The Church in the World:
Secular Morality and the Challenge of Gender

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I am not a theologian. I am a sociologist who has been deeply concerned for some time by the perception of an increasing and, in my view, dangerous disjunction between societal morality and church morality on issues of gender and sexual mores. This disjunction is problematic for both, for secular morality as well as for church morality. Today I must restrict myself to address the dangers which such a disjunction entails for the future of the Church. Obviously the disjunction is equally problematic for developments in secular morality, particularly when the voice of the Church is not heard properly due to a crisis of legitimacy originating precisely in such a disjunction. I do not claim any theological competence in these matters. But I hope that my critical sociological reflections can be of help for new theological reflection within the Church.

The relationship between societal and church morality throughout the history of Christianity has been a complex and mutually reciprocal one. In a somewhat simplified formulation one could argue that roughly from the time of the Constantinian establishment when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire till the eighteenth century the predominant direction of influence was marked by attempts of the Church to Christianize the saeculum, that is, to make secular society and the people living in it “Christian.” Charles Taylor has offered us one of the most persuasive accounts of the diverse and recurrent
movements of Christian reform which have contributed in manifold ways to the emergence of our “Secular Age.”

But one could argue that at least since the eighteenth century the direction of influence has been reversed and that increasingly modern secular societal morality has been the one challenging, informing, and influencing church morality. Using again a shorthand formulation, one may say that the key moral principles governing modern societal morality have been the “self-evident truths,” which were formulated most succinctly by the American Revolution:

“That all men (and, we would add today, all women) are created equal,” and “that they are endowed by their Creator with the inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

One could of course legitimately argue that, as was obvious to the Founding Fathers, these modern secular moral principles were in manifold ways related to Christian moral principles. But as the intended and unintended consequences of these moral principles have unfolded and as they found ever greater institutionalization in the various realms of modern societies, the Catholic Church often found itself on the defensive, frequently resisting at first these novel moral developments, then grudgingly accommodating to them, and then finally embracing them as principles grounded in Christian revelation.
The relative tardiness of the Catholic Church in embracing the modern moral crusade of abolition of slavery, and the even more prolonged tardiness in embracing modern individual human rights, most particularly the right of religious freedom, as being grounded in the “sacred dignity of the human person,” can serve as paradigmatic illustrations of the disjunction between evolving secular morality and resisting church morality, and of the resulting typical dynamics of aggiornamento, of catching-up and of discerning theologically the “signs of the times,” which accompany this disjunction.

Already in the middle of the 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville, articulated most poignantly the “providential,” and irresistible moral political force of the modern principle of “equality” of conditions. The imagined egalitarian moral community has been constantly expanding to include within its circle ever larger categories of human persons owed equal dignity and respect: at first bourgeois adult white males only, then progressively workers and the lower classes, women, other races and non-Western people enslaved and colonized by European Christians, and so on.

Presently, the moral principles of life, liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness are converging most dramatically throughout the world around issues of gender equality and sexual morality. While the principle that “all men and women are created equal” is becoming an ever more self-evident truth, the task of
somehow bridging the enormous gap between the norm of gender equality and the appalling reality of unequal worth, unequal status, and unequal access to resources and power which women suffer throughout the world is likely to remain one of the most important historical-political tasks and challenges for all societies and all institutions, including religious ones.

The “gender question” is in many respects the fundamental moral question of our times in the same way as “the social question” was the fundamental moral question from the middle of the 19th century. The Catholic Church, pressed by Catholic dynamics emerging from the grassroots of social Catholic movements has a commendable record of addressing the social question. But when it comes to the gender question, our church, at least our hierarchy and the magisterium, have mainly failed to address theologically the new challenge, contenting itself with reaffirming traditional teachings which fail to come to terms with the radical social transformation and with the signs of the times.

The stillbirth of the 1988 First Draft of the pastoral letter of the US Bishops, Partners in the Mystery of Redemption: A Pastoral Response to Women’s Concerns for Church and Society, offers a reproof of the failure of our Church hierarchy to responsibly face the issue. From the grassroots consultation with approximately 75,000 Catholic women in 100 dioceses, the committee in charge of drafting the document had chosen to discuss the concerns under four headings:
women as persons, women in relationships, women in society, and women in the church. All the issues, but particularly women in the church, have been shelved indefinitely and removed from open public discussion within the Church. But the gender question will not go away. On the contrary, it has only become more urgent.

I would like to address what from a sociological perspective must be viewed as a growing disjunction between societal and church morality by reference to three morally contested issues: the role of women in the Church with particular reference to the ordination of women, the official pronouncements of the Church hierarchy on issues of gender and sexual morality, and the societal moral outrage produced by the clerical sexual abuse of children.

a) The ordination of women and equal gendered access to positions of power, authority, and status within the Church.

While ecclesiologically the Church is to be viewed and apprehended in faith as a sacramental eschatological sign of the Kingdom of God, sociologically as a socio-historical institution in the saeculum, the Catholic Church like any other religious institution can be conceptualized as a “religious regime” that belongs to the City of Man and is analogous in many respects to polities and to economies. In
both cases, the obvious question is the extent to which the system of power relations and the social relations are gendered and unequal.

As a universalist salvation religion Christianity has always offered equal access to salvation and to holiness to male and female. There is no gender discrimination in the eyes of God. As “loving Father,” God expresses a "preferential option" for the weak, the poor, the meek, the orphan, the widow. This is the core prophetic ethical norm that anticipates modern gendered equality as a transcendent principle: “neither Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.”

But sociologically, the Catholic Church is characterized by a dual system of highly differentiated and canonically regulated religious roles. There is, first of all, the sacramental differentiation between ordained priesthood and laity. Additionally, there is the differentiation between, on the one hand, the religious orders which follow the evangelical counsels, and on the other hand, all the secular Christians (including the secular clergy) who live in the world.

The existence of male and female religious orders and the high number of female saints, particularly in the early Church, confirm that there is indeed ungendered, universal access to religious salvation within the *Ecclesia invisibilis*, that is, within the Communion of the Saints. However, within the Catholic Church as *Ecclesia visibilis*, both as public assembly and as a hierarchically and bureaucratically organized episcopal Church, the crucial differentiation is that
between clergy and laity. Priesthood, as the site of sacerdotal/sacramental, magisterial, and administrative/canonical authority is exclusively reserved for males. This is the fundamental issue of patriarchal gender discrimination within a male clerical Church.

The official response of the Catholic male hierarchy to the modern demand for female ordination has been that ordination is of divine origin and therefore unchangeable, since Jesus selected only males as his disciples, who are the links to the apostolic succession of episcopal male priesthood. The hierarchy insists that it has “no authority whatsoever” to change this “divine” injunction and in his 1994 Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotolis* Pope John Paul II attempted to preclude any discussion of this issue in the future by stating that “this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church’s faithful.” The reference to Jesus’s selection of male disciples might be a persuasive socio-cultural argument of historical precedent in accordance with the cultural patriarchal premises of the apostolic age, but it is not a very well-grounded theological argument with scriptural support. Indeed, the male character of the priesthood was such taken for granted cultural premise throughout the history of the Church, so much part of social *doxa* or what Taylor calls “the unthought,” that it was unnecessary to provide a serious theological justification for it. Only after the modern democratic revolution put into question any form of gender discrimination has been a theological justification
required. The justifications offered so far, in the 1976 Declaration *Inter Insigniores* under Pope Paul VI and in *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, are extremely thin in size and light in theological argumentation.

Moreover, even if some theological consensus may persist still for some time that women should be excluded from the sacerdotal/sacramental function, there will be greater difficulty in providing persuasive theological and moral rationales for excluding women, particularly women religious, from greater administrative power within the church, including the Curia and the College of Cardinals. After all, if historical precedent is a relevant argument, originally the Roman College of Cardinals was open to the laity, and there is no serious theological reason why the College of Cardinals as well as ministerial positions within the Curia could not be open today to the female laity or at least to female religious orders. Moreover, if some women such as St. Teresa of Avila and most recently St. Hildegard of Bingen are elevated to the title of “Doctors of the Church” posthumously, why preclude that women may play a role in the magisterium of the Church while they are alive?

But this does not appear to be the direction in which our church hierarchy is heading. On the contrary, the recent Doctrinal Assessment of the US Leadership Conference of Women Religious issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on April 18, 2012, and the decision to place the LCWR under
the disciplinary supervision of three US bishops indicate that the thrust is to restrict even further the limited autonomy of female religious orders and to bring them under greater male clerical control. Striking was the fact that the Vatican condemnation and the sanctions were not directed at specific individuals who may have challenged specific church doctrines nor at concrete questionable doctrinal positions formally embraced by LCWR, but rather it was a blanket rebuke for “sins of omission” of an entire organization of 1500 nuns, who are leaders of more than 300 religious orders, representing ca. 57,000 religious sisters and comprising approx. 80 percent of all female religious in the US.

b) The hierarchy’s inadequate response to the modern sexual revolution and to the evolving gender and sexual morality:

The radical change in circumstances produced by the modern democratic and sexual revolutions and the fundamental transformations in gender relations and gender roles which both entail present a particularly difficult challenge to the sacred claims of all religious traditions. Not surprisingly, the politics of gender and gender equality are central to politics everywhere and religion is thoroughly and intimately implicated in the politics of gender. Indeed, many analysts have been tempted to interpret what they view as the global emergence of religious “fundamentalism” in all religious traditions as primarily a patriarchal reaction
against the common global threat of gender equality, the emancipation of women, and feminism.

Feminism appears to have replaced communism as “the specter” haunting all religious traditions. In turn, the discourses of feminism and secularism have become intertwined today in the same way as communism and atheism became intertwined in the 19th century. “Gender” has become in this respect the preeminently contested “social question,” while “religion” has been thrown, willingly or unwillingly, into the vortex of the global contestation. Traditional religious establishments tend to view feminist agendas and particularly the very notion of gender as a historically contingent, socially constructed, and therefore changeable reality, as the greatest threat not only to their religious traditions and their moral authoritative claims, but to the very idea of a sacred or divinely ordained natural order, inscribed either in natural law, shari’a, or some “right way” universally valid for all times.

At the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church embraced theological developmental principles grounded in the historicity of divine revelation, incarnation, and continuous historical unfolding of the divine plans of salvation for humanity, that require the Church’s careful discernment of “the signs of the times.” The Catholic aggiornamento represented in this respect recognition of the fundamental moral principles of secular modernity. The human dignity of each
and every person emerges as the guiding principle of the three most consequential documents of the Second Vatican Council, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae*, and the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*. All three documents share moreover the explicit reference to “the signs of the times” and the historicist recognition that we are entering a new age in the history of humanity with important repercussions for our understanding of the unfolding of the mystery of salvation.

Actually, the same historicist and developmental recognition appears most poignantly in the section directed to women in the Closing Speech of the Council when the Council Fathers asserted that “at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation …” “The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved.” Yet this prophetic vision of the unprecedented transformation in gender relations which humanity was experiencing did not have the transformative consequences one should have expected in the life of the church after the council.

Indeed, on issues of gender and sexual moral theology, the Catholic hierarchy, since the publication of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, has reasserted a traditionalist ontological conception of human nature and of human
biology based on the essentialist conception of an a-historical, un-changing and universally valid natural law. Such a traditional ontological conception is increasingly in tension with the historicist conception of human moral development upheld by the social sciences as well as with the conception of a changing biological-historical nature informed by the new evolutionary life sciences.

Confronted with the radical character of the gender and sexual revolution of the late sixties the post-conciliar church seemed to be back-pedaling and abandoning the historicist, prophetic, and forward-looking discernment of “the sign of the times,” reverting to the defense of an unchanging and unchangeable tradition grounded in eternal and divine natural law.

I want to make very clear that the historicist principle of aggiornamento and a critical prophetic discernment of the “signs of the times” do not need to imply at all an uncritical accommodation to modern secular liberal culture. Not every change is for the better and there are many signs of the times particularly in high divorce rates, teenage pregnancy, abortion, pornography, and the commodification and debasement of the female body and of human sexuality in general which are negative, violations of human dignity, that many social scientists also recognize as anomic. But the church can only maintain a critical, indeed prophetic, relationship to secular cultural if it can differentiate its eschatological principles from their
irremediable historical embeddedness in particular traditional historical cultures. Eschatologically, the Body of Christ and the City of God may always be in tension with any societal “culture” and with the City of Man. But this tension will prove historically unsustainable if it is simply derived from an uncritical defense of a traditional form of societal culture which appears resistant to moral historical development.

The issue here is not one of moral relativism, as a matter of arbitrary individual choice or preference, but that of the clash between fundamental “sacred” moral values. Theologically, any religious community has the right and the duty to uphold what it considers a divinely ordained sacred injunction or moral norm. Sociologically, however, the question is how long any religious tradition, particularly a “catholic” one, can resist the adoption of a new moral value when a near universal consensus concerning the sacred character of such a value emerges in society. To decree modern moral developments as a reversion to paganism or rampant relativism is to misunderstand modern historical developments. The modern sacralization of human rights is a case in point. The Catholic affirmation and missionary embrace of modern human rights, such as the inalienable right to religious freedom, grounded in the sacred dignity of the human person, after having been repeatedly condemned by various popes as anathema, should serve as ground for some theological and moral caution. Humbly, the Catholic Church has
admitted publicly to have committed grave moral errors in the past, on this and on many other issues.

Sociologically, in reaction to the Catholic Church’s official defense of a “traditionalist” position on gender issues and a singularly obsessive focus on “sexual” moral issues, one can observe throughout the Catholic world a dual process of female secularization and erosion of the Church’s authority on sexual morality. Perhaps for the first time in the accumulative waves of modern secularization women have left the Church in large numbers, most dramatically throughout Europe, but increasingly also throughout North America and incipiently in Latin America in a way that should sound alarm bells. Female secularization is probably the most significant factor in the drastic secularization of Western European societies since the 1960’s and in the radical rupture of European Christian “religion as a chain of memory.” The male intelligentsia left the Church in the eighteenth century, the male bourgeoisie in the early nineteenth century, and the male proletariat in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. But as long as women remained in the church, children were baptized and raised as Christians and there was a future for the church and the possibility of a religious revival and a reversal of secularization. Once women begin to abandon massively the church, as has happened and continues to happen since the 1960’s, the future of the Church begins to look sociologically much bleaker.
Equally crucial and of grave societal relevance is in my view the drastic secularization of sexual morality. Increasing numbers of practicing Catholic are disobeying the injunctions of the Catholic hierarchy and following their own conscience on most issues related to sexual morality. Moreover, there is increasing evidence from public opinion polls in Europe, North America, and Latin America that young Catholic adults are explicitly dissociating their sexuality and their religiosity, claiming that religion has absolutely no influence upon their attitudes toward sexuality.

We are witnessing on the one hand a church hierarchy which evinces an almost obsessive focus in defending traditional sexual morality, and on the other hand a majority of Catholic faithful in the secular world who not only ignore the moral injunctions of the hierarchy, but feel increasingly comfortable dissociating their religion and their sexuality. One must wonder how far this radical dissociation of private sexuality from religion and even from morality can go and where it may lead. In my view, it is leading to a radical secularization of the private sphere of individual consciousness that parallels the secularization of politics and of the public sphere.

In my judgment, the uncritical defense of traditional sexual mores and a wholesale critique of the modern sexual revolution in the name of natural law principles, one that fails to recognize the providential sign of the times in modern
secular moral developments, grounded in the sacred dignity of the human person, will be counterproductive and will not be able to play a critical prophetic role vis-à-vis some of the most questionable trends. Only a church that recognizes and embraces the validity of the core modern moral developments as part of the providential “signs of the times,” can play a critical prophetic role vis-a-vis immoral and anomic secular trends.

c) The skandalon of the clerical sexual abuse of children

Perhaps in no other area has the gap between societal and church morality been more publicly visible than in the revelations of clerical child sexual abuse that have rocked so dramatically the Catholic Church country after country in recent years. The scandal has taken everywhere a threefold form. First there was the initial shock and the scandal at the public revelation of the clerical sexual abuse of children. Then there followed the even greater shock and scandal at the revelation of the widespread and persistent episcopal and curial praxis of cover-up. Then there followed the dismay at the totally inappropriate character of so many public statements and rationales offered by episcopal and Vatican authorities.

The Church of course has always considered child sexual abuse a grave moral sin, but it has shown difficulties understanding the extent to which child sexual abuse is not just a grave moral offense but has become a sacrilegious moral
and legal crime precisely in supposedly sexually free-wheeling and licentious contemporary societies. The Canadian moral theologian Daniel Cere has captured most poignantly the emerging gap in societal and church morality:

The Catholic Church appears to be caught in a deadly cultural cross-fire. The Church is widely mocked for its attempt to resist the ongoing liberalization of sexuality. At the same time, the Church has become the focus for intense public outrage insofar as it is perceived to be the showcase for the one form of sexual transgression that contemporary culture, with all its free-wheeling sexual transgressiveness, decisively condemns as beyond the moral pale.

Nothing reveals perhaps as clearly the gap between societal and church morality than the fact that it has taken the Church so long to understand that child sexual abuse, which was a relatively widespread but ignored practice in the past across societies and institutions, has become a modern societal taboo and that modern societies have learned to react with the same scandalous shock and with the kind of moral outrage which according to Durkheim is the typical societal response to the sacrilegious profanation of any taboo. It was secular society and public opinion that were ahead of the Church on this moral issue, while the Church appeared to be lagging behind and dragging its feet.

Fortunately, the Papacy of Benedict XVI put an end to the ambiguities of the Vatican’s response and initiated a new policy of zero tolerance towards abusing priests, full collaboration with civil authorities in the investigation of any criminal allegation, repeated gestures of contrition and public supplications of forgiveness
for the clerical wrongdoing and for the serious harm caused to the victims, and personal encounters and open dialogue with the victims and their families. There are solid grounds for hope that the worst of the scandal may be behind us.

But what are the moral lessons which the Church appears to have drawn from this disastrous historical episode? One important but in my view insufficient lesson appears to be that the Church, being in the World, was caught up like everybody else and like all worldly institutions in the whirlwind of the sexual revolution, the countercultural experiments, and the general anomic attitudes and deviant behavior that became seemingly endemic in liberal Western societies in the 1960’s and the 1970’s. This appears to be the selective lesson reinforced by the two reports presented to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops by the Research Team of the John Jay College of Criminal Justice.¹

The findings are very relevant and demonstrate that the phenomenon of clerical sexual abuse was a historical episode, in that there was a drastic and persistent increase in the number of incidents of sexual abuse of minors from the early 60s to the late 70s, which was uniform across all dioceses and regions in the United States, and was followed by an equally precipitous, consistent and uniform decline from the early 80s to the early 90s. Paradoxically, revelations of the abuse

only began to appear slowly in the early 1980s, two decades after the endemic abuse had begun and at a time when the decline was already well underway.

The Church hierarchy appeared to be relieved by the conclusive findings of the reports that, contrary to widespread public opinion, there was no demonstrable correlation between clerical sexual abuse and the priestly rule of celibacy, nor any clear correlation between the noted homosexual tendencies among candidates to the priesthood and the sexual abuse of children, since the homosexual tendencies in seminaries increased significantly in the 1990s, while the rate of abuse continued to decline throughout the decade and remained persistently low into the first decade of the twenty first century. The report findings seem to confirm the impression that the causes of the epidemic were social and external, rather than internal to the Church, a clear case of secular moral degeneration contaminating some “rotten apples” within the Church. The lesson which the Church appears to have drawn heartily from the scandal is the need for greater vigilance, reforming its seminaries, putting even stricter emphasis on the doctrine of celibacy and on the separation and protection of seminarians and priests from corrupting secular immoral influences. The model appears to be increasingly that of a pure clerical church in an impure secular world.

The lesson could have been a different one if the reports and the ecclesiastical reading of the findings had paid greater attention to the obvious fact
that the decline of the clerical sexual abuse was equally due to social causes that were external rather than internal to the Church, since the decline started and continued uninterruptedly well before the Church began to respond to the crisis instituting its own internal reforms. The single most important cause in the sudden and rapid decline of clerical sexual abuse was a change in secular societal morality that led to the criminalization of the sexual abuse of women and children. The practice, which now began to be viewed as aberrant, had been hitherto widespread, ignored and concealed in most social settings. The main carriers of this secular moral revolution were feminists who made society morally aware that the widespread sexual abuse of women at home, at work, and in public places was morally unacceptable and could not continue with impunity.

The elevation of the sacred dignity of children and their protection from adult, predominantly male sexual abuse was primarily also the moral consequence of the same feminist movement which helped to raise the sacred dignity of women. In my humble sociological view, it behooves the Church to discern carefully the providential “signs of the times” in such secular moral developments. After all, feminism might not be the main problem facing the Church. On the contrary, a proper response to the feminist challenge may in fact be a solution to many of the contemporary problems facing the Church. But the world and the faithful are still waiting for a serious institutional and theological response on the part of the
hierarchy and the magisterium to Pope John Paul II’s own call for “a new feminism” in his 1995 Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*.

It is true that celibacy is not to blame for the abuse, but clericalism was certainly part of the problem and was to a large extent the reason for the inadequate response. Moreover, the reinforced male clericalism we are witnessing is most surely not the appropriate response to the problem. The long term solution can only come from greater clerical transparency, greater openness to the laity and greater authority and responsibility of the female religious within the Church. A problematic trend within the Church today is the growing clericalization of diocesan priests, who are becoming increasingly detached from the laity and from the world, while the male and female religious orders are becoming ever more incarnated in the world. This entails a paradoxical reversal. The diocesan secular clergy is becoming ever more “religious” and detached from the world, while the male and female religious are becoming more engaged in the secular world. The religious orders remain today one of the rare places within the Church for relative autonomy from episcopal supervision and control. Understandably, given the increasing trend towards centralized, hierarchic and clerical authority within the Church, the Vatican and the episcopate tend to view the autonomy of the religious orders with a certain apprehension and would like to curtail their autonomy. The
disciplining of the LCWR, along with the attempt to discipline Catholic universities run by religious orders are apparent gestures in this direction.

Yet, the crackdown on female religious who question the official position of the hierarchy on issues of gender equality and sexual morality is in my view not the appropriate response. It might reassert internal discipline in the short term, but it is unlikely to solve the crisis of moral authority of the hierarchy in the long run and it is likely to lead to increasing female alienation from the Church.

Bemoaning the break of trust between the Vatican and the LCWR, President Sister Pat Farrell told NCR (National Catholic Register):

We have differing perspectives...about the Church, and our role in the Church, and the role of the laity in the Church. We have never considered ourselves in any way unfaithful to the Church, but if questioning is interpreted as defiance, that puts us in a very difficult position.

Ultimately, what is at stake is the room for “faithful dissent” within the Church. In the same way as modern democratic societies have to accommodate the principle of civil disobedience, the Catholic Church in the modern world will need to accommodate the principle of “faithful dissent” within its ranks, and also be more open to its internal pluralism.

We, the laity have a special obligation to assume our responsibility as “People of God” and to respond to the growing clericalism within the Church,
faithfully, yet assertively expressing our dissent when called forth. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the Council Fathers affirmed: “The laity are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on these things which concern the good of the Church”

This lecture has been my humble response to this calling, the faithful dissent of a Catholic sociologist concerned about the growing disjunction between societal and church morality.