

SEXUAL JUSTICE—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Failures in Sexual Justice: Catholic Feminist Responses and Recommendations
Convener: Elizabeth Antus
Moderator: James F. Keenan, S.J.
Presenters: Elizabeth Antus, Megan K. McCabe, Cristina Traina

Because sexuality is still commonly assumed to be in the realm of the private and personal, it is still all too easy in Catholic ethics to remove considerations of sexuality from concerns for justice. Furthermore, it is also commonplace for Catholics to discuss sexual ethics in a way that ignores the needs and rights of women in relation to men. Thus, to connect sexuality and justice from a distinctively Catholic feminist perspective, Antus, McCabe, and Traina each offered different approaches for encouraging the sexual and reproductive subjectivity of women. It was the hope of this panel that women will therefore be “given their due” in the realm of Catholic sexual ethics.

In “What Makes ‘Good Sex’ for Women? Female Sexual Disorders as Disruptions to Sexual Unity and Test Cases for Rethinking Catholic Theologies of Marriage,” Antus used sexological literature to discuss female sexual pain disorders (grouped under the term vulvodynia), wherein women can have intercourse, but it causes them chronic and increasing vulvar pain. Antus pointed out that women often felt pressure to fulfill various social and religious obligations to have sex despite this pain, and that the official Catholic emphasis on sex as always potentially procreative reinforced this harmful dynamic and negated the unitive meaning of sex. Antus then argued that the Catholic Church should encourage couples dealing with vulvodynia to prioritize women’s sexual subjectivity and the bonds of union apart from the obligation to procreate. Not to do so would perpetuate a grave emotional and physical harm against women.

In “A Culture of Sexual Violence: A Catholic Feminist Analysis of Individual Complicity and Social Normalization,” McCabe situated herself amid the resurgence of concern to identify rape as inherently violent rather than sexual. Against this backdrop, McCabe argued instead that rape was also inherently sexual because it revealed the violent implications of the social mores normally regulating heterosexual gender identities. Specifically, by analyzing accounts of young women’s experiences of sexual encounters, McCabe argued that men always already identify as agentive, sexual conquerors and that women always already identify as passive instruments in service of male pleasure. This social emphasis on women as “fuckable” makes it difficult to identify real conditions for women’s sexual consent and, therefore, to identify instances of sexual coercion. McCabe concluded by calling for solidarity with victims of sexual coercion and for removing the cultural presumption of women’s sexual availability.

In “Conception as a Corporate Act: Revisiting Solidarity and Abortion,” Traina argued that women who become pregnant unintentionally and who do not have the financial and social resources to handle this situation experience a level of moral anguish that is typically ignored in Catholic ethics. Even if a woman chooses to carry the fetus to term, she often experiences herself as failing to live up to her real obligations to other family members, especially her other children. Traina used the work of Lisa Tessman to argue that this sense of moral anguish and failure experienced by unsupported pregnant women points to both the tragic dimension of pregnancy and the way that we cannot always meet the moral demands placed upon us. This experience of failure highlights the

need for a turn away from the fixation on assigning moral culpability, for a thick account of mercy, and for solidarity with women struggling with unintended pregnancy.

In the discussion that followed, most of the questions were attempts to understand the implications of the presentations rather than challenge their premises. Audience members asked about the place of LGBTQ relationships in relation to compulsory heterosexuality; the possibility of positive norms for promoting real consent from women; the need for more sexual norms aside from “Do no harm”; and the need to think through how promoting women’s sexual subjectivity would resist the problems of sexual objectification of the other that are typically associated with men. This panel was the most well attended of the concurrent sessions at the entire conference (with 54 audience members). Many audience members encouraged the panel to convert this topic into a three-year interest group, which indicated the real need to think about sexual justice more systematically.

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