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The Cross and the Coat Hanger: Catholics for a Free Choice and the Rise of a Religious Movement

By Claire Elizabeth Brady

Introduction: Catholics and Abortion

This year, major developments have arisen surrounding American reproductive rights and Catholicism. *Roe v. Wade* has been struck down by the Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, leaving millions of American women without the ability to receive abortions. Five of the Court's six Catholic Justices supported the decision. The religious right celebrates a victory nearly fifty years in the making, with abortion bans taking effect in several states and a proposed nationwide ban by the GOP.¹ The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has published a statement supporting *Dobbs*,² and even Pope Francis claimed to respect the ruling, likening abortion to "hiring a hitman."³ Given these happenings, one might believe that Catholics wholly oppose abortion rights, as Church laity are expected to accept all dogmatic teachings and follow their institutional leaders. The truth, however, has always been more complicated.

For decades, American Catholic women have challenged the policies of Catholic leadership in both private and public spheres. Countless have obtained divorces, used birth control, and received abortions against the advice of the Church. Countless have quietly disagreed with its policies. Overtly, Catholic women have challenged male clergy on their conservative policies, most notably with the rise of the Catholic feminist movement during the Second Vatican Council. At the same time that the mainstream feminist movement of the 1960s

¹ Colleen Long, "White House Says GOP's Abortion Ban Proposal Could Lead to a Nationwide Crisis," PBS, September 22, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/white-house-says-gops-abortion-ban-proposal-could-lead-to-a-nationwide-crisis>.

² "USCCB Statement on U.S. Supreme Court Ruling in *Dobbs v. Jackson*," United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 24, 2022, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2022/usccb-statement-us-supreme-court-ruling-dobbs-v-jackson>.

³ Hannah Brockhaus, "Pope Francis Condemns Abortion in New Comments About *Roe v. Wade* Decision, Responds to Question on Communion," Catholic News Agency, July 4, 2022, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251710/pope-francis-condemns-abortion-in-new-comments-about-roe-v-wade-decision-responds-to-question-on-communion>.

and 1970s flourished, a sister movement occurred among American Catholics; according to Mary J. Henold's landmark *Catholic and Feminist*, the first history of American Catholic feminism, "the historical record of the sixties and seventies...provides more than ample evidence that Catholic feminists existed, that they articulated a strong connection between their faith and their feminist principles, that they formed organizations to forward feminist agendas, that such organizations were networked into a larger movement of Catholic feminism, and that this movement had connections with the much larger American feminist movement."⁴ The movement indicated women's dissatisfaction with Church patriarchy and their disagreement with it on myriad issues. It was during this period of Catholic feminism's advent that an organization called Catholics for a Free Choice was founded, an activist group composed primarily of pro-abortion Catholic women. Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) would become an unprecedented voice for pro-choice Catholics in America.

Henold claims that CFFC was ideologically separate from most Catholic feminist groups; indeed, many Catholic feminists were opposed to CFFC's efforts,⁵ and Henold states that those in CFFC "identified primarily with the secular movement and did not describe their feminism as originating in their faith tradition."⁶ As such, they did not fit the paradigm of Catholic feminism, which was more focused upon issues like women's theological participation and women's

⁴ Mary J. Henold, *Catholic and Feminist: The Surprising History of the American Catholic Feminist Movement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3.

⁵ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 220

It should be noted that many women of the second-wave feminist movement opposed abortion rights, even those who may not have been Catholic or Christian. Particularly before the 1970s, abortion rights were seen by many as a matter of physicians' rights rather than women's rights; it was not until the mid-1970s that feminists used *Roe v. Wade* to remake the identity of the abortion debate and bring it deeper into the feminist movement.

Mary Ziegler, *After Roe: The Lost History of the Abortion Debate* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 121.

⁶ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 224.

ordination and largely ignored abortion.⁷ CFFC seemed more aligned with secular feminism given that it, too, by the mid-1970s, had widely adopted abortion rights as a core issue.⁸ Still, CFFC defied both Catholic and mainstream feminist standards, occupying the liminal space between parallel movements. Many Catholic feminists did not support CFFC, but key members of the Catholic feminist movement, including key figures Rosemary Ruether, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Mary Hunt, and Donna Quinn, were affiliated with the organization.⁹ It also aligned with many secular and non-Catholic religious groups, but differed from them in being distinctly Catholic, with its most high-profile activism challenging the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Vatican in addition to secular authorities. As a mixture of mainstream pro-abortion politics and Catholic identity, the group was absolutely unique, occupying a niche that other groups of the time had not filled.

Using documents from both CFFC and the Church-owned National Catholic News Service, I posit that the prominence, position, and impact of CFFC in the 1970s and 1980s displays the existence of a distinctly Catholic pro-choice movement, which was neither a subsection of Catholic feminism nor part of the mainstream pro-choice movement. This movement is set apart by its direct confrontation of Church hierarchy and its primary existence within the Catholic sphere; although the movement also organized with and against secular forces, it was primarily carried out by Catholics, and in later years, its primary opposition became Catholic institutions. The existence of a Catholic pro-choice movement has been stated by Patricia Miller in *Good Catholics: The Battle Over Abortion in the Catholic Church*, but does

⁷ *Ibid* 220.

⁸ Ziegler, *After Roe*, 121.

⁹ Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 224.

not appear to have been postulated by other scholars.¹⁰ Though the visible movement may have been small and possesses limited historical records beyond CFFC files and media coverage, the Catholic pro-choice movement rebuts the assumption that Catholics have always supported their male leaders' positions on abortion. While many American Catholics have always been staunchly anti-abortion, many have been ambivalent, quietly pro-abortion, and even vocally in favor of abortion rights. CFFC's history as an example of the latter, particularly in a moment of unprecedented abortion rollback, is highly notable.

I: The Development of Dissent and Beginnings of Pro-Choice Catholicism

In November 1982, American politician Geraldine Ferraro signed a letter written by Catholics for a Free Choice, a leading voice of pro-abortion Catholicism in the United States, inviting Congress members to a briefing on issues facing Catholic politicians.¹¹ The briefing, according to the letter, was intended to show that “the Catholic position on abortion is not monolithic and that there can be a range of personal and political responses to it.”¹² Two years later, as the first female vice-presidential nominee of a major U.S. political party, Ferraro's signing of this document was criticized by one of America's leading Catholic figures:

Archbishop John O'Connor of New York.¹³ O'Connor, a staunch anti-abortion advocate, claimed that Ferraro had misconstrued the teachings of the Church, thus misrepresenting them to the public. According to him, the Catholic position on abortion was not open to interpretation. After

¹⁰ Patricia Miller, *Good Catholics: The Battle Over Abortion in the Catholic Church* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 70.

¹¹ “Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 11 September 1984,” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, September 11, 1984, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32146068>, 3.

¹² Kristin E. Heyer, Mark J. Rozell, and Michael A. Genovese, *Catholics and Politics: The Dynamic Tension Between Faith and Power* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 20.

¹³ Rutgers University Center for American Women and Politics, “Women Presidential and Vice Presidential Candidates: A Selected List,” March 20, 2009, https://web.archive.org/web/20090320201043/http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/fast_facts/levels_of_office/documents/prescand.pdf.

several days of dialogue with O'Connor, Ferraro made the following statement: "The Catholic Church's position on abortion is monolithic...but I do believe that there are a lot of Catholics who do not share the view of the Catholic Church."¹⁴

The debate over Ferraro's message represents one of the greatest religious developments of the twentieth century. Although the papacy had explicitly considered abortion murder since 1869, opinions of the Catholic laity were less clear.¹⁵ While over a third of U.S. Catholics did not approve of 'abortion on demand' in the late twentieth century,¹⁶ many disagreed with official teachings and the majority supported women's rights to abortion without religious or government interference.¹⁷ In her statement, Ferraro acknowledged what many Catholics at the time knew to be true: despite the Church's *official* and monolithic position on abortion, it was not the lone Catholic view. The Church itself, including the scores of women deprived of representation in the clergy, did not fully agree with the men who wielded its institutional power.

Catholic women's dissent to official teachings, both latent and overt, was something which many Church leaders worked to quash. The Vatican and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops were among its most ardent opponents.¹⁸ Regardless, dissent manifested in

¹⁴ Heyer et al, *Catholics and Politics*, 20.

¹⁵ All abortion was initially condemned as murder in 1588 by Pope Sixtus V, but this statement was walked back by his successor. Several centuries later, abortion was again condemned as murder under the papacy of Pope Pius IX. This position, established in 1869, has not been challenged by any pope since.

G. W. Hovey, "Abortion: A History," *Planned Parenthood Review* 5, no. 2 (1985): 18-21.
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12340403/#:~:text=In%20the%20early%20Roman%20Catholic,with%20excommunication%20as%20the%20punishment.>

¹⁶ Andrew Greeley, *American Catholics Since the Council: An Unauthorized Report* (Chicago, Illinois: Thomas More Press, 1985), 83.

¹⁷ George Gallup, "Abortion Seen Up to Woman, Doctor," in *Before Roe v. Wade: Voices that Shaped the Abortion Debate Before the Supreme Court's Ruling*, ed. Linda Greenhouse and Reva B. Siegel (Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 207-210.

¹⁸ The National Conference of Catholic Bishops combined with the United States Catholic Conference in July 2001 and is now known as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). It continues to be active as of 2022.

both the public and private lives of American Catholics and extended to a variety of issues, with abortion being perhaps the most divisive. It is in this context that Catholics for a Free Choice (CFFC) was born. This section will examine the early history of CFFC, the most vocal Catholic pro-abortion group of the 1970s and 1980s, and what drove it to become such a potent cultural force.¹⁹ Regardless of humble beginnings and efforts by the Church to discredit its supporters, CFFC expressed unprecedented Catholic support for abortion rights as they became an increasingly public topic after *Roe v. Wade*, and ultimately came to challenge both bishop and papal authority in a groundbreaking way.²⁰ Catholics for a Free Choice's early history — indeed, its very *existence* — exhibits the intersection of the feminist movement, centuries of gendered Church oppression, and the rapid political changes of twentieth-century America. Each of these forces converged to spark the American Catholic pro-choice movement.

To understand the development of post-*Roe* Catholic dissent, one must first understand what was being dissented to. Although CFFC represented dissatisfaction with the Church regarding its handling of abortion, social disquiet within the Church extended to a number of other women's issues. The Vatican's forbiddance of birth control, its views on sexuality, its prohibition of women clergy, its crackdown on high-profile dissidence within the Church, and its general treatment of female members were all aspects of Church policy which had inflamed

“A Brief History of USCCB,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, [https://www.usccb.org/about/a-brief-history-of-usccb#:~:text=On%20July%201%2C%202001%20the,of%20Catholic%20Bishops%20\(USCCB\)](https://www.usccb.org/about/a-brief-history-of-usccb#:~:text=On%20July%201%2C%202001%20the,of%20Catholic%20Bishops%20(USCCB)).

¹⁹ This organization remains active as of 2022 and is known as Catholics for Choice, having shortened its name in 2007.

“Our Case for Support,” *Catholics for Choice*, <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org>.

²⁰ While the abortion rights issue had entered the public sphere before the legalization of abortion under *Roe v. Wade*, the verdict was followed by a heightened social consciousness of the issue, including religious backlash against abortion and rising progressive support for it.

Ziegler, *After Roe*, 12-17.

tensions with Catholic women by 1973.²¹ Two papal decisions of the late 1960s also lay additional groundwork for CFFC to form. The first was Pope Paul VI's apostolic letter "Ecclesiae Sanctae," which encouraged the formation of episcopal conferences in which bishops could exert their power collectively.²² This gave bishops newfound prominence in the Church and directly caused the formation of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), which became one of America's strongest anti-abortion voices after *Roe v. Wade*.²³ The second came three years later with the publication of Paul's third encyclical. In the decades following "Casti Connubii,"²⁴ Pope Pius XI's 1930 encyclical affirming the prohibition of contraception and abortion, the laity's views on contraception softened, and Paul assembled a papal commission on birth control to advise him. It appeared that the Church's official position on birth control might be revised in the late 1960s.²⁵ However, Paul doubled down with his 1968 encyclical "Humanae Vitae," claiming that "each and every act must of necessity retain its intrinsic relationship to the procreation of human life."²⁶ As Church officials failed to adapt to their changing congregations in the 1960s and 1970s, the Catholic Church developed what priest

²¹ Greeley, *American Catholics Since the Council*, 182-192.

²² *Ecclesiae sanctae* may be translated as "holy church."

Pope Paul VI, "Ecclesiae Sanctae — Apostolic Letter, Paul VI," Vatican, August 6, 1966, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_p-vi_motu-proprio_19660806_ecclesiae-sanctae.html.

²³ "A Brief History of USCCB."

²⁴ *Casti connubii* may be translated as "chaste marriage."

Pope Pius XI, "Casti Connubii - Encyclical Letter, Pius XI," Vatican, December 31, 1930, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html.

²⁵ Daniel Callahan, "Contraception and Abortion: American Catholic Responses," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 387 (1970): 109-117. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1036743>. 112.

²⁶ *Humanae vitae* may be translated as "human life."

Pope Paul VI, "Humanae Vitae - Encyclical Letter, Paul VI," Vatican, July 25, 1968, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html.

and sociologist Father Andrew Greeley called a “woman problem.”²⁷ By ignoring the needs and opinions of women for not merely decades but centuries, it created fertile ground for dissenting movements to take root.

It was from this ground that Catholics for a Free Choice and the pro-choice Catholic movement sprang forth, informed by both the Church’s treatment of women and the rapidly changing sociopolitical landscape of post-World-War-II America.²⁸ In 1970, abortion was not openly considered controversial in the Catholic Church. Though a handful of theologians had raised questions about the official Catholic position on abortion,²⁹ there was not yet a prominent collective of voices calling for change. In his 1970 journal article “Contraception and Abortion: American Catholic Responses,” philosopher Daniel Callahan notes that Catholic controversy over reproductive rights primarily surrounded birth control instead of abortion.³⁰ Just a year later, however, the first explicitly Catholic pro-abortion organization in America was founded,³¹ and three years later, Catholics for the Elimination of All Restrictive Abortion and Contraception Laws was founded by Patricia McQuillan. It did not take long for this organization to reorganize and rename itself Catholics for a Free Choice.³² Unlike most pro-abortion organizations of the

²⁷ Greeley, *American Catholics Since the Council*, 183.

²⁸ *Ibid* 191.

²⁹ Thomas A. Wassmer, “The Crucial Question About Abortion,” *Catholic World* 206, Nov. 1967, 61.

Donald A. Giannella, “The Difficult Quest for a Truly Humane Abortion Law,” *Villanova Law Review* 13, Winter 1968, 257-302.

Joseph Donceel, “Mediate v. Immediate Animation,” *Continuum* 5, Spring 1967, 167-171.

Leonard F.X. Mayhew, “Abortion: Two Sides and Some Complaints,” *The Ecumenist* 5, July-August 1967, 76.

³⁰ Callahan, “Contraception and Abortion,” 112-115.

³¹ The first explicitly Catholic pro-abortion organization in America was Roman Catholics for the Right to Choose, a small group formed in 1971. The organization was small-scale and far more low-profile than CFFC would become, but marked an important first for Catholics in the United States.

Miller, *Good Catholics*, 56.

³² *Ibid* 66-67.

time, the catalyst for CFFC's foundation was neither *Roe v. Wade* nor any other government action; instead, it was the Catholic Church's response to *Roe*. An emboldened NCCB wasted little time condemning the verdict and continued its activism against abortion rights, despite fifty-six percent of U.S. Catholics believing that abortion should be a decision made solely between women and their doctors when *Roe* was decided.³³ The National Right to Life Committee (NRLC), created by U.S. bishops in 1968, quickly became the voice of the anti-abortion movement,³⁴ and in 1975, bishops personally entered the political fray with the NCCB's publication of its Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities in 1975.³⁵ CFFC emerged as a direct response to Catholic leadership's political action, with its first demonstration, a 1973 L.A. Times ad, becoming the first challenge on abortion from lay Catholics to bishops themselves.³⁶ Not all supporters of CFFC believed that abortion was devoid of sin;³⁷ Geraldine Ferraro, one of its high-profile supporters in the 1980s, stated to the press that she considered abortion morally wrong.³⁸ Still, they challenged Church intervention in U.S. politics and supported the rights of women to choose freely. CFFC also endeavored to influence government policy and work with activists from other religions, particularly in its early years.

II: Platform, Goals, and Focus

³³ Gallup, "Abortion Seen Up to Woman, Doctor," 209.

³⁴ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 46.

³⁵ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities," in *The Abortion Controversy: A Documentary History*, ed. Eva R. Rubin (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) 219-224.

³⁶ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 66.

³⁷ "Display Ad 156 -- A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion." *New York Times (1923-)*, Oct 07, 1984. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/display-ad-156-no-title/docview/122516688/se-2>.

³⁸ Ferraro is quoted as having said that she "supports abortion funding as a public policy in spite of her personal opposition because of the suffering she saw as an assistant district attorney prosecuting rape and child abuse cases."

"Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 16 July 1984." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, July 16, 1984. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32146029>. 10.

Given the catalysts for CFFC's foundation and its position as the most prominent Catholic pro-choice group of the twentieth century, the organization had a number of issues on its plate. It was opposed by the Vatican, the NCCB, various anti-abortion groups, and even many Catholic laypeople. It was the product of cultural forces which existed both inside and outside of the Church. As a new organization in the early 1970s, it also had a number of decisions to make, including its scope, concerns, and plans for activism. Given all of this, the following questions arise: What was the organization's purpose beyond articulating that some Catholics supported abortion? What issues was it most focused upon? And how did all of this develop as the organization found its footing? In order to answer these questions about CFFC and its corresponding movement, I will explore relevant early issues of *Conscience*, CFFC's newsletter and later magazine. Although *Conscience* briefly ceased publication in 1979,³⁹ these magazines span most of the period from 1974 to 1985, and have been provided by Kate Hoeting, a writer and managing editor at the modern Catholics for Choice.⁴⁰ These key issues show the organization's early foci and development, its reorganization in 1980, and its transformation into a more Catholic-focused activist group. It becomes clear that CFFC possessed a variety of goals, which became more honed as the organization changed; however, at the heart of each lay the desire to protect Catholic women's reproductive choices and oppose who would remove them. These documents show that, to serve its main purpose as an advocate for Catholic women, CFFC evolved from a somewhat disorganized lobbying group to a more polished, strategic organization aimed at challenging the Church; this development cemented it as the face of a Catholic movement, rather than the extension of a secular one.

³⁹ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 82.

⁴⁰ I was able to communicate with Catholics for Choice, formerly known as Catholics for a Free Choice, through the "Contact Us" page on the organization's website, which led me to submit a comment and receive a response from Ms. Hoeting.

The first published issue of *Conscience* appeared in June 1974 as a newsletter.⁴¹ Volume one, number one celebrates CFFC's first elected board of directors and triumphantly begins with the phrase, “We have an office of our own!”⁴² Its content is typed in courier font, likely at a typewriter, and its title appears to have been hand-designed. It is two pages long and its articles are anonymously written. The newsletter, brief and wide-ranging, is a microcosm of the fledgling organization’s limited resources and the issues facing it. A quote from a priest who supported the CFFC cause, but declined to be on its Honorary Advisory Committee for fear of institutional backlash, appears beneath the title “The Power.” A criticism of the Birthright organization’s anti-abortion pregnancy clinics appears, stating that there are “no alternatives to Birthright — except US!” A mock action call exemplifies the hypocrisy of proposed anti-abortion measures in New York, and is followed by a plea for the state’s Catholics to call their legislators. A CFFC member quote of the month from Glenn Ellefson-Brooks reads: “The inhumane assumption that a woman has no privacy of body, and the lack of concern for her sanity of mind, is unconscionable. I cannot believe that Christ stands for this.”⁴³

This first issue of *Conscience* represents the inaugural era of CFFC as an organization. In the mid-1970s, the organization’s numbers were growing, but it was still finding its footing. It faced the challenge of gaining membership and funding when supporting abortion could lead Catholics to lose Church positions, leaving pro-choice believers in fear of the aforementioned “Power.”⁴⁴ It had a few thousand members and far less money than Church-backed pro-life

⁴¹ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 71.

⁴² *Ibid* 71.

⁴³ *Conscience* newsletter, vol. 1 no. 1 (June 1974).

⁴⁴ It was in this same year that Father Joseph O’Rourke, a CFFC board member, baptized a baby whose mother supported the right to abortion in Massachusetts after the priest at her local parish refused to do so. For this alone, O’Rourke was dismissed from the Jesuit order and later laicized. This is just one example of Church crackdown on pro-choice Catholics, particularly clergy members.

groups. Despite limited resources, it looked to fight both Catholic hierarchy and political opposition to abortion, viewing both as threats to reproductive choice in the United States. Further, it looked to make an impact upon everyday Catholic women seeking counseling and support, despite the presence of organizations like Birthright which sought to discourage abortion. CFFC set up support networks, circulated pro-choice publications for pregnant Catholics, and leveraged its controversy as power, conducting “guerrilla-like actions that were quite effective” and siphoning press coverage from the pro-life groups it protested.⁴⁵ This can be noted in the way that one pro-life demonstration is discussed in volume one, issue two: “It was noted that in spite of their large PR budget, the public didn’t see 6,000 right-to-lifers demonstrating in Washington last January 22 because CFFC had planned a stunt to bounce their coverage — a woman being crowned Pope. What CFFC lacks in PR budget, we make up for in dedication and hard work.”⁴⁶ Members believed that they could define their Catholic identity, that it could contradict modern papal doctrine, and that they had a right to make it seen.

Subsequent *Conscience* issues display the organization’s early foci as a Catholic abortion advocate, which included lobbying Congress, challenging the power of bishops, organizing rallies and counterprotests, and keeping CFFC supporters informed. Though CFFC newsletters of the 1970s were short — five to six pages at most — they included coverage of all of these things, jumping between many different topics. Stories of CFFC members testifying before the Democratic Party and staging demonstrations (including a recreation of Jesus’s Sermon on the

O’Rourke would later go on to become CFFC’s president.

“Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 6 September 1974.” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, September 6, 1974. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143597>.

⁴⁵ Tom Davis, *Sacred Work: Planned Parenthood and Its Clergy Alliances* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 146.

⁴⁶ *Conscience* newsletter, vol. 1 no. 2 (July/August 1974).

Mount)⁴⁷ show its establishment of its public image. Issues from 1976 through 1978 contain heavy coverage of government matters compared to later issues, most of which were proposed anti-choice measures in Congress. 1976 issues, in particular, contain several stories on the Hyde Amendment, which prevented federal Medicaid funds from subsidizing abortion, as well as other proposed anti-abortion laws.⁴⁸ This increased focus upon government conservatism reveals a deeper development in the history of reproductive freedom: the rise of the religious right.

In the early 1970s, most Protestant denominations did not share the Church's hardline stance against abortion; however, as the decade progressed, it became clear that outright opposition to abortion was growing, and Catholic bishops fueled its fire. In addition to founding the NRLC and publishing the Pastoral Plan for Pro-Life Activities, Catholic bishops and individual dioceses funded anti-abortion causes throughout the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁹ High-profile priests and bishops also continued to speak out against abortion. At the same time, members of the New Right assembled a pan-Christian coalition against abortion as the Republican Party tied anti-abortion stances to other socially conservative issues.⁵⁰ The result was a large, vitriolic anti-abortion movement which threatened the gains of *Roe v. Wade*. As this movement grew, CFFC declined in the political sphere; efforts to make it a greater lobbying presence had failed and the small organization was losing money.⁵¹ Virginia Andary, CFFC's lone hired lobbyist, resigned. Publication of *Conscience* even ceased in 1979. With its previous strategies no longer effective, CFFC underwent significant changes in 1980, reorienting its focus in order to most effectively

⁴⁷ *Conscience* newsletter, vol. 2, no. 1 (June/July 1975).

⁴⁸ *Conscience* newsletter (August 1976).

Ziegler, *After Roe*, 75.

⁴⁹ *Conscience Magazine* (July 1981), 4.

⁵⁰ Greenhouse and Siegel, *Before Roe v. Wade*, 259.

⁵¹ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 82.

advocate for its cause and best combat the religious right. New problems called for creative — and unprecedented — solutions.

Realizing that becoming a nationwide lobbying group was not viable, CFFC refocused from “lobbying at the national level to focusing on public education, using the media, and reaching out to community groups to stimulate rational, informed study of the abortion issue.”⁵² *Conscience* was restarted, and the new issues of *Conscience* reflect this organizational change. Larger, more polished articles offer insight on specifically Catholic news. More articles appear on the theology of abortion and the Catholic Church itself than in 1970s editions. Front pages are more likely to center stories about bishops and Church activism than new legislative measures. While government matters are still covered, they are less prominent than in issues of the 1970s; a battle previously waged on the political front had become a more religious one. A new segment called Gabriel’s Ear told stories of Catholic women and their abortions, showing their perspectives to others and showing Catholic women they were not alone.⁵³ Finally, more international stories appeared, most of which centered areas with large Catholic populations, including Italy, Ireland, and Latin America.

Many things about *Conscience* remained the same in the 1980s. A slogan has always read, across the top of the first page: “In conscience, Concerned Catholics must deem reproductive decisions to be a person’s most basic civil liberty.” Reproductive rights have always been its primary — and usually sole — focus. It has always advertised pro-choice materials and covered news items that were relevant to its readers. Yet, its increasingly Catholic center and more outright defiance of Church leaders mark a more centered organization. Its religious focus

⁵² *Conscience Magazine*, vol. 1 no. 1 (September/October, 1980), 3.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 5.

positions CFFC and its corresponding movement in the Catholic sphere, setting it apart from the secular pro-choice movement. It marks increasing Catholic dissent, not only to the Church's views on abortion but to its inference in political matters. In the words of CFFC's 1980 director, Patricia McMahon, "the reorganization of CFFC was carried out to perpetuate the goals of helping women of the Catholic faith and all religions secure their right not to bear children against their will: and to uphold the principle of separation of church and state."⁵⁴ This principle had been violated by Church leaders in CFFC's eyes, and something had to be done about it.

III: Impact as Shown Through Media Coverage

Catholics for a Free Choice established itself as a Catholic pro-choice advocate in 1973, and for the next decade, developed its focus and goals. By 1980, it had become a social force whose efforts were focused within the Catholic sphere. Though "social movement" is defined in varying ways by scholars, CFFC's activism seems to embody the phenomenon. Pro-choice Catholics fit the criteria of engaging in organized efforts, setting common goals, possessing contentious politics, having an antagonist, working toward the solution of a problem, and using joint action.⁵⁵ As such, it has many characteristics of a traditional social movement. Social movements, however, are not merely defined by their aim, but also by their impact. The effect of CFFC in the Catholic sphere can be seen in primary source documents via its coverage by the National Catholic News Service (NCNS), a news organization run by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Though NCNS's newsreels on CFFC do not show all of its grassroots activism, they do display the group's growing relevancy, even to bishop-backed news groups

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

⁵⁵ Each of these are the criteria of social movements according to varying sociologists.

who had a vested interest in minimizing its message. That CFFC became so impossible to ignore is a testament to its influence upon Catholic America. Despite its waning membership and prominence in the late 1970s, its resurgence in the 1980s and publicity surrounding its landmark 1984 statement in the *New York Times*, as displayed by these newsreels, show its singular power to challenge Church authority on abortion.

The initial rise of CFFC in NCNS newsreels occurred shortly after its birth. Its first mention was in late 1973 as part of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCAR), an early example of its coalition building with non-Catholic religious groups.⁵⁶ During the 1970s, CFFC received its greatest coverage from the NCNS in 1974, its post-inaugural year. It was mentioned in two stories as part of RCAR,⁵⁷ two for a member's involvement in a controversial baptism,⁵⁸ one for creating a reproductive counseling service for Catholic women,⁵⁹ and one regarding Senate testimony by CFFC supporters.⁶⁰ Each of these stories provided the organization with greater publicity and established that it was recognized in the American Catholic sphere. It had made a splash. In 1975, however, CFFC received only one mention,⁶¹ and

⁵⁶ "Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 27 December 1973." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, December 27, 1973. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143421>.

⁵⁷ "Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 29 October 1974." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, October 29, 1974. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143633>.

"Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 21 August 1974." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, August 21, 1974. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143586>.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

"Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 6 September 1974." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, September 6, 1974. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143597>.

⁵⁹ "Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 15 October 1974." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, October 15, 1974. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143624>.

⁶⁰ "Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 13 September 1974." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, September 13, 1974. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143602>.

⁶¹ "Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 12 May 1975." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, May 12, 1975. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143768>.

in 1976, only two.⁶² In a 1975 story about a pro-abortion CFFC march, an archbishop interviewed for the story stated there was “no need to comment on [abortion],” as “the Church had spoken extensively” on it.⁶³ The organization and its points were hardly acknowledged by Catholic authority. Though CFFC was firmly established by this point as a lobbying organization with paying members,⁶⁴ its profile was lowering, and until 1981, the organization appeared in only one or two NCNS news stories per year. When the organization was mentioned, it typically appeared alongside marked criticism from other members of the Catholic Church.⁶⁵ Waning press coverage and increasing condemnation indicated a deeper problem: as the 1970s progressed, CFFC was losing money and its political momentum had begun to stagnate in the face of growing religious backlash against abortion.⁶⁶ The passage of the Hyde Amendment in 1977 and the emergence of the religious right posed a threat to both secular and spiritual abortion rights activists.⁶⁷ Furthermore, Catholic bishops’ intercession continued to shape abortion politics and threaten the Catholic pro-choice movement.

⁶² “Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 26 May 1976.” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, May 26, 1976. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32144035>.

“Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 27 October 1976.” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, October 27, 1976. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32144142>.

⁶³ “Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 12 May 1975.” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, May 12, 1975. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32143768>, 33-34.

⁶⁴ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 89-90.

⁶⁵ One such example is the quoting of Michael Schwartz, associate executive director of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. Schwartz accused RCAR of “violating the separation of Church and state,” something CFFC had accused Catholic bishops of for years, and stated that RCAR had “a lot of nerve to equate their own little ad hoc pressure group with a bona fide Church” after the group criticized Jimmy Carter for meeting with Catholic bishops. RCAR and its lone Catholic member group, CFFC, were not quoted in the story.

“Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 3 October 1977.” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, October 3, 1977. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32144377>, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 82.

⁶⁷ Greenhouse and Siegel, *Before Roe v. Wade*, 259.

CFFC's response to these displayed the genuine power of Catholic dissent against the Church. As previously stated, the organization's board voted to take CFFC in a primarily educational direction in 1980.⁶⁸ While its leadership acknowledged that it would not become a major, highly funded lobby, it could continue challenging the unchecked interference of the Church in U.S. politics.⁶⁹ By hiring a small paid staff and no longer lobbying the government, CFFC conserved its resources and focused its energies upon strategic political statements. It remained aligned with RCAR and other non-Catholic coalitions, but focused its energy upon the clergy, cementing itself as the voice of a small but mighty Catholic pro-choice movement.

By 1981, Catholics for a Free Choice had amassed thousands of supporters in at least 41 states.⁷⁰ The same year, CFFC appeared in five NCNS stories on protests, counterprotests, press conferences, surveys on the abortion attitudes of lay Catholics, and criticism it received from the bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities.⁷¹ The NCNS — and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops itself — began to give CFFC more attention when it threatened bishops with a more brazen public relations strategy. As the 1980s activist group became more focused on criticizing the Catholic Church as an institution, the NCNS mentioned it more in newsreels, publishing five related stories in 1981, four related stories in 1982, and two in 1983. The NCNS also featured more opponents of CFFC, concluding some articles with quotes from sources who considered CFFC harmful, illegitimate, and even non-Catholic. It is stressed multiple times that

⁶⁸ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 90.

⁶⁹ *Ibid* 89-90.

⁷⁰ "Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 6 November 1981." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, November 6, 1981. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32145409>.

⁷¹ "Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 30 November 1981." *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, November 30, 1981. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32145423>, 9.

the group has no official Church status and is in “direct contradiction” with Church teachings on abortion, as noted by both Church officials and the bishops’ Committee for Pro-Life Activities.⁷²

Regardless, CFFC continued making headlines, and in 1984, it made the largest one of all; its advertisement in the *New York Times*, titled “A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion,” was published in support of vice presidential candidate Geraldine Ferraro after Archbishop O’Connor’s criticism, sparking condemnation from even the Vatican itself.⁷³ The ad states that “a diversity of opinions regarding abortion exists among committed Catholics,” that Catholics who publicly dissent to official Church positions should not be penalized, and that Catholics should not seek legislation that limits other people’s choices. In the words of the ad, “responsible moral decisions can only be made in an atmosphere of freedom from fear or coercion.”⁷⁴ The ad was signed by 97 prominent Catholics, including theologians, nuns, clergy members, and laypeople. Backlash from both the NCCB and the Vatican was swift; the statement was immediately condemned and signers were pressured to revoke their support.⁷⁵ Still, the statement was heard around the country, and that year, CFFC made NCNS newsreels twelve times. In 1985, that number spiked to at least fourteen. NCNS newsfeeds preserved in the Catholic News Archive cut off in mid-1985, but CFFC was clearly receiving more attention and reaching more people than ever before. The organization’s return to the spotlight displayed not only the growing push for Catholic women to be heard, but the tremendous social power held by open disagreement with Church leadership.

⁷² “Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 30 November 1981.” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, November 30, 1981. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32145423>, pp. 8-9.

⁷³ “Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 18 December 1984.” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, December 18, 1984. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32146096>.

⁷⁴ “Display Ad 156 -- A Catholic Statement on Pluralism and Abortion.” *New York Times (1923-)*, Oct 07, 1984. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/display-ad-156-no-title/docview/122516688/se-2>.

⁷⁵ Miller, *Good Catholics*, 113-121.

The statement on pluralism, infamously referred to as “the Times ad,” marked a turning point for the American Catholic pro-choice movement. In the words of Patricia Miller, it “put CFFC and the pro-choice Catholic movement on the map.”⁷⁶ The ad forced the Vatican to acknowledge the existence of dissenting Catholic opinions, even as it cracked down upon ad signers and called the ad a “flagrant scandal.”⁷⁷ The crackdown of Church officials upon CFFC supporters failed to make most recant their positions; instead, the Church’s swift action against them increased the cause’s publicity and showed that CFFC posed a genuine threat to the Catholic social order. Both the ad and its response signified that Catholics would not bend to the Vatican’s will on abortion, that Church leaders *could* be deeply affected by the laity, and that CFFC was a key part of a nationwide push for reproductive freedom.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The actions of CFFC and the Catholic pro-choice movement established that a plurality of views existed among a group many considered monolithic. It challenged the role of men as the sole arbiters of Catholic teaching.⁷⁹ It challenged the role of institutional religion in politics. It revealed a hidden bloc of women who refused to be silent about their opinions on religious and moral matters any longer. To use the words of Catholic feminist theologian and Times ad signer Mary E. Hunt, “Catholic women, with no possibility of voice or vote, and barred in many instances from teaching in Catholic institutions for fear that the content of our teachings will be at odds with the institution’s stated views, simply act as responsible religious agents on our own. We claim our right to do so, and we name what we do Catholic. The impact on the larger culture

⁷⁶ *Ibid* 121.

⁷⁷ “Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds, 8 January 1985.” *Catholic News Service - Newsfeeds*, January 8, 1985. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.32146103>. 9.

⁷⁸ Davis, *Sacred Work*, 147.

⁷⁹ Mary E. Hunt and Frances Kissling, “The ‘New York Times’ Ad” A Case Study in Religious Feminism,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 3, no. 1 (1987): 115-127. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002062>. 124-125.

is worth noticing.”⁸⁰ In this year of suppression and conservative rollback, it is important to remember the impact of these women upon Catholic history, and that even decades later, the majority of U.S. Catholics agree with them.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Mary E. Hunt, “The Evolution and Revolution of Feminist Ministry: A U.S. Catholic Perspective,” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 26, no. 2 (2013): 75-88. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jstudyreligion.26.2.75>. 81.

⁸¹ GBAO, “2020 Election Night National Survey Analysis,” Catholics for Choice, 5 November, 2020. <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/2020-Catholic-Voter-Poll.pdf>.

Addendum: An Oral History of Abortion and Catholicism

Introduction

I was a little girl when I first read about the procedure. It was included in a Bible, which had sat innocently upon my parents' bookshelf between children's liturgy guides and Jane Austen novels. I cracked it after a teacher at my Catholic school complained that nobody read scripture anymore. Opening to the book's introduction, I was surprised to read paragraph after paragraph decrying abortion, no doubt written by whatever pro-life organization had paid to publish it. Amid talk of heartbeats and fetal movement, dead babies and God's will, I felt compelled to agree with its point. The Bible had stated that abortion was wrong. God, therefore, must have agreed.

In subsequent years of Catholic school, I was exposed to a number of questionable messages. Women could altar serve, but only men could join the clergy. Men could be many things in the Bible, but women's roles were limited. In the passages we studied most, women were sinful, as Eve, Lot's wife, Jezebel, and Mary Magdalene, or pure, as the Virgin Mary. Like the latter, good women were not sexual or attention-seeking; they were humble. Good women, like Mary, Elizabeth, Sarah, Hannah, and Rachel, were granted sons, and they were happy.

At the same time, newfound, unrestricted access led me into the misogynistic depths of the Internet. "Feminists owned" compilations on YouTube, memes of red-haired radfems who 'drank male tears', and posts from others who swore they 'weren't like other girls' took root in my brain. I did not know what I thought of abortion then, but knew that I would never be irresponsible enough to need one. There was no common plight between myself and the women who were shunned for their abortions, the divorcees refused communion, or the nuns denied ordination. I followed the rules, and thus was safe.

In her landmark history *Catholic and Feminist*, which documents the Catholic feminist movement, Mary J. Henold describes an event which she calls ‘the click.’⁸² It is a phenomenon described by scholars in which feminist consciousness first appears. It is a “sudden revelation, a ‘conversion experience.’” Something happens in a woman’s life to alter her worldview, presenting her surroundings in stunning new clarity. The understanding of how misogyny affects her life provides a sense of community with other women, transforming her from ignorant to aware. It did not take long to realize that I had misjudged the ‘other girls’ around me, but it was years before I saw that I was, in fact, as vulnerable as they were.

I left my K-8 Catholic school, attended a public high school, and graduated. I went to college. My body changed, and for the first time, people were attracted to me. Finally, in my junior year of college, I got to do what “other girls” did: I dated, kissed, and finally had sex with a boy I’d met that year. That first time, I insisted that we use the only protection I had, which was a Planned Parenthood condom I’d received at a club fair. It was thrown away after a first awkward encounter and he pressured me to continue without it. Despite my regular use of birth control pills, my period was late that month, and when it began, it was irregular. It did not take long to WebMD my way through various conditions, eventually settling on the diagnosis which best fit my symptoms: implantation bleeding, which occurs shortly after a fertilized egg attaches to one’s uterine lining.

Suddenly, I was one of those girls who hadn’t been careful enough; the irresponsible woman; the abortion seeker. My roommate drove me to Walgreens to buy the only pregnancy test I’ve ever taken, and I frantically googled each product on the shelf, trying to reconcile my

⁸² Henold, *Catholic and Feminist*, 4.

unemployed student budget with my need for accurate results. I thought of what I'd tell my parents. I thought of what I'd tell myself.

On the night of May 2, 2022, my test proved negative. Relief washed over me. Faced with an impending due date for a short story, I began writing about unwanted pregnancy, drawing on fear I'd felt moments before. I imagined young women like me, trapped with a man who feigned harmlessness, not knowing what was happening to their bodies until it was too late. I immersed myself. I became the women I had not fully identified with in the past, and they, in turn, became me.

Glancing up from my computer after hours, I read a notification on my phone. A Supreme Court opinion draft had leaked to the press. *Roe v. Wade* would be overturned in a matter of weeks.

My breath caught in my throat.

Click.

But what succeeds the click? After the recognition of one's vulnerability to patriarchy, what follows? Henold begs the same question, particularly with regards to religious women. Among secular women, "the click" is often treated as self-evident and complete, after which newly forged feminists are prepared to leave the patriarchy of their past lives behind. "For religious women—" Henold writes, "and indeed, any woman with multiple, conflicting loyalties — such an approach is problematic."⁸³

Amid the landmark *Dobbs v. Jackson* case this spring, I gained interest in the practice my childhood faith had deemed so contentious. As I researched Catholicism and abortion for my

⁸³ *Ibid* 5.

thesis, I wondered how women's bodies had been controlled both legally and religiously over time. What had it been like before it was legal? How had women's lives changed? How had those within the Catholic sphere navigated the issue? How had they rebelled *against* Church control? As I discussed these questions with someone dear to me over lunch, she began sharing her own experiences, and I was surprised to hear the things she spoke of. In all our years of knowing each other, she had never told me about them before.

When she recounted her experiences before *Roe v. Wade* during her marriage to a devout Catholic husband, I was struck by how powerful they were, and knew that they could not only expand my understanding of the relationship between women, religion, and abortion, but also make a valuable source for future generations. I asked if I could interview her for my Honors capstone, and to my delight, she agreed. I spent the next several weeks researching oral history methods and learning about the process using resources from the Smithsonian Institution and the Oral History Association. Informed by these resources, I prepared to speak to her on the record. I composed over thirty questions for the interview, most of which went unused as she answered many before I could ask. Finally, I traveled to her home to interview her where she was most comfortable.

Without further ado, I present the oral history of a woman who navigated both religious and legal barriers to bodily autonomy in the mid- to late twentieth century. This is her testimony on her — and many other women's — lives before and after the legalization of abortion.

Editor's note: Some of these transcripts have been rearranged to provide a more linear narrative. The order number of each recording is included before its content to maintain integrity. These transcripts have also been edited to exclude vocal fillers and most unfinished sentences. It

should also be noted that some of these recordings reveal traumatic experiences which may be difficult for some readers.

RECORDING 1

Interviewer: My name is Claire Elizabeth Brady and I am conducting this interview for my Honors capstone project at Western Washington University. The capstone will focus upon the history of reproductive rights in the United States. This oral history interview is being conducted to illuminate the experiences of women before abortion was legalized and the impact of reproductive autonomy — or lack thereof — upon their lives. It will be transcribed and included within a larger document, which will be submitted to the Honors Projects section of the CEDAR Archive at Western Washington University. Do I have your full permission to record this interview, transcribe it, and use it for the aforementioned academic purposes?

Interviewee: Yes, you do.

Interviewer: Would you prefer to be named or to remain anonymous for the purposes of this interview?

Interviewee: I would prefer to remain anonymous.

Interviewer: Okay, let's get started. When and where were you born?

Interviewee: In 1948 in Long Beach, California.

Interviewer: Who was in your family growing up?

Interviewee: I had both biological parents and a male and a female sibling. And numerous cousins, grandparents... it was a big family.

Interviewer: What was your family's background — religion, race, ethnicity, place of origin, all that kind of stuff?

Interviewee: My parents were not religious, although some of my aunts and uncles attended church regularly so I was exposed to religion. We're basically white, although I grew up believing that I was part Native American and I found out later we missed by a whole continent.

The great-grandmother that I thought was Native American was a Sephardic Jew, so I...I don't know why the stories all said that. I didn't find that out until I had my DNA tested. Um, mostly Northern European, Scottish, Norwegian — that's all.

Interviewer: And had your family lived in the United States for an extended period of time, for generations?

Interviewee: Since the 1700s, yes. I am a Native American. [laughs]

Interviewer: What kind of work did your parents do?

Interviewee: My father was a laborer for a long time. My mother was a housewife. He was a smart man and he eventually got his high school diploma and was able to get a job as a manager at the plant he worked at, mostly because he was tired of going on strike every summer. He just didn't want to go on another strike, and even though it's difficult, especially at that time in the 50s to work during a strike — people would beat on his car, he would come home pretty upset because of the ugly things they said to him — he said it was worth it because he could still feed his family.

Interviewer: What was your life like growing up?

Interviewee: Horrible. It was very traumatic. My father had PTSD from — he was placed in an orphanage during the Depression because his mother couldn't feed him and his brother, and it's one of those places where there's a graveyard next door. He never told me about any of that. I found that out...really, I found it out in just the last few years when some cultural anthropologists were trying to contact the offspring of people who had been at that orphanage. He also got kind of blown up during the Second World War and was discharged after that, but he had trauma from his war experiences and trauma from the way he was raised, and he had an explosive personality disorder and was quite violent. And my mother did not protect us from

him. So it was very difficult. We were not so poor that we were in fear of not having a place to live or a roof over our head, but we had very little. Sometimes, I remember getting a new blanket for my bed for Christmas. And...he was a nudist. And none of the children in the neighborhood were allowed to come to my house because my father would go to the door and answer it naked, which, especially in the 50s and 60s, was not cool. [laughs] So I was pretty isolated socially as a child.

Interviewer: And would you say that your relationship with your parents [was] not very good?

Interviewee: It was entirely dysfunctional, although I was more able to protect myself than my siblings were. I still remember my sister telling me, "You're the only one who ever told him no." And both of my siblings went on to live pretty dysfunctional lives, which was sad because...well, my sister had an abortion before Roe v. Wade and had to go to Mexico, and it was expensive and traumatic for her. And...I don't know how much detail I should say, because I don't want to out her. I should probably stick to my own story.

Interviewer: What was your relationship like, then, with your siblings and with other family members growing up?

Interviewee: I had an aunt who was — I don't know how much she knew, but she was quite supportive, and I would go and live with her. I would live with her for as much as a year at a time. She was one of the churchgoing family members and they were very kind and very supportive and I loved her and her husband very much. I think that balanced out my life in a lot of ways. But I could never tell her. I could never talk to her. When one time I said, "I really don't want to tell you why I am removing myself from my nuclear family, I am not having contact with my parents,"... my uncle said "We don't want to know," and I went, "Wow. They don't want to know?"

But it let me know that I was pretty much alone, even from the people who loved me, and that was hard.

RECORDING 10

Interviewer: I wanted to ask about, you're comfortable talking about it, what awareness you had of sex and reproduction while you were growing up and whether it was discussed at all — and maybe in what context. Did you have any understanding of reproductive autonomy?

Interviewee: I had no idea of reproductive autonomy. Women didn't have reproductive autonomy. I was in the gifted program in school, so I had really good biology classes, plus my parents gave me books. They didn't really talk to me about it [sexual matters], but they had books with all the details. I had a good vocabulary and I was able to understand them. So no, I knew all of the reproductive details. I was embarrassed by it — my parents were hypersexual and intrusive sexually, so I actually got more information than I wanted in ways I didn't want, but I was not lacking for information.

RECORDING 2

Interviewer: What goals and dreams did you have as a child?

Interviewee: I didn't have any. I never expected to live to grow up. My house was so violent and I — the first time I had suicidal ideation I was eight years old. And I got married at seventeen, I think mostly to get out of the house and into a different environment. I thought it would be different. But like many people who go through a chaotic childhood, I married a man...mmm, not violent like my father, but not kind and very misogynistic. He thought women were stupid, and I'm not stupid, so it didn't work out very well. And he was a devout Catholic, so he basically

thought that he owned me after we got married and he thought that my body belonged to him. And when birth control became available, because the Catholic Church said you weren't supposed to use it, he wouldn't let me use it.

A man broke into my house and held me hostage and he'd accused me of making it up. The police came out, they took a report, the screen was out of the window, and he still accused me of making it up. It's like he...in his mind — he was on a business trip, so he wasn't home — thought that I had created this elaborate ruse for attention. And I think that was when I realized that I was gonna have to divorce him to save myself. But it was all before Roe v. Wade, so I was...I was very frightened of enforced pregnancy because he wouldn't even use the things that we were allowed to use as Catholics, like rhythm. He wouldn't do that, and he impregnated me forcibly with me saying “No, this is the time I'm fertile, please no.” And he wouldn't stop and I got pregnant.

We were in California then, and in California you could go to prison for terminating a pregnancy, and I terminated it myself. I went to my doctor at about four weeks and he said, “Yes, you are pregnant,” and I said, “Well, I'm spotting,” which was a lie. I was trying to create a backstory so if things went wrong...I was nineteen. And he said, “Nah, it's probably going to be okay,” and then at six weeks, I got my courage up to terminate. Everything that I used — which was not a coat hanger [laughs] — I sterilized, and I sterilized all the cloths that I used...and I didn't have gloves, so I washed everything that I could...and was able to terminate my pregnancy. I took the conceptus and went to the emergency room because I was bleeding a little bit, and just as I got to the emergency room, I started to hemorrhage. And the doctor said, “Well, I'm going to try to save you some money. I'm going to finish it in the emergency room without anesthetic.” He couldn't do it and I couldn't tolerate it, so I ended up having anesthesia. I was

terrified that he could tell that it wasn't a natural, spontaneous miscarriage, because then, women went to prison for doing that [self-induced abortions] in California. In California! And I was working, I was going to school, I was nineteen, I already had one child, and I just know...I got postpartum depression with the first child, and I just knew I couldn't do that again. I couldn't get pregnant again, not then. But he didn't turn me in. I don't know to this day, really, if they can tell, although I've heard that they can't tell if it's a spontaneous miscarriage or not. So at six weeks that happened, and then the next year I got pregnant again and I thought, "I can handle this." So I ended up ultimately having two children, but I was even more scared of being forcibly impregnated again, because even though birth control was widely available, and I got an IUD because that was something he couldn't find [laughs], [that] he couldn't use — I was afraid to use birth control, because if he found them he'd probably leave me and take my children because I didn't have any skills, so I couldn't support my children at that point...Can you turn it off for a minute?

RECORDING 3

Interviewee: And this was all before Roe v. Wade, this was when women were basically considered property. I remember being in a bar once and this man came in and just picked this woman up and threw her over his shoulder, and some of the men in the bar got up to save her or help her, and somebody said "No, that's his wife." And...so they all sat down, and he went and took her out into the parking lot and raped her. Because she was his wife. That's what it was...that's what it was.

But for me...I knew I needed to leave. There were a couple occasions where I actually thought he was gonna kill me because I had a medical situation and he wouldn't take me to the

hospital. He wouldn't take me to the emergency room. He wouldn't call an ambulance. And I thought, "He really is going to kill me. He's not gonna get a gun, he's not gonna get a knife, but...I am going to end up dead." So I started making my plans. I didn't have a checkbook, I didn't have a credit card. He wouldn't let me have any of those things. He gave me a certain amount of money every week and then would go on business trips, and if I ran out of money, it was just too bad. If he forgot to pay the electricity, our electricity went out. It wasn't that we didn't have money, it's just that he was so thoughtless and I had no control, absolutely no control. That was how the culture was at that time. And having grown up the way I did, it wasn't as bad as how I'd grown up, and if you got stuck with a bad husband, you just got stuck with a bad husband. There was no...no surcease from that. There was no support from society for you to do anything different.

But I checked with the state — we were no longer living in California, I was living in Washington State — well, no, something happened in between that. I was meeting with a group of Catholic women and, of course, the talk turned to propagation of the species because that's what women talk about. They said, "Oh, we know this doctor" — three of them had had hysterectomies — "and he will find a reason to do a hysterectomy." Because, while you couldn't have a tubal ligation according to the Catholic Church (because that was birth control, which you weren't allowed to use — not only were you not allowed to use it societally in many cases, but the Catholic Church made it even harder)...but you could have a hysterectomy. [laughs] So this doctor was doing hysterectomies for Catholic women. He'd find a reason. And there are more reasons to have hysterectomies after you've had several children than you would believe. I went in and I actually had the reasons. He said "Well, I can do some repair work and preserve your fertility, or I can do a hysterectomy," and I said, "Oh please, God, no, don't preserve my

fertility.” And he said, “Well, what will happen if your children get killed in a car accident or something?” And I said, “You can’t replace my children. You will never replace my children. And if something happens to them, that would be a tragedy that would not be changed by having more children. And there are plenty of children in the world that need a home...no. To be free of the burden of enforced pregnancy, please just do it. Just...just do it.”

And he did. And it was the best day of my life to know that I could never get pregnant again, that I could never be forced...that I was free. Then, two years later, *Roe v. Wade* happened, and I still wasn’t sorry, ‘cause *Roe v. Wade* does not protect you from getting raped, but it made things so much better and I knew that women would not have to perform the procedure themselves. By the way, I think I did a pretty good job with the sterilization of things because I never did get an infection [laughs], but I had very good science classes. I was able to get a state need grant, go to college, get into a field where I made decent money and I could always get a job and was able to raise my children, and their father just fell apart without the structure of...I’m not exactly certain what...and my life got steadily better. I can’t say that I wasn’t a damaged person. It took me years to get over both my childhood and the seven years I was married and the forcible impregnations, but I got over it.

And I see how the culture has changed. Men don’t come into a bar and pick up a woman and walk outside with her when she’s struggling and screaming, and take her out into the parking lot and rape her because she’s their wife. That would not happen now with a crowd of people just standing by because she’s his wife. I don’t think people really understand what a huge change that made in society — the fabric of society — that women were not chattel. And I’m so worried about the change it [*Roe v. Wade*’s repeal] is going to make in our society, not just for women but for men. The misogyny will bloom again. I’m very worried about the changes it’s gonna

make because I've seen it go from one thing — which is women are chattel — to women are not chattel, except for some cults [laughs] and certain pretty small religious groups — to just a general attitude in society. [We're] already seeing women who have tubal pregnancies not get the medical care that they need when everybody knows a tubal pregnancy ...is never going to work. The conceptus will not result in a healthy pregnancy and a live child no matter what you do. And yet, they're saying, "Well, the baby's heart is still beating," and it's like, this is insane. It's just insane.

Done.

RECORDING 9

Interviewer: What things were like for the women and girls around you, and what gender expectations existed?

Interviewee: The gender expectations [were] that you get married and stay home and cook. And I had a large family, and none of the women worked. And if you married a man who was mean to you or had affairs, it was just, 'sucks to be you.' [laughs] And if you married a nice man, your life was pretty good. But it was all dependent on what kind of a man. None of them got divorced. There were no divorces, absolutely none. There was no exit. If you got into a bad marriage, you were stuck, because everybody had children, nobody had any job skills, and...yeah. You were just stuck. And the police would not help you. I remember a woman that I worked with briefly — and this was after Roe v. Wade, but the culture was still shifting — her husband was a policeman and he broke her jaw. And she wanted to make a complaint, and the police chief said, "You can cry on my shoulder, but I'm not taking your complaint." Because it was so inculcated that men would stick together and that women should just submit to whatever happened in their marriage.

Distressing to even think about it. And she stayed with him. They're still together, as far as I know. I don't know them now, they're not friends — they were never my friends — like I said, it was someone that I worked with, and it was sad.

Interviewer: It wasn't just that there were no — or very few — legal protections, it was also just that, socially, there was minimal support, and that what laws and rules might've been in place weren't being enforced in a way that helped.

Interviewee: Right. Even the laws that there were that should have been enforced...because of the culture, they didn't enforce them for women. If he had broken a man's jaw, they would've taken the complaint, but because it was just his wife, she was just ignored. Like he said, "I'll let you cry on my shoulder." Oh, that's gonna help her a whole lot. And women used makeup a lot to cover bruises and black eyes. And women were always less than, because if you could get a woman down and have sex with her...

One of my cousins married a woman. Six weeks afterward, she was kidnapped and we never saw her again. And they had a place fairly close to the Manson ranch, we found out later. This was before Manson was a thing, before he started going out. Her sister-in-law — and I didn't know about Manson, so we thought maybe she'd been kidnapped and taken over the border for white slavery — I said, "Well, maybe she'll be able to escape and come home," and her sister-in-law said, "Oh, she'll never come back, she would never shame this family so. She's ruined now." *She's ruined now*. Kidnapped, possibly sold into slavery, and they're saying they don't want her back because she's too damaged? I couldn't believe it. It didn't make any sense to me. But everybody else was okay with it. But that's just a little snapshot of what society was like. There was also the, 'If you don't fight hard enough that he has to kill you to rape you, then you didn't fight hard enough. It's your responsibility. [laughs] Even though nobody will help you

and the whole bar will sit there while somebody drags you out, it's still your responsibility.' It's illogical that it's both your responsibility and you have no control. And if someone impregnates you, you have all of the responsibility but no control.

And after *Roe v. Wade*, you had control. You could take care of a termination. If you were unfortunate enough to be in a situation where you couldn't trust your partner or your family to tell them, you could do it privately. You had privacy. You had control. If you didn't have money, they had a sliding scale. And I'm just...I'm just so horrified. I mean, really, I'm not using the word in a hyperbolic fashion. I am so horrified that women are gonna have to go through that again. And I wish that our politicians — and I certainly didn't have this either — had had a foreshadowing that this was going to actually happen. I never thought it would happen. I never thought it would be overturned. I thought it was...ah, I can't remember the technical term, but in place [as] law, that it couldn't be overturned. But we've had so many political changes. We have a new Supreme Court that's been stacked, and...*stare decisis* is the word I was looking for, which means law that's kind of embedded in concrete, to say it in plain language. That it was *stare decisis*, and that it could not and would not ever be overturned. Still, we could have, ten years ago or even eight years ago when Obama was president... moved to make it a federal law. But we didn't, and now this has happened. But shoulda woulda coulda doesn't mean anything, so...

RECORDING 4

Interviewer: Do you want to tell me about everything, in more detail, that happened in your life after you left your first husband and moved to another place?

Interviewee: After I left my husband and moved into another place, I had very little money from the state, although they did give me money for childcare and helped me buy a car, even. But I woke up one night — I mean, I was living in a tenement — and I thought I felt something in my hair, and I sat up and a mouse fell out of my hair because the place was just infested. And it fell out of my hair onto the bed [laughs].

Interviewer: Oh my goodness.

Interviewee: Yeah. So I think that paints a picture of what I dealt with for the first couple of years, and then I got a roommate. I moved in with a woman who had no children but was living in a fairly large place and lived with her until I graduated from school, and then I felt like I was rich. I was making six hundred dollars a month for the first three months, and then nine hundred dollars a month, and I literally felt like I was rich. Remember this was 1975. Having lived on two hundred thirty five dollars a month while I was in school, it seemed like a lot of money. My husband stalked me like any good sociopath does, and the neighbors would say, “There’s been this man walking around your house, like at two and three o’clock in the morning.” And I was afraid he was gonna come back and kill me, because one time one of his girlfriends called me and said, “You know, if I was you I’d get out of town, because he’s really angry at you and I’m afraid he’s gonna do something to you.” So I...I lived the first half of my life being afraid that a man was gonna kill me because I wasn’t doing the right things as a woman was supposed to do.

But gradually, I went into therapy. I was in therapy starting at that time, and off and on, and then I was with the same psychiatrist for twenty years, and I had terrible nightmares about all kinds of things. Mostly about being out of control or about driving my car into a swamp and drowning and not being able to get out of it. Not being able to breathe was one of the themes. Or a tsunami would come and sweep me and my children away. And so he started me on meds for

the nightmares and, between that and the therapy, I got centered. The therapy's changed my life, and...I went into psychiatry. You'll find [that] a lot of people who go into medicine go into medicine because they had a particular need for that *kind* of medicine...like I met surgeons — bone surgeons, orthopedic surgeons — who had broken a leg skiing when they were young [laughs] and decided to be an orthopedic surgeon. I guess it was natural for me to be interested in that because it made such a difference in my life and I wanted to make a difference in other people's lives in the same way. My fellow nurses would come to me and say, "Why do you want to do that kind of work? Those people are so crazy!" [laughs] And I said, "Well, they're not really crazy, and if I am really smart, then they need somebody who's smart. They don't need a three-hundred-pound gorilla who's gonna toss them around. They need somebody who actually understands it." And I got a whole set of medical books and psychiatric books, and at that time I wasn't sleeping very well, so if I woke up in the middle of the night, I would read my medical books and I would read psychiatric journals and educated myself far beyond the level that most psychiatric nurses were educated at. I went to work at the university. I had mentors — two doctors, specifically — who recognized my proficiency and they mentored me. I became friends with them and that was also very healing, to be recognized in that way. I think that's all I have to say about that, if I answered your question fully.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's good.

RECORDING 5

Interviewer (question not recorded): What sorts of cases have you seen in your career of women seeking abortion or contraceptive healthcare?

Interviewee: I had few experiences dealing with people who were pregnant because I worked in psychiatry, and we were often times, at the unit I worked in at the university and later, dealing with people in crisis situations that did not include pregnancy. I did have a patient who was so psychotic that she didn't know she was in labor — that was interesting.

I tried to sign up for Planned Parenthood to come in and work actually doing and assisting with terminations. I prefer the word termination to abortion because abortion is such a loaded word that it puts people back, but if you use the word termination, it's not as offsetting or off-putting as abortion. Anyway, [I wanted them to come in] to actually help with the procedure. I wanted to do it close to my home, and they never had an opening here, and they wanted me to be the person who escorted the clients into the clinic for an abortion, and I didn't want to do that. Working at the university in acute care psychiatry was...I did that for so many years, and I just didn't want to go back into free-range crazy outside of a termination clinic. So I never really worked with that as a psychiatric nurse. And by that time, there was Roe v. Wade; it wasn't the same thing. The whole world had changed with Roe v. Wade. People weren't desperate. People weren't scared. There were termination clinics. There was a place you could go to. They had a sliding scale if you didn't have money. There were people who donated money for people to have terminations. The world was completely different. Nobody needed my help. I may have given information in the course of counseling, but I honestly can't remember it coming up because it wasn't the same kind of problem that it had been before Roe v. Wade

RECORDING 6

Interviewer: How did you feel and what did you think when Roe v. Wade was struck down earlier this year in 2022?

Interviewee: Sick. Desperate. I have family. I have children. I have [a] grandchild. I don't want to see them live in a world, A) where misogyny is triumphant, [and] B) where they can be forced to become pregnant and then can be forced to carry that child to term, or terminate their own pregnancy, or do a back-alley termination, or have to travel to — if the Republicans have their way, I'm very worried about a national abortion ban — or have to travel to a foreign country.

And I also know the way it shifts cultural attitudes towards women because I lived through that. I was twenty-five when Roe v. Wade happened. And I don't want to see any young woman live in that world. They're talking about not allowing the Plan B for people, even though Plan B only works if the egg hasn't implanted. The abortion pill that's for the first, I don't know, so many weeks, they're talking about not allowing that. IUDs, they're gonna try to make that against the law. Right now they're deciding if it's actually already against the law or states are making it against the law. It's like they can't wait to take women's lives apart and take away the freedom to choose, even [to choose] birth control. It's highly illogical. They don't understand what Plan B does. It's not an implanted egg, it doesn't have a heartbeat. It's, like, eight cells. And they're so ignorant. They're trying to control something and tell people what to do with their bodies and they're basing it [on the idea that], "Well, it's a baby." It's not a baby and it doesn't have a heart, and it's never been implanted, and it's ridiculous, and...I have to go to the bathroom [laughs].

RECORDING 7

Interviewee: Sometimes I feel sorry for my children, even though ultimately it was for the best — getting the divorce, going to school. It was a struggle for me and I was not the best parent, especially when they were young, because I was changing all the time and I was in therapy and I

needed to heal. I was their only parent, and an unhealed parent is not the best parent. As they got older, I could see the effects of my inadequacies, my damage reflected in them, and I...I tried to fix it, but I realized that it had damaged them as well. And I did the best that I could. The one thing I did, I think, that was right, was to tell them it wasn't their fault, that it was my fault, that I was the one who was inadequate as a parent. I didn't beat them, but I could be short and forget to pick my son up from cub scouts, and I could get self-preoccupied, and when I read I totally go inside of myself. Reading was one of the ways that I went into another world for a while and didn't have to deal with reality, and when they got a little bit older — like ten or twelve — they said, “You know, mom, I think if the house catches on fire you'll never even notice it, because you don't notice us when you're reading. It's like you're not here at all.” And I thought, “Oh, that's not the way it's supposed to be.” They have grown into healthy adults, but I still see the scars from having, as I said, to take that journey with me...it's hard sometimes when I reflect on their childhood, so I don't do that very often.

RECORDING 8

Interviewer: Do you want me to ask a question — may I ask a question?

Interviewee: Sure.

Interviewer: Having lived in times when abortion was both legal on a federal level and fully unprotected on a federal level, what do you want women who have no memory of a pre-Roe world to know now, and to be thinking about right now?

Interviewee: That it's not just about termination. I think I said this earlier. I want them to know that it affects women on every level. It affects the value of a woman. It affects the quality of the relationship that you have with men — not just your husband or your father, but the men you

work with. I heard, twenty years ago, young women saying, “I’m not a feminist. I don’t need to be a feminist. Everything is fine.” And they have no idea what it was like before women were feminists, and Roe v. Wade, and birth control, and...that the culture had shifted towards women as equals, women as real people. Because a woman in control of her fertility has a kind of power that we never had before Roe v. Wade. They are enjoying the power that was given to them by that decision, by the women who protested, by the women who acted out and acted up, and...that’s what I’d like them to know, is that they are enjoying the power.

I think now some of them are starting to realize, some of them who said “I’m not a feminist” [laughs], that there was a reason why the feminism movement got started, what they were after, and that they’ve been enjoying the fruits of that for a long time. And now those fruits are being taken away. There have been tragic cases of women who didn’t even want to have a termination but who needed medical care for a pregnancy gone wrong, and women are dying already because they can’t get the medical care. Women have always gotten less adequate medical care than men have gotten. Most of the research about medical care has been directed towards men. We were just starting to get — oh, in the last ten, twenty years — I’m very old [laughs] — they started to do more research on women’s health.

That’s what they need to know, and I don’t know if they’ll understand that in time. They need to stand up for themselves now. They need to vote and they need to get everyone they know to vote. And they need to wrap themselves up in information and really listen to what the politicians are saying, what’s being talked about, to message boards and TikTok, to understand the difference between being free and happy and being used. That’s what I would say to women.

Reflections

Once the interview was complete, I thanked her for everything she had shared with me. We had a pleasant dinner together and I stayed with her for another day before returning home to Bellingham. Once I returned, I spent hours transcribing the recordings myself. From the raw transcript, I edited out vocal fillers and unfinished thoughts. I rearranged the recordings' order to tell the most linear story, as I had collected important contextual and background information later in our talks. The result is the edited transcript above, which hopefully provides some of the insight to other readers that it provided me.

Completing this addendum to my thesis gave me an understanding of life for individual women during the 1960s and 1970s, both within and beyond the Catholic Church. While the woman I interviewed was not a practicing Catholic, she was still subjected to the will of the Church through her husband and navigated religious rules in her own way. She, like so many others, was harmed by both religious and secular forces which sought to control women's bodies — and, like so many others, she ultimately broke free.

The study of Catholicism and abortion hearkens back to childhood for me; I remember that Bible upon my parents' bookshelf, its anti-abortion messaging, and the many Catholic voices telling me how sinful the practice truly was. Yet, regardless of abortion's legality or religious permissibility, women have always found ways to claim it as a right. They have defined Catholicism as they have seen fit for themselves. They have made personal compromises to adhere to religious doctrine, and conversely, compromised doctrine to assert their personhood. They have broken the law. They have — in some cases, even more contentiously — broken religious doctrine.

When I look now at the religious and secular directives created by men to control women's bodies, I see that adherence to them does not make women safe, nor are men's the only perspectives that matter. In organizations like our governments and churches, in which women are neither proportionally nor adequately represented, the burden falls to us to decide which rules we can live by and which we cannot. In the face of religious misogyny, it is up to each woman, including myself, to determine our own relationship to faith and doctrine, to find our own 'click,' and to proceed from it, despite conflicting loyalties, however we see fit.

I am grateful for the women in my life and for each of our God-given abilities to do so.

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