

Wisdom from a Reproductive Justice Framework

Emily Reimer-Barry

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION IN A POST-*ROE* WORLD will not be an easy task. Abortion is not only a medical and moral question, but also a political one. What does reasoned reflection and civil dialogue look like, and how can Catholic leaders—lay and clergy—model it?

Before getting to my specific recommendations regarding this topic, I would suggest that there are two preliminary questions that should always be asked: what is the purpose of any conversation? Whose voices should be centered? As a feminist Catholic theologian, my goals are to support pregnant people in their discernment and create resources that emphasize structural support and social justice. My position is that in the US context pregnant people's voices should be centered, especially those of women of color. The male-dominated ecclesial structures of Catholicism and my own positionality as white render this goal of centering women of color particularly challenging.

Given these broader presuppositions, how should we change the conversation? I offer three suggestions. First, we must do a better job of listening. Much of the current discourse within the Catholic Church betrays an inability to listen to the stories of women. When even Pope Francis compares abortion to a woman hiring a hitman to take care of a problem,¹ our church has seriously missed the mark. Such language fosters a sense of moral superiority on behalf of those eager to condemn women as murderers even before they understand the moral reasoning and discernment that pregnant people report in actual cases of abortion.² Moral absolutism too frequently sacrifices truth in the quest for simplicity and clarity. Truth is messy and particular. We need to make space for the complexity of abortion. In theological debates,

¹ Livia Borghese, "Pope Likens Abortion to 'Hiring a Hitman,'" *CNN*, May 26, 2019, www.cnn.com/2019/05/26/europe/pope-francis-abortions-hitman-rome-intl.

² Rebecca Todd Peters, "Listening to Women: Examining the Moral Wisdom of Women Who End Pregnancies," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 49, no. 2 (2023): 290–313.

this means recognizing competing goods and values at stake and rejecting simplistic answers.³

Second, we need to cultivate self-awareness and greater attention to the limits of our own lived histories and the epistemologies that shape our thinking. I experienced deep joy and gratitude each time I learned I was pregnant. But I also know what it feels like to take a pregnancy test hoping that the result will be negative. I had to borrow money from my parents to pay for an unpaid maternity leave I knew I needed for my mental health. I know what it feels like to return to a workplace after maternity leave grateful for a full-time infant day care program run by a non-Catholic church in the neighborhood, feeling at the same time betrayed by one's own faith community, unwilling to offer such support. I know from personal experience that pregnancy is not easy, and that childbirth can be very painful and scary. I grow impatient with clerical leaders who propose solutions that fail to consider the very real difficulties and even dangers of pregnancy for women. I also know that my experiences do not match the experiences of all pregnant people. White women have reproductive privilege in the US, and "privileges are not something to be dismissed or ignored, but used to ensure that everyone enjoys them."⁴ Scholars of intersectionality discourse invite us to recognize how knowledge is structured by inequalities of race, gender, and class;⁵ asking whose voices are given more space and credibility in our discussion of abortion is an important ethical question. We should approach our work with humility, recognizing that each voice is but one piece of a larger symphony and that no one speaks to everyone's experiences. We should recognize that good intent does not equate with good impact; we should care about the impact of our words and of our silences.

Third, we should pay attention to the research that warns us about the tendency of position labels to create unnecessary barriers to dialogue, particularly the labels "pro-life" and "pro-choice." Sociologist Tricia C. Bruce and her team of scholars explain that labels are often polarizing, oversimplifying, and inaccurate.⁶ Rather than fostering thoughtful dialogue, such labels serve to simply dismiss

³ Cristina L. H. Traina, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Unwanted Pregnancy, Mercy, and Solidarity," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no. 4 (2018): 658–681.

⁴ Caroline R. McFadden, "Reproductively Privileged: Critical White Feminism and Reproductive Justice Theory," in *Radical Reproductive Justice: Foundations, Theory, Practice, Critique*, ed. Loretta J. Ross, Lynn Roberts, Erika Derkas, Whitney Peoples, and Pamela Bridgewater Toure (New York: Feminist, 2017), 241.

⁵ Vivian M. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality: Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 160.

⁶ Tricia C. Bruce, *How Americans Understand Abortion: A Comprehensive Interview Study of Abortion Attitudes in the US* (Notre Dame, IN: McGrath Institute for Church Life, 2020), 4.

another's viewpoint before engaging it. Thus, they are intellectually lazy and, in fact, short circuit constructive conversations before they even start. Catholic discourse—given its commitments to reason and fruitfully seeking common ground—should especially avoid using such labels.

For the same reasons, Catholics should take seriously constructive efforts to move beyond these polarizing labels. Recently, for example, one Catholic scholar labelled the phrase reproductive justice as a euphemism.⁷ His claim suggests that when scholars use the term reproductive justice, they are simply creating a nice word for abortion. In doing so, he simply dismissed decades of women's scholarship—a discourse rooted in the experiences of marginalized women in the US context, with decades of research to support it—without doing the hard work of making the counter-argument. This sort of rhetorical move is disrespectful and contrary to our vocational call as theologians.

Now is not the time to use polarizing labels, tired analogies, or to dismiss blithely decades of women's scholarship. On the contrary, reproductive justice is the best framework I have found for conceptualizing the inherent value of maternal *and* prenatal life, the moral agency of the pregnant person, and the structural injustices that prevent pregnant people from choosing to parent even when they express ambivalence or sorrow about a decision to terminate a pregnancy. Those who have not taken the time to listen carefully believe that reproductive justice is all about abortion. It is not.⁸ For decades, reproductive justice advocates have held that justice for pregnant women requires affordable health care for all, attention to racial disparities in maternal and infant mortality, affordable child care, equal pay for working women, family and medical leave/bonding policies that enable women to recover physically from childbirth before returning to work, comprehensive sexual education that includes honest conversations with pre-teens and teenagers about all of the social realities they are facing, an end to human trafficking and sexual violence, and real conversations about consent and hookup culture—among many other social goods and moral issues. Many of these are common ground and nonpartisan issues that Catholics can get behind, if we are willing to change the conversation in both church spaces and the public square. If we are to be successful, we will need to start by listening to women, cultivating self-awareness, and

⁷ David Cloutier, "A Defining Conflict," *Commonweal Magazine* (September 8, 2022), www.commonwealmagazine.org/defining-conflict.

⁸ Loretta J. Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 70.

rejecting the temptation to adopt dismissive labels in place of actual dialogue. **M**

Emily Reimer-Barry, PhD, is Associate Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of San Diego. She teaches courses in theological ethics utilizing feminist and anti-racist pedagogies. Her articles have appeared in *Theological Studies*, *Theology and Sexuality*, *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, and the *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*. Her research explores themes in fundamental moral theology, including the role of experience in theological method, as well as topics that probe the relationship between social justice and sexuality, including HIV-prevention, birth control, gender justice in marriage traditions, and reproductive justice.