

“Falling Short of Our Humanity”: Shame and Queer Catholic Families

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Abstract: Queer Catholic Families (QCF) negotiate a complicated landscape of belonging and exclusion in the church that they love. In this dynamic, shame figures as a theological and moral qualifier of their experience when observed through the lens of the Catholic Church's teaching on sexuality and gender. Understanding how shame is experienced in these families, how it deepens a rift between families and the community, and how families find ways to nourish and preserve their links to the Church, ought to be a primary ethical and pastoral task of the Church.

IN THIS BRIEF CONTRIBUTION I ATTEND TO A FEW REFERENCE points, definitions, and theological touchstones that impact the lives of what I like to refer to as “Queer Catholic Families” (QCF). We are families whose narratives include any of a myriad identifiers of queerness: same-sex parents or partners as heads of household (married or otherwise); non-binary, transgender, or queer family members; and other identifiers. Our families are also committed to the Catholic tradition, its sacramentality, sense of justice, community building, and the mystery of a God who creates from love and becomes incarnate in the realities of a suffering world. In the contexts of these families, *shame* takes on an almost existential modality. As I shall explain below, for QCF shame ultimately relates to some sense that we have failed at the project of being human in light of God’s invitation to be part of the mystery of faith as expressed in the teachings of the Catholic Church.

In what follows, I provide a brief working definition of shame that ties it directly to one’s most profound sense of being human. Second, I engage Martha Nussbaum’s discussion of primitive versus productive shame. Nussbaum’s understanding of primitive shame, which she relates to a child-like narcissistic drive to control one’s moral world, serves as a bridge to understand how shame might function in QCF making sense of our own dignity amid a church still struggling to understand how to fully include us. I close with some modest

suggestions of what the church could do to steer its relationship with QCF toward a more holistic and compassionate encounter.

REFERENCE POINTS

Shame is often experienced as a deep resentment against the self for failing to meet personal or communal standards or norms achievable/possible and necessary for one's identity.¹ This could be one's identity in relation to something or someone else (one's role as a spouse or one's role within an institution or job). The experiences I consider in this piece relate shame more closely to a feeling that one has failed to meet the standards of what it means to be a human being.² It is a basic response to the sense that we have fallen short of the essential principles for being human as established by a particular body (religious institution, family or clan, society or form of government) entrusted with the authority to lay out the content of such principles. In this respect, shame as an emotion related to one's sense of moral state of being is linked to virtue ethics where the goal of moral practices is to become a certain kind of person or to perfect a specific trait (such as justice, hospitality, or friendship).³ The person experiencing shame believes they are failing at practicing the trait of being human.

In Martha Nussbaum's *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, she explores two possibilities for shame: what she calls *primitive shame*, typically experienced as children when our psyches are less developed; and what she considers *productive shame*, a more positive experience of shame that occurs as we realize that we have failed to meet some standard important to us and our identity and that we deem achievable.⁴

¹ Heidi L. Maibom offers a good review of commonly held understandings of shame in "The Descent of Shame," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 80, no. 3 (2010): 566–594.

² Maibom puts it thusly: "The most common view about shame is that it is an intensely negative emotion directed at the self as result of having failed to live up to some standard, ideal, or norm. By contrast to guilt, which focuses on the action performed, *shame focuses on the self as a whole*. Even when shame is precipitated by an action, it is not the action, as such, but *being the sort of person who would perform such an action, that the person is ashamed of*" ("The Descent of Shame," 568, emphasis added).

³ See, for example, the treatment of shame within Aquinas's virtue ethics in Heribertus Kwi Kristanto, "Aquinas on Shame, Virtue, and the Virtuous Person," *The Thomist* 84, no. 2 (2020): 263–291, and Jennifer Herdt's "Guilt and Shame in the Development of Virtue," in *Developing the Virtues: Integrating Perspectives*, ed. Julia Anna, Darcia Narvaez, and Nancy E. Snow (Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton University Press, 2004), electronic version. All page numbers refer to this electronic version.

The first, bad kind is experienced as an affront to the self and one's world because the situation that causes the shame is perceived as contrary to an immature (juvenile or what Nussbaum calls *narcissistic*) understanding of one's completeness. In this case, the shame associated with the realization that one has fallen short of some expectation of what is normative for our families, institutions, friend groups, cultures, or religious community, results in expressions of rage against the self and anyone perceived as contributing to that failure. It leads to shutting down and becoming secluded or excluded from those dimensions in life that created the contradiction in perceptions of the self that resulted in the experience of shame.⁵ Nussbaum relates this to narcissistic tendencies in children and narcissistic adults who come to understand their world as fully fitting their sense of self and the norms established to fully inhabit that world, norms that in children are absolute yet incomplete in terms of what it means to be fully human.

The "good" or productive kind of shame also comes from an experience of failing achievable norms required for being fully who we ought to be, but oftentimes comes from a much more developed self invited—by the self or trusted others—to consider one's actions as falling short of who we ought to be as part of a family, community, or society as a necessary step for self-improvement. Productive shame considers the norm or standard in question achievable, and the good it strives for as aligned with one's purpose and identity.

Nussbaum suggests that the shame produced from reading Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dime*⁶ is an example of productive shame. Other words that could be used here instead of "shame" are "awakening" or "conscientization." That is, many who live in relative economic security (roof over one's head, food predictably available, medical care also reliably available) develop a sense of inadequacy about their standing *vis-à-vis* the norms of being human with respect to US society upon reading *Nickel and Dime* and its insights about the life of the working poor. Ehrenreich's experiences a low-wage worker challenge our ideals about equality and democracy, and the myth that hard work ought to be enough for people to achieve

⁵ Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 301–307.

⁶ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting by in America* (Holt, 2008). Ehrenreich's book documents the author's experience working minimum wage jobs in various industries and the hardships this entailed: limited living conditions, difficulties accessing food and health care, inability to take care of auto repairs and other expenses that impacted her day-to-day life. The book also details how class marks communities in the United States, making it very difficult for minimum wage workers to have access to experiences that have no actual cost to them but that represent belonging to specific income brackets, as well as the humiliating treatment of low-wage service workers by higher wage earners.

economic security of some sort, a myth that the book destroys very effectively.

For Nussbaum, this kind of shame is productive. It causes us to question positions we might have solidly held about reality (“poor people simply do not work hard enough to get the things they need”) and moves us to point the finger at our national greed, indifference, and economic myths and the ways we have been shaped by and participate in these myths. For Nussbaum, this productive shame may motivate solidarity and transformation of one’s ideas, ways of participating in politics, and ways of relating to people we might have judged and excluded from our social circles before reading the book.⁷ Theologically, I believe the words “awakening” or “conscientization” are more fitting than the phrase “productive shame” because these highlight the transformative power of the initial negative feelings of having failed at the human project of building a just and equitable economy (in the case of Ehrenreich’s example).

For Nussbaum, primitive and productive shame are tied to an experience of deep failing in our humanity but lead to different experiences of resolving this tension or contradiction of the self. There are ways in which Nussbaum’s characterization of good and bad forms of shame is helpful. I am still struggling with whether public shame, especially with respect to the law, can be a good motivator for personal and social change, one of the elements explored in Nussbaum’s book. However, her discussion of shame in relation to narcissism—as a sense of the self and one’s world that is underdeveloped, childishly absolute and inflexible, and closely linked to actions rather than ways of being—clarifies how shame operates in church teaching on sexuality and gender.

SHAME AND QUEER FAMILIES IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

While in essence church teaching on sexuality and gender is profoundly grounded in a more global sense of being human, this teaching is encapsulated and taught or disseminated as the morality of specific acts whose very essence threatens the humanity of the doer. The most recent declaration from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, evidences this central connection in the Catholic tradition between the sexual morality of specific acts and human dignity.⁸ In this sense church teaching on sexuality and gender mirrors Nussbaum’s understanding of shame as child-like narcissism.

⁷ Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 308–315.

⁸ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita, On Human Dignity*, April 4, 2024. The brief nature of this contribution does not allow a full discussion of this important document for the topic at hand. I point to other authors who have already

In her discussion on shame, Nussbaum refers to the category of “disgust.” This often seems to be the reaction that establishes a link between the kinds of categories, situations, or behaviors associated with shame and the policies established to prevent these from becoming commonplace. Disgust is a reaction associated with a situation considered to be outside the bounds of what it means to be human.⁹ Discussions on the legitimacy of pornography, for example, often include the category of disgust, as do violence in film, food combinations or production deemed supremely unhealthy, and cruel and abusive treatment of animals. Disgust confronts us with the judgment that what is before us falls way below the standards of humanity or some firmly established and shared understanding of what it means to be human.

Church teaching on sexual morality and gender identity is not framed in the category of disgust, but within an established sense of what it means to be human. Use of the sexual organs and the sexual act are permissible only within marriage, only between a man and a woman, and only for the unitive and procreative purposes. Anything that falls outside of that is considered against our humanity, that is, utilizing parts of our human bodies for purposes contrary to human nature.¹⁰

For many, church teaching on sexuality and gender is about judging the humanity of a person, narrowly defined by specific acts. In the church’s perception—and here I am talking about the larger church community that includes clergy and the faithful—persons involved in same-sex sexual activity or who are transgender fall short of the norm for humanity (as do people whose sexual practices are not

made careful analysis of the declaration in light of the experiences of queer Catholics. See Jeannine Gramick, “Pope Provides Sr. Jeannine a Clarification of ‘Dignitas Infinita,’” May 1, 2024, www.newwaysministry.org/2024/05/01/pope-offers-clarification-to-sr-jeannine-about-dignitas-infinita/; Daniel Horan, “The Strawman of ‘Gender Theory’ in the Vatican’s New Document,” April 8, 2024, www.newwaysministry.org/2024/04/08/the-strawman-of-gender-theory-in-the-vaticans-new-document/; Mary Hunt, “Comparing Gender Transition and Surrogacy to War and Human Trafficking, Vatican’s ‘Dignitas Infinita’ Is an Intellectually Embarrassing and Harmful Mess,” *Religion Dispatches*, May 2, 2024, religiondispatches.org/comparing-gender-transition-and-surrogacy-to-war-and-human-trafficking-vaticans-dignitas-infinita-is-an-intellectually-embarrassing-and-harmful-mess/.

⁹ Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, chapter 4.

¹⁰ In *Humanae Vitae*, no. 13, for example, Pope Paul VI insists that: “They [humanity] must also recognize that an act of mutual love which impairs the capacity to transmit life which God the Creator, through specific laws, has built into it, frustrates His design which constitutes the norm of marriage, and contradicts the will of the Author of life. Hence to use this divine gift while depriving it, even if only partially, of its meaning and purpose, is equally repugnant to the nature of man and of woman, and is consequently in opposition to the plan of God and His holy will.”

confined to the church's moral teaching on sexuality and reproduction). Unique to how these teachings are understood, these specific acts render a judgment against the person's humanity, rather than being perceived as directed more against the proper use of the sexual and reproductive organs. Really no other dimension of moral doctrine is understood in this way. Sins, in general, are actions for which we must atone and might impact our humanity over time, but the acts themselves are not seen as reducing our humanity.

This is most commonly observed in people's decision to refrain from participating in the sacraments. Once again, very few sins are commonly understood by the faithful in general to place a person outside the bounds of being ready for participating in the sacraments as sexual sins. Surely, the person who embezzles hundreds of thousands of dollars impacting the lives of their employees and their families ought to consider participating in the sacrament of reconciliation before participating in the sacrament of the Eucharist, but there is little public sense that this ought to be so. However, a person who is divorced and remarried or a same-sex couple permanently bear the mark of falling short of the humanity needed to partake in the sacrament of the Eucharist, for example.

For many, the contradiction between their marital status, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity and the moral teaching of the church as expressed in recent years is a source of sorrow, but it does not always result in a sense of shame.¹¹ The shame settles in from the very public nature of the church's discussions on these topics in a way that singles out sexual sins as particularly corrosive of one's humanity and therefore deemed worthy of being excluded in a rather public way. Shame is also present when a person has to make the calculus of whether they will participate in their church community and the Eucharist and risk causing scandal. The experience of contradiction between church teaching and their own acceptance of their identity and sexuality, or the decision they have had to take for the sake of their integrity outside the bounds of marriage (for example, leaving an abusive marriage or having a spouse leave as a result of that spouse's infidelity) become an occasion of shame when the faithful has to calculate how their community and their priest or faith leader will react if such a person were to participate in the sacraments. Community stigma, the humiliation of being made to feel less than fully human, is what gives rise to the occasion of shame, not the contradiction between one's life circumstances and official church teaching on marriage, family, and sexuality.

¹¹ Angele Deguara, "Sexual Morality and Shame Among Catholics Whose Lifestyle Does Not Conform to Church Teaching, *Sexuality and Culture* 23, no. 1 (2019): 793–810, [dx.doi.org.proxy3.noblenet.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09591-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09591-w).

Let us return to some of Nussbaum's claims about what she calls "primitive shame," which she relates to narcissism. Throughout her discussion Nussbaum is paying attention to where shame fits in the raising and development of children. Primitive shame, the kind that is not constructive and that leads to rage, distortions of perception, and self-hate, is associated with the underdeveloped psyche of children and narcissistic tendencies that do not allow for complex moral development, have difficulty adapting one's world view to challenging situations, and seek to conform people to one's moral sense of right or wrong.¹²

This reading of primitive shame in Nussbaum is akin to moral paternalism in the church: while spiritual development is fostered throughout the faithful's life, there is a strong paternalism in the church's communicating of sexual morality. For example, the person who has gone through extensive internal and communal consideration as to whether to divorce an unfaithful spouse, cohabitate with a longtime partner, or begin hormone therapy to align their body (or that of a minor under their care) with their gender identity—in other words, persons who have engaged in serious examination of conscience regarding matters of sexual morality and their gender—is ultimately treated by the church as a child (psychologically incapable of considering the full implications of their decision), excluded, and made to feel like they are frivolously making a momentary choice that radically alters their humanity. In these cases, the church exhibits the traits Nussbaum labels as "narcissistic," while also promoting unnecessary primitive shame in the faithful who see themselves as judged by church teaching and the varied public expressions of this teaching in various media.

In this respect, Bridget Burke Ravizza's *The Sacrament of Same-Sex Marriage: An Inclusive Vision for the Catholic Church*, practices a methodology that counters the paternalism of the church's promotion of its teaching on sexual and reproductive ethics.¹³ By listening attentively to same-sex couples who have carefully, prayerfully, committedly, united in marriage, Burke Ravizza highlights the myriad of ways in which these couples are actively fulfilling the requirements of the sacrament of marriage. These couples' witness to their committed and enduring love for each other and their faith counters the church's judgement of same-sex marriage as a frivolous and momentary choice that denies the full humanity of the couple. The couples whose stories Burke Ravizza describes so attentively continually reflect on matters already mentioned here: their

¹² Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity*, 292.

¹³ Bridget Burke Ravizza, *The Sacrament of Marriage: An Inclusive Vision for the Catholic Church* (Sheed and Ward, 2024).

desire to participate in the sacraments, the church's teaching on sexuality and gender, the potential for scandal, their love and need of the community, and how best to witness as a couple to their Christian faith.

SHAME AS A PASTORAL QUESTION: POPE FRANCIS'S *AMORIS LAETITIA*, *FIDUCIA SUPPLICANS*, AND *DIGNITAS INFINITA*

Shame as it relates to QCFs is a complicated, but ultimately pastoral question. Pope Francis's trajectory that includes comments such as the famous "Who am I to judge?" when asked early on in his papacy about the moral (and therefore able to participate in the sacraments) status of LGBTQ folks, and his opening to divorced and remarried couples during various papal visits and the Synod on the Family, points to a pastoral rather than a legalistic position regarding people's experiences of living and loving in ways that contradict Catholic teaching on sexual morality. Indeed, *Amoris Laetitia* asks priests and other pastoral agents to walk closely with families who find themselves in "irregular" situations, and consider on a case by case basis whether they ought to take part in the sacrament of the Eucharist.¹⁴ The 2023 declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* allowing the blessing of persons in same-sex relationships (note that the blessing is not of the relationship itself) also demonstrates a more pastoral approach to the contradictions that historically have caused much shame among the faithful.¹⁵

However, if we understand shame as being made to feel less than human or the perception of falling short of the ideal or paradigmatic human, Francis's pastoral approaches are not enough. Francis's pastoral approach with respect to the standing of the faithful in irregular situations regarding their marital status, sexual orientation, or gender identity takes the path of private pastoral accompaniment—certainly a necessary part of extending a sense of wholeness to these faithful. However, the research shows that there is a public or communal dimension to the exclusion and shame felt by many in the church that these approaches do not necessarily address because they do not directly impact church teaching on sexual morality or *how* this teaching is communicated to the faithful.¹⁶ Participants in a study on

¹⁴ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family*, no 243, www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

¹⁵ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Fiducia Supplicans: On the Pastoral Meaning of Blessings*, www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20231218_fiducia-supplicans_en.html.

¹⁶ Heidi Meibom's argument is, in fact, that more classic views on shame in the philosophical and theological tradition overlook the social dimensions of this

perceptions of shame among Catholics whose marriages or relationships fall outside the norm “feel that the Church’s teaching contributes significantly to their distress because of the negative image it gives them in the eyes of the religious community from which they feel excluded.”¹⁷

To the private/public split experienced by queer or non-conforming Catholic families, we must add the public shaming that follows each of these pastoral openings toward LGBTQ+ Catholics by Pope Francis, such as his encounter with the leadership of New Ways Ministry during the second gathering of the Synod on Synodality.¹⁸ In the world of Catholic social media there exists a cadre of those who, whether through ecclesial standing or simply popularity within conservative Catholic media, feel authorized to call attention to the sexual lives of persons of faith with derision, disgust, and, yes, shame. These voices often dominate the public sphere, with influence that reaches deep within parishes and pulpits at the expense of QCFs.

Most recently, the declaration from the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith *Dignitas Infinita: On Human Dignity* frames the lives of transgender people as an affront to human dignity.¹⁹ The Magisterium’s insistence on framing conversations regarding gender identity within the perceived evil of “gender ideology,” a confusing phrase that lumps all considerations about gender into a nefarious category, adds more damage to QCF’s sense of wholeness in the church. The declaration seemingly confirms quite publicly that gender-affirming medical care falls short of the human ideal, a profound source of shame for queer individuals and families in the church.

In “What Does the Bible Tell Us About Shame?,” Jewish thinker Lawrence Goodman puts it this way: “In the Hebrew imagination, shame was a state of physical suffering on a continuum with death. It led to a degradation of the body akin to how a body decomposes after burial.”²⁰ This sense of shame aligns with Nussbaum’s understanding

experience; there is an “audience” by which the feelings are measured, supporting the observation that shame within Catholic communities is particularly corrosive to one’s sense of self.

¹⁷ Deguara, “Sexual Morality and Shame,” 798.

¹⁸ Robert Shine, “New Ways Ministry Brings Transgender, Intersex, Ally Catholics for Dialogue with Pope Francis” (October 12, 2024), www.newwaysministry.org/2024/10/12/new-ways-ministry-brings-transgender-intersex-ally-catholics-for-dialogue-with-pope-francis/.

¹⁹ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita: On Human Dignity*, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html.

²⁰ Lawrence Goodman, “What Does the Bible Tell Us About Shame,” *Brandeis University The Jewish Experience*, March 2, 2022, www.brandeis.edu/jewish-experience/history-culture/2022/march/shame-bible-lipscomb.html.

of disgust, shame as finding oneself judged as falling short of the human ideal because of some action, social norm, or expectation, whether that action was done to us, we intentionally performed that action or, as in the case of queer families, we have, in good conscience, come to understand those actions as aligning with God's will for us.

The public or communal dimension of shame in the church is a much bigger pastoral problem than the approaches Francis has enacted, significant as these are. As a queer family in the church, we have experienced the shame of having children who openly—and for good reasons—reject the church for its teaching on same-sex relations, gender identity, and how it views them. We are no longer *that* family with four children who fully participate in the life of the church. Rather, we are now a couple who on the outside seem to have failed or not done enough to keep their children in the church. All the while this is not seen as an issue of family pastoral care but, rather, an issue of statistics on the disaffiliation of youth from the life of the church (an issue not seen as a pastoral problem).

In the study mentioned earlier about shame among Catholics whose life situation does not align with Catholic teaching on sex and marriage,

Study participants may have experienced some internal dilemmas about their non-conforming lifestyles when they initially found themselves in such situations. However, eventually they managed to overcome most of these doubts as long as they are not within the context of a religious congregation. They learned to neutralise any guilt they may have had. . . . Non-conforming Catholics tend to redefine their notion of sin in a way which departs from official Church teaching. In reconstructing their sexual morality, they redeem themselves of any wrongdoing in the eyes of God. . . . Such neutralisation techniques enable non-conforming Catholics to clear their conscience.²¹

Both their sense of who God is and who they are before God leads the faithful to find grace in their situation: "Indeed, the study participants tend to be convinced of God's blessing, to the extent of seeing their relationship as part of God's plan even if it goes against the morality of his church. Indeed, they tend to legitimise their sexuality or their lifestyle choices in terms of God's plan for them."²² The couples interviewed by Burke Ravizza in *The Sacrament of Same-Sex Marriage* likewise witness to this sense of peace and grace that comes from years of prayerful discernment.

²¹ Deguara, "Sexual Morality and Shame," 800.

²² Deguara, "Sexual Morality and Shame," 801.

Certainly, Francis's openings in *Amoris Laetitia* and *Fiducia Supplicans* acknowledged the evidence of this study: the faithful who find themselves in relationships and situations that fall outside of the church's teaching on sexual morality have often found peace and grace within their relationships and choices and seek greater integration and acceptance in the life of the church and the communities they love. But the language of "gender ideology" found in *Dignitas Infinita* strikes against the very dignity of QCF and transgender persons the document seeks to promote. It once again raises the specter of public shame for folks who may already have made peace, in their own ways, with a fractured relationship to the church into which they were baptized.

The framework of a synodal church Pope Francis started leading us to, seems like an important step toward addressing shame among QCF. I see great potential for affirming the lives and experiences of faith and committed and sacramental love of QCF, not only in meetings and audiences with transgender persons and allies, but also in the practice of listening in the Spirit characteristic of the Synod on Synodality. Next steps ought to be marked by efforts to encounter the lives of QCF in ways that are more public, communal, pastoral and, hopefully, with some adjustments made to how Catholic ethics on sexuality and gender are both understood and communicated. Next steps in approaches that begin to address QCF's feelings of falling short of the ideal will need to enable wholeness within the community, an appreciation of queer community members as "Equally Blessed"²³ and, therefore, fully human. **M**

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²³ Call to Action, "Past Partnerships," www.cta-usa.org/partners. Equally Blessed is the name of a coalition of advocacy groups for queer persons and families within the Catholic Church.