

Holding the Tensions: Female Bodily Integrity as an Intrinsic Good

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MY RESPONSE TO THIS SYMPOSIUM'S QUESTION came quickly: to improve dialogue around abortion, we Catholics need to get better at recognizing and sitting with moral tensions. Life is full of messy nuances; rarely (if ever) can we have the peace of mind offered by black and white choices. If we wish to foster more constructive discourse, we must learn to wrestle with the contradictions inherent to human experience. Our sacramental and non-dualistic tradition invites us to inhabit the space between.

When it comes to abortion, the Catholic Church unfortunately has reinforced a dualistic mentality: either one supports legal prohibitions on abortion rights, or one is in violation of Catholic principles. There is no room, it often seems, for those who would work to decrease abortion through means other than legal prohibition, despite data that shows such measures to be effective.¹ I suspect this is why, in homilies, we are much more likely to hear about opposition to abortion than about opposition to other injustices,² and why more than two-thirds of Catholics who attend Mass weekly say that abortion should be illegal in all or most cases.³

¹ See Joseph Wright, "Reducing Abortion in America: Beyond *Roe v. Wade*," Catholics United (August 2008), www3.nd.edu/~cdems/College_Democrats_of_Notre_Dame/College_Democrats_of_Notre_Dame/Issues_files/reducing-abortion-in-america.pdf; and Jonathan Bearak, Anna Popinchalk, Bela Ganatra, Ann-Beth Moller, Özge Tunçalp, Cynthia Beavin, Lorraine Kwok, and Leontine Alkema, "Unintended Pregnancy and Abortion by Income, Region, and the Legal Status of Abortion: Estimates from a Comprehensive Model for 1990–2019," *The Lancet* 8, no. 9 (July 2020): E1152–E1161, [www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30315-6/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30315-6/fulltext).

² Dennis Quinn and Aaron Smith, "Pastors Often Discussed Election, Pandemic, and Racism in Fall of 2020," Pew Research Center (July 8, 2021), www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/07/08/pastors-often-discussed-election-pandemic-and-racism-in-fall-of-2020/; Dahlia Fahmy, "8 Key Findings about Catholics and Abortion," Pew Research Center (October 20, 2020), www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/10/20/8-key-findings-about-catholics-and-abortion/.

³ Gregory A. Smith, "Like Americans Overall, Catholics Vary in their Abortion Views, with Regular Mass Attenders Most Opposed," Pew Research Center (May 23,

Ultimately, it comes down to principle: abortion, as the taking of innocent life, is intrinsically evil—an action never permitted, regardless of circumstance.⁴ Whatever the evidence might suggest about the impracticality of legal restrictions on abortion, at least those restrictions affirm the dignity of unborn persons.

Certainly, amplifying the dignity of unborn life is important. Any time moral claims are being weighed, it is necessary to attend to those whose voices are marginalized or unheard—from those who have been made poor, the person seeking asylum, the unborn, to our nonhuman neighbors. This is what it means to see; to engage in the first step of moral action enjoined by the pastoral cycle of our Catholic social tradition. Problems arise, however, when we refuse to see beyond the scope of our own limited vision—when we refuse to attend to the voices of others whose claims run counter to those we affirm. There will always be tensions, and unless we take time to understand the totality of the experience, our efforts to promote dignity and flourishing will be deficient.

Indeed, Pope Saint John Paul II, referencing *Gaudium et Spes*, tells us that “whatever violates the integrity of the human person” also constitutes an intrinsic evil.⁵ We also read in *Pacem in Terris* that bodily integrity is among our first inalienable rights as human persons.⁶ In our legal tradition, too, bodily integrity is a right all persons—including corpses—possess, and it often outweighs the right to life.⁷ If violating bodily integrity is an intrinsic evil, then it is never permissible to use a woman’s body against her will, regardless of the good we hope to attain.

In other words, those who argue for abortion rights by appeals to bodily integrity are also opposing an intrinsic evil—namely, that of violating the integrity of a woman’s body by forcing her to remain pregnant against her will. This is precisely why it can be logically consistent to be “morally but not legally opposed” to abortion: laws prohibiting abortion may violate a woman’s bodily integrity and, thus, be seen as intrinsically evil. Ultimately, it comes down to principle.

What has occurred to me, however, is that perhaps Catholics struggle to see this tension involved in legislative action on abortion

2022), www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/05/23/like-americans-overall-catholics-vary-in-their-abortion-views-with-regular-mass-attenders-most-opposed/.

⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 80, (August 6, 1993), www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html#%2430.

⁵ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 80.

⁶ John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, no. 11 (April 11, 1963), www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_11041963_pacem_en.html.

⁷ See Bertha Alvarez Manninen, “Rethinking Roe v. Wade: Defending the Abortion Right in the Face of Contemporary Opposition,” *American Journal of Bioethics* 10, no. 12 (2010): 33–46.

because we are not taught that there is a tension. The Church's theology of women focuses primarily on the renunciation of the embodied female self in favor of sacrificial motherhood or virginity. If women's bodies exist for the express purpose of receiving the gift of another, especially through bearing children, then pregnancy never can be a violation of a woman's bodily rights. Steeped in this theological application, Catholics do not recognize the possibility that a woman's bodily agency ever could be distinct from the life of the fetus she carries in her womb, so arguments related to bodily integrity appear simply as "falsehoods,"⁸ rather than as legitimate moral concerns. We struggle to engage in well-rounded, empathetic discourse because we cannot see the female body as good in itself—we have inherited a theological tradition suspicious of women and our bodies.

The roots of this suspicion reach back to the early church and interpretations of Genesis passed down through our tradition. When the author of 1 Timothy, for example, considers that Eve, not Adam, was the one who "was deceived and transgressed" (1 Tim 2:14), he offers these instructions to women: women are to dress modestly, perform good works, "receive instruction silently and under complete control," and have no authority over men (1 Tim 2:9–12). Luckily, he claims, women "will be saved through motherhood" (1 Tim 2:15).

In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, we see echoes of this sentiment: women are called to relinquish their bodies to receive the gifts of femininity—remaining virginal is linked to motherhood, and motherhood is linked to virginity,⁹ because womanhood, we are told, is authentically embodied only when the body is sacrificed and given over to the care of another.¹⁰ This perspective is passed on to Catholic young people through catechetical instruction. Sharon Kanis, SSND, notes the negative implications of teaching the dignity of women in this way: "Rather than emphasizing [a] young girl's relationship with God or her identity as created in the image of God, [teachers] usually accented Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus, as the perfect model of womanhood. Mary's status as virgin and mother placed her beyond imitation; her life as a woman was an unnatural one. The best a young Catholic girl

⁸ See Joseph F. Naumann, "Priorities at the Polls" (October 2020), www.usccb.org/resources/rfp-20-priorities-at-the-polls-bulletin-insert-rev-10-2022.pdf.

⁹ See John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, VI, (August 15, 1988), www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

¹⁰ See John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 11. Echoing *Gaudium et Spes*, John Paul II writes that God intended each woman to be "a person for her own sake, who discovers herself 'by means of a sincere gift of self,'" and expounds on this in no. 18: "In conceiving and giving birth to a child, the woman 'discovers herself through a sincere gift of self.'"

could do was to choose which of Mary's roles she would emulate: that of the pure, untouched virgin or the obedient, loving mother."¹¹

Women have always known the dualism present in these teachings on womanhood to be unjustified and rooted in suspicions toward women and our bodies. St. Teresa of Ávila, Doctor of the Church, described the matter bluntly in the sixteenth century: "Since the world's judges are sons of Adam and all of them men, there is no virtue in women that they do not hold suspect."¹² Today's women, especially the young generations, are skeptical of the moral norms that derive from such theology. As one of my students—raised Catholic—boldly stated, she developed a sense of the dignity of female bodies in spite of the teachings of the Church, not because of them.

Now, like all dualisms, the tensions will not be assuaged by ignoring or eradicating difference. In the relationship of mother and fetus we are offered a unique image of the unity-in-difference that is our call, and the ability to bring forth new life is a powerful expression of embodied feminine love. But this is not the only expression, and the fact of difference should not compel us to express ourselves only through that particularly feminine experience. If the biological processes that occur in women's bodies are indeed constitutive of our being, then surely we must note that the pregnant woman's body, generative and strong, actively forms, nurtures, and delivers another being—not without sacrifice, to be sure, but certainly not passively. When we value a woman's body as an instrument of agency rather than pure receptivity, we cannot remain blind to the tensions that arise when abortion laws infringe on a woman's right to bodily autonomy.

I suggest that when we begin to focus more on affirming the dignity of women and their embodied agency, the Catholic understanding of justice as right relationships will be more holistically applied and better received. Indeed, if Catholics hope to persuade women that efforts to protect fetal life are not meant to undermine their dignity, we have to embrace a more robust theology of women's dignity. Catholics must see that female bodies are intrinsically good, even as we recognize that the bodies of women offer particularly compelling insights into our fundamental relationality. Our social principle of rights and responsibilities can guide our efforts at moral persuasion here. For when women do not have rights, it seems disingenuous to require them to carry out corresponding responsibilities. The black and white dualistic approach to abortion legislation that characterizes much Catholic discourse must be left behind, not to diminish our commitment to the dignity of the unborn, but to recognize the equal

¹¹ Sharon Kanis, *My Body, My Self: A Narrative Study of the Relationship Between Embodiment and Women's Spiritual Self-Identity* (PhD Diss., Union Institute and University, 2002), 3.

¹² Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, Chapter 3.

import of women, “in whose bodies,” Christyne Neff reminds us, “these dilemmas unfold.”¹³

Nothing less than fullness of life for everyone in the entire community of being is what God’s justice invites. But we are limited creatures, and though our consciousness can apprehend this web of relationships, we are hard-pressed to act in ways that promote the flourishing of everyone at all times. This is the gift and tragedy of human existence. As Catholics, our discourse should reflect the deep conviction that even our most just efforts may be fraught with moral ambiguity; we should avoid, as Pope Francis exhorts, “the simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil.”¹⁴ In other words, we have to be willing to hold the tensions. **M**

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¹³ Christyne L. Neff, “Woman, Womb, and Bodily Integrity,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 3, no. 2 (1991): 327–353.

¹⁴ Pope Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress” (September 24, 2015), www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html.