

Catholic Higher Education and Student Formation in a Post-*Roe* World: A Proposal for Women's Personhood and Reproductive Autonomy

María Teresa Dávila

CATHOLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES consider student formation one of the central elements of their mission. We spend energy, financial and intellectual resources, and a lot of public relations capital considering, designing, and carrying out formation-driven curriculum and activities that will shape students into persons animated by the charisms of our founding orders and the essentials of the Catholic faith. In so doing, we hope to be faithful to the Christian tradition while at the same time paying attention and being responsive to the signs of the times, something we are uniquely poised to do as educational institutions where observation, research, and reflection are core, everyday tasks. In the name of student formation, many schools require courses in Catholic studies and Catholic social teaching, assign service learning to accompany the curriculum of most majors, plan retreats, offer mini-courses, catechism, peer leaders and mentoring, and many other activities from offices of Mission and Ministry.

Yet very little of these formational efforts addresses the changing landscape of family life, gender and sexuality, work and vocation, and the way these impact our sense of personhood. Keeping to the doctrinal line on these key topics of everyday life, Catholic higher education does not provide tools for students, especially female or AFAB,¹ to begin to make the connections between the essentials of Catholic teaching and who they are in a changing world.

FORMATION, PERSONHOOD, AND REPRODUCTIVE AUTONOMY

Even before the US Supreme Court decision in the Dobbs case to overturn *Roe v. Wade* by returning the abortion question back to each state, the evolving character of personhood—especially women's

¹ AFAB: Assigned female at birth. The phrase is used to include males with female anatomy.

personhood—was not part of the task of formation.² Catholic higher education would make room for the changing role of women in the workplace, politics, leadership, industry, science, and the academy, while ignoring how these impacted women's understanding of ourselves as persons. Catholic higher education boxed questions of female personhood that had to do with gender, sexuality, and reproduction within the doctrinal guidelines of the church's moral teaching (and often in line with Saint John Paul II's non-magisterial theology of the body), never to interact with the changes experienced by women in other areas of society eventually integrated (sometimes with hesitation or resistance) into Catholic higher education. This made for an all the more salient troubling bifurcation as this post-*Roe* moment has Catholic women and allies across the nation asking hard questions about family life, gender expectations, reproductive autonomy and justice, among other topics.

For example, in June 2022 Catholic moral philosopher Rachel Lu hinted at this bifurcation and the troubling impact it has on our contemporary understanding of motherhood and the personhood of women:

Mothers are taken for granted because their defining contribution is natural and therefore expected. It is built into the female body itself. The act of becoming a mother often simply arises in the course of married life. The woman can rise to the occasion, or not. Mothering, meanwhile, happens in the hidden places: behind closed doors, within closed wombs, at quiet bedsides. Historically, it rarely seemed necessary to incentivize this form of service or inspire young women to rise to it. What else were they going to do with their lives?³


² My use of the term "personhood" here is twofold. Firstly, I hope to evoke the question of personhood that has overwhelmed discussion on abortion with a focus on the life of the unborn, seldom applied to the life of the mother. Many pro-life efforts, especially legal challenges to the right to abortion resort to ascribing personhood to human life in utero at various stages of development. Secondly, Catholic anthropology has traditionally avoided discussing personhood in part because it proposes that who we are before God does not change over time, does not evolve, and therefore constitutes an ontologically unchanging characteristic of humanity onto which moral principles are grafted throughout the generations. The limited space of this symposium does not allow for a summary of the discussion on the personhood of women biblically, in ancient and medieval Western thought, or during the Enlightenment, when women's personhood and that of indigenous and black populations was pitted against the personhood of the European male, his reason, industry, colonizing spirit, and the rights that resulted from these traits.

³ Rachel Lu, "The High Cost of Motherhood," *America Magazine*, June 2022, 23, www.americamagazine.org/sites/default/files/issue_pdf/2022/05/19/ARI_June2022.pdf.

While Lu and I reach different conclusions on Catholic responses to a post-*Roe* world,⁴ she outlines how difficult it is in contemporary society to integrate what the Church—and I would argue Catholic higher education alongside it—and society have rent: reproduction, autonomy, and personhood.

POSSIBILITIES FOR CATHOLIC HIGHER EDUCATION

It is true that terms such as “reproductive autonomy” and “reproductive justice” are not in the menu of Catholic social teaching. These terms are typically associated with the pro-choice movement seeking to guarantee that women and AFAB folk are granted the right to decide when their bodies will reproduce, how often, under what conditions, and with whom, all moral considerations that fall far outside the landscape of Church teaching. What would happen if we dedicated formation efforts at our colleges and universities toward reflection and reintegration of key questions of women’s personhood and reproduction? Would we begin to address the assumptions pointed out by Lu that stand in juxtaposition to the evolution of women’s roles in society? Would we be able to acknowledge that something fundamental about how we have understood women’s personhood does not match the actual experience of women in the home, at work, in their religious, cultural, and social lives? Would we come to an understanding of reproductive autonomy and reproductive justice that makes sense within the Catholic moral universe?

A modest proposal includes deploying missional efforts in Catholic higher education to women and gender studies in collaboration with interdisciplinary social justice programs that include theology and the social sciences. Academically rigorous explorations of women’s experiences (family life across diverse communities, gender and society, reproductive health and trends, data emerging from the impact of “trigger laws” being passed in various states across the nation) in light of the mission of Catholic colleges and universities can help integrate student formation with the lived experiences of our female and AFAB students. It may also set the stage for considering questions of reproductive autonomy as integral to personhood and honest engagement with the signs of the times for women in the US, and perhaps even globally. 

María Teresa Dávila, PhD, is Associate Professor and Chair of Religious and Theological Studies at Merrimack College, North Andover (MA). Her main areas of study include racial and migrant

⁴ See María Teresa Dávila, “4 Ways the Church Can Get Ready for a Post-*Roe* World,” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 4, 2022 and “Being Pro-Life and Feminist after *Roe* Includes Access to Contraception,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 19, 2022, www.ncronline.org/authors/mt-d-vila.

justice, the option for the poor and liberation theology, public and political theology, and the ethics of the use of force.