and the Taoist insight

¹ Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt to Ascend to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 513.

² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Heart of Matter*, trans. René Hague (San Diego: A Harvest Book, 1921), 118.

concerning the mystical significance of the little, the feminine, and the new-born;³ both are inseparable from the process of reproduction. Deep down in the cultural memories of the Chinese Church, there exists an integral meaning of reproduction, where filial piety, femininity, and natality coincide to express the living life that is at once divine, human, and cosmic. Such insight, if allowed to be expressed, might just be the greatest contribution of the Chinese Church to the universal Church and the global community.

Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, SJ (Philippines)

The Church in the Philippines should play a more pastoral role with regard to reproduction. Unfortunately, the Church prefers to use its social and political influence to impose Catholic norms of reproduction on a multi-religious Filipino population. In the Philippine context, the Church has been more of a roadblock to rather than a resource for reproductive justice. The Church's leadership should stop doing the following:

1. *Reinforcing the image of the Philippines as a Catholic nation where Catholic norms must be legislated.* While the Philippines is 85 percent Catholic by baptism, a large majority of its population are either nominal or nonpracticing Catholics. There are also significant numbers of Protestants, Muslims, and those who hold indigenous faith traditions. When it comes to reproductive health issues, the Church uses only a Catholic lens to address society and ignores the rights of non-Catholics and dissenting Catholics to decide on reproductive issues that gravely affect them and their families.⁴

³ John C.H. Wu, *Chinese Humanism and Christian Spirituality* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017), 97.

⁴ Jose Mario C. Francisco, "People of God, People of the Nation Official Catholic Discourse on Nation and Nationalism," *Philippine Studies: Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints* 62, no. 3/4 (2014): www.jstor.org/stable/24672316.

2. *Conflating abortion and contraception as if they are the same moral issue.* The pro-life voices that the Church leadership supports are those which identify the evils of abortion with that of contraception. They cause confusion in the faithful with regard to Church teachings on these two issues. One example is the statement from a pastoral letter of the Philippine bishops' conference. It argues against contraception by pointing out that "these artificial means are fatal to human life, either preventing it from fruition or actually destroying it."⁵
3. *Engaging in partisan politics on reproductive issues.* The local church leadership has a long history of organizing a Catholic vote against politicians who do not pass the Church's standards of morality, including those who campaign for better access to contraceptives for poor families. The Church had launched a negative campaign against politicians who supported the passing of a reproductive health law that addressed many issues related to reproductive health, such as HIV prevention, domestic violence, infant and maternal mortality, and sex education in public schools.⁶
4. *Demonizing sex education.* The Church has a deep suspicion against sex education. It has consistently objected to sex education in public schools, fearing that information about sex will automatically lead to promiscuity. The bishops prefer that sex education be done at home by parents, which rarely happens because of cultural taboos in families regarding conversations about sex.

The Church has been so used to wielding immense power and influence on Philippine social life and politics that it finds it easier to simply impose universal norms regarding reproduction rather than make pastoral adjustments to address the extraordinary situations faced by many poor and vulnerable persons. Unless the Church's leadership listens to persons

⁵ Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, "Choosing Life, Rejecting the RH Bill," *CBCP Online*, January 30, 2011, cbcponline.net/choosing-life-rejecting-the-rh-billa-pastoral-letter-of-the-catholic-bishops-conference-of-the-philippines/.

⁶ Eric Marcelo O. Genilo, SJ "The Catholic Church and The Reproductive Health Bill Debate: The Philippine Experience," *The Heythrop Journal* 5, no. 6 (2014): 1044–1055.

in difficult marital and family situations with attention, compassion, and goodwill and responds to their plight with both justice and mercy, there will always be a disconnection between the hierarchy and the laity and between what the Church preaches and what it actually practices.

Kathryn Lilla Cox (USA)

When thinking about the role of the Catholic Church in advancing justice regarding reproduction, it is helpful to distinguish between the various facets of the Church. While the Pope, bishops, and priests have varying degrees of leadership and teaching responsibilities, they are a small portion of the Catholic Church. As Vatican II taught, the Church is made up of the whole people of God, who have a responsibility to “bring forth fruit and charity for the life of the world” (*Optatum Totius*, no. 16) and accompany all people in “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1) while working for more just societies.

Speaking as a theologian, I have been involved in reproductive justice discussions for several years with my colleagues. We are participating in advancing reproductive justice with our attention to the issues in this volume. We use our research skills to identify resources that assist in highlighting love as a key component to reproductive justice and call our leadership to change harmful patterns of societal interaction and teaching. We advocate for institutional reform. We have one role in advancing reproductive justice.

Given the call in *Gaudium et Spes* to engage the world, there are various ways the laity can play a role in advancing reproductive justice. For example, those in the healthcare fields could speak out against laws and policies that make it harder for people to receive needed reproductive healthcare, whether it is pre- and post-natal care, contraceptives, disease screenings, or health insurance to assist in covering costs. When voting for politicians, Catholics could consider the politicians’ stances on reproductive questions in a holistic manner and vote accordingly, instead

of narrowly focusing on one issue. We can talk with our priests, deacons, and other homilists when we hear homilies that reinforce and sanction reproductive injustices from the pulpit. We can also challenge them to support reproductive justice when it is appropriate to the scripture readings.

In the United States of America where I reside, the Church is both a resource and a roadblock. The United States Conference of Bishops, with their voting guide and other materials that focus on abortion as the pre-eminent life issue, truncates their own approach to reproductive justice. They could do more for reproductive justice by advocating more vociferously for economic and healthcare policies that support people who have already been born. They need to recognize that pregnancy is a health condition and that supporting public policy which does not put pregnant people in life-threatening situations is both pro-life and just. Individual bishops and priests are a roadblock when they politicize the Eucharist around reproductive concerns. There are Catholic politicians who advocate and vote for laws and public policies supporting reproductive justice, and as such, they are a resource. Likewise, there are Catholics in organizations, such as Catholics for Choice, that advocate for reproductive justice in several areas. For example, Network, a Catholic lobbyist organization, works to encourage just federal policies, including healthcare reform. In these instances, the Catholic Church is a resource for reproductive justice.

Virginia Saldanha (India)

With its growing population, India is the world's most populous nation with 1.486 billion people.⁷ As a multi-religious country, Hindus constitute

⁷ Esha Roy and Anuradha Mascarenhas, "India's population 142.8 crore in 2023, crosses China's: UN population report," *The Indian Express: Journalism of Courage*, indianexpress.com/article/india/india-population-up-un-sowp-report-life-expectancy-fertility-rate-8564123/.

the majority of India's population, while Christians are a minority, with less than 3 percent of the population and Catholics forming only 1.5 percent of the population.⁸ Though today the Hindu right is trying its best to foist Hindu culture and values on people of other faiths, the law of the country prevails in the area of reproductive rights. Due to a powerful women's movement, the Catholic Church's impact on laws affecting reproductive rights is absent.

Abortion is legal in India. However, given the cultural bias against girl children in India, abortion is strictly controlled in order that sex selective abortions can be prevented. While no Catholic hospital will provide abortion services to anyone, Catholics have the option to go to any other hospitals to obtain an abortion. Abortion, or medical termination of pregnancy as it is known in India, is used frequently to prevent unwanted births, while sex selective abortions are punishable under law.

Regardless, when a young woman decides to go ahead with a pregnancy out of wedlock and keep the baby, the Catholic Church needs to support such women. The Church should charge men to take responsibility when they make a girl/woman pregnant. It can do much in changing the mindset of boys and men towards women and ending the double standards of morality it has for men and women. Currently, the Church's pro-life agenda targets only women, not men. Men should be taught to respect women. Rape should be condemned and spoken about in homilies. The incidences of priests' sexual assault against religious sisters should be reduced. Marital rape should be condemned, and mutuality in marriage should be promoted.

The Catholic Church in India is encouraged by the powerful Catholic conservatives in the West to promote their pro-life agenda. A lot of money and resources have been poured into this effort. Some bishops and clergy take every opportunity to denounce abortion in their homilies, while insisting that life begins at the time of conception. This can guilt trip women who are struggling with alcoholic husbands. Often times, these

⁸ "Statistics," *Catholics India*, catholicsindia.in/statistics/

men come home drunk and force their wives to have sex with them without caring if their wives get pregnant or if they can even afford another child. Women in this case usually terminate the pregnancy by traditional means, such as eating an unripe papaya, or going to a hospital (which is hardly an option). Their decision to pursue abortion is either a result of poverty or because there will be no one to care for the home and the children. Regarding cases in which priests have sex with and impregnate religious sisters and afterwards suggest the sister to have an abortion, we should clearly point out the hypocrisy while also attending to women's suffering in a context of unequal power and secrecy.

Only when women gain full equality with men in the Catholic Church will insensitive anti-woman policies of the Catholic Church be challenged. Presently, women who think critically act according to their conscience. However, a large majority of women who think that the priests are in the place of God suffer tremendous guilt and trauma in their sexual/reproductive lives.

Julie Clague (UK)

In *Justitia in Mundo*, the 1971 Synod of Bishops stated that "Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel." (no. 6) In other words, Christians are called to put right all injustices, including the breath-taking inequalities, life-threatening social and economic conditions, and harmful cultural norms and practices that make reproduction and childbearing unsafe. Catholics, therefore, join with all people of good will in tackling the scandalous abuses of power and privilege and the unequal access to resources that increase the vulnerability of women and children and impose an intolerably disproportionate health burden on those in low- and middle-income countries.

Throughout history, in its pastoral care and charitable activities, in its advocacy and witness, in its hospitals and shelters, the Catholic Church has

been a powerful resource in support of family wellbeing, including maternal and child health. However, the Catholic Church must also attend to the corrective dimension of justice by acknowledging the times when its own understandings and practices of reproductive justice have fallen short and missed the mark.

In the British Isles, there are shameful cases concerning the incarceration of unmarried mothers in Magdalen Laundries, the covert sale of adopted children to US couples, the deportation of orphans to Australia as cheap labor, and the cruel and demeaning treatment and sexual exploitation of vulnerable women and children by Catholics in positions of trust. On the wane are stigmatizing attitudes towards “illegitimate” children, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and infertile couples, though casual gossip, deceptions, denials, secrecy, and cover-ups concerning pregnancy, paternity, miscarriage, abortion, and adoption remain commonplace. By undertaking a personal, communal, and institutional examination of conscience, Catholics are asked to identify current and historical failures to promote justice with respect to matters of reproduction, including harmful teachings, cultures, habits and organizational structures, as well as individual failings.

Flawed thinking and deficient theologies, which foster damaging attitudes and behaviors, have not been universally eradicated. Non-negotiable norms, such as the inherent dignity of women and the equality of the sexes, are proclaimed but not always put into practice. Presenting procreation as a sacred duty and considering large families as praiseworthy place a heavy burden on women’s health and wellbeing. Willing submission and personal sacrifice have been held up as feminine ideals, while the euphemistic language of marital debt and conjugal right has functioned as an ecclesiastical trump-card for husbands to compel their wives, based on the axiomatic principle that justice renders what is due. The paradigmatic patriarchal family, with its *pater familias*, takes its cue as domestic (little) church from its big ecclesiastical brother.

With regards to sex and reproduction, the Catholic Church has tended to operate from an ethic of sin and judgement rather than one of love and justice. Within a framework of self-critical honesty and restorative justice, we Catholics should strive to change the discourse. We must carry out an audit of what needs to be corrected and determine how best to repair the damage. We should admit our errors, pray for forgiveness, and make space for God's healing Spirit.

Kathryn Lilla Cox (USA)

In reading our collective responses to the questions posed to this group, the universality of shame, harm, double standards, the need to re-think various aspects of magisterial teaching and approaches stood out. The particular descriptions of cultural manifestations of reproductive injustice are heart-rending. Yet, my colleagues provided hope as well. Simeiqi He's intercultural approach shows how the Catholic Church can learn from the Chinese Church's wisdom. Eric Genilo's outline for change needed by the Philippine's bishops could serve as a roadmap for other bishops' conferences. He highlights the need for the bishops to adopt a listening stance regarding reproductive justice. They need to learn from their flocks. Virginia Saldanha provides another needed roadmap for reproductive justice. It is a map that does away with double standards for women and men, a map that has no place for rape or other types of sexual violence, and a map that requires us to remember and educate each other that priests are not God. Sadly, Saldanha names the reality that despite proclaiming the equal dignity of women as *imago Dei*, on the ground practices continue to denigrate and treat women as less than equal. Julie Clague raises fundamental moral themes regarding the need to reform moral norms, do away with shaming techniques, and own and repent for reproductive injustices perpetrated by the Church in various ways. She eloquently reminds us that we need to draw upon the Holy Spirit for the work of transformation. Thank you!

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